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Prison officers in Poland: A profession in historical perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study concentrates on the changing nature of the prison officer profession in Poland as the country developed from a Stalinist satellite to a liberal democracy and member of the European Union. Drawing on a range of archival materials, the study also aims to demonstrate how a social institution is shaped by political forces. The analysis supports two theses. Firstly, because for two generations the prison system was deployed 'against the people', it is unsurprising that Polish citizens view prison officers in a negative light. Secondly, if prison staff wants to be recognised as professionals devoted to a decent and worthy task, they are likely need to deploy imaginative public relations.

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1. Introduction

In Poland, during the second half of the last century, changes in the prison system were closely linked with transformations in the country's polity and economy. The nature of the profession of prison officer has changed, with concomitant change of the people who perform their roles (Gawroński, 2012). At the same time, there have been significant transformations, quantitative and qualitative, in the prisoners themselves. Social consciousness of the profession of a prison officer has changed too, but here the changes have been more subtle and to some extent paradoxical (Szymanowski, 2013; Pabjan, 2009).

In the ranking of occupations by prestige, the jailer's profession comes nowhere. In fact, it is remarkably rare for this line of work to become the object of media interest or of public social analysis. Because of where the work is carried out and because of its particular nature, the fraction of society which has occasion to come in direct contact with its representatives is tiny. In 2008 only 3% had cause to come into contact with a representative of the prison service (by comparison: 18% had direct contact with the police). Furthermore, 18% of the public rate representatives of the prison service — along with debt collectors (35%) and prosecutors (32%) — among occupational groups with whom any contact is reckoned a very bad thing. Only two social groups, namely doctors (67.2%) and lawyers (62.5%) are noteworthy by reason of giving prison officers a positive assessment. In all other occupational groups, age categories, place of domicile, and educational level, public opinion in Poland is critical of the prison service and those who serve in it (CBOS, 2008).

Prison officers are a relatively small group in terms of numbers, but their role in the context of internal security is an important one. Society charges them with the rigorous punishment of convicted individuals, with keeping in isolation people who are depraved and serving long terms of incarceration (CBOS, 2006), yet as we have seen the profession of prison guard does not enjoy great esteem in public opinion. Its representatives are often and traditionally defined by the term *screws*, a

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word with a decidedly negative connotation.¹ Given changes in prison populations, as well as structural change in the process of penal rehabilitation, carrying out the occupational duties of today's prison officers requires specific competences and character dispositions. The bar set for aspirants to this profession today is high. Unfortunately, a negative image of a prison officer, built up in socialist Poland over nearly half a century, is strongly rooted in the social consciousness. Prison officers constitute an important element of the society's disciplinary apparatus, and they are associated with violence, repression and enslavement.

In this study we analyse the changing nature of the prison officer profession in Poland, as the country is developing from a Stalinist satellite to a liberal democracy and a member of the European Union. Our analysis throws some light on how a social institution is shaped by political forces, while indicating some limits to change, even under conditions of huge political transformation. In the next section we outline the methodology of our archival research and the types of documents we used for analysis. Then we analyse the socio-political nature of the prison officers: their demographic profile, educational and political profile, as well as their standing in Polish society. Our analysis follows a chronological pattern, starting with the years immediately after the Second World War and right through to Poland's accession into the European Union.

2. Methodology

This research is based on information drawn from an analysis of the literature on the subject, chiefly the historical publications prepared by the publishing arm of the Central Training Institution of the Prison Services at Kalisz, as well as the documents held in the Internal Archive of Łódź Remand Centre. In Poland of the 1950s and 1960s Łódź was the centre of a big concentration of prisons of different types, including a political prison and a labour camp. The Remand Centre was being built from the beginning of the 1960s and up to the mid-1980s, and was a central prison recognized as the biggest and most modern in the People's Republic, after Warsaw's. Correspondingly, its archival holdings were immense and the documents analysed in this study ranged from those collected in the 1950s and through the 1980s. Many documents in the Archive contained *inter alia* material from official correspondence, including accounts of the state of the existing prisons at that time, revealing how sheer dilapidation of prison buildings caused tensions in the prison's relation with the surrounding communities, as well as providing the background for the problems associated with the work of prison officers.

Among the documents analysed (all held in Section 2347, volumes 1–136) were:

- Conference reports from meetings of the Central Board of Prisons with the directors of Regional Boards of Prisons
- Letters issued by prison directors to subordinate officials conveying official instructions
- Letters on official promotions (together with an appraisal of the subject of the promotion and an account of the subject's service career)
- Minutes of meetings of prison personnel, directors' decisions on behaviour of and conduct with the prisoners (together with any justifications)
- Official notes and reports and on matters arising within the organization and on progress of prison officers' work
- Opinions taken from prison officers with a view to initiating investigatory or disciplinary proceedings; also complaints and accusations made by prison officers against other prison officers

In addition, the annual prison system activity reports for Łódź from the 1950s and 1960s were subjected to analysis. A considerable portion of the documents in question held in the Archive — which now possess historical value and show an “unofficial” face of the Polish prison system in the People's Republic period — remains unpublished to this day. In the course of this research, difficulties were caused by the fact that the Archive's holding of materials from the period has never been subjected to any logical system, and no adequate catalogue or description of these materials exists.

3. Second World War and Stalinist times

The annexation of the eastern part of Poland, which followed the attack of 17th September 1939, left around 250,000 Polish soldiers in Soviet captivity. According to Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* or IPN in future) records eight big camps were organized, among them three designated as “special” (IPN, 1992–2009). The special camp at Starobielski ultimately contained around 3900 Polish prisoners and contained the highest-ranking military officers and civilian officials. Special camps were set up also for 4500 army officers at Kozielsko and for more than 6500 Polish POWs at Ostaszkowo; this camp housed mainly officers of the frontier service, officers of the prison service, police and court officials (Bedyński, 2008). Executions were carried out in the utmost secrecy, but as early as 1943 mass graves came to light at Katyń, near Smolensk. The victims, identified as “enemies of the Soviet state”, were executed with pistol shots to the base of the skull; this was the work of the Soviet political police, the NKVD. From the place where the inmates of the Kozielsko camp were buried, these crimes have become known by the collective name of the Katyń Massacre. This atrocity involved the death of

¹ The Polish word translated as “screws” is “klawisz”, and this word comes from the Latin *clavis* = “key”. In prison slang *klawisz* means (*skeleton*) *key*, *doorknob*, as well as *guard*; the feminine *klawiszka* is an alternative for *straznicka*, which means “female guard” (Stepniak, 1993).

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