

## Final report on the Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives

The practices, representations, and expressions used by mineworkers to defend their interests in authoritarian Poland and Spain, 1958–1975

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### Doctoral project

My doctoral project focuses on the intangible cultural heritage of miners in the authoritarian regimes of Poland and Spain between 1958 and 1975.<sup>1</sup> It investigates the individual and collective practices, representations, and expressions leveraged by workers employed at coal mines in the Polish region of Silesia and the Spanish region of Asturias to defend and promote their material interests. Its aims are twofold. First, it seeks to demonstrate how each authoritarian state deconstructed and reconstructed miners' long-standing traditions, co-opted miners' pre-existing organisations, and instrumentalised or weaponised miners' collective pasts. It assumes that, grappling with the misappropriation of their inheritance and navigating in a legal and political context which prevented them from freely articulating collective demands or co-ordinating collective action, miners concocted new means to maintain or improve the conditions of their employment. Second, then, it seeks to explore the lawful, extralegal, and illegal practices that Polish and Spanish miners devised to secure their material needs.<sup>2</sup>

The practices that workers in democratic settings used throughout the twentieth century to maintain and improve the conditions of their employment are well documented and understood. The right to associate and the right to bargain collectively constitute mainstays of democracy, and countless histories have been written that tell of workers exercising these rights via their affiliation to trade unions and their elaboration of trade union activity. The practices that workers in authoritarian regimes used, being necessarily less outwardly political and ergo less detectable, are less well documented and have rarely been studied comparatively.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For works on intangible cultural heritage, see: Hamzah Muzaini and Claudio Minca, eds. *After Heritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage from Below*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020; Iain J. M. Robertson, *Heritage from Below*. London: Routledge, 2016; Laurajane Smith, ed. *Heritage, Labour and the Working Classes: Key Issues in Cultural Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2011; Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, eds. *Intangible Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> For works on such workplace practices elsewhere, see: Jesse Adams-Stein, 'Making "foreign orders": Australian print-workers and clandestine creative production in the 1980s'. *Journal of Design History* 28:3 (2015): 275–92. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epv012>; Michel Anteby, 'Factory "homers": understanding a highly elusive, marginal, and illegal practice'. *Sociologie Du Travail* 48:1 (2006): 22–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sotra.2006.02.003>; Michel Anteby, 'The "moralities" of poaching: manufacturing personal artifacts on the factory floor'. *Ethnography* 4:2 (2003): 217–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381030042004>; Jason Ditton, 'Perks, pilferage, and the fiddle: the historical struggle of invisible wages', in Gerald Mars, ed. *Occupational Crime*, 3–35. London: Routledge, 2018; Alf Lüdtke, 'Cash, coffee-breaks, horseplay: Eigensinn and politics among factory workers in Germany circa 1900', in Michael Hanagan and Charles Stephenson, eds. *Confrontation, Class Consciousness and the Labor Process: Studies in Proletarian Class Formation*, 65–95. New York: Praeger, 1986; Gerald Mars, *Cheats at Work: An Anthropology of Workplace Crime*. London: Routledge, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> For works on infrapolitical practices in authoritarian regimes, see: Paul Corner, 'Non-compliance, indifference and resistance in regimes of mass dictatorship', in Paul Corner and Jie-Hyun Lim, eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of Mass Dictatorship*, 413–25. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

## OSA holdings

The holdings of the Open Society Archives (OSA) represent a boon for my project insofar as they include data collected by the Radio Free Europe (RFE) Research Institute relating to labour and the mining industry in the Polish People's Republic. I first visited the OSA in June 2022 within the framework of the Cold War Archives Research Institute organised by the Wilson Center. During this short stay, I reviewed the Polish subject files of the RFE East European Research and Analysis Department relating generally to labour, labour disputes, trade unions, wages, working hours, workplace health and safety, and absenteeism. Thoroughly impressed by the breadth and depth of the holdings preserved at the OSA, I determined to return for a longer stay to review the subject files relating specifically to the mining industry, as listed below.

### Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute East European Research and Analysis Department Subject Files Relating to Poland

Call Number	Description
300-2-6:63/1	Industry: mining, 1963–1977
300-2-6:76/8	Labor: safety, 1964–1970
300-2-6:80/1 300-2-6:80/2	Labor: wages, 1970 Labor: wages, 1971
300-2-6:96/3 300-2-6:96/4	Power and fuel: coal, 1963–1969 Power and fuel: coal, 1970–1973
300-2-6:97/1	Power and fuel: coal, 1974–1975

### Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute Media and Opinion Research Department East Europe Area and Opinion Research

Call Number	Description
300-6-2:2/10	Polish respondents view the allocation of national resources, 1966

### Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute Polish Unit Old Code Subject Files

Call Number	Description
300-50-1:869/5	Women's employment / Zatrudnienie kobiet, 1971
300-50-1:870/1 300-50-1:870/2	Women's employment / Zatrudnienie kobiet, 1972–1973 Women's employment / Zatrudnienie kobiet, 1974–1975
300-50-1:1166/2 300-50-1:1166/3 300-50-1:1166/4	Mining industry / Przemysł górniczy, 1951–1961 Mining industry / Przemysł górniczy, 1971 Mining industry / Przemysł górniczy, 1972
300-50-1:1167/1 300-50-1:1167/2 300-50-1:1167/3 300-50-1:1167/4	Mining industry / Przemysł górniczy, 1973 Mining industry / Przemysł górniczy, 1974 Mining industry / Przemysł górniczy, 1974 Mining industry / Przemysł górniczy, 1975
300-50-1:1171/4	Miner's Day / Dzień górnika, 1952–1957
300-50-1:1172/3 300-50-1:1172/4	Coal mines / Kopalnie węgla, 1961–1968 Coal mines / Kopalnie węgla, 1969–1972

300-50-1:1173/1 300-50-1:1173/2 300-50-1:1173/4	Coal mines / Kopalnie węgla, 1973–1974 Coal mines / Kopalnie węgla, 1975–1977 Accidents in mines / Wypadki w kopalniach, 1954–1958
300-50-1:1174/1 300-50-1:1174/2 300-50-1:1174/3	Accidents in mines / Wypadki w kopalniach, 1959–1969 Accidents in mines / Wypadki w kopalniach, 1970–1974 Accidents in mines / Wypadki w kopalniach, 1975–1978
300-50-1:1398/5 300-50-1:1398/6	Mines, Miner and Hutnik Day / Kopalnie, Dzień górnika i hutnika, 1955–1959 Mines, Miner and Hutnik Day / Kopalnie, Dzień górnika i hutnika, 1960–1961
300-50-1:1401/2	Employment in mines, mining, special groups / Zatrudnienie w kopalniach, górnictwo, grupy specjalne, 1956–1986

Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute  
Polish Unit  
Subject Card Files

Call Number	Description
300-50-3:9/20 300-50-3:9/22	Zjednoczenia węglowe, 1951–1984 Kopalnie węgla, 1951–1991 (A-H)
300-50-3:10/1	Kopalnie węgla, 1951–1991 (I-Z)

## OSA findings

My reading of the data uncovered a multitude of findings, but here I shall present only those findings that relate explicitly to the two key aims of my project.

First, wanting to better understand the interventions of the Polish authoritarian state into the long-standing traditions of Polish miners, I looked at the old code subject files of the RFE Polish Unit concerning the subject of Miner's Day. These files contain data collected from the official media outlets of the Polish United Workers' Party between 1952 and 1962, predominantly in the form of clippings of articles featured in the party newspapers *Głos Pracy* and *Trybuna Ludu*, and also in the form of transcriptions of broadcasts featured in the programme of *Polskie Radio*.

The fourth of December was first celebrated as Miner's Day in 1948 and was repeatedly celebrated as such on an annual basis throughout the existence of People's Poland. Typically, a central ceremony was convened in Katowice, the regional capital of Silesia, where leading party functionaries addressed a large audience populated by other party functionaries, the mining intelligentsia, and miners themselves, and thanked them for their dedication to the mining industry. This address was usually followed by the bestowing of distinctions and gifts, feasting, and dancing. The fourth of December had not always been celebrated in this manner however. From the middle of the eighteenth century, it had been celebrated throughout Silesia as Saint Barbara's Day. Typically, on this day a solemn early morning mass was held underground at the mines or aboveground at the churches, whereby miners prayed and eulogised their patron saint, Saint Barbara of Nicomeda. This mass was also followed by feasts and dances, where miners exchanged accounts and tales about mining work with each other and with their family members.

The naming conventions adopted by the party from 1948 divested the fourth of December of its divine associations as it transformed from the sacral day of Saint Barbara to the secular day of the miner. The counting conventions adopted by the party invisibilised the long past of the celebration and foregrounded its short past by nominating 1945 as the year of its inception. Thus, addressing the central ceremony of Miner's Day in December 1959, the Chairman of the Miners' Trade Union Michał Specjał opted for the construction: 'for the fifteenth time in the liberated homeland, we celebrate the annual mining holiday'.<sup>4</sup> I was unsurprised to find that the broadcasts featured in the domestic programme of *Polskie Radio*

<sup>4</sup> "Centralna akademka z okazji Dnia Górnika." *Radio Warszawa II*, 1959, 03 December. HU OSA 300-50-1:1398/5.

relating to the fourth of December, as featured on the channels *Radio Warszawa I* and *Radio Warszawa II*, neglected to mention the custom of spiritual invocation that had historically been intertwined with the date. I was surprised, however, to discover that the broadcasts featured in its international programme, as featured on the channel *Rozgłosnia Kraj*, made extensive mention of the cult of Saint Barbara and openly discussed the founding myth of this cult.<sup>5</sup> This channel targeted the Polish diaspora living abroad and actively encouraged its repatriation.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps in their coverage of the fourth of December, the channel editors sought to create the impression that the Catholic predilections and customs of emigrant Poles would be respected and accommodated should they return to People's Poland. Or perhaps they conceded that the Polish mining fraternity festering in capitalist Belgium and France still needed the god and spirits of Catholicism on their side.

I was curious to learn how, having hollowed out the celebration of its spiritual connotations and content, the party sought to reconstitute and reconstruct it in its domestic programme. Expectedly, the celebration was to involve the veneration of the miner and the mining profession. Certain motifs constantly reappeared in the Miner's Day coverage of the official media outlets: the mining workforce as the historical and contemporary vanguard of the Polish working class; the lifeblood of the Polish nation and the Polish national economy; and an army bravely fighting with the forces of nature to extract naturally occurring minerals that, once extracted, ensured heat in Polish homes, light in Polish rooms, and production in Polish factories. The miners of People's Poland qualified as the best sons of the Polish nation and warranted the respect, admiration, and adoration of all its constituent social groups. In the Polish vernacular of the 1950s, the term 'beniaminek' referred to the favourite son of the family, as Benjamin had been the favourite son of the Israelite patriarch Jacob, and miners were frequently designated by the party as 'nasze beniaminki' or 'our Benjamins'. In 1957, *Trybuna Ludu* published a selection of letters addressed by all manner of working Poles, including farmers, steelworkers, and shipmasters to 'their Benjamins' thanking them for good coal and wishing them good health.<sup>7</sup>

The celebration of the miner was not to be conducted in the spirit of unqualified panegyricism but in the spirit of reflexivity. On the fourth of December, miners were invited to reflect on their performance vis-à-vis the annual production plan. The Miner's Day address of the party general secretary invariably featured a long segment reflecting on each indicator of the annual production plan and the plan outcomes. Had the stipulations of the plan regarding output, productivity, production costs, work organisation, work discipline, and workplace accidents been satisfied? Was the mechanisation and automation of mining processes at the mines developing at a satisfactory pace? Was the implementation of occupational health and safety measures at the mines unfolding at a satisfactory pace? Year after year, the custom of critically assessing the productive performance of the mining industry in the preceding year was increasingly packaged as a valued and time-honoured tradition, which 'underlined the socialist content of Miner's Day and the role of miners as custodians of the mines and the people's state'.<sup>8</sup> This custom ostensibly took its cue from a ministerial order regarding preparations for the first Miner's Day celebrated in the Soviet Union in August 1948, which stated that miners were to review their production achievements in the foregoing year.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Miner's Day coverage of the official media outlets was the ubiquitous sense that the miner's value was inextricably interwoven with their productive performance.

If one feature of Miner's Day was its critical celebration of miners, another was its less equivocal celebration of the state and the facilities and services which it furnished the mining workforce with. The generous investments recently made by the state were enumerated. The state had: increased miners' wages; expanded the housing stock available to miners and their families; provided educational facilities and

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<sup>5</sup> "4 grudnia - Barbary - tradycyjne święto polskich górników." *Rozgłosnia Kraj*, 1956, 05 December. HU OSA 300-50-1:1398/5.

<sup>6</sup> Jerzy Myśliński, 'Rozgłosnia "Kraj" na tle programów radiowych dla Polonii po 1944 r.'. *Kwartalnik Historii Prasy Polskiej* 26:1 (1987): 109–115.

<sup>7</sup> "Czego życzą górnikom." *Trybuna Ludu*, 03 December, 1957. HU OSA 300-50-1:1398/5.

<sup>8</sup> "Pracujemy dla siebie - pracujemy dla pokoju." *Trybuna Ludu*, 04 December, 1960. HU OSA 300-50-1:1398/6.

<sup>9</sup> Beata Piecha-van Schagen, 'Cały naród świętuje z górnikami: propagowanie "Dnia Górnika" w latach 1948–1979 jako manipulowanie pamięcią społeczną', *Górniki Polski* 8 (2015), 101–121.

opportunities for miners and their children; provided medical facilities for the preventative and palliative healthcare of miners; allocated money for the prevention and compensation of mining accidents; legislated to shorten the miners' working day; endowed mining localities with cultural and scientific facilities, like the House of Music and Dance in Zabrze and the planetarium in Katowice. Occasionally, in the clippings of the moderately critical *Polityka* and *Życie Gospodarcze* newspapers, I was able to see that this state grandstanding did not wash with everybody. The journalists of these newspapers highlighted that wage increases failed to deliver improvements in miner purchasing power due to taxation and inflation, that localities with large volumes of new recruits to the mining industry struggled with chronic housing and infrastructural shortcomings, and that many mines continued to be extremely dangerous. Whilst the official programme of Miner's Day sought to underpin the legitimacy and generosity of the state from the perspective of the miners, the expression of such perspectives suggests that not everyone was convinced.

Second, wanting to better understand the practices observed by Polish miners to secure their material needs, I looked at the old code subject files concerning the mining industry, employment in the mining industry and mining accidents. Again, these files contain data collected from the official media outlets of the Polish United Workers' Party. At the beginning of my stay at the OSA, I spoke with Professor István Rév, who warned me not to trust the 'voice of the worker' as it appeared in these official publications and instructed me to read between the lines as Carlo Ginzburg read between the lines of the trial accounts that he examined for *The Night Battles*.<sup>10</sup> Reading between the lines, I was able to detect some of the infrapolitical ways that miners were defending and promoting their material interests.

Firstly, if a miner could not maintain or improve the conditions of their work via legitimate trade union activity, they could simply not go to work. The neuroses of the party regarding absence from work and absenteeism informed the compilation of a vast body of quantitative and qualitative reports which tell of miners, en masse, taking unjustified leaves of absence, simulating illnesses, and manipulating healthcare officials to grant them justified leaves of absence. Whilst the official publications present the dry statistics of absenteeism in light of their relationship with output statistics, few venture to explain the high incidence of absenteeism by way of anything other than sheer laziness or indiscipline. The testimonials of Polish miners that I have encountered elsewhere suggest that, far from being lazy, the miners who engaged in 'absenteeism' were fatigued and exhausted by highly physical mining work and found that occasionally soliciting a sick note was the easiest way to secure sufficient time for recuperation.

Secondly, the miners and mine managers of a given mine could manipulate or falsify data relating to output and occupational health and safety to ensure that they would be paid the annual bonus for satisfactory completion of production tasks. As the 1960s proceeded, more and more mines registered the early completion of their production tasks, implying on the one hand that the introduction of new mining methods and machinery was permitting productivity to grow exponentially, but implying on the other, less well reported, hand that mine managers were submitting more and more optimistic reports on output and productivity indicators. The files suggest that miners themselves were also culpable of breeding unjustified optimism by sending Potemkin wagons to the surface of their mines. The issue of poor quality coal resurfaces throughout the official publications, suggesting that coal miners, many of whom were remunerated by piece-rate, were extracting whatever minerals they could to fill more wagons more quickly, simultaneously ensuring that the production tasks of the annual production plan were completed and that their piece-rate earnings and bonuses were larger. The testimonials of miners from the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic collected by Eeva Kesküla attest to a similar phenomenon occurring in Estonia.<sup>11</sup>

Another issue that resurfaced throughout the official publications was a perceived 'lack of respect' for state property on behalf of some miners. It was rarely elucidated exactly what this 'lack of respect' entailed, but it seems to have taken two forms. The first was committing economic crimes such as stealing mining materials. One unusually condemnatory 1960 article from *Dziennik Polski* on the Silesian mining industry

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<sup>10</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, translated by John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Eeva Kesküla, 'Fiddling, drinking and stealing: moral code in the Soviet Estonian mining industry'. *European Review of History* 20:2 (2013): 237–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2013.766522>.

noted that miners were rarely arrested for so-called political abuses but commonly arrested for so-called economic abuses.<sup>12</sup> Again, cross-referencing the official accounts with the accounts of Polish miners uncovers an interpretational conflict: miners conceived of mine property not as state property strictly speaking but as the property of the mine's workforce, hence they were not committing an economic abuse when relocating materials from their mines to their homes but claiming what was rightfully theirs. The second form that a 'lack of respect' could take was boycotting mining machinery. Many articles that featured in the official publications of the 1950s and 1960s, a period of intensive mining mechanisation, noted disappointedly that the conservatism of some miners prompted them to boycott new mining devices such as conveyor belts.<sup>13</sup> Whilst the official publications present these boycotts as unjustified Luddite outbursts by unproselytised miners, I suspect that the miners were cognisant that the adoption of mining devices would lead to the imposition of yet less attainable work norms, and that in physically contesting their adoption were attempting to regulate those work norms.

In my reading, I found that miners did have less subversive ways of securing their material needs or reasserting their agency than shirking, deceiving, stealing, and machine-breaking. They could, for example, bring legal action against particularly disagreeable mine supervisors or write letters to official media outlets parroting the language of the party whilst criticising mining conditions.<sup>14</sup> As one miner explained, one could strategically engage with the system, living not 'within it' per se but 'next to it'.<sup>15</sup>

I shall conclude this section on my findings with a note on the 'voice of the woman' as it appeared or, rather, did not appear in the official publications. I came to the OSA knowing that women worked at the coal mines prior to and during the period focalised by my project, chiefly in the coal processing plants on the surface of the mines, but I found few references to such women.<sup>16</sup> They were scarcely mentioned in the general coverage of the mining industry and in the coverage of Miner's Day. Women were increasingly addressed in the early 1970s coverage of Miner's Day, not in their productive capacity but in their reproductive capacity. For example, 1,355 women were awarded golden crosses on Miner's Day in 1971 for each bringing up three or more sons working in the mining industry.<sup>17</sup> Their sons were recognised as an integral part of Poland's best mining staff; the women who worked in the mining industry were not. Mercifully, I was able to find one official account of women employed at a coal mine asserting their agency by intervening where habitual shirkers threatened their annual bonuses and occupational health and safety: in 1972, one Klara Gościcka, employed at a coal processing plant, stated 'if someone is suspiciously ill too often, the crew ousts them'.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "W śląskim zagłębiu górniczym." *Dziennik Polski*, 06 April, 1960. HU OSA 300-50-1:1166/2.

<sup>13</sup> "Problemy łączyczej kopalni." *Trybuna Ludu*, 18 May, 1960. HU OSA 300-50-1:1166/2.

<sup>14</sup> For works on letter writing in authoritarian regimes, see: Juliane Fürst, 'In search of Soviet salvation: young people write to the Stalinist authorities'. *Contemporary European History* 15:3 (2006): 327–45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777306003353>; Grzegorz Miernik, "'Socjalistyczny zakład pracy" w listach do władz z pierwszej połowy lat siedemdziesiątych', *Polska 1944/45–1989: Studia i Materiały* 17 (2019): 195–234.

<sup>15</sup> "Living "next" to the system." *Washington Evening Star*, 18 March, 1971. HU OSA 300-50-1:1166/3.

<sup>16</sup> For an excellent work on working women in the Polish People's Republic, see: Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> "Akademia Barburkowa w Zabrze." *Radio Warszawa II*, 03 December, 1971. HU OSA 300-50-1:1166/3.

<sup>18</sup> "Wydać sąd o wszystkim, wierzymy mu." *Polityka*, 01 January, 1972. HU OSA 300-50-1:1166/4.

## Concluding remarks

I presented the major findings of my stay at the OSA on July 26, 2023 as part of the Visegrad Scholarship presentation series. My presentation was entitled: "'Nasze beniaminki': the state and the miners in People's Poland, 1958–1975'. Preparing and delivering this presentation helped me begin to synthesise and verbalise the many discoveries I made deep in the files of the RFE Research Institute, and the questions and comments I received alerted me to important dimensions which I hope to consider as I proceed with my research. The value of the OSA holdings to my research inheres in the highly concentrated contextual information they provide about developments in the Polish mining industry during the period focalised by my project. I intend to supplement this information with the information I glean from other national and local archival institutions in Poland and Spain about specific coal mines and coal mining bodies in order to produce a doctoral thesis which comparatively studies miners and their heritage in state-socialist Poland and Francoist Spain.

Finally, as the individuals who worked at the coal mines may have been the 'lifeblood' of the Polish national economy, the individuals who work at the OSA undoubtedly constitute the lifeblood of the archive. I have been equally intellectually stimulated by my conversations with these individuals, positively astonished by their familiarity with the holdings of the archive, and warmly welcomed by both their academic and touristic recommendations. I give special thanks to István Rév, Katalin Gáboros, Bianka Horváth, Judit Hegedűs, Robert Parnica, Tibor Szigeti, and Márk László-Herbert for their time and input. The potentialities of the holdings for the innovation and completion of my doctoral thesis have only been confirmed by my stay at the archive. What I could not have anticipated before my stay at the archive was how much it would refresh and propel me as a researcher and as an individual. I thank all who made this possible and I thank the International Visegrad Fund board for generously supporting my research. I conclude the Visegrad Scholarship excited about my doctoral project and with a spring in my step.

Kraków, 01 August, 2023