

**Adriana Merta-Staszczak**

Wrocław University of Science and Technology

Faculty of Management

e-mail: [adriana.merta-staszczak@pwr.edu.pl](mailto:adriana.merta-staszczak@pwr.edu.pl)

ORCID: 0000-0002-2692-1057

**Sylwia Straszak-Chandoha**

Wrocław University of Economics and Business

Faculty of Economics and Finance

e-mail: [sylwia.straszak-chandoha@ue.wroc.pl](mailto:sylwia.straszak-chandoha@ue.wroc.pl)

ORCID: 0000-0002-3220-9533

**FOOD CRISES IN POST-WAR POLAND  
(1945–1989)**

**Abstract.** Fulfilling the needs of securing the food market was a key problem for the economy of the People's Republic of Poland. According to the assumptions of the socialist system, all basic means of production were owned by the state and society as a whole, and production: its structure and volume depended on central assumptions. Farmers not only had to face the issue of reconstruction of farms in the post-war period, they were also obliged to make compulsory deliveries, and had the main responsibility for feeding the country. Production capacity in the face of the growing needs of society was insufficient, which forced rationing and the use of substitutes in the diet. There were periodic declines in the consumption of selected commodities, especially meat. The purpose of this article is to analyze the situation of the food market in the period 1945–1989, taking into account the burden of the countryside, the level of consumption and the import and export of basic food products.

*Keywords:* history, food security, agricultural production, consumption, People's Republic of Poland.

**Introduction**

The most significant political and economic changes during the period of post-war reconstruction in Poland were the changes in borders, the reconstruction of the agricultural structure and the admission of a centrally planned economy. The post-1945 reconstruction of Poland's agricultural system toward collectivization was intended to ensure the stability of the food sector. The formation of agricultural cooperatives, and later State Agricultural Farms, and getting the expected results from them, was a com-

plicated process. The most important barrier in the development was the considerable destruction of farms as a result of warfare, but also a plan for accelerated industrialization aimed at the reconstruction and expansion of industry, consuming massive financial resources. The post-war situation in rural areas was very difficult – buildings, agricultural workshops, farmland and livestock were largely destroyed. There was a lack of livestock, and the damage negatively affected the entire agri-food industry (Merta-Staszczak, Burak, Leśniewski, 2020, 27–28) not only in the so-called Regained Territories, but all over the country. Rural areas were taxed and later obliged to supply cities. Agricultural products were sold at depressed prices, which further negatively affected the condition of the Polish food economy. In the first years of post-war Poland, the food objective was to eliminate food deficiencies, return to pre-1939 levels, and then increase consumption levels. However, the development plan was for minimal inputs with maximum profit, mainly based on already existing resources. The purpose of this article is to analyze three issues related to the functioning of the food market: obligatory supplies introduced in 1951–1971, the level of consumption of basic foodstuffs, and imports and exports, taking into account critical moments in production and consumption. The basic source material of the article is the literature on the subject, statistics, legal materials and newspaper articles. The article is a contribution to the discussion of reconstruction and economic problems of the period of the People's Republic of Poland.

## **1. Obligatory supplies as part of food security**

During the People's Republic of Poland (PRL), in accordance with the tenets of the socialist system, all basic means of production were owned by the state and society as a whole. In contrast, where private ownership was less prevalent, producers were burdened with forced transfers of benefits in various forms. For such pressing needs as feeding society, agriculture was burdened with a wide variety of contributions: financial (land tax) and material. The last included forced deliveries of agricultural products. This was particularly difficult for underinvested individual farms, while production cooperatives were given a reprieve (Ogrodnik, 1977–1978, 299). In 1944. The Polish Committee for National Liberation issued a Decree about war benefits (Dekret Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego z dnia 18 sierpnia 1944 r. o wojennych świadczeniach rzeczowych – obowiązkowych dostawach zbóż i ziemniaków dla państwa, Dz.U. 1944 nr 13 poz. 72.).

They concerned the obligatory supply of grain and potatoes to the state and were intended to guarantee an equal supply of food for the army, cities and industrial settlements. They concerned the obligatory supply of grain and potatoes to the state and were intended to guarantee an equal supply of food for the army, cities and industrial settlements. The largest quantity of supplies for the 1944/45 was in the Lublin province, with a total of 570 kilograms of wheat, rye, barley, oats and potatoes (Table 1). In Warsaw province and the right coast districts it was: 311 kg, in Rzeszów district – 295 kg, Białystok province – 272 kg, in Kielce and liberated districts – 138 kg. deliveries overall included 773 kg of potatoes, 397 kg of rye, 164 kg of oats, 142 kg of wheat, 110 kg of barley. All those evading their obligation to deliver were to be charged under the laws of war.

**Table 1**

**Level of supplies for the year 1944/1945 [in kg]**

Voivodeship	Wheat	Rye	Barley	Oats	Potatos
Lublin province	65	131	45	56	273
Białystok province	12	81	16	30	133
Warsaw province and the right coast districts	21	94	15	24	157
Rzeszów district	33	56	23	41	142
Kielce province and liberated districts	11	35	11	13	68
Total	142	397	110	164	773

Source: Dekret Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego z dnia 18 sierpnia 1944 r. o wojennych świadczeniach rzeczowych – obowiązkowych dostawach zbóż i ziemniaków dla państwa, Dz.U.44.3.9.

The distribution of supplies to individual provincial and district farms was decided by national councils and Gathering Supply Commissions following guidelines:

- farms over 50 hectares of farmland provided supplies in the amount of the total harvest minus the need for products to supply for the entire year for the owner's family, workers and estate laborers, to feed livestock and grain for sowing. Deliveries of farms over 50 hectares could not be less than the quotas enforced by the German occupation authorities;
- deliveries of farms with 15 to 50 hectares of farmland could be for cereals and potatoes a quarter less than last year's quotas;
- deliveries of farms from 5 to 15 hectares of farmland may be less for cereals by a quarter, and for potatoes by a third less than last year's quota;

- deliveries of farms from 2 to 5 hectares may be one-third less for cereals and less than half of last year's deliveries for potatoes;
- farms with less than 2 hectares of agricultural land can be completely freed from the obligation to supply.

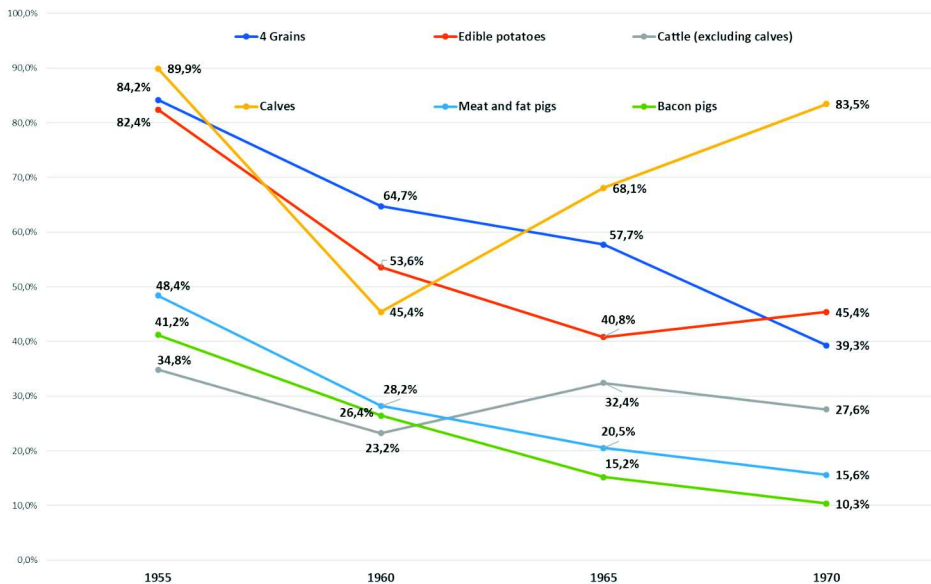
The organizations, accepting forced deliveries on behalf of the state, paid prices for the products, increased by 10% compared to 1943/44 prices. For 100 kg, they were paid: wheat – 37.50 zlotys, rye – 27.50 zlotys, barley – 27.50 zlotys, oats – 26.50 zlotys, potatoes – 9.00 zlotys. New legislation introduced in 1947 approved a land tax. However, this did not improve the situation in the countryside, and mandatory deliveries of potatoes were introduced in 1951, and in the next year – slaughter animals, milk and grain.

The next laws imposing new obligations were three acts from 1952. – about the obligatory supply of slaughter animals (Ustawa z dnia 15 lutego 1952 r. o obowiązkowych dostawach zwierząt rzeźnych, Dz.U. 1952 nr 8 poz. 46.), updated in 1953, (Dekret z dnia 1 grudnia 1953 r. o obowiązkowych dostawach zwierząt rzeźnych. Dz.U. 1953 nr 50 poz. 244.) and grains – rye, wheat, oats, barley, cereal mixed (Ustawa z dnia 10 lipca 1952 r. o obowiązkowych dostawach zbóż. Dz.U. 1952 nr 32 poz. 214.), and on obligatory supply of potatoes (Dekret z dnia 28 sierpnia 1952 r. o obowiązkowych dostawach ziemniaków. Dz.U. 1952 nr 37 poz. 255.). These obligations covered: individual farms; homestead plots members of production cooperatives and the areas parts of land cultivation associations members, production cooperatives; State Farms subordinate to the Minister of State Farms and other state-owned farms. At least 70% of the amount of compulsory supplies of slaughter animals included pigs, and the remainder in swine, horned cattle, calves or sheep (Straszak-Chandoha, 2021, 207). The amount of obligatory deliveries of individual farms was set by the presidiums of the municipal national councils and the municipal delegations of the Central Office of Purchasing and Contracting. Under the above-mentioned laws, farms were exempted from the obligation:

- area of agricultural land not exceeding 0.5 hectares with the exception of horticultural-vegetable or floricultural farms;
- agricultural area not exceeding 1 hectare, if their owners: are over 60 years old and there are no family members over 14 years old on the farm; they are performing military service and there are no family members able to work on the farm except for one woman and children over 14 years old; they have 5 or more dependent children under 14 years old.
- belonging to the fattening houses of the Meat Central, hospitals, sanatoriums, public schools, homes for invalids and the aged.

The law also provides an exemption for farms in extraordinary situations or a 20% reduction in supplies. The acts were supplemented by another law adopted in 1957 about the realization of arrears in compulsory supplies of grain, potatoes and slaughter animals (Ustawa z dnia 13 grudnia 1957 r. o realizacji zaległości w obowiązkowych dostawach zbóż, ziemniaków i zwierząt rzeźnych. Dz.U. 1957 nr 62 poz. 337.). The law specified the conditions under which farms could make up the arrears in the supply of agricultural and livestock.

**Graph 1**  
**Obligatory deliveries of major agricultural products in the purchase of agricultural products [in percent]**



In 1950 and 1955 – without supplies from state farms: provincial unions of state farms, the Union of Breeding Animals and the Union of State Fishing Farms (and in 1950. – without supplies from the farms of the Unification of Plant Breeding and Seeding). In 1960 – without supplies from the state farms of the Ministry of Agriculture. In 1965–1970 – without supplies from all state farms

Source: Statistical Yearbook 1970, Warsaw 1971, p. 332.

In 1955, obligatory deliveries in the purchase of agricultural products accounted for four total grains – 84.2%, potatoes – 82.4, calves – 89.9%, meat and lard pigs – 48.4%, bacon pigs – 41.2%, cattle – 34.8% (graph 1). In later years, they were reduced. In 1960 it was accordingly: 64,7%, 53,6%; 45,4%; 28,2%, 26,4%, 23,2%. In 1965 was accordingly: 57.7%; 46.8%; 68.1; 20.5%; 15.2% and 32.4%. In 1970, most of the obligatory deliveries decreased by

about half compared to 1955, including a total of four cereals, which in 1970 accounted for 39.3% of the total quantity in purchase, potatoes (45.5%). Deliveries of meat and lard pigs (15%) and bacon (10.3%) decreased by almost a one-third. Deliveries of cattle (27.6%) and calves 83.5% remained high compared to 1955. Obligatory supplies were abolished in 1971 (Ustawa z dnia 26 października 1971 r. o zniesieniu obowiązkowych dostaw zbóż, ziemniaków i zwierząt rzeźnych. Dz.U. 1971 nr 27 poz. 253.).

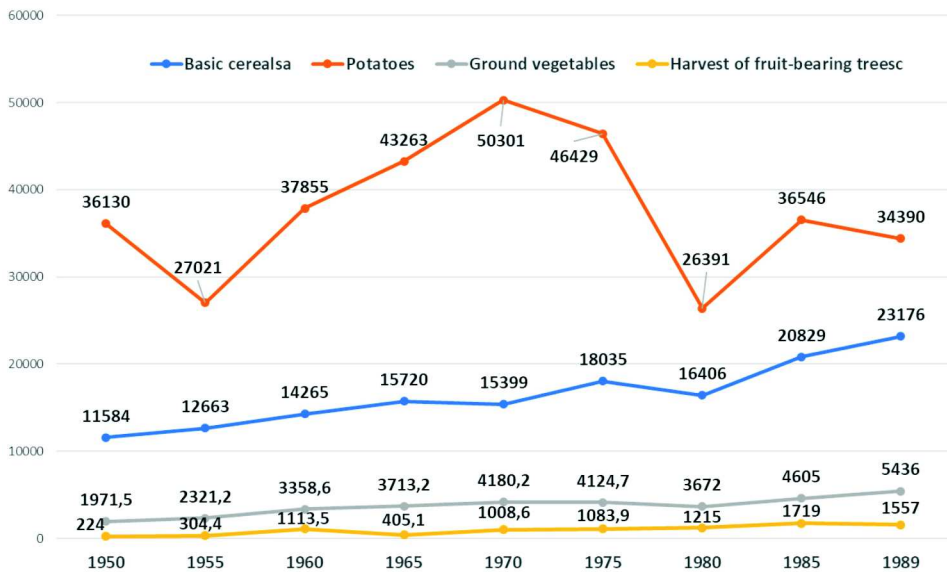
## **2. Consumption**

The period of implementation of the first economic program in post-war Poland (1947–1949), was described by H. Minc as the “three-year satiety period” (Szpakowicz, 1946, 2), since its goal was to restore pre-war consumption levels. During the interwar period, the basic food was potatoes, with much less consumption of sugar, meat and fish and fats. Meat and fats were the least available commodities. There were 43.5 kg of wheat flour and 170 kg of rye bread per person per year. The consequences of malnutrition from the war period was the weakening of immunity which resulted in a high incidence of tuberculosis, particularly dangerous for school-aged children. In 1946, there were 34 kg of flour and 62 kg of bread per person. while for 1949, the plan was to reach 47 kg of wheat flour and 164 kg of rye bread. Potato consumption was supposed to equalize to the pre-war level, at around 248 kg per year. Sugar consumption was to increase – to 17.7 kg of sugar per year (12.2 kg before world war II), pork to 36.5 kg (12.9 kg before the war), poultry to 2.9 kg (1.1 kg before the war), 3.75 kg of fish (87 decagrams before the war). Only beef consumption was to be lower, 3.1 kg compared to 6.9 kg before the war, and milk – 256 liters before the war and 184 liters in 1949 (Szpakowicz, 1946, 2). Butter would be replaced for the most part with lard. Instead of 3.4 kg of these fats in 1938, in 1949 residents were expected to consume 8.8 kg (Szpakowicz, 1946, 2). Instead, the plan was to significantly increase egg consumption. Before the war, one inhabitant consumed about 114 eggs, while in 1949 consumption was expected to reach one egg per day – or 365 eggs per year. Compared to the pre-war state, per capita consumption of spirits was expected to increase by 63%, and the tobacco industry was expected to produce 2.5 times more cigarettes per capita (689 units) than in 1938 (268 units) (Szpakowicz, 1946, 2).

The data in graph 1 show the yields of selected agricultural products from 1938 to 1989. Immediately after the war, cereal yields were very low, related to the destruction and mined fields, but by the end of the three-

year plan they were already approaching pre-war levels. From 1950 onwards, there was an upward trend in both staple cereals and potatoes; higher potato yields also correlated with an increase in pigs. The greatest dynamics of change was observed in the potato harvest, at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, despite a doubling of the harvest, it did not meet society's demand and most of it had to be imported. The biggest drop in the harvest of the specified product groups took place in the 1980s. This was due to the economic crisis and the inefficiency of the socialist economy. It was only after 1985 that there was an increase of 40% in potatoes, less than 30% in cereals and several percent in ground vegetables and fruit tree harvests. At the end of the 1980s. The upward trend only continued in cereal and ground vegetable yields while potatoes and fruit tree yields recorded a decline of several per cent.

**Graph 2**  
**Harvests of selected agricultural products from 1938 to 1989**



Source: own analysis based on Statistical Yearbooks for 1939–1990.

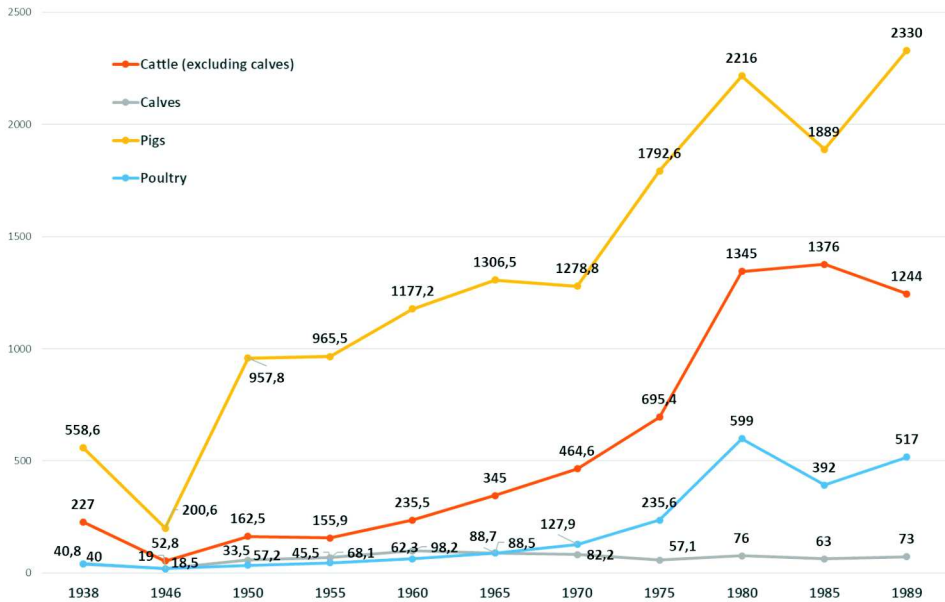
The data in graph 2 shows the harvests of selected agricultural products from 1938 to 1989. Immediately after the war, grain crops were very low. This was related to the destruction and mined fields. By the end of the three-year plan, crops were already approaching pre-war levels. Since 1950, the upward trend in both staple grains and potatoes continued, higher potato

crops, also correlated with the growth of pigs. The greatest dynamics of change is observed in the potato harvest. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, despite the doubling of the harvest, they did not fulfill public demand and most of them had to be imported. The most significant decline in the harvest of the listed product groups took place in the 1980s. This was due to the economic crisis and the inefficiency of the socialist economy. After 1985, there was an increase of 40 percent in potatoes, less than 30% in grains and a few percent in ground vegetables and fruit tree harvests. By the end of the 1980s, the upward trend continued only in the grains and ground vegetable harvests, while the potatoes and fruit tree harvests experienced a decline of several percent.

The data in graph 3 shows the enormity of the loss of slaughter livestock during the war period. Comparing statistics on slaughter livestock production from the last year before the war and the first year after it ended, it is noted that it dropped almost threefold. This most affected the production of slaughter cattle, where the decline was more than fourfold, and pigs, whose production decreased almost threefold. In the subsequent post-war years, there was an increase in livestock production. It was particularly significant in the first post-war five-year period, in which growth was almost fourfold. The highest growth rate in the postwar five-year period was achieved in pig production. It increased almost fivefold during this period. There was also a large increase, threefold, in the production of slaughter cattle and calves. This was due, among other things, to the increasing number of livestock since 1947, associated with imports from the West and, in part, the importation of livestock with proceeds by repatriates. While after H. Minc's speech in July 1948 announcing the collectivization of agriculture, animals were slaughtered on a massive scale in the villages and harvested crops were sold off, and field work was delayed (Zaremba, 2019, 71). The second period of major recovery in livestock production, especially cattle (almost threefold increase), and pigs (almost twofold increase) was the 1970s. There was a slight decline in livestock production after 1980 (martial law period). The decline was greater in the first half of the year, and was about 12%. In the second half of the period, there was some improvement in this area of production, but by the end of the decade, the 1980 production level had not been reached. One of the sources of the lack of visible growth in production was the continued steady consumption of feed per unit of livestock production, meaning that there was no improvement in the efficiency of feed use, too low harvests that did not meet livestock demand, and the development of grain-intensive animal husbandry technologies (Makowiecki, 1979, 6).

**Graph 3**

**Meat production (in live weight) in Poland in 1945–1989**  
[in thousands of tons]



Slaughter livestock: beef, veal, pork, sheep, horse, poultry, goat, rabbit and wild meat.  
Source: own analysis based on Statistical Yearbooks for 1939–1990.

The data in table 2 illustrate trends in the consumption of basic foodstuffs in the post-war period until the 1989 political transition. They show that in the 1950s and 1960s, cereal products, potatoes and milk dominated among foodstuffs. Compared to 1938, in 1951 there was an increase in the consumption of sugar (70%), beer – 200%, wine – 600%, cigarettes – 100%, candy – 200%, more expensive – 50%, cereal coffee – 200% (Kokeli, 1951, 356). In 1950, there were deficits of beer, fruit wine, vinegar, denatured spirit, chocolate, pepper, cigarettes and sugar, among others. The reason for this was increased public need at a certain time and insufficient factory capacity. In the second half of the 1960s and into the 1970s, consumption of grain products, potatoes and milk began to decline. The average Pole in the 1970s consumed on average 25% less grain products, 22% less potatoes and about 25% less milk. At the same time, meat, fish and eggs played an increasingly important role in the structure of consumption during this period (more than doubled). At the First National Conference of the Polish United Workers' Party (22–23.10.1973), Edward Gierek said: “We are faced with the task of developing a comprehensive and long-term program to better fulfill the food needs of our

**Table 2**  
**Consumption of selected products a per capita in 1949–1989**

Years	Grains in terms of products (kg)	Potatos (kg)	Meat (kg)	Livestock fats (kg)	Milk (l)	Egs (unit)	Fish (kg)	Sugar (kg)	Tea (g)
1949	163	–	28,0	4,3	279	116	1,7	19,3	–
1950	166	–	36,5	6,2	293	116	1,7	21,0	–
1955	171	229	37,7	6,1	332	137	2,7	24,0	72
1960	145	223	42,5	7,4	352	143	4,5	27,9	115
1965	141	215	49,2	6,8	356	162	5,0	32,6	177
1970	131	190	48,7	8,2	262	186	6,3	39,2	266
1975	120	173	70,3 <sup>a</sup>	8,1	264	209	7,2	43,0	400
1980	127	158	69,1	8,1	262	223	8,1	41,4	713
1985	118	143	55,8	7,1	273	220	7,8	41,3	791
1989	118	141	64,1	8,2	260	194	6,1	46,9	1000

<sup>a</sup> meat and offal together

Source: own analysis based on Statistical Yearbooks for 1939–1990.

society and to secure the resources necessary to implement this program. This is a matter of paramount importance. The modern world is facing a growing food crisis” (Berger, 1974, 6). The slowdown in the upward trend of meat consumption occurred in the 1980s. This was associated with the introduction of a card system for food products. There was a systematic increase in the consumption of sugar. Very common in this period became the consumption of tea – an increase of 10 times. Consumption of individual products depended on the prices of items to the average income of the population. Especially in 1980–1983, the relationship of the prices of meat, eggs, processed cereals, potatoes and milk to the average wage in the socialized economy changed a lot. In 1982, the average wage could buy less meat and meat products than in 1980 – only about 45% of these products (Michna, Sztarbałło, Prędecka, 1984, 10). This was the result of a decline in national income and a reduction in subsidies from the state budget for food, especially meat. Provisioning problems and meat rationing introduced since April 1981 influenced the public’s unfavorable attitude toward the government (Jarosz, 2019, 316). At the time, changes were made to the consumption pattern recommending, especially to mass feeding facilities to introduce dishes made of eggs, milk, vegetables and fish

as an alternative to meat (Jarosz, 2006, 241). In 1984, there was a further increase in food prices. However, due to the increase in the level of national income, it was possible to buy 55% more meat on the bone or sausage compared to 1980.

With the target model of food consumption at the end of the 1980s, per capita consumption was projected at 60–70 kg of meat and processed foods, 8–10 kg of fish and processed foods, 260–280 milk, 120–130 kg of processed cereals, animal fats – 5–6 kg, vegetable fats – 9–11 kg, 140–160 kg of potatoes, 110–130 vegetables and processed foods, 50–60 kg of fruits, 39–40 kg of sugar. However, the end of the 1980s was characterized by an increase in the price of inputs for agriculture causing increases in purchase prices and retail prices of foods (Dziejowski, 1989, 3).

### **3. Export-import**

Between 1945 and 1989, supplies from national sources often had to be supplemented by food deliveries from abroad (table 3). Between 1945 and 1949, help was of a post-war nature. In 1949, the Ministry of Foreign Trade was established to control supplies. Sell of Polish flagship food-stuffs as meat and sugar for foreign exchange caused shortages for the statistical citizen and the rationing of necessities. Through state-determined top-down trade policies, the structure of trade was based on strict implementation of production plans and exchange controls, and such interference prevented economic growth. Despite the fact that exports in various years exceeded imports, they did not compensate for losses and resulted in a negative trade balance. The low value of the zloty was also a problem; after 1955, the role of the USSR in Polish foreign trade temporarily declined and that of the capitalist countries increased, mainly thanks to loans from the United States of America, Canada, East Germany and Czechoslovakia (Kaliński, 2011, 45–46). In the 1960s and 1970s. Poland imported and exported mainly from and to the USSR, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Great Britain and West Germany. In the 1980s. Poland also imported from France and exported to Hungary and Italy. In 1975, among imported goods, food products accounted for 4.3% and agricultural products for 6.9%, in 1980 it was 5.9% and 9.1%. Similarly, in 1975, exports of food products were 7.1% in 1980. 5.5%, agricultural products 2.7% in 1975. 2.2% in 1980 (Rocznik Statystyczny 1981, 410). Imports were mainly grain, fodder, vegetable and animal fats and exports were meat, butter, eggs, canola oil and sugar. Most of the products

**Table 3**

**Imports and exports of selected groups of goods between 1950 and 1989  
in thousands of tons**

Product	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980	1985	1989
Import									
Vegetable and animal fats	44	40	50,1	55,4	79,3	79	145	126	139
Wheat	236	664	1700	1378	1099	1477	3465	1703	1797
Barley	54	11	231	485	1093	1376	1129	383	505
Corn	22	7	51	785	231	634	2523	138	409
Meat and meat products	3,1	87	18,1	39,4	–	62,5	87,6	89,4	231,4
Fish and fish products	22,3	9,6	31,4	20,9	–	36,6	24,4	125,3	64,4
Eksport									
Pork livestock	40,9	0,5	29,4	9,2	54,6	121,6	158	93	161
Potato flour	24	56	43	83,6	30,5	33,2	14	–	15,9
Butter	1,1	3,3	28,6	18,3	12,6	38,9	14,1	12,9	12,4
Rape oil (edible vegetable fats)	–	–	–	7,8	37,6	53,7	6,7	37,5	17,3
Sugar	234	60,8	316	473	306	67	24	196	190

Source: own analysis based on Statistical Yearbooks for 1949–1990; Foreign Trade Yearbooks for 1948–1989.

in imports maintained an upward trend, grains imports increased several times in 1989 compared to 1950, similarly with meat and meat products, which shows the inefficiency of the Polish economy. Imports of vegetable and animal fats, fish and fish products increased more than threefold. The statistics in the table clearly show an upward dynamic, with exports of pork livestock and butter increasing several times in the 1960s. The flagship export product were eggs, exports of which amounted in 1950. 410 thousand of units, in 1989 exports increased to 4,743.1 thousand (Rocznik Statystyczny Handlu Zagranicznego 1990, 228). Since 1976, the dynamics of foreign trade has steadily declined. In the late 1970s, imports from capitalist countries declined, but imports from socialist countries remained high, particularly in grains, vegetable and animal fats and meat products. Exports of food and industrial goods collapsed in the early 1980s due to the crisis in industry and agriculture.

## Summary

In the period of the People's Republic of Poland in the public opinion, responsible for the level of nutrition of the country, the diversity of the diet and the continuity and reliability of the supply of foodstuffs was the countryside and agriculture (Hunek, 1969, 43). Despite the fact that state farms, which dominated the rural structure, operated under preferential conditions, they were underinvested, poorly managed and, despite the growth of slaughter animals, were unable to meet growing social needs. This sector of production has experienced periodic small declines or years of stagnation (1970s) or crisis (mid-1940s, 1980s). However, only an analysis of per capita consumption of products gives a clear picture of food crises and shortages. From the mid-1950s there was a decline in the consumption of processed cereals and potatoes, from the mid-1970s – meat and periodically sugar, in the 1980s – fish. However, there was a systematic increase in the consumption of milk and eggs and animal fats (except in 1985), which, especially in periods of crisis, were an important substitute or supplement to the diet. In view of supply difficulties, mutton, horsemeat and nutria meat were also promoted, but they did not gain acceptance in Polish cuisine (Straczuk, 2016, 207). Obligatory deliveries and temporary rationing of goods linked primarily to the shortage of the basic foodstuff – meat – did not improve the situation of the food market. Inadequate supplies and price increases, however, caused social discontent and strikes. These problems correlated with foreign trade, taking into account imports of food products, which steadily increased as well as exports, which practically collapsed in the early 1980s due to the crisis in industry and agriculture.

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