# The fight for uncensored literature in communist Poland



The intricate story of underground literature during Poland's communist era is illuminated through the lens of the clandestine activities of individuals such as Teresa Bogucka and Mirosław Chojecki, who fought to disseminate uncensored literature despite the oppressive regime's attempts to enforce censorship.

The impetus for this struggle began in the 1950s when Janusz Bogucki, Teresa’s father, smuggled a Polish edition of George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four" into Poland from Paris. This illegal act marked the beginning of a lifelong passion for literature that would later fuel Teresa’s commitment to resist the communist regime. As a child, she was deeply moved by the parallels between Orwell's dystopian world and her own life under authoritarian rule, a sentiment she shared years later when she recounted, "It absolutely traumatised me" in her reflections on the impact of the book.

By the mid-1970s, as Teresa Bogucka became more involved with the opposition movement, she initiated a project known as the "Flying Library", in which she would circulate banned books among closely-knit groups of readers. Operating under the constant threat of surveillance by the Polish secret police, known as the SB, Bogucka arranged clandestine loans of selected titles, categorising them into various themes such as politics and literature. In time, her library grew to encompass around 500 titles smuggled into the country in various ingenious ways. The effort to provide access to banned literature was not just an act of rebellion; it was a lifeline of knowledge and ideology for many Poles.

Simultaneously, Mirosław Chojecki was building his own legacy within this shadowy and dangerous domain of underground publishing. Inspired by a history of resistance within his own family, Chojecki founded the Independent Publishing House NOWa, which quickly became a major force in distributing uncensored texts across Poland. His activities would often lead to arrest; on one occasion in March 1980, he was detained for the 43rd time, escalating tensions that culminated in a hunger strike within the confines of a notorious prison.

Chojecki’s hunger strike drew attention not just to his own plight, but also to the broader struggle for free expression in Poland. During a momentous court appearance, Chojecki eloquently articulated the necessity of independent thought, stating, "This trial is not about the accused but about free speech and thought, about Polish culture, about the dignity of society." Despite his eventual conviction and a suspended prison sentence, he emerged as a symbol of resistance, inspiring countless others in the fight against the regime.

The underground literary movement thrived alongside the covert support of external forces. It is reported that the CIA operated a long-term initiative, termed the "CIA book program," which sought to deliver uncensored materials to the eastern bloc. The aim of this programme was clarified by its leader, George Minden, who asserted that "truth is contagious". The arrival of banned literature was not merely accidental, but part of a strategic psychological warfare effort to undermine communist authority.

The scope of these literary networks expanded significantly as the years progressed, with enormous quantities of texts smuggled in through various avenues—from trains and boats to even unusual transportation methods like balloons and disguised compartments in vehicles. One notably inventive instance involved Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "The Gulag Archipelago", which was smuggled into Poland hidden in a baby’s nappy.

By the late 1980s, the persistence of these underground efforts began to fracture the foundations of communist censorship in Poland. The flourishing "second circulation" of uncensored literature played a pivotal role in fostering an environment that ultimately broke the grip of authoritarian control. As Adam Michnik, a key dissident figure, insightfully noted, "It was books that were victorious in the fight. A book is like a reservoir of freedom, of independent thought, a reservoir of human dignity."

Teresa Bogucka, reflecting on the unexpected support she received during the tumultuous years, remarked, "I thought, wow, a secret service supporting books. That’s fantastic." This perspective highlights the intersections of literature, resistance, and international dynamics that characterised the era. As history has shown, the relentless pursuit of knowledge and truth in the face of oppression played a critical role in shaping Poland’s transition towards independence and freedom.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://slavica.indiana.edu/duplicator-underground-the-independent-publishing-industry-in-communist-poland-1976-89/> - This URL supports the claim about the underground publishing industry in communist Poland, highlighting the scale and significance of independent publishing during that era. It provides insights into the 'second circulation' of uncensored literature.
* <https://guides.lib.ku.edu/c.php?g=95123&p=618653> - This URL corroborates the existence of banned books in communist Poland and the efforts to circumvent censorship, which aligns with the story of Teresa Bogucka's 'Flying Library'.
* <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/poland/polish-underground-literature.pdf> - This URL provides information on underground communist literature in Poland, which, although not directly related to the main figures mentioned, illustrates the broader context of clandestine publishing during the communist era.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Orwell> - This URL provides background information on George Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', which was smuggled into Poland and had a profound impact on Teresa Bogucka's life and commitment to resisting the communist regime.
* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aleksandr-Solzhenitsyn> - This URL supports the mention of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 'The Gulag Archipelago', which was smuggled into Poland as part of the underground literary movement.