

## *Communist Poland 1944-1989. Some Controversies and a Single Conclusion*

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As a rule, victorious revolutions experience no problems with the past, and do not have to "settle accounts of any sort". The enemies, from kings and generals to confidantes and professors, have been strung up on lampposts or have perished in battle, and the survivors are either incarcerated or have fled abroad. Folios containing decrees and law registers have been used by the revolutionary soldiers for rolling cigarettes or kindling fires. Life started with the New Beginning, and a general condemnation of the *ancien regime* appears to have been sufficient. The situation becomes quite different when the change of the prevailing system is the outcome of more or less rapid pacific transformation. Representatives of the former regime hand over power and subject themselves to the rules of democracy, yesteryear is not devoured by the flames of the revolution, and "men of the past" occupy parliamentary benches, referring to the will of the people (or, at any rate, those who voted for them). The past does not disappear or become the object of one-sided interpretation, to which an exclusive right is usurped by the "true revolutionaries". It assumes special significance as a component of political discourse and an ideological confrontation of the sides that, thanks to democracy, enjoy equal rights.

In this state of affairs, which, with all certainty, exists in Poland and probably in the majority of post-communist states, the historian is placed in a deplorable situation. The results of his work are unavoidably doomed to be contested by one side or the other, and, frequently, by both. He finds it extremely difficult to liberate himself from the pressure exerted by his own views or political sympathies. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this does not constitute a reason for suspending research and waiting for more conducive times, although numerous colleagues do just that. A considerable part of society demands that the historian should embark upon something quite different, namely, a "balance sheet" of the past. Jerzy Szacki, one of the intellectual gurus of present-day Poland, wrote that as regards familiarity with the recent past, we find ourselves in the "phase of an unhurried liquidation of blank spaces", and a "reconstruction of martyrological history". He added that we are "extremely far from such a balance sheet" [1]. True, the rate of learning about that which up to now remained enclosed in archival material and the memory of the witnesses of the events, remains slow. This is not to say, however, that researchers should be charged with "slothfulness". On the contrary, while reading some of the works of my colleagues, and, obviously, my own, I am rather inclined to condemn excessive haste than to complain about tardiness.

I am not acquainted with the exact number of recently published pertinent books (articles, dissertations); as can be easily seen, bookstore sections dealing with contemporary history are brimming with such publications. Periodicals present successive tides of debates. The latter commenced with *Bilans czterdziestopięciolecia* (The balance-sheet of the past forty five years), published in "Polityka" in 1990, followed by two copious cycles in "Tygodnik Powszechny" - *Czym by³a PRL?* (What was the Polish People's Republic?), which appeared at the turn of 1992, and *Bilans PRL* (The balance sheet of the Polish People's Republic), from the second half of 1994. In 1993, "Mysl Socjaldemokratyczna", the theoretical organ of the post-communist party (the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland) published up to twenty opinions under the joint title: *Polska 1944-1989. Próba oceny* (Poland 1944-1989. An attempted assessment). More or less at the same time, "Res Publica Nowa" issued a number of articles entitled *Dziedzictwo Peerelu* (The legacy of the Polish People's Republic).

Parliamentary debates on so-called ideological bills - predominantly de-communization and "lustration" - are another recurring pretext for attempts at "settling accounts" with the Polish People's Republic.

Owing to the restricted time of my presentation, I will not mention particular texts. These texts are great in number, as evidenced by the first trial analysis of heretofore "account settling" statements [2]. Its author cites about 150 articles and studies published up to 1995. They are accompanied by several syntheses of the 1944-1989 period, not to mention school textbooks. In my capacity as an author of such a synthetic study, I find it awkward to assess the value and level of these publications. The very fact of their appearance negates the opinion that historians have accomplished little as regards a "balance sheet" of the past epoch. On the contrary, some have done quite a lot, at least as far as descriptions are concerned, and have paved the way for others.

The pessimistic mood of views about heretofore publications is shared not solely by outside observers. In a current discussion, four renowned servants of Clio severely criticised historiography dealing with the recent past [3]. They were correct in indicating such "negative features" as the fact that, to a large degree, it still remains "martyrological history". This state of affairs is the consequence of, i. a. numerous books being written by amateurs - as a rule, veterans - who ignore fundamental standards (with which they are, most often, simply unacquainted).

Such an approach is particularly vivid in the case of publications of source material. Not only the ordinary reader, but the professional historian too finds himself afloat in an ocean of totally worthless books. Nonetheless, I would be inclined not to ignore this shoddy output. It is worth hazarding the thesis that such publications - frequently inept, at times suffused with embarrassing stereotypes, and written in a highly emotional vein, which deprives us of all chances for rational analysis - express the opinions of part of the national community. These are views to which we should all remain particularly sensitive - the views of the victims.

I would like to propose a certain typology of attitudes present among historians (as well as sociologists and political scientists venturing into the domain of contemporary history), which can be recreated upon the basis of published statements. It is not my intention to justify such a typology, a task which is highly time-consuming; on the other hand, I also do not claim that my suggestion should be treated other than as a "rough draft". The distinction encompasses the following varieties of stands towards the not-so-distant past:

- radical condemnation,
- radical criticism,
- rational distance,
- post-communist revisionism,
- critical affirmation.

Obviously, the debate involves not merely the "types" themselves, but concrete people. In reality, there exists a continuum whose extremities are expressed in a totally negative "balance sheet" (I describe the supporters of this thesis as "negationists") or its positive counterpart ("affirmationists"). The only reservation is that the majority of the "affirmationists" admit that the image of the Polish People's Republic is marred by certain blemishes, while the other extremity is dominated by those who in the history of communist Poland do not perceive any positive phenomena at all.

Whatever the opinion held by historians about post-1989 events, it is quite apparent to all that a certain chapter in the historical process of the nation has come to an end. There is little more normal in history than the end of a certain period, which, simultaneously, denotes the beginning of its successor. This view is shared by all, even those radical representatives of the right wing who claim that present-day Poland is only an "encore of the People's Republic of

Poland". Beyond this extremely significant common point, however, there stretches a controversy-ridden region. It includes particularly sensitive areas, open to debates, polemics, and even vulgar clashes. Since the number of those spots is considerable, and I do not have the opportunity to present all of them, I limit myself to pointing out only several select examples. Even if they are not the most important, these examples concentrate the majority of the basic polemics.

One such issue is the "sovereignty-occupation" opposition.

To be honest, none of the "camps" includes adherents of the thesis that the Polish People's Republic was a sovereign state. Nevertheless, those who believe that the general appraisal of the past epoch is rather positive, reveal a distinct tendency towards accentuating the fact that, with the exception of the 1948-1956 period, all consecutive ruling teams made great efforts to win maximum independence from Moscow.

Frequently, attention is drawn to the gradation of the concept of "dependence"; at times, this approach leads to the conclusion that true sovereignty was enjoyed only by the two super powers. Here, we come across a certain continuum of stands between the two extremities. By way of example, even those not inclined towards affirmation tend to regard Polish-Soviet relations as a simple application of the "centre-peripheries" model. This stand results (or could do so) in the acknowledgement that Soviet rule over Poland, and other countries of the bloc, was quite normal and even typical for twentieth-century reality. A further conclusion could be that such dependence did not differ specially from the one between, for instance, Argentina and the United States.

In turn, radical critics claim that 1944 marked the beginning of an occupation. Initially, it was carried out directly by the Soviet Union, and subsequently within a governor-general system, in which the "natives" fulfilled executive functions. At times, however, the "affirmationists" perform a perverse interpretation of the conception of occupation, which, in the intention of its authors, was to lead, and does so, towards the recognition of those who participated in the system as collaborators. More, it offers an opportunity for placing responsibility for crimes and "errors" on the Kremlin-based Centre, and to regard the "native administrators", especially the communists-patriots (as a rule, personified by Gomułka) as successive victims of Moscow.

In order to describe the state of dependence, numerous moderate critics of communist Poland sought analogies with the more distant past, for example, the Duchy of Warsaw during the Napoleonic era or the Kingdom of Poland in the wake of the Congress of Vienna. Others resort to a comparison with the wartime satellite states of the Third Reich.

Another controversy, whose rational analysis comprises a particularly difficult task, is based on the question: Was there an alternative to the seizure of power by the communists?

Here too, participants of the polemics represent a gamut of intermediate stands. The "affirmationists" repeat in unison that the only real alternative was the incorporation of Poland as a "seventeenth republic". This was actually the silent wish of certain (scarce) Polish communists during the 1944-1945 period, although so far no documents confirming the supposition that Stalin shared those plans have been discovered. The thesis in question declares that the acceptance by the communists of power handed over by the Soviet authorities protected Poland against the fate of, for instance, the Baltic states or the rule of (even) worse vassals, imported from Russia and of non-Polish origin.

This opinion took on the value of an axiom, and the ensuing conclusion (concurrent with the theory of lesser evil) claims that since the situation could not have been any better, then it is just as well that it assumed the shape that it did. It must be said that even radical critics of communist Poland find it difficult to reply to such reasoning.

Was the alternative a third world war? The global stage lacked volunteers for further combat.

Was the answer solitary struggle waged against a world power? A battle of this sort was commenced by the anti-communist Underground in 1944-1948, and the resultant conflict, which actually resembled pacification, ended with defeat.

Perhaps the solution lay in the acceptance of the Beneš model? Such an attempt was made, unsuccessfully, by Mikołajczyk; even in Czechoslovakia, the model in question was tolerated by Moscow for only a few years, and in February 1948 Prague too was called to order.

Enthusiasts of the consequences of situation-induced compulsion are to be found in assorted corners of the political stage. “Poland fared unexpectedly well during this time [i. e. 1944-1989], and it was worth paying a considerable price in order to win such a territory, a society devoid of estate differences, and a country almost without national minorities”, wrote Marcin Król, one of the leading intellectuals of the democratic opposition prior to 1989 [4]. This is pure geopolitics.

Nevertheless, others consider the question to be posed improperly, since the issue at stake is more of a moral than a geopolitical nature. We are not concerned whether Stalin would give his consent for free elections and governance by non-- or anti-communists, but with the facts that

- necessity should not be turned into virtue; and
- not for a single moment did the Polish communists show any inclination towards seeking a truly democratic solution to the question of power, but wished to win it at all costs, also *per nefas*; they simply utilised outside factors - the force of the Red Army and the imperial-revolutionary ambitions of Stalin - in order to reach their own ideological targets.

The “society without estate differences”, mentioned by Król, leads us onto the trail of the third point of the controversy: was Poland the scene of authentic revolution or social engineering, applied for the implementation of communist utopia (the creation of the “new man”), by resorting to all accessible instruments, the most important being physical and mental coercion?

The “affirmationists”, that is, the defenders of the first thesis, draw attention to

- the elimination of the last estate barriers and the “humanisation of the peasants”,
- the “educational revolution”,
- long-term immense social promotion, whose beneficiaries constituted the mainstay of the system.

Emphasis is placed on the worker-peasant or outright plebeian character of the communist party, and the participation of the “oppressed strata” in the construction of the state and the management of the economy. Without negating this obvious thesis, it seems worth drawing attention to the fact that:

- the social composition of the resistance movement in 1945-1948, dominated by peasants representing all the strata of their class, was almost identical to that of the communist party;
- the majority of persons arrested during the Stalinist period were “sons of workers and peasants”, a source of constant anxiety for the functionaries of the security apparatus, whose prisons housed inmates of close “class affiliation”;
- workers’ strikes took place even during the darkest “Stalinist night” (for example, in 1951), and the revolts of 1956, 1970 and 1976 were of a purely plebeian character.

Adherents of the “social engineering” thesis draw attention not only to the enormity of lawlessness and committed crime, but also to the devastative nature of the revolution. This was a revolution conducted “from above”, in a double meaning of that term: it was imposed upon the country by the Soviet Union, and upon society - by the communist party. A social

revolution, which functioned in this manner, led to a loss of motivation for honest work, offered power (both local and central) to unscrupulous and cynical technicians of rule, and corrupted entire professional groups. Such a revolution, indicate the most radical supporters of the “social engineering” thesis, produced a new type of man - the “homo sovieticus”.

The fourth component of the debate, worth underlining, are attempts at a description of economic reality.

The simplified version of the thesis, held universally by the “affirmationists”, declares that the seizure of power by the communists, brandishing their programme of radical reforms and manifesting the iron will of its realisation, led Poland onto the path of modernisation. True, society paid a considerable price, and the ruling teams committed numerous errors (partially not due to their own fault, but under the pressure of Moscow); such a rate, and, hence, such a quantitative dimension of changes, could not have been accomplished under a different leadership. The less determined supporters of this thesis stress that from a certain moment, which they situate in different periods (as a rule, in the mid-1970s), there emerged symptoms of an exhaustion of the pro-modernisation energy of the system, which lapsed into a chronic crisis. This phenomenon affected the whole bloc. Nonetheless, it is said that the attained changes introduced Poland into the range of modern industrial civilization.

The opponents of this thesis hope to prove on the basis of comparative statistics that in the European ranking Poland held a similar or even worse place than in 1939 [5]; it maintained this level despite decades of efforts and sacrifice, including compulsory labour (in 1948-1959 the so-called Military Coal Corps employed tens of thousands of young men) and collectivisation. Apparently, modernisation, pursued relentlessly until the end of 1988, had led to a cul-de-sac. The fault lay not so much in the errors made by the ruling teams (although such mistakes occurred in abundance) nor in obedience towards “recommendations” proposed by Moscow, but in the very essence of the system: a non-innovative, centrally steered economy of inadequate supply, whose principles were derived from petrified nineteenth-century ideology.

The margin of this motif of the debate includes views, by no means isolated, that Poland was not a socialist (communist) country. One of the participants of the discussion conducted in the above mentioned series presented by “Myśel Socjaldemokratyczna”, mentioned “state-totalitarian capitalism”. Naturally, the illogical quality of such a term could be demonstrated easily; nonetheless, it reveals an attitude, perhaps not universal but present all the same, whose carriers declare that the reason for the defeat of the system was not so much an “excess” of socialism as its insufficiency. A certain, intellectually more subtle variant of questioning the socialist character of the Polish People’s Republic, is the thesis (also proposed in “Myśel Socjaldemokratyczna”) that the system was “barbarian” or “plebeian” socialism, dominated by “the most pauperised particles of society”. This, and not the principles of the system, was the source of its imperfection.

The polemic pertaining to the nature of the state (system) was pursued relatively readily, although the basic controversy is located elsewhere. It is expressed in the question: Was Poland a totalitarian state?

The very concept of “totalitarianism” is yet another “sensitive spot” in the Polish discourse about history. It was one of the key concepts in the “civil war concerning tradition”, which the democratic opposition and liberal intellectuals waged (with the assistance of émigré circles) against the communist party. This “war” assumed greatest dimensions at the end of the 1970s, and lasted, with almost unwavering intensity, up to 1989; in other words, it was conducted at a time when many observers “in the West” regarded such a concept to be a relic of Cold War propaganda.

Thanks to his polemical talent and erudition, one of the most active and convincing opponents of placing this concept into the instrumentation of research into postwar Poland is Andrzej Walicki. Walicki aligns Polish reality with a theoretical model (in the form deduced by Hannah Arendt, Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski), and writes that it is possible to reflect on the adequacy of life and the model only in reference to the years 1949-1954. Even so, this task can be pursued exclusively with certain reservations, although at the time Polish communists both believed in the Leninist version of the Brave New World and embarked upon attempts at its realisation. Actually, communist Poland was an authoritarian state. Moreover, or at least during a considerable part of its existence (after 1956 or in the 1970s), it represented a mild variant, akin to “enlightened authoritarianism”. This opinion is accepted rather universally, partly owing to the authority enjoyed by Andrzej Walicki. It is even shared by many of those who see the “balance sheet of the Polish People’s Republic” in a negative light.

The justifications vary. Krystyna Kersten, for instance, proposes the thesis that due to its very nature, a dependent state, which Poland indubitably was, cannot be totalitarian. It can, however, be part of an empire ruled by a totalitarian state (in this case - the Soviet Union) [6]. Motivated by a certain contradictory nature, I suggest the hypothesis that both in Poland and in other countries of the Soviet bloc, “mature”, stable totalitarianism did not function until after 1956. The era of “pure Stalinism” (1948-1954) signified, to paraphrase one of the communist slogans, “the construction of the foundations” of a totalitarian state [7]. True, terror was an inevitable stage in the creation (or reinforcement) of such a state, but it remained the means and not the end. The actual target, to put it succinctly, was envisaged as an internalisation by society as a whole of a millenarian vision of a kingdom of eternal happiness on Earth, as well as complete subordination (stemming from acceptance) towards decisions made by those who nominated themselves the builders of this realm. A similar opinion is expressed by radical critics of the Polish People’s Republic; without acting as the *advocatus diaboli* in an intellectual debate, they believe that totalitarianism *sensu stricto* lasted in Poland until 1989. Such critics recall not only the “excesses” of the authorities, such as the proclamation of martial law, but, predominantly, the fact that after 1956 the prime instruments of the totalitarian state were not disassembled. This holds true for the monopolistic and internally undemocratic party, the expanded political police, censorship and mass media licences, and the system of nomination and co-optation (the “nomenclature”) to all top posts, including social organisations.

The “affirmationists” willingly uphold the stand represented by Walicki. The more radically inclined reject the very notion of “totalitarianism” and, referring to “Western authorities”, maintain that the entire concept was a purely propaganda device from the “hot phase” of the Cold War. In other words, it does not deserve to be treated seriously. They concede that it could be applied as a research directive in the case of communist states such as Cambodia, North Korea, China, or the Soviet Union, but certainly not in the case of Poland.

This particular domain of reflection includes the popular thesis, well known already at the time of the post-Stalinist thaw, about “errors and deformations” which led to “deviations”. In accordance with the premises of this thesis, the Party (today, no one writes this word with a capital letter any more) eliminated errors whenever it had a wise leader and enough time; subsequently, it returned to the correct path, and stripped of power those who were found guilty of such depravation. Another rather universally held conviction claims that from 1956 on no other factor, apart from the communist party, was the true generator of transformations aiming at democracy and independence. Quite possibly, we might soon come across an opinion demonstrating that the Polish United Workers Party strove consistently at the

restitution of private ownership and market economy, a belief based on the fact that the free market reforms were initiated several months prior to the Round Table.

Certain “affirmative” political scientists (even those enjoying good repute in the world) argue that the changes occurring in Poland in 1956-1989 comprised a logical sequence, whose ideological confirmation lay in Marxism. Such transformations, naturally affected by certain restraints or outright “steps backwards”, for which the blame must be placed on successive conservative factions, took place upon the initiative and free will of communist reformers.

The response on the other end of the spectrum is based on the assertion that it was Polish society which, by means of its behaviour - passive resistance, strikes, demonstrations and self-organisation - enforced upon the authorities every step in the direction of democratisation and liberalisation. The communists formed a cohesive group, which not only toadied to a foreign (and hostile) power, but utilised terrorist and mafia-like techniques of governance. The scarce reformers in their midst aimed, at best, at a cosmetic refurbishment of the system; the very term “socialism with a human face” indicates the outcome of work performed by a beautician and not a surgeon. As is always the case with exceptions, periodic and local concessions confirmed the rule about the non-reformable nature of the system.

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The list of those “sensitive spots” could be made much longer. Regardless how rapidly and correctly historians fill the columns of their balance sheet, I harbour a conviction - bordering on certainty - that no ultimate or even a single balance sheet will emerge. On the contrary, the number of such balance sheets shall be considerable; some will be complimentary, others - mutually exclusive. Even if there should appear an ingenious Chief Accountant, capable of preparing a balance sheet that would be the result of a compromise, who could he present it to for the purposes of corroboration?

After all, God has His own accountants...

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1. *W drodze do przyzwoitej demokracji - rozmowa z Jerzym Szackim* (On the path towards decent democracy - an interview with Jerzy Szacki), “Nowe Księżki”, no. 5, May 1994.

2. Anna Magierska, *Dylematy historii PRL* (Dilemmas of the History of the Polish People’s Republic), Warszawa, 1995, p. 124.

3. Krystyna Kersten, Włodzimierz Suleja, Tomasz Szarota and Wojciech Wrzesiński in the discussion: *Historia najnowsza - między polityką a nauką* (Most recent history - between politics and science), “Odra”, no. 11, November 1995.

4. Marcin Król, *Długie trwanie a PRL* (Long duration and the Polish People’s Republic), “Res Publica Nowa”, no. 3 (54), March 1993, p. 39.

5. As in the case of, i. a. historians of the younger generation (Antoni Dudek, Dariusz Jarosz, Paweł Machcewicz, and Andrzej Friszke) in the discussion: *Czym była PRL?* (What was the Polish People’s Republic?), *Więź*, no. 2, 1996.

6. She presented this thesis most extensively in the paper: *O użyteczności konceptu totalitaryzmu w badaniach historii PRL* (On the usefulness of the concept of totalitarianism in studies into the history of the Polish People’s Republic) in: *Czy PRL była państwem totalitarnym?* (Was the Polish People’s Republic a Totalitarian State?), ed. A. Paczkowski, Warszawa 1991.

7. I discuss this issue slightly more broadly in the article: *Stalinizacja Europy Środkowo-wschodniej: casus Polski* (The Stalinisation of Central-Eastern Europe: the Polish case), "Obóz", no. 28, 1993.

## Q&A

Q. Are there any specific controversial issues left? Or are there only general issues?

A. The discourse is quite different between historians than it is in society. It is important to link these two types of discourse. People prefer black-and-white dichotomies, not the multicolored palettes which are used by historians. Hence, there is a popular presence for seeing Poles as victims of communism, and for seeing 1944-1989 as an assault from the outside. People also demand explanations only for big events, and are not that interested in the general cultural, socioeconomic, and political processes of transformation which interest historians.

Q. You spoke about totalitarianism before 1956 – could you elaborate on this comment?

A. Kersten's thesis is relatively complicated. If Poland was part of a totalitarian empire, then it had to be in a totalitarian sphere. Yet its rulers could not themselves be totalitarian because they were in a colonial relationship. The period of pure Stalinism was a period of the construction of totalitarianism. It included generalized terror and reaches all strata, including former Politburo members. It created an atmosphere of fear which survived Stalin. After 1956, there were quasi-elections, conformism, and internationalization of order. Terror was no longer necessary, but the possibility or threat of terror was real and the security network remained huge. It is important to remember that submission without terror is totalitarian, too.

Q. Do you feel that non-political conformity and aspects of totalitarianism relaxed after 1956?

A. Totalitarianism is an ideal type. For Gomułka and his successors, the problem was that some spheres of privacy were outside full control, but not without control. Holidays were organized as well. In the Gierek era, the possibility of control declined. In the crucial spheres of life, control existed until the end of the system, even though that control was perhaps not efficient.

Q. Are there any archival sources that historians have not been able to access?

A. There are many closed sources. These include special files of the secret police, military, and foreign affairs. There is a thirty-year limit. In the national archives, all documents of the Party have been available since 1990. These are the most important, because all organs were subservient to the Party. For some years, there has been a struggle with archival directors over the thirty-year law, but this remains unresolved. This concerns also the archives of the voivodships, where there is much material on the popular mentality, including jokes, rumors, gossip, etc.

Q. What are the political implications of the gap between the historians and the public – especially on the center-periphery view of communism? And is not this gap dangerous, since historians are not participating in democratization?

A. First of all, most of the historians involved in the transformation of 1989-1990 were medievalists. There was a prevalence of contemporary history in the samizdat of the 1980s. The Catholic Church also organized conferences and school meetings. Yet the public today demands "victimology."

Q. Are there no blank spots that people still argue about? Kielce? The postwar civil war?

A. I think that the more interesting work today is on long-term social and cultural history instead of quasi-military political history. For historians, these processes are more interesting. These are the new fields.

Q. Does the government force the teachers to use a specific textbook?

A. The government approves textbooks for use in the classroom, but the teacher decides which of the texts he or she will use.