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POLISH EMIGRE PERIODICAL DISCUSSES GOMULKA CASE, RECALLS STALIN'S TREATMENT OF POLISH COMMUNISTS IN 1937

The following article, written by Alfred Burmeister and taken from a Polish emigre periodical published in Paris, discusses Stalin's treatment of Polish Communist leaders from the 1937 purges to the time of Gomulka's downfall.

Gomulka had already been in prison for several months when he was deprived of his parliamentary immunity on 30 October 1951. Even party members did not know of his imprisonment, nor of his removal from the party, nor that for 2 years his every step had been watched by the Bezpieka (Security Police). Party members hopefully said that he was still active and not threatened with a trial.

The PZPR (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, Polish United Workers' Party) nourished such hopes to show that it was "free and independent."

The news of Gomulka's removal from the Central Committee struck the party unexpectedly. The reaction was so strong in the rural areas, because the peasants feared complete collectivization after Gomulka's removal, that it took Minc several months to bring the supply of meat to the towns back to normal.

A year later [1949], Gomulka spoke for the last time before the plenum of the Central Committee. He was to give a speech of self-criticism, but something unheard of happened: he did not express repentance, but defended himself. His cause was hopeless, and his comrades wept both for him and for their own youthful idealism, which Stalin was betraying for the second time. They knew he would ruin Gomulka, as he had ruined others, and as some day he would probably ruin them. It was then that the Central Committee remembered the year 1937.

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Unfortunately, the fate of the Polish Communists in this year is little known in the West, especially in Poland. It is easy to see why. It would not do the party, the regime, nor Soviet propaganda much good if Polish public opinion were to know what actually happened. The Poles could not know that Stalin ordered the arrest and execution or imprisonment of all functionaries, of the KPP (Komunistyczna Partja Polska, Communist Party of Poland) upon whom he could lay his hands; that he ordered all of them who were outside the USSR to report to Moscow only to arrest them; and that he accused all who, from idealistic conviction, had faithfully served the Bolshevik cause, of being "Pilsudski spies."

Hundreds of Polish Communists were arrested in the USSR. Their number was undoubtedly many times greater than the number arrested and sentenced by the "fascist" government of Pilsudski during the whole time of its existence. The NKVD, moreover, was much more efficient and could carry out its drive with much greater precision. It actually was able to seize all who took an active part in some illegal activity in Poland. Having inside knowledge of the organization, it could also seize those who were just being trained for such activity and even those who had taken part in its activity many years before and were now inactive. It was in this manner that the whole structure of the KPP toppled suddenly.

Among those arrested was Adolf Warski, who voted with Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the historic Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party (1903) in the name of the SDKPIL (Socjaldemokracja Krolestwa Polskiego i Litwy, Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania). This 70-year-old revolutionary, who belonged to the first worker organization in Poland (called the "Proletariat"), was dragged out of the home of Feliks Dzierzynski's widow. (Warski belonged to the circle of her closest friends.) Max Walecki, leader of the left wing of the PPS (Polska Partja Socjalistyczna, Polish Socialist Party), which in 1919 united with the SDKPIL to form the KPP, was arrested in May 1937. The same thing happened to Lenski, who directed the KPP for nearly 10 years (1927 - 1937), and to all his co-workers, as well as to members of the Central Committee that preceded Lenski's -- Sewery Fruchniak and Wera Kostrzewa. Wera Kostrzewa, an old and sickly woman, died during a "hearing" in a Moscow prison. Karjewski, the Polish Communist and functionary of the Comintern, was sentenced for a time to the secret "silence camps." Such a sentence, as far as the old guard was concerned, was synonymous with the death sentence. He is supposed to have died in 1942, in one of these camps, according to notification received by his family. Slawa Grosser (among the most important prisoners at the famous Swietojurski trial in Poland in September 1922 of 39 leading Communists) was sentenced in 1937 to 10 years imprisonment which she did not survive. (Daniszewski, the contemporary official party historian, mentions the Swietojurski trial but can name only one of the accused, Stefan Bojka, who died in Poland.) Rylski and Ciszewski, the Polish Central Committee's functionaries, were sentenced to "silence camps"; Wroblewski, a former member, was sentenced in 1936 to 5 years and was supposed to have died on the way to Alma-Ata. One of the last to be arrested, after being recalled to Moscow, was the Polish Communist, Ryng.

Henrychowski was sentenced to 10 years. Standa and Bruno Jasienski, Polish Communist writers, disappeared. The latter died in a transfer camp at Vladivostok in 1938.

Eliminated also as "Pilsudski spies" were those Polish Communists who for years had served in the ranks of the USSR and had taken an active part on the side of Lenin in the 1917 Revolution. These included: Unslicht, a member of the Revolutionary War Council, together with his wife and sister; Bronski, who during World War I represented the SDKPIL at the famous conferences in Zimmerwald and Kienthal, and in 1921 was a Soviet envoy to Vienna; Stanislaw Boninski,

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professor of history; and Malecki, vice-director of the "Communist University of Western National Minorities" in Moscow, an old man who had spent 13 years in prison before the Revolution. Malecki, broken in spirit, died in a transfer camp in Vladivostok. The fate of Karol Radek, who came out of the SDKPIL, is common knowledge. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison at one of the famous Moscow trials. Among his co-workers who were also arrested were the Polish Communists Lapinski, Rajewski, the younger Kowalski, and Dolecki, chief of Tass, who committed suicide when the NKVD came to arrest him. Bratmann-Brodowski, a former member of the SDKPIL and adviser to the Moscow embassy in Berlin for many years, was eliminated by the NKVD. Lauer, who was one of the most skilled economists of the Gosplan USSR, the economist Leder, and many others also fell.

With each of the arrested Polish Communists fell his relatives, just as in the 1937 arrests and purges in the USSR. The only difference was that it was impossible to arrest all Russian Communists, while the arrest of all Polish Communists in the USSR presented no difficulty. By the middle of 1938 those remaining were Marchlewski's widow; the aged Feliks Kor, who died shortly after; and Zofia Dzierzynska, the widow of Feliks Dzierzynski, who sat alone in the deserted Polish section of the Comintern. The Polish daily published in Moscow ceased to exist, and the Polish section of party publications was eliminated.

After Stalin had destroyed the leaders of the KPP and a good portion of its members, it was decided to dissolve the party itself. A 1938 Comintern resolution called the KPP a party of traitors.

It seems strange, then, for Daniszewski and Fiedler, the editor of the theoretical organ of the PZPR, Nowe Drogi, in trying to piece together the history of the KPP -- after filling pages with the history of its glorious strikes, its theoretical and political struggles against reaction, and its "introduction of Marxism and Leninism to the working class movement in Poland" -- to state suddenly "in 1938 the situation became even more complicated -- the Communist Party of Poland, which had become infiltrated with enemies and provocateurs sent by Pilsudski, was dissolved by the executive of the Communist International." (Daniszewski, Droga walki KPP, (The Hard Road of the KPP), fall 1949, on the 30th anniversary of its founding.) They do not admit, however, that these "agents whom the Pilsudski people smuggled into the party and who even reached executive positions in the party" were their closest companions. They do not mention the names of those "spies," nor the number. They do not give the names of the Communists beyond those who died in Poland. Thus, this "history of the KPP" is a sad tale of nameless "worthy cadres," not mentioning, however, that their services were paid for by the NKVD, that they fell not as offerings to "fascist reaction" or the Gestapo, but as victims of their commander in chief. Supposedly, both historians tried to salvage at least such names as Warski, Walecki, and Lenski, but approval was not forthcoming from the Kremlin.

Perhaps it is not yet forgotten that over 2 years ago the Warsaw government and representatives of the PZPR initiated a solemn transfer of the urn containing the ashes of Julian Marchlewski, the Polish Communist, from the eastern sector of Berlin to Warsaw. This was all that the PZPR could bring back to the country. The remains of other Polish Communists, friends and co-workers of Marchlewski, will not be brought to Warsaw; they lie far away in the vast taiga, where the bones of a whole generation of Russian Communists also lie.

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In 1939, the Communists in Poland, deprived of a party, were in the depths of despair; the war and a new betrayal was visited upon them by their commander in chief when he divided Poland with Hitler. Polish Communists in Russian prisons were mobilized and sent to Siberia by the Red Army, which was recruiting among former party members in Lwow, Stanislawow, and other Soviet-occupied Polish towns.

The "amnesty" given by the USSR to those who survived after 2 years in no way applied to the Polish Communists arrested in 1937. They disappeared, as did their Russian comrades, among the many millions in chains.

The war in 1939 freed many Polish Communists who ironically missed the fate of their comrades because they had been arrested in "Pilsudski's Poland" and could not take advantage of the invitation to Moscow. They were all fully aware that if they had been in Moscow they would have been liquidated also. A leading figure in present-day Poland recounted the following incident which casts a characteristic light on the present system. "In 1938 we were transferred from jail to jail and were given opportunities to escape. Of the 17 transferred prisoners 11 escaped while the others, including myself, politely remained. We were Communists and decided to remain. Where were we to flee? We would fall into hands of the Gestapo in Czechoslovakia, and in the Soviet Union (as was known even in Polish prisons) we knew we would end up behind bars as "Polish spies." By remaining in prison we saved our lives.

Toward the end of 1939, when this purge had run its course in the USSR, Bierut, Minc, Berman, and others went to the USSR and waited to regain Stalin's favor. They did so during the war, when the Soviet Army staged its counter-offensive. They were entrusted with the task of forming the new Polish Communist government.

Others, among them Wladyslaw Gomulka, remained in Poland. Gomulka, FINDER, and Nowotka formed the PPR (Polska Partja Robotnicza, Polish Workers' Party) in January 1940. Although the PPR program spoke of "continuing in the best traditions of the KPP," and although Gomulka, who had spent many years in Polish jails, was a former KPP activist, nevertheless the new party differed greatly from the old Communist Party. There was more talk of democracy and of Poland in its program, and less of the dictatorship of the proletariat. There was even talk of cooperation with other parties, although this cooperation was understood to mean cooperation under the leadership of the Communist Party. After the deaths of the co-founders, FINDER and Nowotka, Gomulka became the leader of the party and, according to the official party publication as late as 1948, not only "devoted his whole strength, indefatigably participated in the building of the party, and laid the foundations of the new Polish state," but also won the cooperation of Jozef Cyrankiewicz and his PPS associates, thereby assuring the success of the Communists in Poland.

This is the crime of which Gomulka is today accused: Gomulka was the leader of the Communists during the period in which Stalin agreed to some semblance of democracy to quiet somewhat the demands of the Western allies. Then there was talk of the "people" and not the "proletariat," the word "Communism" was not used, and there was no thought of collectivization. Stalin promised Gomulka "a Polish road to socialism" -- a promise similar to those he made Ackerman in Germany and Tito in Yugoslavia.

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Stalin also agreed to something which under different circumstances he would not even have considered. When Communist Poland was being created, it became apparent that there were too few persons faithful to the USSR who would be able to carry out the new plan which the Kremlin had in mind for Poland. Bierut and his associates remembered the Polish Communists still alive in Soviet prisons and decided to speak to Stalin about their freedom. It was surprising that the petitioners as well as Stalin had no doubts that these people, who had been imprisoned for an average of 8 years, would be willing to build Stalinist Communism in Poland with equal vigor and devotion.

The NKVD asked Bierut and Berman for a list of names and the camps in which these Polish Communists were confined. They worked at this zealously for several months. The list was made up from memory and on the basis of innumerable letters and verbal reports handed down by other comrades in prison. In this respect, it is interesting to note that 12 Polish Communists, returned to Poland from prisons on the Kolyma River, owe their freedom to the sister of Bierut's wife, who spent 8 years there. The first to be freed gave additional names and new lists were drawn up. Funds were raised for the prisoners and money sent to them for their passage.

They arrived in Moscow with dirty, torn clothes and for a long time did not dare approach the embassy to which they owed their freedom. They claimed that it was because of their visits to the Polish Embassy that they were imprisoned in 1937. Gradually they became accustomed to the new conditions. A summer home in the vicinity of Moscow was rented and designated as extraterritorial so that the prisoners could live near Moscow. This was actually prohibited to them since they were not supposed to be closer than 100 kilometers to Moscow. They were provided with food and shelter and even employed in the Polish embassy. It is interesting to note that one group was even entrusted with drawing up a list for a new amnesty of Poles arrested during or after the war; for 10 months, 20 former prisoners worked on this list. On the basis of information and letters from those arrested and their close relatives, a list of about 60,000 names was drawn up. The great number of prisons in which Poles were imprisoned were marked on a large map of the USSR in the embassy. However, no more was heard of the promised amnesty.

The freed Communists were sent one at a time for a 10-day rest to a private villa which Stalin had given to Wanda Wasilewska. The stout hostess looked with disdain at the rags in which her guests were clothed. She was surprised that they knew how to serve themselves with the costly table service placed before them, and remembered the French names of the dishes. They, indeed, were strange acquaintances for Wasilewska in Moscow.

There were many obstacles and much formality before a few groups of the freed Communists returned to Poland. There were perhaps 80 to 100 returned, a tiny fraction of those seized in 1937. Among them were women, mothers, and grown children of former Communist functionaries. They were the second and third selections of the party and contained no prominent personages. They were only the wretched remains of the scattered old guard. None of the former leaders returned.

The reason for this is very simple. When the lists of Polish Communists were drawn up, Bierut and Berman could not give the location of their distinguished former colleagues. They could not be expected to know this, since Communists of any importance were sentenced to "camps of silence." No one knew their addresses. The NKVD men would only shrug their shoulders and say they did not know. Despite this, the Poles conscientiously wrote down all the names, the dates of birth, the places and times of arrest, and occupations; these lists were submitted.

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Shortly afterward, when Bierut and Berman dared again to mention these prisoners in the "silence camps," they received the reply from Beriya, chief of the NKVD, that these people were no longer alive, at least to them.

The former prisoners, who returned to Poland, were not disappointed in the confidence placed in them within the country. The designation "class of 1937" was sufficient identification to open all doors since it meant that this was "a good, old, devoted Communist and worthy warrior for a new Poland." The "1937 people" started to learn Polish nationalism instead of internationalism and learned not to shudder at the sight of the Polish white eagle, which now was the symbol of a new order. Did they believe? Could these people seriously put up with every gesture and any kind of move by Stalin? Even at the border in Brzesc they were stripped naked and examined to determine whether they were smuggling anything out of the USSR. However, they had found nothing in the USSR that would be worth taking with them. They were received lavishly by the party. The Central Committee at the time received them as part of the family. And then something strange happened; they started to believe. How easy it is to bring hope back to a person! What could be more pleasant to the betrayed and disillusioned Polish Communists than the faith and hope that they would be building a socialist Poland according to the Polish way.

These hopes were dashed to the ground in 1948. The Cominform condemned Tito, and Stalin ordered a return to the "right way." Many then believed that Poland too would turn against Moscow. The internal situation provided more reason for this in Poland than in Yugoslavia. However, Soviet armies were stationed and still are stationed in Poland. It was for this reason that there was peace in Poland when Stalin ordered Gomulka and his friends out of the party leadership.

Gomulka, who in the last 2 years had become the symbol of the "struggle for freedom against Moscow" for many people -- or a symbol of the "Polish form" of Titoism -- in no way contributed to this idea, but still it decided his fate.

"Stalin does not like the Poles," said an old Bolshevnik in 1937 as a means of justifying the arrest of so many Polish Communists. This explanation is not strictly correct: Stalin does not like anybody who is able to think independently, who wants something other than what he wants, or who cannot be swallowed without resistance.

The tragedy of the Polish Communists, within that of all Communism, is the most terrible of all.

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