

Poland 1956: A Year of Protest and Progress

First Runner Up, Humanities

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Across Poland, 1956 was a remarkable year of protest against the hegemony of the Soviets and progress as Poles demanded reasonable changes within their system which gave way to significant reforms. Sweeping changes in Poland, such as those which came as a result of the Polish October in 1956, did not occur in isolation; rather, they were the product of a much longer continuum in Polish history beginning in the wake of the Second World War. From the ashes of this conflict arose a Poland which barely resembled its prewar self as the Potsdam Conference in July 1945 transformed the country's political boundaries. This change in boundaries saw the annexation of Poland's territories east of the Curzon Line (named after the British Lord Curzon), which included the city of Lwów, by the USSR.^[1] In compensation for this, Poland was granted territories in the West formerly belonging to Germany, such as Silesia, Pomerania, and the bulk of East Prussia.

The expulsion of the Germans from these Recovered Territories to the west on the one hand and the swallowing of Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians and others by the USSR on the other, along with the near elimination of the Jewish population as a result of the Holocaust, left Poland with an ethnically homogenous population, a 'Poland for the Poles.'^[2] This contrasted deeply with the comparative multiethnic population in prewar Poland. Although born from the ashes of nearly eight million deaths (both Catholic and Jewish) as a result of the Holocaust, the achievement of this long-desired demographic uniformity created a truly homogenous, united and strengthened Poland, a trait which became crucial in the events of 1956.

Arising from the ashes of the Second World War was a Poland more committed than ever to Catholicism. As a result of the removal of ethnic groups who held non-Catholic beliefs, Poland was now more Catholic demographically than it had been for centuries. The strength of the Catholic Church was also increased dramatically by the Second World War, as it became a bastion and a refuge for Poles fleeing the terrors and persecution of the Nazi occupation.^[3] Furthermore, the Church's role in society was reinforced during the process of ethnic cleansing in the Recovered Territories. Here, in the chaos that was the Polish 'wild west,' the Church provided a rare and welcome symbol of order and normalcy in an otherwise unruly area.^[4] As such, the Church became a centralizing institution which stood as a beacon of true Polishness even under a theoretically atheist communist state. This had numerous repercussions throughout the communist period in Poland.^[5] The protection of the Church against government persecution became a crucial rallying point for Poles across the nation. These claims became particularly important during the Poznań uprising and the Polish October, to be examined later. The Church also proved to be extremely resilient; even as religious leaders were imprisoned and

religious teachings were excluded from schools, the Church maintained an incredible degree of influence and autonomy.^[6] The Church was thus reinforced as one of the main foci of Polish identity, Polish political expression, and subsequently Polish resistance.

The attitudes of Poles towards the USSR were also crucially shaped by the events of the Second World War. Although Poles had a long standing and deep antagonism towards the USSR, the Second World War exacerbated this. One event which polarized popular opinion against the Soviets when it became public knowledge was the Warsaw uprising of August-September 1944, where the Soviets sat passively at the edge of the Vistula River while the Germans and the Polish Home Army fought in the city of Warsaw, leading to the slaughter and destruction of the Home Army.^[7] The Russians had also perpetrated the Katyń massacre in 1940, the cold-blooded killing of over 10,000 Polish officers, which Soviets officially blamed on the Nazis. These both, however, became known as or were at least suspected to be Soviet atrocities against the Polish people, as revealed by the discourse which emerged during the protests in 1956.^[8] The Soviets also ignored the theoretically legitimate (although quickly forgotten) Polish government-in-exile in London installing their own which would rule Poland throughout the Communist period.^[9] As such, the already antagonistic relationship between the Poles and their Soviet neighbours became even more troublesome as a result of the Second World War, an antagonism which would colour the events of 1956.

Stalinism made a notable impact on Poland, as it did all countries under Soviet control; however, these changes occurred much more gradually in Poland than elsewhere. Collectivization introduced under Stalin provided one of the most tangible examples of this. Although collectivization had an undeniable impact on Poland (a resoundingly negative one) the process was not as widespread here as in other Soviet satellite states such as Czechoslovakia. Indeed, in Slovakia, 40% of arable land was collectivized, compared to 30% in the Czech lands, and a comparatively meagre 11% in Poland.^[10] Poland had felt the heavy hand of Stalin in numerous other ways, such as the enlargement and empowerment of state security, the imprisonment of political dissidents, and the presence of an iron-fisted rule heavily reliant on fear.^[11] While all of these were perhaps less prominent in Poland than other satellites behind the Iron Curtain, they were still felt and they still bred a significant amount of animosity towards the state apparatus which was yearning for a means of expression.

Similar to Stalinization, de-Stalinization occurred much more slowly in Poland than elsewhere in eastern Europe. This can be credited largely to the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), which maintained a firm grip on Stalin's ideology even after his death on March 5, 1953.^[12] Indeed, collectivization and the repression of the Catholic Church, and other groups opposed to the communist government, continued unabated in the immediate wake of Stalin's death. Slowly, however, change did begin to occur within the Polish government. This began in the latter half of 1954, reaching true expression in December 1954 when the PZPR central party activists met and began to criticize the government, particularly those officials who had been put in place by Stalin himself.^[13] At this same time, the Ministry of Public Security was replaced by the Committee for Public Security, which had a reduced mandate and 30% less personnel across the country than its predecessor.^[14] The Party's Central Committee also began to

purge its most vehement Stalinists, such as Roman Romkowski and Konrad Swietlik. During this time many of those imprisoned by the Stalinists were also released, most notably Władysław Gomułka, although this release was not announced to or known by the general public.^[15] It is significant to note, however, that all of these changes were envisioned and implemented by the PZPR. Indeed, the party remained strong, keeping the process of de-Stalinization under control and guiding its direction and speed until 1955.^[16]

Khrushchev's Secret Speech

If the process of de-Stalinization began as a trickle, then the flood was not truly unleashed until the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, held from February 14th to the 25th, 1956. The flood of de-Stalinization was let loose by Khrushchev himself, on February 25th, on the last day of the congress in his Secret Speech.^[17] In this speech, Khrushchev passionately attacked Stalin, blaming him for horrific terror, criticising his dictatorial methods, his forced resettlement of entire populations, and his terrible incompetence for bringing the Soviet Union to the brink of catastrophe in the Second World War.^[18] This speech was transcribed and distributed to members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in a red pamphlet. Eventually this pamphlet was distributed in Poland by the Central Committee of the PZPR who intended to release it in an organized and controlled manner, in order to create a public confidence that the government could now break with its troubled past. The reaction, however, was more radical than originally intended as copies of the speech were rapidly replicated.^[19] These copies were initially quite expensive; however, they soon became easily available and cheap, even appearing in flea markets across the country.^[20]

This caused a surge of activity and a drastic change in Polish attitudes toward their leadership. This speech called into question Stalin's actions, the party he supported and the people he appointed throughout Poland, most notably Bolesław Bierut who had led Poland throughout the Stalinist period.^[21] In Poland, Stalin was quickly branded an enemy of the people, and widespread calls began for the release of those he had imprisoned, most notably Gomułka, who had led the Communist Party in Poland prior to his 1948 imprisonment for being anti-Stalinist (the fact that he was already released was not yet known).^[22] Gomułka, as a result of Khrushchev's Secret Speech, became a folk hero and was held up as one of the true heirs to Lenin. Poles started to question Stalin's entire legacy; they began to call for better working conditions, shorter working hours, and bread.^[23] Poles also began to suggest that they were worse off than others areas in Eastern Europe: they cited better working conditions and higher wages in Czechoslovakia and across the USSR. Even if this perception of inequality did not truly align with reality, the perception itself persisted and formed a critical aspect of the revolutions in 1956.^[24] The release of the Secret Speech in Poland gave Poles a tangible inkling of the weakness of the system; it revealed how weak the government truly was and lowered the threshold of fear. Now that the emperor had no clothes, Poles no longer feared standing up against him.^[25] This occurred in spite of the controlled de-Stalinization which the Party had instigated; indeed, the calls for Gomułka to be released from prison had been met before they publicly began.

Coinciding with these developments was the death of Bolesław Bierut on March 12, 1956.^[26] Bierut, installed by Stalin as first secretary of the PZPR following the imprisonment of Gomułka in 1948, was one of the chief and most emblematic Stalinists of the Stalinist era in Poland. His death not only gave further fuel to those wishing to break with the past (indeed, Bierut led the charge towards collectivization and was instrumental in persecuting the Catholic Church), but also immediately called up the question of succession.^[27] The name which was on everyone's lips was Władysław Gomułka, the 'hero of the people' who had been imprisoned by a hated dictator for his anti-Stalinist leanings.^[28] Initially, Poles were quite stricken by Bierut's death; even if he had been dictatorial and brutal in life, Bierut became an accepted Pole in death and many mourned his passing quite sincerely. Rumours even began to spread that he had been murdered by the USSR (he died shortly after arriving home from a trip there).^[29] These rumours are evidence of the anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiments which arose following Bierut's death. Although his death caused a great deal of political disorganization as the Party scrambled to find a new leader, the Polish people at large began to draw a clearer picture of the direction they wanted Poland to embark upon: a distinctly anti-Soviet one.^[30]

The Thaw

In conjunction with the anti-government, anti-Soviet sentiments now spreading across Poland as a result of the Khrushchev's Secret Speech, and the deaths of both Stalin and Bierut, a Thaw began as people's demands increased while their fear of repression subsided. The clearest indicator of the destabilization of the government was the further weakening of the political police necessary to the maintenance of government power.^[31] The arrests of Roman Romkowski and Anatol Fejgin (the vice minister of public security and the former director of the Tenth Department respectively) for "imprisoning many innocent people and using forbidden methods of investigation in the departments under them"^[32] were significant steps in this process."^[33] As a result of the weakening of state repression and power, Poles across the country began to demand more of their government. This was evident in the annual student festival in Kraków on May 12th and 13th, 1956, where groups of 100-300 students paraded the streets shouting slogans such as "We want the constitution to be changed."^[34] During the same event students smashed tram windows and attempted to break in to a radio station in order to broadcast western jazz music. This indicated not only the decline in the power of the government to react to anti-communist demonstrations but also the real end of fear amongst the general populace.

During the period of the Thaw (starting roughly around the time of Bierut's death), this cessation of fear spread throughout the country. On April 26, 1956, members of the Basic Party Organization in the Agricultural College in Wrocław even demanded the widespread implementation of the principle of elections in all the Party organizations, including the heads of departments in the Central Committee.^[35] Poles demanded an opening up, requesting all documents about the activities of their hero Gomułka (whose release was still publicly unknown) and demanding that the records of the Sejm (the parliament) be published.

During this period the Church retained its powerful status. Even though the power of the Church was never truly suppressed during the communist period, it had lost a significant amount of popularity amongst the youth in Poland as the result of years of communist repression.^[36] This trend was, however, reversed during the Thaw as is shown by the celebrations of the holiday of the Queen of the Polish Crown (a celebration of the Virgin Mary) on May 3, 1956 in Jasna Góra in Częstochowa which, in addition to the sermon, had several youth-oriented events under the theme of 'returning the lost sheep to the Church.' This included sports competitions, music lessons, photography clubs, reading activities and even motorcycling classes.^[37]

This Thaw also spread across the working class as workers began to demand higher wages, lower costs of living and better working conditions, and farmers spoke out against rising taxes. One farmer went as far as saying, in an anonymous letter to the Central Committee, that:

Before the war the farmer paid his whole year's tax for a 100 kilogram pig and he had money left, but today I delivered a young 92 kilogram pig for the levy, so our people's government paid 485 zlotys and the tax I have to pay is 3600 zlotys.^[38]

These concerns were issued across the country as Poles felt that their contributions to the state were immensely disproportionate to the benefits they received.

The Poznań Uprising

These sentiments found their first expression in the Poznań uprising which occurred from June 28th to the 30th, 1956.^[39] It was here that the growing anti-government, anti-Soviet sentiments conflated with the desperate living conditions in Poznań itself. Indeed, workers in Poznań were paid 100 zlotys less per month than the nationwide average and government investment was much lower: 368 zlotys per person in Poznań compared to 1,276 in Warsaw.^[40] Poznań had also experienced rapid growth in the postwar years, expanding by nearly 120,000 residents since 1948, which resulted in widespread housing shortages. If this was not enough, Poznań province was host to the second highest number of collectivized agricultural workers with 1,391 cooperatives, behind only Wrocław province with 1,680.^[41]

The nationwide grievances combined here with these localized disparities amongst workers in the industrial sector. Particularly influential in this was the largest factory in Poznań, Zispo, which had a staggering 13,000 employees involved in the production of a variety of heavy industry goods such as railcars.^[42] In this factory, the median wage had dropped significantly between January and May 1956, as a result of the imposition of greater discipline and higher production quotas by the factory managers. Workers at this factory began to make speeches urging the crew to defend their interests with great courage and without fear as they believed they would no longer need to fear the retaliation of the state following the Twentieth Congress. As greater coordination amongst disgruntled workers at Zispo arose, they spread their plans for a march on the centre of Poznań with other facilities including the Rolling Stock Repair Shop and the Municipal Transportation Enterprise.^[43]

A signal was set that if after 6 a.m. the Zispo siren was sounded it would mean that the march in protest to the city centre was about to begin. On June 28th, early in the morning, a misspelled note on a tram car said "Tram driver's general strike, we are not driving today," and following this the Zispo siren sounded at 6:30 a.m., signalling the start of the Poznań uprising.^[44] The workers of factories across Poznań moved out once alerted by Zispo employees; they destroyed signs reading "J. Stalin Enterprise" and marched to the centre of the city shouting slogans such as "we want bread," "we demand a pay raise," "price decreases," "down with the red bourgeoisie," "fewer palaces, more apartments," and "we want fewer Polish children to have tuberculosis and anemia."^[45] While these are all certainly valid desires, they also show the disorganization of the uprising; it had no clear goals and quickly broke down into mob mentality. The workers were emboldened when militiamen from Poznań did not try to stop them, and even joined them. Workers even managed to capture a militia tank, placing the National flag down its barrel.^[46]

From this point, however, the uprising broke into its distinct although not ideologically unique second phase. This is where the uprising shifted from a relatively peaceful protest into an attempt at revolution. As workers reached the city centre, a group of them who had commandeered a radio broadcasting van drove around Poznań (eventually situating themselves in Stalin Square), declaring that uprisings had occurred in other major cities across Poland.^[47] As this progressed and the protestors moved on the state security building, rumours started flying that all of Poland had risen up and that the communists had been routed throughout the country, with the state security office in Poznań as the last bastion of their power.^[48] The uprising was eventually quashed by the fourth and fifth infantry divisions of the Polish Army (under the command of Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky) with more than four hundred tanks and armoured vehicles, nine hundred cars, and about ten thousand soldiers.^[49]

The Results of the Poznań Uprising

Perhaps the most significant result of the Poznań uprising was the way that it captured the public imagination, giving Poles the confidence to speak up against the perceived injustices of PZPR rule. Across the country, graffiti, fliers, and even bottles thrown into rivers allowed Poles to communicate and spread the message about the uprising.^[50] These messages discussed a wide variety of issues from the uprising itself, to the state of the government, to the possibilities for change. The uprising became a tool through which people could voice their dissatisfaction, even if they were less inclined to portray the uprising accurately.^[51] One such instance of this occurred on the night of June 30th in Warsaw, where many places from Warsaw University to the Bristol Hotel to the statue of Copernicus were vandalized with glued-on fliers proclaiming: "heroic Warsaw: honor the heroic deaths of 1,000 of Poznań's children and workers;" "citizens: let the PZPR and the people's government rot; the general strike was crushed with tanks and guns, 200 were killed and 400 wounded, bread for the workers of Poznań."^[52] Much of the ephemera being spread across the country bore anti-Soviet slogans. Some suggested that the entire nation should "join in Christ to fight the invader," that "Russkies in Polish uniforms are killing helpless children," or "go away communism," and "we want a free Poland."^[53] These statements, drawing on notions of Polish solidarity and appealing, in some cases, to the Church suggest that people across Poland viewed the Poznań uprising as a movement aimed against the Soviet and communist domination of their country.

State security did not sit idly by as people spread messages across the country. Nearly every instance of graffiti or flier distribution was faced with an inquiry by state security. Few of these investigations succeeded as a result of the drastic weakening of state security. Indeed, many underground organizations, most popular amongst students, sprung up; these evoked the legacy of the Home Army. They emerged to spread anti-government, pro-Poznań messages, to discuss the political situation, to distribute fliers or even to obtain weapons to use against the communists.^[54] Although the state security was certainly in decline by this point, many of these groups were caught, unlike the undetected vandals, and their members were either faced with lengthy prison terms or death. Other Poles continued these more provocative methods. Across Poland, animosity was growing towards the Polish Army which had suppressed the demonstrations.^[55] This animosity was expressed in an incident where a group of youths in Krapkowice district, Opole Province, attempted to disarm the commander of the local militia and threw him in a pond while shouting pro-Poznań slogans.

Poznań was an event which was on the tip of everyone's tongue across the country, workers in Warsaw greeted each other with "long live Poznań" and 'Poznań' cigarettes were commonly referred to as 'heroes.'^[56] This quickly became an event which all Poles were able to relate to. Poznań adopted a national character: it was an event through which everyone in Poland could voice their dissatisfaction with the state of the country. They decried the low wages paid in comparison to workers in Czechoslovakia, the longer hours workers had to endure, and claimed that the red scum had overrun Poland.^[57]

Eventually, the myth of Poznań developed. Much as workers participating in the Poznań rebellion were swept up in the myth that all of Poland had risen with them, Poles across the country began to romanticize the scale, impact and nature of the Poznań uprising. Some claimed that Edward Ochab, the First Secretary of the PZPR, had died during the disturbances, while others suggested that it was not merely factory workers in Poznań who had risen up, but also 300,000 agricultural workers from surrounding areas, a sign of the persistent unpopularity of collectivized agriculture.^[58] Rumours suggested that a train carrying security office employees had been blown up and lamented that if only the uprising had continued on for a few more days, the west (or perhaps General Władysław Anders), would have arrived to see the uprising through to its glorious conclusion and all of Poland would be free.^[59]

Overall, the Poznań events gave Poles a single currency through which they could voice their dissatisfaction with the socioeconomic conditions of their country. That the events became so popular, for such a long period of time (people were disseminating fliers across the country well into September) suggests that the Poznań uprising sounded a note which Poles across the country were more than eager to hear. It was interpreted not as a symbol of government force but rather a display of state weakness; it showed that Poles could strive to make significant changes and that these changes were not as unobtainable as they may have originally seemed.^[60] Another crucial aspect to the Poznań uprising is the way that the government took notice of it. While the uprising itself was brutally suppressed and although guards were stationed at crucial buildings throughout the country, the PZPR realized the

significance this event had on the nation's character.[\[61\]](#) The Party recognized that much change was needed if another Poznań was to be avoided.[\[62\]](#)

On the Road to the Polish October

One of the crucial turning points which formed the nature of the Polish October occurred on August 4, 1956, as it was announced on the radio evening news that the Central Committee of the PZPR had granted a membership card to Władysław Gomułka (whose release was now publicly known) and that the seventh Plenum of the PZPR had agreed to annul the decision of the third Plenum, which led to the wrongful imprisonment of Gomułka and his allies.[\[63\]](#) Although Gomułka himself was not immediately granted a role in government, some of his closest supporters who had been imprisoned along with him were. On August 5th, 1956, Ignacy Loga-Swinski and Zenon Kliszko were appointed as the Secretary of the Central Council of Labour Unions and the Undersecretary of the Department of Justice respectively.[\[64\]](#) It now became clear that the hero of the people, imprisoned for his defiance of Stalin, would triumphantly return to office and, hopefully, restore Poland in the process. Peasants and workers across the country immediately became hopeful; they declared that "if Gomułka was in power, the events of Poznań would not have taken place,"[\[65\]](#) and that he would bring an end to the cooperative farms Stalin had imposed. The values of Poznań also reemerged as a result of Gomułka's apparent return as the press outlined elaborate plans for reform, calling for the enlarging of the Sejm, limiting censorship, allowing more open criticism of the PZPR, decentralizing the economy and giving workers a larger role in the management of the workplace.[\[66\]](#)

Another critical event on the road to the Polish October was the trials of those arrested during the Poznań uprising, which began on September 27th, 1956, and immediately captivated public attention. Across the country, but particularly in Poznań, people threatened to rise again; they placed the blame for the uprising squarely on the PZPR's shoulders by stating that the uprising could have easily been avoided had the government properly responded to the public's demands.[\[67\]](#) These trials, however, set the mood for the Polish October as the government responded in an unexpected and unprecedented way. The PZPR allowed many western reporters and diplomats, as well as representatives of many international human rights organizations, into the courtrooms.[\[68\]](#) The public beating of captives by the Army was also discussed quite openly and the Defense had a great deal of freedom. This showed that the iron fist of Stalin had been permanently removed and that the government had no intention of tightening their political line, although the opposite could have easily been true as these were the trials of men who had openly and violently acted against the government.

Early October, 1956 was still a very tumultuous time for Poles, which the surprisingly favorable treatment the government gave to the trials of the Poznań rebels did not abate. This even went down to an elementary school in Junikowo, where fliers were found saying "we want to study German and English," "we demand religion in schools," and "down with the Russian language." These were demands which Gomułka sought to address when he outlined his plan, should he be returned to office. On October 12, he called for a more equitable relationship between the USSR and Poland, including the

removal of Russian troops and an end to the forced exporting of goods to the USSR.[\[69\]](#) Thus, while Gomułka wanted to reform the system and give more independence to Poland, he certainly did not wish to sever the relationship with the USSR. This mood carried through to October 16th when the press announced that Gomułka had participated in a meeting of the Politburo and that he would be returning on the 19th to participate in the eighth Plenum of the PZPR.[\[70\]](#)

The last stepping stone on the road to the Polish October was walked across on October 19th, when, on the verge of the opening of the eighth Plenum which was expected to implement many of Gomułka's ideas, Khrushchev, Lazar Kaganovich, Anastas Mikoyan and Vyacheslav Molotov landed uninvited but not unexpected (they had sent a message on the 18th) at the Warsaw airport. Khrushchev paid this visit both because he had been informed by the Soviet embassy that Poland was on the verge of a general revolt, and because he had been monitoring the increasingly anti-Soviet publications gaining popularity across the country.[\[71\]](#) The primary aims of this delegation were to delay the eighth Plenum, and to ensure that those comrades who were the best guarantors of Polish-Soviet friendship not be removed, particularly Defense Minister Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky.[\[72\]](#)

The Polish October

The Eighth Plenum of the Central Committee of the PZPR marked the start of the Polish October. In this meeting, which began on October 20th, 1956, Gomułka was unanimously elected as the First Secretary of the PZPR.[\[73\]](#) Along with this momentous election came a myriad of other sweeping changes, as Gomułka promised an increasingly open government and a more democratic process in future elections. Pro-Soviet and conservative members of the politburo were also dismissed. Konstantin Rokossovsky, Władysław Dworakowski, Hilary Chelchowski and others were removed, significantly altering the face of the Politburo and the government at large.[\[74\]](#) In the wake of these sweeping changes, massive social movements across the country erupted. People, previously deprived of their ability to express themselves, or others who had to do so in more covert ways (such as through vandalism), were now able to truly express their dissatisfaction with the direction Poland had been moving in.[\[75\]](#) People lined up in the streets to give speeches, hold rallies and participate in demonstrations across the country.

These mass demonstrations, which occurred throughout the country in October, November and even December in some areas, reflected many of the same desires and had many of the same goals as the Poznań uprising. There are, however, a few key differences which deserve to be noted. These gatherings produced a wide variety of demands, but what was most remarkable about these demands was how similar they were across Poland. Poles attacked symbols of Soviet authority but also those of government repression.[\[76\]](#) One such instance occurred on the 24th of October, 1956, when members of a rally organized to support the eighth Plenum of the PZPR walked in to the headquarters of the state security office and jail in Warsaw, breaking windows with rocks and demanding the release of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, the restoration of religious teaching in schools, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Poland.[\[77\]](#) Street demonstrations also occurred in Warsaw on October 24th when ten thousand people rallied, demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the removal of Rokossovsky as the leader of

the Polish Army, and the clarification of the Katyń massacre. This continued as demonstrators smashed display cases in the Polish-Soviet friendship building and tore down and burned flags at the main railway station.[\[78\]](#)

This demonstration was eventually shut down by the Citizens' Militia, although it continued on in smaller groups for several days. Similar incidents sprang up across the country; other demands included free trade with capitalist countries; an ending to the jamming of foreign radio signals; a return to the former uniforms of the Polish Army; the recovery of the Eastern Territories; an end to the teaching of Marxism-Leninism, and; the return of the May 3rd Constitution Day holiday.[\[79\]](#) It is also crucial to note that these demonstrations were *not* directed against the communist government. Indeed, many of the meetings that eventually became demonstrations were initially arranged in support of the new first secretary, Gomułka.[\[80\]](#)

One of the most remarkable features of such demonstrations, and the Polish October as a whole, is their demographic diversity. Indeed, a large portion of those who participated in these events were students, soldiers and factory workers. One such student rally occurred on October 22nd at the medical academy in Rokitnica in Silesia, where a large group of university students mirrored desires to return Cardinal Wyszyński and remove Soviet officers from the Army, but also demanded that courses in theology be brought back and that the Russian language requirement be removed.[\[81\]](#) Another demonstration which highlights some of the critical differences between the October and Poznań movements also occurred on the 22nd of October at the Rolling Stock Repair Works in Ostrow Wielkopolski, Poznań Province.[\[82\]](#) Here workers presented a petition demanding the release of those imprisoned during the Poznań uprising, but also expressing desires for a cordial relationship with the USSR as equals. This shows a distinct change in attitude; people were accepting of their new government, headed by Gomułka, and no longer wanted the relationship with the USSR severed.[\[83\]](#) They also expressed economic concerns centred on the desire to have a husband make enough money so that his wife would not need to work. If these demands were more humble than those of the Poznań uprising they were also much more realistic, as they requested a modification of the system already in place as opposed to a complete overhaul.

Rallies on military bases also followed many of the larger trends. Thus, navy men in Świnoujście near Szczecin demanded the return of traditional uniforms, the replacement of Soviet officers with Polish officers, the release of wrongfully imprisoned Polish officers, the stopping of radio jamming and the elimination of censorship.[\[84\]](#) Anti-Soviet tendencies also carried into elementary schools. In Sieniawa Zarska students threw acorns at Rokossovsky's portrait, then painted over it. Another school removed their portrait of Rokossovsky and replaced it with a cross.[\[85\]](#)

Thus, the Polish October was a truly Polish movement. One of the most incredible things about this movement is that, even though people from disparate areas of the country were involved, the demands they made remained relatively similar. People demanded the reinstatement of religion on a mass scale,

calling for the release of Cardinal Wyszyński and demanding the teaching of religion in schools (some even requested that a religion grade be put on report cards).^[86] They dealt with economic demands, calling for higher wages, an adjustment of Polish debt to the USSR and shorter working hours. They also rallied for the reestablishment of Polish cultural landmarks throughout the country. These included the adoption of traditional Polish military garb, the reduction of Polish dependence on the USSR, the removal of Russians from positions of authority, and the elimination of censorship.

The Polish October was a significant event in many other respects. One of the most notable differences between these mass movements and other ones is that they were not brutally suppressed and that they were not specifically anti-government.^[87] In this way the Polish October was distinct from the Poznań uprising even though these two events had several commonalities. The Polish October was certainly much less radical than its predecessor. Demands for the removal of communism and calls for free elections were much less common (although they were still present).^[88] The Polish October did not demand the removal of the communist institution; rather it sought to work within it. One key ingredient in this difference was Gomułka; he not only showed that the government was attentive to the demands of the people but he himself had been a victim of Stalin, representing a clear distinction between the 'old' Stalinist government and the 'new' one headed by Gomułka.^[89]

The Soviet Response

The Soviet response to the Polish October makes apparent the unique character of this event, particularly when compared to the Hungarian Revolution of the same year.^[90] Here, a variety of factors combined which led the Soviets away from direct military intervention (as occurred in Hungary). The first of these is the flexibility of the new Polish government: not only was Gomułka and the Party he led able to satisfy the demands of the protestors across the country, but they were also able to convince Khrushchev on his visit before the eighth Plenum that Polish-Soviet relations were not at risk, a promise which they managed to keep in spite of popular sentiments.^[91] Another critical factor was Soviet involvement in other areas at the time. Hungary was an obvious and frequently cited example of this but the Soviets were also experiencing popular protest at home. The most prevalent of these was on the campus of Moscow State University where protestors were demanding a greater voice in the political process.^[92]

The rising influence of China also had a part to play in the lack of Soviet intervention in Poland. This was solidified in a September 1956 visit by Edward Ochab, the First Secretary of the PZPR, to Peking where Ochab received strong support from the Chinese, announcing that the eighth Plenum of the PZPR would be held on October 19th shortly after his return.^[93] Indeed, Chinese officials made it clear that they were opposed to the concept of Soviet intervention in Poland.^[94] As such, it was a combination of factors both within and outside of Polish control which led to the Soviet decision not to intervene. In lieu of military intervention, tangible changes began to occur in Poland as a result of the Polish October.

The Results of the Polish October

The effects of the Polish October were numerous. On October 28th, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was released and returned to Warsaw where he immediately gave speeches to a grateful public. All priests imprisoned by the government were also released and religious instruction was reintroduced into schools as an elective. The relaxation of the persecution of the Catholic Church was personified in Cardinal Wyszyński's Christmas address, which was broadcast by Polish radio.[\[95\]](#) Economic demands were also met as workers in some sectors were given higher wages, the yellow curtain exclusive shops of the 'red bourgeoisie' were closed and government villas and residences were transformed into daycare centres and orphanages. Vacation homes for government officials were also transferred to the employee vacation fund and the Polish debt to the USSR was eliminated.[\[96\]](#) Although demands for the lifting of compulsory deliveries to the USSR were not fulfilled, the volume of deliveries was significantly lowered. Grain was reduced by 35% whereas pork and potatoes were reduced by 19%. Farmers' taxes were also lowered and collectivized agriculture was effectively reversed.[\[97\]](#)

This is not to suggest that the Polish October was entirely successful; indeed many of the changes that people demanded were not met, such as the removal of Soviet troops from Poland. Gomułka himself could not live up to the image the public had set of him. While he was seen as the epitome of Polish ideals, Gomułka himself was a loyal communist and did not seek to overthrow the system. Gomułka, as a communist, also bore some anti-religious leanings which proved, in later years, to be quite unpopular. Nevertheless, with the installation of Gomułka as the head of government Poles felt confident that the break with the Soviet past was complete and that Poland could now begin on a new course.[\[98\]](#)

The election of 1957 represented the culmination of the Polish October. Now that many of the people's demands had been met the opportunity was given for an essentially democratic election. The laws which previously allowed only as many candidates as seats to run were eliminated and 66% more candidates than seats were allowed to run in the election. Gomułka rose to the helm during this election: his popularity proved itself as 89.37% of voters followed his request of "voting without crossing out" (which automatically voted for the top candidate).[\[99\]](#) 94.1% of eligible voters turned out to this election and the top candidate was elected in all regions except one, Nowy Sącz in Kraków Province. There is no evidence that this outcome was rigged and no one challenged the results.[\[100\]](#) This election represented the first and only time during the communist period in Poland that the communist government, by answering peoples' cries during the Polish October, gained some semblance of democratic legitimacy.

Conclusions

1956 was an undoubtedly tumultuous year across Poland as this newly redefined state managed to find its collective voice for the first time since the beginning of the Communist era. The Poland which emerged from the Second World War barely resembled its prewar self in terms of geography and demographics. This ethnically homogenized Poland was strengthened by the increasing significance of the Catholic Church in society, managing to find its feet after the deaths of Joseph Stalin and Bolesław

Bierut and the release of Khrushchev's famous 1956 Secret Speech. These events combined to lower the threshold of fear across the country, giving Poles their first ever chance to vocalize their discontent with the Communist state. This discontent manifested itself first in the June 1956 Poznań uprising, a particularly anti-government, anti-Soviet demonstration which, due to its radical and uncompromising nature, was brutally suppressed by the Polish Army.

Following this, waves of discontent surged across Poland as the uprising gave birth to a national zeal, leading to even more widespread but comparatively discreet protest. The Polish October, which began after an unexpected visit by a Soviet delegation prior to the eighth Plenum of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), quickly spread across the country. The character of this outpouring of primarily anti-Soviet sentiment proved quite different from its predecessor, adopting a much more flexible attitude which the government could work with. As a result, Soviet intervention was seen as unnecessary when compared with the more radical and violent contemporaneous events in Hungary. The Polish October yielded many positive fruits, although not all of its goals were met and many of the illusions Poles held proved fleeting. Nevertheless, 1956, with its two waves of public outcry, was a watershed in the history of Poland under communism, eventually settling on a more compromising tone which allowed for cooperation between the Polish government and its people to make tangible, if fleeting, social and economic progress.

[1] Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001), 133.

[2] Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 136.

[3] David Curp, *A Clean Sweep? The Politics of Ethnic Cleansing in Western Poland, 1945-1960* (Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 8.

[4] Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 135.

[5] Prazmowska, *A History of Poland*, 197.

[6] Curp, *A Clean Sweep*, 9.

[7] Lukowski and Zawadzki, *A Concise History*, 272.

[8] Allen Paul, *Katyń: Stalin's Massacre and the Triumph of Truth* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 342.

[9] The Polish government-in-exile consisted of the remnants of the prewar Polish government which was forced to flee to London in the face of military defeat. Although its political power was never restored, the government-in-exile continued to exist until its dissolution in 1990.

[10] Paweł Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 12.

- [11] Jane Leftwich Curry and Luba Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution: People vs. Elites, 1956-1990* (Washington: The American UP, 1996), 25.
- [12] Thomas Simons, *Eastern Europe in the Postwar World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 85.
- [13] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 13.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 15.
- [15] Nicholas Bethell, *Gomułka: His Poland and His Communism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1969), 199.
- [16] Anthony Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism: A Cold War History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 67.
- [17] Roger East and Jolyon Pontin, *Revolution and Change in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1997), 12.
- [18] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 9.
- [19] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 26.
- [20] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 36.
- [21] Jan Weydenthal, *The Communists of Poland: An Historical Outline* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986), 74.
- [22] James Brown, *Eastern Europe and Communist Rule* (London: Duke UP, 1988), 51.
- [23] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 43.
- [24] Paweł Machcewicz, "Intellectuals and Mass Movements: The Study of Political Dissent in Poland in 1956," *Contemporary European History* 6:3 (November 1997):364. JSTOR (accessed February 1, 2012).
- [25] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 53.
- [26] Brown, *Eastern Europe and Communist Rule*, 53.
- [27] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 73.
- [28] Brown, *Eastern Europe and Communist Rule*, 160.
- [29] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 52.
- [30] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 27.
- [31] Lukowski and Zawadzki, *A Concise History*, 295.
- [32] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 60.
- [33] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 60.
- [34] *Ibid.*, 63.
- [35] Machcewicz, "Intellectuals and Mass Movements", 369.

- [36] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 28.
- [37] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 70.
- [38] *Ibid.*, 80.
- [39] Lukowski and Zawadzki, *A Concise History*, 295.
- [40] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 87.
- [41] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 104.
- [42] *Ibid.*, 87.
- [43] Machcewicz, "Intellectuals and Mass Movements," 369.
- [44] East and Pontin, *Revolution and Change*, 13.
- [45] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 100.
- [46] *Ibid.*, 110.
- [47] Simons, *Eastern Europe in the Postwar World*, 98.
- [48] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 88.
- [49] Johanna Granville, "Hungarian and Polish Reactions to the Events of 1956: New Archival Evidence," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53: 7 (November 2001): 1053. JSTOR (accessed February 1, 2012).
- [50] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 125.
- [51] Brown, *Eastern Europe and Communist Rule*, 99.
- [52] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 127.
- [53] *Ibid.*, 127.
- [54] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 90.
- [55] Granville, "Hungarian and Polish Reactions", 1054.
- [56] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 139.
- [57] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 30.
- [58] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 95.
- [59] Machcewicz, "Intellectuals and Mass Movements", 367.
- [60] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 31.
- [61] Neal Ascherson, *The Polish August: The Self Limiting Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 66.
- [62] Bethell, *Gomułka*, 211.
- [63] Bethell, *Gomułka*, 213.

- [64] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 158.
- [65] *Ibid.*, 160.
- [66] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 101.
- [67] Lukowski and Zawadzki, *A Concise History*, 296.
- [68] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 41.
- [69] Machcewicz, "Intellectuals and Mass Movements", 373.
- [70] Simons, *Eastern Europe in the Postwar World*, 98.
- [71] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 45.
- [72] Johanna Granville, "1956 Reconsidered: Why Hungary and Not Poland?," *Seer* 80:4 (October 2002): 662. JSTOR (accessed February 1, 2012).
- [73] Ascherson, *The Polish August*, 67.
- [74] Krzysztof Persak, "The Polish: Soviet Confrontation in 1956 and the Attempted Soviet Military Intervention in Poland," *Europe-Asia Studies* 58: 8 (December 2006): 1288. JSTOR (accessed January 25, 2012).
- [75] Kemp-Welch, "Dethroning Stalin", 1273.
- [76] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 172.
- [77] Kemp-Welch, "Dethroning Stalin", 1274.
- [78] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 45.
- [79] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 177.
- [80] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 103.
- [81] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 179.
- [82] *Ibid.*, 181.
- [83] Brown, *Eastern Europe and Communist Rule*, 101.
- [84] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 186.
- [85] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 50.
- [86] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 194.
- [87] Prazmowska, *A History of Poland*, 197.
- [88] Granville, "1956 Reconsidered", 669.
- [89] Persak, "The Polish: Soviet Confrontation", 1300.
- [90] Granville, "1956 Reconsidered", 656.

[91] Mark Kramer, "The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises in Hungary and Poland: Reassessments and New Findings," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33:2 (April 1998): 169. JSTOR (accessed March 7, 2012).

[92] Kramer, "The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises", 195.

[93] Curry and Fajfer, *Poland's Permanent Revolution*, 36.

[94] Kramer, "The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises", 211.

[95] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 210.

[96] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 117.

[97] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 209.

[98] Lukowski and Zawadzki, *A Concise History*, 298.

[99] Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 233.

[100] Kemp-Welch, *Poland Under Communism*, 122.

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