

University of Warsaw

STUDENT PROTESTS IN POLAND IN 1968

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*Coming Together or Coming Apart?:*

*Europe and the United States in the sixties*

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The 1960's is a decade in which social, cultural and political struggles changed the world to an enormous extent. The year 1968 when student protests spread all over the world can be regarded as a culmination of this process. Such events are associated primarily with the United States and Western Europe, however, student counterculture was present in a slightly different form behind the Iron Curtain as well. The so called Polish March of 1968 was on the one hand a phenomenon parallel to what was happening in the west, being an important episode of the series of events which ended up in the fall of Communism.

To discuss the Polish protest movement from 1968, it is necessary to go back in to the year 1956. At that time - 3 years after the death of Joseph Stalin - Nikita Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, delivered in Moscow a secret speech for prominent members of communist parties from the USSR and other countries of the Soviet block, in which he condemned Stalin's crimes. What followed was a barrage of liberalization of the policy of the regime both in Soviet Union and the whole region. In Poland, Wladyslaw Gomulka took the office of the Party's First Secretary.

Gomulka himself was a victim of Stalinism. Being a prominent communist, he developed his own ideas, which included the rejection of collective farming and other elements preserving "the national character" which was considered by Stalin's most devoted followers to be "inappropriate and "dangerous"<sup>1</sup>. Gomulka spent some time in prison but as a result of a policy of liberalization after the death of Stalin, he was discharged and regained his position<sup>2</sup>. For Polish people the new leader of the Party meant hope for a change. In his inaugural speech in October 1956, Gomulka condemned mistakes made by communist leaders in the past. Such a statement - which had been unthinkable in the past - caused real

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1 Kuron, Zakowski, p.47

2 Ibid, pp.94-96

enthusiasm amongst crowds gathered in front of Joseph Stalin's Palace of Culture in the center of Warsaw. This was probably the most crucial moment of the “thaw” - a period in the communist block when as a result of more liberal policies of regimes in Eastern Europe, the societies of the region could - to a certain degree - experience more political freedom. This, in turn let more lenient activist work in frame of state-controlled social organizations and develop independent thinking. Polish youth organizations were places where further leaders of protests from March 1968 started their activities as more or less independent – however still limited by Marxist-Leninist ideology - activists<sup>3</sup>.

After a short period of economic growth in years 1956-1960, Polish economy experienced a serious crisis resulting in the increase of food prices<sup>4</sup>. Polish society no longer hoped for improvement of economical and political condition of the country under Gomulka. Especially Polish intelligentsia did not feel that their expectations can be met and the model of economy and policy of the First Secretary has reached its limits<sup>5</sup>. In March 1964, a group of 34 intellectuals issued an open letter to the authorities as a protest against limitations on the amount of paper to print books. As a matter of fact, it was a protest against the cultural policy of the Party. The letter resulted in further repressions<sup>6</sup>.

The International situation at the wake of the 1968 events aggravated negative trends in Poland. The so called Six Day War broke out on June 5<sup>th</sup> 1968 when Israel army attacked Egypt. Four days later in Moscow the meeting of the Advisory Committee of the Warsaw Pact states took place. The delegates, depending on the Soviet Union, decided to suspend diplomatic relations with Israel <sup>7</sup>. Taking into account American engagement in Vietnam and

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3 Friszke, pp. 19-23

4 Eisler, p.7

5 Ibid.

6 Kaminski

7 Eisler, p.5

stepping-up of the arm race the Six Day War was considered as a remote confrontation of the United states (supporting Israel) and the Soviet Union (supporting Egypt). Consequently, Poland, as a member of the Warsaw Pact, officially advocated Egypt. Gomulka during his speech at the meeting of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party expressed fear that Israel might be willing and would prepare to produce nuclear weapon<sup>8</sup>. Polish citizens considered the defeat of Egypt as a landslide of the Soviet Union . Amongst huge part of the society that opposed the domination of the USSR over Poland, it meant sympathy for Israel. At the same time, a fraction in the Party surrounding Mieczyslaw Moczar - ex communist guerrilla soldier – gained importance. The group was often accused of anti-Semitic and nationalistic aberrations<sup>9</sup>. The Anti-Semitic campaign began after Gomulka's speech from June 14 1967, when he called Polish Jews “the 5<sup>th</sup> column”, comparing them to the German minority living in Poland and participating in Nazi invasion during the World War Two <sup>10</sup>. People of Jewish descent were removed from the army and the secret service. The propaganda accused Jews of threatening the political system of Poland. Official target of attacks was the state of Israel, not the Jewish nation itself however in practice the campaign had clearly anti-Semitic character<sup>11</sup>.

Probably the most crucial fact in forming the student movement in 1960's Poland was the emerge of a group of students at the University of Warsaw, called later by the secret police the “Commandos” . The name came from the way of acting. As members of communist youth organizations the “Commandos” were taking part in official gatherings, starting discussions and asking difficult questions no one wanted to hear. The group organized the celebration of 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of workers protests, which took place in Poland

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8 Ibid. p.6

9 Ibid. pp.12-13

10 Ibid, pp.16-18

11 Kaminski

in 1956. After that gathering, Leszek Kolakowski – a prominent philosopher was expelled from the Party. After that incident many intellectuals left Polish United Workers Party. The leader of the “Commandos” group was Adam Michnik – a history student at Warsaw University, supported by Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski, both sentenced to imprisonment for their political activity in 1967 <sup>12</sup>.

An immediate cause of the protests was a ban imposed on a play written by Polish romantic poet and play-writer Adam Mickiewicz. “Forefathers' Eve” (in Polish “Dziady”) was directed by Kazimierz Dejmek for the National Theater in Warsaw . The play was staged as a part of the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution in Russia which took place in 1967 and included different cultural events in Poland. The Department of Culture of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party was disappointed with the modern interpretation of Mickiewicz's work and positive press reviews were banned by the Office of Censorship. Despite the fact that the content of the play – dealing partially with hard relations between Polish people under Russian rule during partitions of Poland and the issue of independence in 19<sup>th</sup> century - had never before been considered anti-communist and although the intention of Dejmek was probably different, his interpretation was regarded by Polish authorities as targeted against the Soviet Union<sup>13</sup>. Paradoxically, Soviet newspaper “Pravda” published a positive review and staging “Forefathers' Eve” in Dejmek's version in Moscow was considered<sup>14</sup>, but rumors that Soviet ambassador Averkij Aristov pressed the Party spread around Warsaw<sup>15</sup>. The reason why “Forefathers' Eve” was banned remains unclear, however the fact that the public reacted with an applause during fragments of the play which could possibly be seen as anti-soviet is certain. As Jacek Kuron said later,

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12 Ibid.

13 Oseka, p.145

14 Kaminski

15 Oseka, p.147

“Forefathers' Eve” started attracting young intelligentsia contesting political situation in Poland, which would probably not be the case without a common opinion about Soviet embassy reaction to the play<sup>16</sup>. All that factors combined with gossips about anti-Soviet character of the play resulted in banning it in January 1968. The last performance was planned for January 30<sup>17</sup>.

A few weeks before the first staging of “Forefathers' Eve”, in Czechoslovakia, an important political change was about to take place. The events which were later called the Prague Spring brought a relief to the internal politics of the country. The new first secretary of the Communist party of Czechoslovakia, Alexander Dubcek, started a set of reforms, aiming to give the citizens more freedom by allowing free press and letting citizens participate in political life. At the same time, the policy of Polish communist party was a reverse. The late 1960's was a period of strict repressions against the critics of the political system<sup>18</sup>. Academic year 1967/1968 started with vivid discussions amongst students and young scholars at the University of Warsaw<sup>19</sup>, which created an intellectual background for further actions.

Such atmosphere encouraged students to take some more courageous steps. After the last performance of “Forefathers Eve”, a group of youth from University of Warsaw, supported by students from Warsaw National Theater School, gathered around Adam Mickiewicz monument in the center of Polish capital demanding a cessation of censorship.

Before that, a group of students related to the “Commandos” entered the National

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16 Ibid.

17 Kaminski

18 Oseka, pp. 149-150

19 Tarniewski, p.22

Theater and enthusiastically applauded all the “anti-Soviet” moments in the play<sup>20</sup>. The demonstration around Mickiewicz monument was suppressed by the police. 35 people were arrested, some of them had to pay some fees according to the court decisions<sup>21</sup>.

The next day, students Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer met with Bernard Margueritte, a journalist of French *Le Monde*. They told him about the events from the night before and informed about the situation amongst Warsaw intelligentsia. Their statements were later used by Radio Free Europe, by means of which it could be heard in Poland<sup>22</sup>. After the source of information became clear for Polish authorities, both Michnik and Szlajfer were expelled from the university. The decision was made by minister of schooling and higher education Henryk Jablonski on March 4 1968<sup>23</sup>.

On January 31, the “Commandos” decided to send a petition against the ban imposed on “Forefathers' Eve”. In next two weeks, more than three thousand people signed it in Warsaw and next thousand signatures were collected in the city of Wroclaw, in western Poland<sup>24</sup>. The action was disturbed by agents of the secret service which started gaining information about rebelling students. Some activists of the Polish Youth Association and the Polish United Workers Party were often confiscating and destroying lists with signatures<sup>25</sup>. The petition was received by the Parliament and its copies were sent to independent scientists and authors<sup>26</sup>.

Student action had its echoes amongst Polish writers. On February 29, an urgent

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20 Eisler, 23

21 Kaminski

22 Eisler, pp. 22-23

23 Kaminski

24 Eisler, p.26

25 Tarniewski, p.14

26 Eisler, p.26

meeting of the Warsaw chapter of the Polish Authors Association – to which the most prominent authors belonged - issued a resolution against cultural policy of the Party and criticizing the ban on “Forefathers' Eve”<sup>27</sup>.

As a response to the expulsion of Henryk Szlajfer and Adam Michnik, the “Commandos” organized an rally *in defense of citizen rights*, as one of leaflets distributed before this event stated. Students quoted article 71 of Polish Constitution which guaranteed freedom of speech and gatherings. During 1968 protests, students were often calling for obeying the law contained in the Constitution, which in communist Poland seemed to be a meaningless document <sup>28</sup>. About thousand students gathered at a yard of a main campus of the Warsaw University at the noon of March 8 1968. Participants acclaimed a resolution demanding the reinstatement of expelled students.

After a short period, protesters were supposed to end the rally, however they were stopped by the so called *workers collective* – civilians, mainly workers of Warsaw factories inspired by the Party, who entered the university with batons beating the students. After about two hours, students were let free, however a special unit of police trained in suppressing riots attacked them<sup>29</sup>. The protesters, amongst them young women, were severely bitten. The police hurt random people from the crowd, including some passers-by .

The same day, many student activists, including Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski, who were supposed to establish a protest committee, were arrested<sup>30</sup>. Brutality of police forces was yet another - after the ban on “Forefathers' Eve” - factor that caused further events. The press reported the protests without providing readers with the context and suggesting the

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27 Ibid

28 Tarniewski, p.30

29 Ibid, p.31

30 Osska, p.184

leading role of Jewish minority in the riots<sup>31</sup>.

The next day, students of Technical University in Warsaw decided to support the action at Warsaw University and organized another rally against repressions. Two days later, the protest spread around the country. Students in Krakow, informed by delegates sent from the capital, gathered at the main square of the city. The strike crossed the border of academia. Protests took place in towns with no universities, when high school students and young workers joined the action<sup>32</sup>. The only representative of university authorities who supported students was dean of the University of Wroclaw Alfred Jahn, who later lost his position. On March 12, he appealed to the students asking not to leave the campus and guaranteed freedom of expression at the university during the rally. The position that contrasted with reluctant attitude of vast majority of authorities was taken by lecturers, who for the most part supported students trying to moderate the language and content of the demands to allow them to be acceptable for the Party authorities<sup>33</sup>.

The movement ended relatively fast. Last actions took place on March 22 and 23 and the very last protest took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, during one of many officially held demonstration as organized every year by the authorities during the May Day. A group of protesters interrupted a huge parade in Wroclaw, in which the officials participated<sup>34</sup>.

The student protests in March 1968 in Poland did not have any detailed program. The main goal was to change the attitude of the communist party, which was in fact a center of power in Poland. Maybe that is why the whole movement ended up so fast. However, despite

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31 Oseka, p.162

32 Kaminski

33 Oseka, p.196

34 Kaminski

the common opinion, the fight for the freedom of speech and citizen rights was not only an issue of the intelligentsia. Only one per four persons arrested after the protests was university student, the rest of them being young workers and high school students<sup>35</sup>. The fact that the protesters could find support in the society – collecting money and food during strikes at universities were common – was for sure one of major achievements.

An important aspect is that the protesters did not fight against the entire communist system. It may be because of the fact that they realized that the change of the whole political organization of the state is impossible under the influence of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, most of leaders of the movement - including Michnik, Kuron and Modzelewski - had a leftist background. Being members of communist – the only existing – youth organizations they still believed in injustice of the capitalist system and tried to improve the existing one in the frame of their competences. A common statement, often repeated by some of contemporary Polish scholars and especially politicians, saying that the that Polish March 1968 protesters was meant to fight with communism, remains doubtful.

As a result of the March protests, the anti-Semitic campaign, which began earlier, stepped up. In one of documents in the file found in the office of Gomulka, a member of the Committee of Science and Technology of the Polish United Workers Party complains about the atmosphere at his department. The persecutions of the Jews became an obsession. People were bringing documents confirming that they were baptized - which is particularly strange in an officially atheist country – to proof they do not have a Jewish background. Such a situation was not uncommon at that time<sup>36</sup>.

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35 Ibid

36 Oseka, p.207

Communist discourse always needs a common enemy to focus the force of people. In Poland before 1968 this label marked hooligans, The“American imperialists”, or a Colorado beetle. The truth was that many of protest leaders had Jewish ancestors, but the anti-Zionism - as it was called at that time - grown to enormous extend<sup>37</sup>. Probably, an important role was played by a group of prominent party members surrounding Mieczyslaw Moczar, for whom the rebel of March 1968 was a confirmation of their anti-Semitic claims. An important fact is that Jews were called the Zionist. Anti-Semitism as contradictory to communist doctrine could not be officially supported. The term “Zionists” described Jews supporting the Policy of Israel , however, in reality, no one ever tried to deny the claim that every Jewish student protesting in March 1968 was “Zionist” and this expression became in fact synonym of the “Jew”<sup>38</sup>.

The anti-Semitic campaign was launched by distributing leaflets after the protest from March 8. Prepared by the secret service, highlighted the Jewishness of protest leaders. On March 11, “*Slowo Powszechne*”, a journal edited by PAX - Catholic association, collaborating with communist authorities, wrote an article extending such accusations. During next weeks, it was a main focus of Polish press writing about the protests.<sup>39</sup>.

The fact that many protesting students were children of prominent Jewish members of communist party from Stalinist period was broadly exposed. As a matter of fact, many Polish Jews joined communist organizations even before World War Two. Such persons hoped to assimilate with the Polish society. A stereotypical Pole was considered Catholic and with a new Communist movement Polish-Jewish minority hoped to find a new, modern way

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37 Kaminski

38 Ibid

39 Ibid

to become fully acceptable members of the society<sup>40</sup>. In 1968, the Party establishment tried to expose the fact that the members of Jewish protesters families gained their positions under the most oppressive and already officially condemned period of Stalinism. Called “political bankrupts” they were accused of preparing an overthrow of the government and reestablishing of a tough regime<sup>41</sup>.

March 1968 was presented by the propaganda in a broader context. Default Zionists were supposed to be a part of an international conspiracy. According to articles which were published in Polish press, together with Israel supported by United States and West Germany, they would try to accuse Poland of crimes against the Jews during World War Two and augment the military position of Israel in fight against Egypt. Taking into account the support given by the United States to Israel and Soviet engagement on the side of Arabic countries, it would threaten the position of the USSR<sup>42</sup>. Press was not the only mean used by the propaganda against participants of the March riots. Huge gatherings were held in factories, during which workers inspired by party members were criticizing students rebelling against the authorities. As a result, about 13 thousand people were forced to emigrate with no possibility to go back to Poland<sup>43</sup>.

Because of the protests, many students were expelled from universities. Two biggest actions took place at the university of Wroclaw and the University of Warsaw, where about 1500 students had to leave schools. About 2500 people were arrested in the whole country , majority of them being high school students and young workers, not university students.

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40 Friszke, p.5

41 Kaminski

42 Friszke, pp. 74-75

43 Kaminski

Most of them were suspected to prosecution. The sentences were lenient for the most part, some of the accused were discharged. The “Commandos” group members were treated more strictly. Kuron and Modzelewski being accused of inspiring the riots were sentenced to three and a half year of imprisonment. Many students – the exact number is not known – had to as a kind of penalty serve in the army <sup>44</sup>.

March 1968 was a short, but important episode in Polish recent history. It took place in a year, in which the whole world was undergoing a cultural revolution provoked by the youth. It is difficult to directly connect the events in Poland with Western counterculture, since on one hand Polish people had limited access to western media, however the attempts to reach Poles by means of Radio Free Europe were successful to a certain degree. It is hard to find evidences that the events in Poland had common background with those in Western Europe and the United States; the impact of Czechoslovakia was probably more important. But all what happened in the 1960s in every part of the world is connected by the spirit of freedom and hope for a change.

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44 Ibid

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