

Student Protests

The spark that incited the fire was the decision to remove Michnik and Szlajfer from the University of Warsaw. Prof. Henryk Jabłoński, the Minister of Education, made the decision on March 4th; the formal pretext being that the two had given information to foreign journalists regarding the “Dziady” (Forefather’s Eve) case (an investigation had been conducted into their involvement in the matter). In reply, Komandosi (“The Commandos”, a student political activity group) organized a mass meeting on 8 March.

In a short time a great number of leaflets calling for participation in the protest were distributed. Although in the morning a number of people were detained, around a thousand people gathered in the UW courtyard in the afternoon. After accepting the appropriate resolutions, the throng planned to disperse, but this was made impossible by the sudden appearance of ‘worker activists’, who arrived on the campus in several buses. After a long altercation, things came to an open intervention and the beating of students, with the participation of ORMO (Voluntary Reserves of Civil Militia) and ZOMO (Motorized Reserves of the Civil Militia) units. The fights also moved into the areas surrounding the university.

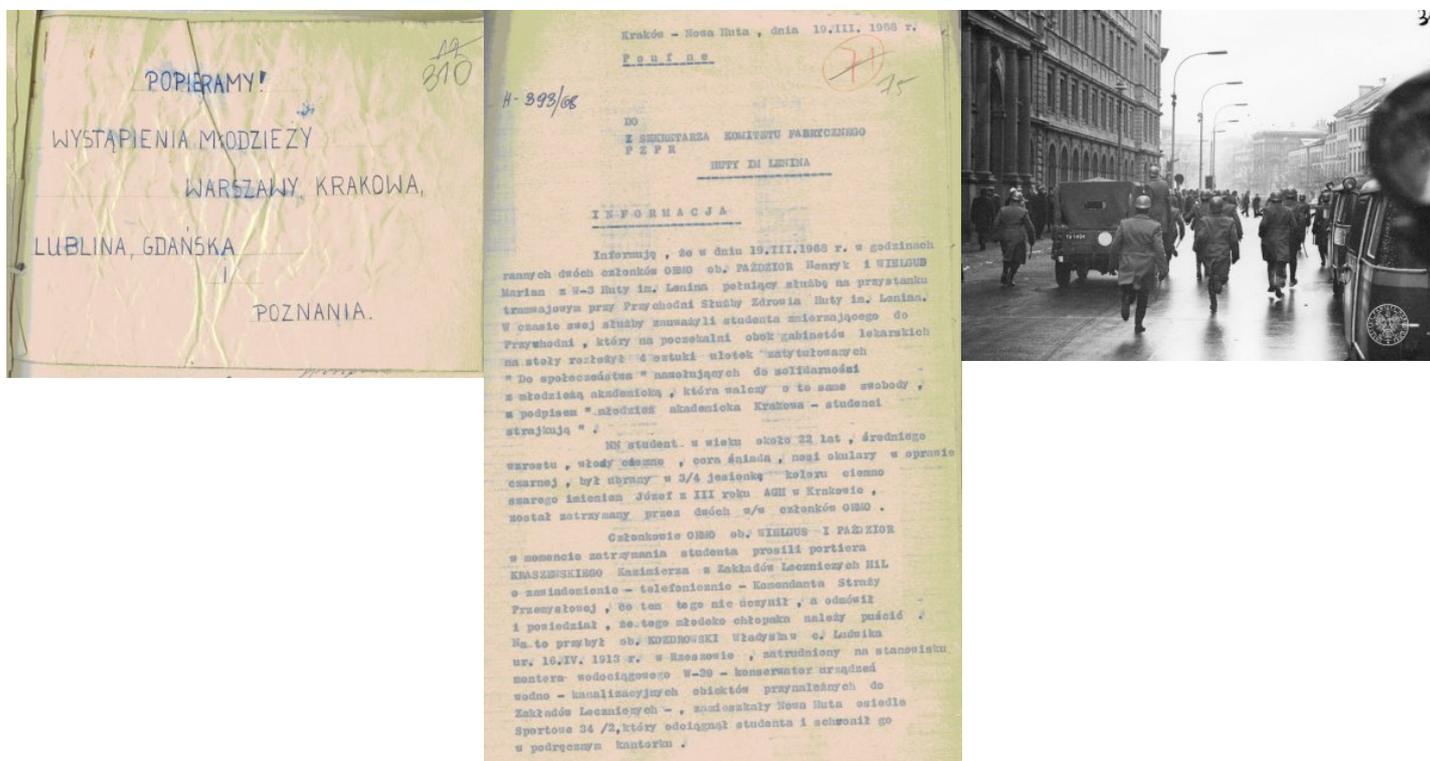
In Warsaw things came to a serious clash again on March 9th and also on the 11th after the rally at the Polytechnic. That day began the spread of the protest throughout the entire country. Tens of thousands of people took part in rallies, strikes and demonstrations. The protest covered the whole country, not just academic centres. Clashes with the MO (Citizen’s Militia) took place in Bielsko-Biala, Legnica, Radom and Tarnow. The March movement collapsed equally rapidly as it had exploded. The end came with the strikebreaking actions of March 22-23. Underground groups were active for a while longer at individual institutions of higher education. The last note of the March event was the May 1st demonstration in Wroclaw. (For a detailed description of events see ‘Kalendarium i Regiony’.)

March '68 was above all a movement of moral opposition, so the paucity of the program is not really surprising. First and foremost, the repeal of repression, the return of “Dziady” to

the stage and the refutation of propagandist lies were demanded. From today's perspective, the demands for compliance with the Constitution of the PRL and frequent references to socialism might seem surprising. On the one hand, this probably had an element of tactics, on the other, however, it reflected the real state of consciousness of those born and raised in People's Poland. A mature program containing stipulations for broad reforms was formulated only after the protests had died out, in the form of the Student Movement Declaration adopted on March 28.

Today historians have no doubts that March '68 was not merely a student rebellion, but also the protest of an entire generation. From among the more than 2,700 people arrested in connection with the student actions, students made up less than a quarter. In the street protests, young workers and high school students played a prominent role. In light of the most recent research, the myth perpetuated by Andrzej Wajda in his film "Człowiek z żelaza" (Man of Iron) that the workers did not support the students in March, for which the latter were to repay by their passivity in December '70. Throughout the country many cases of collections of money and food for the protestors were noted, as well as attempts to openly oppose the anti-student campaign, although its egalitarian theme undoubtedly reached many people.

Łukasz Kamiński





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