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The paper examines the latest research in the field of social, documentary, and artistic photography created by working class amateurs and left-leaning professionals in the 1920s and the 1930s. The field encompasses phenomena such as the international movement of working-class photographers, left-wing illustrated press and theory of proletarian photography. Such examination allows me to outline research possibilities in Poland and their possible methodology. The article describes its local conditions of production and circulation. It also outlines the available evidence for further research, including materials related to The First Exhibition of Worker-Photography in Lviv (1936, curated by Władysław Bednarczuk), communist press and Polish interwar photography magazines.

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Worker's Photography Movement of the 1920's and 1930's. Theoretical Perspectives and Research Possibilities in Poland

The concept of worker-photography is one that is impossible to define succinctly and completely. In the sense that it is a historical phenomenon, it primarily constitutes "an attempt to create class consciousness by shaping [people's] perception and seizing the means of visual production."[1] However, the worker-photographers active in Weimar Germany, the USSR, Austria, Czechoslovakia, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, and Hungary from the mid 1920s to the outbreak of World War II—that is, the artists to whom this label is generally applied today, in hindsight—achieved these goals by harnessing the extraordinarily varied range of technical, stylistic, and organizational means available at the time. It is therefore difficult to pinpoint any distinct stylistic features or shared tactical methods that would allow the art historian or photography critic to categorize this genre of photography as a movement or school. It is defined, above all else, by its subject, namely, photographs depicting the lives of the working class: labor in the factory and the home, leisure activities, and political struggle. Worker-photography was pursued by thousands of workers and intellectuals. Their ranks comprised amateurs as well as professionals, most of them men. Documentary photography and photojournalism made up the majority of their work, though some produced artistic photography (pictorial pieces and images in the vein of New Objectivism) as well as studio pictures. They used both photographic plates and film. The images were intended for private and public consumption, and were reprinted in the press, collected in albums, and presented at exhibitions. Some photographers worked collectively, while others practiced their craft alone. Groups of workers/amateur photographers were organized primarily by communist parties,

though social democrats were also active in this regard.

Given the extensive research conducted on this phenomenon—especially with regard to its history in Weimar Germany—it is reasonable to inquire about worker-photography in Poland.[2] The Left in interwar Poland was aware of illustrated periodicals published by foreign labor parties and their activities in the field of the arts and culture. Despite this, no organized worker-photography movement ever emerged in the Second Polish Republic. In this article, I explore the causes of this state of affairs, and discuss possible future avenues of research in Poland. Due to the significant role played by communist parties in organizing the worldwide proletarian photography movement, I focus here primarily on the efforts of the Communist Party of Poland (KPP) and its supporters. Consequently, this article does not attempt to present a broad overview of depictions of class conflict or photos found in the family albums of Polish workers.

Worker-Photography in Weimar Germany

In 1921 the Workers International Relief (WIR, or the Internationale Arbeiter Hilfe, in German), headquartered in Berlin, was formed as a branch of the Communist International to raise funds for victims of famine in Russia and to disseminate information about post-revolutionary Russia to readers in Europe and North America. The WIR published two illustrated magazines, *Sowjetrussland im Bild* (Soviet Russia in Pictures, 1921) and *Sichel und Hammer* (Hammer and Sickle, 1922–1924), which presented the accomplishments of the revolution and reported on developments in the international communist movement. The collection of photographs amassed by these two periodicals, together with their methods of combining text and images developed in the early years of their operation, laid the foundations for what would soon become the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (The Workers' Illustrated Newspaper, published 1924–1938), the most recognizable of all communist

periodicals to publish photographs taken by workers.

More or less concurrently, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD)[3] began to use visual art in its messaging, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by mass agitation in public spaces. This meant expanding the methods of the party's ideological work, hitherto grounded in the spoken and written word, to include forms that were more typical of advertisements and the bourgeois illustrated press. The Department of Agitation and Propaganda was established at the Central Committee, while the professional artists George Grosz, John Heartfield, and Rudolf Schlichter announced the formation of Die Rote Gruppe (The Red Group), an informal collective whose goal was to support the Communist Party by creating posters, banners, and wall newspapers.[4] This was followed, in 1928, by the foundation of the Assoziation revolutionärer bildender Künstler (Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists), subordinate to the KPD Central Committee's Department of Agitation and Propaganda, for the purpose of training workers in the production of visual material.[5]

The activities of the WIR and its periodicals, the KPD's support of the use of imagery in class warfare, and artists' involvement in the communist effort paved the way for the emergence of the German amateur worker-photography movement. In the March 1926 issue of *AIZ*, the editorial board announced a contest for the best non-professional photographs, openly admitting that the monthly could not compete with middle-class illustrated magazines due to the dearth of photos depicting the lives of workers. The bourgeoisie had the upper hand in the struggle for the right to present or hide images of the lives of particular classes, *AIZ* claimed, due to the support of bourgeois photo agencies. As there was not going to be a return to non-illustrated periodicals, the editors of *AIZ* argued that it was also necessary to oppose the bourgeoisie in the fields of the production and distribution of images.[6] The magazine expected its readers to submit photographs illustrating the revolutionary movement,

modern industry, and the living and working conditions of the proletariat. This form of self-representation was also intended to depict the relations between the classes: photos of laborers at work were at once illustrations of social and economic relations. Significantly, genre scenes that did not emphasize the theme of class struggle in the lives of workers were also permitted.

The contest garnered significant interest among amateur working-class photographers, and a number of their photos were published in the very next issue. The Vereinigung der Arbeiter-Fotografen Deutschlands (VdAFD, Association of German Worker-Photographers) was formed in the summer of 1926, with chapters in Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, and Hamburg, among other cities. In August Neuer Deutscher Verlag, the publishing house headed by the WIR's founder, Willi Münzenberg, and Babette Gross, a KPD activist, began publishing the monthly *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* (The Worker-Photographer). As an organ of the VdAFD, the magazine was tasked with coordinating the efforts of the amateur photographers who submitted images for use in *AIZ*, which boasted a monthly circulation of up to half a million copies.[7] *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* continued to mobilize its readership according to the principles laid out in the contest announced in *AIZ*, while printing photography how-to guides, running a regular column in which professionals critiqued the composition of submitted photos, and reporting on legal restrictions faced by photographers as well as current events in the international worker-photography movement.

Der Arbeiter-Fotograf ran the most important theoretical texts on class relations in the practice of photography. These articles offer insights into the development of relations among party activists and the amateur photographer movement. In its early years, the periodical remained focused on the technological divide between the classes, the relative scarcity of laborers with the skill to document their living and working conditions, and bourgeois dominance over the circulation of images.

In *Dei Eroberung der Beobachtenden Maschinen* (1928),[8] Franz Höllering likens the titular "seizing of the machines of observation" (the still and movie camera, the phonograph record) from the hands of the oppressive class, to seizing the means of production in industry. The aim of the revolution was not to destroy industry, but to harness it to satisfy the needs of society. Similarly, Höllering argues, the working class ought not to reject technology that enables the visual documentation of their environment, but should instead learn how to use it for the emancipation of humankind.

> Today, the machines of observation are controlled by the bourgeoisie, who naturally wield them against their class enemy—the proletariat. The police use photography in their efforts to identify protesters. In Vienna, after the destruction of the Palace of Justice last year, many workers were indicted based on photographic evidence. [...] It is apparent that the human spirit has managed to discover the means of recording objective information. There remains, however, the key matter of who owns these technical means. Technology enables us to sew cotton clothing for shivering people or to manufacture dynamite for the destruction of freedom-loving nations. [...] Currently, in capitalist countries, technological achievements almost exclusively serve the needs of the ruling classes, who use them for the continuing exploitation of the masses.[9]

In Höllering's view, when the bourgeoisie documented the world through technological means, it was only to reinforce its rule, whereas the same effort undertaken by the working class in itself constituted a revolutionary action. Absent from his concept is the figure of the proletarian buttressing the dominance of the bourgeoisie by imitating its artworks. For this reason, the author refrains from imposing on amateur photographers a particular repertoire of forms and themes. Instead, he attempts to persuade his readership that class warfare is being waged

in every realm of human activity, including that involving technical and creative skills.

It is the seizure of technology from the hands of the bourgeoisie, rather than the production of propaganda material itself, that is the essential argument pushed by Höllering's text. The author seems to believe that, in the course of their labor and struggle, the working class will itself determine which forms and themes to retain and which to replace. Illustrating the article are photographs of athletic divers and a Bauhaus edifice in Dessau. The images, therefore, are not literal depictions of factory labor, class struggle, or the consequences of the expansion of capitalism. Though it is impossible to determine whether the author had any say in their selection, the photos seem to imply that what distinguished worker photography from its bourgeois counterpart was the class affiliation of the photographers and viewers.



Figure 1. Photograph illustrating the article by Franz Höllering. E.M., *Kopfhocksprung* (Forward Dive), *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* no. 10 (1928), 4;
źródło

The policies adopted by the 1928 Sixth World Congress of the Comintern regarding "social fascism" and the need to fight enemies on the Left, as well as the aftermath of the economic crisis and the creeping Stalinization of the KPD, all left a mark on the ideological line of *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*. The notion of photography as the acquisition of the technical skills needed to document one's place in the public sphere and in history—presented three years prior by Höllering—gave way to a new concept of photography as struggle. In the July 1930 issue, Edwin Hoernle, who represented the KPD in the Reichstag and was the party's specialist on education, presented the

concept of the "worker's eye." The faculty of sight, he maintained, is not identical in all people, even though everyone is innately equipped with a camera.[10] The most important stage of seeing is the "development," in the brain, of the image detected by the eyes—in other words, the moment in which it appears in a person's consciousness. What is seen by the internal eye of one's consciousness is largely dependent on one's profession, but can also be adjusted through training. An obstruction exists in the minds of bankers, industrialists, and bourgeois politicians that prevents images of the lives of other classes from reaching their consciousness. However, millions of proletarians were also unable to see in accordance with their class interests.

The cinema, illustrated press, and advertising had trained them to see in a petit-bourgeois manner, instilling in them a "cult of vanity."[11] Because the bourgeoisie were oblivious to the lives of workers, the bourgeois-sighted workers were themselves incapable of seeing the class struggle. The pictures they took, therefore, were images of vanity—artistic photographs such as nudes and landscapes. If they could see as proletarians, they would photograph the repugnant, not the beautiful, and their images would be an indictment of society rather than invitations to solitary contemplation. Photography, Hoernle argued, should inspire belligerence, increase consciousness among the masses, and reinforce in them the desire for retaliation, solidarity, and discipline. "Photography is a weapon; technology is a weapon; art is a weapon!" he announced, deploying worker-photographers to a crucial stretch of the front: they were to teach their comrades how to look.[12]



Figure 2. Photograph illustrating the article by Edwin Hoernle. F.M., *Die Polizei sucht bei uns Waffen* (The police search us for weapons), *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* no. 7 (1930), 152; źródło

On October 12, 1931, Berlin hosted the first conference of the Vereinigung Arbeiter-Fotografen Aller Länder (Association of Worker-Photographers of All Countries), attended by delegates of amateur worker-photography clubs from across Europe and Japan. Facing government intimidation, the Polish delegation, most likely from Katowice, did not arrive at the conference,[13] and there is no mention of the group in the press, save for a single article in the November 1931 issue of *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*. Announcing the conference in May 1931, Willi Münzenberg described the goals of the international worker-photography movement thusly:

> Proletarian pictures, photographs created by the class-conscious worker, should contribute to defending the cause of socialism in the Soviet Union against all attacks by the imperialist gangs. It should mobilize the workers and peasants of the world to overthrow the capitalist system and create a world ruled by all creators—a dictatorship of the proletariat.[14]

In the November 1931 issue of *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, *AIZ* editor Hermann Leupold called photography a weapon in the class struggle, describing the belligerents in this conflict—and the tasks of the amateur photographer—in much more concrete terms than Hoernle.[15] Weakened by the Great Depression, he argued, capitalism would collapse in its final stand against the proletarian masses. Fascists and social democrats were mustering their forces to defend capitalism. The mission of worker-photographers was to persuade as many workers as possible to stand with the communists in the coming battle. To mobilize the masses, they would need to disseminate images of police violence and clashes with the Nazis. These guidelines remained in place until the end of the worker-photography movement in the Weimar Republic.

The seizure of power by the National Socialists spelled the end of the communist amateur photography movement in Germany,

though *AIZ* continued to be published abroad until 1938. The periodicals printed in Weimar Germany in the years 1924–1933 served as a model for amateurs in other countries, and the work of local German clubs also inspired practitioners of worker-photography in Poland.

The history of worker-photography in the Weimar Republic, as told above, emphasizes the impact of political events and party politics on the work of individual amateur photographers. However, contemporary research based on a methodology known as *Eigen-Sinn* suggests that photography was in fact a pursuit that allowed workers to define their agency in relation to the bourgeoisie and the Communist Party itself. *Eigen-Sinn*, which can be translated as "self-will," is not synonymous with defiance, dissent, or refusal. Rather, it denotes "various methods, peculiar to the individual, of producing and uncovering meaning, developed through the use of the body and senses."[16]

Wolfgang Hesse writes that examples of worker "self-will" can be observed both when workers are the subjects of photographs and when they themselves are behind the camera. The former, he explains, is evident in the signs of a person's awareness of being photographed. Assuming poses, looking directly at the camera, expressing affects, the use of props, staged documentary photographs, the imitation of conventions—all of these are examples of conscious self-representation and autonomy in becoming a part of visible history.[17] In regard to the latter, Hesse argues that the involvement of amateur photographers in the communist movement was driven not just by ideological conviction, but also by the desire to take more pictures and have them published,[18] which meant that they did not strictly adhere to the aesthetic program proclaimed by *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, among others. Workers were not entirely reliant on communist parties in their aspirations for visual equality with other classes, but simply took advantage of the

material and organizational resources offered by them.

By 1929 the VdAFD numbered 2,500 amateur photographers in 100 local chapters.[19] Each group submitted a monthly report on their activities to *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, which the magazine published along with the chapter's address and calendar of events. The reports reveal a significant degree of independence from the VdAFD leadership. Funded by membership dues, local groups organized their own photo exhibitions, lectures, and discussions. These bodies were also tasked with setting up darkrooms and helping their members procure cameras and materials - by way of exchange or rental, for example. Additionally, local chapters provided training to photographers who were just starting out. Classes were often taught by representatives of companies that manufactured photographic materials—a surprising choice, considering the strictly anti-capitalist attitude of the VdAFD. Though *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* encouraged photographers to collaborate and combine their images into collectively-authored works of photo journalism, the act of photography itself remained a solitary activity.

From the standpoint of the KPD, the worker-photography movement failed to achieve the goal for which it was founded, namely, to eventually transform into a labor photo agency. Even though photography was not as expensive a pursuit in Germany as it was in the USSR, few workers could afford to purchase high-quality photo equipment. Additionally, the majority of these images could be described as personal mementos, and were only meaningful to viewers with substantial knowledge of the context in which they were taken.[20] Photographs of family members, colleagues, workers enjoying leisure activities, and even minor labor rallies lacked the necessary air of momentousness and historical gravitas. Too infrequently did these photos depict factory labor, and too often did they imitate conventional studio portraits and group pictures. The images were suitable for publication in *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, whose mission was

largely to popularize photography, and which taught its readers the techniques used in nature and landscape photography, but they were rarely reprinted in the pages of *AIZ*. The latter, a high-circulation political magazine, required technically adept photographs of class struggle and, to the extent possible, universal depictions of working-class life in Germany and in other countries.

This is the likely explanation for why an archive of worker photographs was never created to supply the communist press with images. As Christian Joschke claims, an institution of this type was still being planned as late as 1927, but German communists eventually began to rely on the services of professional photo agencies that belonged to a larger network of Soviet agencies, such as Union-Bild, founded in 1930.[21]

Obstacles to the Emergence of a Worker-Photography Movement in Interwar Poland, 1918–1936

The formation of an active, class-conscious movement of worker-photographers was hindered by the difficult conditions facing photographers in the Second Polish Republic, and was rendered practically impossible by the character of the Communist Party of Poland's activities and its cultural policies. Prior to the *First Exhibition of Worker-Photography* in 1936, considered to be the founding event of the movement in Poland, the emergence of this stream of amateur photography was prevented by mounting obstacles of a material, creative, legal, and ideological kind.

The development of worker-photography in Poland was limited not only by the price of cameras and photographic materials – film stock, paper, developer, fixer, etc. Polish amateur photographers—i.e. individuals who practiced photography without any professional training or remuneration—strove to

achieve recognition of their craft as an art form. Consequently, Polish pictorialists produced images that imitated paintings thematically (landscapes, genre scenes, portraits), and used special processes such as bromoil. The popularization of photography inspired by New Objectivism and journalism was slow and fitful.[22] Photography enthusiasts did not regard their hobby as a profession, even when they achieved high levels of technical proficiency. They were uninterested in collaborating with photo studios, and believed photojournalism to be a second-rate genre.[23] Polish photography magazines were relatively late to voice the opinion that professional photographers were also needed in the press and advertising industry.[24]

In contrast to their amateur contemporaries, professionals—proprietors of photo studios—operated according to guild principles. They regarded photography enthusiasts and photojournalists as threats to their monopoly. They decried the practice of paying amateurs for photos printed in the industry press, and called for greater regulations on stores that sold photographic materials, which offered their customers help in developing film and making enlargements. Professionals also staked out their own "turf," and forbade amateurs from taking pictures there.[25]

The ability to operate a camera and develop pictures was not a common skill, and Poles were rather late to adopt the 35 mm camera. The lack of photographic training and the insufficiency of efforts to popularize the art of photography were perennial topics of discussion in the Interbellum press. In the November 1931 issue of *Fotograf Polski* (Polish Photographer), for example, Stanisław Sheybal proposed the idea of using touring exhibitions and training sessions to promote photography in small-town and rural Poland.[26]

For the worker-photography movement to succeed in Poland, however, it was not enough to merely overcome technical and material challenges. Photography and the publication of photos

were both subject to numerous official and arbitrary restrictions in the Second Polish Republic. It was forbidden to take pictures of defense installations, and special permission was required to photograph government buildings and for street photography.[27] Historical landmarks could only be photographed with consent from the relevant heritage authorities.[28] Even when taken legally, photographs were not allowed to undermine the authority of the Polish government. In *Historie fotografii w Polsce* (The History of Photography in Poland), Adam Mazur cites the examples of *Dola i niedola naszych dzieci* (The Fortunes and Misfortunes of our Children), an album published in 1938 to mark the National Children's Congress. With a print run of 60,000 copies, the booklet featured photos by Aleksander Minorski, Jan Ryś, and Tadeusz Bukowski, depicting such subjects as child poverty in Warsaw. Even though the event was held under the patronage of First Lady Maria Mościcka, the booklets were confiscated and destroyed at the orders of Prime Minister Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski.[29]

It seems that, under such circumstances, to organize a home-grown amateur photography movement would have required an unjustifiable amount of effort and risk on the part of Poland's communists. They were familiar with the phenomenon of worker-photography, as well as the Soviet and German illustrated magazines, including *AIZ*,[30] and yet they did not take up the challenge of launching a similar movement in the Second Polish Republic. On the contrary: this state of affairs can be explained in part by the fact that, in pre-war Poland, communist activities required a certain degree of invisibility.

The Communist Party of Poland (KPP; known in 1918–1925 as the Communist Workers' Party of Poland, or KPRP) existed until August 1938. In this period, its membership oscillated between 5,000–16,000, including members of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine and the Communist Party of Western Belarus, active in Poland's Eastern Borderlands.[31] Together

with the members of communist youth organizations, the ranks of the communist movement in the Second Polish Republic numbered 30,000[32] people, in addition to numerous active sympathizers who were not card-carrying members.

The KPP's activities were illegal due to the social and economic radicalism of their demands, and on account of their loyalty to Soviet Russia and, later, the Soviet Union, particularly during the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–1921. Most communists fell victim to repressions in the years 1918–1939. According to police data, 99,209 people were arrested,[33] while some researchers cite numbers as high as 145,000.[34] It should be noted, however, that other political groups were also suppressed by the Polish authorities, whose intolerance of opposition was evidenced by their operation of the Bereza Kartuska Prison internment camp from 1934 to 1939.

The party's paltry membership and clandestine character, as well as the constant threat of political infiltration, affected its stance on public-facing activities. At the Second Congress of the KPRP in August 1923, party authorities contrasted agitation and recruitment efforts with the pursuit of revolutionary goals.[35] The revolution was understood strictly as a confrontation between the vanguard of the working class and the state and capital. With time, the party line shifted in a direction that was more accepting of agitation, provided that it was conducted in the spirit of ideological, communist pedagogy—that is to say, the radicalization of workers and soldiers through speeches and printed text.[36] Political work, the party maintained, involved teaching labor history and Marxian economics, as well as exposing the nefarious deeds of capitalists and the Polish authorities. The radicalization of the proletariat would follow from a better understanding of the concepts and processes

its members encountered in their daily lives. The exacerbation of class struggle and economic crisis would ultimately spark a revolution.[37]

At the party's Fourth Congress in November 1932, the KPP drafted a new program proposal. The document called for a nationalized means of "spiritual production" to be used in service of the political and general enlightenment of working people, and for the construction of a new socialist culture on the foundations of the proletarian class.[38] A necessary condition for this, however, was a victorious revolution. Only after the working class, under the leadership of the KPP and the USSR, had seized power would it be possible to create a centralized, proletarian culture.

In her study of notions linked to (and transgressions of) the gender-based order among Polish communist women, Natalia Jarska mentions two common convictions that illuminate the KPP's stance in regard to particular forms of agitation and cultural activity. First, it was understood that an essential experience for every revolutionary was that of imprisonment. Quoting Celina Budzińska, Jarska half-jokingly writes that a communist woman would be ashamed "not to have been 'a victim of the white terror.'"[39] Prison communes offered them a chance to prove their dedication to the revolutionary cause and demonstrate their organizational skills. If this belief was indeed widespread among KPP activists, it is unsurprising that the party was not especially active in the field of visual propaganda. The revolutionary struggle, after all, was envisioned to be a direct battle against capital and the state, and would be met with the most severe legal repercussions. This sort of seriousness and directness was absent from efforts to make class struggle a relevant part of the culture.

Second, female members of the KPP were expected to demonstrate restraint and rationality. Opposing the bourgeois gender order required one to refrain from "primitive and overly

emotional" expressions of femininity, such as the emotional outbursts that were common among non-KPP inmates.[40]

This type of revolutionary rationality was likely more widespread; in a review of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Aleksander Wat accused the author of "defusing class consciousness" and "phantomizing biological factors where social ones were actually in play." Meanwhile, the "Freudian sympathies" displayed by some communists, Wat argued, were proof of their insufficient grasp of Marxism.[41]

Years later, in an essay about Mieczysław Szczuka, Andrzej Stawar summed up the attitude of the KPP's leadership to art and artists as follows:

> [I]t seemed downright inappropriate for an artist to come in with his own ideology, his own theses, articulated firmly and imperiously, most often in aphoristic form. (Furthermore, these theses were encumbered by a philosophical clumsiness that belied their categorical delivery.) Szczuka's ideas for agitation and his poster designs were met with approval, but his program proposals drew little more than shrugs of indifference.[42]

Szczuka's disagreements with the party leadership resulted in his relegation to the role of an isolated individualist, "practically a fantasist,"[43] despite his insistence on the need for utilitarian art in service of the proletarian struggle.[44]. Artists' works were used in books and the press, in prisoner aid efforts and in parliamentary election campaigns, but the artists themselves were rarely permitted to call upon the authority of the party in disputes over artistic matters.[45] Every artistic activity conducted in public—from publishing to the training of workers/amateur photographers—exposed members of the underground network to the threat of discovery and arrest. Additionally, censors gradually learned to identify leftist publications based solely

on their graphic designs, created by communist artists such as Teresa Żarnower.[46]

Despite this, professional artists remained active within the party's zone of influence, as members or sympathizers. In the 1930s, themes of class conflict featured in the work of a number of left-wing artists, for instance those associated with the Kraków Group such as Stanisław Ostostowicz and Leopold Lewicki. In a review of a joint 1937 exhibition by the two, in Lviv, the editor of *Trybuna Robotnicza* wrote that the artists had demonstrated the possibility of synthesizing "high art" and "social tendencies" in Polish art. Lewicki's drawings titled *Więzienie* (Prison), *Kopalnia* (Mine), *Masówka w fabryce* (Rally at the Factory), and *Pochód* (A March) "conveyed the indelible quotidian experiences of the struggling class." Ostostowicz, meanwhile, "captured, in a synthetic form, the enormous pain and struggle of peasants, who bear nearly the entire burden of exploitation on their shoulders," in the oil painting *Epopeja chłopska* (Peasant Epic).[47] Warsaw was home to a group called Phrygian Cap (which included Mieczysław Berman, Zygmunt Bobowski, and Helena Krajewska), while the Artes group was active in Lviv, with Otto Hahn, Marek Włodarski (Henryk Streng), and Aleksander Krzywobłocki numbering among its ranks.[48]

The illustrated communist magazines *1930*, *Przekrój 1930*, and *Kuźnia*, whose editorial staff professed an ideological affinity with Die Rote Gruppe,[49] published class-critical photomontages by Mieczysław Berman, Władysław Daszewski, Stefan Themerson, and Teresa Żarnower, and reprinted photomontages from *AIZ* and images supplied by Soviet photo agencies.[50]

In Polish magazines of the time, however, illustrations typically served as accessories to articles or as means of engaging in polemic among intellectuals. Aleksander Wat, for example, used two photos depicting unemployed English workers, reprinted from *AIZ* in the July 1930 issue of *Miesięcznik Literacki*,[51] to refute Antoni Słonimski's claims, in *Wiadomości Literackie*,

about the alleged idleness of the English proletariat.

Artists and cultural workers were critical of both the working class and the KPP, a stance that was sometimes expressed in accusations that they exhibited bourgeois habits and employed imperfect, insufficiently thought-out forms. Szczuka regarded distinguished party figures as old fogies blinded by their bourgeois view of culture.[52] Witold Wandurski, the creator of a workers' theater in Łódź, maintained that working-class youth were uncritical and pervaded by habits adopted from the bourgeois press, and that the pinnacle of working women's aesthetic sensibilities was to adorn their walls with soap advertisements and clippings from magazines and cookie boxes.[53] Older communists, on the other hand, were accused of being stuck in an era of idealistic socialism; they would decorate their meeting halls with portraits of Marx, Lassalle, and Waryński, and treated Antoni Kamieński's engravings in the album *Duch rewolucjonisty* (The Spirit of the Revolutionary) as holy relics from the battles of 1905. The often-radical leaders of the worker movement, in Wandurski's view, allied with the censors when it came to matters of "new art."

The editors of *Kultura Robotnicza* (Labor Culture), *Nowa Kultura* (New Culture), *Dźwignia* (Lever), *Miesięcznik Literacki* (Literary Monthly), and other magazines helped organize art clubs for laborers and supported the literary aspirations of the proletariat. Still, their responses to submissions from workers and sympathetic intellectuals, printed in the above periodicals, were frequently vituperative. Workers were criticized for their poor spelling, stylistic inadequacy, lack of talent, pessimism, and non-materialist world view. The party's stringent expectations regarding discipline and revolutionary gravitas were reflected in the communists' disdainful treatment of the creative efforts of amateur proletarians. They encouraged laborers to produce an authentic worker culture, and then critiqued it as they would professional art. Instead of rejecting the standards and legacy of

bourgeois culture, they expected workers to help advance or transform them by means of wary imitation. Only at the end of this process would the proletariat be able to prove the justness of their demands for equal treatment in the field of culture. The working class thus remained a vanguard that was unprepared for its tasks.

New prospects for cultural work opened up for the KPP in the 1930s. In July 1932, Poland and the USSR signed a non-aggression pact, paving the way for cultural exchange between the two countries. The following year, the Institute of Art Propaganda in Warsaw hosted an *Exhibition of Soviet Art*. Subsequent editions of the show, in 1934 and 1935, were put on in Warsaw and Lviv. Most significant, however, were the policies adopted at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, which concluded in August 1935. Facing the looming threat of war against the fascist powers, the congress prioritized the maintenance of peace in Europe. Seven years after it had been announced, the policy of attacking social democratic and people's parties was abandoned by the communists, in favor of building a popular front against fascism. The shift in relations among left-wing parties made it possible to form alliances between labor unions, to stage joint strikes and protests, to coordinate publishing activities, and to attempt to organize the amateur worker-photographer movement in Poland.

The First Worker-Photography Exhibition

Curator and historian of photography Aleksandra Garlicka writes that the idea for the *First Worker-Photography Exhibition* was conceived in early 1936.[54] Printed in the April 1 issue of *Nowości Fotograficzne* (Photography News) was an invitation to what was billed as "the first nationwide photography exhibition of photography workers," marking the thirtieth anniversary of the Union of Photography Workers (ZZPF) in Lviv. It was penned by Władysław Bednarczuk, a photo studio employee and artistic

photographer. The announcement makes no mention of worker-photography nor the formation of a working-class amateur-photography movement.[55] In July 1936, Bednarczuk issued another invitation, this time for the *First Worker-Photography Exhibition*, with an overtly class-based program.[56] The new concept for the exhibition may have been a response to the April riots in Lviv, which had been sparked by an economic downturn and resulted in several dozen deaths, as well as an indication of the show's connection to the Congress of Culture Workers in Defense of Freedom and Progress, which had drawn socialist and communist intellectuals to the city in May.

In the invitation, the organizing committee called upon laborers and intellectuals, professionals and amateurs alike, to submit images that could help launch the worker-photography in Poland. A variety of forms and themes were permitted, with the notable exception of retouched images and conventional studio photography. To ensure their high quality, a panel of judges would assess submissions based on a "worker ethic," the precepts of which were not explained.

That the panel formed a united ideological front is evident in the names and political affiliations of the judges. It included the botanist Dezydery Szymkiewicz, active in the League for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights, formed both by socialists and communists to defend individuals facing political repression; Jan Szczyrek, chairman of the Lviv chapter of the Polish Socialist Party and editor of *Trybuna Robotnicza* (The Worker's Tribune), and Leon Lutyk, an engineer, People's Party activist, and supporter of radical agrarian reform.[57] Tadeusz Cyprian mentions two additional members: the painter Andrzej Pronaszko (whose name was crossed out on the invitation that was hand-delivered to him) and Jarosław Hałan, a writer and member of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine. Organizational duties were undertaken by the Union of Photography Workers, represented by a committee comprising

Władysław Bednarczuk, Filip Haber, and P. Süssmann. Little is known about the structure and activities of this union. It was open to journeymen and low-level employees of photo studios, and the worker-photography exhibition was intended to commemorate its thirtieth anniversary.[58] The collections of the National Library in Poland contain a communiqué issued by the union's Warsaw branch on October 14, 1935.[59] The union called for a boycott of Mojżesz Byk's "RYS" Photo Studios, whose workers had been on strike, demanding an end to "12–14-hour work days" and "starvation wages." The studio's proprietor was reported to have called in the police to deal with the workers, and was attempting to recruit new employees through ads in the National-Democratic press, emphasizing that people of Jewish descent need not apply. According to Ignacy Płażewski, in 1936 the ZZPF submitted to the government a memorandum in which the union demanded reforms to the vocational training of photographers, which at the time required one to complete an apprenticeship under a master photographer. "The unskilled master," the union argued, "had little to teach the apprentice."[60]

The exhibition opened on December 13, 1936, at the City Museum of the Art Industry, at 24 Hetmańska Street. The display featured 120 photographs by 22 artists, sixteen of whom were from Lviv, while two hailed from Vilnius, one from Łódź, and one from the Dąbrowa Basin.[61] The photos were arranged in two categories - artistic photography and photojournalism - with the latter comprising the bulk of the works. An absence of sources prevents us from determining the social class of the exhibited photographers. It is certain that not all of them were workers; on view were images by such notable artists as Władysław Bednarczuk, a prize-winning photography apprentice from a poor family of craftspeople, and Edmund and Bolesław Zdanowski, both members of the Polish Photoclub.



Figure 3. Edmund Zdanowski, *Documentation of the First Worker-Photography Exhibition in Lviv*; źródło

The reviews and individual photographs printed in *Trybuna Robotnicza*, *Dziennik Popularny* (The Popular Daily), and *Sygnały* (Signals)[62] testify to the diversity of themes and techniques present at the exhibition. Displayed alongside landscapes were *Bieda-Grajek* (The Poor Busker), *Zwycięzcy* (The Victors), and *Elementy* (Elements), by Władysław Bednarczuk, who garnered praise for his mastery of the "difficult technique of isohelia."[63] The photograph *Mówca* (The Speaker, by J. Eisenstark) depicted Jan Szczyrek atop a podium on May Day. There were grandiose and well-composed photos of May-Day marches and factory workers, as well as journalistic pieces documenting illegal "bootleg mining" (*biedaszyby*, J. Środula) and *łybaki*—people who harvested crude oil from natural petroleum seeps—along with photographs of a homeless family hauling their belongings on a two-wheeled cart. A photograph titled *Ulica naszym domem* (The Streets are our Home) showed a group of homeless youths, while *Dożywianie* (Scrounging for Food) featured a young vagrant eating an ear of corn. Some of the pictures represented specific "types" of workers and craftspeople of various professions, such as *Portret starszego robotnika* (Portrait of an Elderly Worker) and *Głowa starej wieśniaczki* (The Head of an Old Peasant Woman) by A. Rieser, and Bolesława Zdanowska's *Ślusarze* (Locksmiths). Meanwhile, *Światła i cienie karabinów maszynowych i armat* (The Lights and Shadows of Machine Guns and Cannons), by J. Mehrer, was an example of the style known as "new photography," and depicted, from a top-down perspective and at a sharp angle, a row of machine guns trained on the shadows of soldiers, marching out of frame.

From the point of view of art history, it would be understandable to locate the *First Worker-Photography Exhibition* in the context of the development of socialist realism, if only due to its temporal proximity to the Soviet exhibitions mentioned above and the exhibition by the Phrygian Cap group. There is an absence of sources (especially extant photographs) that would justify including the exhibition in this particular style of depicting class conflict in art. The material that does exist allows one to observe that it was characterized by an unresolved tension which Jacques Rancière called "the politics of the becoming-life of art and the politics of the resistant form."[64] True, the *First Worker-Photography Exhibition* was political in character, but its purpose was not simply to channel party politics into the gallery. Its organizers hoped to provoke a shift in class relations in the field of art, while preserving its autonomy.

The call for submissions specified that the artworks must be photographs created by the artists themselves, and must correspond thematically to the views of the working class. Class and profession were of secondary importance: photographs could be taken by industrial workers, trained photographers, or working intellectuals. Furthermore, entrants were permitted to submit artistic and journalistic photography created using a variety of techniques. The condition was that they accept the organizers' view of art as a form of creative labor, and that they express a willingness to participate in the worker-photography movement and to set aside individualistic assessment criteria.[65]

On the other hand, the goal was not to dispute the existence of art or the conditions in which it operated, thereby relegating the movement to the margins of Polish photography. On the contrary: the organizers chose to hold the show in a public institution, published the judging criteria, and personally invited

artistic photographers to participate. Reviews of the exhibition in the labor press were similar to those found in the photography press, and did employ oversimplifications. The photos displayed at the show stretched the contest's thematic and professional guidelines, but they exhibited proper composition and dynamics (as in the case of Bednarczuk's *Ręce Mocarne* (Powerful Hands) and *Hej... rr... up!,* by someone credited only as Szeitel) as well as attention to lighting and pose, as is visible in *Ślusarze*. The Polish worker-photographer movement, it was believed, would be driven by the steady creative output of a network of amateurs, regular exhibitions, and a presence in the photographic and technical press. The antagonistic tone adopted by the organizers with regard to the Polish photography establishment was therefore an expression of the former's conviction that they in fact belonged to the latter, and simultaneously a rejection of the principles that had guided Polish photography thus far.



Figure 4. Władysław Bednarczuk, *Ręce mocarne* (Powerful Hands); źródło

According to Janina Mierzecka, the exhibition was a success, as reflected in its large attendance.[66] Still, Bednarczuk never managed to put together another show. Mierzęcka attributes this failure to his despondency at the lukewarm reception the show received from artistic photographers, but one should bear in mind that, by 1937, the Sanation government had dissolved the League for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights, under whose patronage the first exhibition was

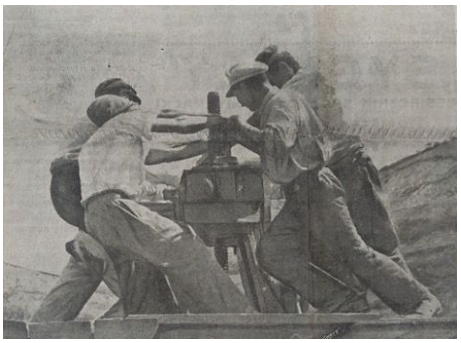


Figure 5. Szeitel, *Hej... rr... up!*, *Trybuna Robotnicza* no. 52 (December 27, 1936), 1

held. The exhibition left few traces in the photographic press, but nevertheless succeeded in sparking a debate between one of its judges, Leon Lutyk, and the photographer Tadeusz Cyprian. The latter asked, in September 1936, if it was even possible for the worker and the bourgeoisie to see differently.[67] He was also outraged that the organizers had sent out multilingual invitations, as if Lviv were not a Polish city. Cyprian blasted the show as a "hexalingual event put on by a 'domestic international.'" He was similarly opposed to the use of the ill-defined "worker ethic" as a judging criterion: "They could very well have chosen the professional ethic, defined by the aspiration to fulfill one's professional duties, but what does that have to do with the artistic quality of the photographic image?" In other words, Cyprian cited both the class-transcending universalism of art, and the particularistic interests of the Second Polish Republic. Attempting to temper the radical tone of the invitation, Leon Lutyk in turn emphasized the elements of perception that were common to all classes, though he did observe that intellectual artists were terrified by the idea of class struggle becoming a matter of interest to art. Lutyk chose arguments that were understandable to artistic photographers, presenting class struggle as a powerful emotional stimulus for art. He also reminded Cyprian that the purpose of including workers (including photo studio employees) was to popularize and improve the quality of photography in Poland—goals which Cyprian himself shared. Crucially, Lutyk's rebuttal noted that, prior to the show in Lviv, photographs of class conflict were inadmissible in photo exhibitions.[68]

More or less concurrently, Lutyk published an article titled "Artistic Photography and the Aesthetic Training of Technicians."[69] Echoing Hoernle, Lutyk drew a clear connection between one's trade—in other words, a person's class status—and one's predisposition to see particular phenomena and practice specific arts. Technicians' innate reliability drove

them to pursue technical perfection—and in photography, he argued, technical perfection was inextricably linked to beauty. The deliberate, organized training of perception would enable working intellectuals and laborers who practiced photography to combine social issues with matters of art. Industrial workers made it possible to synthesize class-conscious worker-photography and artistic photography into something Lutyk dubbed the "labor landscape." In this view, greater emphasis was placed on the very action of consciously choosing a subject, composing the image, and carefully observing one's environment. The purpose was not to photograph classes *per se*, but for new social classes to take up photography. It was hoped that, by taking part in an aesthetic experience, industrial workers would realize that they been unwitting participants of something beautiful, even if that beauty also took the form of filth, neglect, and ugliness. According to this concept, modern Polish society would be prevented from engaging in self-perception and self-depiction as long as it sought artistic subjects and models outside itself and its contemporary activities.

In the December 1936 issue of *Przegląd Fotograficzny* (The Photography Review), Jan Bułhak, the doyen of Polish artistic photography and a figure of authority for the country's amateur photographers, addressed Lutyk's "Artistic Photography and the Aesthetic Training of Technicians," rounding off the discussion that had followed the *First Worker-Photography Exhibition*. He ascribed to the concept of the labor landscape an important role in "counteracting contemporary materialism" and unleashing the noble, selfless sensations



Figure 6. Bolesława Zdanowska, *Ślusarze*, *Trybuna Robotnicza* no. 1 (January 3, 1937), 1

that are stirred by the exploration of the Polish landscape. "True democratism," Bułhak wrote, was not about "leveling down," which in the context of the *First Worker-Photography Exhibition* meant photographing class antagonism and its consequences.[70] Clearly enraptured, he described the members of the Lviv Polytechnic Club of Photography Technicians (in which Lutyk was himself active) as a bunch of "upstanding young men" much like the Hitler Youth and Balilla. Bułhak's comment stripped the concept of the "labor landscape" of its materialist and class elements. Moreover, he subordinated it to his own concept of *fotografia ojczysta* ("homeland photography"), itself an offshoot of the German *Heimatphotographie*, which was being promoted by Germany's fascists.

"Homeland Photography" and the Visuality of Social Class

Fascist photography organizations and *Heimat* tourism clubs had, since 1935, inspired Polish pictorialists, who admired their highly developed operations and their efforts to elevate the status of tourist and landscape photography. The exchange began with a visit by the chairman of the Association of Photographic Societies in Germany, Prof. Paul Lüking, to Warsaw.[71]

In his books and articles written between 1936 and 1939, Jan Bułhak openly discussed *Heimatphotographie* and the possibility of its adoption in Poland. Crucial to this discussion are the class-related themes found in Bułhak's writing during this period.

As early as in *Estetyka światła* (The Aesthetics of Light, 1936), Bułhak states that although Poles are not a noble nation, they will not be a nation of burghers, either.[72] As the "descendants of farmers and peasants," they have no business photographing "industrial and urban" scenes.[73] To shut ones' eyes to nature, meanwhile, would be "un-Aryan and un-Slavic" and lead to the imitation of "the West's material and industrial one-sidedness" in

photography.[74] Cities, in Bułhak's view, were "storehouses of ugliness," and New Objectivist photographers were unnecessarily preoccupied with the detailed analysis of this hideousness and the "material conditions of city life."[75] Despite its heterogeneity, regional folklore - he argued - was where the common (aristocratic and peasant) history of Polish soil was preserved,[76] and photography could save it from proletarian-bourgeois modernity.

In Bułhak's view, the task of organizing a movement of homeland photographers, recruited among skilled amateurs, fell to the state. Crucially, the Sanation movement was the direct class representative of Polish pictorialists. The latter traced their roots to the gentry of the Eastern Borderlands (as in Bułhak's case), were members of the noble-born intelligentsia, or else were working intellectuals who shared the aristocratic ethos.[77] "Homeland photography" was therefore intended to be a shared project by the nobility and the intelligentsia, who—in the service of their country and with its assistance—aspired to establish a canon of class depiction. The peasantry were worthy of being photographed only to the extent they personified old traditions, devoid of specific historicity, and were photogenic anthropological subjects. The working class and the petty bourgeoisie, by contrast, did not yet deserve the honor of being immortalized in the documentary and artistic works of homeland photographers.

In November 1938, an exhibition titled *The Beauty of the Silesian Land* was held in Katowice. Most likely funded in part by the Silesian voivodeship, the exhibition and the catalog accompanying it were mature realizations of homeland photography's guiding principles.[78] As Maciej Szymanowicz observes, the efforts to depict Silesia's industry—an expression of the power of the Second Polish Republic—in symbiosis with folk traditions and in harmony with nature, produced astonishing results. In landscapes by Jan Bułhak, the outlines of factories

blend into the sprawling, empty countryside, becoming an organic element of the natural environment. In photos by Antoni Wieczorek, meanwhile, the workers at a calcium carbide plant in Chorzów appear as shadows: uniform, faceless black silhouettes. There were numerous portraits and group photos of women in folk garb, as well as pictures of rural homesteads. Consequently, Szymanowicz writes, "readers of the exhibition catalog would be forgiven for thinking that the gigantic factories were separated by nothing but outdoor ethnographic museums."[79] Whenever "homeland photographers" addressed the subject of Polish industry, they did their best to hide the workers that operated it.

Conclusion



Figure 7. Antoni Wieczorek, *Robotnicy opuszczają karbidownię* (Workers Leaving a Calcium Carbide Plant), *Nowości Fotograficzne* no. 20 (1938), 32

Worker-photography—in the sense of a public-facing style of photography concerned with the theme of class, created mainly by workers associated with political parties—failed to gain traction in Poland due to the priorities and strategies of the KPP, the conservative nature of Polish photography circles, and the material and legal challenges facing photographers in the Second Polish Republic. The most significant local response to the postulates of proletarian photography developed in Weimar Germany and the USSR—namely, the 1936 *First Worker-Photography Exhibition* in Lviv—did little to increase the visibility of the proletariat in the public space. The show's organizers did not achieve their goal of establishing lasting collaboration between working intellectuals and laborers in the realm of photography.

Still, as Aleksandra Garlicka has demonstrated in her research and curatorial work, the Polish working class amassed their own archives of portraits, group photos, and commemorative pictures of weddings and funerals.[80] In 1989 Garlicka displayed photos from the private collections of working-class families at the *Second Worker-Photography Exhibition* held in Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Częstochowa, and Sosnowiec. She collected and captioned thousands of photographs taken in the years 1881–1946, which now form the digital archive *Workers in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, launched in 2012 by the University of Łódź's Institute of Ethnography and Cultural Anthropology.[81] The archive's contents will allow scholars to study the methods of memory preservation employed in working families, to determine the role of the photograph in forming the working-class identity, and to compare these grassroots photographic activities with the output and principles of the international amateur worker-photography movement.

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72 Jan Bułhak, *Estetyka światła* (Vilnius: Polska Drukarnia Artystyczna Grafika, 1936), 26.

73 Ibid., 92.

74 Ibid., 91, 93.

75 Ibid., 25, 90.

76 Jan Bułhak, "Regionalizm w fotografii czyli fotografia ojczysta," *Nowości Fotograficzne*, no. 2 (1937): 17–24.

77 Szymanowicz, "Topografia sukcesu," 92–93.

78 Ibid., 100.

79 Ibid., 111.

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81 Grażyna Karpińska, "Dziedzictwo w cyfrowym archiwum: fotografie robotników w repozytorium cyfrowym," *Zeszyty Wiejskie*, no. 19 (2014): 201–14.

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