

= Polish October =

Polish October , also known as October 1956 , Polish thaw , or Gomułka 's thaw , marked a change in the politics of Poland in the second half of 1956 . Some social scientists term it the Polish October Revolution , which , while less dramatic than the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 , might have had an even deeper impact on the Eastern Bloc and on the Soviet Union 's relationship to its satellite states in Eastern Europe .

For the People 's Republic of Poland , 1956 was a year of transition . The international situation significantly weakened the hard @-@ line Stalinist faction in Poland ; Polish communist leader Bolesław Bierut died in March ; it was three years since Stalin had died and his successor at the Soviet Union 's helm , Nikita Khrushchev , denounced him in February . Protests by workers in June in Poznań had highlighted the people 's dissatisfaction with their situation . In October , the events set in motion resulted in the rise in power of the reformers ' faction , led by Władysław Gomułka . After brief , but tense , negotiations , the Soviets gave permission for Gomułka to stay in control and made several other concessions resulting in greater autonomy for the Polish government . For Polish citizens this meant a temporary liberalization . Eventually though , hopes for full liberalization were proven false , as Gomułka 's regime became more oppressive . Nonetheless , the era of Stalinization in Poland had ended .

= = Development = =

Gomułka 's thaw was caused by several factors . The death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and the resulting de @-@ Stalinization and the Khrushchev Thaw prompted debates about fundamental issues throughout the entire Eastern Bloc . Nikita Khrushchev 's speech , On the Personality Cult and its Consequences , had wide implications for the Soviet Union and other Communist countries as well .

In Poland , in addition to criticism of the cult of personality , popular topics of debate centered on the right to steer a more independent course of " local , national socialism " instead of following the Soviet model in every detail . For example , many members of the Polish United Workers ' Party (PZPR) criticized Stalin 's execution of older Polish Communists during the Great Purge . Several other factors contributed to the destabilization of Poland . These included the widely publicized defection in 1953 of high @-@ ranking Polish intelligence agent Józef Wiatło , resulting in the weakening of the Ministry of Public Security of Poland (Polish secret police) . In addition , the unexpected death in Moscow in 1956 of Bolesław Bierut , the PZPR First Secretary (known as the " Stalin of Poland ") , led to increased rivalry between various factions of Polish communists and to growing tensions in Polish society , culminating in the Poznań 1956 protests (also known as June ' 56) .

The PZPR Secretariat decided that Khrushchev 's speech should have wide circulation in Poland , a unique decision in the Eastern Bloc . Bierut 's successors seized on Khrushchev 's condemnation of Stalinist policy as a perfect opportunity to prove their reformist , democratic credentials and their willingness to break with the Stalinist legacy . In late March and early April , thousands of Party meetings were held all over Poland , with Politburo and Secretariat blessing . Tens of thousands took part in such meetings . The Secretariat 's plan succeeded beyond what they expected . During this period , the political atmosphere in Poland shifted as questions were increasingly asked about taboo subjects like the Polish Communists ' legitimacy , responsibility for Stalin 's crimes , the arrest of the increasingly popular Gomułka , and issues in Soviet ? Polish relations , such as the continued Soviet military presence in Poland , the Ribbentrop ? Molotov Pact , the Katyn massacre , and the Soviet failure to support the Warsaw Uprising . A new Party Congress was demanded , as was a greater role for the Sejm and a guarantee of personal liberties . Alarmed by the process , the Party Secretariat decided to withhold the speech from the general public .

In June 1956 , there was an insurrection in Poznań . The workers rioted to protest shortages of food and consumer goods , bad housing , decline in real income , trade relations with the Soviet Union and poor management of the economy . The Polish government initially responded by branding the

rioters " provocateurs , counterrevolutionaries and imperialist agents " . Between 57 and 78 people ? mostly protesters ? were killed , and hundreds were wounded and arrested . Soon , however , the party hierarchy recognized that the riots had awakened a nationalist movement and reversed their opinion . Wages were raised by 50 percent , and economic and political change was promised .

The Pozna? protests , although the largest , were not unique in Poland , where social protest resumed its fury that autumn . On November 18 , rioters destroyed the militia headquarters and radio @-@ jamming equipment in Bydgoszcz , and on December 10 , a crowd in Szczecin attacked public buildings , including a prison , the state prosecutor 's office , militia headquarters , and the Soviet consulate . People across the country criticized the security police and asked for the dissolution of the public security committee and the punishment of its guiltiest functionaries . Demands were made for the exposure of secret police collaborators , and suspected collaborators were frequently assaulted . In many localities , crowds gathered outside the secret police headquarters , shouted hostile slogans , and broke its windows . Public meetings , demonstrations , and street marches took place in hundreds of towns across Poland . The meetings were usually organized by local Party cells , local authorities , and trade unions . However , official organizers tended to lose control as political content exceeded their original agenda . Crowds often took radical action , in many cases resulting in unrest on the streets and clashes with police and other law @-@ enforcement agencies . Street activity peaked during and immediately after the 19 ? 21 October " VIII Plenum " meeting of the Central Committee of the PZPR , but continued until late in the year . A concurrent upsurge in religious and clerical sentiment took place . Hymns were sung , and the release of Stefan Wyszy?ski and the reinstatement of suppressed bishops were demanded . Nationalism was the cement of mass mobilization and dominated public meetings , during which people sang the national anthem and other patriotic songs , demanded the return of the white eagle to the flag and traditional army uniforms , and attacked Poland 's dependence on the Soviet Union and its military . They demanded the return of the eastern territories , an explanation for the Katyn massacre , and elimination of the Russian language from the educational curriculum . In the last ten days of October , monuments to the Red Army , despised by Poles , were attacked : red stars were pulled down from roofs of houses , factories and schools ; red flags were destroyed ; and portraits of Konstantin Rokossovsky , the military commander in charge of operations that drove the Nazi German forces from Poland , were defaced . Attempts were made to force entries into the homes of Soviet citizens , mostly in Lower Silesia , home to many Soviet troops . However , unlike the protesters in Hungary and Pozna? , activists limited their political demands and behavior , which were not purely opposed to communist and the system . The communist authorities were not openly and unequivocally challenged , as they had been in June , and anticommunist slogans that had been prevalent in the June uprising , such as " We want free elections " , " Down with Communist dictatorship " , or " Down with the Party " , were much less prevalent . Party committees were not attacked .

= = Political change = =

In October Edward Ochab , the First Secretary of the Party and the Polish Prime Minister , proposed W?adys?aw Gomu?ka election for the First Secretary of the Party during 8th Plenum meeting . Gomu?ka was a moderate who had been the First Secretary of the Party 1943 @-@ 48 and had been ousted and imprisoned in 1951 after " right @-@ wing nationalist deviation " accusation by Stalinist hardliners ' with Bierut . Gomu?ka proved to be acceptable to both factions of Polish communists : the reformers , who were arguing for liberalization of the system , and the hardliners , who realized that they needed to compromise . Gomu?ka insisted that he be given real power to implement reforms . One specific condition he set was that Soviet Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky , who had mobilized troops against the Pozna? workers , be removed from the Polish Politburo and Defense Ministry , to which Ochab agreed . The majority of the Polish leadership , backed by both the army and the Internal Security Corps , brought Gomu?ka and several associates into the Politburo and designated Gomu?ka as First Secretary . Untouched by the scandals of Stalinism , Gomu?ka was acceptable to the Polish masses , but at first was viewed with much

suspicion by Moscow .

The Soviet leadership viewed events in Poland with alarm . Destalinisation was underway in the Soviet Union as well , but the Soviet leadership did not view the democratic reform that the Polish public desired as an acceptable solution . In Moscow , the belief was that any trends towards democracy in one bloc country could lead to the destruction of communism and the ruin of Soviet influence in the region as a whole . Eastern Europe created a fence between Soviet Communism and Western Democracy , and any break in the wall could end Soviet power . The Soviet Union was not worried solely about the political implications of reform but about the economic implications as well . Economically , the Soviet Union was heavily invested in Poland . The Soviet Union had financed Polish industry and was Poland 's main trading partner . The Soviet Union directed what products Poland manufactured ; the Soviets bought the products and exported goods to Poland no longer produced within the country itself . The Polish and Soviet economies were thus heavily integrated ; any reform , whether political or economic , in one of the countries would inevitably have a great impact on the other . Because Poland was inextricably connected to the Soviet Union economically , the thought of an independent Polish economy was unrealistic . The country had been forced to rely on the Soviets for such a long time that breaking away completely would prove disastrous . Thus , both countries held crucial power in different facets . Poland could threaten Soviet strength and power in Eastern Europe politically , and the Soviet Union could essentially destroy the Polish economy . Therefore , any reform in the Polish government would have to concede to some Soviet demands , while the Soviets concurrently would have to concede to a vital partner .

A high @-@ level delegation of the Soviet Central Committee flew to Poland in an attempt to block removing pro @-@ Soviet members of Politburo mainly Soviet and Polish Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky . Soviet delegation was led by Nikita Khrushchev and included Anastas Mikoyan , Nikolai Bulganin , Vyacheslav Molotov , Lazar Kaganovich , Ivan Konev , and others . The negotiations were tense ; both Polish and Soviet troops were put on alert , engaged in ' manoeuvres ' , and were used as thinly veiled threats . The Polish leadership made it clear that the face of communism had to become more nationalized ; no longer could the Soviet Union directly control the Polish people . Here , Khrushchev 's speech worked against him . During Stalinism , the Soviet Union had placed Moscow @-@ friendly Poles , or Russians themselves , in important political positions in Poland . After denouncing Stalinism so vehemently in his speech , Khrushchev could not regress to the Stalinist position by forcing more Russians into the Polish leadership . The Poles , in recognizing the cries of the public , needed to keep the Soviets from direct control but could not raise their demands to a point that endangered their relationships in the bloc . Gomu?ka demanded increased autonomy and permission to carry out some reforms but also reassured the Soviets that the reforms were internal matters and that Poland had no intention of abandoning communism or its treaties with the Soviet Union . The Soviets were also pressured by the Chinese to accommodate the Polish demands and were increasingly distracted by the events in Hungary . Eventually , when Khrushchev was reassured that Gomu?ka would not alter the basic foundations of Polish communism , he withdrew the invasion threat and agreed to compromise , and Gomu?ka was confirmed in his new position .

The leadership 's stance contributed to the relatively moderate political dimension of social protest in October . Also crucial were the impacts of nationalism and nationalist emotions . They spurred social protest in June but dampened it in October , when the threat of Soviet invasion against Gomu?ka and his supporters transformed the social image of Polish communists . In June , they were still treated as the puppets and servants of alien , anti @-@ Polish interests and excluded from the national community . In October , they became a part of the nation opposing Soviet domination . Gomu?ka was enthusiastically supported by the great majority of society , not primarily as a communist leader , but as a leader of a nation who , by resisting Soviet demands , embodied a national longing for independence and sovereignty . His name was chanted , along with anti @-@ Soviet slogans , at thousands of meetings : " Go home Rokossovsky " , " Down with the Russians , " " Long live Gomu?ka , " " We want a free Poland " .

While his anti @-@ Soviet image was obviously mythical and exaggerated , it was justified in the

popular imagination by his anti @-@ Stalinist line in 1948 and years of subsequent internment . Thus , Polish communists found themselves unexpectedly at the head of a national liberation movement . The enthusiastic public support offered to Gomu?ka contributed to the legitimization of communist rule in Poland , which incorporated mass nationalist , anti @-@ Soviet feelings into the prevailing power structures . In Hungary , social protest destroyed the political system ; in Poland , it was absorbed within it .

= = Aftermath = =

Information about events in Poland reached the people of Hungary via Radio Free Europe 's news and commentary services between 19 October and 22 October 1956 . A student demonstration in Budapest in support of Gomu?ka , asking for similar reforms in Hungary , was one of the events that sparked the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 . The events of the Hungarian November also helped distract the Soviets and ensure the success of the Polish October .

Gomu?ka , in his public speeches , criticized the hardships of Stalinism and promised reforms to democratize the country ; this was received with much enthusiasm by Polish society . By mid @-@ November , Gomu?ka had secured substantive gains in his negotiations with the Soviets : the cancellation of Poland 's existing debts , new preferential trade terms , abandonment of the unpopular Soviet @-@ imposed collectivization of Polish agriculture , and permission to liberalize policy towards the Roman Catholic Church . In December , the status of Soviet forces in Poland , the Northern Group of Forces , was finally regulated .

In the aftermath of the October events , Rokossovsky and many other Soviet " advisers " left Poland , signaling that Moscow was willing to grant Polish communists slightly more independence . The Polish government rehabilitated many victims of the Stalinist era , and many political prisoners were set free . Among them was cardinal Stefan Wyszy?ski . The Polish legislative election of 1957 was much more liberal than that of 1952 although still not considered free by Western standards .

Gomu?ka , however , could not and did not want to reject communism or Soviet domination ; he could only steer Poland towards increased independence and " Polish national communism " . Because of these restricted ambitions , which were recognized by the Soviets , the limited Polish revolution succeeded where the radical Hungarian one did not . Norman Davies sums up the effect as a transformation of Poland from puppet state to client state ; Raymond Pearson similarly states that Poland changed from a Soviet colony to a dominion .

Gomu?ka 's pledge to follow a " Polish road to socialism " more in harmony with national traditions and preferences caused many Poles to interpret the dramatic confrontation of 1956 as a sign that the end of the dictatorship was in sight . Initially very popular for his reforms , which were optimistically referred to at the time as " Gomu?ka 's thaw " , Gomu?ka gradually softened his opposition to Soviet pressures , and the late @-@ 1950s hopes for major political change in Poland were replaced with growing disillusionment in the 1960s . In the end , Gomu?ka failed in his goal to salvage communism ? or socialism ? in Poland .

Society became more liberal (as seen , for instance , in the achievements of the Polish Film School and the creation of such controversial movies as *Ashes and Diamonds*) , and a civil society started to develop , but half @-@ hearted democratization was not enough to satisfy the Polish public . By the time of the March 1968 events , Gomu?ka 's thaw would be long over , and increasing economic problems and popular discontent would end up removing Gomu?ka from power in 1970 ? ironically , in a situation similar to the protests that once had propelled him to power .

Nonetheless , some social scientists , such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Frank Gibney , refer to these changes as a revolution , one less dramatic than its Hungarian counterpart but one which may have had an even more profound impact on the Eastern Bloc . Timothy Garton Ash calls the Polish October the most significant event in the post @-@ war history of Poland until the rise of Solidarity . History professor Ivan Berend claims that while the effects of the Polish October on the Eastern Bloc may be disputed , it set the course for the eventual fall of communism in the People 's Republic of Poland .