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Zine Publishing and the Polish Far Right

Kaja Marczevska

The rise of the far right in Poland during the last decade has been chilling. The 60,000-strong controversial Independence Day march in Warsaw in 2017 – called “a beautiful sight” by Mariusz Błaszczak, the Interior Minister (Chrzczonowicz 2017), and “a great march of patriots” by one of the state-owned TV stations¹ – was the subject of extensive coverage in the Western media. The march was not an isolated incident but a culmination of the far right’s growing strength Poland today. Incidents such as setting fire to a flat occupied by a Chechen family in 2013 in Białystok, the stoning of a Yemeni doctor and his son in Toruń in 2016, and the violent assault of a black female passenger by two ticket inspectors on a bus in Bydgoszcz in 2017 are increasingly becoming an everyday occurrence in the country. A Polish NGO, the Centre for Monitoring Racism and Xenophobic Behavior, reports that as many as 100 racist incidents are logged by the organization daily (Dulkowski 2017).

In this context, diverse forms of publishing and circulating information serve as an important tool for promoting far-right ideology. For example, Blood and Honour, an international far-right network very active in Poland, regularly releases online lists, the so-called ‘redwatch’ lists, of individuals identified as future targets for attacks. In 2017, Młodzież Wszepolska (All-Polish Youth) – a prominent far-right youth organization – circulated a collection of fabricated death certificates for a number of Polish city mayors, whose future demise would be apocryphally based on their continued support of ‘liberalism, multiculturalism, and stupidity’, i.e. the mayors’ readiness to offer support for refugees. Online plat-

1 | Wiadomości TVP (2017): “Szkalują patriotów, gardzą Polakami”, 13 November 2017 (<http://wiadomosci.tvp.pl/34794068/szkaluja-patriotow-gardza-polakami>).

forms and periodicals focusing on far-right content are also increasingly popular. For example, *Nacjonalista.pl*, Poland's most prominent far-right online publication, enjoys 270,000 clicks and 100,000 individual page visitors per month and *Szczerbieniec*, a radical nationalist monthly, is published in 4000–5000 copies per issue. *Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski* (NOP/National Rebirth of Poland), an ultranationalist political party, runs a successful online bookstore selling far-right books, music, and periodicals.

While, predictably, publishing online is the most common form of far-right communication today, in Poland an unusual phenomenon of far-right zine publishing constitutes an important and an increasingly prolific sphere of activity. A report published in 2012 by the Polish Ministry of the Interior identified zines as one of the tactics that most contribute to the threat posed by far-right organizations in Poland.² Zines were listed in the report alongside music concerts, marches and demonstrations, as well as maintenance of internet forums and websites as means of far-right community building. This chapter explores the parallel resurgence of far-right nationalism and DIY forms of publishing since the change of the political system in Poland in 1989. It draws on these recent histories of Polish radical nationalism and self-publishing to explore the ways in which zine culture has been co-opted by the far right today. It focuses in particular on the use of print as a tool of organizing and consolidating groups already strongly embedded in far-right circles to suggest that the very limitations of zines as a media form make them an important and useful safe space for radicalization and far-right community enlargement.

ZINES AND UNDERGROUND PUBLISHING IN POLAND

Zines are a unique form of publishing. They are handmade, self-published, non-commercial, small-run periodicals, usually photocopied, characterized by a cut-and-paste aesthetic and amateur feel. They tend to be distributed through independent networks, often bartered rather than sold. Stephen Duncombe (2008) traces zines back to the 1930s North American

2 | Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych (2012): "Raport o Stanie Bezpieczeństwa w Polsce w 2011", (https://mil.link/instytut/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Raport_o_stanie_bezpieczenstwa_w_Polsce_w_2011_roku.pdf).

fanzines, self-published at the time by the science fiction community, but they are best known as a product of the 1970s' punk scene. Evocative of its DIY ethos and defiance of the commercial and mainstream media, zines helped to perform that community's commitment to radical, often anarchist politics. The punk heritage heavily informs the approach to cultural production represented in zines: zine publishing not only works outside of the market, it actively opposes its logic, working against the corporate media and the culture of late capitalism. As such, it is also implicitly associated with predominantly left-wing politics. Zines tend to explore subjects as wide ranging as environmental justice, body image, the housing crisis, and queer sex, alongside everyday interests approached from points of view that interest readerships with unusual tastes, often covering topics unacceptable or of little concern to mainstream publications. Although many zines are not focused on politics per se, the great majority explicitly support political agendas that show allegiances with, and active support for, the working class, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised.

The formation of a popular and widespread far-right zine culture in Poland seems antithetical to strategies of zine publishing. But in this unusual appropriation of the form, the phenomenon is perhaps symptomatic of the broader history of zines in the Polish context. This history differs quite significantly from the familiar narratives of their USA and UK-based equivalents. Until 1989, a strict censorship regime was in place in Poland, which made publishing independently almost impossible. Offset printing, a relatively cheap method widely available in the West by the 1980s, was, before the fall of communism, only available in Poland to state-supported organizations and so beyond reach for most groups interested in the cultural underground. At the time when corner Xerox shops were emerging on an unprecedented scale in the USA – a phenomenon that exerted huge impact on surrounding zine communities (Eichhorn 2016) – the few Xerox machines available to the general public in Poland from late 1980s onwards were also controlled heavily by the state censorship apparatus. Although officially all publications in print runs of up to 100 copies were not subject to censorship – a legislation loophole readily exploited by early Polish zinesters – independent publishers attempting to copy their work were often refused the service by copy shop owners.

In spite of – or perhaps precisely because of – the limited and highly controlled access to cheap reproduction technologies, a rich underground publishing culture emerged in Poland at the time. The underground it-

self, however, developed into two distinct strands. Publishing in the communist People's Republic of Poland was organized into the so-called first, second, and third circulations. The first circulation included all publications that were approved by the authorities and supported the political status quo, and the second and third circulation was constituted by the opposition and spheres of independent publishing (Dunin-Wąsowich/Varga 1995; Sławiński 2000; Pęczak 1988). The second circulation, which emerged in the 1970s, included publishing activities most typically associated with the political opposition at the time but also illegally worked to 'supplement' the first circulation by publishing and distributing banned books including works by George Orwell and Milan Kundera as well as Polish oppositional authors, such as Tadeusz Konwicki (Doucette 2018). Although actively resisted by the censorship apparatus, it was well established by the 1980s, operating widely known publishing houses and sophisticated, semi-official distribution networks.

Unlike second circulation publishing, third circulation was decentralized, self-organized, and relied on strategies of self-publishing that gave rise to what could be described as a Polish zine culture. As a publishing movement, third circulation formed at least in part in response to the activities of second circulation. It was associated with alternative movements, punk – somewhat belatedly arriving in Poland in the early 1980s – and publishing that was not focused on exploring political topics (although, similarly to zines more broadly, it was always politically motivated). The publishing communities associated with third circulation did not support the government and its politics, but they did not look favorably at the second circulation either, which they saw as the new establishment (Dunin-Wąsowich/Varga 1995: 228).

For both second and third circulation, however, publishing outside of the mainstream was a necessity rather than a choice. The political system and then the introduction of Marshall Law in 1981 in particular, which strengthened censorship and imposed further limitations on personal freedoms, were a natural context for zine publishing to develop, even if the system they opposed was radically different from the environment that gave rise to zines in the first place. A gradual relaxing of the political system in the years leading up to 1989 meant that increasingly small print run self-publishing was becoming a possibility in Poland. This transformation subsequently led to an explosion of independent publishing in the 1990s.

ZINES AND THE POLISH FAR RIGHT

In 2001, an anthology of Polish zines was published – the first comprehensive attempt at addressing this form of publishing in the Polish context.³ The anthology included information about 1,000 underground publications created after 1989. In the introduction, Dariusz Ciosmak, its editor, foregrounds his focus on publications addressing questions of anarchism, antifascism, music, ecology, and animal rights, i.e. topics typically associated with zine publishing. Ciosmak also explicitly stresses his lack of interest in, and intentional exclusion of, zines produced by the far right (2001: 3). This declaration and the absence of far-right zines in the anthology is perhaps the most telling statement on the complex makeup of the contemporary Polish zine scene. It is an acknowledgement of the unusual but active presence of these far-right publications in the country's underground publishing circles.

Zines have been a communication method used by the Polish far right for some time now. Their appropriation of the zine form can be attributed to two parallel histories: the transformation of the public sphere, including the print and publishing sectors, in the early years of transition from dictatorship to democracy, and transformations of the far right in Poland during the same period. The fall of communism and the change in the political system meant, among other things, the opening of borders, the introduction of the free market, the end of censorship, and the reintroduction to Poland of civil liberties, including freedom of speech and freedom of organization.

The consequences of these dramatic changes were many. A new influx of media from the West meant new forms of access to all sorts of publications, both mainstream and underground. In this new political reality, the Polish underground, as it operated before 1989, lost its purpose and ceased to exist, with books distributed by second circulation now entering the mainstream and many third circulation publications transforming into official though independent publishers. New access to technology and print (paper could now be purchased legally, materials reproduced in unlimited and uncensored copies) also lead to an enthusiastic explosion

3 | The title of this compilation is a misnomer. The publication is a lexicon of short entries about zines rather than an anthology. It remains, however, a useful and most comprehensive source of information about zines in Poland to date.

of new forms of independent publishing at the time. Kajtoch estimates that by 1995, 1800 new publications were created (2006: 55–56). But as the new official, independent publishing culture was forming, so was a new underground. In the 1990s, there was a legal zine scene in Poland – i.e. publications which were registered and allocated an ISBN number, transforming from zines into small, independent magazines – and an illegal one – i.e. publications operating as zines, without ISBN registration and so, according to then new Polish legislation, in breach of the trade laws (Flont 2018: 159). The new underground, however, unlike its censored equivalent pre-1989, was allowed to operate freely and the limitations of trade laws were not exercised with respect to very small publishers. This state of affairs opened space for a rich and diverse zine scene in 1990s Poland.

The systemic transformations in the early 1990s also led to an almost instantaneous proliferation of new subcultural activities and youth organizations, including far-right groups, who were almost entirely stifled before 1989 but who grew in strength rapidly at the time. Marta Polaczek (2006) explains that immediately after the fall of communism, it was the political left that was the focus of widespread attention. Fears of post-communist left-wing organizations growing in strength again meant that little to no attention was paid to the activities of the quickly expanding far right. In the 1990s, the focus of far-right organizations was on creating a pan-Slavic program, driven by pagan and racist ideologies. A commitment to an ethnically-Polish, white community that heavily informed this far-right revival was a consequence of the long history of Polish nationalism, with its roots in 123 years of partitions,⁴ the restoration of the independent Polish state in 1918, and the establishment, as a result of the events of World War II with its territorial changes and forced migration, of an ethnically homogenous Polish state in 1945. This revival of far-right organizations after the transition was geared in the early years towards establishing new organizational structures and expanding and strengthening their community of supporters. The appropriation of zine publishing was part of this program.

4 | Three annexations of Polish territory in the 18th century by Habsburg Austria, Prussia and Russia which resulted in the elimination of sovereign Poland and Lithuania (at the time the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) for 123 years.

The turn to zines was a directly oppositional response to liberal left-wing activities and publications, both those continuing the work of third circulation titles and the rapidly proliferating new ones. The expansion of diverse forms of self-publishing at the time served as an important means of accessing the younger population at a crucial moment in the country's socio-cultural development. To the re-emerging far right, this was a key priority. For them, zine publishing in the early 1990s was a means of partaking in this new subcultural environment. The logic of this approach was simple: left-wing, progressive and liberal groups had zines, and so right-wing communities had to have zines too.

The publications of far-right groups discussed here have been referred to as zines by their creators since the early 1990s. Like their left-wing equivalents, these developed from third circulation publications and were disseminated without an ISBN number (second circulation far-right publishing also existed before 1989, including, for example, *Jestem Polakiem* [I am a Pole], a magazine published by NOP since 1983, transformed in 1992 into an official, registered magazine). But, typically, the far-right zines of the transition period lacked the collage, cut-and-paste aesthetics or zines' characteristic DIY feel. Their makers took little interest in the broader aesthetics and politics of the form itself. For reasons described above, the character of the zine was only tentatively appropriated by far-right communities to promote and consolidate, somewhat under the radar, their ideology. *White Storm*, for example, a skinhead zine created in the early 1990s, was produced on a desktop computer. Its pages were set using a relatively large font and its text was spaced out to make it easily legible (unlike a typical zine, often messy and difficult to decipher due to its layout and design). In its design and feel *White Storm* was akin to an amateur independent magazine, but due to its unregistered status and the models of distribution it relied on, it operated as a zine. Its aesthetic was explicitly and unambiguously a manifestation of a far-right sensibility. The pages of *White Storm* included ornamental margins into which the Othala rune was incorporated, a symbol used by Nazis, as a reference to Aryan heritage. This use of Nazi symbolism on pages of far-right zines was frequent, as was the incorporation of numerical codes applied to communicate far-right messages (e.g. 18 for Hitler, 88 for 'Heil Hitler' as well as David Lane's 88 *Precepts*), symbols all easily identified by the community these zines were aimed at, and identifying them almost instantaneously as radical publications. This approach remains prominent in far-right zines to-

day, which maintain a similar aesthetic and rely on the same forms of symbolic communication.

Since the 2011 parliamentary elections there has been a continuous movement of far-right ideology in Poland from the margins into the mainstream. Tomasz Słupik (2009) associates this recent re-emergence of right-wing radicals in Eastern Europe more broadly with what he describes as post-transformation trauma. Poland's aspirations since 1990 have been heavily influenced by a vision of an idealized Western order that the country was hoping to adopt. But this vision has proven to be an impossible dream and has only been realized in part. The far right today often draws on this disappointment, to accuse the EU, liberalism, and refugees of what they see as major failures in the process of systemic change. This perception of post-1989 transformations has been an important trigger for the turn towards the right in Polish politics during the last decade. Inevitably, an increasingly widespread support for right-wing ideology legitimizes the activities of radical groups, including radical publishers. But the content that might have, ten years ago, only been published via zines or dedicated online forums, has today entered our everyday discourses. Thrust into this context, the underground character of zines also changes. These publications are now *not* a tool of propaganda and a means of communicating messages otherwise invisible in the mainstream, but *rather* a form of community building and inter-group association. Whereas far-right zines in the early 1990s served as one of the tools employed to re-introduce the far right in the public imagination, today they serve an altogether different purpose. Utilized first and foremost as an internal communication method, these zines are designed to maintain an already established network.

This focus on community, which was prominent in a different sense for underground, sub- and counter-cultural groups before, is today central to the general aim of mainstreaming the extreme ideologies in which Polish far-right zines play a part. The approach is typical for zines more broadly, which are, Chris Atton explains, "primarily concerned with the object of their attention" (2001: 54) and as a result often serve as a means of building and maintaining an alternative community. According to Atton, a zine "is dialogical in intent and offers itself as a token for social relation" (2001: 55). Today, Polish far-right zines are less a space for reading and writing and more a tool for community formation. Their capacity to connect is important not only as a tool for networking; it is also a tool for

establishing the agency of community members. It demonstrates a simple model of making and sharing in which they can actively participate by self-publishing. Such actor-participants have the capacity to co-create the culture of far-right nationalism by engaging in this form of publishing, not just as readers but also as publishers.

What emerges, then, from the pages of these zines, is a sense of collective and highly homogenous identity and a sense of a community that speaks in a unified voice. Characteristic distinctions between different far-right groups are almost entirely obscured on the pages of their zines and as a result neo-Nazi, Pagan, and skinhead zines, for example, tend to be strikingly similar both in their design and content. This approach is a direct outcome of the role zines play within far-right communities. It also speaks to the ways in which far-right supporters tend to create their identity, as individuals and communities, always constructed in opposition to any form of diversity and difference. However, its manifestations in the Polish context are unusual insofar as contemporary Poland is one of the most ethnically homogenous European countries, and ethnic minorities as well as immigrant communities are almost non-existent.⁵ As Daniel Płatek suggests, this ethnic homogeneity means that the Polish far-right's attitude grows out of historical resentment (e.g. antisemitism, anti-German sentiments) and is not formed in a direct response to the makeup of contemporary Polish society (2015: 4). As a result, Płatek argues, the Polish far right today relies on creating an 'enemy' for itself, fabricating a target of hate that is almost always absent from its immediate environment. The Polish far-right's approach, then, is deeply rooted in an understanding of a traditional national identity, defined through Catholicism, Polish language and Polish ethnicity, and a commitment to traditional values, including familial bonds and religion. Central to the contemporary far right in Poland, is a certain historical nostalgia for the interwar nationalist programs and an idealized vision of a patriotic Poland that once was.

5 | Both a recent Polish census and a 2017 Eurostat survey suggest that only 0,2 of Poland's residents are of a nationality other than Polish. In this ninth most highly populated country in Europe of over 38m people, there are estimated 30,000 Muslims, 30,000 Asians, and ca. 5,000 people of African descent, making Poland one of the least diverse countries in the world. James D. Fearon's (2003) diversity study places Poland among the bottom 10 out of 160 studied countries in the world with respect of diversity.

The homogeneity that far-right zines are characterized by and seek to promote is counter to what could be described as the radical differencing of traditional zine communities, which, as a phenomenon, are committed to a project of creating spaces for a great diversity of voices to be heard. This tension in the way the zine form is used by the far right is a direct result of its appropriation, one that is inherently antithetical to the ideological project that informed the emergence of the zine phenomenon in the first place. The imagined and fabricated context for an exclusionist, racist, nationalist cause makes publications such as the far-right zines so much more important to mainstream politics than traditional zines. In their appropriated, unified voice they become a space where a common or consistent 'enemy' can easily be constructed, a space that makes it possible to create imaginary communities made up of those enemies against whom the right-wing groups can position themselves. In the context of the Polish far right, the role of publication is central to making the community a community in the first place.

THE INVISIBLE COMMUNITY

Unlike publishing formats that are easily accessible online by a range of readers, regardless of their political views, access to these zines is limited to those who are already 'in the know' due to their small print runs and dependence on direct distribution. Whereas 'traditional' contemporary zines, which in their celebration of print, the zine fair, and the independent niche bookshop, also embrace the digital sphere as a tool of circulation and a means of reaching communities far beyond their local networks, contemporary far-right zines remain somewhat outside of digital distribution channels.⁶ Their visibility online is limited and any means of accessing and sourcing copies of current or past issues are often ambiguous or obscured. These small publications are sometimes mentioned on portals such as Nacjonlista.pl, referred to earlier, but access to them is unambiguously reserved to far-right supporters who already participate in

6 | There are, of course, exceptions, and a sub-phenomenon of far-right e-zines also exists in Poland. Published and distributed exclusively online, these publications however, are rare and a not representative of the broader far-right zine phenomenon today.

far-right networks. They are often made available during football matches, right-wing marches, and dedicated far-right gatherings. This relative invisibility to any general public is a conscious choice made by the far-right zine publishers and not a failure on their part. It is an important manifestation of the role the medium itself plays among the communities it speaks to.

This is not to say that right-wing zine communities are invisible online. A lot of contemporary far-right zines develop out of or are published alongside a website or a forum. The football fan zine, *Droga Legionisty*, supported by a prominent online platform is a good example. But the content published in zines tends to be unique to their pages and is rarely made available via online channels. This turn to self-publishing in print in the context of the far-right's active online presence is key to developing a characteristic aesthetic and discourse; it allows for an unfiltered conversation about ideas that would be considered controversial at best in the mainstream. The limited nature of zine circulation, then, creates a space for the use of more extreme ideas, language, and imagery, unconstrained by the norms and standards that still dictate the mainstream's boundaries, even if the Polish mainstream, especially when it comes to publicly owned media, is heavily controlled and manipulated by today's right-wing government.

Open declarations of antisemitism, the promotion of racism as a central value, and a commitment to white supremacy are common on the pages of far-right zines. While the same ideals and beliefs are central to online communications by far-right groups, their expressions tend to differ. What is published online and made widely accessible, like the Blood and Honour lists mentioned above, is often a provocation, a trigger for greater visibility on a wider scale, inside and outside of right-wing circles. The turn to zines among the far right serves the opposite role. This distinction between the use of print and digital as far-right spaces of communication is particularly interesting as it reverses the logic of publishing today. The seemingly unfiltered digital sphere becomes, for these groups, the space of relative (self) censorship; whereas publishing in print, in small print runs, and outside of mainstream circulation, serves as a space to manifest open and unconstrained expressions of the ideology they support. This move away from the digital is devoid of the kind of retro-nostalgia that often characterizes contemporary zine publishing. Nor does it appear to be informed by the new commitment to 'making' so central to the zine communities. Rather, the materiality of the form, and its characteristic

amateur status, is primarily utilitarian in far-right contexts. It offers a means of communicating somewhat under the radar within the growing far-right community, and it carries connotation of a struggle against the repression of free speech or radical ideas. Hidden in plain sight, far-right zines are a powerful tool exactly because of their limited reach. Their proliferation is one manifestation of a community growing in strength, yet their constrained, underground circulation makes any form of response to them significantly more difficult.

While independent media and organizations report an alarming rise of far-right activity in Poland, the most recent report on national security published by the Ministry of the Interior in 2017 (i.e. after the election of the current, conservative government) under the directorship of Mariusz Błaszczak describes the activities of the far right as limited and broadly unthreatening.⁷ A new risk, according to the report, is posed by the “radical left-wing pro-Islamists”. However, this apparent left-wing radicalism, i.e. the activities of groups who support refugees and oppose the anti-immigration sentiment of the current government, is not flagged up in the report as a threat in and of itself. It is instead identified as a problem because of its potential to provoke the anti-refugee far right, the same far right that the report claims not to be a problem; the same far right for whom Poland is fast becoming a new international cradle.

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7 | Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych (2017): “Raport o Stanie Bezpieczeństwa w Polsce w 2016”, (<https://bip.mswia.gov.pl/bip/raport-o-stanie-bezpie/18405,Raport-o-stanie-bezpieczenstwa.html>).

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