

Unfit, Unwanted, or Superfluous?

State Agricultural Farms and Their Workers as a New Social and Occupational Group in the Polish People's Republic

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Abstract. State agricultural farms (*Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne* or PGR in Polish) had a unique socio-economic status in post-war Poland. Modelled on the Soviet sovkhozes, they were intended to serve as a space for the creation of a new socialist socio-professional group, described in official propaganda as “the most advanced rural segment of the working class.” Although designed as a tool for agricultural modernization, state farms ultimately became spaces of permanent marginalization and lack of prospects, with far-reaching consequences for their communities up to the end of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL). Located between the traditional rural and working-class communities, state-farm workers were seen by public perception both as beneficiaries of the communist transformation and a microcosm of all the social pathologies, leading to their social rejection and stigmatisation.

This article examines the emergence of agricultural workers in the Polish People's Republic as a distinct social and occupational group, considering their low status, lack of integration with other occupational groups, and gradual marginalization. Drawing on archival material, journalistic sources, and oral testimonies, it examines how workers on state farms functioned in the Polish People's Republic, how their work and lifestyles were perceived, and how their systemic organization limited their agency and social mobility. The text also addresses the issue of the social isolation of agricultural workers, who after the collapse of communism were seen as an example of the failed attempt to create the communist ‘new man.’

Keywords: Poland, socialism, agriculture, modernization, state agricultural farms, workers

A resident of one state farm (*Państwowe Gospodarstwa Rolne*, PGR) located in north-western Poland noted in her diary in the 1960s: “I must point out that it was simply embarrassing to admit that one worked at a state farm because its employees were generally viewed rather negatively. However, with time you can get used to everything.”¹

1 *Młode Pokolenie Wsi Polski Ludowej*, Vol. 2, 290.

In turn, in accounts written down in the 1990s, another woman noted:

“People refer to the employees of the nearby Plant Breeding Station as »dworusy« [farmhands]. It is an insulting term, and there have been many fights over it.”²

Despite the temporal distance of over three decades separating these testimonies, what remains prominently foregrounded is the acutely articulated shame, the sense of inferiority, and people seeing employees in state agricultural enterprises as ignorant. The workforce of these institutions constituted a novel social and professional group that was created in the post-war Poland.

State farms were established in 1948 and represented a form of Stalinization initiated in rural areas that year. The second, considerably more oppressive manifestation took the form of production cooperatives—socialized agricultural entities created as components of the so-called collectivization policy. While in the Polish context, collectivization ultimately proved unsuccessful, forcing the communist authorities to withdraw from the project and recognize the permanence of private farming, the project of nationalizing agriculture—as embodied by state farms—continued until the dissolution of the communist regime.³

This article outlines the history and operational specifics of state farms while simultaneously exploring how the social group emerging within them remained for decades not only internally disintegrated but also alienated from other social and occupational groups. Despite propaganda efforts to present them as “the most advanced part of the working class in the countryside,” these communities were condemned to social isolation and marginalization to the end of the communist era, ultimately finding themselves among the major victims of the post-communist transformation. The workforce of state-owned farms established after the war represented a diverse and internally heterogeneous socio-professional group whose challenges in gaining acceptance and integrating into broader social structures proved unsuccessful throughout the entire period of the Polish People’s Republic.

The initial section of the article provides a historical overview of state-owned farms, with a focus on the origins and evolution of the entities, along with the

2 Majka, *Moje życie – nasza bieda*, 103; Maniak, *Wysilek, efekt i ocenianie ciał*, 120–21.

3 Pursuant to the Act of 19 October 1991 on the Agricultural Property of the State Treasury, state agricultural farms were liquidated and their assets taken over by the Agricultural Property Agency of the State Treasury (now the Agricultural Property Agency), and their employees—between 300,000 and 450,000 people joined the ranks of the unemployed (the number of all inhabitants of state-owned farms, including the families of employees, was estimated at around 2 million). Farms that were not sold or leased were placed under the management of the Agricultural Property Agency and were managed by administrators appointed by the Agency.

phenomena that accompanied the establishment of this community. Within this section, I introduce not only the stages of creating state enterprises and the accompanying public discourse (propaganda) but also present the people settling there, the way workplace hierarchies were formed, and the mechanisms governed them. In the second part of the study, by confronting state farms' daily reality with its external descriptions and media discourse, I show the relationship of the new socio-occupational group with the external environment—both other rural groups (including private farm owners) and city dwellers—workers and officials, and finally representatives of local and central authorities.

The analyses presented here rely on a comprehensive array of sources, encompassing archival materials about the operational dynamics of state-owned farms, predominantly sourced from local archives. In addition, the research builds on journal reports and propaganda materials from the period, along with sociological and economic studies. A notable contribution to the information base were diaries, memoirs and oral accounts, meticulously collected during a research program conducted between 2002 and 2006 at the Institute of History of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

The beginnings of state farms: From land reform to the Soviet model (1944–1949)

The establishment of state farms in Poland was underpinned by the concept of *sovkhozes*. This concept emerged in the USSR in 1918 due to the state expropriation of manors and land. Alongside the *kolkhozy* (collective farms), these enterprises were to function as specialized and mechanized models of production.⁴ The genesis of state-owned farms in Poland was anchored in the agricultural reform that fundamentally reshaped the pre-war rural social and property order. Adopted in 1944, the reform led to the dissolution of substantial landholdings and the redistribution of land among the peasant population. Encompassing an area of 3.5 million hectares, 10,000 estates had been taken over by 1948.⁵ The land not distributed among the peasants went into state ownership.

However, the Soviet *sovkhoz* concept was not immediately implemented in Poland. In the initial post-war period, the administration of state-owned estates was entrusted to a specially established institution, the Państwowe Nieruchomości Ziemske (State Land Properties, SLP), founded in 1946 and led by Witold Maringe,

4 Dosekocz-Winiarski, *Rolnictwo Związku Socjalistycznych Republik Radzieckich*, 289–92.

5 Chwałba et al., *Dzieje Polski*, 718–19.

a Polish engineer, economist and farmer well-suited to the role.⁶ The management of the estates was typically undertaken by qualified specialists, many of whom were from a landowning background.

The initial focus of state-farm activities was on the so-called 'Regained Territories,' i.e., areas annexed to Poland at the expense of German territories following the Potsdam Conference. Within a few months, the organization's activities were expanded to cover other voivodeships. By the end of the first year of their operation, approximately 1.4 million hectares was under the supervision of state farms, the vast majority of which located in northern and western Poland. The institutions employed nearly 120,000 workers. However, the next year, at the turn of 1947 and 1948, it was revealed that the state farm, which had initially been supported by the Polish Peasants Party (PSL), a traditional agrarian party, was not the primary target of the communists. With the consolidation of communist power, former landowners found that they were no longer welcome in their positions.

As late as 1948, many of the former landowners were accused of sabotage, negligence or wastefulness and were imprisoned. In the same year, the director of one of the north-western districts was put on trial and sentenced to death, and in 1949, the entire company management was arrested and accused of acting to the detriment of the state.⁷ These events were intended to legitimize the necessity of liquidating the SLP. This decision had in fact been made much earlier, at the turn of 1947–1948, and was related to the intensive Stalinization launched in 1948.⁸ The implementation of the idea of the sovkhozes and the creation of the first state farms coincided with the aggressive collectivization of Polish agriculture. This was a significant factor in the profound and often protracted tension between state farm workers and traditional farmers, who in many cases were neighbours.

The state farms started in 1949; however, as with all developments initiated in the post-war era, their growth and adaptation to the new agricultural policy objectives necessitated a considerable investment of time and substantial financial resources. This was in terms of the resources required to initiate agricultural production, such as livestock, horses, feed, fertilisers, equipment, machinery, and so forth, as well as the material, infrastructural, and social foundations.⁹

In the initial years of their operation, state-owned farms used the farm and manor buildings left over from the former landed estates, in addition to their own material and

6 Machalek, "No Chance of Success," 250–65.

7 They were accused of being of 'landed gentry origin,' economic sabotage and spying for foreign powers. After a show trial lasting several days, they were sentenced to long prison terms ranging from ten years to life imprisonment. Szpak, *Między osiedlem i zagrodą*, 23.

8 *Przegląd Rolniczy*, 1948, 8; Kochanski, *Polska 1944–1990*, 265.

9 Panek, *Zboże rosło jak las*, 33.

infrastructural base. It was on these foundations that the first state farms were established, with other farms gradually emerging in their vicinity. Some were created from scratch in remote locations, while others were established in the immediate vicinity of villages and production cooperatives that were already in existence at the time.¹⁰

The available premises were converted into farm buildings, such as stables, barns and cowsheds, or temporary barracks were erected. Working and living conditions in the newly established state farms were dramatically poor. Although the photographs of state farms in the 1950s propaganda may have encouraged many people to go and work there, in the first post-war decade, the real situation was generally far from ideal.

Particularly in northern and western areas, the abandoned housing left behind by the former German owners was quickly occupied by the first settlers—and was subsequently plundered and vandalized by post-war ‘looters.’

In the years 1945–1946, ‘menacing looting intensified,’ Eugeniusz Kłoczowski, a state farm manager wrote. Peasants from areas closer to the Regained Territories often arrived with evil intentions. Machines, tools, furniture, and even windows and stove tiles that the Germans had left behind in their houses were massively transported ‘home’ in the east. Only with great difficulty and only partially did the authorities manage to stop this wild looting.¹¹

Another diarist recorded about the year 1947:

“there were people who did not treat state farms as state property. They considered them remnants of the landowners and the noble lords, so they thought the estates should be looted as quickly as possible and the land should be parcelled among the peasants [...] people still had prejudices against estates.”¹²

The new employees arriving at state-owned farms saw massive devastation on the former estates. They found apartments where almost everything was missing—windows, floors or doors, with roofs that were falling apart or leaking.¹³ It is no surprise that, in this situation, pioneers, seduced by propaganda and agitation, often abandoned the farms, fleeing to other workplaces that offered better social and living conditions. In 1956, a journalist reported this phenomenon in *Trybuna Ludu*:

“I spoke to the pioneers. Out of the eighteen who went there, only six stayed, the others fled [...]. The young people complained about the living

10 Szpak, *Między osiedłem a zagrodą*, 29–44.

11 Kłoczowski, *Moja praca*, 25.

12 *Nasze nowe życie*, 185; Szpak, *Między osiedłem a zagrodą*, 35.

13 Łyś, PGR, czyli jak PRL zakonserwował feudalizm: <https://www.rp.pl/plus-minus/art11893201-pgr-czyli-jak-prl-zakonserwowal-feudalizm> (Accessed: 27 February 2025).

conditions, the canteen, everything that was positively evaluated in the report [...] the difficult conditions are still not improving and are giving rise to feelings of hopelessness and expectations.”¹⁴

From the very beginning, however, state farms were characterized by a specific type of physical space. Former manor quarters, surrounding manors or palaces were used to accommodate workers throughout the entire period of the Polish People's Republic. From the 1960s, they were supplemented by two or three-story collective buildings (blocks of flats), more characteristic of urban and workers' settlements in the landscape of Poland. Often emerging in the middle of open fields, these structures formed the distinctive landscape of state farm settlements.

The new order and systemic challenges: Work organization and hierarchies (1950s)

Similarly to sovkhozes, state-run agricultural farms also functioned according to centrally determined economic plans. Their establishment often defied technical or natural possibilities—disregarding the quality of the soil, the drainage of the meadows, access to machinery, and other factors. However, the top-down plan was not subject to bottom-up negotiations—this applied to both the State Land Properties and the state-run agricultural farms built on their basis.

“Here is a manager of a farm with heavy soil, who is not starting the spring sowing until the field properly dries out, the way the State Land Properties institution's manual instructs him to do. The sowing campaign is in full swing in the district, the Security Office bursts in, accuses the manager of sabotage and puts him in prison just when sowing is at last possible [...] the Security Office's activities could not be criticized.”¹⁵

In his diary, the manager of the Kurkławaki state-owned farm entered at the beginning of the 1950s:

“I know very well that the land is being violated. But I'd rather harvest three quintals per hectare than sow it differently and go to jail. We argued professionally in the union that the plan should be different, but it didn't help. Everything is imposed from above.”¹⁶

A significant number of farms were loss-making from the outset, as research indicates.¹⁷ While the concept of the state farm was commended in the propaganda,

14 *Trybuna Ludu* (1956): 3; “Nasze nowe życie...,” 180; *W poszukiwaniu drogi*, Vol. 2, 183.

15 Kłoczowski, *Moja praca*.

16 Czuła, *Z pamiętnika pioniera*, 152.

17 Machalek, *Likwidacja państwowych gospodarstw*, 269.

in practice, individuals at the central level saw the challenges and limitations of this agricultural model.¹⁸ Nevertheless, public discourse maintained the special position and unique role of state agriculture. Importantly, this was not its primary focus. An analysis of propaganda content in 1950–1956 shows that the press devoted three times more attention to collectivization and production cooperatives than to state farms.¹⁹ This reflected the position of the authorities and the extent of social resistance to collectivization.

In the public perception, state-owned farms were often associated with manors and wage labour on land that did not belong to the farmer. Moreover, even in the period of the People's Republic of Poland, the organizational structure and work system in nationalized estates drew upon manor traditions, but the status of their employees—foremen, farm labourers, farmhands or day labourers—was perceived by traditional rural communities as very low.²⁰

The communist state tried to disassociate itself from the burdensome 'land-owning' past. Consequently, adopting the model set by the USSR, the brigade work system and novel job designations (new nomenclature of positions) were introduced at the end of 1949. This transition was already governed by the Collective Labour Agreement of 1950–1951.²¹ Former estate managers, overseers, stewards, stablemen, farmhands, day labourers and casual workers were replaced by directors, managers, foremen, accountants, warehouse managers, etc. The system of brigades divided the farm staff into teams for crop production (so-called field work) and animal breeding. In practice, the latter consisted of a team for the barn, swine handling, poultry, etc. Depending on the specialization of the farm, the composition of the brigades could be more diverse. From the end of the 1950s, new brigades started to emerge: typically, the renovation and construction brigade (the previous lack of which says a lot about living conditions) and the mechanization brigade, which were started when farms were saturated with machines, tractors and other vehicles.

In this system, the employee structure was divided into three main categories, which also determined the individual employees' social status. The highest category was that of white-collar workers, who were in fact an elite and constituted the management of the plant. In addition to the director, who managed a team of several farms, this group of employees included the managers of individual farms, accountants, warehouse managers, and later also zootechnicians.

The second category consisted of manual workers, among whom brigade leaders, i.e., managers of individual brigades, played the most important role. Although

18 Panek, *Zboże rosło jak las*, 32–34.

19 Szpak, *Między osiedlem a zagrodą*, 27.

20 Solarz, *System organizacji pracy*, 35–46.

21 *Układ Zbiorowy Pracy* [Collective Labour Agreement] 1951, 11.

formally they were classified as physical workers, in practice they were part of the company elite, placed in between the world of physical and intellectual work.

The lowest level of the permanent occupational structure was constituted by the rank-and-file workers of the brigades, referred to as 'agricultural workers.' They were supplemented by seasonal or temporary workers, who were recruited from pioneer units, youth organizations (e.g., *Służba Polsce*/Service of Poland),²² vocational and technical school apprentices, casual workers, random people seeking additional income or those who were formally obliged to do temporary work on farms.²³ What distinguished this group from the rest was the fact that they were usually completely unintegrated with the teams of permanent workers, lived in temporary and often substandard and overcrowded collective accommodations. Quite frequently, after completing their assignments, they moved on and spread a very negative image of the daily life of state-farm communities.

The group of temporary workers was partly made up of the young post-war intelligentsia. Due to mandatory internships, from the 1950s, university and secondary school students very often ended up on state farms for doing seasonal work. One of the diarists even used the word 'pegeerophobia' (derived from the Polish abbreviation 'PGR' meaning 'state farm') among students.²⁴ Other young people studying at universities also mentioned that they would mock their colleagues earning some extra money on state farms. One young woman who was forced to do an internship on a state farm reported with undisguised surprise:

"I expected to find stupid drunkards that are impossible to have a conversation with. Although they mostly talk about their wages, sometimes they are interested in other things as well, such as politics. They have a peculiar, somewhat naive view of the world. It is true that almost all of them drink heavily [...]"²⁵

The distinct structure of the workforce made a strong impact on interpersonal relationships, both at work and outside it. The housing estates, slowly developing in the neighbourhood of farms, made it difficult to separate professional and formal relationships from social and private ones in people's everyday lives. As a rule, company hierarchies and the loyalties or tensions at work transferred to social and neighbourly relations.

22 Lesiakowski, *Powstanie Powszechnej Organizacji "Służba Polsce."*

23 The work order in Poland was introduced by the Act of 7 March 1950 "on the prevention of the rapid turnover of employees in professions or specializations particularly important for the socialized economy."

24 Wojciechowska-Kołataj, ed., *Blisko ziemi, blisko życia*, 99.

25 Wójcik, ed., *Dzień dobry za dwa złote*, 252.

Initially, as sources indicate, the different categories of employees were accommodated in separate spaces. The company elite, comprising directors, managers and accountants, were provided with more spacious three or four-room flats, usually located in the premises of a former landed gentry manor or palace, or flats provided as part of newly built housing.²⁶ The former farm buildings, which were usually quite cramped and dilapidated, were allocated to manual workers. In 1951, a new policy was introduced, whereby work leaders and rationalizers were given priority for more spacious accommodation.²⁷ Following the political thaw in the late 1950s, this privilege was shifted to employees with the longest period of service, and it was only then that the size of apartments began to depend on the number of family members.²⁸

However, it should be noted, nonetheless, that this policy shift did not translate into meaningful social integration between employees of different ranks—for example, the housing estate manager might have lived next to a low-ranking labourer, yet their social roles remained clearly separated. In practice, this kind of integration proved to be ineffective, and conflicts, tensions and corporate dependencies spilled over into everyday life, often resulting in mutual distancing in non-work relations.

Due to the centralization of farm management, there was a significant reduction in employees' initiative and agency, even in the case of senior management. The managers of most farms—with the exception of the model farms, i.e., Manieczki or Kietrz, which had greater influence due to their high profitability—were not in a position to modify the production plans imposed on them according to their own efficiency and production capabilities. Despite the apparent irrationality of the centrally imposed measures, they were regularly implemented. A similar phenomenon was observed among manual labourers at a lower level. This is aptly described in the 1956 diary of Jan Czuła, a pioneer and later manager of the state-owned Kurkławki farm:

“Nothing makes people angrier than the feeling that they are doing unnecessary work, even though they are being paid for it. The mere realization that they are making a pointless effort has a demoralising effect.”²⁹

The limitations of employees' agency and innovation were also observed in the workers' housing estates. Despite the terrible housing conditions, agricultural workers were not permitted to renovate their apartments independently. Even in cases where apartments were riddled with structural deficiencies, such as holes in

26 *Układ Zbiorowy Pracy*, 1948, 22.

27 *Układ Zbiorowy Pracy* 1950/1951, 18–19.

28 *Układ Zbiorowy Pracy*, 1958, 18–19.

29 Czuła, *Z pamiętnika pioniera*, 97.

walls, leaking roofs, or uneven floors, permission for even minor renovations had to be obtained from the manager or director of the respective state-owned farm. It was not until the late 1950s, with the establishment of the renovation and construction brigades within individual companies, that such redevelopments were made possible. The work was done exclusively by specialized professionals; however, due to persistent staff shortages, repairs dragged on for years or were postponed until the relevant teams were completed.³⁰ Consequently, the condition of pre-war state farm apartments and their surroundings remained substandard for a long time.

The employees' dependence on the management's decisions was further entrenched by several other factors, with the remuneration system playing a pivotal role. Although as Włodzimierz Dzun notes, before the mid-1950s, wages were minimal,³¹ it was wage-payment that distinguished state farms from collective or private farms. However, the system of food supplies and social benefits in kind was also instrumental in enabling the employees to subsist. The system encompassed the provision of essential commodities, such as milk, potatoes and coal, as well as in-house facilities, including a staff canteen, a backyard plot allocated to permanent employees, and a barnyard for breeding poultry or pigs for personal consumption. Despite stringent restrictions pertaining to the pig population, in the late 1950s the provision of land for growing potatoes, beets, beans, and fundamental vegetables, in addition to breeding chickens (for eggs) or pigs, enabled employees to attain a minimal subsistence level for their families.

The other important elements of company benefits, which were much more appreciated by the state-farm communities in the last two decades of the Polish People's Republic, were free access to healthcare guaranteed by the company (health centres were located in larger state farms), the offer of kindergarten care for employees' children and the employee holiday fund.³² Research has highlighted the importance of these facilities, particularly for young married couples and families with children.

A new man? Social isolation and the identity crisis of a new class (1960s–1970s)

The low social status of agricultural workers and the terrible social and living conditions of the 1950s and 1960s did not make state-owned farms the most desirable workplaces. While propaganda and recruitment drives in the 1950s attracted to state

30 Szpak, *Między osiedlem a zagrodą*, 152–57.

31 Dzun W., *Państwowe gospodarstwa rolne*.

32 Pilch, *Problemy społeczne załóg PGR*, 34.

farms many young people rather at random, few stayed for long. The workforce showed great fluidity and instability, which translated into the low internal integration of the communities.

The oldest settlers were the most stable group, usually those who ended up on former estates immediately after the land reform or when the previously mentioned state farms took over their management. This group of workers was most often made up of so-called 'redundant people,' usually the rural poor who could not afford to buy the land offered as part of the parcelling-out project. They usually belonged to the interwar farmhands or came from other professional groups employed on inter-war landed estates. According to the testimony of rural dwellers, the initial employees of state farms lacked the skills to work independently, which is why even after the war they chose farms where they were not involved in management.³³

In the first years after the war, a significant proportion of state-farm pioneers hailed from the migrant population that relocated from south-eastern Poland to the Regained Territories. Some individuals embarked on the journey voluntarily, driven by a desire for adventure, a sense of anonymity, or the prospect of a new beginning in a post-war world. However, others, such as the population displaced from the so-called Eastern Borderlands,³⁴ were forcibly resettled in response to territorial shifts to northern and western Poland, where state-owned farms were predominant.³⁵ The initial years of the state-farm communities were characterized by profound ethnic and cultural diversity, a consequence of their origins. The communities were comprised of Greek Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and minority groups, such as Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Belarusians, who had previously resided in the easternmost regions of the country. These communities subsequently encountered the indigenous population and the German population that stayed in the Regained Territories. The presence of these diverse groups led to cultural friction and conflicts arising from their different customs and traditions, as well as traumatic war experiences, particularly in relation to German-speaking locals and Ukrainians. The presence of different ethnic and cultural groups, although sometimes inspiring and arousing mutual curiosity, generally hindered faster integration. The anthropologist Anna Zadrożyńska wrote interestingly about this phenomenon in the 1970s:

"A sense of belonging on the estate was primarily linked to a shared place of origin. This, in turn, generated the negative notion of »foreignness« towards people from different regions of Poland. Outsiders were often

33 Maniak, *Wysilek, efekt i ocenianie ciał*, 121; Wylęgała, *Był dwór, nie ma dworu*, 179.

34 The Eastern Borderlands (Polish Kresy Wschodnie) was a historical region in the eastern part of the Second Polish Republic.

35 Szpak, *Między osiedlem a zagrodą*, 50.

accused of acting against »our people«—whether in farm management, local government, or institutions. They were seen as forming cliques, pursuing only their own interests. Yet, defining the exact group of »outsiders« proved elusive; their identity shifted, depending on the situation and the nature of conflicts. Alliances were often justified retrospectively, based on shared regional origins, workplace bonds, or even drinking companionships. Consequently, groups of »insiders« were fluid and largely invisible in day-to-day interactions.”³⁶

As time passed, ethnic and cultural differences became less pronounced, eventually disappearing in the succeeding generation. However, the community’s persistent openness, coupled with its unfavourable reputation and public perception, resulted in a pervasive atmosphere of vigilance, control, distrust, and prejudice towards strangers and newcomers. Integration and the sense of common interest were, as Zadrożyńska acknowledged, characterized by instability and fragility. During the 1960s, the ageing of the workforce became an increasingly prominent phenomenon. Consequently, measures were implemented from the 1960s onwards to motivate younger generations to find employment and establish themselves on state-owned farms. To encourage young couples from rural areas, a program of non-repayable loans was introduced to help them settle on state-owned properties. The initial allocation and furnishing of their apartments was financed by a company loan, which was then redeemed after at least two years of employment on the state farm.

It is noteworthy that despite significant tension between the peasant population and state-farm employees in the 1950s, young individuals entering state farms over the subsequent decades predominantly originated from peasant families. In the 1950s, state-owned farms represented the antithesis of production independence for rural communities and were widely perceived as a symbol of Stalinism, eliciting strong feelings of disdain and opposition. They often triggered anger, primarily due to their role in the promotion through propaganda of state-owned farms and production cooperatives and because they received state subsidies and supplies of fodder and machinery. This was in stark contrast to the resistance exhibited by small and medium-sized farmers against aggressive collectivization policies. Furthermore, the oldest generation of peasants perceived the estates established on the basis of the landed estates as synonymous with the space inhabited by the rural poor.³⁷

The older generation maintained a sense of resentment towards state farms to the very end. However, their children, who often had different ideas about the nature of farming, independence and social advancement, often consciously opted

36 Zadrożyńska, *Homo faber*, 286–87.

37 Maniak, *Wysilek, efekt i ocenianie ciał*, 119.

for state farms, which offered them greater opportunities to sooner become independent, while simultaneously providing a pleasant alternative to working-class and urban life with monthly wages, company apartments, leisure time and holidays, an employee holiday fund, and summer camps for children.

In addition to the guaranteed benefits, what always attracted many young people to state-owned farms was the similarity of the (agricultural) work and the vocational or technical agricultural training they had completed.³⁸ However, even those with no agricultural work experience or education could generally count on being hired, due to constant staff shortages. The scarcity of labour during periods of heightened seasonal work was supplemented by the deployment of seasonal workers and university and vocational school students doing their compulsory internships on state-owned farms, and occasionally, by convicts serving sentences in nearby prisons.

The motivations for pursuing employment in state farms were diverse. For some, prior experience in agricultural work was a key factor, while for others, it was a matter of necessity to obtain paid employment. For some, state farms represented a chance to embark on a new adventure. Additionally, sources frequently highlight single women, often mothers with children, who sought employment on state farms due to the anonymity and extensive social benefits they offered.³⁹

A combination of the workers' limited qualifications, experience in agricultural work, restricted agency and initiative, together with the associated frustration, gave considerable scope for abuse within the fluid and poorly integrated community. A state-farm employee complained as follows:

"People were hired without background checks. All kinds of hooligans and crooks found a haven here - some to continue stealing, others to get fired after a few months of work and to be able to continue loafing around. These people tarnished the reputation of state-owned farms and undermined the authority of the staff."⁴⁰

During the 1950s, the prevailing source of abuse was identified as 'cliques,' meaning social groups in which employees engaged in fraudulent activities, including the theft of equipment and animal feed. In the Stalinist period, these phenomena were repeatedly exposed and condemned in the press, with each article emphasizing the hostile and pathological attitudes of the individuals involved, rather than pointing out systemic limitations or flaws. The state-farm management system itself was not exposed to public criticism either in the 1950s or later.

38 Szpak, *Między osiedlem a zagrodą*, 60–61.

39 Cp. Czula, *Z pamiętnika pioniera*.

40 Golebiowski, ed., *Pamiętniki Polaków 1918–1978*, 151–52.

However, the October Thaw focused more attention on workers' living and material conditions, leading to the decision to increase funding for housing construction and to set up renovation and construction brigades. In 1957, the wage system underwent modification, and a year later, a bonus fund and a 'thirteenth salary' were introduced. The bonus fund was streamlined and enhanced a few years later, enabling employees to accrue up to 60 percent additional income on an annual basis.⁴¹

Despite these changes, work pathologies resulting from a lack of responsibility for the land used and the state inventory were still frequently reported. This was primarily due to the overly abstract concept of 'state ownership,' as evidenced by diaries and accounts. In the minds of many rural workers, the concept of common (state) ownership and the lack of a specific owner—as the manager of the plant was not one—was very difficult to understand. There was even a common expression equating state ownership with no one's ownership.⁴²

The misappropriation of company property, the utilization of company equipment for personal use, or engagement in paid work in neighbouring fields were frequently attributed to an erroneous comprehension or misinterpretation of the notion of collective ownership. In the portrayals of state-owned agricultural farms featured in opinion-forming newspapers and socio-cultural periodicals, the prevailing themes encompassed fatal housing and living conditions, destitution and neglect, often intertwined with labour pathologies. These issues were typically attributed to the perceived cultural lag and socio-economic disadvantage of the agricultural workforce, as well as various familial pathologies.⁴³ In press reports, the realm of state-owned farms was often depicted as a gloomy world of poverty with its inhabitants portrayed as primitive people indifferent to the aesthetic quality of their environment. While the technique of emphasizing the 'otherness' of the reality described is a characteristic feature of journalism, an observation that is too superficial had the potential to distort the picture. An example is provided by a report from the 1950s by the manager of the Kurkławki state-owned farm:

"Zaleski's reportage amazed me. [...] instead of showing life as it is, he outlined an imaginary picture of gloomy vegetation and insisted that he did not see any joy in us [...] clearly, if one sees the joy of life only in a cup of black coffee and coffee-house chatter, then suddenly landing in our state farm must have filled Zalewski with fear. He could not therefore perceive our joys of a completely different kind than his. Well, and the whole reportage turned out like this, with »ominously cawing crows«, »a

41 Szpak, *Między osiedlem a zagrodą*, 26.

42 Karpińska, "Od awangardy komunizmu do sierocińców transformacji," 523.

43 Tischner, "Widnokrag pracy ojczystej"; Wróblewski, "Najpiękniejsza z PGR," 3; Wesołowska, "Kawior na prostej drodze," 2–5; Rolicki, "Kartki z PGR-u," 3.

mysterious chapel«, »the sadness of the field«. Shadows, shadows. [...] I was shuddering with cold when I was reading this. He would not be convinced that it was untrue.”⁴⁴

The bleak world of the state farms, characterized by pathologies and the poor behaviour of workers, has become deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness, serving as a hallmark of these communities.⁴⁵

The negative image of working conditions, like a vicious circle, fuelled personnel problems. This, in turn, forced managers and directors responsible for timely production to be more flexible in dealing with work discipline, regulations and their attitude to subordinates who exceeded acceptable boundaries. Forced to implement a top-down plan, managers could not afford to fire or let go too many employees, even if some did not follow the work regulations.

This situation created an unhealthy system of dependency, ‘turning a blind eye’ and tolerating mediocrity, mistakes and sometimes even abuse. Although the Collective Labour Agreement formally included a provision on the possibility of the disciplinary dismissal of an employee as early as 1948, in practice this procedure was rarely used. “Mr. M. was given a notice of termination. Despite numerous job adverts, no one has applied for this position so far. Therefore, the director was forced to suspend the dismissal until a new warehouse worker was hired,”⁴⁶ one of the employees reported. Sociologists described yet another situation:

“Residents of Owczary (a state-owned farm) can confirm that silence about not always legal behaviour was a kind of currency that could be used to ‘pay for something’. The director often turned a blind eye to the private use of machinery, fertilisers and tools, thus earning the gratitude of his subordinates and their willingness to reciprocate. Conscious silence binds the patron to the client. The state farm was no exception in this matter.”⁴⁷

An employee of another state farm stated:

“The director has two faces—one for the board, where he pretends to be an idealist, caring for the social good, and another on the farm, where he has »his own«.”⁴⁸

44 Czula, *Z pamiętnika pioniera*, 167.

45 Rychlik, *Problemy rozwoju PGR*, 190; Maniak, *Wysilek, efekt i ocenianie ciał*, 124.

46 Szpak, *Między osiedlem a zagrodą*, 86.

47 Tarkowska, ed., *Lata tłuste, lata chude*, 114–15.

48 Chałasiński, ed., *Młode pokolenie wsi Polski Ludowej Awans pokolenia*, Vol. 1, 92–93.

Despite the introduction of reforms in the 1960s, intended to improve the poor reputation of state-owned farms and the living and working conditions of their employees, changes were extremely slow. It was not until the 1970s, which were characterized by Edward Gierek's policy of gigantomania—a trend that was prevalent in most collectivized agricultural systems worldwide—that some changes were made. On an organizational level, this resulted in a program to merge farms into large enterprises, and on an infrastructural level, it manifested itself in the idea of transforming former state farms into agricultural towns. This policy quickly began to improve the living standards of employees and their families on state farms. Investments were mainly made in the social sphere, in accordance with a declaration published in 1965 in the newspaper *Życie Partyjne* (Party Life) magazine:

“Our farms will be the best propaganda. The most effective agitators must be the employees of state farms themselves, with whom a sense of emotional connection to the farms should be fostered.”⁴⁹

As Jolanta Pilch's research demonstrates, during the 1970s, such bonding and the resulting employee loyalty did indeed increase. This phenomenon was evidenced by the proliferation of company kindergartens, the organization of bussing children to nearby schools, as well as a notable rise in the feminization of administrative staff and the professional work of both spouses.⁵⁰

Despite their higher standards of living, the status of agricultural workers and employees of state-owned farms was still among the lowest in society.⁵¹ Moreover, employment satisfaction studies carried out on state farms at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s also brought ambivalent results.

Confrontations and external perceptions (1950s–1980s)

From the outset, those engaged in agricultural pursuits within state-owned farms were aware of the distinctiveness and cultural foreignness of their milieu. Situated at the intersection of the rural and urban landscapes, agricultural workers, often regarded as the most rural segment of the working class,⁵² cultivated a distinct socio-professional identity both in relation to the individual farmer and the conventional peasant farm, and in relation to urban workers.

49 *Życie Partii*, 1965, No. 2, 16.

50 Pilch, *Społeczne problemy załóg PGR*, 39–42.

51 Domański, *Prestiż zawodów w obliczu zmian społecznych*, 86; Machalek, *Likwidacja państwowych gospodarstw*, 270.

52 *Robotnik Rolny*, 1951, No. 1, 5.

However, an analysis of memoirs and diaries reveals that the self-image of agricultural workers was characterized by significant instability and heterogeneity. Some individuals who were closely connected to state-owned farms perceived them as offering considerably better prospects for a more comfortable life. One diarist noted, "I know the village well and I know the state farm where I have been working for eleven years, and I dare say that a state farm worker lives better than the average peasant."⁵³ In contrast, another representative of this occupational group, cited at the beginning of the article, emphasized that it was simply shameful to admit to working in a state-owned farm, as the prevailing opinion about the employees was unflattering. In a similar and ambivalent tone, another employee wrote:

"I was happy because I felt I belonged here. I was not ashamed of being a state-owned farm worker, who was often treated like some kind of low-level commune member—and not only by people from the countryside and towns, but even by individuals in positions of authority in state offices."⁵⁴ Yet another wrote, "We don't feel good there [in the state-owned farm], but we are materially well off."⁵⁵

Even from an economic perspective, there was no unanimity, as evidenced by Jolanta Pilch's research. At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, 60.3 percent of the surveyed employees of state-owned farms assessed their income as inadequate for supporting their families.⁵⁶ The sociologist's analysis also shows that as many as 37.7 percent of the employees surveyed believed that there were no good sides to working for state farms.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, more than 67 percent expressed general satisfaction with their work. This ambivalence, stemming from the social opinions of the subjects, led to a significant proportion of employees contemplating changing jobs, with the highest rate observed in the youngest age group, where it was as high as 80 percent. Notably, almost half the respondents expressed a desire to relocate to urban areas, while a third did not intend to change their occupation but simply to move to another state farm (only 10 percent aspired to acquire a farm and become independent). These analyses are consistent with other studies by Hanka Zaniewska that demonstrate that the isolation and specific stigmatization of agricultural workers resulted in a phenomenon within this community that is termed as the "state-farm ghetto."⁵⁸

53 *Droga przez wieś*, 66.

54 *Młode Pokolenie Wsi Polski Ludowej*, t. 2, 290.

55 *Młode Pokolenie Wsi Polski Ludowej*, t. 5, 482.

56 *Pamiętniki z ziem zachodnich i północnych*, 291.

57 Pilch, *Spoleczne problemy załóg PGR*, 34.

58 Zaniewska et al., *Zagospodarowanie przestrzenne i zabudowa wsi*, 30.

Employee mobility observed throughout the period of the Polish People's Republic was in fact spatially limited. A significant proportion of those who decided to change jobs did so by moving to other state farms, thus minimising exposure to external influences that might potentially react negatively to their employment within the state farms framework.⁵⁹

State-farm workers' isolation was reinforced by top-down measures. An example was the celebration of public holidays, such as 1 May or 22 July, which in socialist countries were public events celebrated on a grand scale. As in other contexts, they were preceded by preparations, including the appointment of special committees and the presentation of awards during the ceremonies. However, all these activities took place in a state of occupational isolation.⁶⁰ Moreover, the isolation was maintained by the workforce in other situations. A prime example was employee holidays, which, although formally available to permanent employees from 1949, were not popular in the Polish People's Republic. This phenomenon was documented on the pages of the flagship magazine of the Polish United Workers' Party, *Trybuna Ludu*, that in 1961 stated:

“Resting in the bosom of nature is not popular with state agricultural farm workers [...]. Agricultural workers are exposed to exceptionally bad and humiliating treatment from the »better« [...] holiday guests.”⁶¹

This phenomenon was also confirmed by Jolanta Pilch's research in the 1970s.⁶²

Conclusion: The legacy of marginalization and poverty?

The workforce of the state-owned farms established after the war was a very diverse and internally heterogeneous socio-professional group, which in the official propaganda and ideology was supposed to constitute the new, “most advanced section of the working class in the countryside.”⁶³ Despite the propaganda's efforts and intentions, this group remained isolated and marginalized in terms of social interaction with other socio-professional groups until the end of the 1980s.

The social and professional isolation of agricultural workers was due to several factors. The two key ones are: firstly, the perception of agricultural workers as a backward and at the same time ideologically privileged social class and, secondly,

59 *Młode Pokolenie Wsi Polski Ludowej*. t. 2, 291.

60 Szpak, *Między osiedlem a zagrodą*, 137.

61 *Trybuna Ludu*, 1961, no. 78.

62 Pilch, *Społeczne problemy załóg PGR*, 40.

63 *Robotnik Rolny*, 1951, no. 1, 5.

the contempt resulting from their low social status and rural tensions in the Stalinist period. At the same time, due to the fluidity of the workforce, the staff of state-owned farms was always internally unstable and unintegrated.

The challenges faced over decades, including the arduous process of integration into broader social structures (e.g., through the employee holiday fund, theoretically available to all public sector employees and having an integrating effect) and gaining acceptance as a distinct but valued social group, proved unsuccessful. This was particularly evident during the period of systemic (economic) transformation in the 1990s. The desire of the new political elites to quickly deal with the communist legacy, which had hampered economic development, led to the liquidation of state farms and the reprivatization of state property. It appears that liberal reformers did not treat the marginalized and despised social group of state-farm workers with due care. State-farm workers, still identified with communist backwardness and pathologies, were forced to adapt to the top-down changes. Internally divided for decades, the community found itself unable to unite and protest against the brutal and socially insensitive elimination of their workplaces, which deprived them of everything.

In the absence of protective programs during the period of liquidation and political transformation, the vast majority of state-farm residents, estimated at 2 million in the early 1990s,⁶⁴ were condemned to unemployment and, in the long term, to poverty and destitution, ending up as some of the main victims of the post-communist transformation.

In the western and northern regions of Poland, historically dominated by state-owned farms, the unemployment rate rose to 27 percent after these entities were dissolved.⁶⁵ An emblematic symbol of the public legitimization of the significant reductions and minimal protective measures granted to the state-farm communities was the controversial and quasi-documentary film 'Arizona' directed by Ewa Borzęcka, broadcast in 1997 at prime time on public television.⁶⁶ The film portrayed the community of one of the north-eastern state-owned farms as broken, depressed, helpless and affected by alcoholism. The reportage was criticized by the film industry, and the director and the staff were accused of unethical behaviour (for example, recording residents under the influence of alcohol).⁶⁷ However, the film had a significant impact on Polish society, deepening the existing stigmatization of state-farm workers.

64 Panek, *Zboże rosło jak las*.

65 Machałek, *Unemployment as a Consequence*, 192.

66 Borzęcka, "Arizona," TVP 1998.

67 Karpińska, *Od awangardy komunizmu do sierocińców transformacji*, 527.

As anthropologist Katarzyna Maniak emphasizes, in the 1990s, alternative portrayals of state-owned farms also contributed to the propagation of an unfavourable image of female and male workers in public discourse, who were presented as members of a 'subclass' or representatives of the '*homo sovieticus*' category.⁶⁸ The term '*homo sovieticus*,' popularized by sociologist Piotr Sztompka, described a set of personality traits, including 'civilizational incompetence,' dependence on state paternalism, learned helplessness and passivity, which for years were attributed to the workers and inhabitants of the former state farms.⁶⁹

In a study published in 2024, Bartosz Panek argues that the social and mental costs of political and economic transformation in post-state-farm societies were enormous. The stigmatization and marginalization experienced by former employees resulted in long-term social trauma, which is still evident among the next generation of residents of former state-owned agricultural estates.⁷⁰

While the privatization of state property and the dissolution of state farms were criticized by experts as early as the 1990s,⁷¹ it was not until at least a decade later that the public media began to report that the process could have been carried out differently, taking social issues into account. In 2001, the former minister for privatization admitted in an interview that the state farms, modelled on the Soviet *sovchoz* were dissolved in an excessive hurry:

"It was a mistake in the perception of the dynamics of change. Too little attention was paid to the social catastrophe, the human dimension [...] it was a failure of imagination," he said.⁷²

In 2015, Bożena Kulicz, co-founder of the PGR (State-farm) Museum in Bolegorzyno, made a different comment on the liquidation and privatization process:

"State-farm employees were never able to unite and fight for themselves [...] everyone turned their backs on them: directors and managers, politicians, individual farmers, city dwellers."⁷³

The inferiority complex that persisted throughout the entire period of the Polish People's Republic and the isolation of state-owned farm workers and their residents from other social and professional groups in the 1990s caused indifference on the

68 Maniak, *Wysilek, efekt i ocenianie ciał*, 217.

69 Maniak, *Wysilek, efekt i ocenianie ciał*, 217.

70 Panek, *Zboże rosło jak las*, 50–279.

71 Machalek, *Likwidacja państwowych gospodarstw rolnych*, 277–78, 288.

72 Cyt. za Panek.

73 PGR, czyli jak PRL zakonserwował feudalizm, Rzeczpospolita, <https://www.rp.pl/plus-minus/art11893201-pgr-czyli-jak-prl-zakonserwowal-feudalizm> (Accessed: 27 July 2025).

part of decision-makers towards their post-communist fate. This led to decades of a sense of injustice and resentment felt by generations of not only former state-farm employees but also their families.

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