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## THE PATH TO POWER: NOTES ON A NEW BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD GIEREK\*

**Abstract:** Edward Gierek served as the Secretary of the Communist Party's Regional Committee in the Katowice Voivodeship from 1957 to 1970. He was regarded as the most influential local leaders and, by the end of the decade, one of the key politicians in the country. He was brought into central politics by the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) Bolesław Bierut, and in December 1970 he contributed to the overthrow of Władysław Gomułka's leadership and replaced him as the head of the party. Mirosław Szumiło describes Gierek's path to power from the second decade of the twentieth century to the early 1970s.

**Keywords:** Mirosław Szumiło, Edward Gierek, biography, Katowice, Communism, Polish Workers' Party, Polish United Workers' Party, People's Republic of Poland.

Today, the number of published biographies of Communist policy-makers is slowly increasing, and as a result historians have less and less reason to complain about the dearth of these sources, as was the case previously.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the level and objectivity of these biographies varies, nevertheless they are already numerous enough to fill a separate academic library. Thus, we can familiarize ourselves with the biographies of, among others, Jakub Berman,<sup>2</sup> Bolesław Bierut,<sup>3</sup> Jerzy Borejsza,<sup>4</sup>

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\* In connection with the book: Mirosław Szumiło, *Gierek: Droga do władzy*, Łódź: Dom Wydawniczy Książki Młyn; Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2023, pp. 400.

<sup>1</sup> I wrote about this at greater length when reviewing a previous biography by the same author, Robert Spałek, 'Pierwszy po triumwirach, pierwszy po "Wiesławie" – Roman Zambrowski', *KH*, 123, 2016, 2, pp. 339–55.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Sobór-Świdzka, *Jakub Berman: Biografia komunisty*, Warsaw, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Czesław Kozłowski, *Namiestnik Stalina*, Warsaw, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Eryk Krasucki, *Międzynarodowy komunista: Jerzy Borejsza – biografia polityczna*, Warsaw, 2009.

Leonard Borkowicz,<sup>5</sup> Władysław Gomułka,<sup>6</sup> Ignacy Loga-Sowiński,<sup>7</sup> Wojciech Jaruzelski,<sup>8</sup> Czesław Kiszczak,<sup>9</sup> Witold Kolski,<sup>10</sup> Mieczysław Moczar,<sup>11</sup> Mieczysław F. Rakowski,<sup>12</sup> Józef Światło,<sup>13</sup> Franciszek Szlachcic,<sup>14</sup> Aleksander Zawadzki,<sup>15</sup> and Roman Zambrowski.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, it is worth noting the books which in one volume present the intertwined biographies of several Communist activists.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the scholarly literature is supplemented by a growing number of works intended for the general public, some of which are quite interesting.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Katarzyna Rembacka, *Komunista na peryferiach władzy: Historia Leonarda Borkowicza 1912–1989*, Szczecin and Warsaw, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Anita Prażmowska, *Władysław Gomułka: A Biography*, London and New York, 2016 (Polish edition: Anita Prażmowska, *Władysław Gomułka*, transl. Katarzyna Skawran, Warsaw, 2016); Andrzej Werblan, *Władysław Gomułka sekretarz generalny PPR*, Warsaw, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Krzysztof Lesikowski, *Ignacy Loga-Sowiński (1914–1992): Portret gomułkowca*, Łódź, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Lech Kowalski, *Jaruzelski: General ze skazą*, Poznań, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, *Cze.Kiszczak: Biografia gen. broni Czesława Kiszczaka*, Poznań, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Eryk Krasucki, 'A jednak coraz silniej wierzę': *Życie i los Witolda Kolskiego (1902–1943)*, Szczecin, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Krzysztof Lesiakowski, *Mieczysław Moczar 'Mietek': Biografia polityczna*, Warsaw, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Michał Przeperski, *Mieczysław F. Rakowski: Biografia polityczna*, Warsaw, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, *Trzy twarze Józefa Światły: Przyczynek do historii komunizmu w Polsce*, Warsaw, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Anna Sobór-Świdorska, *Franciszek Szlachcic (1920–1990): Biografia między służbami specjalnymi a polityką*, Cracow, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Janusz Mokrosz, *Aleksander Zawadzki — działacz komunistyczny i wojewoda śląski (1945–1948)*, Katowice and Warsaw, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Mirosław Szumiło, *Roman Zambrowski 1909–1977: Studium z dziejów elity komunistycznej w Polsce*, Warsaw, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Jerzy Eisler, *Siedmiu wspaniałych: Poczec pierwszych sekretarzy KC PZPR*, Warsaw, 2014; Barbara Fijałkowska, *Borejsza i Różański: Przyczynek do dziejów stalinizmu w Polsce*, Olsztyn, 1995; Robert Spałek, *Na licencji Moskwy: Wokół Gomułki, Bermana i innych (1943–1970)*, Warsaw, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> In this category, Piotr Lipiński's historical-reportage portraits come out well (*Cyrankiewicz: Wieczny premier*, Wołowiec, 2016; *Bierut: Kiedy partia była bogiem*, Wołowiec, 2017; *Gomułka: Władzy nie oddamy*, Wołowiec, 2019; *Wasilewska: Czarno-biała*, Wołowiec, 2023), while Piotr Gajdziński's book entitled *Gierek: Człowiek z węgla* (Poznań, 2014) brings new, cognitively important information supplementing the image of the 1970s already known to historians (a different view has been presented by Paweł Sasanka, 'O Człowieku z węgla krytycznie', *Polska 1944/45–1989: Studia i materiały*, 13, 2015, pp. 261–66), while two other biographies elaborated by the same author (Piotr Gajdziński, *Czerwony Ślepowron: Biografia Wojciecha Jaruzelskiego*, Poznań, 2017 and *Gomułka: Dyktatura ciemniaków*, Poznań, 2017) are considerably more imitative and lack objectivity; still different are the books of Mariusz Głuszko, which, although factually and interpretatively of secondary importance, prove useful through their summaries of the issues (*Edward Gierek: Szkic do portretu PRL*, Sandomierz, 2017; *Piotr Jaroszewicz 1909–1992*, Warsaw, 2021). Janusz Rolicki's *Gierek: Życie i narodziny legendy*, Warsaw, 2002 is hagiographic in nature. It is still possible, of course, to go back to older biographies of Communist policy-makers, for example: Paweł Machcewicz, *Władysław Gomułka*, Warsaw,

What emerges from the book under review is a picture of Edward Gierek as a Communist who was atypical for his generation. He had grown up in the West and had not taken part in the illegal Communist movement in the Second Polish Republic. Consequently, the mentality of a revolutionary, living under constant threat of arrest or surveillance, or betrayal by his comrades — situations natural to many members of the Polish Communist Party — was alien to him. Gierek spent much of his childhood and teenage years in France, and as an adult settled with his wife in Belgium. He lived in Poland temporarily from 1934 to 1937, during which time he completed his military service. He was a fourth-generation coal miner; his brother, father and grandfather had all died in the mines. In Poland, he was condemned to poverty, with nowhere to live, while as a migrant he earned well, and was also allocated a one-storey house on a mining estate. While in France, he learned French, and over time also absorbed the rudiments of Dutch; after the war, he additionally acquired a knowledge of Russian.

He became interested in Communism for idealistic reasons. Mirośław Szumiło does not mock the fact, and indeed emphasizes that today this model of idealism remains as probably 'the factor which impacted the susceptibility [of young Polish citizens] to Communist agitation that is most underestimated by historians' (p. 35). In France, Gierek joined the French Communist Party, but it was not until he was living in Belgium, when he became a member of the local Communist Party as a twenty-something year old — a role which he combined with activity in the miners' trade unions and with social activism — that he associated himself with the movement for good. As it transpired, of greatest importance for his career was his involvement with the pro-Communist campaigning among the Belgian Polish community soon after the end of the Second World War. In June 1946 he joined the Polish Workers' Party (Belgium branch), and less than a year later became part of its three-man foreign leadership. In 1948, after various vicissitudes (including an unsuccessful attempt at taking up the post of Secretary of the Polish Workers' Party branch in France), he found himself in Poland, where he appeared before Roman Zambrowski, the Party's de facto personnel decision-maker. Zambrowski, after some hesitation, decided to make use of the by then worldly-wise Communist, and assigned him to the Organizational Department of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party.

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1995; Eleonora Syzdek and Bronisław Syzdek, *Cyrankiewicz: Zanim zostanie zapomniany*, Warsaw, 1996 (in the latter case we are dealing with an ideologized hagiography, albeit one rich in factual content).

Half a year later, Gierek was transferred to Katowice as the Deputy Second Secretary of the local Provincial Committee, and at the same time sent to the Party School at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. Over the following years, Gierek worked his way up through the ranks as the Organizational Secretary, Economic Secretary to the Executive Committee, and Second Secretary, and additionally was elected a Member of Parliament in 1952. Finally, in 1954 he received a spectacular promotion; namely, he was elected a member of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, thus entering the official Party elite; and he was also appointed head of the Department of Heavy Industry of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. Once a week he would meet with the most important Communist principal in Warsaw, Bolesław Bierut, who was extremely interested in the mining industry. At the same time, Gierek obtained a diploma in engineering without having to take and complete an engineering studies course (this was made possible by a special law that had been introduced on 28 January 1948).

Thanks to his moderate attitude and non-involvement in factional infighting, the promising activist won the trust of the next First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Edward Ochab; and in August 1956, at the age of forty-three, took over as head of the Organizational Department of the Central Committee — one of the most important departments in the entire communist structure. Gierek's professional situation took a turn for the worse after October 1956, when Władysław Gomułka came to power; during the first few years their relationship was cold. Gomułka decided to send Gierek from the Warsaw headquarters to Katowice, appointing him First Secretary of the local Provincial Committee. The breakthrough in contacts came in early 1959, after Gierek made an unequivocal declaration of loyalty to the First Secretary. But even so, the Communist autocrat did not rid himself of his distrust of the Silesian leader, whose political power was growing steadily, and — as Szumiło points out in the book — he tried to curb the latter's influence on at least three occasions. Namely, he tried to entice Gierek with seemingly lucrative promotions, which in practice were intended to turn him into one of the many Party officials; Gomułka offered him, in turn, the positions of Economic Secretary (in 1960); Prime Minister (in 1964); and finally Deputy Prime Minister (1969) (pp. 189, 245, 290).

A reading of his biography reveals that in the region Edward Gierek consciously gathered around him young Party activists without seniority, who strove to create good conditions of 'work and leisure' (by Communist standards) for the people of Katowice, while at the same time hoping to

make a career from his side. By the middle of the decade, the uniquely independent and strong position of this provincial secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party was recognized even abroad. The author argues that no other local party leader gained even comparable influence, or was able to vie for funds in Warsaw as effectively as Gierek.

Gierek understood that he could not make a false start in the struggle for power, which is why he supported Gomułka during the socio-political crisis of March 1968 and during the Warsaw Pact military intervention in Czechoslovakia in August of the same year. However, Gomułka was becoming increasingly quarrelsome and withdrawn, including in his relations with the Soviet authorities, and thus ceased being a partner for rational cooperation. Already in the autumn of 1969, during the Party's national congress, it became apparent that Gierek had gained a very strong influence on the selection of the membership of the Political Bureau and Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. December 1970 witnessed the outbreak of a multi-faceted socio-economic crisis in the Polish People's Republic, in consequence of which the Communists who were aspiring to establish a 'new leadership' hatched an intra-Party conspiracy and brought about personnel changes, and Gierek was elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. As Szumiło recalls, a large part of Polish society (the workers, intelligentsia, the hierarchs of the Catholic Church, and émigré circles) accepted these developments with hope and relative optimism. The Western press and politicians (for example, in the United States, United Kingdom and France) reacted similarly (pp. 348–55). Gierek assumed a position that marked the apogee of his career, influence, importance and prestige. Unfortunately, it is at this very point that the author concludes his book, drawing a veil, so to speak, over the following decade.

The narrational and analytical part of the biography of Edward Gierek consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion; and also includes a bibliography, an index of personal names, a list of abbreviations, and a small selection of illustrations. The work has been written in chronological order (the exception being the third chapter, written thematically). As the author himself observes, he was keen to trace his protagonist's political career, the causes and circumstances of his promotions, and his ambitions and the political goals which he pursued until December 1970, that is, until he was appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. Szumiło also wanted to answer the question as to whether Gierek was more of an ideological or a pragmatic politician.

The author carried out his basic preliminary archival research at the Central Archives of Modern Records, where he familiarized himself

with documents of the Polish United Workers' Party, and personnel materials and testimonies. He also made use of the collections of the State Archives in Katowice (including documentation of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party), the Archive of Historical Documentation of the Polish People's Republic (in which he was interested mainly in memoirs, interviews, and so on), and the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (where he analysed materials of the Political Department). Furthermore, he utilized documentation gathered in the Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance (in Warsaw and Katowice), the Archives of the University of Warsaw, the Central Military Archives, the National Digital Archives (radio intercepts), the Ossoliński National Institute in Wrocław (manuscripts), and the Polish Library in Paris. He additionally accessed a relatively large number of Soviet documents — relevant, but by and large supplementary to the topic — originating primarily from the Russian State Archive for Social and Political History (RGASPI); among these materials excerpts from the transcripts of conversations between politicians and diplomats from both sides, as well as characterizations of activists, proved particularly valuable.<sup>19</sup> In addition, a dozen or so years ago Mirosław Szumiło independently collected several accounts from Party activists (from, among others, Stanisław Kania, Artur Starewicz and Józef Tejhma).

This constitutes an impressive archival search, all the more so because it has been — naturally enough — extensively supplemented by the author with published sources (documents, memoirs, accounts, and so on), scholarly literature, and materials from press archives.

The introduction to the work lacks a scholarly analysis of Gierek's three volumes of memoirs: *Edward Gierek: Przerwana dekada*,<sup>20</sup> *Edward Gierek: Replika*,<sup>21</sup> and *Smak życia: Pamiętniki*<sup>22</sup> should have been subject to

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<sup>19</sup> In addition, the author made use of the fonds of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), the writings of Gustáv Husák from the National Archives in Prague, the materials of Radio Free Europe gathered in the Open Society Archive in Budapest, the files of the National State Archives in Brussels, the Archives of the Department of Pas-de-Calais, and other sources.

<sup>20</sup> Janusz Rolicki, *Edward Gierek: Przerwana dekada*, Warsaw, 1990.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, *Edward Gierek: Replika*, Warsaw, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Gierek, *Smak życia: Pamiętniki*, Warsaw, 1993. In the wake of the spectacular publishing success of *Przerwana dekada*, other extended interviews were printed, including: *Zatrzymać konfrontację: Stanisław Kania w rozmowie z Andrzejem Urbańczykiem*, Warsaw, 1991; Piotr Jaroszewicz and Bohdan Roliński, *Przerywam milczenie... 1939-1989*, Warsaw, 1991.

an in-depth critical discussion. It would have been desirable to mention in this context both the decisive role of Janusz Rolicki, who became the *spiritus movens* of Gierek's two crucial public political confessions, and the ghostwriters of his autobiography, *Smak życia*. Moreover, it would have been appropriate to make use of the opportunity to address, in a systematic way, the inveterate posing and self-idealization of the story's protagonist. The author recognizes Gierek's propensity for confabulation and indeed mentions it, but he does so in several separate places in his narrative, and thus in a scattered manner.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, he fails to reflect on his methodology in the introduction. In addition, he should have mentioned Rolicki's considerable interference in the content of the two previously-cited extended interviews. For not only did the journalist reword what Gierek said — a practice more or less usual in the circumstances — but he also added certain things for his interlocutor, or even wrote them in his stead; and only later sought Gierek's authorization.<sup>24</sup> In such a situation, it is the responsibility of the historian to inform readers of the peculiar way in which these sources were produced and how uncertain their reliability is as a result (cf. p. 15).

In spite of the above considerations, it should be regarded as positive that the author did not become over suspicious of these testimonies, which would be unnecessary.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned methodological shortcomings, it should be noted that although Szumiło did not carry out a theoretical dissection of these sources, he was aware of their frailties in practice, and consequently identified and exposed many of the lies and insinuations that Gierek smuggled into his books and official biographies. Szumiło pointed out distortions concerning, for example, Gierek's 'revolutionary seniority'; the party positions that he held; and the nature of the work which he performed (pp. 30–32, 63, 66); and wrote about how his protagonist 'appointed' himself the leader of a strike contrary to the facts, made up a story about his own arrest (pp. 41, 42), and also how he exaggerated his wartime service (pp. 59–62).

Some of the chicanery exposed by the historian concerns matters that are relevant to more than just a single biography. In March 1968, Gierek famously said that if the workers of Silesia and the Dąbrowa Basin wanted to go on strike, the authorities would 'crush their bones' in retaliation.

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<sup>23</sup> The author notes, for example, that Władysław Gomułka's memoirs are 'far more reliable than Gierek's' (p. 23).

<sup>24</sup> *Wańka-wstańka: Z Januszem Rolickim rozmawia Krzysztof Piławski*, Warsaw, 2013, pp. 266–69.

Years later, he explained that he had used such strong words in order to stop the revolt and avoid having to send the militia into action against demonstrators. However, the biographer has shown that contrary to these claims, the militia then brutally attacked people protesting on the streets of Gliwice and Katowice, and employed methodical, sometimes even sadistic, violence against a number of those arrested (p. 267).

Moreover, Gierek claimed that he did not participate in the meeting of the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party on 11 December 1970 that decided to introduce price rises, which led to workers' protests along the Polish coast and the deaths of dozens of people. On other occasions, he claimed that, although he did participate in the meeting, he opposed its adoption of price hikes. By doing so, he attempted in various ways to dissociate himself from co-responsibility for the decision that led to the outbreak of the social crisis. Both accounts — as the Author shows — are untrue, because Gierek, together with other policy-makers, supported the idea of raising prices (pp. 310–13).

And one final example. Already as the newly-elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Gierek recognized that he had become personally indebted to the Minister of National Defence, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who was one of the most important persons securing Gierek's road to power. Moreover, it could not have been ignored that Jaruzelski had a very good reputation in Moscow. For these reasons, Gierek tried to convince various circles — from politicians in the Kremlin through to provincial secretaries of the Polish United Workers' Party and to the Polish shipyard workers who listened to him — that in December 1970 Gomulka's faltering government had ousted Jaruzelski from command of the troops on the Polish coast. In this way, he not only deceitfully attempted to defend Jaruzelski himself, but also, in a more general sense, strove to cut short suspicions pointing to the hatching of an intra-Party conspiracy against Gomulka by the new ruling group (pp. 323–24).

At the same time the biographer deconstructs the myth, which still appears from time to time, that Gierek started cooperating with Soviet intelligence while living in Belgium (pp. 84, 151). He proves that one did not have to be an informer entangled in formalized albeit clandestine links with the Soviet secret services to make a career in the Polish People's Republic.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mirosław Szumiło also avoids shocking readers with artificial sensationalism when giving a brief description of Piotr Jaroszewicz's career (he and Gierek established a close acquaintance after 1954). His rapid promotions — particularly in light of the fact that he had not previously been a Communist — might raise suspicions as to his links with Soviet intelligence. Doubting this kind of speculation, but — as it



This, in turn, means that the politician's curriculum vitae does not contain the element of mystery which historians previously sought.<sup>26</sup> As it turned out, the main driving force behind Gierek's career was the post-war reality: the pro-Soviet authorities that were installing themselves at the time suffered from a chronic shortage of cadres, while Gierek already had some experience of political work, and besides gained the trust of the Polish Workers' Party and its most important policy-maker, Roman Zambrowski from the outset in 1948 (pp. 94–95).

A few years later, in 1953, Bierut too began to appreciate Gierek. It was quite commonly said of Gierek that he 'knows how to work with people' and 'has considerable standing' (p. 124). On top of this, his lack of authority among former cadres of the Polish Communist Party proved to be an advantage rather than a disadvantage (as one might have thought), as Bierut was not afraid to support a man who was dependent only on him. Gierek — a worker with Polish ethnic roots — had the 'right background', which was of value in the years when Communists of Jewish origin were being removed from prominent positions on Moscow's orders. Similarly, it was significant for Edward Ochab that Gierek did not get involved in the in-fighting between the Natolin and Puławy factions, instead keeping to the sidelines and giving the impression that he was an ordinary activist. It was Ochab, therefore — and not the Soviet policy-makers — who awarded Gierek successive promotions (to the position of Member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee and the Political Bureau), thus binding Gierek to Ochab himself.

But in October 1956, when Gomułka, less than impressed with Gierek, removed him from the inner leadership circle, there was a most surprising reaction from Moscow: Nikita Khrushchev stood up for Gierek as one of his few favourites. And it was this very event that years later led historians to propound the thesis of Gierek's possible involvement in spying. But Szumiło puts forward a rational and logical argument, abandoning all conspiratorial elements, and demonstrating that Gierek had been known to and was valued by the Soviets from the early 1950s via standard and overt Party contacts, mainly gained while acting as head of the Department of Heavy Industry of the Central Committee of the Polish

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seems — not ruling it out definitively, Szumiło points to a simpler explanation. Three factors turned out to be decisive for Jaroszewicz's career: his Polish descent, his good looks, and, above all, the patronage of Wanda Wasilewska, who had met Jaroszewicz back in 1937 as one of the participants in the teachers' strike (p. 129).

<sup>26</sup> Edward Gierek was suspected of collaborating with the Soviet intelligence services by Jerzy Eisler (*Siedmiu wspaniałych*, p. 267) and Andrzej Werblan (*Polska Ludowa: Postscriptum*, Warsaw, 2019).

United Workers' Party. On top of this, Gierek supported and respected the Soviet Marshal Konstantin Rokossovskii, who had been seconded to the Polish People's Republic to serve as its Minister of National Defence (pp. 151, 156–57). This was enough for Moscow to speak up for 'its man' in a situation of crisis. A certain paradox perceived by Szumiło during his analysis of documents authored in Moscow was that at the very same time Gierek was under the impression that he was underestimated and unnoticed by the Soviet authorities (p. 164).

This impression passed after about two years. It was then, while travelling on official business and holidays to the USSR, that he got to know the Soviet dignitaries better, and adroitly courted their influence (pp. 182, 184, 186, 230). From 1960 onwards, he began to be described in Soviet documents as a 'sincere friend of the Soviet Union', and was viewed as a good communist (p. 190). We also know that at the beginning of 1964 he frequently met with the Soviet Consul, Mikhail Volkov, and made personal requests to him. The Soviet diplomat considered these conversations to be cordial (p. 241).

Furthermore, Gierek contributed to the establishment of close relations between and exchanges of Soviet and Polish Party delegations from Silesia and the Donbas, which also earned him recognition in Moscow (p. 254). In accordance with the findings of Andrzej Skrzypek, the author observes that in the eyes of the Soviet authorities Gierek had become the leader of the mining and metallurgy lobby, which was one of the highest priority industries for the USSR (p. 300). At the same time, Gierek's regional subordinates, who maintained personal contacts with politicians from the USSR, also gave him excellent testimonials (p. 242). As a result, with each passing year of the 1960s Gierek's standing improved with the Kremlin leadership (p. 278).

The first two chapters of the book are filled with detailed facts concerning the young Gierek's daily life (up to 1956). The diligence of the scholar's research and its substantive results make a very positive impression, but unfortunately his descriptions do not captivate readers with literary images, which makes reading this part of the biography tedious at times. Some passages have been unnecessarily spread over many pages, such as the one on the history of the two-year Party School and its students (pp. 96–102). Theoretically it could appear useful for the main argument, but in fact we are dealing here with a separate topic attached to the biographical narrative as by force, as if the author wanted above all to present the end-product of his panoramic search. This does not alter the fact that this thread contains quite a few interesting observations and conclusions; for example the section regarding Gierek's classification in

January 1950 as among the best students of the aforementioned School (p. 101).<sup>27</sup>

On several occasions, the narrative of the book dissipates into detailed descriptions of the history of the Polish United Workers' Party — descriptions which are not always necessary. It was not required, for example, to present in such minute detail the personnel changes and the division of positions made as a result of the Third Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party (pp. 185–88). In this and similar fragments of the biography we are dealing rather with a record of the history of the Party elite, which is an important, but nonetheless separate element of the author's interests.<sup>28</sup> In contrast one can cite here a positive example — albeit less representative of the whole — that is the barely three-page-long description of the changes that took place in the Party following its fifth Congress in 1969; which is a logically justified and both cognitively and factually valuable complementation of the primary content (pp. 282–84).

But to focus on similar shortcomings of the reviewed biography: the author provides us with detailed biographical notes on the persons who accompanied Gierek during his career. These are extended, often several paragraphs or even several pages long, and frequently unrelated to and even disruptive of the main flow of the narrative (for example: pp. 88–89, 92, 98, 114–17, 128–29, pp. 166–67, 169–71, 194–95). While they may be regarded as containing extremely important factual information, nevertheless it would have been best to place them in the footnotes, and to incorporate only basic information — pointing to the links and parallels between these biographies and that of Gierek — in the main text.

In view of the above remarks, it can be seen that the book could have used a greater number of separate, appropriately titled subsections

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<sup>27</sup> As an aside, a year later these positive opinions about Edward Gierek as a student were made more realistic: 'He gives the impression of not being very able, of not grasping the train of thought' (p. 106).

<sup>28</sup> Mirosław Szumiło's numerous scholarly publications on the topic are widely appreciated, for example, idem, 'Elita władzy w Polsce 1944–1989: Studium socjologiczne', in *Władza w PRL: Ludzie i mechanizmy*, ed. Konrad Rokicki and Robert Spalek, Warsaw, 2011, pp. 155–74; idem, 'Elita PPR i PZPR w latach 1944–1970 — próba zdefiniowania', in *Elity komunistyczne w Polsce*, ed. Mirosław Szumiło and Marcin Żukowski, Warsaw and Lublin, 2015, pp. 34–60; idem, 'Kobiety jako "szare eminencje" w komunistycznej elicie władzy w Polsce', *Res Historica*, 2018, 45, pp. 287–309; idem, 'I sekretarze Komitetów Wojewódzkich PPR (1944–1948) — portret zbiorowy', *DN*, 45, 2013, 4, pp. 43–59; idem, 'Pierwsi sekretarze komitetów wojewódzkich PZPR w latach 1948–1970 — portret socjologiczny', in *Partia, państwo, społeczeństwo*, ed. Konrad Rokicki, Warsaw, 2016, pp. 258–79; idem, 'Elita PZPR w dokumentach dyplomacji sowieckiej z lat 1959–1964', *Komunizm: System — ludzie — dokumentacja*, 4, 2015, pp. 291–328; idem, *Roman Zambrowski 1909–1977*.

focused on specific problems, which would have made it possible for the author to systematize more threads, while at the same time making it easier for readers to peruse and orient themselves in the substantive content of the whole. In other words, a separate, collective picture of 'Gierek's men' would have been useful, or a subsection on relations with the Church, and perhaps also on the alleged anti-Semitism of the future First Secretary (cf. pp. 236, 241, 268).

The book lacks even cursory comparisons of young Gierek's life history with pertinent selected fragments of those of other future First Secretaries of the Polish United Workers' Party. This shortcoming is also evident in the very interesting and engagingly written subsection on Gierek's style of work; his daily habits; the expectations which he had of his colleagues; his family life, and so on (pp. 219–31).<sup>29</sup> The chapter in question, although enthralling, also leaves something to be desired, because although the historian cites interesting opinions about Gierek, he does not use them to create an original individualistic (or psychological) portrait of his protagonist.

In passing, it should be noted that something more should have been written about the relationship between Edward Gierek and Maciej Szczepański, head of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, and the professional friendship that started to develop between them, as it proved important for building Gierek's authority in the 1960s and decisive in terms of the influence of government propaganda on the perception of the First Secretary in the following decade (see p. 221). This is all the more so because the researcher has himself stressed that Gierek was the first local Party leader who consciously cultivated his own image in the regional press, radio and television in Katowice; in fact, he even set up a special team of journalists for this very purpose (p. 220).

Further, the work does not reference Teresa Torańska's in-depth interview with Maciej Szczepański.<sup>30</sup> The author has also failed to cite the writings of Anna Sobór-Świdorska, the author of a biography of Jakub Berman<sup>31</sup> and an important biographical article on Franciszek Szlachcic,<sup>32</sup> even though he mentions both politicians in *Droga do władzy* (Szlachcic is referred to numerous times, and a biographical

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<sup>29</sup> To this end, the author could have used the biographies listed at the beginning of this review in footnotes 2–4.

<sup>30</sup> Teresa Torańska, *Byli*, Warsaw, 2006, pp. 153–95.

<sup>31</sup> Sobór-Świdorska, *Jakub Berman*.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Sobór-Świdorska, 'Franciszek Szlachcic (1920–1990) — przyczynek do biografii "supergliny"', *DN*, 45, 2013, 2, pp. 231–49.

note is included, pp. 166–67). One may get the impression that the Author was the first to find all this information. And when he wrote about Gierek's material status and, above all, about the houses in which the Silesian leader lived (p. 229), he failed to inform the reader that the pioneering findings on Gierek's financial abuses — admittedly concerning the 1970s, but nevertheless directly related to the author's narrative and line of thought — were made a decade ago by Piotr Gontarczyk.<sup>33</sup> In passing, it is worth acknowledging that Mirosław Szumiło did not put himself in the role of an accuser and did not succumb to the temptation to moralize but, as it seems, was able to judge what was fact and what was rumour in people's stories about Gierek's 'riches'.

And a final, similar comment is in order here. The political history of December 1970, including the mass replacement of personnel which it brought about, was described years ago in minute detail by Jerzy Eisler in his book *Grudzień 1970: Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje*.<sup>34</sup> The author of *Droga do władzy* informs his readers of this fact, but only by means of a single laconic sentence in the introduction (p. 11), while he should have also made a mention of it in the body of the text in Chapter V, in the passages describing the crisis at the highest levels of government (pp. 332–45). Eisler devoted many pages to this issue,<sup>35</sup> also covering the role played by Gierek at the time.<sup>36</sup> Szumiło, like Eisler, made use of several memoirs, which — as I will emphasize below — he interpreted both superbly and clearly, but he also followed in the footsteps of others and this fact is not emphasized with sufficient explicitness.

What remains unconvincingly documented and explained is the author's observation that in March 1968 Gierek was 'undoubtedly acting in concert with Moscow, and it was thanks to Moscow that he was soon to gamble for the highest stakes' (p. 277). His argumentation is neither based on specific source materials relevant to the above conviction nor on an original hypothesis. It would be difficult to regard as such the previously-mentioned threads, scattered throughout the book, concerning Gierek's contacts with the Soviets. Significantly, no such inferences can be drawn from these threads. In a word, the cited statement may be true, but the Author has not demonstrated this (the description of Gierek's contacts with Soviet politicians in mid-1968 cannot be construed as evidence) (pp. 277–78).

<sup>33</sup> Piotr Gontarczyk, 'Być jak towarzysz Gierek', *Do Rzeczy*, 2013, 1, pp. 66–68.

<sup>34</sup> Jerzy Eisler, *Grudzień 1970: Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje*, 2nd edn, Warsaw, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38–47, 61–71, 253–64, 307–17, 367–79, 413–23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61–71, 371–73, 375–79.

Furthermore, the statement that the intra-Party coup of December 1970 was 'largely' inspired by Moscow (p. 347) is fundamentally similar in content and must be viewed as an over-interpretation. Once again the historian has failed both to support his categorical observation with evidence and present a logical and causal line of reasoning in defence of such a supposition. The conclusion must be somewhat different — that Moscow granted selective support to Gierek and Piotr Jaroszewicz in order to take advantage of the ongoing Polish internal crisis (of a dual, that is, socio-political and personnel-Party nature) and overthrow Gomułka, while after the coup had taken place it expressed satisfaction with the turn of events.

Even accepting the final date of Gierek's biography adopted by the historian, the work still lacks some narrative anticipation. For example, the author quotes Gierek's relatively sensible remarks made in the autumn of 1970, in which he pointed out the failings of the protective measures that were being prepared at the time to accompany the increase in the price of foodstuffs planned by Gomułka's team (the 'relief' was to consist primarily in the lowering of prices of luxury industrial goods). In a word, it becomes apparent that Gierek was able to see that the price increases of December 1970 would hit the average Polish family hard (p. 307). The historian could have commented in passing that barely six years later, the very same politician would, on the occasion of further price increases, make the equally obvious mistake of pushing through extremely unfair compensation: symbolic for the poor and favourable to those best off. There would be no need for long-winded arguments, it being sufficient to mention that the author is in control of his protagonist's entire life story.

What is surprising are the slight inconsistencies in the narrative and its certain naïveté. The historian, for example, is surprised that Gierek — who was regarded as a liberal within the Polish United Workers' Party — spoke using 'harsh Marxist language' at a meeting with officers of the Citizen's Militia and the Security Service. But how else could a Communist speak to Interior Ministry cadres, accustomed to radical and unambiguous assessments of reality and brutal action? Such a meeting should not serve as a yardstick by which to measure 'liberalism' or 'dogmatism' (p. 289). Elsewhere, the author writes that in the second half of 1969 'Gomułka's attitude to Gierek cooled even further' (p. 291), although in many preceding pages of his book he argues that in the 1960s relations between the two were, by all appearances, good and that Gierek 'was even able to win Gomułka's favour' (for example, p. 253).

Another thing: Szumiło mentions Gierek's promotion to the position of Organizational Secretary of the Provincial Committee of the Polish

United Workers' Party in Katowice in 1951 (p. 108), but only two pages later informs readers that Gierek was appointed Second Secretary in the city (p. 110). This appears inconsistent, and is certainly unclear. In order to understand the matter, the reader has to go back a dozen or so pages to where the author includes, in passing, the important information that the Second Secretary of the Provincial Committee was at the same time, in principle, the head of the Organizational Department of the Provincial Committee (p. 92). The statement that Gierek became the number two person in Katowice only after Franciszek Waniołka left the post of Economic Secretary at the Provincial Committee in 1952 (p. 119) is similarly unclear, for the narrative earlier implies that Gierek had already occupied this position previously (for example, in p. 110).

I will now move on to the mainly positive assessments. Undoubtedly, the author possesses an in-depth knowledge of both the political era which he describes as well as its realities. He has skilfully sought out documents relevant to the topic (and used them appropriately), properly explaining complex and detailed problems, carried out a logical sequence and critique of sources; taken note of nuances;<sup>37</sup> learned the rules governing the functioning of the Party office system; and excellently navigated the labyrinthine structures of Party departments and their competences (for example, pp. 161, 163). Whenever necessary, he analyses not only the content of specific documents, but also the reasons for their creation, and further clarifies the broader background of events.<sup>38</sup>

Particularly valuable is the fact that the author has striven to ensure the objectivity of his argumentation. In particular, he has not used the anti-Communist paradigm, which assumes the programmatic criticism of Communism as a research goal and which has supporters among researchers and readers of scholarly literature;<sup>39</sup> nor has he focused on demonstrating the undeniable negative aspects of the functioning of

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, the semi-legal status of the Polish Workers' Party in Belgium (p. 72); the complex assessment of Edward Gierek's performance at the Party School (pp. 101–04); and the importance of the function of Chairman of the National Council of Poles in Belgium (p. 86, also p. 82).

<sup>38</sup> For example, he provides a comprehensible explanation of the causes and consequences arising from the implementation of the forced 'coal contract' between the Polish People's Republic and the USSR, so that readers possessing a less specialized knowledge of the realities of the era can follow the argumentation of a professional (p. 110).

<sup>39</sup> One of the most titled and recognized historians with an impressive academic oeuvre who supports this paradigm is Sławomir Cenckiewicz (*Transformacja: Mazowiecki, Magdalena, Czempiniński, Petelicki, WSI, Komorowski, 'Afera marszałkowa', Tusk, Dziekanów Leśny*, 2022).

the Communist system in Poland and of the activities undertaken by Communist cadres; instead proceeding to an objective and properly oriented description of the state of affairs.

Szumilo has also struck the proper balance between information concerning central and local policy. Far from being an apologist for the People's Republic of Poland, he has managed to present Gierek's economic successes in the Katowice region both thoroughly and concisely. And, when compared with preceding years, the progress achieved there was indeed impressive.

Let us pause for a moment at this point. The author has rightly noted the positives of the above-mentioned changes, namely the unprecedented development of the gas grid and the water supply system, and the construction of more than a quarter million housing units between 1961 and 1971. He writes that, as a result, 80,000 to 100,000 jobseekers registered in Silesia every year, and many new workers settled in the region permanently. We can also see that Gierek understood that in order to retain the streams of workers arriving in his region, it was necessary not only to pay them high wages, but also to improve leisure conditions, which is why, as the historian demonstrates, many recreational centres and areas were built throughout the province. Furthermore, wishing to attract the humanist intelligentsia to Silesia, Gierek displayed a degree of organizational shrewdness and eventually brought about the establishment of the University of Silesia in 1968 (pp. 192–210, 219).

At this point, however, the question arises as to whether the image outlined by the author is not excessively idyllic? Did the province not witness fraud, waste, embezzlement, injustices, foul play, and so on on a grander scale over the years? What is missing is a clear statement from the author on this matter, as well as a broader critical commentary — which is not to say that Szumilo does not recognize certain of the mistakes made by Gierek's team. He writes, for example, about the environmental degradation resulting from the rapid economic development, which was insufficiently counteracted (p. 207), and about the astonishing practice — widespread among apparatchiks in the region — of holding diplomas awarded on questionable grounds for political service; although it is worth noting here that these were not — as the quotation used by the author in the text suggests — 'fake diplomas' (pp. 196–97).

In the section entitled 'W sojuszu z Moczarem' (pp. 232–58), the historian accurately presents the historical background necessary to properly understand the process of formation of the Party's 'partisan' faction, and its subsequent alliance with Gierek's 'Silesian' bloc. The entire subsection is significant and interesting, with Szumilo explaining the



causes and showing the effects of friction, infighting, and changing personal alliances, concisely depicting the behind-the-scenes struggles and, finally, explaining how Gierek developed his technocratic base. This method of interweaving the history of the Party with the biography of a single character is an added value (in contrast to the similar – and less successful – parts of the book which I have already mentioned). Szumiło, like few authors before him, was able to recognize the nature of the relationship between Mieczysław Moczar and Gierek, and writes about their tactical cooperation and rivalry (p. 258), while at the same time simply and accurately pointing out the role of Franciszek Szlachcic – periodically associated with both Moczar and Gierek – as someone with a dual factional affiliation (pp. 232–36, 256).

In his work, the author has made a number of interesting observations that go against the historical stereotype. For example, he has cited the accounts of Franciszek Szlachcic and Walery Namiotkiewicz which indicate that Gomułka – despite many misgivings, a personal aversion, and attempts to impede Edward Gierek's career – was at one point grooming him as his successor (p. 252). In addition, it turns out that Stanisław Kociołek – one of Gomułka's favourites – was also involved in the plot against the former First Secretary. This has already been written about, at least in part, by Jerzy Eisler,<sup>40</sup> but the author of the biography under review lends credence to previous hypotheses by citing his own source research (pp. 298–99).

Equally novel are the researcher's findings showing – also contrary to popular opinion – that towards the end of his reign Gomułka, with the help of court economist Bolesław Jaszczuk, attempted an economic reorientation towards the West, while the critic of this planned turn-about was none other than Gierek, who incidentally reported it to the Soviets. Although he seemed to understand the necessity of this reorientation, Gierek nevertheless considered it inappropriate that Gomułka had not consulted Moscow. He even ventured the opinion that it would be best to atone for the *faux pas* with some 'grand gesture' to the Soviets (pp. 296–97).

When we read episodes like the above, it becomes easier for us to understand Gierek's *modus operandi* and the consequent presentation of the Order of Virtuti Militari to Leonid Brezhnev in 1974. But the author has failed to note these dependencies, which must be seen as an error; for regardless of the beginning and end dates adopted in the biography,

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<sup>40</sup> Eisler, *Grudzień 1970*, p. 68.

Gierek for years relied on previously developed habits and methods of action. And such anticipation in the narrative is most fitting here.

All the more satisfying, then, are the author's observations regarding the personality of Gierek, who in his first years in office in Silesia applied himself to his duties, conscientiously studying documents and analyses, and only fell into a routine after several years of work as an administrator. He then stopped reading documents, shifted his responsibilities to trusted subordinates and — a very valuable observation by the author — avoided making decisions on his own responsibility (pp. 219–20). He also fell in love with the glamour of power and the obsequiousness of his inner circle (p. 223). Here Szumiło makes use of materials from Radio Free Europe, meticulously noting that the émigré community, too, was 'fooled' by the Secretary's public image, finding him to be well-read, hard-working, honest and moderate in his views. The historian was able to find such information, but I must reiterate that it is a pity that he did not conclude this and similar findings with scientific summaries. Again, he seems to have missed the point, namely that the offloading of decisions onto others and the love of glitter were the aspects of Gierek's behaviour that were clearly continued during the most important period of his career — the 'interrupted decade'.

However, the researcher was able to accurately combine facts that, while described in the literature, are less well-known; and endow them with a new meaning. Using this approach, he recreates, for example, an event from mid-1970, when Gierek expected to be removed from the Party leadership — an eventuality which was ultimately prevented by bringing about a conciliatory conversation between himself and Zenon Kliszko and Ignacy Loga-Sowiński, two of Gomułka's associates (pp. 304–05).

Among the best parts of *Droga do władzy* are its several dozen final pages. I expect that not all scholars of the Polish People's Republic will share this opinion, as it is easy to recognize that these particular fragments of the biography were based largely on materials already known to historians, and thus it would have been difficult to expect a research breakthrough here. But such a view would have been formalistic. The value of the concluding sections of the final chapter lies in the fact that Szumiło is perhaps the first historian to prove so unequivocally and clearly that Gomułka's removal had the nature of a political coup inspired and controlled by conspirators. While it is true that this has been known for years and historians have touched upon and referenced the issue, the author has managed to clarify the subject in an exceptionally coherent manner. Interestingly, in order to achieve this he did not need previously unknown documents, just

a good pen, technique, and the ability to understand the events being described.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, in his final chapter Szumiło defied still other stereotypes: he did not ascribe a demonic role to Kliszko, and did not hold him as most responsible for the fateful decisions taken regarding the Baltic coast in December 1970. Instead, Szumiło points to General Bolesław Chocha, who, in agreement with his superior, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, helped change the leadership of the Polish United Workers' Party (pp. 320–22). In addition, the author succeeds in succinctly explaining the specific role played by Franciszek Szlachcic in the cities of Gdynia, Sopot and Gdańsk. Yet again, this is a matter that has been described many times in historiography; however Szumiło has drawn an evocative, convincing and conclusive portrait of the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs (pp. 325–26). He also dealt deftly with Henryk M. Kula's thesis<sup>42</sup> that the entire December coup organized by Mieczysław Moczar (pp. 329–30).

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Within a decade, the author of *Droga do władzy* became one of the most important and prolific scholars writing about the Polish People's Republic, and his works (books, articles, printed sources) immediately enter both the contemporary canon of scholarly literature and the 'indispensable reference list of publications' for scholars of Communist Poland. He possesses an excellent understanding of the source documentation (archival and published), and knows full well how and when to make use of it. Further, his preliminary research is both insightful and accurate, indeed faultless. Mirosław Szumiło has confirmed all this in the book under review, which, however, also has its shortcomings — a fact not in and of itself unusual.

While he skilfully classifies and connects successive facts, the book however lacks in-depth original hypotheses and conclusions, as well as clearly formulated and emphasized synthetic comments; it is often unclear what the author's conclusions are, or the summary of a given line of argumentation. It would also have been preferable for the narrative to contain a greater number of references to scholarly (or even popularized scholarly) studies on the issues touched upon by the author, so as not to create the confusing impression that hardly anyone has dealt with them before.

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<sup>41</sup> Regarding this matter, see Spalek, *Na licencji Moskwy*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>42</sup> Henryk M. Kula, *Dwa oblicza Grudnia '70: Oficjalne — rzeczywiste*, Gdańsk, 2000, pp. 61–63, 354–55.

As I have already mentioned, in his introduction the historian declares that, besides an analysis of a part of Edward Gierek's political career, the most important objective of his work would be an attempt to answer the question whether he was a more of an ideological or a pragmatic politician. Accordingly, already at the beginning of his work (p. 35) the biographer determined that Gierek was 'a man of action and not an ideologue' (p. 362) — a finding which he further confirms at the end of the book.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the work under review simply must find its way to the bookshelf of every researcher of the political history of the Polish People's Republic.

*(Translated by Maciej Zakrzewski)  
(Proofreading James Hartzell)*

## Summary

Edward Gierek was one of the most important Polish communist politicians from 1957 to 1970, initially on a local scale, and in the second half of the 1960s also in the national perspective. According to Mirosław Szumiło's biography, he consciously surrounded himself with young party activists who aimed to improve living conditions in Katowice according to the standards of the Polish People's Republic (PRL), and hoped to advance their careers alongside him. The historian described Gierek's rise to power from the second decade of the twentieth century until the early 1970s. As he declared, his intention was to trace the political career of the protagonist, and the causes and circumstances of his promotions, ambitions, and the political goals that he pursued until December 1970, when he assumed the position of First Secretary of the PZPR Central Committee. Thanks to his moderate approach and avoidance of factional struggles, the promising activist gained recognition from successive party and state leaders (starting from Bierut and ending with Gomułka, who appreciated him but remained very distrustful). Mirosław Szumiło's book is based on a meticulous, thoughtful, and carefully conducted research of both Polish and foreign archives (including Russian ones), and private collections and accounts. Formally, the biography consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, supplemented by a bibliography, index of names, list of abbreviations, and a small selection of illustrations. The work is written in a chronological arrangement (with the exception of the third chapter, which is written thematically). The author possesses extensive knowledge of the political era he describes and understands its realities. He adeptly selected documents relevant to the topic and used them appropriately. Complex specific issues are well explained. The work is not without its flaws, such as the lack of in-depth authorial conclusions as well as clearly formulated synthetic comments, often leaving the reader unsure of the author's conclusion or

the summary of a given exposition. However, the significance of these shortcomings with respect to the overall substantive content and cognitive value of the book is minimal.

(Translated by Maciej Zakrzewski)  
(Proofreading James Hartzell)

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