

Genesis

The events of March 1968 were multi-faceted; in the space of a few weeks, several completely different and often unrelated incidents dovetailed with each other. In that light, when talking about the genesis of the March 1968 events, it is necessary to mention a series of diverse proceedings.

The basis for the student protests was undoubtedly the growing dissatisfaction and disappointment with the policies of Władysław Gomułka's cadre. "Wiesław", as he was popularly known, very quickly began the process of moving away from the changes and reforms won by the populace in the autumn of 1956. First, free speech was limited, then the press was muzzled once again, and many independent initiatives were closed down. Then it came time for the renewal of the fight with the Church and political repression also resumed. Finally, from the beginning of 1960, the economic situation began to systematically deteriorate.

The intelligentsia in particular felt Gomułka's policies severely. The growing repression, the escalation of censorship, and the limitations on cultural and educational spending led intellectuals to open protest, which was epitomized by Letter 34 from March 1964. This consequently brought on the further escalation of repression. In the autumn of 1966, a group of former party intellectuals turned in their red party membership cards after Leszek Kołakowski was expelled from the PZPR, embarking on their evolution towards an oppositional stance. The critical mood towards the cultural policies of the party was exacerbated when the production of "Dziady" (Forefather's Eve) was closed down.

One of the elements most difficult to describe from the March events is the internal conflict at the heart of the Polish United Worker's Party, connected to the rivalry for power. This was related to the formation of factions within the PZPR that posed a potential threat to Gomułka. The first of these groups, referred to as 'partisans,' was focused around Gen. Mieczysław Moczar, the interior minister (this position was held from 1964; previously he had been deputy minister). The name comes from the fact that Moczar referred to the tradition of partisan warfare in the ranks of the communist People's Guard, as a bond which

connected him to his followers. However, it is necessary to remember, that within the realities of a communist state, we cannot talk about organized groups within the party, but rather about factions that were struggling to gain influence behind the scenes. Undoubtedly, Moczar tried to use the March events for his own ends, however, this does not mean that he instigated them. Followers of Edward Gierek, then Secretary of the PZPR Politburo in Katowice made up a second, even less formally organized group; they were sometimes called the “technocrats”.

In March 1968, one of the main propaganda lines was the so-called “anti-Zionist” campaign, directed against the nation of Israel and her sympathizers in the Polish People’s Republic, which in reality often took on an openly anti-Semitic character. Until the mid-1960s the attitude of the Communist authorities towards Jews did not differ from their treatment of other nationalities. The situation changed after the outbreak of the Six Day War on 5 June 1967. On Moscow’s orders, the PRL severed diplomatic relations with Israel and began an anti-Israeli propaganda campaign. After Władysław Gomułka’s speech on 19 June 1967, in which he called Polish Jews the “Fifth Column”, an anti-Semitic purge began in the party apparatus, the Security Service and the military. In the autumn of 1967 a propaganda campaign was unleashed against *Wielka Encyklopedia Powszechna* (the Great Universal Encyclopedia). The pretext for the smear campaign and removal of a large group of people (mostly of Jewish origin) from employment was allegedly the incorrect formulation of the slogan “death camps”. The authors were accused of thereby diminishing the martyrdom of the Jewish nation.

The student uprisings were the main (and of course most important) undercurrent of the March events. The formation of the so-called “commandos” group in the mid-1960s, from amongst the students of the University of Warsaw seems to be the most important for the genesis of the uprisings. The name came from their method of action – unexpectedly appearing at official meetings, entering into the discussions and asking the speaker “awkward” questions. The leader of the circle was Adam Michnik, and his patrons Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, who had been imprisoned since 1965. For acting in their defence, a number of people from the commandos’ circle were taken to a disciplinary court for the first time, in the autumn of 1965. On the tenth anniversary of the October 1956 events, the group initiated a meeting, after which the PZPR deposed Leszek Kołakowski, which in turn caused the afore-mentioned solidarity action by party intellectuals. Michnik’s answer during the discussion then became a further pretext for expelling him from his studies, which caused a mass action in his defence. Before the March events, the commandos were already a tight-knit group (although actually made up of several groups), efficient and experienced in organizing protests. It is necessary to remember, that they were not the only group of this type acting at the University of Warsaw (although

undoubtedly the most important one). In other centres similar groups did not form, though it should be remembered that small conspiratorial circles of collaborators existed (more often made up of pupils than students), of which the organization 'Ruch' ('Movement') had the most significant and nationwide character.

Łukasz Kamiński



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