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**INCONVENIENT ANNIVERSARY.
OCTOBER REVOLUTION DAY
IN THE POLISH PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC, 1957-67**

Abstract

This article shows how the leaders of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) tried to incorporate the October Revolution into the Polish culture of remembrance. The author concentrates his attention on two round anniversaries (in 1957 and 1967) and describes the limits, zig-zags, and paradoxes of the official politics of memory conducted by the PZPR. He argues that although the Soviet leaders conceived the anniversaries of the October Revolution as a means of strengthening the friendship between the nations, in the case of Poland, they created an opportunity to advance arguments for easing Soviet domination. The author also points out that both the Soviet and Polish cultures of remembrances shared one feature in common: by the late 1960s, the theme of the Second World War started to overshadow all other events from the past, including first and foremost the October Revolution.

Keywords: politics of memory, Polish People's Republic, October Revolution, memory studies, Soviet Union, Gomułka

I
INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution, Polish historians published a book with more than seven thousand short biographies of Polish revolutionaries who had fought on the side of Bolsheviks during the 1917-22 Civil War.¹ Fifty years later, one of

¹ Lidia Kalestyńska, Aleksander Kocharński, and Wiesława Toporowicz (eds.), *Księga Polaków uczestników Rewolucji Październikowej 1917-1920. Biografie* (Warszawa, 1967).

the leading figures behind that project, Professor Aleksander Kochański, revealed that *Pravda*, the official organ of the CPSU, was to publish a note about this volume. However, the leader of the Polish Section in the CPSU, Peter Kostikov, had done his best to prevent publishing any information about the volume in any Soviet newspaper as there was “too much of the year 1937 in it [*слишком много тридцать седьмого года*]”.² As a result, Soviet citizens did not learn about this publication from the Soviet press.

Kostikov’s allusion to the year 1937 was a reference to the fate of the Polish revolutionaries who had been killed during the Great Terror. The de-Stalinization process initiated by Nikita Khrushchev brought to light issues that not only could destabilize the internal situation in the Soviet Union, but worsen relations with its satellite states. It thus appeared that the October Revolution, envisioned by the Kremlin as a transnational memory project, had its blank spots.

This article aims to present a case study of the Day of the Great Socialist October Revolution in the Polish People’s Republic in two separate years – 1957 (the 40th anniversary) and 1967 (the 50th anniversary). It focuses on these two anniversaries of the October Revolution from the perspective of the official politics of history. These round anniversaries were both an occasion for politicians to demonstrate their loyalty, while at the same time requiring that they take a stance and interpret the ‘lessons of history’. In this way, they become landmarks in terms of shaping and establishing the dominant narrative regarding specific events.³ In this article, I am particularly interested in the question: To what political ends was the memory of the October Revolution exploited by the leaders of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR)? Wherever possible, this article tries to describe widespread reactions to official celebrations of the October Revolution Day.

I also try to identify the ‘thorny’ issues that limited the agency of Polish politicians because of expected reactions from the Kremlin on one side and from Polish society on the other. In doing so, this article adopts a case study approach to transnational memory

² Александр Коханьский, ‘Польские участники Октябрьской революции 1917 года и их дальнейшие судьбы’, in Мариуш Волос, and Александр Орехов (eds.) *Революционная Россия 1917 года и польский вопрос: новые источники, новые взгляды* (Москва, 2009), 309.

³ Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York, 2007), 58–72.

projects⁴ and reveals the fluidity, constraints, and paradoxes regarding the official politics of memory.⁵

Anniversaries of the October Revolution were aimed at strengthening the friendship of the peoples and projecting Soviet soft power; however, in the case of Poland, they posed a constant challenge, i.e., how to shape official discourse given the blank spots and longstanding mutual distrust between Poles and Russians.

There are some studies devoted to the communist celebrations and commemorations in the Polish People's Republic (PRL).⁶ Equally well-researched and reported in the literature is the question of the school history curriculum.⁷ The same might be said of the role of historians as a social group and the policy of the PZPR towards the history departments at the universities.⁸ Separate studies have been devoted to the question of identity, the legitimacy of the communist regime and Marxist ideology, and the role historiography played in that context.⁹

⁴ Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction', in Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin, 2016), 1–25.

⁵ Edgar Wolfrum, 'Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik als Forschungsfelder', in Jan Scheunemann (ed.), *Reformation und Bauernkrieg. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik im geteilten Deutschland* (Leipzig, 2010), 19–21.

⁶ Piotr Oseka, *Rytuały stalinizmu: Oficjalne święta i uroczystości rocznicowe w Polsce 1944–1956* (Warszawa, 2007); Izabella Main, *Trudne świętowanie. Konflikty wokół obchodów świąt państwowych i kościelnych w Lublinie (1944–1989)* (Warszawa, 2004); Paweł Sowiński, *Komunistyczne święto. Obchody 1 maja w latach 1948–1954* (Warszawa, 2000).

⁷ Krzysztof Kosiński, *O nową mentalność. Życie codzienne w szkołach warszawskich w latach 1945–1956* (Warszawa, 2000); Joanna Wojdon, *Propaganda polityczna w podręcznikach dla szkół podstawowych Polski Ludowej (1944–1989)* (Toruń, 2001); Dariusz Jarosz, *Polacy a stalinizm 1948–1956* (Warszawa, 2000), 186–226.

⁸ Tadeusz P. Rutkowski, *Nauki historyczne w Polsce 1944–1970. Zagadnienia polityczne i organizacyjne* (Warszawa, 2007); Rafał Stobiecki, *Historiografia PRL. Ani dobra, ani mądra, ani piękna..., ale skomplikowana. Studia i szkice* (Warszawa, 2007); Zbigniew Romek, *Cenzura a nauka historyczna w Polsce 1944–1970* (Warszawa, 2010).

⁹ Maciej Górny, *Przede wszystkim ma być naród. Marksistowskie historiografie w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej* (Warszawa, 2007) (English translation: *The Nation Should Come First: Marxism and Historiography in East Central Europe* (Berlin, 2013); Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warszawa, 2001) (German translation: Marcin Zaremba, *Im nationalen Gewande: Strategien kommunistischer Herrschaftslegitimation in Polen 1944–1980* (Osnabrück, 2011). See also the very interesting discussion of historians regarding the national identity in the PRL: 'Problem tożsamości narodowej w Polsce po 1945 roku – dyskusja redakcyjna', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, 1 (2002), 5–28.

In the last fifteen years, scholars have also employed the methodology applied in the field of memory studies and looked at the Polish People's Republic from this perspective.¹⁰ Despite the rich literature on the subject, the issue of so-called 'imported' memory and public holidays either has not been explored as a separate theme by specialists – with the exception of Piotr Osęka's book on public holidays and celebrations during the Stalinist period (1944–56) – nor have scholars analysed this topic in an exhaustive fashion. This article is an attempt to fill this gap.¹¹

II THE ANNIVERSARY DAYS OF THE GREAT SOCIALIST OCTOBER REVOLUTION IN THE STALINIST PERIOD 1944–56

Following the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany, the Soviet political system was imposed on Eastern and Central European countries. Along with the political and military subjugation came a cultural one.¹² The adaptation of the anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution into the official calendars of the new socialist states was one of the forms of the Soviet cultural 'conquest'. Having synchronised calendars with Moscow, the Soviet satellites expressed their acceptance of the Soviet leadership and eagerness to organise society in compliance with the new values. The Soviet Union strongly supported this as a form of soft power. The Bolsheviks from the very beginning promoted the October Revolution as a stellar example for all societies which wished to join the camp of 'progressive people' and go beyond

¹⁰ Joanna Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej 1949–1969* (Warszawa, 2009) (English translation: *Veterans, Victims, and Memory: The Politics of the Second World War in Communist Poland* [Berlin, 2015]); Tomasz Leszkowicz, "Wychowanie na tradycjach" na szczeblu jednostek wojskowych LWP (1956–1980). Środki i metody oraz ich skuteczność w oddziaływaniu na pamięć zbiorową żołnierzy', *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały*, 14 (2016), 123–59. Łukasz Polniak, 'Mity i symbole "patriotyzmu wojskowego" na przykładzie polskiego kina wojennego w latach 1956–1970', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, 2 (2011), 99–113.

¹¹ Osęka, *Rytuály stalinizmu*. See also Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, 'Do przerwy 11:7, czyli przyczynek do kłęski pewnej polityki historycznej', in Krzysztof Ruchniewicz (ed.), *Filologia trudnego sąsiedztwa* (Wrocław, 2017), 275–89.

¹² Patryk Babiracki, *Soviet Soft Power in Poland: Culture and the Making of Stalin's New Empire, 1943–1957* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015).

national boundaries. This conviction resulted from the ideology and ultimate goal promoted by the USSR: the world revolution.¹³

Readjustment of official calendars was also an important factor concerning the identity of the new Central and Eastern European regimes, as well as an essential statement addressed to the outside world: From that point on, these countries symbolically declared their belonging to the camp of advanced and progressive people.¹⁴ However, in the case of Poland, the PZPR did not succeed in monopolising control over time, as the official calendar listing all the public holidays consisted of both religious as well as communist ones. Surprisingly, none of them had a foreign origin, except for the International Workers' Day (1 May).¹⁵ In fact, however, there were more days off work for religious holidays than those organised by the state and secular in nature.¹⁶ Throughout all the years of the existence of the PRL, although the Day of the Great Socialist October Revolution (7 November), the Red Army Day (23 February) and Victory Day (9 May) were included in the official calendar, none of those days were days off work.¹⁷ This was another example of how the Polish communist elites were powerless to sovietise cultural space.

Indeed, the fact that the October Revolution Day (7 November) was not an official holiday lowered its significance. Nonetheless, it was celebrated in some fashion every year. How then should one describe

¹³ On early commemorations of the October Revolution in the Soviet Union, see Malte Rolf, *Das sowjetische Massenfest* (Hamburg, 2006); Светлана Малышева, *Советская праздничная культура в провинции: пространство, символы, исторические мифы* (Казань, 2005); Frederick C. Corney, *Telling the October. Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca, 2004).

¹⁴ For more on the political aspects of organising the calendar and time, see Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time, 1870–1950* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); cf. Olick, *The Politics of Regret*, 88, 179.

¹⁵ 1 May officially became a public holiday in 1950. See 'Ustawa z dnia 26 kwietnia 1950 r. o ustanowieniu dnia 1 maja świętem państwowym', <http://prawo.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19500190157> [Accessed: 9 Nov. 2018].

¹⁶ 'Ustawa z dnia 18 stycznia 1951 r. o dniach wolnych od pracy', <http://prawo.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19510040028> [Accessed: 9 Nov. 2018]. It listed: New Year's Day, Epiphany, Easter, the International Workers' Day, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, the Day of Poland's Rebirth (22 July), Assumption of Mary, All Saints' Day, Christmas.

¹⁷ Victory Day was a day off work between 1945–51. See 'Dekret z dnia 8 maja 1945 r. o ustanowieniu Narodowego Święta Zwycięstwa i Wolności', <http://prawo.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19450210116> [Accessed: 14 Nov. 2018].

and categorize the status of the anniversaries of the October Revolution in the Polish People's Republic (PRL), and why and how was it celebrated? A potential answer comes from a circular regarding the upcoming anniversary of the October Revolution issued on 3 October 1944 by the Department of Education of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (a puppet Polish provisional government set up by Joseph Stalin in Moscow on 21 July 1944¹⁸): "Nations of the Soviet Union and the Polish Nation fight jointly against the common enemy. The Polish Republic pays tribute to the public holiday of its great Ally and expresses it by taking appropriate action".¹⁹

The new regime thus declared that it celebrated a public holiday of the USSR as a form of commemorating the common struggle against Nazi Germany. The narrative about a joint fight against a common enemy was later further developed and became an important argument justifying the status of Polish-Soviet relations and fit well into the concept of the friendship between the peoples.²⁰ Hence commemoration of the October Revolution became a way of honouring the efforts of the Red Army during the Second World War. In other words, while not being a public holiday, some commemoration of October Revolution Day was staged above all for and because of the Soviet Union. There was no need to explain the dominant role of the USSR to the members of the PZPR. The problem for the governing Party was to explain to Polish society why the October Revolution should be commemorated in Poland and why the Poles should treat commemoration of the events of the Great October Revolution of 1917 as part of their history. Three reasons made this task extremely difficult: the image of the Soviet Union fixed in the Polish culture of remembrance; the proximity of the date to 11 November (Polish Independence Day); and – last but not least – the lack of popular support for the PZPR.

In the Polish culture of remembrance, the USSR was viewed as a threat to Poland's independence.²¹ This was most visibly evident in

¹⁸ Andrzej Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours: Poland and the Poles From Occupation to Freedom* (University Park, PA, 2003), 119–20.

¹⁹ *Dziennik Urzędowy Resortu Oświaty*, 1–4 (30 Dec. 1944, Lublin), 26.

²⁰ Jan C. Behrends, 'Nation and Empire: Dilemmas of Legitimacy during Stalinism in Poland (1941–1956)', *Nationalities Papers*, 4 (2009), 443–66; Babiracki, *Soviet Soft Power in Poland*, 9–12.

²¹ Borodziej and Górny, 'Do przerwy 11:7', 275–89. Behrends, *Nation and Empire*, 446–7.

The Feast of the Polish Armed Forces, celebrated annually on 15 August in the Second Republic of Poland, which was a commemoration of the Battle of Warsaw (1920), where the Polish armed forces defeated the Red Army at the Vistula River near the capital. Therefore, the October Revolution was perceived by Polish society as a new, foreign element that transgressed the foundations of the existing culture of remembrance. Another obstacle for adjusting the October Revolution to the Polish reality was the coincidence of two dates. Poland's Independence Day fell on 11 November, a date which, of course, obviously was just four days after the Day of the Great October Socialist Revolution.

The PZPR managed to dominate the political scene during the first twelve years of the existence of the PRL.²² This status was achieved mainly through repressions, falsifications of the parliamentary elections in 1949, and, to a certain extent, the land reform of 1944. Political opponents either escaped the country – like the leader of the Polish Peasants' Party, Stanisław Mikołajczyk – or were jailed by the new regime, like Kazimierz Pużak, a well-known politician with the Polish Socialist Party who previously had been sentenced in the so-called 'trial of sixteen' in Moscow to a year and a half in prison.²³ However, the Catholic Church was the entity the PZPR perceived as its most dangerous enemy. Although Stefan Wyszyński, the Primate of Poland, was imprisoned for three years (1953–6), the Church was not banned from the public space, and the new regime had no choice but to tolerate its presence.

The PZPR's domination of political life did not, however, give rise to legitimacy and popular support. It struggled with the image of a foreign, non-Polish state imposed by an outside party. The problem of legitimacy of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR) – predecessor of the PZPR – and its foreignness in Poland was fully grasped by the first secretary of the Central Committee (CC) of the PPR, Władysław Gomułka, at the Session of the CC of the PPR in May 1945: "Masses should treat us as a Polish party. Let them attack us as Polish communists, not as foreign agents".²⁴ It is not surprising then that Polish communists reached for national rhetoric and traditions to position themselves

²² The name of the Polish People's Republic was introduced in the constitution adopted in 1952.

²³ Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours*, 190, 198–278.

²⁴ Aleksander Kocharński (ed.), *Protokół obrad KC PPR w maju 1945 r.*, ii (Warszawa, 1994), 505. For more on this, see Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm*, 135–221.

as – if not representatives of ‘Polishness’ at least not enemies to the concept of ‘Polishness’ – which one may define in short as a longing for a sovereign, independent state with a significant presence of the Catholic Church in the public life/public sphere. Members of the PPR attending a Catholic Mass were not a rare spectacle during the transitional period in 1944–5. On 15 August 1945, they even celebrated ‘the Miracle on the Vistula’.²⁵ Nevertheless, tensions between religious feelings and atheism and the anti-religious policies pursued by the party existed among the PZPR members throughout the entire period of the PRL.²⁶

In such circumstances, the PZPR disseminated two narratives concerning the October Revolution during the Stalinist era (1945–56). According to the first one, 7 November was an opportunity to express gratitude to the Red Army, which had liberated and re-established Poland.²⁷ In other words, the party was trying to convince society that it ought to celebrate the most important holiday in the Soviet Union as a form of courtesy and thereby nurture friendship with the Soviet nation. The historical dimension of the October Revolution, understood as the Bolshevik seizure of power and the beginning of a new era in the history of humankind, was given the status of a secondary priority.

Commemoration of the October Revolution was also viewed as a way to gain the approval of the Kremlin leadership, while at the same time being considered by many as a symbolic act of subordination. All the satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe treated the commemoration of the October Revolution as adherence to a signpost pointing to the one and only right example to follow. The 1948 arrest of Gomułka, who had advocated ‘a Polish path to socialism’ and as a result was accused of ‘rightist-reactionary deviation’,²⁸ led to the situation whereby on the occasion of subsequent anniversaries of the October Revolution (as well as Vladimir Lenin’s death) during

²⁵ Oseka, *Rytuály stalinizmu* (Warszawa, 2007), 58. For more on the national legitimacy of the PWP/PUWP, see Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm* (Warszawa, 2001).

²⁶ Krzysztof Kosiński, “‘Religianctwo’”. Napięcie między ideologią a religią w świadomości członków i działaczy PZPR’, *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały*, 12 (2014), 107–203.

²⁷ Oseka, *Rytuály stalinizmu*, 34.

²⁸ Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours*, 205.

the Stalinist era, in propaganda materials he was presented as a traitor, for example as follows:

We remember that in the recent history of our party there were attempts to push the working class out of the Leninist road under the pretext of the alleged "Polish path to socialism". This road, advocated by the right-nationalist group of Gomułka as well as the right wing of the Polish Socialist Party, would mean the resignation from socialism and independence.²⁹

The October Revolution was thus used as a weapon by Gomułka's adversaries. However, after 1956 it was Gomułka's turn to change the interpretation of the October Revolution in accordance with his own views, and he attacked his opponents by referring to the foundational myth of the USSR.

III

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE STALINIST PAST

Following Stalin's death and Nikita Khrushchev's secret report, Poland found itself en route toward its own thaw. In June 1956, workers at the Cegielski factories in Poznań went on strike, demanding better working conditions. Initially, the demonstration had mostly an economic aspect, but very soon, marchers began to formulate political postulates (such as: 'Down with the Soviets'; 'We demand freedom of speech'). The demonstration was bloodily suppressed by the Polish Army, with 50–100 demonstrators left dead.³⁰ The severity of the repression was a visible sign for party officials that the Stalinist model of governance was out of date.

Gomułka became a symbol of the approaching changes. He had been released from prison in 1954 but was rehabilitated by the PZPR only in April 1956, and six months later was appointed the first secretary of the PZPR. His return was met by society with high hopes and natural enthusiasm. Very soon, two competing groups formed around him. The first one was called 'Puławianie' and consisted of

²⁹ See a brochure for party propagandists: Archiwum Akt Nowych (State Archives of Modern Records, hereinafter: AAN), W 30. rocznicę śmierci W. Lenina, ref.no. 237/VIII/270, 3v.

³⁰ Makowski, *Poznański czerwiec 1956. Pierwszy bunt społeczeństwa w PRL* (Poznań, 2001).

communists mostly of Jewish origin supporting a reformist agenda, while its opponents were dubbed 'Natolińcycy' (after the palace in Natolin where its leaders used to meet). They blamed Jews for the whole Stalinist period and pursued nationalistic rhetoric.³¹

Having come to power in 1956, the new leadership of the PZPR led by Gomułka had to deal with the Stalinist legacy, including the role ascribed to the memory of the October Revolution. The aim of the first secretary was to reshape its meaning in accordance with his political agenda and make it acceptable to Polish society. This task was facilitated due to the process of destalinization initiated by Khrushchev, which allowed satellite states to advance the theory of their 'own paths' to socialism. Gomułka was a proponent of that agenda. From 1956, subsequent anniversaries of the October Revolution started to be treated by the party leadership as an opportunity to convince Moscow that while all the regimes were heading in the same direction, they were using different roads. In the Polish reality, this meant first of all the lack of coercive collectivisation and partial acceptance of private property in the countryside. The PZPR cleverly suggested that those roads were part of the same path set by the 'Red October', the legacy of which had been distorted by Stalin. Thus, paradoxically, the memory of the October Revolution, perceived by many in Polish society as an element of dependency on Moscow, was exploited by the PZPR to demonstrate that it was easing Kremlin's control.

Interestingly, the breakthrough in Poland in 1956, which took place in October, began to be called the 'Polish October', or as one Polish historian recently named it, 'the Inter-October Revolution'.³² However, the 'Polish October' was never presented as a challenge to the Soviet October, even though this coincidence created positive connotations for the new first secretary.

Although Gomułka was widely perceived as a victim of Stalinist crimes and an embodiment of hope for a reform that would loosen Soviet control over the social and intellectual life in the country, disappointment set in relatively quickly. On the eve of the fortieth

³¹ A good introduction to the theme of antisemitism among Polish communists is provided by D. Stola in Dariusz Stola, 'Anti-Zionism as a Multipurpose Policy Instrument: The Anti-Zionist Campaign in Poland, 1967–1968', *Journal of Israeli History*, 1 (2006), 175–201.

³² Jerzy Kochanowski, *Rewolucja międzypaździernikowa. Polska 1956–1957* (Warszawa, 2017).

anniversary of the October Revolution, the newspaper *Po Prostu* (Speaking Frankly), a leading journal advocating reform, was closed. While this exacerbation of censorship did not mean a return to practices known from the Stalinist period, nevertheless, the PZPR sent a message to society that there would not be any radical changes.³³

It was in these circumstances that the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution was 'celebrated'. Polish communists strived to be simultaneously 'patriotic and internationalist', as stated in theses prepared by the Propaganda and Agitation Department.³⁴ To that end, the party's propaganda workers and rank-and-file members were instructed to emphasize that the October Revolution had provided Poland with its independence in 1918 by cancelling the partition treaties signed by Austria, Prussia, and Russia in the eighteenth century.³⁵ Gomułka wrote the following in an article published in *Pravda* on 5 November 1957:

Among all nations, no one has so consistently defended the right to self-determination of the Polish nation and its independent existence more than Lenin and the Bolshevik party which, via its Soviet power, cancelled the disgraceful partition treaties.³⁶

Independence or, more accurately, a broad autonomy, was crucial at that time for the PZPR leadership. Gomułka still had to legitimise his political agenda. Under the notion of 'independence', he promoted the idea of Poland's 'own path to socialism', an idea for which he previously had been sharply criticised and ultimately jailed. This political zigzag resembled the situation in the Soviet Union, though

³³ Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours*, 285–6.

³⁴ AAN, 40-lecie Wielkiej Socjalistycznej Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/271, 190v.

³⁵ On 29 August 1918, the Council of People's Commissars issued a decree that cancelled "all treaties and legal acts regarding to the partition of Poland." This did not mean, however, that the Bolsheviks were in favour of the re-establishment of an independent Polish state. Two months after the armistice in Compiègne had been signed, on 8 January 1919, the Polish Revolutionary Military Council was established in Moscow with the aim of installing it with the help of the Red Army in Warsaw. For more on this episode and early Polish-Soviet relations, see Andrzej Nowak, *Polska i trzy Rosje. Studium polityki wschodniej Józefa Piłsudskiego (do kwietnia 1920 roku)* (Kraków, 2015), 108ff.

³⁶ Владислав Гомулка, 'За творческое применение опыта Великого Октября', *Правда* (5 Nov. 1957), 5.

on a much smaller scale and without such far-reaching consequences.³⁷ In the end, however, it did not lead to any increased credibility of the communist ideology in the eyes of society.

Nevertheless, the destalinization launched by Khrushchev made it possible for Gomułka to significantly reshape and spin the meaning of the October Revolution 180 degrees. Instead of speaking about the only one Soviet path to socialism set by the Red October, Gomułka talked about “general, as proved by the experience of the Soviet Union, regularities of building socialism”.³⁸ It was history, according to him, that determined the specific fate of socialism in each country. This political postulate was explicitly stated in the “Theses of the CC of the PZPR for the fortieth anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution”, as follows: “Every country finds its own path of development of socialism according to the conditions and capabilities prevailing in one’s country. The most important, however, is that it is a path to socialism, regardless of temporary twists and turns”.³⁹

This claim, the authors continued, was based on the experience of the October Revolution. Nevertheless, the PZPR, in order to attain socialism, had to adjust it to the “Polish conditions, the social structure of our country and the historical traditions of our nation and desires and aspirations of society”.⁴⁰

The ‘progressive and revolutionary’ traditions of the Polish nation – mirroring the concept from the Soviet Union⁴¹ – began to be invented as prevailing from the onset of the communist regime in Poland. They were first tailored to the publication of the July Manifesto (22 July 1944), which was celebrated as the beginning of the new Poland. The party positioned itself as the heir to the peasant uprising under the command of Aleksander Kostka-Napierski in the seventeenth

³⁷ See Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–70* (Yale, 2013). Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children. The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

³⁸ Гомулка, ‘За творческое’, 5.

³⁹ AAN, Tezy KC PZPR w sprawie 40. Rocznicy Wielkiej Październikowej Rewolucji Socjalistycznej, ref. no. 237/VIII/274, 45.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 69.

⁴¹ For more on the revolutionary traditions in the USSR see Bartłomiej Gajos, ‘Fading Red October: Soviet Youth and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the October Revolution’, *Revolutionary Russia*, 31 (2018), 107–25. Robert Hornsby, ‘Soviet Youth on the March: The All-Union Tours of Military Glory, 1965–87’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2 (2017), 418–45.

century and the Polish members of the anti-tsarist movements in the nineteenth century, who had cooperated with Russian intelligentsia and revolutionaries against the tsarist regime.⁴² Gomułka recalled the Poles, who had been in Petrograd in 1917 and joined the side of the Bolsheviks.⁴³ The Central Administration of Museums and Conservation of Monuments announced that all the Lenin Museums (located in Warsaw, Cracow, and Poronin) would organise exhibitions about Polish participants in the October Revolution.⁴⁴ The staging of historical sessions was described as desired and needed and would bring about positive effects. The authors of a report issued by the Propaganda and Agitation Department, which listed all events dedicated to the fortieth anniversary of the October Revolution, explained that they connected the October Revolution to Polish issues and emphasised the Polish contribution to the success of the Bolsheviks.⁴⁵

However, the 'progressive and revolutionary' traditions in Poland had their own blank spots. One was the history of the interwar Polish Communist Party (PCP), which had been dissolved by Stalin in 1938 and its leaders killed during the Great Terror. Understandably, this theme did not feature in 1944–56. It was Gomułka, a member of the PCP since 1926, who began to rehabilitate and adapt the story of the PCP to the official politics of memory. Without the destalinization triggered by Khrushchev, this obviously would not have been possible.

The October Revolution once more become the background for a political clash. By recalling the efforts of the PCP, Gomułka attacked those who represented the Stalinist era, both in the USSR and Poland. The logic of the argument advanced in favour of the PCP was very similar to the one concerning 'the Polish path to socialism'. It was a battle over who were the rightful heirs of the October ideals. The narrative of 'traitors' and 'foreign agents' – widespread during the Stalinist period – was replaced by a different one saying that the members of the PCP continued the struggle against imperialism sparked by the October Revolution. It is highly probable that Gomułka was alluding to his own

⁴² Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm*, 169–71, 219, 225.

⁴³ Гомулка, 'За творческое', 5. It is estimated that 20 thousand Poles fought on the side of the Bolsheviks in 1917 and during the Russian Civil War.

⁴⁴ AAN, Propozycje komórek organizacyjnych Ministerstwa w sprawie obchodów 40-lecia Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/392, 5.

⁴⁵ AAN, [Narada w sprawie obchodu uroczystości 40-lecia Rewolucji Październikowej], ref. no. 237/VIII/397, 22.

experience from the 1930s when he stated as follows: “The only party that despite terror adamantly and consistently fought for the friendship between Poland and the Soviet Union was the Polish Communist Party”.⁴⁶ A year later, in 1958, the PZPR organised events commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the PCP.

The PZPR also presented the October Revolution as a promise of modernisation. The technological and economic achievements of the Soviet Union were probably the most frequent topics appearing in newspapers, cinemas, and in speeches by party members. The fact that Sputnik-1 and Sputnik-2 were successfully launched on the eve of the fortieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution was an additional argument in the debate about which system best guaranteed development: capitalism or socialism. The day before the fortieth anniversary the *Trybuna Ludu* – the Polish equivalent of the USSR’s *Pravda* – enthusiastically reported on its front page that Sputnik-2 would that day orbit over Warsaw twice!⁴⁷ However, as recent works suggest, the Poles remained sceptical of the modernisation claim, and their perception of socialism was affected more by their own experiences with shortages. Generally, Moscow was seen as less attractive than the capitals of Western Europe, such as Paris or London.⁴⁸ The October Revolution as a symbol of modernity, and the Soviet Union as a role model, were perceived as a burden that disturbed and stunted, rather than boosted, the process of modernisation.

Like in the Soviet Union, the memory of the October Revolution was also highly personified in Poland. The main hero was Lenin, who overshadowed all other figures. ‘Lenin days’ were organized in April. However, he was also at the centre of attention every 7th of November (i.e., the Great October anniversary). The main events were held in the Museums of Lenin, consisting of lectures, exhibitions, and meetings. The anniversary of the October Revolution was also an excellent occasion to publish his works and broadcast documentaries about his life in the cinemas.⁴⁹ There was hardly any event that differed in any significant way from those organised in the Soviet Union. The museum

⁴⁶ Гомулка, ‘За творческое’, 5.

⁴⁷ ‘Sputnik II dwa razy przeleci dziś nad Warszawą’, *Trybuna Ludu* (6 Nov. 1957), 1.

⁴⁸ Kochanowski, *Rewolucja międzypaździernikowa*, 77. Cf. Babiracki, *Soviet Soft Power*, 232.

⁴⁹ AAN, Plan wydawnictw na 40-lecie Rocznicy Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/392, 5, 7.

in Warsaw was planning to organise evenings of reminiscences, which resembled *vechera vospominanii* in the Soviet Union.⁵⁰

So the question arises: Who actually was Lenin for the PZPR, and how was he tailored to the social reality in the PRL? The attitude in 1957 towards the leader of the Bolsheviks was limited by the way his legacy was reinterpreted by Khrushchev. The slogan 'Return to Lenin' was exploited to the same end in Poland as was the legacy of the 'the October Revolution', i.e., to legitimise its 'own paths to socialism'. Józef Cyrankiewicz, the prime minister of the PRL (1947–52; 1954–70), declared in his article 'International meaning of the principles of the October' that it was Lenin, who had "warned that it is unacceptable to ignore and underestimate the specific features, historically-formed institutions, and notions and traditions of each nation".⁵¹

Undoubtedly, the year 1956 brought about a new quality in the sphere of politics of memory vis-à-vis the October Revolution. The turn to history in the Soviet Union, initiated by Khrushchev, was exploited politically by Gomułka to earn more freedom in Poland's internal affairs. However, it is difficult to assess to what extent this change of narratives was acceptable to Polish society. Regardless of the answer to that question, it seems that Gomułka had nothing to lose. The memory of the October Revolution was forcibly imposed on him from the outside, and Poles would positively perceive any attempt to change its Stalinist meaning.

IV

'POLISHING' THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

The change at the top of Soviet leadership in 1964 affected the way the October Revolution Day was celebrated and what political statements

⁵⁰ AAN, Plan pracy Muzeum Lenina dot. obchodu 40-lecia Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/392, 19. The Propaganda and Agitation Department planned a set of evenings of reminiscences. See a plan from 21 August 1957: AAN, Informacja o planach pracy organizacji społecznych i instytucji państwowych w związku 40-tą rocznicą Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/397, 5. For more on *vechera vospominanii* in the Soviet Union, see Corney, *Telling the October*, 121–5.

⁵¹ Józef Cyrankiewicz, 'Międzynarodowe znaczenie zasad Października', *Trybuna Ludu* (4 Nov. 1957), 3. This article was later reprinted in the Soviet journal *Международная Жизнь*.

were advanced on that occasion. Leonid Brezhnev, having come to power, became the first leader of the Soviet Union who had not taken part in the events of the October Revolution or in the subsequent Civil War. This generational change significantly influenced the Soviet politics of memory concerning the October Revolution. For Brezhnev, the most important event of his life was the Great Patriotic War (the Second World War), the commemoration of which under his rule became at least as important as the Great October Revolution (7 November).⁵²

This was one of the reasons why the new first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) – after 1966, the General Secretary – very quickly stopped the process of destalinization, which could have undermined the newly invented myths surrounding the Great Patriotic War. This considerably limited the space for accepting interpretations such as those spread by Gomułka since 1957.

The position of the first secretary of the PZPR in 1967 was at least as complicated as ten years earlier. His authority was constantly undermined by the leader of the newly established faction within the Party called the ‘Partisans’. Its leader was Mieczysław Moczar, who during the Second World War was the commander in the Łódź district and then in the Lublin Gwardia Ludowa (People’s Guard) – a communist partisan organisation of the PPR. He became the Ministry of Internal Affairs and served in that capacity from 1964–8. War was his generational experience, and he used it as a tool for elevating his position among the party members. Similar to Brezhnev, Moczar published his ghost-written memoirs depicting that period, entitled *Barwy walki* (The Colours of the Fight) in 1962, which was enthusiastically met by reviewers.⁵³ He also managed to unite partisans of various political stripes within the veterans’ association called The Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację).⁵⁴ Last but not least, he and his fellows pursued a nationalistic and anti-Semitic policy, which

⁵² See Bartłomiej Gajos, ‘The Fiftieth Anniversary of the October Revolution (1967) – a Generational Turnover and the Politics of Memory of the USSR’, *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 2 (2017), Special Issue, 174–204.

⁵³ Krzysztof Lesiakowski, *Mieczysław Moczar “Mietek”. Biografia polityczna* (Warszawa, 1999), 226–35.

⁵⁴ For more on ZBoWiD, see Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej 1949–1969*.

resonated among young rank-and-file party members hoping to boost their careers.⁵⁵

Another problem for Gomułka was the approaching millennial anniversary of the Baptism of Poland in 966. Since the Thirteenth Party Session in 1963, the first secretary further strengthened the party's control over culture, which sparked protests by intellectuals. They wrote the so-called 'letter of thirty-four' against the increasing censorship. At the same time, the PZPR used administrative measures against the Polish Catholic Church to diminish its influence. The conflict between the party and the Church was growing and erupted in 1966, with the millennial anniversary of The Baptism of Poland setting the stage for this clash. The Communist Party organised its own celebrations of this occasion but under a different name: the Millennium of Polish Statehood.

This millennial anniversary required the PZPR to present the official version of Polish history from its very beginning to the present. Gomułka, as leader of the PZPR, gave a speech on 21 July 1966 at a Special Session of the Polish Parliament, in which he extensively discussed the thousand years of Polish statehood. Tellingly, the October Revolution was mentioned only once by Gomułka and was totally overshadowed by the 'Polish progressive and revolutionary traditions'.⁵⁶ His speech demonstrated that the October Revolution, after the 22 years of existence of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL), still posed a challenge and had not been internalized and adapted to the existing culture of memory. Secondly, in the ongoing memory conflict with the Catholic Church, it seems that even the PZPR perceived it as a worthless or even harmful argument.

Moreover, Gomułka diminished the importance of the dogma that "the October Revolution gave Poland independence" by stating the following: "As a result of the Great Socialist October Revolution in Russia, and as a result of the defeat of the Central Powers in the First World War, preconditions arose in which the independent Polish state could be reborn".⁵⁷

Thus, the October Revolution, being juxtaposed with other factors that led to the independence of Poland in 1918, lost its central character

⁵⁵ Stola, *Anti-Zionism as a Multipurpose Policy Instrument*, 194.

⁵⁶ 'Nierozzerwalna więź Polski socjalistycznej z twórczą i patriotyczną przeszłością naszego narodu', *Trybuna Ludu* (22 July 1966), 3–4.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 4.

in the *longue durée* of the history of Poland. Nor was it by any means considered a breakthrough in the history of humanity, as was maintained in the official Soviet narrative.⁵⁸

Between 1964–7, the party further developed the narrative of the progressive and revolutionary traditions of the Polish nation. They were to be institutionalised in the form of a future Museum of Progressive and Revolutionary Traditions. The idea for such an institution had begun to be discussed in 1957, but the first concrete plans were not drafted until 1966.⁵⁹

The tension between the national and international elements of the official ideology grew in the following years of the PRL. Patriotism, as understood by the PZPR, began to take the upper hand in that competition. The designed plans for the above-mentioned museum left no doubt that the October Revolution was more in the nature of a parallel story than one integrated into the culture of remembrance of the PRL. The authors of that document stated the following:

The aim of this Museum is to extract from the events of history dating from the uprising of Kościuszko⁶⁰ those themes regarding the participation of the masses in struggles for national and social liberation, the culmination of which is the People's Republic of Poland, the heir and continuer of the best traditions of the Polish nation.

The Museum will exhibit the progressive-patriotic and revolutionary traditions of the Polish nation, of its working intelligentsia and peasants, with the workers' class at the head.⁶¹

Only after that did the authors declare that a special place would be devoted to the participation of Poles in international revolutionary events, such as the Paris Commune and the October Revolution.

Gomułka's speech, held in Moscow on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution, also reflected the tendency to

⁵⁸ For more on the Catholic Church and the PZPR's celebrations and the conflict surrounding the anniversary, see Bartłomiej Noszczak, *Pół wieku Milenium. Religijne, polityczne i społeczne aspekty obchodów Tysiąclecia Chrztu Polski (1956–1966/1967)* (Warszawa, 2017).

⁵⁹ The first 'framework draft' for such a Museum was likely prepared in 1957. See AAN, Ramowa tematyka muzeum centralnego, ref. no. 237/VIII/357, 219–220.

⁶⁰ Tadeusz Kościuszko was the leader of the failed uprising against Imperial Russia and the Kingdom of Prussia in 1794.

⁶¹ AAN, Założenie programowe budowy gmachu Muzeum Postępowych i Rewolucyjnych Tradycji Narodu Polskiego, ref. no. 273/VIII/880, 50.

position the October Revolution as a second-priority theme. Given the political situation at the time, he addressed such issues as Mao's policy and West Germany. The fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution was an opportunity to, on one hand, approve Moscow's policy towards China, and on the other to strive for official recognition of the PRL's western borders with Germany.⁶²

The Sino-Soviet split was at that time the most serious challenge Moscow faced.⁶³ Unsurprisingly, Gomułka followed Brezhnev's example and criticized China by saying that Beijing had forgotten the basic principles of internationalism. He reiterated the well-known 'truth' that the Soviet Union was the top socialist superpower, which had been guaranteed by the successful course of the October Revolution.

Further on, the leader of the PZPR focused on the Polish contribution to the October Revolution. After recalling that the Bolsheviks cancelled the partition treaties and thanks to that Poland had been re-established, he drew a parallel between 1917–18 and 1945. In both cases he said it was the Soviet Union that had secured the independence of Poland and its "new, righteous borders". Western Germany was depicted as the main enemy to its independence.⁶⁴

The lines sketched out by Gomułka were followed in the Polish press. The October Revolution meant independence and progress. Therefore, the alliance with the Soviet Union was the best choice, an one to which there was no alternative.⁶⁵ Deepening friendship with the Soviet Union should be one of the most important outcomes of every October Revolution Day (7 November), as was stated in the guidelines of the Propaganda and Agitation Department ahead of the fiftieth anniversary.⁶⁶ The 'no alternative to the Soviet Union' character of the October Revolution was put more straightforwardly in a report

⁶² Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours*, 313.

⁶³ More on that see Sergej Radchenko, 'The Sino-Soviet split', in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ii (Oxford, 2010), 349–72.

⁶⁴ 'Przemówienie tow. Wł. Gomułki na uroczystym posiedzeniu w Pałacu Zjazdów', *Trybuna Ludu* (4 Nov. 1967), 1.

⁶⁵ Karol Małcużyński, 'Rewolucja i Polska', *Trybuna Ludu* (1 Nov. 1967), 3. Edward Ochab, 'Przyszłość należy do socjalizmu', *Trybuna Ludu* (7 Nov. 1967), 3.

⁶⁶ See AAN, Wnioski w sprawie obchodu 42 rocznicy Wielkiej Socjalistycznej Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/682, 2; AAN, W sprawie obchodu 43 rocznicy Wielkiej Socjalistycznej Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/682, 43; AAN, W sprawie obchodów 47 rocznicy Wielkiej Socjalistycznej

concerning ceremonies in the Kieleckie voivodeship: "The main aim of all activities regarding the fiftieth anniversary of the Great October was to strengthen the understanding among society that the fate of our nation and motherland were and are inseparably bound with the victory of the revolution, and that the alliance with the USSR is a guarantee of our internal successes and the position of Poland in the world".⁶⁷ The commemoration of the October Revolution thus evolved into a ceremony that kept reminding Polish society of the geopolitical position of the PRL.

One may observe this geopolitical content of the October Revolution and its lack of an historical and utopian character in the most visible manifestations of memory, namely monuments. Every important anniversary in the socialist states was accompanied with a monument campaign. According to a report by the Ministry of Culture and Art, between 1945 and 1967 3,001 monuments, plaques, obelisks and other objects dedicated to 'prominent historical figures' were erected.⁶⁸ The vast majority of them were devoted to the Soviet Army (at least 412), Polish martyrdom during the Second World War (at least 1,124), clashes involving the Polish Army and partisans (at least 637), and prominent figures (at least 260).⁶⁹ Some insight into the figures to whom the unveiled monuments were dedicated was noted in an appendix to a report listing the monuments built between 1966 and 1967 at a cost of more than two hundred thousand złoty. Among them were monuments dedicated to nineteenth-century Polish writer Władysław Reymont; sociologist and Marxist thinker Ludwik Krzywicki; twentieth-century writer Stefan Żeromski; and Tadeusz Kościuszko.⁷⁰ The monument to Julian Marchlewski, the leader of the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee at the time of the Polish-

Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/909, 1; AAN, W sprawie 48 rocznicy Wielkiej Socjalistycznej Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/909, 13; AAN, W sprawie 49 rocznicy Wielkiej Socjalistycznej Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/909, 22.

⁶⁷ AAN, Informacja o realizacji obchodów 50 rocznicy Rewolucji Październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/911, 29.

⁶⁸ AAN, W sprawie zasad postępowania przy podejmowaniu inicjatywy i zatwierdzeniu projektów budowy pomników, ref. no. 237/VIII/882, 65.

⁶⁹ These numbers concern the years 1945–1965 and therefore are preceded by the formulation "at least".

⁷⁰ AAN, Wykaz pomników o wartości powyżej 200 tys. zł zrealizowanych w latach 1966 i 1967, ref. no. 237/VIII/882, 72–5.

Soviet war (1919–21), was probably the only large memorial associated with the October Revolution, and it was erected between 1957–67. Even the Monument of the Revolutionary Deed, which was unveiled in Sosnowiec (Śląskie voivodeship) on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution did not commemorate the year 1917 in Petrograd. It was dedicated to all the revolutionary deeds of all generations of Polish revolutionaries, as was explained by Edward Gierek, the first secretary of the Śląskie Voivodeship Committee of the PZPR.⁷¹

The great number of monuments dedicated to the Second World War and to Polish martyrdom were a function of both the internal as well as the international situations. The policies proposed by Moczar's group, which enhanced its position by exploiting the history of the Second World War, exerted pressure on the party's leadership. However, the pressure did not come from Moczar alone. The experience of the Second World War was common to every citizen of the PRL, which cannot be said of the October Revolution or of the Russian Civil War.

In 1967, Gomułka felt no further need to legitimise the agenda of the 'Polish path to socialism'. No one in the Kremlin contested it at that time. All the other elements of the previous narratives concerning the memory of the October Revolution remained in place. Thus during the twenty-three years of the existence (up to that time) of the PRL, the PZPR still had not managed to effectively accommodate the most important public holiday of its superior from Moscow.

In fact, there was no need and no demand from the party officials, and even less from the society, to do so after Brezhnev came to power in the Kremlin. His accession triggered a generational process that finally allowed the Great Patriotic War to obtain the status of the most important historical event in the USSR.⁷² The most vivid display of this phenomenon in the Polish context is contained in a letter to Gen. Teodor Kufel, the chief of the Polish Internal Military Service, which he received from Gen. Ivan Fadeikin, the chief of the Third Directorate, on 13 January 1966. Fadeikin asked him to prepare archival documents for publications on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary that would "show the cooperation of counterintelligence agents from the Polish People's Republic with Soviet counterintelligence during

⁷¹ 'Na wieczną chwałę bojowników socjalizmu', *Trybuna Robotnicza* (18 Sept. 1967), 4.

⁷² Gajos, *The Fiftieth Anniversary of the October Revolution* (1967), 175–204.

the Great Patriotic War and in the post-war period”.⁷³ He did not even mention the October Revolution and the Civil War.

V CONCLUSIONS

Scholars have long debated the issue of when the Soviet Union lost its utopian character, which was embodied by the October Revolution. Post-war Poland did not go through the utopian period, and one may hardly find any excerpts from speeches in which leaders of the PZPR presented communism as a political and achievable aim, as did the CPSU in its Third Program in 1961.⁷⁴ The commemoration of the October Revolution – perhaps the best occasion for such claims – is the most vivid example of the non-existence of this kind of tendency among PZPR officials.

The very fact that the October Revolution Day did not eventually receive the status of an official holiday shows how inconvenient it was for the Polish communists to adapt to it. Anniversaries of these events were exploited mainly by the PZPR in its intra-party and external conflicts in the international arena. More interestingly, October Revolution Day (7 November) was not treated by the PZPR as an opportunity for attacks on the Catholic Church. Celebrations of the October Revolution did not have an anti-religious character. It seems that the party was aware of the foreignness of this public holiday, which under the circumstances would not have provided them with any additional support from the society.

In the 1960s, there were many fewer people in the PRL than in the USSR who, in fact, had experienced the revolutionary years in Russia in 1917–21. Most of them were killed during the Great Terror. Party officials estimated that 450 ‘October’ veterans lived in Poland in 1967, and many of them “were in difficult material circumstances”.⁷⁵ There is hardly any better example demonstrating the lack of popular – and more tellingly the Party’s own – appreciation of their deeds.

⁷³ IPN BU (Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance), Письмо ген. И. Фадейкина ген. Т. Куфлю от 13 января 1966, ref. no. 2386/18347/2, 2.

⁷⁴ ‘Программа Коммунистической партии Советского Союза’, in *КПСС в резолюциях и решениях съездов*, x, 83.

⁷⁵ AAN, List Biura Spraw Kadrowych KC PZPR do I Sekretarza KW PZPR z 12 VII 1967, ref. no. 237/8/912, 14.

This “shortage of individual memories” naturally did not generate any particular need to publicly tell and commemorate the revolution. The generational experience for the Polish communists was the Second World War. Therefore, the October Revolution came to be used as an occasion to remind the people of the years of ‘liberation’ in 1944–5 and the Polish-Soviet brotherhood of arms, rather than to recall the events in Petrograd in 1917.

Nevertheless, Moscow carefully observed how countries of the Eastern Bloc prepared for anniversaries. The Polish embassy in Moscow received information that Soviet officials from the Central Committee and Ministry of Foreign Affairs were unsatisfied with the texts that were published by Polish journalists on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Great October Revolution (1967) because they lacked “serious articles” that would present “this issue [the October Revolution] in the historical context”.⁷⁶

It is difficult to estimate the participation of society in the various undertakings devoted to the October Revolution. A report by the local Propaganda and Agitation Department from the Białystok voivodeship concerning the forty-third anniversary (1960) may provide a particular image:

It is positive that this year more people took part in celebrations of the October Revolution than in recent years. It is estimated that 13 thousand people attended the voivodeship and district ceremonies. Approximately 65 thousand took part in all the more significant events. The society quite massively attended events of party-type rather than lectures.⁷⁷

At the same time, the anniversaries of the October Revolution were also an opportunity for people to express their discontent. For instance, the Security Service registered 88 ‘hostile political acts’ on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution, which included: dissemination of anti-Soviet and anti-state leaflets and destroying decorations and anti-state writings in public space.⁷⁸ However, 7 November was also an occasion to advance not only

⁷⁶ IPN BU, Notatka dot. obchodów 50. rocznicy rewolucji październikowej, ref. no. 01375/6, 62.

⁷⁷ AAN, Informacja o obchodach 43 rocznicy rewolucji październikowej, ref. no. 237/VIII/682, 94.

⁷⁸ IPN BU, Informacja dot. wrogiej działalności w okresie obchodów 50. rocznicy rewolucji październikowej, ref. no. 0296/250/1, 210.

political but also economic statements. An interesting situation took place in the Cotton Industrial Plant in Białystok. Female workers hung banners reading “Strike on the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution” and “Finish your work early”.⁷⁹

To conclude, it is not surprising then that the place of the October Revolution in the historical chronology invented by the PZPR was not as important as it may seem at first glance. Official celebrations of the October Revolution Day (7 November) – organised from the very first days of post-war Poland – did not automatically translate into the successful adaptation of the October Revolution to the PRL culture of remembrance. One may even argue that by emphasizing the geopolitical position of Poland on the occasion of the subsequent Great October anniversaries, the PZPR in fact admitted that they celebrated it because of the constant pressure of the logic of history, which had situated Poland in its alliance with the Soviet Union. It was an alliance contested by many attendees of anniversary ceremonies, who raised questions about the role of the Soviet Union in the Katyń massacre and its activities in the prewar eastern territories of Poland which had been annexed by the USSR in 1939 (as happened for example in the Kieleckie voivodeship during the fiftieth anniversary of the October Revolution).⁸⁰

proofreading James Hartzell

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⁷⁹ IPN BU, Meldunek, 21 Oct. 1967, ref. no. 1585/936, 13.

⁸⁰ AAN, Ocena obchodów 50. rocznicy Rewolucji Październikowej na terenie województwa kieleckiego, sygn. 237/VIII/911, 50. For more on the Katyń Massacre leaflets and writings, see also reports from the police, cf. IPN BU, ref. no. 1585/936, 35, 57, 93.

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