

Why did Gomułka not become a Polish Slansky?*

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Why Gomułka failed to become a Polish Slansky is truly difficult to ascertain. It is one of those riddles of history, which cannot be given a definite reply. The documents that most likely would help a historian resolve this question are at present unknown, and probably will never be found. Thus, we are forced to formulate hypotheses, for only the basic facts are undisputed.

Before World War II, Władysław Gomułka was a middle-rank activist of the Communist Party of Poland. In 1937, when Stalin dissolved the Party and exterminated its leaders, Gomułka was serving a sentence in a Polish prison for subversive activities.¹ In 1942, he joined the effort to establish the Polish Workers' Party, becoming a member of the Central committee in September of that year. After the detention of Paweł Finder in November 1943, Gomułka, who was using the pseudonym of "Wiesław," became General Secretary of the Party.² Apparently, however, he was not wholly trusted by the Soviets. His main opponent among the Party leadership was Bolesław Bierut, who did not hesitate to inform Moscow of Gomułka's actions.³

The period of erecting the foundations of the communist system in Poland and the fight with the opposition pushed the differences between the Party leaders into the background. The conflict was refueled in the autumn of 1947, when Gomułka openly opposed the exceedingly broad powers given to the newly created Cominform. The dispute was deepened by differing opinions on the unification of the Polish Workers' Party and the Polish Socialist Party. Gomułka was convinced that this process should not resemble "absorption" of the socialist Party by the communists, but rather should be a kind of mutual "intermingling." A serious error made by Gomułka involved the distancing of himself from condemnation of the Yugoslav communists by Moscow, and his later proposal to mediate in the conflict. In April 1948, the Foreign Policy Department of the Central Committee of All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) published a memorial entitled "On anti-Marxist ideological tendencies in the Polish Workers' Party leadership," where for the first time the thesis of "nationalist deviation" was formulated. In the beginning of June, Gomułka decided upon open confrontation. During the Party Central Committee plenary assembly, he presented a report accusing both the Social-Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania and the Communist Party of Poland of underestimating the importance of Polish independence. Against this he set the

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¹ P. Machcewicz, *Władysław Gomułka*, Warszawa 1995, pp. 7-8.

² A. Werblan, *Władysław Gomułka Sekretarz Generalny PPR*, Warszawa 1988, pp. 175-176.

³ *Polska – ZSRR. Struktury podległości. Dokumenty KC WKP(b) 1944-1949*, G.A. Bordiugow, A. Kochański, A. Koseski, G.F. Matwiejew, A. Paczkowski (ed.), Warszawa 1995, pp. 65-66.

example of the Polish Socialist Party activity in this field. As a result of his actions, Gomułka was suspended from Politburo meetings. In the beginning of September 1948, the Central Committee plenum ousted him from the position of General Secretary of the Party.⁴

In January 1949, Gomułka was removed from official state positions (minister and deputy premier) and relegated to an inferior post as vice-president of the Chief Board of Supervision.⁵ Shortly after the Laszlo Rajk trial, in October 1949, Bierut traveled to Moscow to discuss, among other issues, the matter of the "Attitude towards Gomułka and Spsychalski in the light of experience coming from the Budapest trial."⁶ During a plenary assembly of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in November, Gomułka was again attacked and ousted from the Committee membership. In 1950 his associates, Marian Spsychalski and Grzegorz Korczyński, were arrested.

Władysław Gomułka and his wife Zofia were arrested in the beginning of August 1951.⁷ This happened several days after the start of the "Show Trial of Generals," which was meant to be the first step on the ladder leading to Gomułka's prosecution.⁸ Interrogation of the suspect began in February 1952. The investigation brought no result, and in 1954 he was released from prison. Nearly two years later, in October 1956, Gomułka again assumed the position of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party.

The most trivial answer to the question of why Gomułka did not share the fate of Xoxe, Rajk, Kostov, Slansky and other communist leaders, is to recall that there were many elements of Stalinist order that were not introduced in Poland. For instance, the subversion of the Catholic Church was unsuccessful, the opposition was never fully exterminated, and collectivization of agriculture failed. Such an approach is, however, too great a simplification. The efficiency of the repressive system, measured in thousands killed and tens of thousands detained, was great. If the communist courts of justice were able to "prove," with no great effort, that there was an alleged collaboration of heroes of the wartime underground with the Nazis, it would be much easier to find proof of Gomułka's participation in a "provocation in the workers' movement."

Undoubtedly, the attitude of Gomułka himself during the investigation had important meaning. During interrogations, he not only refused to confess to the charges brought against him, but even fiercely argued with the interrogators. Contrary to Rajk or Slansky, he was not convinced by the argument that he should plead guilty "for the good of the Party." Moreover, Gomułka was even able to retort with undisguised threats,

⁴ P. Machcewicz, op. cit., pp. 24-30.

⁵ *Działalność Władysława Gomułki. Fakty – Wspomnienia – Opinie*, W. Namiotkiewicz (ed.), Warszawa 1985, p. 508.

⁶ *Polska w dokumentach z archiwów rosyjskich 1949-1953*, A. Kochański, G.P. Muraszko, A.F. Noskowa, A. Paczkowski, K. Persak (ed.), Warszawa 2000, p. 56.

⁷ *Działalność...*, op. cit., p. 515.

⁸ J. Poksiński, „TUN” *Tatar – Utnik – Nowicki*, Warszawa 1992.

You fabricate charges. According to you, I did nothing else but hide my activity from the Politburo. This is nonsense. All your lies will be unmasked and, I wonder, how then you will look. What will become with you, when I prove using the documents, that your charges are fabricated. I will denounce your lies using the documents.⁹

He was undoubtedly not an ideal candidate for a show-trial, especially in light of the trial of Kostov, who had publicly withdrawn his earlier statements.

Such an attitude towards Gomułka was also made possible by the striking approach of the Polish United Workers' Party leadership towards his case. After November 1949 the case of "Wiesław" was never mentioned during Politburo meetings. Apart from total isolation from the outer world, Gomułka was not subject to any tortures or any greater psychological pressure. At the beginning of the investigation, Bolesław Bierut gave general directions to officials of the Ministry of Public Security. They contained standard expressions about the necessity of explaining "the hostile activity of Gomułka," especially in the years from 1943 to 1944 and from 1947 to 1948. The beginning of the directive is surprising [emphasis in the text were made by Bierut],

Concerning Gomułka. Who was Gomułka in the light of the facts known until that time? [...] Gomułka - sliding down from opportunism to factionalism and treason - **so rather sliding down**, not being an enemy who from the very beginning joined the movement with hostile intentions and only more or less cunningly kept hidden his inimical face and plans.¹⁰

It was an attitude entirely different from that taken in similar cases by Rakosi, Dimitrov or Gottwald. Rajk, Kostov and Slansky, as well as other convicted communist leaders, were pronounced "traitors from the start," enemy agents in the workers' movement.

These words are especially striking, because they came from Gomułka's rival of many years who, as already mentioned, did not hesitate to send denouncing letters to Moscow behind the General Secretary's back. Maybe it was a human impulse directed towards a long-term coworker, with whom Bierut had lived through difficult moments during the German occupation, as well as during the period of establishing Communist rule in Poland. It is, however, difficult to expect human impulses in a man who easily affirmed thousands of death sentences. The reason might be more prosaic. For instance, some threads of the investigation might have also endangered Bierut himself.

Most likely Gomułka was helped by a long period of nearly three years, during which time he was deprived of power and eventually arrested. In the moment of his detention, he had practically no influence on Polish society; therefore, there was no need to organize a quick trial and exterminate the former Party leader. In addition some of

⁹ J. Ptasieński, *Pierwszy z trzech zwrotów, czyli rzecz o Władysławie Gomułce*, Warszawa 1984, pp. 129-130.

¹⁰ A. Garlicki, *Z tajnych archiwów*, Warszawa 1993, p. 127.

Gomułka's former associates, even if they officially condemned his opinions, could have *de facto* slowed down the investigation and made its course relatively mild. According to Jan Ptasieński, General Roman Romkowski, who was at that time a vice-minister of Public Security, supposedly at first declined to carry out the order to arrest Gomułka, calling this order "groundless."¹¹ Apart from these reasons, Gomułka managed to "survive" the most difficult period. After Stalin's death, establishing the collective leadership in the Soviet Union and the liquidation of Beria, the trial of "Wiesław" was less and less probable. Chances of its actual starting came to zero after Colonel Józef Światło, who in the famous broadcasts of Radio Free Europe denounced the security apparatus' methods of work, escaped to the West.¹²

The reluctance of some Polish United Workers' Party Leaders to speed up the Gomułka trial could also be connected with their awareness that the wave of repression by Soviet forces could also overthrow them. One such leader who was sensitive to the happenings of the party was Jakub Berman. Considered the "power behind the throne" of the Communist Party, he was the man supervising the work of the security apparatus. In an interview given to Teresa Torańska nearly thirty years later, he recalled,

I became an ideal candidate to be a Slansky and all the preparations headed that way, and who knows how they would have ended if Stalin had not died.

Berman's fears were made more probable by the fact that already in 1949 his personal secretary, Anna Duracz, was arrested in connection with the case of the Fields. Moreover, in 1950 his own brother, Adolf Berman, a chairman of the Central Committee of Polish Jews, emigrated to Israel.¹³ One could even speculate that Jakub Berman was a better candidate for a "Polish Rajk" or "Polish Slansky" than Gomułka was. It is perhaps worthwhile to ask why Berman himself did not become a "Polish Slansky?"

Undoubtedly, more important than the approach of the Polish communists was the attitude of Moscow. Polish and Soviet documents uncovered so far contain no information supporting the idea that Stalin pressed to speed up the Gomułka case. Moreover, there is an impression that Moscow was not especially interested in his fate. This attitude is considerably different from the attention that the Soviets paid to the trials of Rajk or Slansky. In contrast to Budapest and Prague, there was no special group of Soviet security police sent to Warsaw. Only in the report of Colonel Józef Światło does there appear information that Soviet advisers asked about progress in the Gomułka case.¹⁴ However, the credibility of his account, not only at this particular point, is disputed.

The attitude of Stalin towards Gomułka is not reliably easy to judge. Undeniably, "Wiesław" became a Party leader without Soviet permission. He was the only one among

¹¹ J. Ptasieński, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

¹² Z. Błażyński, *Mówi Józef Światło. Za kulisami bezpieki i partii 1940-1955*, Warszawa 2003.

¹³ T. Torańska, *Oni*, Warszawa 1989, p. 135, 141; B. Szaynok, „Walka z syjonizmem w Polsce (1948-1953),” [in:] *Komunizm. Ideologia, system, ludzie*, T. Szarota (ed.), Warszawa 2001, p. 263-265.

¹⁴ Z. Błażyński, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

Polish leaders able not only to argue with Stalin, but also openly opposed him. According to Khrushchev's memoirs, Stalin described Gomułka to his associates in the following way,

He is such a man [...] I look and simply do not understand him. He sits, looks me in the eyes continuously and makes notes of everything I say.

This, however, does not mean that Stalin felt dislike towards Gomułka. Especially intriguing is the fact that after "Wiesław" had been ousted from the position of general secretary, Stalin invited him for a personal talk to Moscow. There, he made him a proposal to join the leadership of a new, united party. This proposal was made in spite of the fact that Gomułka had opposed the will of Stalin twice in the preceding year. First, he expressed opposition in the case of the Cominform, and later in matters concerning Tito. The Soviet leader was in for another surprise, because Gomułka declined his proposition. A disappointed Stalin wrote to Bierut that, "the attitude of Comrade Gomułka towards the Party and his honesty require further checking."¹⁵ One can suppose that, paradoxically, it was this refusal that saved Gomułka's life. If he had agreed to return to the Party leadership, it might have been easier to make him a "Polish Slansky" in a year or two.

One could also argue that Stalin's opinion of Gomułka resembled a sort of respect for his courage. Surely Stalin was aware of Gomułka's influence among Polish Party leaders, "Wiesław's" ability to gather some social support, and his understanding of the Polish character. Without a doubt, of all the Polish communists, Gomułka was best at understanding the Stalinist strategy of the gradual sovietization of Eastern Europe in the years 1945-1946. Their ways diverged when Stalin decided to discard all pretences and move to the stage of unification of all the satellite countries with the Soviet Union.

In contrast to other participants of publicized trials, such as Laszlo Rajk, Trajcho Kostov, Rudolf Slansky and others, Władysław Gomułka did not play any role in the international communist movement before 1944. Stalin, therefore, felt none of his irrational jealousy towards Gomułka. Stalin probably felt he did not have to be afraid that "Wiesław" would diminish his own achievements. This was one more reason that the Soviet leader did not pay too much attention to Gomułka's conviction.

For these same reasons, Gomułka was not a likely candidate for an "international plot," for he never had any contacts with the victims of subsequent trials. Even the arrest of Hermann Field in Poland could not bring up any "proof." The next obstacle was the fact that neither Gomułka, nor any of his close associates (apart from his wife Zofia), was of Jewish origin. There was thus another important element lacking from linking him to the subsequent trials against "Zionists." Despite Gomułka's opposition to Stalin's activities against Tito in 1948, he had no close contacts with the Yugoslav leader. He was, therefore, not liable to be convicted of "Titoism," as Kostov was.

¹⁵ P. Machcewicz, op. cit., p. 28.

One can speculate that Władysław Gomułka escaped the fate of Rudolf Slansky for several reasons. First of all, he was not a good candidate to become "a Polish Slansky," as it was difficult to link his person with preceding trials. This problem, however, could easily be solved. It seems much more important that neither the Soviet nor Polish leadership was committed to finally resolve the case of Gomułka and bring it to a court of justice. Hypotheses trying to explain this attitude of communist leaders have been presented in this paper. All of the causes that influenced the course of this case will, however, probably never be known..