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**June 1956: Poznań protests**

**O**n 12 March 1953 Joseph Stalin died, one of the most notorious criminals in human history and the USSR's leader, an event that triggered a fight for power among former close collaborators of the dictator. Initially, a long-term vision for the USSR's policy was less important than support of the most powerful members of the power camp. Eventually, after Lavrentiy Beria had been murdered, power was taken over by Georgy Malenko, Vyacheslav Molotov and Nikita Khrushchev. They were gradually seeking less terror and a semblance of 'collective' party management.

**I**n Poland, the thaw after Stalin's death came with some delay. At first, the only visible response of the authorities was the cult of the deceased criminal order by the communists. At the same time, those in power intensified their attack on the Polish Catholic Church. The economic situation was also deteriorating, to be saved by a 'six-year plan' whose successive versions, however, failed to stop the crisis. It was clear in 1955 that despite some successes in the industrial sector, the situation in agriculture had become catastrophic. Despite slight pay rises, there were fewer commodities on the market, so that the living standards of the population went down. The terror machine still worked yet people hoped for some change. In October 1954, workers at the Cegielski factory in Poznań (then called the Poznań Joseph Stalin Factory) staged a protest against low wages and the management did make some concessions, the first time after the war that the authorities had not resorted to repressive acts against the protesters.



**I**n Poland, PUPW party activists used the post-Stalin thaw to engage in infighting. Critics of the terror now pretended they did not know about the drastic methods applied by the Ministry of Public Security of Poland (MBP). To demonstrate their break with the past, they managed to liquidate the MBP and remove Stanisław Radkiewicz (Minister of Public Security from 22 July 1944). Several oppressors infamous for their cruelty towards prisoners were also arrested.

**I**n March 1956, Bolesław Bierut died in Moscow, which stirred the ranks of Polish communists and renewed struggles for power. Eventually, the post of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party went to Edward Ochab supported by Khrushchev. Ochab started by promoting Khrushchev's ideas for less terror and breaking with Stalinism in Poland.

**I**n April 1956, an 'amnesty' was announced. The word usually referred to guilty criminals put in prison

but was used here for political prisoners of the Stalinist regime. Thus accepting the so-called 'acts of grace' was an additional humiliation for the prisoners. It did not entail any rehabilitation or judgment annulment. Some of the detained Home Army soldiers and activists of independence-oriented underground were released from prisons and their death sentences changed to long imprisonment.

**B**ecause of this and other actions that were meant to look like liberalisation, various strata of society thought more and more openly about better living and working conditions. Most protests took place in towns with strong independence-minded centres from pre-war times where life in poverty and terror was unacceptable, the Cegielski factory being in one such area.

**S**ince April workers had been negotiating with the management and then with Warsaw-based state authorities contesting imposed taxes perceived as unjust. As no agreement was found, they announced strike action. Late June was an important time in Poznań as the International Fair hosted many guests from behind the 'Iron Curtain' who could have easily witnessed riots in town. That is why the factory pretended that the talks would continue. The workers had no intention of waiting any longer, however, and on 28 June 1956 announced a general strike, to be combined with street demonstrations.

**A**t 06:30 AM, the workers left the plant and went towards the Castle, the seat of the National City Council. The banners carried by the crowd spoke of bread and freedom. As the march progressed, patriotic and religious songs were sung, and openly anti-communist and anti-Russian slogans were shouted. Local residents were joining the workers spontaneously.

**T**he protesters demanded to be heard by Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz. A delegation of the workers entered the seat of the authorities. Soon the rumour spread across the crowd that they had been arrested and the workers broke into the building in order to release their colleagues. Some protesters started to march towards the prison planning to release the inmates. Having taken control over the prison and released the prisoners, the protesters took over the weapons which were there. They also entered court buildings and destroyed and burnt court files. From the roof of the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) building, equipment used to jam western radio stations was thrown down. Around 11:00, a shootout began between the protesters and the army called to pacify the city.

**F**ights across Poznań continued until the end of the day. The protesters managed to secure more arms and control posts of the militia. Although regular units and heavy equipment were used by the other side, the fighting continued the following day. The authorities pacified the city in a brutal manner. Fifty-eight people died (data provided by the Institute of National Remembrance), several hundred were injured, another several hundred arrested and 135 were tried and convicted. The youngest victim, thirteen-year-old Roman Strzałkowski shot during the fighting, became a symbol of the struggle in Poznań.

**T**he Poznań June events only intensified the infighting among PUWP leaders and were one of the direct reasons for the political changes that came in October 1956 when Władysław Gomułka came to power. For Polish society, it was a clear signal that the communists would not hesitate to use the army and militia against the people, but also an unprecedented manifestation of patriotism where local residents marched alongside workers in the spirit of solidarity. This certainly influenced the public, who now felt obliged to be active.

**T**ranslated from Polish to English by Mikołaj Sekrecki, Proofread by Dr Ian Copestake



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**References:**