

## The Polish–Soviet Confrontation in 1956 and the Attempted Soviet Military Intervention in Poland

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In 1956, a deep political crisis developed in Poland. The power elite was paralysed by internal conflicts and public feelings were strongly anti-Soviet. The Kremlin viewed this situation with concern. On 19 October, the Soviet leadership sent a top-level delegation to Warsaw to prevent changes in the Politburo which they feared might lead to Poland's secession from the Soviet bloc. Simultaneously, Soviet troops located in Poland started an advance towards Warsaw. After the dramatic talks between Khrushchev and Gomułka Soviet intervention was ceased but it took several more days before the Kremlin gave up an armed-intervention solution in Poland. It was China's firm objection to it and the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution that made Soviet military engagement in Poland impossible.

FOR POLISH–SOVIET RELATIONS THE YEAR 1956 STARTED WITH TWO far-reaching events. The first event—of worldwide importance—was the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), at which Nikita Khrushchev delivered the secret speech denouncing Stalin's crimes. Soon after the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP), Bolesław Bierut, died of a heart attack during a stay in Moscow.

### *The thaw in Poland*

Khrushchev's speech, broadly publicised in Poland, was a shock to communists, but raised hope for a rapid change among wide circles of society. Contrary to the author's intentions, the report condemning Stalin's 'personality cult' struck at the heart of the ruling system. The political situation after the CPSU Twentieth Congress could not remain intact. Under the circumstances, the death of Bierut, the head of the state and head of the party during the worst period of Stalinism, was a factor facilitating the process of destalinisation. As a result the 'thaw' began transforming into a real 'spring'. The tide of discussion and critique became more and more diffuse, and the press played a very important role in it. The slogans of the day were 'democratisation',

'abiding by the law', and struggles against 'bureaucracy' and 'distortions'. 'Truth' and 'morality' were becoming the values of public life (Kemp-Welch 1996, pp. 181–208).<sup>1</sup>

As part of the relaxation, an amnesty pronounced in April 1956 resulted in the release of 35,000 prisoners (including 9,000 political prisoners). Nine officers who had been accused of 'a plot in the Army' were rehabilitated, whereas Roman Romkowski, former deputy minister of public security, and Anatol Fejgin, former director of the tenth department of the ministry,<sup>2</sup> were put under arrest. Minister of justice Henryk Świątkowski, prosecutor-general Stefan Kalinowski and chief military prosecutor Stanisław Zarakowski were dismissed from their posts. At the beginning of May, Jakub Berman, who in previous years had been considered the second most important person in the party's leadership after Bierut, resigned from the Politburo. However, neither these personnel changes nor the restitution of wrongs resulting from the lawlessness of the Stalinist period could be a substitute for necessary radical reforms of the system. The workers' revolt in Poznań on 28 June 1956, when anti-communist slogans were used, was manifest proof of the increasing social and political crisis.

During the Seventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the PUWP held in July 1956, a deep split was revealed inside the elite of the communist authorities. The basic difference between the emerging party factions was in their ways of responding to the crisis of the system. According to the dogmatic conservative faction called the Natolinians the way to alleviate the increasing social tensions was primarily by personnel changes and holding individual officials responsible for mistakes that resulted from the 'personality cult', as well as by satisfying the most urgent financial needs of the population. The essence of the system, however, was to remain intact. The Natolinians were in favour of tough methods of rule; they demanded the re-establishment of strict control over the press and the limitation of the freedom of expression. Among the most prominent Natolinians were Politburo members Zenon Nowak, Franciszek Joźwiak and Franciszek Mazur, as well as the trade union chief Wiktor Kłosiewicz and Kazimierz Witaszewski, chief of the main political administration of the Polish Armed Forces. Among Politburo members, Aleksander Zawadzki was also close to the Natolinians. This faction enjoyed strong support from regional mid-level party apparatus activists.

Another faction, the Pulavians, was characterised by a more liberal approach and a pro-reform attitude. They supported giving up terror as an instrument of exercising power and they recognised the need for authentic changes to the system. They were also distinctive by demonstrating a greater sensitivity to public feeling and recognised the need to obtain support in broader circles of society. The political base for the Pulavians was a large part of the central party apparatus, and they also exercised influence among the intelligentsia, especially among journalists. Politburo member Roman Zambrowski was considered to be a leader of the Pulavians. The reform-minded secretaries of the Central Committee were also linked with this group, including Jerzy Morawski, Władysław Matwin and Jerzy Albrecht. Members of the Politburo close to this orientation included Adam Rapacki, Stefan Jędrzychowski and Roman Nowak, and in a later phase, also Józef Cyrankiewicz, the prime minister.

<sup>1</sup>For the most recent detailed account of the 1956 crisis in Poland, see Codogni (2006).

<sup>2</sup>This department was responsible for the internal security of the PUWP (Communist Party).

Another basic line of division between the Natolinians and the Pulavians stemmed from differing opinions on the issue of Polish–Soviet relations. Natolinians were in favour of maintaining the hitherto existing tight link and full submission to the USSR. They maintained very close contacts with the Soviet embassy. They had an intimate relationship with the minister of defence of the Polish People's Republic, Soviet Marshal Konstantin Rokossovskii, and the public generally perceived them to be Moscow's people. On the other hand, the Pulavians recognised the need to change the existing model of dependency and to establish a mutual relationship based on the principles of partnership and autonomy in home policy.

#### *The visits of Khrushchev and Bulganin to Warsaw*

In Moscow, after the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, a lot of attention was paid to developments in Poland. It is enough to mention, as proof of Soviet interest in the situation in Poland, the visits to Poland of Nikita Khrushchev in March and Nikolai Bulganin in July 1956.

Khrushchev, who came to Warsaw on 15 March to attend the funeral of Bierut, stayed for five days in order to participate in the debates of the Sixth Plenum of the Central Committee of the PUPP and at that time he also had talks with the Polish Politburo. Their content is not known. One may assume that he participated in the decision to propose Edward Ochab as a candidate for the post of the first secretary of the PUPP. On 20 March Khrushchev met the leading activists of the PUPP, and then participated in the debates of the Plenum of the Central Committee, which was an unprecedented event in the history of Polish–Soviet relations. Taking the floor during the debate at the Plenum, he indirectly supported those opposing the election of Roman Zambrowski as secretary of the Central Committee (Brzeziński 1989, pp. 126–135; Gluchowski 1998, pp. 44–49).

Prime Minister Nikolai Bulganin's July 1956 visit to Warsaw (officially in connection with the celebration of the national holiday in Poland) was held during the stormy Seventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the PUPP. His speech during the festive celebration took up themes close to the ideas of the Natolinians at the Plenum. Bulganin warned against the 'attempts to weaken the internationalist ties of the socialist bloc under the banner of so called national specialties' and against 'attempts to undermine the power of people's democratic states under a mask of spurious diffusion of democracy'; he also criticised the revisionist tendencies in the Polish press.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Public feeling*

Profound antagonisms and differences of opinion within the leadership of the PUPP made it impossible for them to develop a unanimous approach to the deepening social and political crisis and after the July Seventh Plenum the authorities were paralysed. At the same time, the party leaders were exposed to more and more pressure from party members. The demand for democracy was generally expressed by the party, as well as society as a whole. However, the themes developed within the emerging mass movement went far beyond what even the most reformist activists of the PUPP

<sup>3</sup>*Trybuna Ludu*, 22 July 1956.

understood to fall within the idea of democratisation. Generally one could differentiate four main streams in the ideas of the popular movement, stressing the need for reforms of an economic, religious, democratic liberal and nationalist nature. Very often they were expressed in the language of anti-Soviet phraseology.

Widespread anti-Soviet resentments that had been suppressed for a long time started manifesting themselves soon after the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU. Khrushchev's criticisms of Stalin's crimes prompted the Poles to recall all the wrongs inflicted on them by the Soviet Union in the past. In private conversations as well as at meetings convened to discuss Khrushchev's speech, statements were made and questions were asked about the Soviet aggression of 17 September 1939, the slaughter of Polish officers in Katyń in 1940, the lack of Soviet support for the Warsaw uprising in 1944, the post-war deportation of soldiers of the Home Army to Siberia, and the Moscow trial of the 16 leaders of the Polish underground state in 1945. In social consciousness, the forced supplies of coal at 'special prices' became a symbol of the economic exploitation of Poland, and the presence of Soviet officers and advisers including Marshal Konstantin Rokossovskii (the minister of national defence) was a symbol of the political domination of the USSR. The slogan 'Down with the Soviets!' was used alongside the demand 'Freedom and bread!' during the Poznań workers' revolt.<sup>4</sup>

At the meetings on 8 and 10 October 1956, dedicated to discussion of the crisis situation in the country, the Politburo noted, among other developments, that an

intensification of an anti-Soviet atmosphere was being promoted, beside the hostile propaganda, by the inadequate structure of mutual relations between the Polish People's Republic and the USSR (e.g. the issue of coal prices, that high rank officers in the military could not speak Polish and were not Polish citizens, and the Soviet ambassador's interference in the internal affairs of the country) (Dudek *et al.* 2000, p. 188).<sup>5</sup>

At this point one should mention that preparations to deal with some of these issues had already been made. On 7 September 1956 the Politburo discussed the issue of settling accounts with the Soviet Union in connection with war damages that Germany owed Poland, as well as the issue of supplies of Polish coal at reduced prices. It was also decided to talk to the USSR about the withdrawal of Soviet advisers from provincial offices for public security and from the Committee for Public Security (Dudek *et al.* 2000, pp. 183–184). These issues were really the topic of the talks held by Edward Ochab in Moscow in mid-September, when he stayed there on his way to Beijing for the Eighth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Subsequently, on 10 October, the decision was taken 'to approach the USSR as well as the relevant [Soviet] generals, holding posts with the military forces, offering them Polish citizenship. Those Soviet officers, who do not speak Polish, should become advisers and should be replaced by the promoted Polish officers' (Dudek *et al.* 2000, p. 188).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>For an excellent study of public feelings and the mass movements of the Polish October 1956, see Machcewicz (1993).

<sup>5</sup>For detailed analysis of the debates of the CC PUWP Politburo before the Eighth Plenum see Friszke (1996, pp. 188–212; 2003, pp. 167–213).

<sup>6</sup>As of 1 May 1956, in the Polish military forces there were 76 Russian officers on duty (including 28 generals, 32 colonels, 13 lieutenant-colonels, two majors and one captain) and about 50 military advisers (see Nalepa 1995, pp. 86, 134).

*Speeding-up*

The course of events was dramatically speeded up at the beginning of October. On 12 October the Politburo took the decision to convene a Plenum of the Central Committee. Władysław Gomułka participated in the meeting of the Politburo for the first time since he had been ousted from it in 1948. In his speech he assumed a very critical tone towards the party leadership, who had not been able to undertake any reform measures for several months. Gomułka said:

All the process of our life must at present originate from the foundations of the new, from the principles of democratisation; any turn back towards the old may bring worse results. One may rule the nation having lost its confidence with the help of bayonets, but the one who orients himself to such possibility, orients himself towards total destruction. We cannot get back to the old methods.

simultaneously indicating that he was ready to take responsibility for the fate of the country (Andrzejewski 1987, p. 95).<sup>7</sup>

Where Polish–Soviet relations were concerned, Gomułka was speaking for almost all of Polish society. He raised the issues of coal and of the dismantling of industrial plants in the regained territories by the Russians in 1945:

war reparations for Regained Territories were taken both in the form of coal and in the form of dismantling [industrial plants]. True, we gave in under the circumstances of a certain pressure. I am of the opinion, that the Soviet comrades should understand that and bring back what they owe us (Andrzejewski 1987, pp. 93–94).

Gomułka also criticised the Politburo for a lack of resoluteness concerning the issue of Soviet officers and advisers in the military forces:

we had the advisers, they are not needed, so it is obvious that any government should itself solve the issues which are of concern. We approach those who gave us these advisers and we tell them that we dismiss them. We don't co-ordinate anything with them. Nobody will respect you if you act like that. You have got to solve big issues, not just the small ones, so what are you debating about? (Andrzejewski 1987, pp. 94–95).

Two subsequent meetings of the Politburo (on 15 and 17 October) were devoted to preparations for the Central Committee Plenum. Beside a substantive dispute over the draft resolution of the Plenum, there was also a dispute over changes to the party leadership. It was already decided that Gomułka would be proposed for the position of first secretary, but the Natolinians (Zenon Nowak, Franciszek Józwiak and Konstantin Rokossovskii) were against the idea that the Politburo as a whole should resign and a new one be elected at the Plenum. However, they constituted a minority at the combined meeting of the Politburo and the Secretariat together. A resolution was adopted on decreasing the number of members of the Politburo to nine. The following were put forward as new Politburo members: Władysław Gomułka, Aleksander Zawadzki, Józef Cyrankiewicz, Ignacy Loga-Sowiński, Roman Zambrowski, Adam Rapacki, Jerzy Morawski, Stefan Jędrychowski and Edward Ochab.

<sup>7</sup>Jakub Andrzejewski is a pseudonym used by Andrzej Paczkowski.

They were—with the exception of Zawadzki, Ochab and Loga-Sowiński—of the Pulavian orientation, on whom Gomułka finally decided to rely on his way to power. Zawadzki was considered a moderate Natolinian, Ochab—the current first secretary—assumed a centre position, while Loga-Sowiński was Gomułka's man. The following were also put forward as candidates for the Secretariat: Gomułka, Ochab, Zambrowski, Edward Gierek, Jerzy Albrecht, Władysław Matwin and Witold Jaroński.<sup>8</sup> In the proposed composition of the new party leadership there was no room for the leading Natolinians: Zenon Nowak, Franciszek Jóźwiak, Franciszek Mazur, Hilary Chełchowski and Władysław Dworakowski. There was also no room for the Marshal of Poland and the USSR, Konstantin Rokossovskii.

The mood in society was becoming increasingly tense. The official announcement published by the press on Gomułka's participation in the meeting of the Politburo and on the decision to convene the Eighth Plenum of the Central Committee clearly indicated a political breakthrough.<sup>9</sup> The proposed composition of the Politburo, on the recommendation of Ochab, was distributed to the members of the Central Committee and therefore soon ceased to be a secret. Rumours arose—which have still not been explained to this day—about a *coup d'état* by the Natolinians.

#### *Soviet delegation in Warsaw*

On 18 October 1956 the Soviet ambassador Pantaleimon Ponomarenko notified Ochab that the following day, on the opening day of the Plenum, the Soviet leadership intended to send a delegation to Warsaw to discuss the current situation in Poland.<sup>10</sup> It was tantamount to a demand to postpone the Plenum. The Politburo convened on the spot (Gomułka did not participate in that meeting) and it was decided to suggest that the Soviet delegation should come a day or two later. From amongst the Politburo members only Rokossovskii spoke in favour of receiving the Soviet delegation before the opening of the Plenum (Dudek *et al.* 2000, p. 215). However, in spite of the Polish response, in the early morning of 19 October the delegation of the Central Committee of the CPSU landed at the military airfield in Warsaw. The delegation was composed of Nikita Khrushchev, Lazar Kaganovich, Anastas Mikoyan and Vyacheslav Molotov, and was accompanied by the Chief Commander of the Warsaw Pact, Marshal Ivan Konev and a dozen or so other generals.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Candidatures for the Politburo and the CC Secretariat were agreed upon by an *ad hoc* commission set up on 17 October consisting of Gomułka, Ochab, Cyrankiewicz and Zawadzki. In the voting the Natolinians objected to the candidatures of the 'young secretaries' of the CC, Morawski, Matwin and Albrecht.

<sup>9</sup>*Trybuna Ludu*, 16 October 1956.

<sup>10</sup>There were rumours circulating at the time—noticed by Western diplomats—that the arrival of the Soviet delegation had followed a refusal by the Polish leaders to go to Moscow 'for consultations'. However there is no confirmation of this in the accessible sources (see Kula 1992, pp. 123, 132).

<sup>11</sup>Konev arrived in Warsaw a couple of hours ahead of Khrushchev. Some Polish accounts mention also the arrival of Marshal Georgii Zhukov, minister of defence of the USSR. Rumours of his presence in Warsaw were recorded by Western diplomats (Kula 1992, p. 122). However, according to Aleksandr Orekhov, Zhukov was taking part in Soviet–Japanese negotiations in Moscow together with Soviet Prime Minister Bulganin on 19 October 1956 so he could not have been in Warsaw on that day (Orekhov 2005a, p. 208, note 21).

What was the opinion of CPSU leaders regarding the situation in Poland? Undoubtedly, their understanding of the course of the crisis was shaped by reports sent from the Soviet embassy in Warsaw. Their content has not been released to researchers so far. However, the information must have been alarmist and at the same time extremely one-sided, because the reports were influenced mainly by only one party to the internal political conflict—by the Natolinians.<sup>12</sup> In one of his speeches delivered later, Gomułka described the motives behind the Soviet delegation's arrival as follows:

they thought (as they apparently were thus informed), that what is done in Poland, the preparations connected with the Eighth Plenum and the changes planned at the Eighth Plenum lead towards the breach of the Warsaw Pact, lead to the breach of the Polish–Soviet relations, well, shortly, they are directed against vital interests of the whole socialist camp, including the specially vital interests of the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup>

Having taken the decision to send a delegation to Warsaw, the Presidium of Central Committee of the CPSU informed central committees of 'fraternal parties'. A telegram sent on 18 October stated

recently within the authorities of the Polish United Workers' Party sharp differences of opinions arose pertaining to issues of evaluation of the situation in the Polish United Workers' Party and in the country, as well as further steps to be taken in this connection. Differences of opinion involve key issues of foreign and internal policy of the party and the state as well as the composition of the party leadership. We are seriously concerned about the situation created within the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party because of the special importance of the Polish position for the camp of socialism, and especially for the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that indeed the Soviet leadership were genuinely afraid that the course of events in Poland might lead to its detachment from the Soviet bloc; this was also indicated by the course of talks in the Belvedere Palace in Warsaw. The refusal to receive the CPSU delegation before the opening of the Eighth Plenum was not only perceived as insulting, but seemed to confirm the worst misgivings of Soviet leaders (Khrushchev 1999, p. 235; Talbott 1976, p. 227).

The visit of the Soviet delegation started with an expression of hostility by Khrushchev. As Gomułka reported it, 'Khrushchev first greeted, above all, comrade Rokossovskii and the generals [the Soviet generals from the Northern Group of the Troops of the Soviet Army located in Poland—KP], underlining—"these are the people on whom I rely"'. Turning to us, he said [in Russian]: "the treacherous activity

<sup>12</sup>Such a supposition is confirmed in works of A. Orekhov in which the author uses (although to a narrow extent) documents from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive (see Orekhov 1995; 2005a, pp. 169–171; 2005b, pp. 265–266).

<sup>13</sup>Speech delivered by Władysław Gomułka at the meeting with editors of the press on 29 October 1956 (see Mond 1962, p. 61).

<sup>14</sup>SSSR i Polsha (1996, p. 181). This telegram was sent to the central committees of the communist parties of China, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania and the GDR, and its content was conveyed (orally, through Soviet ambassadors) to leaders of the communist parties of France, Italy and Yugoslavia.

of comrade Ochab has become evident, this number won't pass here!" (Dudek *et al.* 2000, p. 216; Korzon 1996, p. 130; Gluchowski 1995, p. 40). The basic demand of the Soviet leadership was to postpone the Plenum; they also objected to the plan to remove 'a number of comrades who are supporters of a Polish–Soviet union, namely comrades Rokossovskii, [Zenon] Nowak, Mazur, Jóźwiak' from the Politburo' (Dudek *et al.* 2000, p. 216; Korzon 1996, p. 130; Gluchowski 1995, p. 40). Khrushchev reportedly threatened an active (in other accounts—brutal) intervention in Polish affairs.

After dramatic discussions, the majority of Politburo members proclaimed themselves against making concessions to satisfy the Soviet demands (Dudek *et al.* 2000, pp. 67–68).<sup>15</sup> At 10 o'clock when the Plenum was opened, Gomułka and a few of his close collaborators from the period before 1948 (Marian Sychalski, Zenon Kliszko and Ignacy Loga-Sowiński) were included in the composition of the Central Committee, and only after that were talks continued with the delegation of the Presidium of the CC of the CPSU. However, Ochab, who was opening the Plenum, did not allow elections to the new Politburo to take place before negotiations with the Russians started, as had been demanded by Pulavians, Helena Jaworska and Michalina Tatarówna. It would have been a flagrant challenge to the Kremlin leaders.

In the absence of any minutes or shorthand report on the Polish–Soviet talks at the Belvedere Palace it is not possible to reconstruct their course in detail. However, fragmentary notes taken by Gomułka and Zawadzki as well as later accounts render it possible to make an attempt to present standpoints taken by both parties.<sup>16</sup> In the light of these sources it seems that Zbigniew Brzeziński was right when he drew up the hypothesis 'that the Soviet delegation didn't go to Warsaw with a clear recognition of the situation or a ready program that they intended to impose on the Poles, but only with a bunch of certain claims' (Brzeziński 1960, 1964, p. 218).

<sup>15</sup>During the discussion the following were against postponing the Eighth Plenum: Gomułka, Gierek, Roman Nowak, Rapacki, Stawiński, Jędrzychowski, Ochab and, surprisingly, Zenon Nowak. In favour of concessions were Rokossovskii, Jóźwiak, Dworakowski and Chełchowski. Zawadzki, basically supporting Gomułka's standpoint, expressed himself in favour of moderate concessions. In the minutes of the Politburo meeting Cyrankiewicz's opinion was not mentioned.

<sup>16</sup>An official report of the talks was submitted by Aleksander Zawadzki on 20 October at the CC Plenum (*Nowe Drogi*, 10, 1956, pp. 17–18). The published version of that account is different from the record in the verbatim minutes of the Plenum, although it does not seem that the speaker's thoughts were misrepresented on purpose (however, one should note that other 'sensitive' speeches—including Gomułka's final speech—were censored in the published materials from the Plenum). Zawadzki's speech was simply discordant to such an extent that it required thorough editing. Notes taken by Gomułka and Zawadzki were published in Werblan (1995, pp. 105–111). For their English translation see: Gluchowski (1995, pp. 41–43). The most comprehensive account of the talks in the Belvedere Palace was given by Gomułka in his conversation with Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai in January 1957 (Paczkowski 1998, pp. 5–12). This was published in English by Gluchowski (1995, pp. 43–45). In this article I refer to another, more detailed version of this document, which was authorised by Gomułka (Werblan 1997, pp. 119–144). Moreover, Gomułka referred to the content of his talks with Khrushchev during the meeting with higher officers of the Army on 27 October 1956 (see note 17) and two days later at the meeting with press editors (see note 13). Another important account of the Belvedere Palace talks can be found in Roman Zambrowski's recollections (1996, pp. 137–143). Minutes of the talks drawn by the Soviet side are believed to be kept in the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation. They have not been released to researchers so far.



The talks were held in a tone of brutal sincerity. Gomułka said later

diplomats have not arrived here. Here arrived the leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to talk with the leaders of the Polish United Workers' Party. And we told each other the truth, face to face: what they think of us and what we think about their moves.<sup>17</sup>

Khrushchev recalled that 'from our side we made comments which were not of a conciliatory nature: we were pouring oil on the flames' (Talbot 1976, p. 228; Khrushchev 1999, p. 236). Russian grievances pertained first of all to the fact that the planned political and personal changes were not agreed upon with them and that they were not informed by the Polish leaders about the situation in Poland (and apparently that was the essence of Ochab's 'betrayal'). They accused the Polish leaders of tolerating anti-Soviet propaganda, and during the talks they submitted evidence in the form of cuttings from the Polish press. They were of the opinion that there was a threat of a loss of power by the Polish communists, which constituted a danger for the military interests of the Soviet Union because of the strategic location of Poland between the USSR and GDR.

Among Soviet claims the top priority had been given to the issue of the planned dismissal from the Polish leadership of comrades who 'in the eyes of the [Polish] nation, are considered supporters of the friendship with the Soviet Union' (Werblan 1995, pp. 105–111; Gluchowski 1995, p. 42). They demanded that no changes be made to the composition of the Politburo, with the exception of including Gomułka. The issue of leaving Rokossovskii within the Polish leadership was acutely emphasised. The plans to remove him were perceived as an attack against the Polish–Soviet alliance. The Polish delegation members justified personal changes in the leadership of the party by the necessity of reaching a unified political line, which had not been possible with the existing personal composition for a long time. Gomułka argued that the existing Politburo was not in a position to control the crisis situation, and that the comrades who had not been reappointed had lost confidence of the party masses.

The basic line of Gomułka's argument was founded on a statement that 'the assessment of the situation in the country is only our business, that we have a better sense of the public feelings and can evaluate them better than an outsider. [...] This is why we said: we assume responsibility for the situation'.<sup>18</sup> Assuring the Soviet delegation that the planned political changes would strengthen the ties between Poland and the Soviet Union and socialist bloc rather than weaken them, Gomułka emphasised that Poland was not less but more keen on the alliance and good relations with the Soviet Union than the Soviet Union was keen on good relations with Poland. In his memoirs Khrushchev admitted that this argument, and the earnestness with which it was presented, impressed him greatly (Khrushchev 1999, p. 239; Talbot 1976, pp. 233–234). Explaining the background of the crisis, Gomułka also presented Polish

<sup>17</sup>Przemówienie Tow. Władysława Gomułki—Wiesława wygłoszone w dniu 27 października 1956 r. na ogólnokrajowej naradzie aktywu partyjnego Wojska Polskiego' Warsaw, 1956, (mimeographed). Khrushchev in his memoirs used almost the same expression as Gomułka: 'a harsh conversation was going on, without diplomacy' (Khrushchev 1999, p. 236).

<sup>18</sup>Przemówienie Tow. Władysława Gomułki ...', p. 5.

grievances concerning problems in Polish–Soviet relations in the past. He raised the issue of the necessity to prosecute Soviet advisers in public security organs and withdrawing Soviet officers from Polish military forces. He also mentioned the issue of war reparations, compensation for coal delivered to the USSR at discounted prices and the outstanding payments for Soviet transport transit through the territory of Poland. However, the most important demand of the Polish side was the request to stop Soviet military forces marching towards Warsaw.

*Soviet military intervention*

The talks at the Belvedere Palace were held ‘with a gun on the table’. Before noon messages started arriving about movements towards Warsaw of units of the Northern Group of the Soviet military forces stationed in Poland. Polish negotiators in the Belvedere were informed about the situation on an on-going basis by Colonel Zbigniew Paszkowski, a liaison officer of the Internal Security Corps, who was on site. In response to the request for explanations, the Soviet leaders persistently claimed that the manoeuvres were planned well in advance. Gomułka later recorded that

we told the Soviet comrades that irrespective of whether that was true or not, in the eyes of Polish society these ‘manoeuvres’ will be perceived as a pressure on the [Polish] government and the party, and we categorically demanded cessation of the military forces’ movements and withdrawal of armoured units to their bases. Then comrade Khrushchev instructed Marshal Rokossovskii who participated in the talks to convey an order to Marshal Konev to cease these manoeuvres, which however did not happen (Werblan 1997, p. 126; Gluchowski 1995, p. 44).<sup>19</sup>

Faced with no response from the Soviet side there were subsequently a few more firm interventions by the Polish delegation pertaining to the march of troops. According to Zawadzki’s notes, as late as at 9 pm Gomułka was still vigorously protesting against the movements of the Soviet armoured columns.

Two Soviet army divisions stationed in Poland participated in the march on Warsaw—the armoured and the mechanised divisions. They started from their bases in Borne-Sulinowo in Pomerania and near Żagań and Bolesławiec in Lower Silesia. Based on the register of road damage caused by the troops, prepared later by local authorities, one may roughly reconstruct the routes of their march.<sup>20</sup> The main Soviet forces arrived

<sup>19</sup>It is symptomatic that Polish Minister of Defence Marshal Rokossovskii took orders directly from Khrushchev. According to the latter’s memoirs: ‘at that time Rokossovskii was more obedient to us than to his own [Polish] government’ (Khrushchev 1999, p. 582).

<sup>20</sup>Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMSZ), Collection 7, fascicle 6, file 51. Registers of road damages were prepared in Spring 1957 by regional offices for public roads management in order to submit damage claims to the Soviet Union. The amount of losses in connection with the necessary repair of roads and bridges was assessed at 36.8 million zlotys, while the damages caused by the Soviet ‘caterpillar vehicles’ in private and state owned properties at 15.3 million zlotys. The first to locate and cite these road damages registers was Robert Łoś in his unpublished doctoral thesis ‘Październik 1956 r. w perspektywie stosunków polsko-radzieckich’ [‘October 1956 from the Perspective of Polish–Soviet Relations’] (University of Łódź, 1993). Beside tabular lists of the damaged stretches of roads, maps of damages were also prepared in the scale of 1:300,000. However, my search for these maps in the archives was unsuccessful.



FIGURE 1. SOVIET TROOPS' MARCH TO WARSAW IN OCTOBER 1956

in the vicinity of Łódź and of Włocławek, where probably late in the evening on 19 October they were instructed to stop their march (some troops went even further—to Łowicz and Sochaczew). It means that troops from Silesia marched 300 km, and from Pomerania about 250 km in a period of 12–15 hours. When they stopped, they were located no more than 150 km from the capital of Poland. Early on 20 October a stray Soviet communications battalion was seen in a suburb of Warsaw.<sup>21</sup>

It is known that ships from the Soviet Baltic Fleet arrived near the Bay of Gdańsk. Also ships of the fleet from the Świnoujście base, under the command of Soviet forces in the GDR, were put in readiness. Soviet aircraft patrolled the Polish coast from air-force divisions located in Poland (Poksiński 1992). According to General Tadeusz Pióro, the then Polish representative in the Combined Command of Warsaw Pact's Military Forces, a state of increased readiness was introduced in the Belarusian, Kiev

<sup>21</sup>Włodzimierz Muś, 'Wspomnienia dowódcy KBW' ['Memoirs of Commander of Internal Security Corps'], unpublished manuscript, Military History Institute, Warsaw, IV/102/39, p. 426.

and Carpathian Military Districts (Pióro 1994, p. 247).<sup>22</sup> Probably the same held true for the Soviet military forces in the GDR: Soviet armoured units were moved towards the Polish–German border (Kozik 1998, pp. 58–61; Anderson 2000, p. 123). In Ślubice a Soviet tank squad even tried to cross the bridge over the Oder.<sup>23</sup>

An obvious question is whether the Kremlin leaders were really ready to solve the Polish crisis by armed intervention. The scale of Soviet military preparations indicates that this option was at least seriously considered. However, before asking such a question perhaps one needs first to ascertain that the intervention was already on course when the Soviet armoured columns marched to Warsaw. However, as long as the Soviet tanks did not enter the capital of Poland, anything was yet possible. Before their flight to Warsaw, the Soviet leaders probably notified the Czechoslovak, East German and Chinese communist parties about their intended intervention in Poland.<sup>24</sup> It seems however, that the final decision was not taken about that issue. The fact that the Soviet delegation arrived in itself only leads to the conclusion that they considered the possibility of attaining their goals by way of persuasion, pressure or brutal threat and without resorting to the force of arms. At least they wanted to examine the situation on site.

It seems that most probably the Soviet leaders had different opinions on what solution should be implemented for the Polish issue. Probably it was not only by mere chance that the delegation consisted of the rigid Stalinists Molotov and Kaganovich as well as the more flexible Khrushchev and Mikoyan. In the light of what is known about the Kremlin decision-making process during the Hungarian crisis which took place a few days later, it seems possible that they tried to trigger both options simultaneously: that their commencement of the armed intervention was accompanied by an attempt to find a political solution (Rainer 1996; Kramer 1996/1997b; Granville 2004; Orekhova *et al.* 1998). In Hungary the plan to potentially ‘restore order’ in the country by Special Soviet Army Corps stationed there was devised as early as July 1956. Thanks to that it was possible to bring the Soviet troops to Budapest on 24 October 1956, several hours after the orders were given. Similar plans—especially after the experience of the June 1956 Poznań workers’ revolt—could have been made pertaining to Poland. However, it is not known what decisions were taken, and when they were taken in Moscow, and what orders were given to the Soviet units marching to Warsaw.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Aleksandr Orekhov writes that Soviet Minister of Defence Marshal Georgii Zhukov ordered the increased readiness in the Soviet military forces in Poland, as well as the Baltic Fleet and troops in the Baltic Military District not later than on 18 October 1956. However, he does not cite any archival source of this information (see Orekhov 2005a, pp. 173–174).

<sup>23</sup>Włodzimierz Muś, ‘Wspomnienia dowódcy KBW’, p. 417.

<sup>24</sup>Such information was conveyed by Mao Zedong to Stanisław Kiryłuk, the Polish ambassador in Beijing, in a conversation held on 3 December 1956 (Werblan 1996, p. 127). In the aforementioned telegram from the Presidium of the CC CPSU to the ‘fraternal parties’ of 18 October no intention of an armed intervention was mentioned, but they did inform them about sending a delegation to Warsaw. One cannot exclude the possibility that they informed the leaderships of the CCP, CzCP and SED about the decision to start up military actions by a separate telegram.

<sup>25</sup>According to General Włodzimierz Muś, the commander of the Soviet detachment that arrived in the suburbs of Warsaw early on 20 October, ‘explained that in compliance with the order he came to Warsaw, where, as he was told, a counter-revolution broke out in which several dozen Soviet soldiers were killed. They had to hurry to rescue the workers of Warsaw’ (Muś, ‘Wspomnienia dowódcy KBW’, p. 426).

The sources currently available do not make it possible to ascertain for sure what intentions accompanied the decision of taking the Soviet troops out of the barracks: whether it was ‘only’ a form of brutal pressure, as Edward Ochab indicated in his interview with Teresa Torńska, or whether a full scale intervention had already started and was—fortunately—called off (Torńska 1985, p. 62; 1987). The borderline between these two options is unclear. Demonstration of power could easily transform into intervention, and the intervention could be stopped at the last minute. Considering these issues, one should also remember the instability, incoherence and unpredictability of Soviet policy at that time. Decisions were probably taken hastily and based on incomplete information, and even based on false premises. Because of all of that, even consistent conclusions based on an analysis of facts may prove to be misleading without a full knowledge of the course of the decision-making process in the Kremlin during the days before the Eighth Plenum of the Central Committee of the PUWP.

*The Chinese veto*

The Soviet leaders probably postponed their final decision to use armed forces in Poland, while waiting for a response from ‘fraternal parties’. Prague and Berlin approved the Soviet proposal but an unexpected objection was raised by Beijing.

A week later Mao Zedong informed Gomułka through the Polish ambassador Stanisław Kiryłuk that

between 19 and 22 October the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party received a series of messages from the Politburo of the CPSU indicating that the Soviet comrades did not approve the programme of the Eighth Plenum of the PUWP and their attitude *vis-à-vis* changes in Poland was negative. The Politburo of the CCP addressed the Politburo of the CPSU with request to revise their standpoint (Werblan 1996, p. 125).

In subsequent conversation with the Polish ambassador, on 3 December, Mao added that

the Soviet comrades asked the leadership of the CCP for approval of the use of armed forces [in Poland]. Mao said that the CCP categorically opposed the Soviet plans and immediately sent their delegation headed by Liu Shaoqui to Moscow in order to present the Chinese standpoint in a direct way (Werblan 1996, p. 127).

In a tense situation, when Soviet tanks were positioned several hours’ march from Warsaw, it was important when exactly Khrushchev got to know about the Chinese objection. Regrettably, no archival sources have been made available in Moscow or Beijing yet to answer this question directly but some Chinese memoirs are helpful. According to the recollections of Wu Lengxi, who was the director of the Xinhua News Agency in 1956 and who participated in meetings of the Chinese leadership, Mao Zedong convened the CCP Politburo Standing Committee to discuss the Polish crisis in the afternoon of 20 October (Lengxi 1999, pp. 34–35).<sup>26</sup> After the CCP leaders unanimously decided to oppose the Soviet military intervention in Poland,

<sup>26</sup>I am grateful to Lorenz Lüthi for sharing with me his working translation of Wu Lengxi’s memoirs.

Ambassador Pavel Yudin was summoned to Mao's headquarters. According to Wu Lengxi's account, Mao Zedong allegedly warned Khrushchev through the Soviet diplomat that in the case of Soviet military intervention in Poland the Chinese party and government 'would be vehement in its protest against it' (Jian 2001, p. 147). Yudin reportedly conveyed this message to Moscow by telephone without delay (Zhe 1998, pp. 551–552; Jian 2001, p. 147).

In Wu Lengxi's memoirs there are, however, some chronological inaccuracies. Most dates of events described seem to be one day 'late'. Also the conversation of Mao and Yudin was recorded by Wu Lengxi under the date of 20 October (after 7 pm), although the information referred to by Wu, arriving from Warsaw to the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, indicated that it could have taken place a day before. (Alternatively, perhaps the difference of dates results from the seven hours' difference of time zones between Warsaw and Beijing.) So one cannot preclude the possibility that Khrushchev got to know about the Chinese objection as early as during his stay in Warsaw and that it influenced his decision to cease the advance of the Soviet armoured columns. Such an opinion has been held for a long time by Andrzej Werblan, who participated in Polish–Chinese contacts as a politician after 1956. He indicates that the breakthrough in the Belvedere Palace talks took place after the break during which Khrushchev probably communicated with Moscow by telephone and he could have heard about the Chinese objection against intervention then (Werblan 1991). Although there is no doubt that the CCP supported the Polish changes after October 1956, a hypothesis that the Chinese veto was a direct cause of cessation of the Soviet intervention still needs confirmation based on Russian and Chinese documents.<sup>27</sup> The Soviet sources currently known (mentioned below) bring another probable interpretation which would also require verification.

Gomułka's firm attitude and his declarations of willingness to create friendly relations with the Soviet Union undoubtedly was of great importance to the result of the Belvedere Palace talks. It also seems that the Polish delegation, notwithstanding the conflict between its members, maintained a relatively unified standpoint. There was no recognisable split which could be treated by the Soviet leaders as an argument in favour of intervention.

#### *Extricating from the crisis*

Beside the telegram to the Central Committees of the communist parties of the Soviet bloc previously quoted, which expressed a general concern about the development of the situation in Poland, other Russian primary sources have not been identified so far that could shed light on the premises and content of decisions taken by the Kremlin before the beginning of the Eighth Plenum of the CC PUWP in Poland. We do not

<sup>27</sup>It is interesting to note that four years later, during the acute conflict with the CPSU, the Chinese made out a 'bill' to Polish communists for the assistance granted in 1956. During the meeting of the communist parties in Moscow in November 1960 Liu Shaoqui said talking to Gomułka: 'today similar kind of difficulties as those of 1956 between Poland and the Soviet Union arose between the Soviet Union and China, and also Albania. As we helped you in 1956, you should help us now to eliminate these difficulties. [...] Just think what would have happened if the Chinese Communist Party had supported the Soviet Union in 1956 against Poland?' (Michnik, 1978, p. 122).

know the course of the discussion of the Soviet leadership on 18 October, preceding the dispatch of the delegation headed by Khrushchev to Warsaw; nor do we know the arguments used in it. Attempts made to explain the motives and the course of the Soviet political and military intervention undertaken in Poland still have to be based on indirect sources and conclusions drawn from the analysis of facts.

However, to some extent the working notes of the meetings of the Presidium of the CPSU Central Committee offer an insight into the course of the discussion and the Kremlin decision-making process after 19 October that resulted in their giving up an armed-force solution in Poland, and led to their gradual extrication from the crisis by mutual agreement. Admittedly, the notes from the meetings of the Presidium of the CC CPSU, handwritten by Vladimir Malin, head of the General Department of the CC CPSU, were indeed of an auxiliary, working nature. They are very laconic and contain fragments of statements, sometimes nothing but single words. Verbatim transcripts of the CC CPSU Presidium meetings were not made then, and formal minutes were limited to a general record of decisions taken. Nevertheless, the ‘Malin notes’ are a capital—and perhaps the only—source revealing the Kremlin decision-making process as well as existing differences of opinions and disputes held within the Soviet leadership. Moreover, they contain unique records from meetings for which minutes were not taken at all, or serve as evidence of some decisions that were taken without being mentioned in the formal minutes. An example is the decision of 23 October on the beginning of the first Soviet intervention in Hungary, which was not mentioned in the formal minutes of that meeting, probably because—in the face of Mikoyan’s objection—it was not taken unanimously (Fursenko *et al.* 2004, pp. 176–177; Orekhova *et al.* 1998, pp. 356–357; Kramer 1996/1997a, pp. 388–389).

One may often encounter an opinion that the Polish–Soviet negotiations of 19 October were concluded successfully. It is argued that they produced a solution to the conflict and the return of the Soviet troops to barracks was completed over time, at a pace that depended mainly on technical reasons (Rykowski & Władysław 1989, p. 239; Eisler & Kupiecki 1992, p. 42). This opinion was strengthened by official pronouncements that were made later by Polish authorities in order to set public feelings at rest.<sup>28</sup> In reality however, the situation continued to be serious.

There are indications that the talks at the Belvedere Palace ended with no clear conclusion. No essential agreement was reached, and only some alleviation of tension was achieved. It is hard to say to what extent Khrushchev and other members of the Soviet delegation were convinced by an argument that the new Polish leadership headed by Gomułka would assume responsibility to control the situation. Military intervention was ceased, but not revoked. By the end of the talks Khrushchev

<sup>28</sup>In the talk with Zhou Enlai on 11 January 1957 Gomułka openly admitted: ‘we did not want to present to society, and even to party organisations, the full and real course of the Soviet intervention in our home affairs, because that would have promoted anti-Soviet and anti-Russian feelings which were already very inflamed in Polish society. That could have only been done in favour of the reactionary movement and would have done harm to the interests of Poland. Therefore our public and intra-party presentation of that intervention verged almost on a justification of it. We presented the unwanted “visit” of the Soviet delegation as a step dictated by the best will of the leadership of the CPSU, and by their concern for the mutual security of our countries and all the countries of the Warsaw Pact’ (Werblan 1997, p. 127).

warned—as Gomułka reported his words—that ‘irrespective of our [of the Poles] standpoint they would feel forced to intervene should Poland intend to leave the bloc of socialist countries’ (Werblan 1997, p. 126).<sup>29</sup> At the break of dawn on 20 October the Soviet delegation flew back to Moscow, but the Soviet tanks remained in the positions they occupied when the order was made for them to stop, ready to resume their advance on Warsaw.

After the Soviet delegation’s arrival in Moscow, on the same day a meeting was held of the Presidium of the CC CPSU, at which information on the talks held in Warsaw was presented. The first sentence from the note recorded at that meeting by Vladimir Malin sounds rather firm: ‘there is one possible solution—to put an end to what is there in Poland’ (SSSR i Polska 1996, p. 182).<sup>30</sup> However, it seems that they decided to postpone taking a final decision in connection with the situation in Poland. They waited for the results of the Eighth Plenum in Warsaw, and above all, for the results of elections to the Polish Politburo. The position of Rokossovskii was at stake here, since he was clearly perceived as a guarantor of a favourable—from Moscow’s point of view—development of events. They commented that ‘if they decide to keep Rokossovskii, it is best to wait patiently for the time being’ (SSSR i Polska 1996, p. 182).<sup>31</sup> As a result of the visit to Warsaw the evaluation of the situation in Poland probably slightly softened, since the Presidium of the CC CPSU became very critical of the value of information conveyed by the Soviet embassy in Warsaw. Namely they noted ‘a very serious mistake made by ambassador comrade Ponomarenko in the evaluation of Ochab and Gomułka’,<sup>32</sup> and two days later at the Presidium meeting it was also said that the ‘ambassador was informing us about perfunctory facts’ (SSSR i Polska 1996, pp. 182, 186).

However, the military option remained valid, and probably further preparations in this regard were continued. This is what may be deduced—if it is at all possible to attempt to draw conclusions based on such a laconic record—from the following fragment of the ‘Malin note’ from the CC CPSU Presidium meeting on 20 October: ‘Manoeuvres. Prepare a document. Form a committee’ (SSSR i Polska 1996, p. 182). It is, perhaps, a trace of preparations that were being made for replacing Gomułka and his supporters by the Moscow people, should the course of events in Poland take an unfavourable turn and the armed intervention prove to be indispensable. Rumours which were circulating in Poland at that time suggested that a potential replacement

<sup>29</sup>In another version of the minutes of the Gomułka–Zhou Enlai talks Khrushchev’s statement was recorded in a version quoted by Gomułka: ‘Whether you want it or not, our opinion is that we will have to start an intervention at yours’ [Modern Records Archive (hereafter: AAN), CC PUWP, XIA/30, p. 55].

<sup>30</sup>Note also Mark Kramer’s translation of this sentence: ‘there’s only one way out—put an end to what is in Poland’ (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 388). According to the account of the trip to Poland that Mikoyan dictated in 1960, immediately after the delegation’s arrival to Moscow Khrushchev decided that Soviet troops would enter Warsaw. This decision was subsequently reversed at the CC CPSU Presidium meeting. Mikoyan’s account, however, does not sound plausible at this point (see Taubman 2003, p. 294).

<sup>31</sup>In Mark Kramer’s translation: ‘if Rokossovskii is kept, we won’t have to press things for a while’ (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 388).

<sup>32</sup>In Mark Kramer’s translation: ‘the ambassador, Cde. Ponomarenko, was grossly mistaken in his assessment of Ochab and Gomułka’ (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 388).



for Gomułka was PUWP Politburo member Franciszek Mazur, who was staying in the Soviet Union during the days of the crisis.

But for the time being the CC CPSU Presidium postponed their decision on further measures while waiting for the results of the Eighth Plenum. They also recognised that convening the ‘fraternal parties’ together, in order to discuss the problem, was desirable. They decided to ‘invite to Moscow representatives of communist parties of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, the GDR, Bulgaria, and perhaps to send a CC representative to China in order to provide information’ (SSSR i Polska 1996).<sup>33</sup> The word ‘perhaps’ in the context of consultations with the CCP seems surprising. It implies the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU did not know at the meeting on 20 October about the firm Chinese objection against the Soviet intervention in Poland yet. Otherwise they would have probably immediately initiated talks with the Chinese.

The CC CPSU Presidium meeting held on 20 October was of an introductory, and above all, of a reporting nature.<sup>34</sup> At the end it was decided ‘to acknowledge the information as provided’ and ‘to consider the issues raised’ (SSSR i Polska 1996, p. 182).<sup>35</sup> Next day the discussion continued on the issue of the Polish crisis. The fundamental question of whether to resume the intervention or attempt to solve the conflict by political measures was not solved. This question of the alternatives was set forth at the beginning of the Presidium meeting on 21 October: ‘what line is to be taken: (a) exercise influence and monitor events, b) or shall we choose the way of intervention’ (SSSR i Polska 1996, p. 182). Unfortunately, in a note from that meeting the course of the discussion was not recorded so we do not know the opinions expressed by its participants, and we do not know what arguments were taken into account. Malin recorded only the conclusion reached by Khrushchev: ‘taking the circumstances into account, we should give up the armed intervention. Show indulgence. (All agree)’ (SSSR i Polska 1996, p. 183).<sup>36</sup>

Against this background, of the intention expressed on the previous day ‘to put an end to what is there in Poland’, Khrushchev’s motion and the consensus on it among the Presidium members is surprising. What caused such a sudden turn? Was the decision to give up armed intervention a result of a thorough analysis of all the ‘pros’ and ‘cons’, whose content is unknown to us, or did ‘the circumstances’ mentioned by Khrushchev imply the emergence of some new facts? It would be difficult to think how the situation in Poland was essentially different from what it was the day before. The Eighth Plenum had not been concluded yet and the results of the elections of the CC PUWP Politburo, which were announced late in the evening, could not have been

<sup>33</sup>In Mark Kramer’s translation: ‘we should invite to Moscow representatives from the Communist parties of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, the GDR, and Bulgaria. Perhaps we should send CC officials to China for informational purposes’ (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 388).

<sup>34</sup>The relevant point of this meeting’s agenda bore a heading: ‘Briefing of the CPSU Delegation about the Trip to Warsaw’ (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 388).

<sup>35</sup>In Mark Kramer’s translation: ‘take notice of information. Think through the questions that have been raised’ (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 388).

<sup>36</sup>In Mark Kramer’s translation: ‘taking account of the circumstances we should refrain from military intervention. We need to display patience. (Everyone agrees with this)’ (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 388).

known during the Presidium's meeting. Moreover, the fact that Rokossovskii was not elected was a disadvantageous event for Moscow. Another event changing the whole scene could have been information about the Chinese veto against intervention, if it reached the Kremlin only then.

The structure of the 'Malin note' of 21 October indicates that the Presidium's meeting consisted of two parts. Khrushchev's quoted statement was apparently delivered to open the second part of the meeting. In the first part, beside the presumed discussion on intervention, they were discussing the issue of a meeting with the 'fraternal parties' and an invitation telegram was drafted. Compared to the note of the previous day, one is struck by the haste in which they started organising the meeting. It was considered 'necessary to convene a meeting together with the GDR, China, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary' and it was suggested that the meeting be held as soon as possible: on Tuesday, 23 October, or on Wednesday, 24 October at the latest (SSSR i Polsha 1996, p. 183). Although in the 'Malin note' a meeting of all the parties is mentioned, ultimately texts of two telegrams were approved. A separate telegram was sent to the Central Committee of the CCP: 'in connection with the situation in Poland we would like to exchange views. We would like to ask you, if that is possible, to let your representative arrive on Tuesday – Wednesday—we are sending our Tu-104 plane for that purpose' (SSSR i Polsha 1996, p. 185).<sup>37</sup>

The decision, influenced by 'the circumstances', taken on 21 October on giving up armed intervention, as well as the decision to hold separate talks with a hastily invited Chinese delegation (reference to that is also made in a note from the Presidium meeting of 23 October) may indicate that it was at this time that the Kremlin got to know about the Chinese attitude *vis-à-vis* the crisis in Poland. Such a hypothesis obviously requires confirmation.<sup>38</sup> Irrespective of when the Soviet leaders finally got to know about the Chinese support for the changes in Poland and their objection to intervention, one may assume that it was the reason for the Soviet decision to hold a separate meeting with representatives from Beijing. European communist parties unconditionally accepted the CPSU line, while one could expect polemics in talks with the Chinese.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup>The telegram sent to other 'fraternal' parties had the following content: 'in connection with the situation in Poland we would like to exchange our views. We submit a proposal to organise a top level meeting in Moscow on Tuesday, or on Wednesday at the latest. Such proposal was also submitted to other fraternal parties. Please notify us of your opinion'.

<sup>38</sup>During the talks on 11 January 1957, Zhou Enlai told Gomułka that the CCP supported the PUWP's stance on 21 October 1956. This may indicate that Mao's conversation with Ambassador Yudin took place rather on 20 or 21 October (see Werblan 1997, p. 132).

<sup>39</sup>In a recently published article, Chinese scholar Shen Zihua argues that the Chinese factor played no role whatsoever in solving the crisis in Polish–Soviet relations, as Gomułka and Khrushchev did not know about China's standpoint during their talks at the Belvedere Palace, nor did the CCP have information about Soviet military intervention in Poland at that time. Although Shen Zihua may be right that Khrushchev might not have known about Beijing's veto yet when he ordered Soviet tanks to stop their march towards Warsaw during the night of 19 October 1956, he does not take into account that the ultimate decision to give up the armed intervention in Poland was taken at the Kremlin as late as on 21 October, and that by that time the Soviet leaders most probably had learned about the Chinese position. The 'Malin notes' strongly indicate that Beijing's veto against intervention did influence Soviet decision-making *vis-à-vis* Poland in October 1956 (see Zihua 2005, pp. 59–61).

The ‘Malin notes’ indicate that on 21 October the Kremlin chose a political solution to the crisis in its relations with Poland. In contrast to the alternative presented at the beginning of the Presidium meeting, the option which prevailed was ‘to exercise influence and monitor events’, although it was not a fully grounded opinion. The situation in Poland continued to be unstable, and the course of events was hard to predict. Malin recorded polemics between members of the Presidium of the CC CPSU pertaining to the preparation of information on the situation in Poland and the line of action to be assumed by the Soviet leadership for the meeting with representatives of ‘fraternal parties’. Molotov and Kaganovich were in favour of preparing such information while Khrushchev and Bulganin thought that it was too early to formulate an evaluation like that. ‘[One should] wait till the resolutions are taken by the Plenum of the CC [PUWP]’, argued Bulganin (SSSR i Polsha 1996, p. 184). Ultimately they decided to draft theses for Presidium members’ use only. However, they considered it possible to publish a press communiqué on the Plenum of the CC PUWP. It was published in *Pravda* the next day. Until then the Soviet press had not covered the current events in Poland.

The course of the meeting of the Presidium of the CC CPSU on 22 October is not known. It is only known that during that meeting they approved a text of the letter to the CC PUWP on the issue of Soviet KGB advisers in Poland. The main themes of that letter were already agreed upon the previous day and the task of drafting it was turned over to Mikoyan, Zhukov, Shepilov, Serov and Konev. The letter brought the first concession to Polish claims. Making reference to talks held by Ochab in Moscow in September, Khrushchev, who signed the letter, informed Gomułka that the Presidium of the CC CPSU had decided to recall all Soviet advisers from Polish security organs, and at the same time he suggested establishing an official KGB representative within the Committee for Public Security of the Polish People’s Republic. This was in line with Soviet thinking of the time. Two days previously, on 20 October, the decision had been taken to recall KGB advisers from Hungary, although the Hungarian leaders did not make such a request (Orekhova *et al.* 1998, p. 315). However, one step further was taken in relation to Poland. In the second paragraph of the letter of 22 October the Soviet leaders expressed their consent to withdraw Soviet army officers from the Polish military forces:

the CC CPSU believes that if in the opinion of the CC PUWP there is no longer a need for the remaining Soviet officers and general officers on the staff of the Polish Army, then we agree in advance to their being recalled. We ask you to prepare the proposals concerning how this could be solved when the delegation from the Politburo of the CC PUWP arrives in Moscow.<sup>40</sup>

Probably the telephone conversation held by the two leaders on 23 October was in connection with Gomułka’s receipt of that letter. In response to Gomułka’s repeated request Khrushchev promised at that time that the Soviet troops would return to their bases within two days (Gomułka 1957, p. 59). It seems that the Kremlin had started to slowly accustom themselves to the changes taking place in Poland. A minimum

<sup>40</sup>AAN, CC PUWP, XIA/71, p. 177. On the letter there is a handwritten note by Gomułka ‘Delivered in person by comrade Ponomarenko’; see SSSR i Polsha (1996, pp. 185–186) and Gluchowski (1995, p. 46).

acceptance of the political programme presented by Gomułka was indicated by the decision taken on the same day to send the text of Gomułka's speech and the resolution of the CC PUWP Eighth Plenum—together with a letter on the situation in Poland—to CPSU regional party organisations.<sup>41</sup> Gomułka had begun to gain the Kremlin's confidence. As Malin recorded on 23 October, they decided to 'assume an attitude in favour of contacting' Gomułka (SSSR i Polsha 1996, p. 186).

On 24 October delegations of 'fraternal parties' gathered together at the meeting in Moscow. First, all members of the Presidium of the CC CPSU met the Chinese delegation, headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. As Malin recorded, Liu Shaoqi began the talks with confirmation of the 'fundamental principle' that the Soviet Union is the only centre of the Socialist bloc, and expressed approval of the steps taken by the Soviet leadership with respect to Poland. At the same time, however, he pointed out 'some shortcomings' in the relations of the USSR with other socialist countries, which 'one should remove' (SSSR i Polsha 1996, pp. 187–188). This reservation represents the essence of the message which the Chinese wanted to convey to the Russians. The subsequent course of the meeting, recorded by Malin as well as scarce Chinese sources, indicates that the focal point of the talks was a critique of the USSR's 'great power chauvinism'. Liu Shaoqi criticised previous examples of the Soviet Union imposing its will on the 'fraternal parties' as well as—in many cases—groundless and overhasty interferences in the internal affairs of the countries belonging to the communist bloc and the infringement of their sovereignty. Co-operation in international organisations was also structured improperly, and other socialist countries were forced to accept Soviet proposals uncritically. Such an incorrect model of relations within the socialist bloc was, in the Chinese opinion, one of the essential causes of the crisis in relations with Poland and Hungary and it required an immediate change (SSSR i Polsha 1996; Jian 2001, pp. 152–153; Zhihua 2005, pp. 66–68; Chang & Halliday 2005, pp. 421–423; Lüthi forthcoming).

The content of the Soviet–Chinese talks which lasted all of that week until 31 October is not known in detail, but the fact itself that the Chinese delegation was headed by the two closest collaborators of Mao Zedong (beside Zhou Enlai) indicates the importance attached to these talks by the Chinese. The Soviet Union's involvement in the crisis in Poland and Hungary created a unique chance for China to strengthen its position in the communist bloc. The Kremlin leaders found themselves in a situation that forced them to take their Chinese ally's opinion into account. Supporting Poland, and initially also Hungary, China initiated a game in which attainment of an equal-rights position in relation to the Soviet Union was at stake. Liu Shaoqi used as an example the unjustified critique of the Communist Party of Japan openly expressed by the Soviet Union some time before without consulting Mao Zedong, which may even indicate that China aspired to the role of the only 'game holder' in the communist movement in Asia (SSSR i Polsha 1996, p. 188).

<sup>41</sup>A ciphered telegram from the Polish embassy in Moscow on 1 December confirms that this decision was implemented: 'we received information in the embassy that for some time comrade Wiesław's [Gomułka's] speech at the Eighth Plenum and resolutions are being read in regional committees of the CPSU for narrow groups of activists, without any comment nor discussion' (AMSZ, Telegrams Collection, fascicle 50, file 638, p. 50).

Under the influence of talks with the Chinese delegation, and in connection with the critique of their ‘great power chauvinism’, which the Russians had to admit to a large extent, on 30 October the Soviet leadership issued a ‘Declaration by the Government of the USSR on the Principles of Development and Further Strengthening of Friendship and Cooperation between the Soviet Union and Other Socialist States’ (Zinner 1956, pp. 485–491). Although immediately violated by the second Soviet intervention in Hungary in November 1956, the declaration seemed to sanction a new political deal for the communist bloc. Based on it, relations between the countries of the bloc were to be grounded on principles of equal rights, respect for territorial integrity, state self-dependence and sovereignty, and non-interference in home affairs. Although the Russians rejected a proposal to include the principle of peaceful coexistence in the declaration—which would mean granting the communist countries a yet broader scope of autonomy—the proclamation was nevertheless a success for Chinese diplomacy. The game of strengthening China’s position *vis-à-vis* the USSR was accomplished successfully (Kuo 2001, pp. 99–103; Jian & Kuisong 1998, p. 264). After his return from the trip to Europe in 1957, Zhou Enlai wrote in his report prepared for Mao Zedong: ‘now the Soviet Union and China can sit down to discuss issues equally. Even if they [the Russians] have different ideas on certain issues, they must consult with us’ (Guang & Jian 1995/1996, p. 154).

In the afternoon of 24 October, the meeting of the Presidium of the CC CPSU was held at the Kremlin and attended by the leaders of the communist parties of the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria (the Hungarian delegation did not arrive, and a Romanian delegation was probably not invited). The SED was represented by Walter Ulbricht, Otto Grotewohl and Willi Stoph, the CzCP by Antonin Novotny, and the BCP by Todor Zhivkov, Anton Yugov and Georgy Damianov. Khrushchev informed the audience about the course of his visit to Warsaw and presented the Soviet line *vis-à-vis* Poland. Forming a very critical judgement of the attitude assumed by the Poles during the talks in the Belvedere Palace, and finding Gomułka’s arguments unconvincing, Khrushchev however expressed the opinion of the CC CPSU that in the case of Poland it was necessary to avoid nervousness and haste. ‘It is necessary to help the Polish comrades straighten out the party line and do everything to reinforce the union among Poland, the USSR, and the other people’s democracies’, stated Khrushchev, thus confirming his will to solve the conflict in relations with Poland in a political way (Kramer 1995, p. 53).<sup>42</sup> In spite of all reservations, the Kremlin decided to bet on Gomułka. Even the decision not to publish his speech at the Eighth Plenum in the Soviet press was, as Khrushchev explained, an expression of the will to ‘help Poland’. Otherwise they would have had to supplement Gomułka’s text with a polemical commentary, which they wanted to avoid.

During the meeting Khrushchev, as it seems, tried to mitigate the zeal shown by the leaders of the GDR and Czechoslovakia who were eager to ‘call Poland to order’. Malin recorded statements by Ulbricht and Novotny that the Poles ‘are opening the door for bourgeois ideology’ and that in Poland ‘after the Twentieth Congress [of the CPSU] the leadership slipped from their hands’ (SSSR i Polsha 1996, p. 187). German and Czech grievances, beside reservations of an ideological nature, were also founded

<sup>42</sup>These are notes from the meeting taken by Antonin Novotny’s secretary, Jan Svoboda.

on economic issues. As early as May 1956, at the session of the CMEA in Berlin, a dispute had arisen over the volume of exports of Polish coal to these countries. The Czech and German delegations (and also the Hungarian) demanded an increased supply, which the Polish side did not want to accept (Skrzypek 2002, pp. 375–377; 2005, pp. 47–50). The Czechs and the Germans hoped that the Moscow summit would bring a top-level solution to the problem of Polish coal, but the Soviet leader found it undesirable to exercise pressure on Poland on this issue and renew the dispute; moreover the Poles were not in a position to satisfy such expectations anyway. Khrushchev replied that the USSR would strive for achieving independence of supplies of coal from Poland in two or three years, and it seems that he recommended the same to Ulbricht and Novotny (Kramer 1995, p. 53).<sup>43</sup> He also said that the Soviet Union would probably grant Poland economic aid in the form of grain and loans.

Before the end of the October meeting with the ‘fraternal parties’, information was received on the content of Gomułka’s speech in Warsaw at a gigantic rally attended by several hundred thousand people on the afternoon of 24 October. The strong emphasis laid by Gomułka on the importance of the alliance and friendship of Poland with the Soviet Union, laying stress on the necessity of Soviet Army troops being stationed in Poland, as well as condemnation of any attempts of ‘anti-Soviet agitation’, all clearly met with Khrushchev’s approval. It was interpreted as confirmation that the right strategy had been followed in relation to Poland. Having heard the account of affairs in Warsaw, Khrushchev said that ‘this speech by comrade Gomułka gives hope that Poland has now adopted a course that will eliminate the unpleasant state of affairs’. He also admitted that ‘finding a reason for an armed conflict now would be very easy, but finding a way to put an end to such a conflict would be very hard’ (Kramer 1995, p. 54).

The meeting of the communist leaders on 24 October, which had been convened in order to discuss the situation in Poland, was in fact dominated by events in Hungary. From that day on the issue of the internal situation in Poland receded into the background in the Kremlin’s policy. Soviet military involvement in Hungary put an ultimate end to the possibility of armed intervention in Poland. Moreover, it was now in the Kremlin’s interest to find a *modus vivendi* with Gomułka as soon as possible. In the face of a serious crisis in Hungary it was necessary to normalise relations and establish loyal cooperation with the most important European country of the Soviet bloc. On 1 November 1956 Gomułka was the first of the communist leaders to be notified by Khrushchev about the decision taken on the second intervention in Hungary (Tischler 1995, pp. 7–9).

*‘Rokossovskii go home!’*

The issue of Rokossovskii remained a difficult problem in mutual relations after the Eighth Plenum of the CC PUWP. The Soviet leadership saw him as a guarantor of a

<sup>43</sup>As early as at the CC CPSU Presidium meeting on 21 October Malin recorded the statement—probably by Khrushchev: ‘the sooner we give up the Polish coal the better’. It is not known, however, whether it pertained to current imports, or ‘reparatory’ coal supplies in the past (SSSR i Polska 1996, p. 183).

proper development of the situation in Poland. Rokossovskii was perceived by the Kremlin as a touchstone of the state of mutual relations. Even on 26 October at the meeting of the Presidium of the CC CPSU it was stated that ‘the point about Rokossovskii is the central question’ (SSSR i Polsha 1996, p. 188; Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 389).

However, Rokossovskii was not included in the proposed new composition of the CC PUWP Politburo. During the elections at the Plenum he was put up as a candidate ‘from the audience’ by the Natolinian Stanisław Skrzyszewski, probably not without inspiration from the Soviet embassy.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless he received only 23 of the 75 votes cast and he was not elected to the Poliburo.<sup>45</sup> Initially Gomułka, aware of the importance attached by the Russians to Rokossovskii’s presence in the Polish leadership, intended to keep him on as minister of national defence. (Marian Szychalski, Gomułka’s close collaborator from before 1948, was nominated deputy minister, responsible for the political line of the military forces on the day after the Eighth Plenum.) However, those plans were—using the language of that time—‘struck out by life’. Social pressure forced the removal of Rokossovskii from Poland.

Rokossovskii became the ‘bad guy’ of the Polish October 1956 mass movement. In public feeling he was a flagrant symbol of the Soviet domination of Poland. In connection with the movements of the troops of the Polish military forces, ordered by him in the days of the Eighth Plenum, he was held in odium for his participation in the Soviet intervention (Gluchowski & Nalepa 1997). Khrushchev suggested later in his memoirs that Rokossovskii had indeed presented himself as ready to accept the command of the Moscow leadership, as a loyal Soviet citizen (Khrushchev 1999, pp. 236–237; Talbott 1976, p. 231). One of the most frequent demands of the rallies and demonstrations, which were organised on a massive scale after the Eighth Plenum to express support for Gomułka, was a demand for Rokossovskii’s removal. He was the focal point for the anti-Soviet emotions of society. In the whole country slogans were repeated: ‘off with Rokossovskii’, ‘Rokossovskii go to Moscow’, ‘Kostek go to Nikita’,<sup>46</sup> ‘Rokossovskii go to Siberia’ (Machcewicz 1993, pp. 154–188; 1999, p. 114).

The Polish military forces were not immune from this wave of opinion. In many units resolutions were passed aimed against Rokossovskii. The military forces demanded replacement of their commander. It proved to be a decisive argument. On 24 October the CC PUWP Politburo ‘in connection with the shaken authority of comrade Rokossovskii’ decided that ‘it is not possible to keep him in his current post for a longer time’ (Dudek *et al.* 2000, p. 221). Rokossovskii was granted leave. At the same meeting a decision was taken on the replacement of the commander of air forces, Soviet general Ivan Turkel.

Further steps in Rokossovskii’s case, however, went beyond the scope of the independent decisions of the Polish leadership. On 27 October, during the meeting of party activists of the military forces, Gomułka said: ‘the issue of comrade

<sup>44</sup>The decision of the Soviet leadership to wait for the result of elections for the CC PUWP Politburo means that in the Kremlin it was expected that Rokossovskii would be included in the list of candidates after all.

<sup>45</sup>*Nowe Drogi*, 10, 1956, p. 157.

<sup>46</sup>‘Kostek’ is a diminutive of ‘Konstantin’ in Polish.

Rokossovskii has not been solved by us to the very end. And we cannot solve it to the very end by ourselves. [...] At this moment there are no firm decisions within this scope yet'.<sup>47</sup> Soon after, consent to dismiss Rokossovskii was obtained from Moscow. On 30 October at the meeting of the Presidium of the CC CPSU Khrushchev announced: 'on Rokossovskii—I said to Gomułka that this matter is for you (the Poles) to decide' (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 392; Orekhova *et al.* 1998, p. 458). On 10 November the Politburo of the CC PUPW

decided to comply with comrade Rokossovskii's request to dismiss him from the post of minister of national defence. It was decided to hand comrade Rokossovskii a thankful letter for his devoted work on behalf of the government, the party and the state council. Comrade Rokossovskii was also granted a life annuity to the amount of the salary he received (Dudek *et al.* 2000, p. 228).

Officially Rokossovskii was dismissed from the post of minister of national defence on 13 November. He left for Moscow a day or two later.

Rokossovskii's departure from Poland may be considered a symbolic closure of the most acute phase of the crisis in Polish–Soviet relations in 1956. The root of this conflict was an attempt undertaken by part of the Polish communist leadership to solve the domestic social and political crisis on their own, without asking Moscow for consent, and without consulting their eastern neighbour. This attempt proved to be successful and was realised in due time. If a social explosion had occurred in Poland and the party leaders had lost control over the situation, Soviet intervention could not have been avoided. On 23 October when the Kremlin considered their decision on introducing troops to Budapest, the argument was used many times in the discussion that the situation in Hungary was quite different from the situation in Poland, where the party leadership did not forfeit control over the society (Kramer 1996/1997a, p. 389; Orekhova *et al.* 1998, pp. 356–357). Avoidance of an open split in the Polish leadership was also of essential importance, and this to a large extent was due to the fact that Edward Ochab voluntarily gave up in favour of Gomułka. The changes in Poland occurred independently of the USSR and even in spite of their will.

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<sup>47</sup>Przemówienie Tow. Władysława Gomułki ...', pp. 10–11.



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