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**March 1968 events**

**T**he March 1968 events in Poland were spread and initiated by various groups. First and foremost, they stemmed from a spontaneous revolt by students and intellectuals from Polish cities against the communist authorities. University students who decided to take a stand defending freedom of speech and civil liberties were brutally pacified by the militia and ZOMO riot troops. The first protests took place in Warsaw, where due to anti-Russian sentiment, the authorities banned the theatre performance of 'Dziady' by Adam Mickiewicz. Students of the University of Warsaw collected over 3,000 signatures under the petition. They were supported by writers from the Polish Writers' Union. The criticism was so powerful that even intellectuals involved in communist party propaganda were unable to stop it.

**T**he direct reason for the militia entering the university was a demonstration staged by students on 8 March in defence of fellow students Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer who had been removed from the university. Official propaganda called them hooligans and the protests were ascribed to 'Zionists,' which fuelled anti-Semitic sentiments in society.

**T**here was yet another aspect: the attitude of the then communist authorities towards Israel. After the six-day war in which the USSR supported Egypt, official propaganda in the countries of the Eastern bloc called for the condemnation of Israel, which did have an impact on the attitude towards Jews still living in Eastern European countries who had been totally assimilated, often for many generations. The communists sought to use the anti-Semitic mood for both their internal party infighting and to incite people against one another. The anti-Semitic witch-hunt was criticised by the Polish Church. Primate Wyszyński called for a stop to racism and hatred.

**A**t the same time, in various Polish towns spontaneous student rallies took place, calling for freedom and expressing solidarity with students from Warsaw and Czechoslovakia. In many places workers were joining the protesters. Futile efforts were made by the authorities to show in the media that workers did not support the students. The March protest was an expression of discontent by young people from both social groups.

**E**ventually, the brutal actions of the authorities suppressed the strikes. Several hundred students were thrown out of the university, some programmes where the opposition movement was particularly strong

were discontinued and several thousand students and workers were compulsorily drafted to the army. Recognised as the leaders of the protests at the University of Warsaw, Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski were convicted to prison terms of a few years. Many academics were removed from the university as well.

**I**nside the party, the factions of Gomułka and Moczar were fighting bitterly. Moczar's supporters used the moment to get rid of inconvenient party activists, not only Jews. Those who were close to Gomułka (Ochab, Spychalski) were losing influence.

**T**he anti-Semitic rhetoric of the communists tarnished not just Poland's image. They primarily left the common people disoriented, unable to tell who was protesting against what, who was guilty and who the victim. Media-manipulated, people were ready to believe that either 'Stalinists' or Jews were to blame. Many persons of Jewish origin left Poland on their own, for fear of possibly more radical waves of anti-Semitism.

**A**fter the March events it became clear to Polish students and the intelligentsia that no negotiations with the communists were possible. Many young people dared to protest for the first time. The generation born during the war or just after it became involved in street fighting for the first time and heard the older generation shout 'Gestapo!' at the ZOMO riot troops. For many, the March strikes were a prelude to their serious involvement in opposition activity in the years to come.

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**References:**