# The underground literature movement in Cold War Poland



The ongoing historical narrative of underground literature during the Cold War era reveals a complex interplay of censorship, dissidence, and the power of the written word in the struggle against totalitarianism. A recently detailed account uncovers the story of a particular volume of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, a work that has become emblematic of the fight against oppressive regimes, particularly in Poland, where it faced a long ban under communist censorship.

This particular copy is a Polish language edition that now resides in the library of Warsaw University. However, its odyssey began with Polish writer and dissident Teresa Bogucka. It was her father, Janusz Bogucki, an art critic, who procured the book from a Polish bookshop in Paris in 1957 and subsequently smuggled it back into Poland during a brief period of liberalisation that followed Stalin's death. Teresa, just a child at the time, read the book and realised how closely its themes aligned with her own experiences living in a repressive state. "It absolutely traumatised me," she recalled.

Years later, in 1976, as Poland’s opposition movement was gaining momentum, Bogucka established a clandestine library consisting of works that had evaded the censor’s watchful eye. Under constant surveillance from the SB (the Polish security service akin to the KGB), she devised a system to circulate forbidden literature among those opposed to the regime. Books were categorised into packages, and coordinators were assigned to distribute and collect them from various locations, resulting in what became known as the "Flying Library".

The demand for Bogucka's collection rapidly exceeded her supply, necessitating sources from the West. Activist friends communicated with émigré publishers in London, leading to the smuggling of significant volumes across the Iron Curtain via sleeper trains and various other means, including hidden compartments in vehicles and even via yachts. By 1978, her library had amassed over 500 banned titles.

Simultaneously, this movement intersected with a broader initiative by the United States intelligence community known as the “CIA book program”. Spearheaded by George Minden, this operation aimed to disseminate uncensored literature across Eastern Europe, illustrating a unique form of psychological warfare that leveraged the power of ideas. The U.S. covertly facilitated the distribution of works by various writers, including Hannah Arendt, Kurt Vonnegut, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, with the belief that providing access to truth could inspire change.

Mirosław Chojecki emerged as a prominent figure in Poland’s underground publishing scene. Following an arrest during his 43rd detention in March 1980, Chojecki experienced the harsh realities of interrogation in Mokotów jail, a facility notorious for its brutal treatment of political prisoners. While in custody, he resolutely chose a hunger strike to protest the unjust nature of his imprisonment. After enduring force-feeding, he was interrogated about his involvement with the underground press.

Chojecki was among the first to engage with the burgeoning underground publishing initiatives stemming from the influx of Western literature, leading to the establishment of the Independent Publishing House NOWa. By 1976, as public dissent increased against government policies, Chojecki and his team sought to leverage the power of print to advocate for freedom of expression. This underground network produced works and reprinted banned literature, witnessing great success despite constant surveillance.

A vivid example of the lengths to which these individuals went to distribute literature occurred during a printing operation on an isolated estate. Using covert tactics to avoid detection, workers transferred clandestine publications under the scrutiny of state police. Despite their evasiveness, agents were perpetually on their tail, employing various methods to track and interrogate the underground publishers.

The culmination of these efforts was encapsulated in Chojecki’s impactful trial, where he delivered a powerful address about censorship and the role literature plays in society. He decried the communist regime’s destruction of culture and literature, stating, “the trial was not about the accused at all, but about free speech and thought, about Polish culture, about the dignity of society.” While he was convicted, the solidarity among the dissidents turned his sentencing into a rallying point for a future defined by free expression.

As the 1980s progressed, Poland's once-strict censorship began to falter under the weight of increased dissident literature and activism. The success of these underground operations contributed significantly to the eventual unraveling of the communist regime, culminating in the profound political transformations of 1989.

Amidst this climate of resistance, Teresa Bogucka, who played a crucial role in the circulation of banned literature, acknowledged the ambiguous support from American intelligence without concern. "I thought, wow, a secret service supporting books," she remarked, seeing the complexity and strangeness of the situation as a triumph in the struggle for literature over oppression.

The narrative of these dissidents and their unwavering commitment to literature reflects a broader historical legacy that continues to resonate in contemporary discussions surrounding censorship, free speech, and the role of literature in society.

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

## References

* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteen_Eighty-Four> - This URL supports the claim about George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four being a symbol of resistance against totalitarianism. The novel has been influential in highlighting the dangers of censorship and oppressive regimes.
* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Orwell> - This URL provides background information on George Orwell and his works, including Nineteen Eighty-Four, which was significant in the context of Cold War literature and censorship.
* <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-56-no-3/pdfs/Book-Program-Excerpts-CSI.pdf> - This URL supports the claim about the CIA's book program, which aimed to distribute uncensored literature across Eastern Europe as a form of psychological warfare during the Cold War.
* <https://www.polishculture.org.uk/articles/underground-publishing-in-poland.html> - This URL provides information about underground publishing in Poland during the Cold War era, highlighting figures like Mirosław Chojecki and the role of clandestine literature in resisting communist censorship.
* <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War> - This URL offers a broader context of the Cold War era, during which censorship and dissidence were significant themes, particularly in Eastern Europe and Poland.