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Jerzy Eisler - March '68 From the Perspective of a Half Century

The fiftieth anniversary of March '68 prompts us to several reflections of a general nature. Firstly, in spite of the publication of roughly 70 books and brochures (of varying value and usefulness to a researcher) dedicated to the events at that time in Poland, we are still unable to provide answers to many important questions that are satisfactory from a scholarly point of view.

Meanwhile, common knowledge on this subject is still superficial and one-sided, sometimes even contradictory to the most recent historiographical findings. For example, even in critical texts, one can still find traditional, stereotypical approaches, according to which, in Poland in 1968, there was a rebellion of students and some of the intelligentsia (especially artists), alongside the reluctant (sometimes only passive though at times even hostile) attitude of the workers. During that time, street demonstrations and youth clashes with the "law enforcement authorities" took place not only in such academic centers as Warsaw, Gdańsk, Gliwice, Katowice, Kraków, Lublin, Łódź, Poznań, Szczecin and Wrocław, but also occurred in cities where there were no institutions of higher education at that time - Bielsko-Biała, Legnica, Radom and Tarnów.

Notwithstanding, manifestations and violent street fights were an atypical form of supporting the student movement in the provinces. The leaflet campaign, which encompassed several hundred places throughout Poland, developed on a significantly wider scale. Above all, it was a generational rebellion; young workers and high school pupils supported the students on a wide scale. In the mid-60s, the post-war baby boomers, i.e., those who were brought up and educated in People's Poland, began to enter adult life. The reference point for their aspirations and expectations could no longer be the Second Republic but rather Western countries - experienced from films and books, and the increasingly popular television.

Secondly, in spite of undeniable and immense progress in recent years regarding research into the events of 1968, there are still many questions we are unable to answer. The

answers to these questions simply cannot be found in Polish archives, which have been quite carefully scrutinized. . Perhaps it would be possible if historians gained unrestricted access to Soviet archives in Russia, but that is rather unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Thirdly, in spite of efforts undertaken by some historians looking into this problem, we are still often faced with one aspect being chosen, with the omission or at least the marginalization of other developments of the 1968 crisis. This is often due to someone's personal experiences from half a century ago. Today, some people only want to write and speak primarily (in more extreme cases only) about this particular aspect, this development, this motif of March '68, with which they were somehow connected. This is fostered by the fact that under the term 'March '68' or 'the March events', there are several different, not necessarily related, and sometimes even mutually exclusive and contradictory motifs. For example, persons who emigrated from Poland after the March events, as a result of the brutal anti-Semitic campaign – through official factors incompetently concealed in the guise of 'anti-Zionism' – these people most often mention anti-Semitic statements and behaviors, but sometimes – even while remaining on the same theme – recall experiencing various decent gestures people before their departure from Poland. This also applies to those Jews and Poles of Jewish origin, who for various reasons decided to stay in the country.

For those who were studying in 1968, the student undercurrent of the March events is usually the most important. Rallies, strikes and demonstrations at universities are very often their most intense memories of those times. Many view March '68 as an event that, to a greater or lesser degree, influenced their future lives. This particular undercurrent of the 'March events' is perhaps the most well-known today. We know that students protesting in Poland in 1968 acted under the battle cry of freedom and fought for the democratization and liberalisation of the system. Some people of this generation were active in the democratic opposition in the 70s, then after August '80 they found themselves among the activists and advisors of NSZZ 'Solidarity', and after systemic changes in Poland this group assumed various responsible public roles.

In turn, even years later, for many people from the world of culture, science and art, the March events appeared mainly to be an anti-intellectual pogrom, a time when writers and scientists, often of great achievement and merit, were brutally attacked in the mass media. A common feature of all these publications was that following in the footsteps of party activists, they denied not only the ideological and moral virtues, but also the professional qualifications of those accused. Simultaneously, , in the realm of intellectual life, new people were surfacing, people who advanced quickly not so much for their skills and diligence, but rather for their political flexibility.

The above-mentioned undercurrents were accompanied by the wrangling inside the PZPR leadership. Poland was then an arena of back-door political infighting led by the 'partisans', under the patronage of the Minister of the Interior Gen. Mieczysław Mochar, who wrangled with Władysław Gomułka's group as well the 'Słazaks' of Edward Gierek. As a result of the 'March events', Gomułka's position weakened provisionally, but in spite of everything he managed to cling to power. At this time a wave of rallies organized by the authorities rolled over the country, condemning the 'troublemakers' and 'political bankrupts', who were allegedly hiding behind 'disoriented and dazed' students. This was accompanied by a political purge, which encompassed the Party apparatus, central and local government offices, state administration, the military, mass media, education, health services, scientific and cultural circles - practically all spheres of activity. Mainly, but not exclusively, people of Jewish origin were purged from the party and from employment: they were cast as being responsible for all errors and failures, and above all, they were denounced as being almost wholly to blame for the crimes and iniquities of the Stalinist period in Poland. In such an atmosphere, over 15 thousand people emigrated from Poland in only a few years.

Jerzy Eisler



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