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British Council's initiatives for the Polish community in the stagnation time of the Cold War (1949-1952)

Introduction

The problem of cultural activity of foreign institutions in the communist Poland is widely recognized by historians, though, the topic of British Council's reactivation and further development in the post-war Poland is not applicable. The paper aims to present the data on British Council's initiatives in Warsaw, based on queries made in the National Archives in London. The context is set in the turbulent times of communist-entrenching in Poland, focusing on the stagnation time of the Cold War (1949-1952)¹.

The post was originally opened in Warsaw in 1938, *inter alia* in reaction to the expansive diplomacy of the German Nazis but was closed after the outbreak of World War II. It was reopened in 1946, but due to the developing political differences between the communist authorities in Warsaw and the enthusiastic implementers of British cultural assumptions with the British Council, relations on this line were significantly hampered from the very beginning. In 1947, the British understood that the grip of the USSR on communist Poland is tightening, thus, London was steely in the determination to counter it. Clement Attlee's government focused mainly: on keeping extensive economic relations with Warsaw, putting back British diplomats to major Polish cities and rebuilding pre-war cultural institutions, which would constitute one of the keystones of promoting western way of life. Apart from the oases of Britishness, which the embassy and British consulates were undoubtedly supposed to be, the plan was to quickly expand the aforementioned British Council.

¹ The topic was taken upon and first depicted in the author's doctoral dissertation *Poland in British foreign policy 1947-1956*.

British Council's Post-War Revival

The first director of the British Council after the end of hostilities was George Chandos Bidwell. He was born on May 3, 1905 in Reading, Great Britain. He came from a merchant family and was the youngest of three brothers. After the outbreak of World War II, he joined the army and after a month of training, he became the deputy commander of the logistics division. From 1942 he participated in the campaign in Africa and a year later he took up a position in the British Council in the Middle East. Then he worked for various liaison divisions of the British Council Alaid, and finally in the Winter of 1945, he was offered the position of the head of this institution in Poland².

Bidwell arrived in Warsaw on January 8, 1946 and immediately faced the difficult task of building the facility from scratch. It has to be stressed that due to the expansive Nazi policy in early 1939, the new branch which opened in Warsaw in 1938, did not manage to fully develop. Therefore, Bidwell's task was not only to recreate, but in fact to create a completely new institution. The Bristol Hotel, destroyed by the war, was chosen as its temporary seat. Service for the British Council was characterized by constant, uninterrupted commitment, and the director himself summed up that he felt "as if he could never get away from his duties" and worked "seven days a week"³.

While the administrative situation of the British Council was becoming more orderly, politically the activities of the British Council were gradually obstructed. George Bidwell truly believed that the Soviet Union's grip on Poland in terms of culture is no match for Britain, and for that reason he hoped that the Cold War would not significantly affect his activities in Poland. He wrote that "the Polish government can take into account, both before and after the elections, that there is nothing contradictory in following the Soviet Union in politics and following the West in culture"⁴.

After the enforced change⁵ on the post of ambassador to Poland, a new policy was adopted. Mostly it centered on thawing economic relations and political reintegration. The aura of the Cold War, especially visible after Marshall's Plan was rejected by the USSR and subsequently by the Polish officials, constricted possible measures. The new ambassador to Poland, Donald St. Clair Gainer, proposed a change in relations with the communist government and was for sharpening the rhetoric. Gainer proposed to increase the funds of the British Council, believing that this institution could really force Western thinking even on communists⁶. Therefore, British Council's new goals

² Bidwell's autobiographies: George Bidwell, *Wybrałem Polskę*, Warszawa 1950; idem, *Ani chwili nudy: autobiografia*, Katowice 1976.

³ G. Bidwell, *Ani chwili nudy: autobiografia*, Katowice 1976, pp 228.

⁴ TNA, sygn. BW 51/8 Poland: British Periodicals Exhibition (1949) – catalogue and report, *Monthly Report*, Dec 5, 1946.

⁵ Victor Cavendish-Bentinck was forced to resign, as he was declared *persona non grata* by the Polish authorities. He was suspected, inter alia, of spying on the Polish officials.

⁶ TNA, sygn. FO 371/66094 Political Situation in Poland: election arrangements and party relationships, *Hancock's note*, Aug 1-2, 1947.

were to: 1) overcome suspicions about the work of British officials and build mutual trust; 2) tighten cooperation with Poles; 3) maintain friendly relations with officials of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, regardless of their policy; 4) constantly cooperate with the leaders of academic and cultural life in Poland⁷.

Consecutive initiatives were carried out and their real aim was sporadically evident, most often they were formed to incite the Polish community and to depict the Western way of life. One of its goals was to promote English culture and language. British Council arranged meetings with the authorities of the University of Warsaw and negotiated the creation of a permanent position of professor of English. As part of other tasks, a periodic subscription to cultural magazines was introduced. On this initiative, the libraries of the largest Polish universities received books in English⁸.

A new British Council's library was opened in February 1947 at al. 1 Armii Wojska Polskiego 11. According to British Council data, the number of readers grew rapidly, from 468 after two months of operation to 893 after another ten. The British Council was also involved in other undertakings, such as:

- distributing and translating periodicals and brochures,
- presenting films,
- organizing musical meetings,
- preparing exhibitions and presentations (Graphics Exhibition at the National Museum from November 10 to December 8, 1947, Theater Art Exhibition from 25 March to April 17, 1948 and other),
- cooperation in the creation of the Shakespeare Festival in July 1947,
- running a permanent scholarship program for English teachers from Poland.

Until March 1948, the director of the British Council emphasized that there were as many successes as failures in the bilateral relations. As an example, he pointed out the fact that three universities had agreed to host permanent lecturers from the British Council (in Lublin, Łódź and Warsaw), but three other universities, despite the consent of the rectors, negotiations were abruptly terminated. George Bidwell did not suggest any specific reasons and in his diplomatic correspondence, described them only briefly as "problems of a political nature"⁹.

In accordance with the earlier assumptions, the British Council office moved to Al. Jerozolimskie 53. The composition of the British Council also changed significantly during the year. Officials¹⁰ cooperating with Bidwell from the beginning of the

⁷ TNA, sygn. BW 51/8 Poland: British Periodicals Exhibition (1949) – catalogue and report, *Report ...*, Feb 28, 1946.

⁸ *ibidem*, *Monthly Report*, Jul 4, 1946.

⁹ TNA, sygn. BW 51/5 Poland Fine Art. Exhibition, *British Council Poland Annual Review 1947/1947*, no date.

¹⁰ incl. Ryhs Ellias, Ian Jago and Neil Davenport.

reopening of the British Council in Poland left Poland to take up positions in other countries in the west. It is difficult to assess to what extent the Cold War situation in Poland influenced these decisions, and to what extent they depended on London's mainstream foreign policy, but there is no doubt that such personnel changes weakened the institution and its range.

Despite the exacerbation of Cold War tensions, the British Council library prospered. During the year, the number of readers increased by another five hundred and there were no major disruptions in the library's activities. Little difficulties appeared in the import of magazines, books and newsletters from Great Britain and in the organization of exchanges of persons between countries, as was, inter alia, in the case of an exchange of writers that did not take place. The British Council also reported problems with the organization of theater performances and musical events, but it was reported that the reasons were "out of control", which could be clearly read as a suggestion of a political nature¹¹.

In 1949, the British Council planned two large exhibitions to interest Poles in the English culture. The first one was *Book Exhibition* organized in January, but it attracted a small number of people. Between May 23 and June 11, the British Council organized *The Periodicals Exhibition*, which was one of the institute's larger ventures during the worsening Cold War crisis. The exhibition was visited by an average of 40 people a day. It also attracted Poles' attention by presenting literary lectures and screening films. These events were attended by an unexpectedly large number of Polish citizens. The list of presented titles included mainly medical, technical, astronomical and physical, chemical, mining, machine and ship building, and agriculture. There were also general-scientific publications – including philosophical, sociological, historical, source studies and literary studies (with the Times reading supplement), but their number was limited. In total over 550 titles were on display, most of them were available for subscription for amounts ranging from £ 1 to even £ 5 per issue, individual titles were offered free of charge. Nevertheless, function officer C. A. Eland, who prepared the report, emphasized that the institute was disappointed with little interest¹².

On June 2, 1949, director Bidwell sent a letter to the chairman of the British Council, Ronald Adam, in which he announced that he was resigning from his position and that he would provide explanations in a statement that will be published three days later in the Polish press. Earlier, he was refused British citizenship to his newly wed, Polish, second wife. On June 4, Bidwell became a Polish citizen and presented his British passport to the embassy, which in the western world, was scandalous. Polish authorities used Bidwell's case to present the supremacy of the appeal of socialism over imperialism. British officials were reserved in commentaries¹³.

¹¹ Ibidem, *British Council Poland Annual Review 1948/1949*, no date.

¹² TNA, sygn. BW 51/8 *British Periodicals Exhibition, Report*, Jun, 1949.

¹³ TNA, sygn. FO 688/78 Bidwell, *Bidwell's statement*, 5 Jun, 1949.

British Council after “Bidwell’s Scandal”

George Bidwell was replaced by John B. S. Jardine, who came to Warsaw on the 20th of September. The situation he found, especially the tension in relations between the British Council and the Polish authorities, was described as an absolute stagnation. *Inter alia*, all lectures were limited only to the topics considered non-controversial, such as for example the British fiction, poetry and workbooks on gardening. Despite the significant increase in the collection of the British Council library, the increase in the number of readers slowed down to around 30 people per month. Undoubtedly, it resulted from the increased control of people attending there. Additionally, in the autumn the Polish security services carried out an inspection of imported publications at the British Council.

From January 1950, the British Council had to stop direct sales of English-language books and periodicals. The government in Warsaw took control of all such activities, introducing restrictions on the sale of non-Russian publications. Poles could make this type of purchase through a special agency that cooperated with the British Council. The agency controlled the content of the magazines and books offered by the foreign posts. As a result, the decline in sales of this type fell to almost zero.

On the 20th of March 1950, Ernest Bevin who was at the time the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, presented the memorandum on the British Council’s policy in “Russian Satellite Countries”. Its aim was to depict all *pros and cons* of the possible withdrawal of the British Council from Eastern Europe. The reason for that was “Hungarian Government’s request for the withdrawal (...) and the hostile attitude adopted towards the Council by the Czechoslovak authorities”¹⁴. Bevin advised to take up measures to stop the cultural-skirmish in Prague. He underlined that after consulting British Council’s heads in Sofia and Warsaw, he still sees potential in the cultural posts and does not recommend voluntary withdrawal. In one of the points of the memorandum, the Secretary of State cites the director of British Council in Poland, who was supposed to say that it is the staff’s duty to stay so long as their work is of use and not mind the possible risk. This risk was i.e. the danger of victimization, just as were the diplomats of British Consulates and Warsaw’s Embassy. Moreover, Bevin non-directly pertained to Bidwell’s case by addressing that: “It is necessary to decide whether a member of the British Council’s staff who marries a national of one of the satellite countries should be debarred for employment in another foreign country, on the ground that we cannot afford the risk of importing, in the wife, a potential agent into the Council’s staff abroad”¹⁵.

From the Summer of 1950, reading and photography exhibitions were still held at the British Council premises or in the library, but to a limited extent. Due to numerous problems and failures, the planning of concerts and theater events with the participation of British artists was discontinued. Despite this, the role and importance of

¹⁴ TNA, sygn. CAB 129/39 The British Council in Russian Satellite Countries, Mar 20, 1950.

¹⁵ Ibidem, point no 10.

the post in Poland was invariably described as significant in the reports of the British ambassador. In the summer of 1952, the British government evaluated the activities of the British Council in Poland. Lord Droghedy prepared a report in which he recommended increasing the financial outlays for this institution. In it, he emphasized the important role that this institution plays in implementing the assumptions of Great Britain's foreign policy towards the satellite states of the Soviet Union, especially in the period of such visible tensions. On July 5, one of the cabinet committees discussed the report extensively, as it was inconsistent with the earlier assumptions of spending propaganda and information activities and was to be presented to the House of Commons. However, Harold Macmillan chose not to publish it, and funding was left unchanged¹⁶.

The stagnation continued over the next three years. Any activity of the British Council in Poland was carefully supervised. Trips to the Islands for scholarship holders and scientific exchanges organized by the British were treated in a special way. As described by the then director of the British Council John Jardine, every person who managed to emigrate to Great Britain, at best after returning to Poland, is silent, and usually speaks publicly about the disappointment that she experienced and denies any influence of Western culture on her person. The tasks of the facility were therefore mainly limited to teaching English and running a library. After the closure of a similar French institution (in 1949) and the American institute and reading room in 1951, the responsibility for keeping Poles in touch with Western culture fell on the British Council. Jardine's successor, Norman Tett, was fully aware of this, but the restrictions imposed on his activities in times of stagnation made it impossible to implement most of the assumptions¹⁷.

Conclusion

In order to facilitate the post-war reconstruction of Poland, British policy towards communists, after the distortional elections of 1947, concentrated on the cooperation in the field of economic and cultural policy. London assumed that Poland would achieve complete independence from the socialist grip of the USSR only when it was sustainable in industrial terms. The British focused mainly on equipping Poles with the necessary tools such as machines, engines, mining equipment, etc. In addition, cultural institutions were to expand their scope of activities and the press to intensify their propaganda activities.

When considering the changes in mutual relations through the next years, it is difficult to ignore the fact that they were influenced by the internal and external ac-

¹⁶ Michael Nelson, *War of the Balck Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War*, Syracuse 1997, pp 86-87; Francis Donaldson, *The British Council The First Fifty Years*, Warszawa 1987, pp IV.

¹⁷ TNA, sygn. BW 51/5 Poland Fine Art. Exhibition, *British Council Poland Annual Review 1949/1950; 1950/51; 1951/52, 1952/53*.

tions of the communist government in Warsaw. The perceptible post war relaxation gave the British hope that their assumptions would bear fruit and that Poland would move away from Moscow, but diplomats at all levels expressed such suggestions in an extremely moderate manner. Despite the fact that the then yoke of socialism, control and gradual freezing of relations with the West caused considerable discomfort in the work of British diplomats in Poland, they were often the source of suggestions to make more decisive political decisions in relation to the communist government, because Poland is ready to resume broadly understood cooperation. Perhaps this was due to the fact that they felt the frostbite of normalization themselves, while politicians in London were more skeptical about this type of relationship.

After Stalin's death, there were no significant changes in the cultural sphere¹⁸. The communist regime continuously supervised the cultural content proposed by British diplomatic missions. It was too early to organize cultural events together, but the interest in English-language publications was growing, especially in the British Council's reading room. British art and literature as well as theater shows, exhibitions and film screenings were more and more eagerly visited. Diplomats described that the foundation of Poles' confidence in the safety of such events was the fact that despite the extremely difficult political situation, British institutions did not withdraw from Poland.

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¹⁸ Andrzej Korzon, *Skrócona misja ambasadora brytyjskiego w Polsce w 1956 r.*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 2002, 1, pp. 157-158, 174.

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Abstract: The problem of cultural activity of British Council's Polish post from its reactivation to further development in the course of two turbulent years of the post-war era, has not been taken upon in literature. The paper aims to present the data on British Council's initiatives in Warsaw, based on queries made in the National Archives in London. The context is set in the times of communist-entrenching in Poland, focusing on the stagnation time of the Cold War (1949-1952), when all contacts of Western diplomats and officials with the Polish community were being gradually restrained. The communist regime continuously supervised the cultural content proposed by British diplomatic missions, though British Council continued its mission.

Keywords: British Council in Warsaw, British Council initiatives, George Bidwell, the Cold War

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