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THE POLISH 'OCTOBER': A RE-APPRAISAL THROUGH HISTORIOGRAPHY

Apart from Yugoslavia's break with the Soviet Union in 1948 three other major convulsive events stand out in the postwar history of Eastern Europe. These are the Polish developments of 1956, the Hungarian revolution of the same year, the Czechoslovak "Spring," and the Warsaw Pact occupation of 1968. The importance of Poland's 1956 experience is generally conceded and it is widely accepted that her apparent transformation from a Stalinist to a reformist form of National Communism was a development of prime importance. As a London *Times* editorial put it succinctly at the time:

What is at stake is whether Poland shall be free to follow her own path to Socialism under the leadership chosen by the Polish Communist Party or whether Russia shall interfere. It is the biggest question to be posed in Eastern Europe since Marshal Tito was expelled from the camp in 1948.¹

Yet it is a surprising paradox that the Polish case in many respects has not been studied and examined as comprehensively and in the same depth as the Hungarian and Czechoslovak experiences. The latter in particular has been particularly well covered by serious academic work in the main Western languages.² This state of affairs can only partly be explained by the great number of Hungarians and Czechoslovaks who went into exile as a result of these crises. In my view it is not a reflection of the intrinsic respective importance of these three revolutionary situations. A preliminary explanation might be that the Polish *October* was not an event limited in time but stretched out over the period 1954–1959 at the very least. The issue whether the year 1956 can be abstracted from the wider sweep of Polish history remains admittedly a highly controversial matter. My contention however will be first, that the interpretation of the events of February to October 1956 is crucially important; and second, that in one

This article was first read at a Seminar at St. Antony's College, Oxford.

¹Editorial, "Warsaw and Moscow" in the *Times*, London, Oct. 20, 1956.

²"Since the Czechoslovak Spring of 1968, over two hundred studies dealing with that subject have appeared in print," Jan Triska, Foreword to Otto Ulc, *Politics in Czechoslovakia*, San Francisco, 1974.

major respect it has not been carried out satisfactorily; and last, that almost two decades later it is both a possible and a necessary exercise.

The purpose of this study is to examine the historiography of the Polish *October*. By discussing the explanations and interpretations which have been proposed I hope to examine their validity and to isolate the omissions and the areas which still remain speculative or controversial. Without attempting to supply a comprehensive and convincing interpretation of my own, I hope that this discussion of the historiography will help to set up a framework for distinguishing between questions which on the one hand may now safely be accepted as established and aspects which on the other hand remain cloudy and not satisfactorily explained. Writing contemporary history in the period between the time of the events and the opening of archives much later is always a difficult operation. But in the case of communist regimes, in particular, the lapse of time and the consequent unfolding of events, such as the replacement of the Gomułka regime in 1970, makes the exercise of attempting a new synthesis especially necessary.

The most striking initial characteristic of the historiography on the Polish *October* is the absence of an authoritative let alone accepted academic study of the standing of the work of Golan, Kusin, Skilling or Brown on Czechoslovakia.³ This is not to deny the quantity of material, most of it written as one would expect in the mid and late 1950's, but it is scattered around in the form of chapters in wider studies, articles in journals and occasional pieces in Polish language publications, both regime and émigré. There are only two books devoted solely to the year 1956 in Polish political history. Both are written by journalists but they differ considerably in their respective approaches and relative merit. Konrad Syrop's *Spring in October*, published in 1957, immediately after the events it describes, is a serious and balanced attempt to write contemporary history.⁴ In the absence of anything better, it must with a number of reservations be accepted as the initial starting point for discussion of the subject. But one must continually bear in mind that Syrop's account is strongly influenced by, or at least runs parallel to the reports of Philippe Ben in *Le Monde* which in themselves are a major source for 1956. Ben was certainly one of the best journalists on the Polish scene in 1956 but his excellent contacts with the supposedly liberal or Puławy faction produced information, which I will argue later, contributed to the formation of a specifically tendentious and one-sided — not to say optimistic — interpretation of *October* in the West. The other account, Flora Lewis's *The*

³See Zdenek Hejzlar and Vladimir Kusin, *Czechoslovakia 1968–69. Chronology, Bibliography, Annotation*, New York, 1975.

⁴Konrad Syrop, *Spring in October. The Story of the Polish Revolution 1956*, London, 1957.

Polish Volcano. A Case History of Hope (1959), is not surprisingly influenced by the reports of the second major correspondent on the Polish scene in 1956, Sydney Gruson of *The New York Times*, her husband.⁵ Lewis's book has some good pen-portraits of personalities such as Władysław Gomułka and Józef Cyrankiewicz and sets out the historical background in a very readable, and one might add, simplified journalistic way. The book is strong in terms of evoking the atmosphere and the excitement of the time but it is nowhere near as solidly based in the published sources as Syrop's. Nor does it produce anything like as coherent and balanced an explanation of the events which it describes.

The second major point is that, in my view, there are three distinct and separate levels of interpretation of the Polish *October*. The first of these is fairly non-controversial. It describes the general significance of these events as the peaceful transformation of Stalinist communism under satellite conditions into a flexible and semi-independent form of National domestic communism which foreshadowed developments after 1960 in some of the other East European states. Poland, according to this explanation, pioneered a novel model of domestic communism as well as a new relationship with the Soviet Union. In the words of H. J. Stehle, probably the best informed observer of the early years of Gomułka's rule, "History will undoubtedly regard 1956 as marking the beginning of a period in which the Soviet postwar Empire assumed more the form of a commonwealth."⁶ The second level of interpretations is concerned with the autonomous movements of Polish society during 1956. The emphasis here is usually placed on the intellectual currents in the period 1955–57 as the role of writers, poets, economists, academics, and so on are much easier to chronicle than the discontent of industrial workers with low living standards and excessive work-norms let alone that of peasants and agricultural workers. This level has again produced something close to a consensus although vast gaps still remain in our knowledge of the changes and movements within Polish society during 1956. It is partly the absence of comprehensive knowledge of these developments which has contributed to the almost complete overshadowing of the very original Polish reform socialist models of 1956 proposed for the economy, and for ensuring socialist democracy by the Czechoslovak ideas and models of 1968. The two preceding levels of explanation have however to be matched by another one: a satisfactory understanding of the mechanics of the power

⁵Flora Lewis, *The Polish Volcano: A Case History of Hope*, London, 1959. A similar, but somewhat poorer, account by another observer is Frank Gibney, *The Frozen Revolution in Poland*, New York, 1959.

⁶Hans-Jakob Stehle, *The Independent Satellite. Society and Politics in Poland since 1945*, London, 1965, p. 221.

transfer in 1956 and of the very complicated and shifting nature of the political in-fighting between the factions. This problem area in my definition includes Soviet policy. It is my view that this particular range of problems which covers the Polish communist factional conflict and the correct definition of the balance struck in October between the alleged victors and vanquished is the key to understanding Gomułka's subsequent political evolution and thus to explaining Polish political history up to the 1968 crisis. In the absence of reliable communist sources and given the welter of Warsaw political gossip and misinformation, this level was bound to remain the most controversial, the most speculative, and the most superficially dealt with of the three levels which have just been set out.

Moving on now to survey the literature on the subject one can start with Nicholas Bethell. He quite rightly says that "the Polish *October*, one of the most dramatic political events of this century, is less understood and recorded than it deserves to be."⁷ His compressed narrative description of about thirty pages highlights the main points of the course of events but does little to illuminate the balance of power struck behind the scenes. Stehle, like Bethell, emphasizes the "charismatic aspect" of Gomułka's public support in 1956. Stehle writes that Gomułka "had become a symbol of hope for the Poles, an alternative to the regime of terror. . . . In that October 1956 it was as if the Polish people had found a new Chieftain. Even the Church gave him its blessing. This had never happened to a communist leader before."⁸ Beneš's and Pounds's rather longer analysis gets on to the third level by latching on to the theme of factional conflict between Stalinist "Muscovites" on the one hand and liberal reformers on the other. They fail to follow the thread up in any detail however and their categorization is highly confusing and probably inaccurate in the context of 1956.⁹ A better sketch of an analysis is provided by Hans Roos who indicates the compromise solution achieved in October 1956 "which gave the PZPR [Polish United Workers Party, hereafter referred to by its Polish initials] — and hence the Polish state which it ran — extensive internal independence while preserving its close links with the CPSU and the Soviet Union."¹⁰ Roos also ties in this compromise on issues with the balance struck between the factions in the PZPR thus explaining how the "irrevocable renunciation of Stalin's dictatorial dogmatism" was counterbalanced by Gomułka's "sound pragmatism" which "was bound to prove a bitter disappointment to many enthusiastic supporters of the October 'revolution.'"¹¹ This provides an important clue which will be taken up later.

⁷Nicholas Bethell, *Gomułka. His Poland and His Communism*, London, 1969, p. 212.

⁸Stehle, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁹V. L. Beneš and N. J. Pounds, *Poland*, London, 1970, pp. 291–311.

¹⁰Hans Roos, *A History of Modern Poland*, London, 1966, p. 250.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 253–254.

Two other useful accounts of *October*, both of which are part of larger political histories, are supplied by Francois Fejto and Zbigniew Brzeziński. They do not provide new material but are competent syntheses and interpretations of the existing documentation. Fejto emphasizes Gomułka's value as a political symbol linked with his independent capacity, once the crisis had passed, to restore the PZPR's authority and monopolistic position. He also takes the possibility of a coup d'état by the Muscovite or Natolin faction in the second week of October more seriously than most commentators.¹² Brzeziński also considers that "Gomułka was the symbol but not the architect of the Polish *October*."¹³ On the matter of the attempted coup he judges that "the domestic resources of the Natolinites thus proved inadequate to the task. What remained to be tested was the degree of Soviet involvement and the capacity of the Poles to resist it";¹⁴ having got over the October crisis, Gomułka then went on to oscillate

from the very start between a very mild form of national communism and the more restricted orientation of domesticism. With neither the capacity nor the will to become a full-blown national communist *regime*, Gomułka increasingly reverted to the earlier pattern of domesticism in which the policy outlook of his *regime* was characterized by an inward perspective.¹⁵

Brzeziński here has provided us with a crucial distinction between Gomułka's (and Nagy's) domesticism and Tito's National Communism. The latter can be defined as independent political control by a native Communist Party which produces its own political measures and usually justifies them in terms of some revision of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Domesticism is marked by the almost complete absence of the latter element and the former characteristic is very much more restricted.

I have left what are perhaps the three basic English-language analyses till last as it is now easier to situate them within the literature. M. K. Dziewanowski's short account of our subject is fairly orthodox in approach and content.¹⁶ It adds very little to our knowledge of the internal factional struggle.¹⁷ To Adam Bromke the Polish *October* was "essentially

¹²François Fejto, *A History of the People's Democracies. Eastern Europe since Stalin*. Penguin Books, London, 1974, pp. 100–111.

¹³Zbigniew K. Brzeziński, *The Soviet Bloc. Unity and Conflict*, New York, 1961, pp. 236–265 and pp. 333ff.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 262. Similar points emerge from Hugh Seton-Watson, *Neither War nor Peace*, pp. 341–2, London, 1960, and Walter Laquer, *Europe since Hitler*, London, 1970, pp. 307–10.

¹⁶M. K. Dziewanowski, *The Communist Party of Poland: An Outline of History*, New York, 1959, pp. 252–281.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 272ff.

nationalist” and revolution was only avoided by “adroit leadership.”¹⁸ He also confirms the basically compromise nature of 1956 by telling us that it “ended in an uneasy truce.”¹⁹ Richard Hiscocks’s is undoubtedly the most comprehensive and detailed account particularly of the social and intellectual developments.²⁰ However he is not as perceptive as Brzeziński or Bromke on the power politics aspect and his interpretations are somewhat colored by what hindsight now tells us was an excessive amount of optimism concerning the 1956 changes.

In my judgment Syrop, Brzeziński and Hiscocks provide the best general English-language accounts of the Polish *October*. If we now turn to other sources we find that the Polish émigré press was, not unexpectedly, very variable in quality. The Polish community’s press in England was particularly poor at that time. This remark applies especially to the *Dziennik Polski* (Polish Daily) which seems to have had no original sources of information of its own and which for the most part belatedly reported the English or French press. Its commentary was uncompromisingly hard-line. The struggle between the two communist factions for power in Poland was of little interest to it. The paper’s demands were for the rollback of Soviet power in Eastern Europe and for free elections in Poland.²¹ Gomułka was merely considered to be “the regime’s last card.”²² The net result of the October events in the *Dziennik’s* judgment was the replacement of obvious Stalinists by somewhat less discredited Stalinists.²³ One turns with relief from this low level of political analysis to the Polish language, Paris monthly, *Kultura*. Its political columnist at the time was Juliusz Mieroszewski whose commentaries during 1956 and 1957 are still one of the most interesting sources for the period. Mieroszewski took issue with the hard-line émigré enemies of communism who refused to differentiate between what they considered to be different levels of evil. Any Polish Government laboring under the existing international conditions, he argued, would have to be pro-Russian. Gomułka’s fate however was tied to producing a degree of national autonomy for Poland and to that extent one should welcome him.²⁴ “The revolution imposed on Poland by force in the year 1945 — in October 1956 has taken on its independent characteristics.”²⁵

¹⁸ Adam Bromke, *Poland’s Politics: Idealism v Realism*, New York, 1967, pp. 92 and 94.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁰ Richard Hiscocks, *Poland, Bridge for the Abyss?*, London, 1963, pp. 170–254.

²¹ *Dziennik Polski* (Polish Daily), Sept. 20, 1956.

²² *Dziennik Polski*, Oct. 5, 1956, p. 1.

²³ *Dziennik Polski*, Oct. 22, 1956, p. 1.

²⁴ Juliusz Mieroszewski, “Lekcja węgierska” (The Lesson of Hungary), *Kultura*, Paris, 12/110, Dec. 1956, p. 90.

²⁵ Juliusz Mieroszewski, “Ewolucjoniści i ‘wyzwoleńcy’” (Evolutionists and “Liberationists”), *Kultura*, 1/111–2/112, January 1957, p. 3.

Mieroszewski proved less perceptive as a prophet: "either communism plus permanent revolution and terror (the Stalinist model) — or communism plus democracy. I do not believe in the credibility of any intermediate model."²⁶ An intermediate model was however exactly what was provided by the Gomułka regime in due course.

Other commentators in *Kultura* provided an early key to understanding the Natolin faction's anti-Semitism and opposition to what they called "Żydoliberalizm." Konrad Jeleński demonstrated how anti-Semitism was a technique for getting at liberal, reforming communists, a percentage of whom could always be pointed to as Jews, now that the Kremlin had banned the original form of Stalinist police terror.²⁷ The tricks attempted in 1956 and the techniques of communist power struggle then evolved were to be applied with far more telling effect by Moczar and his Partisan faction in 1967–68.²⁸ *Kultura* also provided one of the best early interpretations of *October* by Zdzisław Broncel.²⁹ Discussing the connection between de-satellization and de-Stalinization Broncel demonstrated how the two had to go together. Domestic reforms such as a rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church for example could not have been carried out by Soviet agents of the Natolin type but only by National Communists who had gained popular support for their policies and personalities. The non sequitur in this argument, however, was that the choice in 1956 only appeared to be between Soviet agents and genuine National Communists. The optimism of this early period needed to be replaced by a more realistic and differentiated appraisal of the domestic and international forces in play.³⁰

The interpretation of its contemporary history is clearly one of the most sensitive subjects as far as a Communist Party is concerned. It is almost a truism that the definition of recent political history in a communist state is heavily dependent upon ongoing political events and personalities. Thus one is not surprised to find that the present, official view of the Gierek

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁷ Konrad Jeleński, "Od Endeków do Stalinistów" (From the National Democrats to the Stalinists), *Kultura*, 9/107, September 1956.

²⁸ The events of 1968, as well as those of 1970, in Poland provoked a lively re-examination of the nature of "October" in *Kultura*. *I.a.* see Pierre Olfenius "Wrażenia z Polski" (Impressions from Poland), *Kultura*, 10/252, October 1968, pp. 91–95. Leon Szulczyński, "Sukcesy i porażki Mieczysława Moczara" (The Successes and Defeats of Mieczysław Moczar), *Kultura*, 1/256/2/257 Jan.–Feb. 1969, pp. 115–127. Zygmunt Bauman, "O frustracji i kuglarzach" (On Frustrations and Frauds), *Kultura*, 12/255, December 1968, pp. 5–21.

²⁹ Zdzisław Broncel, "Polska Rewolucja Październikowa" (The Polish October Revolution), *Kultura*, 12/110, December, 1956.

³⁰ One can cite the following as a good example of this type of analysis: Stanisław Strzetelski, "The True Force behind the October Revolution in Poland," *The Polish Review*, II, 2–3, 1957, pp. 19–31.

regime on *October* differs in some important respects from that of his predecessor. Taking the interpretation provided by Władysław Góra as approximating to the early 1970's PZPR line, one finds the emphasis placed on the lead taken by the Party in shifting economic priorities to improving the standard of living as early as the Second PZPR Congress in March 1954, and on the rooting out of Stalinist abuses at the third plenum in January 1955 leading to the opposition of "conservatives" within the Party to these PZPR-inspired reforms.³¹ Góra blames Khrushchev's over-emotional and oversubjective condemnation of Stalin's "cult of the personality" for aggravating the situation in Poland; "in Poland it deepened the political crisis which had been growing since 1955."³² This included excessive criticism of the Six-Year Plan. The Gierek line now is to criticize aspects of Gomułka's speech to the eighth plenum and to argue that the right line was the PZPR resolution following the seventh plenum in July 1956. The social outburst and the intra-party division in Poland is now explained away not by the failures in economic planning but by Khrushchev's irresponsibility, bureaucratism, and by Ochab's failure to produce the correct political measures in time. Gierek's party historians, however, accept the centrist Gomułka line on the need to battle on two fronts, on the one hand against dogmatic sectarianism within the PZPR and on the other against Imperialist-supported anti-socialism especially in its most insidious and dangerous political form of revisionism. Other points to note in this analysis is the significance attached to First Party Secretary Bolesław Bierut's death in Moscow following the Twentieth CPSU Congress which is considered to have increased the PZPR's political difficulties. Ochab, his successor, is now held to have made a good try at producing a united and coherent party line but to have failed owing to division within the top leadership. The result was a consecutive aggravation of the crisis including the Poznań riots in late June 1956 which, on the whole, is accepted as a genuine workers' uprising and thus a useful warning to the PZPR leadership. The parallel with the Gierek line on the Baltic seacoast riots in December 1970 is fairly obvious. The seventh plenum, at which Gierek entered the politburo, then took the correct and useful decisions which were sabotaged by dogmatic, sectarian opposition and by the failure of the still disunited leadership to assert itself. The eighth plenum thus merely marked "the decisive turning point" as it confirmed the leading role of the party, which initiated the necessary reform measures in an internally

³¹ Władysław Góra, "PZPR na czele budownictwa socjalistycznego w Polsce" (The PZPR Leading the Building of Socialism in Poland), Antoni Czubiński (ed.), *Polski ruch robotniczy, Zarys historii* (The Polish Working Class Movement. A Historical Outline), Warsaw, 1974, 2nd edition, pp. 420-470.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 439.

disciplined manner. All this was a return to Leninism which brought about a new and healthy political atmosphere by sweeping away the dogmatic, sectarian mistakes and personalities of the past.³³ As far as one can judge from the contemporary Polish literature the post-*October* reforms in the spheres of agriculture, Church relations, political rehabilitations, economic planning, and the adjustment of Polish-Soviet relations are positively appraised. But significantly again in view of present developments Gomułka's centrist policy is most heartily endorsed, particularly his shifting of the brunt of the struggle away from dogmatic sectarianism following the eighth plenum to the struggle against revisionism particularly at the ninth plenum in May 1957. This marked the long drawn out struggle to defeat revisionism both ideologically and organizationally which culminated at the Third PZPR Congress in March 1959.

The contemporary Gierek interpretation therefore follows the mature Gomułka line on post-*October* developments from 1957-68 but again diverges in its explanation of the years 1969-70. The significant differences touching upon our subject concern the interpretation as we have seen of some of the events of 1956 but perhaps more important lays more stress on the efforts undertaken by the party in 1954-55.

Commentators in the Gomułka period naturally emphasized the crucial and positive aspects of the Twentieth CPSU Congress and the eighth PZPR plenum. They played down the significance of the seventh plenum and were much more critical of the January 1954 plenum and the Polish "New Course" reforms.³⁴ The political significance of this was perhaps to highlight the increasingly parallel and similar nature of the Gomułkaite and official Khrushchevite interpretations of 1956. The foregoing themes were confirmed by Gomułka in his speech to the Third PZPR Congress in March 1959 in which he claimed that the eighth plenum resolution summed up the way ahead for the PZPR and would not have been possible without the Twentieth CPSU Congress.³⁵ Furthermore, the eighth plenum had brought the political and social crisis of 1956 to an end by uniting the Party around the correct Marxist-Leninist line. It also marked the shifting of the struggle from that against dogmatic sectarianism to that against revisionism.³⁶ This line was in essence repeated in less detail at the Fourth Congress in June 1964.³⁷ The interpretation of *October* was no longer an issue by the time of the Fifth Congress in October 1968 and it was completely sub-

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 440-448.

³⁴ Cf. Andrzej Burda, *Rozwój ustroju politycznego PRL* (The Development of the Political System of the Polish People's Republic), Warsaw, 1969, pp. 77-79.

³⁵ *III Zjazd PZPR* (The Third PZPR Congress), Warsaw, 1959, pp. 149, 1060-62.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-153.

³⁷ *IV Zjazd PZPR* (The Fourth PZPR Congress), Warsaw, 1964, pp. 231-232.

merged in the anti-revisionist-clerical-Zionist and West German revanchist campaign.³⁸

There has thus been a completely different range of interpretations of *October* among Polish writers both over time and by political affiliation. There was such a narrowing of the limits on political debate within the PZPR by about 1959 that during the 1960's "Znak has virtually remained the sole heir to the program of 'the Polish October.'"³⁹ The *Tygodnik Powszechny* (Universal Weekly) and *Więź* (The Bond) line plus the occasional article appearing in some specialized journal has however been very much the exception even during periods of writer-regime confrontation as in 1961, 1964 and again in 1968. More surprisingly none of the political factions during the 1960's used the historical interpretation of 1956 as part of their power struggles. The Gomułka line therefore dominated the whole range of PZPR opinion and was only contested by some intellectuals and real "revisionists" whose access to publication and opinion formation was clearly extremely limited after 1959. The same applied even more to the unreconciled Stalinists who died away, made their peace with Gomułka, or more rarely, as in the case of Mijal, sought refuge in more hardline communist states, in his case in Albania.

The triumph of Gomułka's centrism produced consequent changes in emphasis in interpretation of *October*. Perhaps the most interesting and certainly the most iconoclastic came from Witold Jedlicki who had been Assistant Lecturer in Sociology and Philosophy at Warsaw University from 1957 to 1961 and who emigrated to Israel in 1962. The main points of Jedlicki's argument can be summarized as follows.⁴⁰ Issues and policies have no intrinsic merit and are merely the counters which are used to conduct the power-struggle in communist states. One should not therefore take the political labels, such as Stalinist, reformer, liberal, or conservative, which were so freely used in explaining *October*, very seriously. Jedlicki's personal disillusionment with the course of Polish politics after 1956 led him into an exaggerated form of cynicism about the motives and fine slogans of politicians but nevertheless he raises a crucially important point concerning the largely instrumental nature of issues in the communist power struggle. Jedlicki thus challenged root and branch the then-dominant explanation that liberal and reforming national communists had triumphed in Poland in 1956. He did so by asking a number of searching, although somewhat disjointed, questions and by giving his own highly

³⁸ *V Zjazd PZPR* (The Fifth PZPR Congress), Warsaw, 1968, pp. 104–108, 157–164.

³⁹ Bromke, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

⁴⁰ Witold Jedlicki, "Chamy i Żydy" (Boors and Jews), *Kultura*, 12/182 December, 1962, pp. 3–41. This article constitutes the first half of Jedlicki's *Klub Krzywego Koła* (The Club of the Crooked Circle), Paris, 1963.

individual answers to them. First, he challenges the thesis that the intellectuals played an independent role in exciting public opinion and challenging the party. In his view either the press carried out party directives or alternatively, the party, or rather the faction in control of mass-communications, for its own reasons allowed the press a free hand. This leads him to the conclusion that public opinion was agitated for a specific political purpose by the Puławy faction after Khrushchev's Twentieth Congress speech.⁴¹ Second, he queries, whether all Warsaw gossip and misinformation notwithstanding, anybody really knows what Gomułka said to Khrushchev during their alleged confrontation on October 20, 1956. In Jedlicki's opinion a possible Chinese initiative was irrelevant as a factor in dissuading Khrushchev from intervention. He is thus highly skeptical of the Ben account of the Gomułka-Khrushchev confrontation at the Warsaw airport which was followed by Syrop and by most subsequent authors.⁴² Third, Jedlicki raises the important question of why the people who allegedly stood up to the Russians so determinedly in October 1956 were later to prove so yielding even on minor matters. How does one explain Gomułka's obduracy on Konstantin Rokossovsky, on private ownership of agriculture and even the conclusion of the trade treaty with Albania in 1961 against Khrushchev's wishes in contrast to his yielding on Piasecki and other matters? The basic conclusion, according to Jedlicki, must be that the retotalization of Polish politics following *October* was not primarily brought about by Soviet pressure, as was then so often claimed in the West, but had other causes. This was that the one and the same people who were interested in democratization in 1956 later promoted totalization irrespective of Khrushchev's and the Soviets' wishes.

To understand the reason for this one must start with the Twentieth Congress and here I agree with Jedlicki that this should be taken as the starting point for an analysis of the *October* situation. His explanation why Khrushchev delivered his condemnation of Stalin is, however, the rather lame one that it was primarily motivated by the need to announce a public ban on personal violence against losers in the political power struggle in the Soviet Union which started with Stalin's death in 1953 and culminated in Khrushchev's triumph in 1957.⁴³ His answer to the question why Ochab, Cyrankiewicz, and Zambrowski appeared to mobilize public opinion to criticize the PZPR and communism, however, takes us into the meat of the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁴² See Philippe Ben in *Le Monde*, Oct. 22, 1956; Syrop, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-97. Khrushchev's account is typically rambling except for his confirmation of the fact that "It was a very stormy meeting conducted in the most venomous atmosphere," Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, Trans. and Ed. S. Talbot, Boston, 1974, pp. 200-201.

⁴³ Jedlicki, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-12.

problem associated with a satisfactory explanation of the power struggle in Poland between February and October 1956. With certain reservations, concerning Jedlicki's idiosyncrasies on certain points, I find his interpretation the most satisfactory to date.

It is clear that Khrushchev intervened at the sixth PZPR plenum in the second half of March 1956. He probably preferred Zenon Nowak as Bierut's successor but compromised on Ochab although, as became clear later, he almost certainly vetoed Zambrowski's candidature. He did so not just because of Zambrowski's Jewish origins but because it was his policy to replace the Stalinist ruling groups by new men loyal to him alone. Here Jedlicki's analysis of the composition of the political forces and factions in play becomes particularly revealing.⁴⁴ There can be general agreement that the men who ruled Poland under Stalin with Bierut were Berman, Minc, Zambrowski, and Mazur. But the supporting positions were occupied by individuals most of whom as in the case of Matwin and Morawski changed their political spots very dramatically after the Twentieth Congress and Bierut's death.⁴⁵ This admittedly far from homogeneous group was very closely linked with the ex-Socialists (PPS), most notably Cyrankiewicz, Rapacki and Oskar Lange,⁴⁶ and with a third sub-group of important regional party secretaries.⁴⁷ The above groups mostly had prewar communist experience although some of course were "Muscovites" while others were "Nativists." In a sense their leading lights constituted the "Old Bolshevik" generation in Polish communism.

Khrushchev however favored a more "second generation" group of communists who were younger and less high up the party ladder. They had the reputation of being much more energetic and brutal although much less sophisticated and experienced than the foregoing individuals. They were also Polish in their origins for the most part and thus much less cosmopolitan and Jewish than the others. The names most often mentioned were those of the trade-union chief, Wiktor Kłosiewicz, Wł. Kruczek, St. Łapot, K. Mijal, K. Witaszewski, and B. Rumiński. An interesting point arises here concerning the specific mechanics of how this faction, which became called the Natolin after the Warsaw suburb where they met, was formed. One can surmise that an important role was played by the Soviet Embassy and by Ambassador Ponomarenko who doubtless guided the Soviet agents

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

⁴⁵ A number, headed by Ochab, emerged from long political retirement in October 1977. Their democratization proposals, however, only superficially paralleled the analysis of the ideas and lessons of 'October' by the newly active dissident movements.

⁴⁶ Plus Jabłoński, Motyka and Werblan.

⁴⁷ Most notably Stefan Staszewski (Warsaw), St. Kuziński (Warsaw province), Michalina Tatarówna-Majkowska (Łódź) and Jan Kowarz (Wrocław).

who had infiltrated the various Polish *apparats* during the Stalinist period. Khrushchev's and Moscow's approval gained the former the support of the older "Muscovite" activists such as Aleksander Zawadzki, Józwiak-Witold, Chełchowski, Matuszewski, and above all, Konstantin Rokossovsky, the Minister of Defense and *de facto* Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces.⁴⁸ The crystallization of the Puławy faction is much less clear but it was largely composed of the middle-rank and somewhat less compromised Stalinists who clearly felt at risk following Khrushchev's intervention at the sixth plenum. The names of the suburbs, Puławy and Natolin, associated with these initially fairly loose groupings of communist politicians with common interests and destinies was purely fortuitous. What was not so was their colloquial expressions for each other. The former called the latter "boors" while Natolin came to view their enemies as the "Yids" and their friends.⁴⁹

Jedlicki clearly gives us a valuable insight into the attempts of less compromised Stalinists such as Matwin, Morawski, Staszewski, and Kasman to give a lead to Polish public opinion after the Twentieth Congress. Their denunciation of the evils of Stalinism both to Party and factory groups spread the idea that there was now a group of "Young Secretaries" who sincerely favored democratization. As they still controlled the press they could influence public opinion through Putrament, Adam Schaff, Stefan Arski, Korotyński, and Osmańczyk. Together they organized a massive whispering campaign against their enemies and, in order to give themselves greater credibility, they sacrificed the older and more compromised Stalinists such as Berman, Świątkowski, Dworakowski, and eventually Minc himself in early October.⁵⁰ Jedlicki however underestimates the impact of the Twentieth Congress revelations and the genuineness of the conversion of some of the younger erstwhile Stalinists such as Morawski or Staszewski. Although it does not affect the essential lines of his argument, one must in the interest of historical accuracy concede the reality of these personal transformations. It makes it very difficult to understand the emotions and great tensions of 1956 if one follows Jedlicki's rational-mechanical political conflict model without this caveat.

This was the position then at the crucially important seventh plenum in July 1956 which followed the Poznań riots. Bulganin, visiting Poland at the time, made a speech warning Puławy not to incite public opinion and intimated that "the policy of liberalization and self-criticism had been

⁴⁸Syrop gives a slightly different line-up and suggests that Zawadzki was more non-committed and that he eventually joined the progressives. This is refuted by Khrushchev. Syrop, *op. cit.*, p. 64; Khrushchev, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

⁴⁹Jedlicki, *op. cit.*, 13-14. Hence the title of Jedlicki's article.

⁵⁰*Op. cit.*, p. 15.

pushed too far.”⁵¹ At the same time Natolin had gone over to the offensive at the plenum. Kłosiewicz bid for Gomułka's support by proposing his return to the Central Committee.⁵² Zenon Nowak however laced his criticisms of the running of the economy with the question of what he considered to be the disproportionate number of Jews in high positions. In other words he threatened that, if Puławy continued to appeal to the Polish people with demagogic liberal-reform promises, Natolin would respond with anti-Semitism. This in the event proved a tactical mistake as it allowed Puławy to counterattack and to turn the tables on Natolin by using the alleged anti-Semitism of their opponents to whitewash their own Stalinist past. Put simply therefore the Jewish question was used quite cynically by both factions for their own political ends.⁵³

The period between the seventh plenum and *October* was thus marked by a number of paradoxes. Behind the scenes Puławy attacked Natolin for its anti-Semitism, anti-intellectualism, Stalinism, and contacts with the Soviet Embassy. The latter point was true enough as the Natolinites were Khrushchev's supporters and almost, one might say, creation. But the Puławy faction had originally been the hardline Stalinists in Poland and thus their enemies could demand personal and political accountability for the UB (secret police) crimes of the early fifties, an issue on which Puławy was clearly on the defensive. The identification of Stalinists and liberal communists on the Polish scene in this period was therefore a highly complicated affair; Jedlicki is thus largely justified in claiming that it is an unprofitable exercise as the people who were now claiming to be the “good guys” had originally been the “bad guys” while on the other side, although there were a number of identifiable “bad guys,” others had fairly clean hands whatever their current intentions. Be that as it may, Natolin was so confident of its control of the Army and of Soviet support that it allowed the political initiative to slip away from it during the summer of 1956. The closer one gets to *October* though, the less valuable Jedlicki's approach becomes unless one relates the intra-party struggle to the vast ongoing intellectual and social upheavals. Jedlicki's explanation of *October* as

⁵¹Philippe Ben in *Le Monde*, July 24, 1956, p. 12.

⁵²Puławy had attempted to close this possibility immediately after the Twentieth Congress. Jerzy Morawski, “Nauki XX Zjazdu KPZR” (The Lessons of the Twentieth CPSU Congress), *Nowe Drogi* (New Roads), X, 3, March 1956, p. 30. Morawski, here, claimed that it was not Gomułka's slogan of the “Polish road to socialism” which was wrong but “the Class-content which the Gomułka faction infused into the slogan.”

⁵³This thorny question is rarely assessed properly. See “Problem antysemityzmu. Ankieta ‘Kultura’” (The Problem of Anti-Semitism. An Enquiry of *Kultura*), *Kultura*, 1/111-2/112, January 1957, pp. 56–79. One of their more interesting conclusions was that “it is a sad fact that the connection which exists between anti-Semitism and Soviet influence in Poland has not yet sunk in sufficiently into the national consciousness.”

being caused by Puławy disorganization of the Party *apparatus* is a complete distortion of the real picture as he makes his particular strand not only the dominant but almost the exclusive one.⁵⁴

The new factor after the seventh plenum was Gomułka who increasingly was courted by both sides. Not surprisingly he disliked Puławy because they had interrupted his political career in 1948 and imprisoned him. He probably had no personal animus against Natolin but he distrusted them because of their Soviet support and apparent political incompetence. He wished to remain as independent as possible and to bring back as many of his personal supporters as he could.⁵⁵ In the event Gomułka was not captured by either of the factions although at the time it looked as though he had thrown in his lot completely with Puławy in the period just before the eighth plenum. Here we can revert for a moment again to Jedlicki's interpretation of *October*. He claims that Puławy were surprised by the strength of Khrushchev's and the Soviets' reaction to the decisions which were being prepared for the eighth plenum. More to the point, according to Jedlicki, Gomułka used this intervention in order to increase his independence of Puławy. He considers that Gomułka convinced Khrushchev of the political incompetence of the Natolinites and of the necessity for his tactical alliance with Puławy and of the recall of Rokossovsky in order to pacify Polish society and restore order and coherence to the party *apparatus*. Khrushchev personally had no reason to distrust Gomułka nor to hold him responsible for the preceding events and this is borne out by his memoirs.⁵⁶ If Jedlicki is right, Gomułka promised to brake the process of democratization, to discipline public opinion, and to restore order to the party *apparatus*; thus contrary to appearances *October* really turned out to be a huge Soviet success.⁵⁷ Khrushchev arrived in Warsaw highly distressed by the turn of events but left reassured that Gomułka would end the democratization process and stem the factional conflict which had allowed political pluralism of sorts to develop in Poland during 1955 and 1956. The price the Russians paid in terms of the revision of their political and economic relationship with the Poles was not an exorbitant one, although it involved the recall of Soviet advisers, a treaty on the status of Soviet troops stationed in Poland, and an adjustment in their trading relations in favor of the Poles. Most of the domestic political reforms such as the liquidation of the UB, the approval of small peasant farming, and the tolerant cultural

⁵⁴Jedlicki, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁵⁵Syrop, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁵⁶Khrushchev, *op. cit.*, pp. 196–205. Khrushchev considered Gomułka "a very sincere and straightforward man." More ingenuously he claims that he had suggested Gomułka's release to Bierut and repeated the proposal to Ochab in Spring 1956, *ibid.*, pp. 197–198.

⁵⁷Jedlicki, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

line had already taken place and were therefore confirmed rather than conceded by Gomułka. The only novum perhaps was the *modus vivendi* arrived at with the Roman Catholic Church. So there is some truth in Jedlicki's disillusioned verdict that the Polish people were cheated by Puławy promises and manipulation and their adroit use of Gomułka as a political symbol. He also had a point when he says that it is very difficult in this period to distinguish the genuine strand of communist revisionism from Puławy pseudo-democracy. The failure of Puławy to capture Gomułka politically explains why from 1958 onwards he wore them down by appointing Natolinites such as Kruczek, Rumiński, Zenon Nowak, Witaszewski, Strzelecki, and Tokarski who had reconciled themselves to the post-*October* political situation. Finally in his view it is an optical illusion to claim that Gomułka's political recompression between 1957 and 1961 was specifically linked with the downfall of Puławy communists personally and directly associated with a form of liberal communism. This may have been true of a number of real revisionists such as the Minister of Education from 1956–59, Władysław Bieńkowski, or the economist, Włodzimierz Brus, but it was not true of the more professional *apparat* politicians such as Alster, Albrecht, Morawski, or Matwin.

Jedlicki's strictures have now seeped into the consciousness of specialists but, as so often happens in East European studies, they probably have not percolated through to the more general reader. His thesis that a split in the PZPR leadership, followed by a power-struggle in which Puławy incited the nation to revolt and by gaining control over the popular movement extracted Soviet approval by threatening an anti-Russian insurrection, has proved a useful corrective to the earlier emphases. These viewed *October* largely as a Polish reaction against Russian exploitation and domination. In Bromke's terms it was a national outburst fuelled by economic discontent and intellectual stirrings in the nineteenth century historical tradition but one in which "realistic" political leadership contained the demands of the masses. The significance of the self-transformation of the PZPR into a new model of domesticist communism clearly also held great significance for International Communism at the time. One can say the same about the intellectual and cultural ferment of 1955–57 although the strand of genuine socialist revisionism which it gave birth to was always weaker and soon suffocated by Gomułka's socialist reformism. Since the late 1960's though the Dubček experience and the increased interest in social groups in communist politics might have been expected to rekindle a greater interest in the Polish *October* than has in fact taken place. The role of writers such as Adam Ważyk, Jan Kott, Józef Chałasiński, and Stefan Żółkiewski and of journals such as *Nowa Kultura* (New Culture) and the forthright students' paper *Po Prostu* (In Plain Words) had been described in considerable

depth in the earlier period;⁵⁸ so had the activities of pressure-groups such as the economists or the workers' self-management movement.⁵⁹ It was however easier to chronicle the role of discussion groups such as the "Club of the Crooked Circle" in Warsaw and even of the more provincial Young Intellectuals' Clubs than to describe the movements in Polish society during 1954–57.⁶⁰ There are of course journalistic accounts of the dramatic outbursts such as the Poznań riots or the excitement and mass-demonstrations of October. But these do not really provide an answer to two inter-linked questions: first, the extent to which Polish society became autonomous of Communist Party control and second, what were to become the main pluralist and social checks to any subsequent attempt to reconvert Poland back into a totalitarian political system. The question who *really* won in social and political terms in Poland in 1956 therefore still remains not satisfactorily answered.

⁵⁸Cf. Ghita Ionescu, *The Politics of the European Communist States*, London, 1967, pp. 209–12. Also see Jerzy Urban, ed., *Po Prostu 1955–56. Wybór Artykułów* (Selected Articles), Warsaw, 1956.

⁵⁹Cf. John M. Montias, *Central Planning in Poland*, Yale, 1962.

⁶⁰On the former see Jedlicki, *Klub Krzywego Koła*, *op. cit.* For the latter see W. Głowacki, "Klub Młodej Inteligencji w Brzozowie" (Young Intellectuals' Club in Brzozów), *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* (Culture and Society), III, No. 2, April–June 1959, pp. 95–117.

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