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Poland March '68

The rise and fall of the left opposition

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Student demonstrations, meetings, petitions, occupations of faculties, beatings-up and arrests, official anti-Semitism - the beginning of the year 1968 in Poland seemed to be an integral part of the vast revolt against the powers in place which was shaking the world.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Pol2.jpg>]

It all started with the announcement on January 16, 1968 that on the stage of the National Theatre of Warsaw there would now only be two performances of Forefathers' Eve, a play by Adam Mickiewicz directed by Kazimierz Dejmek. Twenty years later Adam Michnik wrote that if in Russia they had banned Pushkin, in France Victor Hugo, or in Germany Goethe, the reactions would perhaps have been less strong. But for Polish national consciousness it was an insult. They were censoring the masterpiece of Polish literature and the symbol of the struggles for freedom and independence. (1) [1]

On February 29 the Warsaw Writers' Union voted a resolution against the censorship. At the University of Warsaw 3,000 signatures were collected for a similar protest. On January 30, at the end of the last performance of the play, a demonstration marched through the streets of the city. For the radicalized students, as well as for part of the intelligentsia, the time had come to stop the increasingly repressive course of a regime that was unceasingly restoring the order that had been shaken by the revolutionary wave of 1956.

Brought to power in October 1956 by the democratic Left of the party, Wladyslaw Gomulka had very quickly put a stop to the democratic ferment in the factories and the press: the workers' councils were brought under control and the press that expressed the demands of the Polish October was liquidated. But the door of freedom remained half-open for intellectual circles and it was only in 1962 that the discussion clubs started to be closed (the best known of them, the Club of the Curved Circle in Warsaw, was closed on February 1, 1962) and the censorship became more interventionist in publications with limited print runs. In 1964 an open letter of 34 intellectuals asserting the "right to criticism" and protesting against the limitation of print runs marked the divorce between the intelligentsia and the leadership of the party. Its authors were put on the black list.

At the same time the left communist opposition within the young intelligentsia and among students was repressed. In March 1965 Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski were condemned for having written and diffused an Open Letter to the PUWP (2) [2] and in January 1966 it was the turn of three other militants, Kazimierz Badowski, Ludwik Hass and Romuald Smiech, condemned as Trotskyists for having helped with the publication of this letter. Drawing the balance sheet of the Left of October 1956, Kuron and Modzelewski wrote then: "The only possibility of developing the revolution [in 1956] was the formulation of a proletarian class programme of class and the organization around it of a movement fighting against the power of the liberal bureaucracy. At this decisive moment, not only did the Left not propose such a programme and organize its own party, but it continued to lend support to the liberal bureaucracy. All the enormous authority that the militants enjoyed in their own circles was transferred to the new leadership."

Consistent with such a balance sheet, the left militants formulated a programme of struggle for a democracy of workers' councils, articulated among other points with a reduction of working time and the independence of the trade unions. In spite of the repression of 1965-1966, this current continued to develop among students, reinforced by intellectuals, qualified by the bureaucracy as "revisionists" (in particular the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, expelled from the party in 1966, the economist Wlodzimierz Brus and the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who used Marxism to make a critical analysis of People's Poland). In 1968 this current provided the student revolt with the majority of its organizers.

The student mobilization

The student movement started when two left students, Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer, were expelled from the University of Warsaw for having informed the correspondent of *Le Monde* of the protests against censorship. On March 8 a general meeting of students at the University of Warsaw was attacked by club-wielding police and Kuron and Modzelewski were again imprisoned. On March 9 the Polytechnic School of Warsaw joined in the movement. On March 11 a demonstration faced up to the police in the centre of the capital, while the students of Cracow joined the movement, soon to be followed by those of Gdansk, Lodz, Lublin, Poznan, Wroclaw, Torun and Katowice. "There is no bread without freedom!" was the slogan of the protesters. Strikes with occupation of the universities and the polytechnic schools took place between March 15 and 23. Student committees appeared and formulated demands.

The reaction of the regime was one of great brutality: thousands of students were expelled, hundreds were arrested, and several dozen were condemned. The universities were deprived of the little autonomy that they had and purged of a number of critical intellectuals. But the repression did not stop there: the student revolt was used as a pretext for an in-depth purge of the apparatus of the party and state, getting rid of those who had manifested democratic sympathies in 1956 and of a large number of the old cadres who came from the pre-war PCP. An anti-Semitic campaign conducted by the regime – a campaign that had been started in the apparatus by the fraction of the "partisans" led by the Minister of the Interior, Mieczyslaw Moczar, several years before, but which reached its apogee in 1968 – led to a wave of emigration, evaluated at 20.000 people between March 1968 and July 1969 (8). 8,300 members of the PUWP were expelled, including 14 ministers and 80 high-ranking civil servants.

Like the students, the bureaucrats referred to 1956, but with an extremely different tonality. Thus, Edward Gierek, member of the political bureau, said during an official meeting on March 14 that the vile scum which had appeared on the surface of the October events eleven years ago had not been completely eliminated from the current of our life and he threatened to "to break the bones" of the "revisionists, Zionists, lackeys of imperialism".

Official anti-Semitism

The accusation of "Zionism" was the principal ideological "justification" of repression. For years the reactionary bureaucratic current which appeared in 1956 under the name of the "Natolin group" had drawn from the traditional anti-Semitic arsenal of the Polish Right arguments aiming both to drive competitors out of the apparatus of the competitors and to build a base in the most frustrated social milieux.

In June 1967, after the Six Day War, this current received unexpected support from Gomulka himself. During the Sixth Congress of the trade unions the First Secretary of the party declared: "Since the Israeli aggression against the Arab countries found support in the Zionist circles of Jews, Polish citizens, I want to declare the following: we did not prevent Polish citizens of Jewish nationality from going to Israel, when they wanted to. We consider that all Polish citizens can have only one fatherland – People's Poland". He did not hesitate to say that the Zionists constituted a "fifth column", which was removed from the text made public after the intervention of Edward Ochab, who until April 1968 chaired the Council of State.

Gomulka had thus not hesitated to accuse of Zionism those who, contrary to the Zionist doctrine, had decided to live in Poland! The equal sign placed between Jew and Zionist was in this manner given legitimacy by the principal leader of the country and the way was opened for an anti-Semitic campaign. This campaign was immediately launched publicly in the press controlled by the Moczar fraction. In March 1968 Jewish-sounding names of oppositionists were given prominence in the scurrilous articles justifying the repression, thousands of openly anti-Semitic (but unsigned) leaflets were distributed and Moczar spoke during education sessions of the traditional "Jewish cunning".

Analyzing the turn of the bureaucracy in 1968, Adam Michnik wrote that if October 1956 can be considered as an attempt by the Communists to sink roots in the Polish democratic tradition, then March 1968 was an attempt to sink roots in the [anti-Semitic] tradition of the Black Hundreds. The search for national roots is natural for a regime saddled with the complex of dependence on a powerful neighbour, but - Michnik continued - by choosing a given historical tradition, you also choose your political allies. (3) [3]

The repression and the anti-Semitic wave of 1968 achieved their goal: until 1974, the capacity for opposition of the Polish intelligentsia was crushed. The repression of the Prague Spring in August 1968, in which the Polish army took part, although it provoked widespread indignation, did not give rise to significant protest movements. The regime managed to get through the great strike of December-January 1970-1971 without a junction taking place between the intellectual opposition and the workers' struggle.

Transformation of the bureaucracy

The party in power itself was deeply transformed. Although the Polish Stalinist regime lacked social roots - the Polish CP was liquidated by Stalin in 1938 and the Stalinists only played a secondary role in the anti-Nazi resistance - the liberalization of the regime after 1956 had modified the relationship between the PZPR and the population. The party recruited massively and the few years of economic development which followed nourished the aspirations of its cadres. The normalisation after 1956, the economic stagnation which accompanied it and the blocking of the possibilities of social advancement diverted these aspirations towards a fight for positions.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Pol1.jpg>]

With the beginning of the 1960s a significant layer of intermediate cadres, indifferent towards the official ideology or disappointed by it, felt blocked by the petrification of the structure of the regime. Expressing the aspirations of the nouveaux riches, sharing all the myths and the prejudices of the petty bourgeoisie, this layer identified naturally with the fractions of Gierk (the economic apparatus) and Moczar (the police apparatus, nationalist and anti-Semitic). The anti-intellectual hatred of these fractions entered in resonance with the dissatisfaction of the intermediate cadres, frustrated at not benefiting from the development of the country and the stabilization of the regime, which they regarded as their work. In March 1968 these layers unreservedly supported repression.

They were the ones who replaced the victims of repression. The phenomenon in the university field is well-known: 13% of doctent (4) [4] owed their promotion to their attitude in March 1968. As Ireneusz Krzeminski would later write, those who aspired to strengthen the power of the PZPR were able to win a new generation avid for positions and honours. Reclassification affected in practice all the apparatus of leadership, including, of course, the layer of the managers of the economy. (5). [5]

Commenting on this phenomenon Andrzej Szczypiorski wrote ten years later that for the Polish Communists the years 1967-1970 were a morally difficult period. All their social and political conceptions crumbled. Under the banner of the party, which they had created and at the head of which they had directed the transformation of the country for a quarter of a century, elements for whom everything to do with communist ideology was, in fact, hateful, were able to express themselves. (6) [6]

For his part Jerzy Szacki wrote that a new generation arrived in power then - not only younger, but also representative of other experiences and with a quite different ideological training from the generation of the PCP which was retiring or emigrating. It was completely a-ideological. When it was comfortable, it defended so-called Marxism against revisionism (this was one of the greatest mystifications of March 1968!), but it had no scruples about at the same time stretching out a hand towards the arguments of the far Right of the pre-war period. When it was profitable to do so, it rejected Stalinism, but that did not prevent it from reviving the Stalinist campaigns against "cosmopolitanism" or drawing from the technique of propaganda the worst Soviet models, that is, the "Moscow Trials"

of 1937. When it was comfortable, it followed the slogan “enrich ourselves!” of the 1970s, and subsequently performed other ideological contortions. In March in Poland, communist ideology was buried. Its place was occupied by the techniques of domination, manipulation and propaganda, more or less effectively applied. (7) [7]

Mutation of the Polish opposition

Especially, the repression of the movement of 1968 led to a profound mutation of the Polish opposition and to a lasting divorce between the living forces of the rebellious intelligentsia and Marxism. In March 1968 the student movement was above all a democratic movement. Its demands, which we find again in subsequent revolts, were however formulated in a language marked by Marxism. When it defended itself against bureaucratic repression, it naturally compared this repression to Fascism and claimed for itself the communist tradition. The conjunction of repression - which disorganized the networks of the Marxist opposition - , the anti-Semitism expressed by the officially communist regime and the promotion within the apparatus of careerist and incompetent layers, put an end to this culture of opposition.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Pol3.jpg>]

Later Michnik told how he and his friends, called the “commandos”, took a fresh look at Communism. The slogans of their contemporaries in the West, their revolutionary speeches and their scorn for the institutions of parliamentary democracy seemed to them to be stupid and dangerous, because in their opinion they could lead to totalitarian consequences. And yet they had been on the same path shortly before, seeking a “true socialism”, studying Marx, rejecting conservatism and the Church. In the student meetings they sang the Internationale... I do not want to generalize; the majority of this generation was different. They were “red”. However in March the attitude of the party in power led them to seek the hidden values of conservatism and the moral qualities of the Church. It was this Church, which they did not esteem, which took up the defence of the students, through the letter of the bishops and the voices of the Catholic deputies in the Diet. (8) [8] When Michnik and its comrades left prison in 1969-1971, they taught this new course to those who were joining the opposition. One of them, Rafal Zakrzewski, remembers that when he met the “March” oppositionists after their ideological transformation, they had already given up “revisionism”, left Marxism behind and forgotten the quotations from the classics. What happened in March was the Polish variant of the end of the “century of ideology”, of the belief in the possibility of a transformation of “real socialism” and in communist ideology, which you could take seriously by finding its authentic values. (9) [9]

Thus the two oppositional currents which converged in the course of the 1960s – the young revolutionary Marxists and the reformist communist intellectuals - drew from their experience of 1968 the same conclusion. These currents, joined later by others, more conservative, which during the 1960s had not played an active political role, determined the political and ideological character of the Polish opposition. In the course of the rising revolutionary wave of 1980-81 their language and their convictions were dominant within Solidarnosc, even when the dynamics of this movement escaped their control, posing the question of power and formulating a programme in terms closer to those of the oppositionists of before March 1968, and even of 1956. The coup d'etat of General Jaruzelski (who in April 1968 had become Minister of Defence) in December 1981 confirmed in the eyes of the majority of the population the validity of the lesson which these opponents had drawn from 1968.

So in March 1968 the Polish post-Stalinists laid the first ideological foundations of capitalist restoration, rehabilitating a tradition of the Polish Right and breaking the communist vanguard. The paths of the radicalisation of the revolts of 1968 in the East and the West, which had converged in the course of the 1960s, diverged.

This article was first published in the weekly magazine of the independent trade union “Sierpien 80” (August ~80), Trybuna Robotnicza (Workers’ Tribune) n° 11 (74), March 13, 2008.

- [1] 1. Adam Michnik, "Sakrament Byka" ("The sacrament of the bull"), Krytyka n° 28-29, Warsaw 1988, clandestine edition.
- [2] 2. Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski, Open Letter to the Polish United Workers' Party. Published in English in "Revolutionary Marxist Students in Poland Speak Out (1964-68)", New York, Merit Publishers, 1969.
- [3] 3. Adam Michnik, op cit.
- [4] 4. The position of docent is the first level of lecturer/researcher qualified to direct research. It was obtained with a State thesis. In March 1968, in order to replace the intellectuals who were victims of repression, the regime ceased requiring such a thesis.
- [5] 5. Ireneusz Krzeminski, "Nowe klopoty Z marcem 68" ("New problems of March68"), Krytyka n° 36, 1991.
- [6] 6. Andrzej Szczypiorski, "Konsekwencje marca 1968" ("The consequences of March 1968"), Krytyka n° 1, 1978.
- [7] 7. Jerzy Szacki, "8 marca 1968 roku" ("On March 8, 1968"), text of a report to the colloquium at the University of Warsaw on March 8, 1988, Krytyka n° 28-29.
- [8] 8. Adam Michnik, op cit.
- [9] 9. Rafal Zakrzewski, "Pytania, ktore denies padly" ("Questions which were not posed"), Krytyka n° 28-29.