

Polish-Soviet Relations 1944-1989: The Limits of Autonomy

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Any attempt at presenting the relations between two neighboring countries over the course of almost half a century in a brief paper is a highly hazardous undertaking, and could even be recognized as blatant impudence. In this case, however, the titular relations between Poland and the USSR were highly composite, remaining under the extremely strong impact of a centuries-old tradition of animosity and armed conflict.

In contrast to the extensive studies of the interwar period and World War II, the postwar years have rarely been the subject of thorough research in Polish historiography, as only pre-1989 propaganda and quasi-scientific literature provided accounts of this period until this time.¹ Indeed, not a single monographic study has dealt with the period as a whole, and those works which pertain to particular fragments of time or components of Polish-Soviet relations for all practical purposes limit their scope to the years before 1956.²

Naturally, the authors of numerous monographs or publications that focused on other problems either presented select facts or formulated opinions, sometimes outrightly categorical in nature. They could not have based their arguments on detailed research. The same can be said about the state of investigations into Soviet policy towards the region, since the only reliable monographic study by Henryk Bartoszewicz deals with a short stretch of time.³

¹ Examples of such publications from the 1980s include: Mikołaj Bucharin, Otilda Wyszomirska, *Polsko-radziecka współpraca naukowa 1944-1986* (Polish-Soviet Scientific Cooperation 1944-1986), Warszawa 1987, or *Leninizm i rozwój stosunków polsko-radzieckich* (Leninism and the Development of Polish-Soviet Relations), ed. by Alina Wojcieszak, Warszawa 1982. Scarce publications valuable from the viewpoint of the information contained therein include Andrzej Korzon *Polsko-radzieckie kontakty kulturalne w latach 1944-1950* (Polish-Soviet Cultural Relations in the Years 1944-1950), Wrocław 1982.

² E.g. Robert Łoć *Polska-ZSRR 1956 (Poland-the USSR 1956)*, Łódź 1999, and Edward J. Nalepa *Oficerowie Armii Radzieckiej w Wojsku Polskim 1943-1968* (The Soviet officers in the Polish Army 1943-1968), Warszawa 1995. There exists a copious document publication (*Informator o stosunkach Polska-Zwizek Radziecki 1944-1991* (Information about the Relations between Poland and the Soviet Union 1944-1991), prep. by Walenty Daszkiewicz, Warszawa 1994), but it contains information almost exclusively about official, formal events and documents.

³ *Polityka Zwiizku Sowieckiego wobec państw Europy Środkowo-wschodniej w latach 1944-1948* (The Policy of the Soviet Union towards Central-Eastern European States in the Years 1944-1948), Warszawa 1999.

The state of publications of Polish documents is not much better. Works issued before 1989 are limited to official documents and reprints of press commentaries.⁴ Furthermore, they are tainted by the restrictions imposed by official censorship and self-censorship. After 1989, Poland witnessed the publication of a number of documents previously regarded as “secret,” but no efforts were made to issue a series that would discuss the period as a whole. The most important resource, in my opinion, is the volume entitled *PRL-ZSRR 1956-1970. Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego* (The Polish People’s Republic-the USSR 1956-1970. Secret Documents of the Political Bureau),⁵ but no similar publications exist for the earlier or later years, and select documents that refer directly to Polish-Soviet relations rarely appear. Published reminiscences by Polish politician rarely contain information about Polish-Soviet relations, and among the most valuable are those that pertain to the years 1980-1981. The most significant diaries discussing other periods include those by Piotr Jaroszewicz and Henryk Róžański.⁶ I do not wish to delve into the reasons for the deficient state of Polish historiography, which appears even more curious when one considers that access to key Polish documents (material concerning the most prominent members of the communist party hierarchy) has been unrestricted for over ten years. Some Soviet leaders also kept journals, and from the viewpoint of our topic, the only useful reminiscences are those by Nikita Khrushchev which, however, appear to be rather chaotic.⁷

Political publications fraught with propaganda make the Russian and Soviet literature on foreign relations unreliable. Even the newly available documents provide only several brief monographic studies that resemble journalistic articles rather than books.⁸ As a rule, Polish-Soviet relations are discussed in works, most frequently collective, concerning Soviet policy towards the whole of East Central Europe. Nonetheless, they also as a rule focus on the years between 1944-1948, i.e. the period of the formation of new communist states, unless we take into consideration pre-1991 quasi-scientific writings.⁹ The works in question are based on documents available since the end of the 1980s,¹⁰ but historians still have limited opportunities to obtain

⁴ *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich* (Documents and evidences on the history of Polish-Soviet relations), vol.VIII-XI, Warszawa 1974-1987.

⁵ London 1998 (prep. by Andrzej Paczkowski and Nina Smolar); this volume contains, i. a. protocols from eleven Polish-Soviet summit talks.

⁶ Piotr Jaroszewicz *Przerywam milczenie...1939-1989* (I break the silence... 1939-1989), Warszawa; Henryk Róžański *Śladem wspomnień i dokumentów, 1943-1948* (On the track of reminiscences and evidences, 1943-1948), Warszawa 1988. Unfortunately, the extensive reminiscences by Władysław Gomułka end in 1945.

⁷ Much less information is to be found in the quasi-reminiscence by Molotov. Authors of numerous reminiscences from the 1985-1989 period wrote very little about Polish issues. The most extensive information is provided by Vadim A. Medvedev *Razpad. Kak on nazreval w “mirovom sistemie sotsializma,”* Moskva 1994.

⁸ E. g. Inessa S. Yazhborovskaia *1948 god: Moskva, Varsava, Yugoslovanskii vopros*, Moskva 1998.

⁹ By way of example: *SSSR i bratskie sotsialisticheskie strany Evropy w 70-e gody* (ed. by A. L. Narotchnitskii), Moskva 1988.

¹⁰ I.a. Leonid Y. Gibianskiy *U istokov socialisticheskovo druzhestva: SSSR i vostochnoevropeiskie strany v 1944-1949 g.*, Moskva 1995; *Kholodnaia voina. Novyie podhody, novye dokumenty*, Moskva 1995; Galina P.Murashko and Albina F.Noskova *Sovetskii factor v*

material concerning the highest authorities, not to mention the lack of access to material concerning the special services and the army. On the other hand, quite a few documents of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik), the NKVD, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been released in separate volumes about Poland¹¹ and in four volumes on Soviet policy towards the whole region.¹² These interesting and important documents pertain to the years 1944-1953. Other publications include scarce Political Bureau documents in both Polish and Russian that examine the years 1980-1982.¹³ They are of foremost relevance for analyzing the attitude of the Brezhnev team towards “the Polish crisis.” Certain doubts arise about the disclosure of these documents as a political maneuver performed by President Yeltsin. Nonetheless, this is the only copious collection of Soviet documents on Poland that the highest echelons of the government have provided. All told, the heart of the matter concerns access to archives, hampered both by the regulations in force in Russia, and more pragmatic reasons - the costs of conducting research abroad.

The available western literature on Polish-Soviet relations is incomparably more abundant although it too, as in the case of Russian studies, usually concerns the policy pursued by Moscow in relation to all of East Central Europe.¹⁴ The only known exception is the 1980-1981 period, which seems to attract the attention of researchers. Nonetheless, even this topic has not been discussed in a detailed monographic study until this time, and the only informative publications are those by Mark Kramer¹⁵ and Voytech Mastny.¹⁶ Glancing through library

poslevoiennoi Vostochnoi Evrope 1945-1948, in: *Sovetskaia vneshnaia politika w gody “kholodnoi voiny” (1945-1948)*. Novoie protshenie, Moskva 1995.

¹¹ *Polsha-SSSR mekhanizmy podchinieniia. Dokumenty TsK VKP(b) 1944-1946* (ed. by G. A. Bordiugov et al.), Moskva 1995 (a Polish edition appeared parallel); *NKVD i polskie podpolie po “osobym papkam” I. V. Stalina* (ed. by V. Noskova), Moskva 1994 (there is also a Polish edition); *“Teczka specjalna” J. W. Stalina: raporty NKVD z Polski 1944-1949* (The “Special File” of J.V. Stalin: NKVD Reports from Poland 1944-1949) (ed. by T. Cariewskaja et al.), Warszawa 1998.

¹² *Sovetskii faktor v Vostochnoi Evrope 1944-1953*, vol.I 1944-1948 (ed. By T.V.Volokitina et al.), Moskva 1999 and vol.II 1949-1953, Moskva 2002; *Vostochnaia Evropa v dokumentakh rossiiskikh archivov*, vol. I-II, Moskva 1997, 1999. A selection from vol. II has been published in Polish – *Polska w dokumentach z rosyjskich archiwów, 1949-1953* (Poland in Documents from Russian Archives, 1949-1953), Warszawa 2001.

¹³ The largest collection is in the appendix to the reminiscences of Vitaliy Pavlov: *Generał Pawłow: byłem rezydentem KGB w Polsce* (General Pavlov: I Was a KGB Resident in Poland), Warszawa 1994; a considerable part of these documents was published in English - as a rule prepared by Mark Kramer – as a working paper of the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), or in select issues of *CWIHP Bulletin*.

¹⁴ I omit publications which appeared in post-communist European countries since with the exception of extremely rare works dealing with the whole region they discuss only bilateral relations (Romanian-Soviet, Hungarian-Soviet, etc.); at any rate, their number remains relatively small.

¹⁵ *Soviet deliberation during the Polish Crisis, 1980-1981*, Cold War International History Project, Special Working Paper No. 1, Washington 1999.

¹⁶ *The Soviet non-invasion of Poland 1980/81 and the end of the cold war*, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper No. 23, Washington 1998.

catalogues and data bases under entries on “Soviet-Polish relations” or “the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe” one may find multiple titles, but they are predominantly current analyses of political or economic events, and often commissioned by government institutions for the purpose of providing descriptions and prognoses. On the other hand, the number of historical studies, particularly those containing confidential Soviet and Polish documents, remains slight. The authors tend to concentrate on relations between the superpowers or their “global game” (e. g. the Berlin crisis of 1958-1961, the Cuban crisis of 1962, the Vietnam war, Soviet influence in the so-called Third World, etc.). The problems of Polish-Soviet relations or even Soviet policy in East Central Europe are relegated to the background.¹⁷

The fact is that historiography dealing with our theme is meager. To bring this topic to the foreground of a study, I have provided an outline that presents a general framework of Polish-Soviet relations, showing their basic principles as well as the changes which took place therein.

For the purpose of this text I describe Poland’s relations with the Soviet Union as that of a vassal. The sovereign power, the Soviet Union, deployed the services of the vassal, Poland, and was obligated to take care of the latter’s security in return. Both sides benefited from the arrangement: the vassal enjoyed security and the sovereign thrived off its power. In the case of the vassal, the crux of the matter concerned not only external security (international relations) but also internal threats (protection against a revolution or a coup), which the vassal could not overcome on its own (as in East Germany in 1953). Such an arrangement was never based exclusively on a single factor (e. g. economic or military), but on principles which Vladimir Zubok aptly described as a “geopolitical blend of [political] realism and ideological messianism.”¹⁸ Such a “blend” was characteristic predominantly of the sovereign, but it actually occurred on both sides, ensuring its durability and reducing the susceptibility of the vassal to succumbing to on-the-spot needs, which might profit by abandoning the sovereign. Moreover, it seems worth drawing attention to the fact that the vassal may “perish” without the sovereign, but a sovereign whose vassals have “left” loses its international status. It is therefore interested in its vassals having enough strength to engage in external relations (e. g. with other sovereigns), but not to the extent that the vassal has the power to free itself.¹⁹ The “geopolitical blend” also

¹⁷ Unless one is concerned with events with vast international repercussions, analogous to the Polish crisis of the 1980s (the stifling of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 or the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968), military issues (numerous studies about the Warsaw Pact), the economy (mainly, however, from the 1970s and 1980s) and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc (the best probably being Jacques Levesque’s *1989. La fin de l’empire*, Paris 1995, also available in an English edition). Literature pertaining to the history of the region or particular states, including Poland, is much more copious. Naturally, the “Soviet factor” is always analyzed as the fundamental element molding the situation (as in the best works by Zbigniew Brzeziński, Francois Fejto or Joseph Rothschild); nonetheless, such publications are devoted exclusively to mutual relations.

¹⁸ V. M. Zubok *New evidence on the “Soviet factor” in the peaceful revolutions of 1989*, in *CWIHP Bulletin*, no. 12/13, 2001, p. 6.

¹⁹ The Soviet Union experienced several successful “escapes” (starting with the Yugoslav one in 1948), and in several other cases resorted to armed intervention in order to quash such attempts (Hungary in 1956) or to prevent the possibility of their hypothetical initiation (Czechoslovakia in 1968).

brought about the subordination of the ruling hegemon, the Communist Party, by the Soviet “mother-party.” Amongst the tools serving the creation and, subsequently, the retention of the vassal configuration of forces, the party channel proved to be the most important.

To end these general remarks, another prominent element needs to be mentioned, namely, the place held by Poland in the Soviet vassal system. It is frequently accepted that Poland was “the heart of the main Soviet security zone in the region and the main military communication channel between the Soviet Union and East Germany,” and that it thus played a “pivotal role in Soviet strategy.”²⁰ One may add that traditionally, both for Russia and the Soviet Union, Poland was a terrain from which the enemy approached: Napoleon in 1812, the Central Powers in 1914, the Third Reich in 1941, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Poles themselves occupied Moscow for two years. At the same time, Poland was terrain that the Russian and Soviet armies had to cross to reach Western Europe, in 1815, 1920 and 1945. The need to control this territory, therefore, did not depend on whether the intentions of Moscow or St. Petersburg were aggressive or defensive. Even if one were to acknowledge that the German Democratic Republic was the “pearl in the crown” of the vassal system, then, in order not to lose that gem, the Soviet Union was compelled to control Poland. Although Norman Davies has described Poland as “the heart of Europe,” I find it more appropriate to call it “the main highway across Europe.”

Moreover, Poland was the largest vassal, both with respect to its territory and the size of the population, as a result of the decisions made by Stalin with the consent of both Western allies. If the location of Poland influenced the necessity of maintaining it within the configuration, or in other words, of strictly controlling the vassal’s activity, then its sheer dimension made it necessary to take account of her. Both military occupation and eventual incorporation would have been more difficult and costlier than in the case of the lesser participants of the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet Union almost always feared, although I cannot tell whether correctly so, traditional anti-Russian sentiments, which had been reinforced with anti-Soviet feelings since 1919, were the reason why even the loyalty of the Polish communists could not be trusted.

Despite intensive studies, not much can be said about Soviet plans towards Poland during the last stage of World War II. We know that Stalin himself prepared the creation of a center that would be an alternative to the legal Polish emigre and Underground authorities and would be dominated by the communists. It is uncertain whether he assumed that such a center would act as a trump card in the course of eventual negotiations with the Allies about establishing a Polish coalition government, or whether he planned that it would take complete power in Poland. An analysis prepared at the end of 1943 by Ivan Mayski shows that the existence of a Poland independent of the Soviet Union was being considered. “We are not interested,” Mayski wrote, “in the emergence of [Poland] as excessively strong or strong”; this should be “a country as small as possible,” a goal which could be attained “by consistently applying the principle of ethnographic borders.”²¹ It is not clear whether this was the only option. A document from more or less the same time prepared by Maxim Litvinov did not treat Poland separately, but located it within the Soviet “sphere of interest,” which included also Finland, Sweden and all the countries

²⁰ R. J. Jones, *The Soviet concept...*, p. 198.

²¹ I quote according to the Polish edition: *Memorandum Iwana Majskego* (The Ivan Mayski Memorandum) (prep. by A. Werblan), in *Dzieje Najnowsze*, no. 2, 1997, p.140 (original edition: *Istocznik*, no. 4, 1995).

situated to the south of Poland, together with Turkey.²² According to Filitov, Litvinov presumed that the Soviet Union would decide who would become the leaders of these states, and that these persons would be politicians “oriented eastwards.” Nothing was said about the fact that they were to be the local communists. Quite possibly, other conceptions were also being taken into consideration. At any rate, concluding *via facti*, one may say that no later than the middle of 1944 predominant opinions mentioned the creation of Poland as a relatively strong state, at least according to European standards.

Most probably, this trend was associated with solutions of the aforementioned alternatives as regards the role to be played by a center created by the communists. If Poland was to be a sovereign state, then it should have been weak and small, but as a state located within the Soviet orbit it was envisaged as large and strong. Crucial significance was attached to the western frontier: in the face of the unclear future fate of Germany, this border became, at least temporarily, the western confines of the system of dependent states, and thus the boundary of the empire. For the same reasons that Stalin shifted Poland to the west, the Allies tried to limit his maneuver. The Red Army ultimately had the decisive role.

By endowing his vassal with a certain territory Stalin had created a geopolitical core of dependence, guaranteed by the hegemonic position of the local communists and their simultaneous dependence on Moscow. This “geo-ideological” structure facilitated influencing Poland also because the communists, taking over power under the aegis of a foreign state and treated by the majority of the Poles as a foe, were doomed to experience permanent or at least long-term problems with their internal legitimization. External legitimization, provided by the support of a world power, proved to be even more indispensable.

Generally speaking, the years under examination can be divided into two periods: 1944-1956 and 1956-1989.²³ Keeping in mind the reservation that in the case of a description of extensive phenomena particular dates are arbitrary or symbolic, one may even try to indicate the day of the transition from one phase to the next: the late evening of 19 October 1956 when after long talks Khrushchev stopped protesting against cadre decisions previously made by the Polish political leaders without coordination with Moscow.²⁴ The acceptance of such a division, however, makes it difficult to present the dynamics of the changes, even if they were not as crucial as those dating from the autumn of 1956. This is why it is indispensable to “fragmentize” both periods into shorter stretches of time, all with their own specificity. It is possible, with perhaps excessive meticulousness, to distinguish the following “sub-periods”: 1944-1948, 1948-1956, 1956-1980, 1980-1981, 1982-1986, and 1986-1989. Naturally, the boundaries between

²² Alexei M. Filitov *Problems of post-war construction in Soviet foreign policy conceptions during World War II*, in: F. Gori & S. Pons (eds.) *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943-1953*, London 1966, pp. 3-22.

²³ Undoubtedly, the year 1989 closes the whole period mainly due to the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from exerting direct impact on the situation in the region, which was caused, on the one hand, by Moscow’s weakness and, on the other hand, by the fact that several other communist state had “escaped” from the communist camp. The “geo-ideological” factor ceased functioning, and there was nothing which could have replaced it.

²⁴ In reality, the final decision to abandon intervention in Poland was made at the Kremlin several days later, when Hungary became the scene of abrupt changes. The Soviet Union was incapable of conducting a battle along two fronts, and the events in Hungary were much more menacing for the sovereign since, in contrast to the Polish ones, they had evaded his control.

them are to a certain degree arbitrary. Even the caesura of 1956 is not quite as unambiguous as I have presented it, since events from October 1956 were preceded by a several-years long “thaw.”

To tell the truth, I am incapable of finding a satisfactory and unambiguous description for the situation in 1944-1948. On the one hand, both the Polish communists and the Soviet Union accentuated differences between the Soviet system and its clone being introduced in Poland, avoiding steps which could have been regarded as a Sovietization of the country and stressing the sovereignty of the new authorities. On the other hand, the Red Army and the NKVD were the prime pillars controlling the situation and the seizure of power, while the Soviet armed forces continued to wield direct rule over certain spheres and regions (e. g. German lands handed over to Poland) at the very least through the second half of 1945. Although the Polish communists were well aware of the fact that without the presence of the Red Army they could not have even dreamt about the far-reaching power that they managed to achieve, Stalin reminded them of this factor at least on several occasions. In November 1945, and thus at a time when it seemed that the communists were already firmly ensconced, he said to Gomułka: “There are no international circumstances that would require keeping large troops of the Red Army in Poland (...) The only question is your domestic situation. The point is for them not to kill you.”²⁵ The internal (sic!) armies of the NKVD were stationed in Poland until Spring 1947, at least half a year longer than the Soviet authorities deemed it necessary. Until Autumn 1945, the majority of the commanding posts in the Polish army and in certain types of services or their branches (the navy, the air force, border and internal armies, the counter-intelligence) were still held by Soviet officers. Soviets were not only deployed in the Ministry of Public Security as functionaries supervising several important departments (e.g. personnel or finances), but there also existed a separate apparatus of advisers, probably composed of several hundred persons (sovietnik), ranging from the ministerial to county level, while the aforementioned NKVD troops were subordinated directly to the Supreme Commander and conducted both on-the-spot activity (disarming Home Army detachments, quests, pacification campaigns) and operational activity.²⁶

Other domains of state life were not directly managed by the Soviets, and there was no formal surveillance on their part. Certain channels did exist to transmit recommendations, as they were enigmatically described, which sometimes concerned extremely detailed solutions. Unfortunately, the present-day state of research does not make it feasible to propose a holistic analysis concerning the contents of such messages and the way in which they were communicated. It remains indubitable that alongside permanent, or routine to use another term, communication via the apparatus of the Soviet diplomatic and consular services in Poland (and

²⁵ *The conversation between Władysław Gomułka and Josef Stalin on 14 November 1945* prep. by A. Werblan, *CWIHP Bulletin*, no. 11, 1999, p. 138 (for all of Gomułka's notes see pp. 135-139).

²⁶ Including the arrest of the leaders of the Polish Underground state, whose public trial was held in Moscow in June 1945. In special cases, suitable teams arrived in Poland, as during the referendum of 30 June 1946 and the elections of 19 January 1947, when Moscow sent a group composed of up to twenty persons, who prepared, and partially conducted, the falsification of the election results. More details about this mission in Nikita Petrov, *Sztuka wygrywania wyborów* (The Art of Winning Elections), in *Karta*, No.18, 1996, pp.121-130

probably to a lesser degree their Polish counterparts in the Soviet Union²⁷) as well as the *sovietniki*, contacts at the highest level remained fundamental. On the Polish side, they were maintained by Bolesław Bierut and Gomułka as well as several other “top” Party functionaries (such as Hilary Minc or Jakub Berman). Some meetings were held together with the leaders of the International Communication Department of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik), who in 1944-1947 fulfilled the functions of the Comintern (dissolved in 1943).²⁸ The most important, however, were direct talks with Stalin, which Gomułka described in his reminiscences as “frequent” but whose exact number has not as yet been determined.²⁹

An excellent example of the nature of these consultations could be the already cited conversation held on 14 November 1945, about which Gomułka made rather detailed notes.³⁰ Among other things, the Poles asked: whether to nationalize great industry and the banks; whether foreign capital should be let into Poland; whether to accept American and British loans; whether Poland should sign a friendship treaty with France; whether to invite representatives of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) to a Polish Party congress; whether to delay parliamentary elections; and whether it was possible to change the Prime Minister if the incumbent did not work as he should? Upon certain occasions, Stalin served as an intermediary in conflicts between Polish communists and their closest allies in the socialist party (e.g. in 1946). When Gomułka was being ousted from the Party in Summer 1948, the details of the whole operation were coordinated with Stalin.

Not only international relations (political and economic) but also Polish domestic issues were “steered manually.” Nonetheless, in certain other cases, the Polish communists filed complaints with Stalin (e. g. about the terror imposed by Red Army marauders), stressed the necessity to consider the economic needs of Poland (e.g. by means of suitable participation in German reparations) or publicly complained (albeit at closed Party meetings) about the uncurbed activity of the NKVD, even though this was a period of strict dependency. It would be difficult to determine whether and to what degree the Polish communists attempted to win some sort of a field of maneuver, or strove towards gaining true autonomy. The research and documents which I had the opportunity to examine do not tell us this.

The first instance of more serious discord took place in Autumn 1947, when Stalin initiated the Sovietization of the whole of East Central Europe and there appeared the slogan of the collectivization of agriculture, whose realization he himself had earlier dissuaded. Although other Polish communists accepted the new line without the slightest shade of protest, Gomułka expressed reservations, which is not to say that he was a supporter of private land ownership but merely that he thought that it was too early for such a change. Spring 1948 witnessed another misunderstanding, namely, when Gomułka together with his comrades among the Party

²⁷ A representative of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers’ Party, who in 1944-1948 remained outside the embassy in Moscow, provided the Soviets with information and Party documents, including the protocols of some of the Political Bureau sessions.

²⁸ E.g. the meeting between Gomułka and Dimitrov on 10 May 1945. See minutes in *Polsha-SSSR: mekhanizmy podchinenia...*, pp.105-127

²⁹ W. Gomułka *Wspomnienia* (Reminiscences), vol. II, Warszawa 1994, p. 516.

³⁰ The volume *Vostochnaia Evropa w dokumentakh rossiiskikh arkhivov* includes a much briefer note made by Stalin from the same talk (vol. I, pp. 301-303; for a translation into English see *The conversation between...*, pp. 139-140).

leadership deliberated the possibility of mediating in the Stalin-Tito conflict. Although the very phenomenon of a struggle against “deviations” was of a purely structural character, and was probably an element necessary for inaugurating the actual Sovietization of all the countries already dominated by the communists, it is not quite clear why Gomułka was chosen to be the victim. Upon the basis of examined documents one may argue that Gomułka was “singled out” not by his Polish rivals, but by the apparatchiks from the Soviet Central Committee and possibly by Stalin himself.³¹ Not only Gomułka, but many other leading communists were negatively assessed in Moscow, which for long harbored almost total distrust and suspicion. To summarize, the state of affairs in 1944-1948 can be seen as a period during which the vassal was outfitted with territory and guarantees of power over that area (thanks to protection on the international arena) and its inhabitants.

From the viewpoint of the applied mechanisms of dependence, the following period - the years 1948-1956 - did not differ qualitatively from its predecessor. Certain changes occurred in proportions with respect to the number of advisers in particular sections of the state administration. By way of example, the presence of Soviet functionaries in the security apparatus was limited by the withdrawal of the soviets from assorted counties and the pullback of NKVD troops. The number of Soviet officers not only in the regular army, but also in the internal troops and border guards, dropped. On the other hand, since Autumn 1949, when the post of the Minister of National Defence was taken over by Konstanty Rokossowski, a Soviet Marshal of partially Polish origin, all the highest posts, with the exception of those dealing with political propaganda, were entrusted to Soviet generals.³² Advisers appeared in various civilian institutions, from the Ministry of Heavy Industry to the Party Academy. This process was particularly discernible starting in 1950, i.e. in connection with the Korean war and the general international situation. Rapid industrialization emulating the Soviet model was additionally accelerated by an expansion of the armament industry and the development of the communication and liaison infrastructure. All this took place on the basis of Soviet technology and equipment, which necessitated the presence of experts and advisers even at relatively low level -- armament factories, shipyards, steel plants. Nonetheless, with the exception of the armed forces, which actually became part of the Soviet Army,³³ Soviet economic specialists did not hold top posts nor worked on a regular basis, but were considered “contract” employees. Advisers in the Ministry of Public Security acted rather discreetly and, for example, almost never

³¹ The first document analyzing the “deviation”, known to me, originated in March 1948 within the apparatus of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik); see *Polsha-SSSR: mekhanizmy podchinenia...*, pp. 229-246. Similar analyses pertained to the communist parties of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. This was also the time of the escalation of the conflict with Yugoslavia.

³² Soviet generals held the posts of the Chief of the General Staff (and heads of all the Staff departments), commanders of land armies, the navy and the air force, commanders of all three military districts, and commanders such services and their branches as artillery and liaison. It seems worth drawing attention to the fact that at the same time (November 1949) advisers (“chiefs” and “seniors”) were delegated to the Bulgarian, Romanian and Hungarian armies. In other words, the range of the operation was much wider, although nowhere did a situation arise similar to the one in Poland.

³³ Including changes of rules or the introduction of caps with round crowns in place of the traditional four-cornered caps.

spoke at the periodical councils held by the heads of the Ministry and the local units.³⁴ I am unable to determine or estimate the total number of Soviet specialists and advisers in Poland.³⁵ Viewing their presence in demonic terms seems to be unfounded, with the exception of the army and the security apparatus, although many Poles found it insufferable.

It is much more important that the year 1949 marked the beginning of a wide-scale Sovietization of Poland, a process that aimed to render the country similar to the Soviet political and economic system and with respect to Soviet social and cultural life. A wide-scale exchange of delegations in the most varied fields of life began. The theater and cinema repertoire featured increasingly frequently featured Soviet plays and films. A similar policy was conducted as regards translations, and the Russian language was introduced as an obligatory subject in almost all types of schools, including universities. This process was accompanied by extremely expanded propaganda based on Soviet patterns and using the same slogans, techniques and concepts,³⁶ the leading call being: “The Soviet Union - a help and an example.”³⁷ Although much detailed data are still missing, the documents already known to us (i.a. a list of Stalin’s interlocutors from 1924-1954, published in the periodical “Istoricheskii Arkhiv”³⁸ or the volume containing lists of the Political Bureau’s daily agendas³⁹) make it possible to ascertain that in 1949-1950 meetings with Stalin remained just as frequent. By way of example, in 1949, Stalin held four meetings with Bierut and/or Minc at the Kremlin alone. Unfortunately, I do not have at my disposal any records that detail the course of these talks, but the composition of the Polish side allows us to assume that they dealt primarily with the economy; Minc, the chief person responsible for the Polish economy, participated in three such meetings. The daily agenda of the sessions held by the Soviet Political Bureau frequently mentions issues connected with Poland, including those listed in letters received from Bierut or the Polish leadership.

Documents suggest that the “diplomatic channel,” or at least Ambassador Victor Lebedev, who officiated in Warsaw since 1945 and was familiar with local conditions, remained relatively active. The same documents show, however, that he enjoyed limited opportunities for making decisions on Polish questions, and for all practical purposes was entrusted with the task of merely informing Moscow and passing on letters or oral information which he received from the Soviet capital. In at least one instance, when Lebedev tried to influence the cadre decisions made by Polish leaders, Bierut reacted with a letter addressed to Stalin, who chose not to back his ambassador.⁴⁰ Upon several occasions, Lebedev suggested thorough personnel changes at the

³⁴ Up to 1956, however, the same Soviet officers invariably held posts of directors of personnel (Nikolai Orekhva) and financial departments (Ivan Kisielov).

³⁵ A large number probably stayed for a short period of time, but, for example, the Chief Adviser in the Ministry of Public Security worked in Poland from 1954 to 1959.

³⁶ For a good description of this phenomenon see: Robert Kupiecki “*Natchnienie milionów.*” *Kult Józefa Stalina w Polsce 1944-1956* (“The inspiration for the millions”: The cult of Stalin in Poland 1944-1956), Warszawa 1993.

³⁷ Assistance was so far-reaching that specialists sent to Poland included experts on combating the Colorado beetle (*koloratskii zhuk*).

³⁸ This is a partial list, including only talks held at the Kremlin; from 1945 to his death, Stalin frequently received guests in one of his suburban dachas, in the Crimea or in Sochi. During some years he did not stay in Moscow from August until December.

³⁹ *Politburo TsK RKP(b)-VKP(B): povestki dnia zasedanii*, vol. III: 1940-1952, Moskva 2001.

⁴⁰ For Bierut’s letter to Stalin see *Vostochnaia Evropa v dokumentakh...*, vol.II, pp. 337-342.

very pinnacle of the Polish United Workers' Party and the Ministry of Public Security, but Moscow clearly accepted the existing state of affairs, and probably only a single important proposal made by the ambassador was ultimately implemented (the ousting of Jews from the leadership and Bierut's entourage). The battle that was waged against internal enemies (the "Gomułka phenomenon") and general terror was regulated from outside the embassy. It was the advisers and not the ambassador who passed on cadre decisions or injunctions, and the most important problems were resolved through personal contact with Bierut.

The struggle against the external enemy, and especially the course it assumed in other vassal states,⁴¹ was why fear was probably one of the most essential factors influencing the decisions and behavior of the Polish communist leaders, not to mention society as such. I do not have suitable and reliable sources at my disposal nor am I sufficiently competent to deal with this issue, but it seems that fear should not have been neglected in analyses and descriptions of the state of dependency upon Big Brother. It is quite possible that fear was one of the sources of adulation. A letter written by Bierut to Stalin starts with the words: "Beloved [lubimyi] and dear comrade Stalin."⁴² Obviously, respect was no longer enough and had to be accompanied by love. Although many Party activists had survived Soviet camps or exile to the innermost recesses of the Soviet Union, the only thing they had to fear in 1944-1948 was an attack launched by the anti-communist underground. After 1948, the main threats against personal security came from their own comrades and the repressive apparatus that they had themselves created and that the Party still supervised. Naturally, the "course" aimed at intensifying repression had been initiated in Moscow, and even if Moscow did not steer it in a daily basis, it controlled it.

In 1949-1953, the essential outcome of the system that was established to render Poland dependent was not only the creation of models of behavior and that a considerable part of society - *nolens volens* - accepted them, or at least became accustomed to them. Over time, basic transformations within the structure of the economy, such as trends and manners of industrialization or management, proved to be more important, although there is no empirical proof that without the influence exerted by Moscow the Polish communists would have acted otherwise. The same holds true for social change, including rapid urbanization. Neither industrialization nor urbanization as such were something extraordinary, since from the mid-nineteenth century onward the whole of Europe gradually experienced similar transformations. In the conditions of the communist system, however, they assumed specific forms.

By continuing to describe the relations between Poland and the USSR as characteristic of a vassal, one could say that the 1948-1953 period was one in which the vassal tried or perhaps was compelled to become more similar to the sovereign. The latter needed this process in order to gain an inner cohesion of the whole system. The vassals operated within the framework of the same conceptual and ideological structure, and thus the major part of this "import" probably did not produce any reservations on their part. On the contrary - it was treated as the realization of a long-cherished vision.

The first essential change after the death of Stalin was the gradual disappearance of fear for personal security. The system of "consultations," however, continued to function. Here are two examples: in June 1953, like the communist leaders of Hungary, Bulgaria and

⁴¹ The show trials of Slansky, Rajk and Kostov, the arrests of, and death sentences for members of the elite of power in Albania or Romania, etc.

⁴² *Vostochnaia Evropa v dokumentakh...*, vol.II, p.337

Czechoslovakia,⁴³ Bierut went to Moscow to obtain directives about the “new course” and explanations concerning its essence. During this visit, he asked for “advice,” as was his habit, among other topics, about the stand of the new Soviet leaders concerning the arrest of Primate Stefan Wyszyński. Moscow’s opinion was sought once again (this time, via telephone) in October 1954, when a high-ranking functionary of the Ministry of Public Security fled to the West and disclosed some of the secrets of his Ministry, thus making it necessary to carry out certain cadre changes and to reorganize the security services.

The Kremlin modus operandi underwent a slow evolution, and relations with the vassals became slightly more open. Nevertheless, Moscow did not undertake any steps that would weaken its control and influence. When the death of Bierut was followed by a “succession controversy” and Poland entered a political crisis, the Soviets reacted rather nervously. In the course of seven months, representatives of the highest leadership arrived in Warsaw to take part in three plenary sessions of the PUWP Central Committee: Khrushchev came in March for the election of Bierut’s successor; Prime Minister Bulganin visited in July for a basic discussion with the factions that had come into being within the Polish Political Bureau; and Khrushchev arrived once again in October to prevent Gomułka from being nominated the First Secretary of the Central Committee. Can one imagine Stalin arriving in Warsaw, even for such important reasons? He would have simply summoned the necessary persons and settled the whole matter either at the Kremlin or in Sochi.

Although this type of conduct can be recognized as an expression of determination, it actually revealed a symptom of uncertainty and the weakening position of the empire’s center. The Polish Party leadership was aware of this, and finding itself under growing social pressure and fearing the outbreak of another revolt (the vision of a “second Poznań”), it embarked upon steps that can be regarded as a reflection of efforts aimed at an expansion of autonomy. In September, and thus prior to Gomułka’s return to power, the Political Bureau decided to, i.a. negotiate with the Soviet Union about the losses which Poland had suffered by selling Moscow coal below world prices, and to ask for the withdrawal of advisers from the security apparatus.⁴⁴ Such issues as industrial wage increases, the expansion of “economic maneuver” initiated already in 1954 as part of Malenkov’s “new course,” resignation from part of the obligatory supplies, the announcement of amnesty for political prisoners (leaving “only” about 1,500 incarcerated) or the restoration of Gomułka’s party membership were not consulted with Moscow, or at least appropriate documents do not contain any proof that this took place. Quite possibly, Soviet leaders would have expressed their approval in the case of these particular issues, but the problem lay in the fact that no one asked for their consent or even opinion. In this way, during 1956 the heretofore pattern of relations became partially eroded and the seizure of power by Gomułka was only the apogee of a prevalent tendency. The social atmosphere in which Gomułka returned to power was one of a considerable enlargement of the range of autonomy.

⁴³ The best known were the talks held by the Hungarian delegation, since Moscow outright demanded cadre changes and the appointment of Imre Nagy as Prime Minister. For details see Janos Rainer, *The New Course in Hungary in 1953*, CWIHP Working Paper No.38, Washington DC, 2002.

⁴⁴ Minutes of the session of the Political Bureau on 7 September 1956 see *Centrum w³adzy. Protoko³y posiedzeñ kierownictwa PZPR. Wybór z lat 1949-1970* (The Center of Power: Minutes of the sessions of the managing staff of the PUWP. Selection from the years 1949-1970), Warszawa 2000, pp.183-4.

Gomuška's personality played a large role; he was sensitive to the predominant mood and, at the same time, could act as an unyielding negotiator. Quite certainly, he did not regard himself as someone inferior to Khrushchev; after all, he was one of those men who did not fear Stalin. I cannot say whether other communist leaders won a similar range of maneuver. It is quite probable that, with the exception of Kadar, they too gained greater liberty, but did not exploit it for the purpose of conducting reforms. Regardless of whether we believe that the new limits of autonomy were won thanks to Gomuška's personality and the support he enjoyed among Polish society, or that they were the consequence of the general de-Stalinization conducted by Khrushchev, the existing Polish-Soviet relationship was subjected to far-reaching changes and evolved to a totally different level than had been the case at any point during Stalin's lifetime. The first example of this transformation, although unknown to public opinion at the time, was the fact that not quite two weeks after his unfortunate visit in Warsaw, Khrushchev once again met Gomuška. This time, the encounter was kept secret, and its purpose was to inform the Polish leader about the decision to carry out armed intervention in Hungary.⁴⁵ From that time on, for a number of years, Gomuška held similar annual confidential meetings, always in Poland, first with Khrushchev and subsequently with Brezhnev.

Gradually, relations between the sovereign and the vassals became increasingly formalized; it is perhaps even more important that some of these contacts assumed the character of multilateral meetings attended by all the leaders of communist states.⁴⁶

The hibernation of COMECON, which existed since 1949 but had remained a moribund institution, now ended. In time, sessions held by the political organs of the Warsaw Pact became increasingly regular; during the period immediately after its establishment in 1955 for all practical purposes there were none. Although many of them were sheer ritual, the meetings were not only a question of protocol but, in my opinion, possessed real significance. By way of example, despite the fact that the Romanians often represented a stand at variance with the one held by Moscow and other countries, they remained both in COMECON and the Warsaw Pact. This fact reflected the existence of a sui generis pluralization of the "vassal team," and proved that as long as ideological principles of the system were not negated it was possible to enjoy a rather vast field of maneuver.

A comparison of the way Moscow tackled crises in dependent countries renders discernible changes in the technology of fulfilling the function of a sovereign: in 1956, Khrushchev informed several of his colleagues from fraternal parties about his decision barely a few days prior to armed intervention; he did not use the Warsaw Pact despite the fact that at the time it had already existed for more than a year. In 1968, communist leaders met frequently, and although the decision to intervene was made within the Soviet Political Bureau, its "political packaging" was prepared by Gomuška, Kadar, Ulbricht, and Zhivkov, and the armies of several Warsaw Pact states participated in the invasion.

⁴⁵ The meeting took place on 1 November in one of the government villas to the north-east of Warsaw.

⁴⁶ The functioning of the Cominform was actually a mere episode, similarly to "no. 1" members of other parties Stalin never took part in the sessions; no important decisions were made, with the sole exception of the founding session (1947) and the one at which Yugoslavia was excluded (1948). For all practical purposes, the Cominform shared the fate of many other communist institutions and was just a dummy.

Khrushchev was highly impulsive and sometimes behaved “untypically” or outright brutally. This is why after October 1956 his relations with Gomułka and other communist leaders were tense for a certain time; even then, however, Moscow did not embark upon any sort of activity aimed at alternating the cadres or forcing the Poles to initiate undertakings. Based on documents one may say that the whole process known as a “departure from October” progressed without any Soviet intervention, although the Soviets welcomed the changes. On various occasions the Kremlin expressed its disapproval for assorted symptoms of Polish distinctness, such as the existence of private farms or an independent Catholic Church. It was not the reservations expressed by Moscow, however, which caused the anti-Church *Kulturkampf* initiated by Gomułka in 1961. Minutes of the talks held by him with Khrushchev and Brezhnev reflect that these were no mere “consultations,” during which the vassal asks the sovereign for advice or even decisions, but an exchange of information (whose reliability is quite another matter).

First and foremost, one has the impression, or at least I did, that these meetings involved specialists dealing with the economy. I draw attention to this particular element since the economy became one of the most relevant “anchors” maintaining Poland in a state of dependency. Gomułka was well aware of the innovative character of Western economy and its investment potential, but he was almost panic-stricken by the “new-style counter-revolution,” as he described it in 1968, consisting of a “peaceful absorption” of socialist states by capitalism applying economic dependency. (Admittedly, he was quite correct, and at the end of 1980s this vision to a large degree came true). The only natural solution was advanced economic cooperation with the Soviet Union and other members of COMECON. Naturally, in this configuration, Poland was the supplicant: it asked for increased supplies of crude oil, iron ore, cotton, grain, and even meat. Divergent stands occurred chiefly in those cases when the Soviet side announced that it could not provide Poland with the necessary amount of raw material, but they testified rather to dependency than to a Polish willingness to reduce it. It is impossible to make light of the geopolitical motifs of Gomułka’s fears, since his *idée fixe* was fear of (West) “German imperialism,” the main element of anti-capitalist phobia being ideology. Even if belief in the rapid triumph of a world revolution had faded, there still existed a deep conviction about the superiority of socialism and that by becoming a communist country Poland had selected the best possible path of development. In other words, the “economic anchor” was forged out of ideology.

During the 1960s, Moscow frequently and sometimes in detail, informed its Polish comrades and probably also those from other communist states about various international ventures. On certain occasions Moscow even forwarded drafts of various documents to Warsaw and the Poles passed on their opinions, which were not always positive or trivial but also critical.⁴⁷ Warsaw was interested primarily in the German question; admittedly, it was not only the Soviet side which provided Poland with multiple information about talks with West German politicians, but it was predominantly the Poles and chiefly Gomułka who expressed opinions rather openly, thus producing divergencies. “It is simply unthinkable,” Gomułka said at a closed session of the Central Committee in October 1964, “for Poland to conduct a different policy or for us to publicly express a critical stand towards any move made by the Soviet Union,” and in

⁴⁷ By way of example, in 1963, Minister Adam Rapacki prepared extremely critical comments to the project of a Soviet declaration about Laos (Archive of New Acts, further as: AAN, KC PZPR, 2639).

the case of different views “we express our stand in an inner-Party discussion.”⁴⁸ Yet another area in which Gomułka was active was the communist movement; for a certain time, he tried to halt the more radical Soviet steps towards China, although he was not by any means a supporter of the Great Leap Forward or any other ideas devised by Mao Tse-tung. Nonetheless, even in his relations with “fraternal” countries Gomułka called for help from the Kremlin. In 1970, in a conversation with Gromyko he declared that as regards the conflict with East Germany, he was forced to “complain about that which we find extremely painful.”⁴⁹

An essential element of the new configuration was the departure of the Soviet officers from the Polish Army. Rokossowski and the majority of high-ranking commanders returned to the Soviet Union already in November-December 1946. Only several generals stayed behind, but they too ultimately disappeared at the end of the 1960s. All Soviet functionaries working in the Polish security apparatus were retired together with the institution of the *sovietniki*; nonetheless, the same officer who was the “chief adviser” of the Minister was entrusted with the post of the head of the KGB mission in Poland. This mission, composed of at least up to twenty officers, had direct access to Polish functionaries, but I know nothing about the range of its activity, contacts with members of the Party apparatus, or role in 1964-1968, when Mieczysław Moczar, the highly ambitious Minister of Internal Affairs (and in 1940-1941 a Soviet Army Intelligence agent), tried to dominate the highest levels of Party leadership. One way or another, after 1956 the range of autonomy expanded considerably. Unfortunately, due to the inaccessibility of Soviet documents it is difficult to say whether Soviet leaders aimed at shaping Polish leadership so as to ensure greater influence upon its decisions. Despite intensive research on the course of the events that led to the ousting of Gomułka in December 1970, there is no clear proof that it had been inspired or organized by Moscow.⁵⁰ We only know that Vice-Premier Piotr Jaroszewicz, who was staying in Moscow during the first day of the crisis, talked with Prime Minister Kosygin and discussed personnel issues.⁵¹ It is also recognized, probably correctly, that the letter issued by the Soviet Political Bureau on 17 December drawing attention to the necessity of discovering a “political solution” to the crisis, was if not an outright suggestion, then at least consent to the dismissal of the First Secretary. If the Kremlin had really directly influenced this change, then this would be certainly an isolated case. Until now, the Soviet stand towards the crisis within the Polish leadership in 1967-1968 had not been examined, but Polish documents do not suggest that the Soviet side had opted for a decisive stance. If this is true, then perhaps due to the

⁴⁸ *PRL-ZSRR 1956-1970...*, p. 249. The differences listed by Gomułka included the attitude towards the establishment of NATO multilateral nuclear forces, the acceptance of Mongolia into the Warsaw Pact, the attitude towards China and the rapprochement policy towards West Germany.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 624; Gomułka had in mind the East German proposal that the eventual German-German convention should include a point about the recognition of the frontier on the Odra and the Nysa, which would have been favorable for Poland considering that it was to have been signed for ten years. Gomułka was enraged: “this means that East Germany proposes (...) that [West Germany] recognizes our borders [only] for ten years!”

⁵⁰ The most extensive monograph on December 1970 events. See Jerzy Eisler, *Grudzień 1970. Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (December 1970. Genesis, course, consequences), Warszawa 2000.

⁵¹ P. Jaroszewicz *Przerywam milczenie...*, pp.157-159.

development of events in Czechoslovakia and the extremely “diehard” attitude represented by Gomuška they aimed at a stabilization of the situation rather than at inspiring any shifts.

Despite the opinions sometimes voiced by historians, Gierek’s policy of “opening towards the West” was not the expression of some sort of extraordinary courage or the innovation spirit of the new First Secretary, since it ideally suited the detente policy conducted at the time by the Kremlin. Detente also encompassed economic relations: loans, licenses, etc. A policy similar to the one pursued by Gierek was deployed by all the countries of the communist bloc, including the Soviet Union. I cannot tell whether Gierek argued with the Soviets as decidedly as Gomuška was wont to do, but perhaps he did not have to, at least in 1972-1975, i. e. as long as prosperity lasted not only in Poland but also in other COMECON countries. At the beginning of his term in office, however, he was compelled to request financial assistance and additional credits from Moscow. The Soviet Union supplied them because such were the costs, and principles, of the upkeep of a vassal.

Undoubtedly, Gierek was very useful for the international policy of the Kremlin since, in contrast to Kadar or Husak, he had a “clean account” and was representative, especially against the backdrop of the older apparatchiks dominating in Prague, Sofia or Budapest. It seemed unlikely that his meetings with Western politicians, the welcoming in Poland of the president of the United States, or cordial relations with President Valery Giscard d’Estaing could have taken place without the knowledge and consent of Moscow. On the contrary, they could have been inspired by his Soviet comrades. Although the Soviets incessantly deplored Polish deviations from the norm, their grievances remained identical and there are no traces of the Kremlin trying to force Gierek to halt them. In this respect, Big Brother’s activity had not altered since 1956. Nothing is known about Soviet attempts at influencing cadre shifts within the Polish leadership, although the latter became the scene of several rather serious adjustments. Reminiscences by the head of the KGB mission and the head of the “Polish sector” in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) reflect that both men possessed direct, frequent contacts with persons at the summit of the Party hierarchy,⁵² albeit their tasks were probably limited to information. From the mid-1970s, operational contacts between the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs with respect to battling the opposition and the Church grew stronger. This was a fragment of a general expansion of the bi- and multilateral cooperation of the special services and the security apparatus of all the member-states of the Warsaw Pact, which in previous years had been much less systematic. In this case too, everything, at least formally, took place on an equal footing. The Poles had their own Ministry of Internal Affairs mission in Moscow, but it dealt primarily with the “operational protection” of Polish citizens (workers, students, tourists) in the Soviet Union. Despite growing trade volume with the West, economic contacts within COMECON did not grow any weaker, and the true premises for certain investments which could be construed as intent toward reducing dependency on Moscow (such as a crude oil reloading port) remain unclear. Apparently, Gierek did not enjoy a position identical to that once held by Gomuška in Moscow, and this could have been why he expressed adulation towards the Soviet leaders more frequently and spectacularly than his predecessor. But then Gierek generally acted in a more spectacular manner, and was fond of ostentation and ceremony.

⁵² Piotr Kostikov and Bohdan Roliński *Widziane z Moskwy. Moskwa-Warszawa gra o Polskê* [A view from Kremlin. Moscow-Warsaw the game on Poland], Warszawa 1992; *General Pavlov: by³em rezydentem KGB w Polsce*, op. cit.

Although the 1956-1980 period witnessed certain changes in Polish-Soviet relations, their essence remained the same as when they had been defined *via facti* by Gomułka. The vassal enjoyed the freedom to run the country, all forms of state sovereignty were preserved, and lesser or greater divergences were eliminated or muffled without the sovereign embarking upon drastic steps or threatening to resort to them. All told, the configuration of dependencies was stable and neither side disclosed any tendency toward undermining it. Moscow did not demand overwhelming influence upon domestic issues and Warsaw did nothing to weaken her dependency. Even if we were to assume, as many historians are inclined to do, that ideology had turned into an empty shell, the latter was still employed to legitimize both the system and the character of ties with Big Brother.

Gierek had a weaker personality than Gomułka, but when in August 1980 the Kremlin demanded decisive steps to quash the strikes, he resisted pressure and achieved a pacific end to one of the greatest social conflicts in Europe after World War II. It became apparent that the Soviet Union did not have any personnel alternative or positive project to solve the crisis. On the basis of documents one can surmise that Moscow did not exert direct influence on the changes that took place at the end of August and the beginning of September, including Gierek's departure and Stanisław Kania's assumption of the post of First Secretary. Nonetheless, this prompted Soviet leaders to revive their interest in Polish issues. Their activity was expressed predominantly in strong pressure, both of a propaganda nature and more subdued, in talks with the Polish leadership or letters addressed to its members. Research shows that there were no basic differences between Warsaw and Moscow with regard to defining the ultimate goal (i.e. the liquidation of "Solidarity"), but there was a distinct difference in determining the moment for inaugurating effective activity. The Soviets were clearly in a hurry, fearing - and it would be difficult to say just how well-founded their anxiety was - that the "Polish plague" would spread into other countries of the bloc, including the Soviet Union.

The leaders of the PUWP temporized, trying to discover a way of weakening the opponent and drawing away or neutralizing a major part of society. It is not quite clear whether Moscow initiatives, such as preparations for Warsaw Pact army maneuvers to be carried out in Poland in December 1980, remained a bluff that was meant to compel the Kania team to proclaim martial law. This is the conclusion one may draw from the behavior of the Soviet side and its allies at a meeting of leaders of the Warsaw Pact states held in Moscow on 5 December. Although Moscow regarded splintering "Solidarity" under the cover of foreign armies as the best option, the Polish ruling team first opposed it and in March 1981 decided not to apply this variant, although it was precisely for this purpose that the "staff maneuvers" of the Soviet, Czechoslovak, East German and Polish armies took place. Although pressure was extremely strong, and special army and KGB envoys arrived in Warsaw, Kania and Jaruzelski boycotted, so to speak, Soviet directives, and forced Brezhnev to accept the tactic of a proclamation of martial law by the Poles themselves. The Soviet leaders were displeased with this turn of events, and tried to change the ruling Kania-Jaruzelski team by introducing "healthy forces" within PUWP. The fact that the possibilities of the sovereign intervening in the vassal's internal affairs were becoming limited was attested to by the fiasco of this attempt in June 1981. The Soviet side was simply forced to continue applying propaganda pressure,⁵³ threaten economic sanctions, and

⁵³ Soviet propaganda incessantly presented the situation in Poland in a dark light and vehemently attacked "Solidarity." The intensity of the opinions ranged depending on the attitudes of the Soviet authorities. For instance, the peak periods of attacks launched in *Krasnaia Zvezda*, the official Army organ, coincided with August 1980 and January-March, September-October and

protect the “healthy forces” against Kania’s revenge.⁵⁴ For all practical purposes, the Kremlin was helpless. The events that took place in Poland between Summer 1980 and December 1981, can be recognized as a symptom of the sovereign’s weakness and inability to impose a solution on the vassal. I would like to stress that although there were no essential differences with regard to the ultimate target, the Poles aimed to achieve it in a way deemed most suitable by them. Naturally, advice provided by Soviet experts proved indispensable, and Jaruzelski was certain that should his venture fail Warsaw Pact forces would come to the rescue. Can one, therefore, acknowledge that the vassal system had been essentially impaired? If one were to regard the state of affairs that existed in the Stalinist era as a model, then one could say that this system was not only enfeebled, but experienced such a metamorphosis that de facto it had already disappeared. If, however, one were to accept as our point of departure the situation that emerged after 1956, then one could affirm that no essential change had occurred after 1980. The vassal and the sovereign referred to the same ideology and used the same language to describe reality, including international relations. As long as the vassal did not undermine the systemic canons (including “the leading role of the Party” and conceiving democratic centralism as primary), maintained control over the army and the security apparatus, the vassal could count on material, cash, and military assistance, and on forbearance for not having fulfilled all the standards of socialism and other, more petty sins.

After the proclamation of martial law, Moscow no longer had any reason to apply pressure, and the situation became “normalized.” The Soviets still had certain reservations, but actually were doomed to bear with General Jaruzelski and his cadre decisions as well as his projects for solving the economic and political crisis. In May 1984, Constantine Chernienko enumerated to Jaruzelski the goals which the latter was to strive for: “the uprooting of anti-socialist forces,” “limiting Church intervention in political life,” “liquidating the multi-sector aspects of the national economy,” and “shifting the villages onto a socialist course.”⁵⁵ But this was only the good advice of an elderly gentleman. The Kremlin was no longer capable of enforcing such tasks despite the fact that the reaction of the West, and especially the U.S.A., to the proclamation of martial law induced Jaruzelski to turn even more towards the Soviet Union. At any rate, although the negative impact of the sanctions upon the Polish economy cannot be precisely determined, they compelled expanded trade with the Soviet Union and sought financial assistance including hard currency in Moscow. This time, however, in contrast to the Gomułka period, it was not ideological principles but harsh American policy that caused Poland to become one of the most earnest supporters of intensifying the activity of COMECON and its modernization. Nonetheless, Jaruzelski did not intend to embark upon any undertakings proposed by the Soviet Secretary-General, since this would signify opening another domestic front or even several fronts at a time when correct relations with the Church were considered to be one of the foundations of stabilization.

December 1981. The whole campaign was coordinated upon the basis of decisions made by the Central Committee Secretariat on 4 October 1980: “On certain additional undertakings in the organisation of propaganda and counterpropaganda in connection with the events in Poland,” in Rossiyski Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishoi Istorii (RGANI), fond 89, opis 46, dielo 59.

⁵⁴ In reality this too failed since almost all the diehards lost the elections at the Ninth Congress of PUWP (July 1981), which, in comparison with communist praxis, were close to democratic standards.

⁵⁵ AAN, KC PZPR, V/228.

Polish-Soviet relations did not change immediately after Gorbachev came to power, or even in the wake of the slogans of perestroika (1985) or glasnost (1986), although the new Kremlin leader observed with keen interest Polish and Hungarian attempts at reforming the principles of economic management, which both those countries had already revived on multiple occasions. Favoring the “reformers” or even the emulation of some of their undertakings did not have to mean that the sovereign was resigning its position. The authors of numerous studies - both current analyses by Soviet experts and works by historians, based on archival sources available after 1991- have tried to determine as precisely as possible the moment when the “Brezhnev doctrine” ceased to be binding and members of the Soviet bloc, including Poland, gained actual opportunities for individually shaping their domestic and foreign policies. In truth, none of these publications can be recognized as being totally conclusive. We will never be certain since, although the events ran a rapid course, they remained evolutionary. One phenomenon, though, is particularly significant. In 1987, Soviet leaders became interested in “Polish distinctness,” not in order to criticize it, but to understand it and even imitate it. By way of example, in the summer of 1987, a Soviet delegation of agricultural experts announced to their Polish colleagues that the domination of Polish agriculture by private ownership “cannot and should not, neither today nor in the future, constitute an obstacle in developing bilaterally favorable co-operation.”⁵⁶ In the summer of 1988 not only did Primate Józef Glemp pay a visit to the Soviet Union (upon the occasion of the thousandth anniversary of the baptism of Rus’), but an interview with him was published in the government daily *Izvestia* and reprinted - certainly with the consent, or even perhaps upon the order of the supreme authorities - in many other periodicals. The elimination of the “odium” surrounding all such problems constituted an obvious expansion of the range of autonomy, but for the Polish leaders and the Poles in general the problem consisted in whether perestroika would prove ephemeral, and whether Gorbachev would be deprived of power or compelled to change his policy. Although the Jaruzelski team was convinced that it was necessary to make use of all available chances and to intensify pro-reform activity, there was neither a clearly outlined vision of such changes, especially political reforms, nor any certainty about the time needed to conduct them.

One might say that the Kremlin’s withdrawal of reservations towards atypical situations in Poland (private farms, an independent Church) signified a de-ideologization of the “Brezhnev doctrine,”⁵⁷ which now could be based solely on geopolitical premises. This problem has not been suitably examined, but it is quite certain that although Polish communist leaders were pleased by the fact that the Soviets had ceased to complain about “Polish distinctness” and had stopped interfering in domestic questions, they had not refuted their beliefs in communism as such, even in “real socialism” which, they believed, only had to be set right. At the same time, inner dynamics led Poland beyond the range of socialism and the Soviet sphere. This process took place contrary to the interests of the Polish communists and the Soviet Union, but no one was capable of preventing the course of events. At the beginning of 1989, experts working for the Soviet Political Bureau recognized that Moscow was forced to come to terms with the changes, and to adapt its policy to the new reality coming into being in East Central Europe, first

⁵⁶ AAN, KC PZPR, XI/400.

⁵⁷ Obviously, the key element of de-ideologization was not the recognition of Polish distinctness but the rejection of one of the fundamental principles of Marxism: class struggle conceived as the main motor force of history.

and foremost in Poland, rather than to attempt to block the transformations.⁵⁸ The authors of one expert analysis declared that “actual chances for maintaining the course of events [in Poland] within the course of the revival of socialism are decreasing rapidly,” and that “in the distant perspective, even the most favorable variants do not guarantee the survival of socialism.” They concluded that “in a new situation, it will be necessary to free oneself from some of the ideological stereotypes, for example, the one claiming that only a communist party wielding power is capable of guaranteeing the security of Soviet frontiers.” Naturally, these were internal documents whose contents were not known either to Jaruzelski or Wałęsa. Nonetheless, the signals received from Moscow and primarily the enormous problems faced by Gorbachev made it probable that the Soviet Union would not intervene in Poland, neither from the outside (armed intervention) nor from the inside. For Gorbachev and his team, support for the PUWP diehards would mean the renouncement of all that which they had proclaimed and accomplished. This is why the Gorbachev leadership supported the process taking place of Poland. After the Round Table talks, the monthly *Kommunist*, the theoretical organ of the Central Committee of CPSU, published an article recognizing the negotiations and resulting agreement as a good example. The PUWP leaders informed their Soviet colleagues about the situation and their intentions, and at the end of April 1989 Jaruzelski, led a large Polish delegation on a working visit to Moscow. This time, the Poles were totally free to shape their domestic situation. The main concern of Secretary General Gorbachev and President Bush was stabilization in the region. In July, the American president supported Jaruzelski’s candidacy for the newly created office of President of Poland. When in mid-August the new PUWP leadership (headed by Mieczysław F. Rakowski) questioned the need for a coalition government in which the communists would comprise a minority and the Prime Minister would be a member of “Solidarity,” the Soviet leader went so far as to make a personal telephone call to Rakowski, advising him to agree to such a solution. The Polish First Secretary certainly regarded the Soviet leader as a key authority. Perhaps he still envisaged him as a sovereign? If so, then the Polish state was no longer a vassal, or rather ceased being one, and vassal status was held only by the communist party.

Two final issues need to be addressed in this essay.

The first, neglected in our discussion until now, concerns political forces other than the communists, which also could have become Moscow’s vassals. I do not have in mind satellite parties or political groups subordinate to the communists, but independent political or ideological currents. In 1945 certain Polish political elements, as well as Polish society, tried to convince Stalin that an alternative to the communists was feasible. An attempt of this sort was made by Stanisław Mikołajczyk, who was strongly encouraged to do so by Churchill. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union did not accept such a solution, which was probably never even discussed in Moscow after 1944. In the following years, no one returned to this conception in view of the absence of independent and significant political forces in Poland. In 1980-1981, a number of opposition intellectualists deliberated on coming to an agreement with the Soviet Union “behind the backs” of Polish communists, but “Solidarity” was not interested, predominantly because it had consciously resigned from voicing its opinion about foreign policy, and actually was never a movement which aspired to take a direct part in governance. Despite the profound changes that took place within “Solidarity” and the opposition after the proclamation of martial law, this item was never part of the agenda of the illegal trade union. The publicistic writing of underground

⁵⁸ For complete texts of the three expert opinions from February 1989 see Jacques Levesque “Soviet approaches to Eastern Europe at the beginning of 1989,” in *CWIHP Bulletin*, No. 12/13, Fall/Winter 2001, pp. 49-72.

parties and political groups included quite a few reflections on the possibility of a “Finlandisation” of Poland, but were not and could not be followed by any attempt to establish contact with the Soviets, even indirectly (e. g. via journalists). On the other hand, the Soviet leadership, both the gerontocrats from prior to 1985 and Gorbachev, did not regard Wałęsa and “Solidarity” as political partners. The first did so for essential reasons, while the author of perestroika probably did not wish to interfere in Jaruzelski’s endeavors. The events of 1989 developed in a fashion and at such a speed that the existence of a “non-communist vassal” and even “Finlandization” simply ceased to be topical. Nevertheless, a thorough examination of Soviet documents might enable us to draw the conclusion that this time it was Moscow that was interested in such a variant.⁵⁹ Apparently, not until January 1990 and the coup in Romania, which seemed to have closed the cycle of events in East Central Europe initiated by the Polish Round Table and the Polish elections on 4 June 1989, did Soviet leaders acknowledge that heretofore “fraternal countries” had become totally independent in formulating not only their domestic but also their foreign policy, including military policy.

The second problem, whose thorough explanation exceeds the empirical possibilities of the historical sciences, is as follows: “Could the Polish communists, without accepting the role of vassal, retain power not only during the initial post-war period but also after 1956, when society was pacified and the majority had adapted itself to the system?” One cannot answer this query on the basis of archival research, but if one were to draw conclusions from the events of 1989 then the answer is that the communists would have had no chance. When the sovereign granted them unhampered initiative and ceased being both “an example” and a source of dread, and thus when the communists lost all external legitimization, they suffered defeat. The moral may be as follows: ruling as a vassal can be very unpleasant and even painful, but attaining freedom can prove to be undoing.

The issue of the significance of the vassal-sovereign relationship for the maintenance of the communist system is somewhat similar to that of reforming real socialism. Those who claim or claimed that the system was “reformable” must now admit that everywhere in Europe, from the Elbe to the Ural mountains, where attempts had been made at truly far-reaching changes, the latter ended in a more or less smooth departure from the system and the initiation of a period of systemic changes. Ergo, communism was unreformable. A similar effect was produced by the disappearance of the pillar of the system, which in this part of Europe was the vassal-sovereign configuration. The sovereign’s refusal to provide quick help, even if only financial, to the vassals became one of the reasons, and perhaps even the chief reason, for their defeat. Ergo, in this part of Europe the vassal system comprised the foundation for the functioning of communism as a state system.

⁵⁹ For instance, in the study “On the situation in Poland, possible variants of its development, and perspectives of Polish-Soviet relations,” prepared by, i. a. ministers of foreign affairs and the defense together with the head of the KGB, for a Political Bureau sitting held on 28 September 1989 (RGANI, fond 89, opis 9, dielo 33).