

The project endeavors to elucidate how the evolution of cooperative ideology within the vast empires and subsequently the post-imperial nation-state in Poland has impacted the shaping of the local ethos of social engagement. The fundamental premise guiding this study posits that this transformation occurred in “contact zones” lacking direct mechanisms of civic participation, such as the Kingdom of Poland in the latter phase of the tsarist regime. In this context, cooperativism provided a path for social (and consequently political) change from within. It did not disrupt individuals from their social or national fabric, nor did it advocate for the overthrow of governments. Instead, it directed the focus of social actors toward practical activities, embodying the realization of the “utopia of common people.” In contrast to the prevailing statist tendencies of its era, cooperativism grounded its activities in the institution of association, serving as a counterbalance to both the authoritarian inclinations of emerging nation-states in the region and the vision of the “people’s labour state” propagated by socialist ideologists.

Despite indigenous traditions in this regard (including the initiatives of Stanisław Staszic in Hrubieszów or RP Pawłowska), cooperativism originated in Western Europe as part of the endeavors of proto-socialist ideologists and as a response from the popular classes to pauperization resulting from the expansion of capitalist economy. Upon its introduction to Polish soil, it comprised a heterogeneous set of ideas, the adaptation of which unfolded through debates and intellectual transfers that redefined concepts within local social, economic, and political contexts. The project aims to investigate, among other aspects, the mechanisms behind these transformations and the formation of the political language of cooperativism. In the region where old empires converged, cooperativism fashioned an alternative path to modernity, seemingly entering through the “back door” – from practice to ideas.

An integral facet of the project is an effort to scrutinize political ideology not solely through the lens of grand political or intellectual narratives but also from the perspective of the experiences of ordinary cooperative members, representatives of the popular classes, who actively contributed to shaping the discourse of cooperativism. The project advocates an asynchronous analysis of ideological discourse, utilizing materials often overlooked by historians of ideas or researchers of political concepts, including personal notes, reports from cooperative council meetings, membership lists, and, notably, autobiographical materials such as memories, diaries, and biographies. Rank-and-file cooperative activists frequently acknowledged their unequal position in relation to top-down ideological narratives, underscoring the autonomy of their actions vis-à-vis external trajectories of political action. In this sense, they cultivated a subversive realm of political expression that transcended the official discursive regimes of their time – be it class, religion, gender, or nation – transforming into authentic “democratic subjects.”

The envisaged outcomes of the project include: 1) an English-language monograph; 2) a thematically cohesive series of English-language articles submitted to prominent periodicals in the field; 3) conference presentations; and 4) popular science activities. The objective of these publications and presentations is to present an innovative perspective on this regional ideological phenomenon, examining it through the lens of broader international conceptual connections while simultaneously juxtaposing top-down ideological narratives with social history, incorporating the viewpoint of the popular classes. This comparative approach aims to construct a compelling and comprehensive portrayal of social agency that has hitherto remained on the periphery of official historiography (whether Marxist from the period of the Polish People’s Republic or nationalistic from the post-transformation era). The criteria for such historical exploration would involve delineating enduring changes in the fabric of social life through the establishment of engagement patterns that endure to the present day across various regions of the country.