

The History of Worker Photography in Poland (1918-1939).

The problem addressed in the research project is the emergence and local characteristics of worker photography in Poland in the interwar period. The term “worker photography” is not to be understood simply as iconography of workers and industrial labour. In current research the term means mainly an international movement of communist and socialist photographers — both working-class amateurs and middle class professionals — who documented the life of the working class in the 1920s and 1930s. The movement aimed at creating class consciousness through educating the workers’ gaze and through seizing the means of visual production. It led to the creation of photographic public spheres that counterbalanced the visual production of the middle and upper classes. Moreover, the term encompasses photographic practices of the working class that did not take place within an organized movement, which included taking, collecting and exchanging photographs as well as other illustrated media.

The movement achieved the greatest success in the Weimar Republic. At the height of the German movement, there were more than 2500 worker photographers. They did not only provide photographic resources, educate about photography and share their works locally, but they also published in magazines associated with the Communist Party of Germany, such as *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* a monthly focused on photographic technique and militant Marxist aesthetic theory, as well as in *Die Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*, an illustrated magazine with a circulation of 500 thousand. The movement saw its decline due to the rise of National Socialism in Germany coupled with the cultural backlash of the 1930s in the USSR.

Polish worker photographers did not manage to organize a nation-wide movement. Nevertheless, available evidence allows for an innovative survey that will expand the scholarship on cultural history in Poland. In order to complete such survey I will use a variety of evidence. Firstly, I will investigate the “First exhibition of worker photography in Poland” that took place in Lviv in 1936 as a joint effort of communist, socialist and agrarian parties. Secondly, I will research the biography and oeuvre of Aleksander Minorski, a communist photographer working mainly in Warsaw in the 1930s. Thirdly, and most importantly, I will conduct exhaustive research in the Digital Photography Collection – “Workers in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century” created by the University of Łódź which contains over 9000 photographs and descriptions from private collections of Polish working class families. To provide context for the limited development of worker photography in Poland, I will also investigate the cultural and artistic politics of Polish left-wing parties, especially in regard to the participation of working class amateurs in artistic production. What is more, I will revise the views and actions of the Polish pictorialists from a class perspective in order to demonstrate how they may have influenced the development of worker photography. I will analyze a variety of evidence, such as literary and photographic magazines, newspapers, exhibition catalogues, exhibition documentation, photographs, autobiographical writing, aesthetic treatises, and pre-recorded biographical interviews.

I consider workers’ artistic, literary and political activity to be a part of the phenomenon of “the distribution of the sensible” described by Jacques Rancière. Therefore, I do not treat working class’s consent to being visually documented or take an active role in documentation as a simple surrender to the logic of a modern state or political propaganda, but as a subjective and conscious decision to participate in and shape the public sphere as equals based on the notion of objectivity of photographs. To explain how workers used the resources of political parties to practice photography without strictly following their doctrines, I will base my research on Thomas Lindenberger’s and Alf Lüdtke’s methodology of “Eigen-Sinn” (“Stubbornness”). I will also describe how workers used their bodies and other material objects, such as photographs, to create a class identity supported by a class memory.