

SPECIES CLEANSING. POLITICAL DIMENSION OF RAT CONTROL PROGRAMS IN POLAND AFTER 1945

The way we describe unwanted phenomena says more about our history and culture than we think. In my research I use rat extermination programmes as a lens through which I look at Polish public debate after 1945. I have decided to undertake this research because of my conviction that a reflection on relations between humans and the environment can provide a considerable insight into important social processes and political rhetoric dominant at a particular time.

I am especially interested in three issues. Firstly, I investigate how hostile attitudes are created. During Stalinist times, when the largest rat extermination campaign in the Polish history was held, images of this species strikingly resembled the way political enemies were portrayed. Secondly, I analyse the language of modernization in postwar Poland. As a potential source of infectious diseases and agricultural "thieves" rats were perfect embodiments of problems and challenges faced by the country that was just being rebuilt after the war. Language used to describe "the rat problem" can therefore cast new light on the processes of social change in the socialist times, especially within the sanitary discourse. In the last part of my project I investigate how rat control language has changed after 1989, i.e. since new ideas of effectiveness, profit and ambition to fulfill EU sanitary and esthetic standards began to prevail. I am interested in how this new, capitalist rhetoric influenced the way sanitary and environmental hazards have been presented and, in a broader sense, how the political debate has changed since.

In my research I rely on texts and visual materials on rat control published after 1945: posters, leaflets, documents, professional literature, training videos, training presentations and websites. I will also conduct interviews with rat control professionals in order to investigate how they talk about their work and what sort of arguments they use to justify what they do. I also analyze the collection of Polish DDD Museum and documentary films about rat extermination programs.