

Poland Between the Camps

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THE muted and covert struggle between those inside Poland who stand for a more democratic Socialism and the Stalinists (the "Conservatives" as Gomulka euphemistically dubs them) goes on. Evidence of this is the continued postponement of the 3rd Party Congress.

Originally there was talk of it being held last December. Then various dates in January and the late spring were tentatively suggested. A Party official told me that it would definitely take place by the middle of 1958, about now.

Why no Congress so far? Usual reasons. The controlling group in the Party leadership must be uncertain what would be the outcome. That means a Congress could still bring victory to the "Conservatives." Or it could fail to result in a decisive strengthening of those in the Party leadership who lead the democratization movement.

The Party "verification of members campaign" launched last year supposedly as a pre-Congress purge to bring greater unity to the Party was a flop. It foundered on the rock of "who shall verify whom?" An odd feature at the time of the campaign launching was that everyone in Poland other than Gomulka and the Party spokesmen appeared to know that it could not possibly solve anything. A fringe of Party luminaries, con-men, crooks and political illiterates, together with some extreme "revisionists" and die-hard super-Stalinists, was lopped off, but that was about all. It could not have been otherwise, the political set-up in the Party being what it is.

Imagine, for example, how many Tory and Labour Party members would be expelled from a British institution by a committee composed of Tory and Labour members created to sort out political undesirables.

Gomulka may denounce the opposing "wings" of "revisionists" and dogmatic-sectarians in his Party and try by exhortation to unify them until the proverbial cows come home, but the "wings" remain. Besides other things they are expressions of the two trends in Communism everywhere. The strength of the democratization "revisionist wing" derives from the aspirations of the Party rank and file and the Polish people. The Stalinist dogmatic-sectarian "wing" in the final analysis is made up of the kept men of Soviet power—which does not mean that they are political prostitutes, but rather that they genuinely adhere to the acceptance of Soviet leadership in the international Communist movement. They are a by no means inconsiderable numerical force, particularly in the middle and upper levels of Party leadership, in the Party machine.

In foreign affairs, how does this internal conflict express itself? The Polish ambassador at the recent Yugoslav Congress somewhat pathetically but gamely gauging just how much applause he could indulge in so as to show a sneaking sympathy with the Yugoslavs, without offending the Soviet Union, caricatured negatively just how far the Poles have moved towards a new Stalinist conformism in their external relations and how they cling to that degree of sovereignty they gained in October 1956.

The same ambassador staying to listen

to the Yugoslav speeches when the Soviet and other Communist representatives staged a walkout protest was, perhaps, a tiny demonstrative flag waved to affirm to the world that the men who defied Krushchov and ousted Rokossowski in 1956 still lead Poland.

On the other hand, Tito's tactful postponement of his arranged visit to Warsaw sharply revealed his assessment of how far the Poles dare (or rather dare not!) act independently, at present. And this hard fact was sadly underlined by the new conforming emphasis deliberately laid by Gomulka in his recent speeches made in Hungary on the correctness of the Soviet intervention "to save Hungary from counter-revolution" in 1956. (It was only a change of emphasis from his previous public utterances on the matter, but how emphasis can alter meaning!) From a cautious but nevertheless profound critic of the Soviet role in the Hungarian affair, and a reluctant supporter of the final "necessary intervention," Gomulka's new emphasis turned him into just another apologist. And this was the man who in a Party plenum less than a year ago bitterly rejected the Polish Stalinists' demand for conformity to Soviet leadership by saying: "Rakosi began all his speeches with 'led by the glorious Soviet Union' and where did he end up? With Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest."

The precise reasons for the present increasing conformity of the Polish leadership are, of course, not easy to determine. Their disappointment at the unexpected antagonism toward them of the Chinese leaders in the international gatherings held in Moscow during the 40th anniversary celebrations of the Russian Revolution (the turning point in international Communist policy) must have taken some heart out of them. And given heart to the Stalinists among them.

It was notable that in his report-back speech to Warsaw Party activists immediately following his return from the celebrations Gomulka was at great pains to define clearly the Polish attitude to credits from the West, from America in particular. He stressed that credits were only acceptable if given absolutely without political "conditions" attached. The Party propaganda organization made certain that correspondents from foreign Party newspapers were present at the meeting, an unusual practice. Presumably Gomulka having some idea even then of what form the Soviet attack on non-conforming Tito was to take—"you can't build Socialism on American wheat"—was explaining himself out of the accusation of a little Yugoslav/Polish "revisionist" bloc in the "Socialist camp"—and not only to his own Party members, but to as many foreign Party representatives as could be mustered.

In internal affairs there is further evidence of the move to conformism. For instance, the dismissal a month ago of the editors of *Nowa Kultura*—*New Culture*, organ of the Writers' Association—for "liberalism," etc. Then, the further demotion of the Workers' Self-management Councils in industry which was carried out in the recent Trade Union Congress must have mightily pleased and assured Stalinists everywhere.

For they hold the view that the Soviet political, social and industrial pattern is basically the *only* pattern for a Socialist society—and Workers Self-management is not a part of that pattern by any means.

On the contrary, Workers' Self-management Councils are seen as a dangerous "anti-Marxist" form likely to develop considerable economic power in the hands of the working class *outside of the control of the Party*. And the Stalinists' interpretation of Marxism-Leninism insists that there must be no power-grouping in a Socialist order (not even one rooted in the working class) capable of opposing the Party. Indeed, in practice, Stalinists set out to ensure that all power and all organs of power shall come strictly within Party control, or be liquidated.

Gomulka and other Party spokesmen argue, of course, that the Workers' Self-management Councils have not been demoted but that they have merely found their proper place after a period of trial and error. That is unfortunately hardly true.

The great movement among the Polish industrial workers to develop self-management began after the Poznan insurrection and reached its peak following the October upheaval in 1956. To many workers the 8th Plenum decisions and Gomulka's return to leadership meant a new deal for them, and the self-management council was precisely the form through which this was to come about. Remember, they were disillusioned with the Trade Unions, which far from defending them had lined up with the Party and government in overriding their fair demands for elementary justice and decent living standards during the period of intensive industrialization from 1949 to 1955, the years of the grandiose 6-year plan. Further they were burning with hatred against the new "ruling class" of Party bureaucrats, members of Ministerial hierarchies and managements.

What the workers wanted in a given enterprise was to elect a self-managing council by direct secret ballot. They did not want either the Party group of the Trade Union Committees to determine who should sit on the council. Those whom they decided were best fitted for the job, and those most trustworthy, should serve. They wanted the council to control the whole administration of the enterprise, and to report back regularly to mass aggregate gatherings of all the personnel in the enterprise. They wanted profit-sharing schemes as an incentive to production effort and as a way of raising living standards. Managers would be appointed or dismissed only after consultation with the council, and the council itself would have powers to recommend the discharge of unsuitable managers.

The workers wanted the councils to have the right to develop relations with other enterprises with the aim of ensuring a good flow of materials and of breaking the demoralizing bureaucratic bottlenecks which drove everyone mad. They wanted the councils to investigate producer/customer relations at home and abroad.

And with all these aims in mind the workers further recognized (that is to say the most informed of them) that there had

to be forms of regional and national planning and control to offset possible anarchistic and selfish tendencies. There were discussions about a second chamber to the Sejm (the Parliament) being set up, composed of representatives from the major economic units, a kind of industrial House of Lords.

Basically what the Polish workers were seeking was a workable alternative to the over-centralized, inevitably bureaucratic, system in which they suffered exploitation, oppression, poverty, and the incredibly inhumanity of the bureaucrat in power. They wanted a responsible form of control that vested ultimate authority in a given enterprise in the hands of the mass of the workpeople rather than in one man, or a small group of managers. They did not imagine they knew all the answers but they were anxious to experiment, to learn through trial and error.

Naturally the bureaucrats correctly saw these Workers' Self-management Councils as striking at their very existence. Managers without many politics disliked the fact that the councils challenged their authority and privileges. Stalinist-bureaucrats politically reflected the fears of the Soviet leaders that successful Workers' Self-management Councils operating in any Socialist order would tend to expose the true bureaucratic nature of the Soviet system.

To the dismay of the Polish workers the Party leadership, particularly through Gomulka, soon began fencing in, canalizing, and proscribing the powers to be accorded to the Workers' Self-management Councils. Successive legislation tightened the shackles on them. Gradually it became clear the old Soviet-patterned economic bureaucratic system was to be retained largely, although with some modifications and decentralization. The Workers' Self-management Councils—the white hope of the workers—if they were to exist at all—were to have the limited main functions of developing production-incentives within the bureaucratic system, and of keeping the workers happy.

Once the Councils were reduced to that status inevitably the workers began to lose faith in them, and, anyway, the councils then had little to do that was not normally

done by the Trade Union organizations. Thus arose the Workers' Self-management Council *versus* Trade Union Committee conflict which was the main alleged reason for the latest decision to group the councils within a larger organizational framework including the normal Works' Council, the Trade Union committee and the Party group leadership in a given enterprise. Reducing the Self-management Councils in practice to something of a mockery of what the workers thought they would be in late 1956. Transforming them from democratic organs of workers' control to miserable auxiliaries of the Party and government—of the bureaucracy they set out to destroy.

Through it all the bureaucracy has remained entrenched although some of its powers and privileges have had to be sacrificed, and some of its members have lost their posts.

The Stalinists feel, however, that something very like their conception of a Socialist economy again prevails in the industrial field, although they remain dissatisfied about the "partial restoration of capitalism" among the peasantry and the small manufacturers.

The industrial worker (the exalted proletarian) has tried and failed, again.

The questions now arise: what then is the real political standpoint of Gomulka and/or the Polish Party leadership? Is he (and are they) a near-Stalinist, or a Stalinist-wolf in democratic-sheep's clothing? Or is Gomulka (and his colleagues) a political captive of the Stalinists? A useful *front* man?

The most optimistic answer to such questions it seems to me is that Gomulka and his colleagues are realists. And a good realist approach to survival in this life is "to do in Rome what the Romans do." At least publicly, and particularly when the Romans (read Soviet leaders) suspect you, and when you are geographically situated the way Poland is.

It is to be presumed that Gomulka does wish to survive politically. That against all pressures and cross-currents he wishes the "Polish Road" to go on and survive. He will therefore presumably "fight" or "run away" on every issue according to his own estimation of the laws of survival.

The cold-blooded murder of Imre Nagy and the other Hungarian leaders—so close politically to the Polish leadership, it seemed—the new brutally callous drive against the Yugoslavs, must play their part in persuading Gomulka and his colleagues that at the moment anyway their survival chances are very limited, unless they play ball. Therefore they will certainly not conduct their bouts on lines suggested by emotional ringside spectators who are not receiving the blows.

Another question emerges: might not Gomulka's policy of concession to the Stalinists already have had the effect of demoralizing and demobilizing those very forces in and outside of Poland which brought him back to leadership? Personally I think that is a grave and real danger. A fatal error practical politicians sometimes make is, while grappling manfully with tangible problems, to disregard inponderables. This can bring their downfall, particularly in the sense that what they finally achieve is something very different from what they aimed at.

It could be that the most active political grouping in Poland now is the resurgent Stalinists, with the scalps of the young *Po Prostu* editors dangling round their necks, a sputnik to ride on, the bland smile of Mao Tse Tung reflected in their eyes and the tragic death-head of Imre Nagy in their buttonholes. While those who believed in and fought for democratization have, as one sincere journalist condemned as a "revisionist" put it, "laid down their trumpets" more baffled by the leaders they followed than by the enemy they fought."

Finally, there is one other set of facts which should not be forgotten: the Political Bureau of the Polish Party is still made up of a majority of men who were in political leadership right through the worst Stalinist period; likewise the Party Central Committee is, except for a few expulsions and inclusions that can be counted on one hand, the same body of men. By bringing Gomulka back to leadership, by supporting democratization, they avoided a revolution and saved their own political skins, besides what other less self-centred motives may have moved them. These are facts which it seems to me are often overlooked.