

Flashpoint Poland

George Blazynski



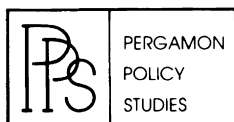
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ON THE SOVIET UNION
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George Blazynski

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To Teresa, my wife,
and to Tali, my granddaughter

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Acknowledgments

This book tries to analyze the position of contemporary Poland between the years 1970 and 1979, the situation inside the country and to look into its future. Poland is the key country in the Soviet bloc and developments there are bound to have repercussions in other "socialist" countries of Eastern Europe. This book is in some respects an unusual one. It is based on extensive research in Poland and in the West - including Britain, United States, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium - and on my long-standing experience of broadcasting to Poland. But, perhaps foremost, it is based on many hundreds of conversations I have had in Poland during my ten visits there between 1964 and 1979 with scores of individuals from all walks of life - from the establishment and with ordinary people, both churchmen and laymen. In a sense it is therefore a collective effort, with contributions from many people.

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Introduction: A Look Back in Anger

A terrible beauty is born.

W.B. Yeats in "Easter 1916"

Poland, the most Latin country east of the Oder River, has for over ten centuries been an integral part of Western European civilization and heritage in Christian, social, cultural and political terms. Ever since embracing Christianity in 966 Poland has regarded herself as a legendary bastion of Christendom, holding out against the East, or as the only country which could extend eastward the very frontiers of Western civilization, or both. In the process foreign armies have raced across Poland's frontiers, killed her people and burned her cities. The Germans and the Russians have throughout history been the principal offenders, their excesses in modern times dwarfing in horror anything attempted before. Yet more than once Poland has saved the West from an Eastern deluge of one kind or another and suffered in consequence. The Poles' long record of suppression, revolt and, on occasion, of conquest, include countless examples of suicidal bravery, and very few of calculated prudence.(1)

Whatever history held in store for them the Poles always relied on the West. They still do in more modern and qualified terms - despite the bitter disappointments in the aftermath of World War II. A thousand years of history cannot be erased from people's minds at one stroke by any political and social system. Polish idealism and romanticism have however gone: they lie buried beneath the ruins of somber wartime memories. A cold political realism, often tainted by cynicism, has come into being instead. The Poles have become much more politically mature and sophisticated than before - often, indeed, to

the overripeness of skepticism. The nation's modern awareness has been shaped in this manner after it has been systematically deceived by its own rulers, and sometimes by others.(2)

Years of Nazi occupation followed by years of Stalinist terror firmly established antiauthoritarian feelings linked with patriotic nationalism more obviously than perhaps anywhere else in Europe. The Poles are adept at frustrating the objectives of any authority and particularly of one which they do not easily accept.(3) They have remained strongly individualistic, with an abhorrence of uniformity, a sense of humor, a pride in national history and in their own achievements. Like quicksilver, the nation eludes all firm pressures to conform while, at the same time, accepts grudgingly the reality of unavoidable geopolitical limitations, and tries to secure maximum advantage from them.

Particular wartime and postwar events have contributed greatly toward the pronounced formation of the nation's attitudes and toward the present situation in Gierek's Poland, which this book attempts to analyze. If the Poles now look back in anger they have every reason to do so. However, it is not my intention in this book to go into historical details which have been interpreted thoroughly in many other publications. But certain facts remain unalterable, and must be considered. The Poland of 1939 lost the war. After the war the completely alien ideology and political system of communism were imposed on the people, not by a national revolution, but by the advancing Soviet armies.

During the years of German occupation, an underground state, unique in Nazi-ruled Europe, was born in Poland - a state with its own Home Army (380,000 strong), its own underground parliament, courts, press, vast provincial administrative network and the largest intelligence organization anywhere in Europe, which supplied the Allies with vital information. The London-based Polish government in exile was represented in the country by a minister plenipotentiary.

The communists (who had before the war existed illegally as a small and politically insignificant party) appeared on the underground scene only after the German invasion of Russia, except for Gomulka and a handful of so-called "native" communists who had remained in the country after the German invasion against the orders of the Comintern. One of the first actions of the communists was to accuse the Home Army of being anti-Soviet, which was true in so far as the overwhelming majority of the nation was anticommunist.

It became clear that Poland, because of its geographical position, was the primary objective of Stalin's policy in Eastern Europe. A noncommunist Poland would have excluded the Soviet Union from Eastern Europe. Poland thus became in many respects both the crux of the British-American-Soviet

alliance and its bone of contention.(4) Stalin's long-term plan of expansion, the helplessness of the Western powers in what was a sphere of Soviet military operations, the rejection of Churchill's idea of a second front along the "soft underbelly of Europe," all prejudged the fate of Poland.

The first Soviet step in September 1939 was the annexation of over a third of Poland's prewar eastern territories in full agreement with Hitler. After the German invasion of Russia, Stalin established diplomatic relations with the London Polish government, and agreed to "amnesty" thousands of imprisoned Poles and to form a 75,000-strong Polish army on Soviet soil, which he soon forced out of Russia by cutting off its vital supplies.

The second step was the mass murder of Polish officers in the Katyn forest. The American House of Representatives select committee has declared unanimously that the Soviet NKVD was responsible for this deed. Simultaneously a Soviet-sponsored political group of Polish communists was formed in Moscow, while a Soviet-led division was also organized. Trained activists were parachuted to Poland to re-create the Communist party (under the seemingly innocent name of the Polish Workers' party), to infiltrate the Polish underground state, set up cells for an eventual seizure of power and to denounce members of the Polish national resistance to the Gestapo. Cooperation with the Gestapo in this particular task also became the top assignment for the Soviet intelligence network in Poland.

In January 1944, the Soviet army crossed the prewar Polish-Soviet frontier and enjoyed the local help of Home Army detachments acting on orders from London. Very quickly, however, the Home Army units were arrested and their officers shot. And finally in August 1944 when the massive uprising started in Warsaw, the Soviet armies stood calmly on the east bank of the Vistula River, quietly watching the city for over two months while the Nazis suppressed the uprising and burned Warsaw to the ground.

Together with their own puppet "provisional government" the sheer force of the Red Army managed to brutally eliminate any national, independent groups in the country. The way was cleared for a complete sovietization of Poland. While the country was shifted westward all the opponents of the regime were eliminated, forced to flee or imprisoned. Step-by-step the country was transformed into a perfect satellite state, obedient to Moscow's orders, ruled by secret police and exploited by the Soviet Union as few colonies have ever been.(5) For every 1,000 citizens in prewar Poland, 220 perished - a much higher percentage than in the Soviet Union. Thus in the shadow of foreign tanks, and from out of the ruins of Warsaw and other cities, from the ashes of their recent past, the disillusioned and exhausted Poles began the tremendous job of reconstructing and rebuilding their country.

In 1951 Gomulka, the general secretary of the Communist party, was arrested. His "sins" were "Titoism" and "bourgeois nationalism," one of the periodical aberrations of the communist system. Until the summer of 1948 he had served Soviet purposes in Poland well. In the difficult task of imposing an alien communist regime on his country he had acted both as a driving force and as a lubricant.(6) But for all that, Gomulka has realized that he would never be able to impose communism in Poland if the Party were to remain exclusively the guardian of Soviet interests. His nationalism was thus a form of compromise between communism and the people.

During the war, Gomulka had tried to organize anti-German resistance even before Hitler attacked Russia and then condemned the communists' cooperation with the Gestapo. Later he strongly opposed the dismantling and looting of German property by Soviet troops on Western territories assigned to Poland and clashed on this issue with Marshal Rokossovsky, commander of Soviet armies.(7) Then he opposed the blind imitation of Soviet "socialist" experiences and quickly came into conflict with his Stalinist colleagues and with Stalin himself. Gomulka argued against agricultural collectivization, maintained that there was no need for a single Party dictatorship and that the pace of industrialization ought to be adjusted to Poland's needs. He thus advocated a "Polish road to socialism."

In contrast with the practice in neighboring countries Gomulka was not brought to trial for fear of what he could say about the past misdeeds of his Polish comrades, but was quietly exiled in a security police villa near Warsaw instead. This way he was available in October 1956 to rescue the Party from complete disintegration.

Gomulka was arrested by Lieutenant Colonel Swiatlo, deputy director of "Department 10" of the Polish Ministry of Public Security, who defected to the West in December 1953 and disclosed all the intimate details of the Party leaders' crimes and intrigues over several years. Department 10 was responsible for the ideological and political purity of the Party leadership: a counterintelligence service against all sorts of "deviations" - actual, imaginary or simply fabricated for specific purposes. Swiatlo was in charge of all the operations and files, and in emergencies could contact Beria directly. The picture he presented of personal relations between top communists and their attitude to many innocent victims of their terror was particularly nauseating. The overwhelming impression was one of a group of utterly ruthless and dishonest men who stopped at nothing in order to obey the orders of their Soviet masters and to foster their own private interests.(8)

Swiatlo was interviewed by this author for several weeks in Washington and his revelations were beamed to Poland, from

September 1954 onward, in over 150 broadcasts by Radio Free Europe. Never, save in wartime, did any broadcasts have such a massive and captive audience. The Party was shaken to its very roots, the secret police apparatus completely destabilized.

Even with the milder climate in Moscow, Swiatlo's broadcasts sparked off a specific Polish popular movement for democratization and for greater liberalization of political life, in which the leading roles were played by the intelligentsia and the students, by the young workers and some young Party activists. Fear of the security police was quickly disappearing. Writers and journalists who had been hitherto afraid to write the truth now began to do so. Censorship was eased. People questioned everything publicly and loudly and came near to questioning the communist system itself. The thaw in Poland in 1955-1956 went further than anywhere else in Eastern Europe.

In the specific Polish conditions then prevailing the very opening of political safety valves brought about the explosion it was intended to prevent. This was preceded by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the twentieth Soviet Party congress and the mysterious death of Bierut ("muscovite" Polish Communist party leader) in Moscow during the congress. Straining under appalling living conditions, thousands of workers took to the streets in Poznan on June 28, 1956 demanding "bread," "freedom," and "the end of Soviet domination." They attacked prisons, Party buildings and the police headquarters. The security police opened fire and the army intervened, but the soldiers fraternized with the demonstrators. Crack troops restored order - though with clear restraint. For the Party itself, bitterly divided internally, the Poznan revolt was a political disaster; 53 were dead, over 300 injured. The riots showed that the workers were bitter and ready to fight, that people were solidly against the regime, that the Party organization was bankrupt, and that the army and the uniformed militia were wholly unreliable.

Poznan also helped to bring home the fundamental contradiction of communism. If a modern society is to be run efficiently, its people must be given freedom and initiative. But when this happens they may take a view of their rights and interests which is quite different from that of the ruling party. Poznan, in fact, was the clearest demonstration that the communist's mythical "leading" role in a single-party system was out of date.

Except for this last imperative of the system, events in Poland had gone too far by then to reverse the course toward more humane change, even if the Party initially tried to blame "imperialist agents" for the revolt. Bowing before dangerously growing pressure from below, the new leaders called desperately on Gomulka for help and reinstated him as a top Party

authority at the eighth Central Committee plenum on October 19, 1956. A truly revolutionary atmosphere reigned in the country with workers and students standing by waiting to be armed. Soviet troops began moving toward the capital. Polish officers disobeyed orders from their minister of defense, Soviet Marshal Rokossovsky, himself of Polish origin. Then four members of the Soviet politburo led by Khrushchev descended unexpectedly on Warsaw. But heavily armed units of the Internal Security Corps loyal to Gomulka took over Warsaw and deployed along positions commanding all approaches to the capital with strict orders not to allow any army formations to enter the city. In the Belveder Palace the Soviet leaders became virtual prisoners of the Poles and on at least one occasion there was an exchange of fire between Polish army units and advancing Soviet troops.

Gomulka became first secretary of the Party and outlined the specific "Polish road to socialism." He purged the Party and the army of Soviet advisers and officers, and convinced the Russians that the domestic concessions were designed to both strengthen socialism in the country and to improve Soviet-Polish relations once Soviet economic exploitation of the country ceased. He also released the leader of the Catholic Church, which had been the mainstay of Polish resistance, Cardinal Wyszynski, from internment.

Gomulka was not the architect of the "Polish October." He was thrust into power on the crest of events and the party managed to effect the transfer of leadership simply because he had been available. His strength rested largely on noncommunist foundations. The support given him by the people was essentially anti-Soviet and anticommunist even though the illusory hopes for a better democratic form of communist government and for the sovereignty of Poland were fairly strong both within and without the Party. Meanwhile, Cardinal Wyszynski sensed the Polish mood with perfect accuracy, recognizing in Gomulka the man of the hour, and used his tremendous authority in the cause of realism and moderation. The result was that the October revolution remained a guided one. And as far as Khrushchev was concerned the Soviet leader faced uncomfortable alternatives given the mood of the Polish people and the uprising in Hungary, catalyzed by events in Poland.

The tragedy of the "Polish October" has always been that people wanted to see in it seeds of further evolution toward a more comprehensive freedom, albeit within the geopolitical requirements. Hopes were running too high and proved to be entirely unjustified, but not because the leaders betrayed the "spirit of October." They betrayed the people's trust, but they did not betray themselves. In Gomulka's "Polish road" program there were two categories of changes: those changes in which he himself had always believed, and other changes

forced on him by strong pressure from below. In time the first category of changes was essentially retained although somewhat curtailed. The changes in the second category were all drastically withdrawn.

October was not the beginning of a new era, but the beginning of the end, of the reversal. It resulted in the restabilization of the power system shattered by popular pressure. And Gomulka spent the remainder of his 14 years in office chipping steadily away at the pedestal his countrymen had built for him in 1956.(9) Yet with all these qualifications it would be unrealistic to minimize the significance of these events. The Poles had demonstrated that no power is omnipotent, that even a highly oppressive system can be attacked and compelled to retreat, and that, even in a country whose independence was limited by geopolitical realities, successful pressure could be exerted without provoking Soviet military intervention.

Poland's "autumn" in March 1968 marked another sad milestone in its history. It was compounded of three elements; massive student demonstrations fully supported by intellectuals, a deep leadership crisis with Gomulka on the brink of downfall, and the threat of a "Czechoslovak infection." And for the first time in Polish history, antisemitism became the official policy of the government when Gomulka, after the six-day Arab-Israeli war warned against "a Zionist fifth column." In the climate of regression from October 1956 thousands of students demonstrated peacefully in Warsaw and other cities demanding freedom of expression, abolition of censorship, and shouting for "a Polish Dubcek." Warsaw writers publicly denounced Party interference in cultural activity and creative endeavors. Massive and brutal reprisals by the security police under General Moczar (minister of the interior) followed and some order was restored after several days. Almost 3,000 students were arrested.

Moczar controlled not only the security forces, but also the militia and mass media. A man of strong nationalist leanings, and leader of the Partisans (a veterans association) he opposed Moscow-imported communist leaders of Jewish origin and made his bid for power, supported by some hard-liners in the Party. To his repertoire he added the deplorable campaign to investigate and purge the Jews. They were made the scapegoats for what was a rebellion of the young thinking generation against double-think and double-talk, opportunism and downright lies.(10) The students had flown in the face of what they had been taught. They had demanded the right to think for themselves and had grown sick of sterile conformity.

It was touch and go for Gomulka who pursued two lines of attack to save himself. First, he went along with Moczar to an extent, maintaining the Partisans in their already strong positions and introducing his own loyal supporters into other

posts. Secondly, he managed to convince some ambitious younger Party members that they had nothing to gain with Moczar but had a real chance with the present leadership. Finally at the November 1968 Party congress politboro (PB) member Gierek's support saved Gomulka and most of his associates from defeat.

But the real clue to Gomulka's rescue was the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Brezhnev doctrine. Gomulka was a persistent and pressing advocate of Soviet armed intervention, arguing that if the rot were not stopped in Prague he could not guarantee what would happen in Poland. After the intervention and once Brezhnev launched his doctrine of limited sovereignty, Gomulka was safe for a while. The more so since Moczar and his views were unacceptable in Moscow. Unwittingly, perhaps, Gomulka had contributed to Moscow's policy formation by his pressure to invade Czechoslovakia.

And so the scene was set for what was known as Gomulka's "little stabilization" - a euphemism for economic stagnation, internal political inertia and uniformity. Isolated in his crumbling tower of power, surrounded by two or three trusted associates, suspicious of "counterrevolution" everywhere, Gomulka completely lost touch with the situation in Poland.

List of Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France Presse
AND	Augemeine Deutsche Nachrichter
ANSA	Name of the Italian Press Agency
AP	Associated Press
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BPO	Basic Party Organization
CC	Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party (Communist)
CCTU	Central Council of Trade Unions
CDU	Christian Democratic Union (West Germany)
CDW	Committee for the Defense of Workers
CIC	Catholic Intelligentsia Club
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki)
CSU	Christian Social Union (West Germany)
DPA	Deutsche Press Agentur
FNU	Front of National Unity
MBFR	Mutual Balanced Forces Reduction (conference in Vienna)
PAP	Polish Press Agency
PB	Political Buro of the Central Committee of the United Workers Party
PCIC	Polish Catholic Intelligentsia Club
PUWP	Polish United Workers Party (Communist)
RFE	Radio Free Europe
SCC	Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party
SPD	Socialist Party of Germany (Socialistische Partei Deutschland)
SWB	Summary of World Broadcasts
UPI	United Press International
VPC	Voivodship (provincial) Party Committee

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Gierek's Miracle: December 1970- June 1976