

Stanisław Salmonowicz

BETWEEN TERROR AND MANIPULATION: THE POLISH INTELLIGENTSIA IN THE FACE OF STALINISM

'During the German occupation we all knew war was being waged and one day victory would come. But at *that* time it seemed that darkness would last for ever'.

Reverend Józef Tischner in 1950

'Today there are only three ways out: PPR (Polish Workers' Party), NSZ (National Armed Forces) or suicide. Joining the first is a shame, the second is stupidity, so are we really left with one choice — a suicide?'

A girl — from the high school in 1948

'I was personally amazed at the speed with which the Polish creative intelligentsia liberated themselves from the self-abasement in which they were plunged by the Stalinist terror. They became a leading force in the processes which led to the Polish October'.

Jan Nowak-Jeziorański in 1994

I begin with three quotations which I treat as mottoes for my article. They view the sad years 1945–56 as if from three standpoints and though they do not exhaust the whole gamut of references, they show the complexity of that era and the difficulty of giving it a black-and-white appraisal.

I should like to start by specifying the character of this paper. The subject 'Intellectuals and Stalinism' has received hundreds of various types of analyses and comments. The broader theme,

'Stalinism and the Intelligentsia' has also aroused many written reflections both of the participants — witnesses of that era, and researchers — sociologists, psychologists and historians of literature; the least frequent opinions about this question have perhaps been expressed by professional historians. The most general subject — that of the attitudes of the whole Polish society to the power imposed on it — has perhaps been studied to the smallest extent and is certainly the most complex to describe. The most difficult problem in presenting the three aspects of reality reflected in the three mottoes is that of accessibility of sources and possibilities of analysis of their interpretation. Political and social attitudes can be researched on the basis of human actions and can be seen in statistics. If, however, we want to reach deeper, that is consider the motivations or transformations of mentality, our situation is extremely difficult: we have to stress that under the totalitarian system human attitudes that find an external expression can seldom be classified unequivocally, even in the light of the past and the future attitudes of a given person. We know well that in a totalitarian system the need for a kind of mimicry, or simple fear, do not exhaust the wide range of impulses for the actions of a given person or group in a specific situation. There were many other motivations at play, such as: the breakdown, in 1945 or later, of the belief in a possibility of effective resistance to communism, a wish to ensure a 'little stability' for oneself and one's family, or sheer opportunism, which must not, however, be understood as tantamount to a dynamic push towards a career at all costs. This may be supplemented by various ideological or political illusions, up to an authentic, conscious support of the new regime.

I proposed some interpretation of this subject for the first time in an article published in 1999.¹ Now, making use also of my other publications that have appeared since, I should like to return to it, and attempt a provisional recapitulation of this issue, introducing some changes to my standpoint in some questions.

I would first like to make two remarks. One is that I am not only a specialist in recent history but was also — as an observer — a participant in that era. I studied at the Jagiellonian University

¹ Cf. Stanisław Salmonowicz, 'Postawy inteligencji polskiej wobec stalinizmu (1944–1956). Refleksje historyka', *Czasy Nowożytnie*, vi (1999), 207–26, *ibidem* numerous references to bibliography.

in the worst years of the height of Polish Stalinism — 1950–4. I recently described those studies² and I have many times found that the younger generation of historians cannot understand well the climate of those times, or interpret correctly the publications of that sad period. Hence the broadly-conceived literature of the subject abounds in texts that try to unmask the reality showing it in black-and-white colours, as well as in *quasi*-apologetic publications, for example Henryk Ślabek's book *Intelektualistów obraz własny w świetle dokumentów autobiograficznych 1944–1989* [The Self-portrait of Intellectuals in the Light of Autobiographical Documents, 1944–1989] (Warszawa, 1997), or a number of more or less distorted accounts. I understand my own position as that of a historian trying to find above all the real picture of that era, who does not yield to current political connotations, but also does not accept the principle *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*. I should also like to stress that being a witness, I was always an active opponent of communism; this, however, does not lead me astray into the simplifications presented by the belated enemies of communism, whom I call in French *les combattants de la dernière heure*, that is people who started to fight against communism after its downfall.

Let me add that this brief text is only its author's attempt to recapitulate the research done so far, it does not carry any facts that would be a revelation, however, in many questions my position differs from those that prevail in the literature of the subject and I am fully aware that many of my formulations may seem debatable, especially to those who have their own, personal vision of those years.

The attitudes of the Polish intelligentsia towards socialism differed greatly — from a positive will to put up resistance to the fanatic support for the new system. One should not forget,

² Cf. Stanisław Salmonowicz, 'Jak studiowałem w dobie polskiego stalinizmu', *Analecta*, xi, 1–2 (2002), 313–36. I do not try to list the literature of this subject here, and will only make a general reference to two sociological studies by Hanna Świda-Ziemba, *Człowiek wewnętrznie zniewolony. Problemy psychosocjologiczne minionej formacji*, 2nd edn (Warszawa, 1998); Maria Hirszowicz, *Pułapki zaangażowania. Intelektualiści w służbie* (Warszawa, 2001), and another of my works: 'Profesorowie i studenci w latach stalinizmu w Polsce (1944–1956)', in Grzegorz Miernik (ed.), *Polacy wobec PRL. Strategie przystosowawcze* (Kielce, 2003), 75–92.

however, the general framework of historical events or situations in personal lives which determined the field of manoeuvre, and the possibility of a free decision of an individual. If we take as the point of departure the beginning of 1945, this field of manoeuvre and situations, in a synthesis that cannot avoid some simplifications, looked as follows:

1. War and the criminal actions of both invaders caused losses, which presented as a percentage, were, if not the greatest, then certainly the most painful precisely to the intelligentsia. Let us add that in the situation that developed after Yalta — despite the end of war — a large percentage of the important representatives of the Polish intelligentsia remained in the West.

2. After the terrible defeat of the Warsaw Uprising, after Yalta and the take-over of power by the new authorities imposed by the Kremlin, the general situation of Poland, to any 'realist', must have seemed unequivocal. Even if some circles did continue counting on the mythical West, since the failure of Mikolajczyk's plan in the years 1946–7 — no realistically-minded person could go on cherishing such hopes.

3. The moment warfare stopped in the Polish territories that were to form the (so-called later) Polish People's Republic, the main problem for most people, including the intelligentsia, was taking up a *quasi*-normal, peaceful activity: professionals — physician, engineer, even a lawyer, artist, actor, writer, could formally return to their jobs: posts and careers, if only because of enormous human losses caused by the war, were open to them. The so-called social advancement was accessible to everybody: a pre-war bank clerk could become its director, a primary school teacher could become a high-school headmaster, a pre-war minor-rank lawyer, if he pleased the authorities, became a judge of provincial court or prosecutor general in a big city, etc., etc. A young leftist journalist, before the war taking his first steps in the press, could make a fantastic career on radio, and a second-rate poet easily climbed the communist Parnassus, where many prizes awaited all pro-government... satirists. So the problem that arose was that of the attitude to the new power, but also of building some minimal personal and family existence. The new authorities, seemingly — as it was to turn out some time later — accepted with open arms almost everybody. The symbol of their

policy towards the intelligentsia was not Jakub Berman, about whom nothing was known for a long time, and not even Bolesław Bierut, a shady figure, but seemingly approachable and friendly to everybody, a communist journalist and skilful organizer Jerzy Borejsza, who was for a short time invested with a *sui generis* 'rule of the souls', but in fact responsible for winning over the Polish intelligentsia for service to the new system.

Even if in some respects the social feeling of 1945 in Poland can be compared to that after the downfall of the January 1863 Uprising, still we must observe a few important differences: (1) The Red Army and the new system entered the country following the terror of the Nazi invader. Nothing worse than that terror could be expected and many people, especially those who did not know Russia and communism, might entertain some illusions. (2) The elastic propaganda tactics of the new authorities — national slogans, the whole Polish decor (Polish army, patriotic manifestations, but only anti-German, Polish schools, theatres), combined with a number of socially radical slogans ('land reform', 'nationalization of industry', 'free education')³ — all this had a considerable power of attraction, though unevenly distributed among various social groups and regions of Poland. Where before the war the influence of the National Democrats and the anti-German feeling prevailed, the new power, also because of ignorance, was welcomed more readily. Poland under the rule of the Polish Committee of National Liberation was from the very beginning subjected to political constraint, but its form, and partly also its character, did not seem to be a new kind of foreign occupation: in the first years no official combat was declared against the Catholic Church, Polish schools were opened, as well as libraries, museums and theatres, Polish journals appeared which said many things that people might like, especially those people who in the Second Polish Republic were far both from power and money.⁴ Frequently only years later did people see that the communist system was a great

³ I have long represented the view that the communist utopia stood a chance of being rooted in a given country of Europe or Asia without the use of Soviet tanks only if it relied to some extent on a peasant revolution, that is in the countries that had not undergone an earlier land reform.

⁴ In this context very detrimental was the role of the so-called radical peasant intelligentsia who still bore a deep, and frequently unjustified grudge against the Second Polish Republic and for this reason became blind to the essential

ideological, social and economic humbug, based on coercion and universally dominating fiction.

Let us note two other elements that are usually omitted in an analysis. The first is the fact that for the workers and various other specialists (for example railwaymen, etc.) returning to normal work after the war was not a political problem. For a professional whose occupation was somehow connected with the basic structures of the state (a judge, prosecutor, administration employee) this was precisely a problem of some kind of political decision. Let us add that, for other reasons, this decision was favoured by two factors: first that after years of being removed from work, the desire one felt to return to it, not only for existential reasons, was extremely strong. Second, that the elements of the apparatus of the still active underground Polish State, in 1945 partly propagated joining such types of structures of the new regime, assuming that this would constrain or impede the actions or conceptions of the new authorities. As a result, *nolens* or *volens*, the majority of the Polish intelligentsia returned to their professional work in 1945, taking the posts that required the acceptance of the new power. Initially this power accepted almost everybody with open arms: the process of massive purges was to start only in 1949. Here we must note one characteristic thing: many professionals from this group who were far from communism, but not devoid of some leftist leanings, having held some posts of responsibility for a certain time, started genuinely to identify with the new regime, treating their reservations or vacillations as a matter of their internal struggle, and maybe sometimes reaching for the elixir of Ketman.⁵

problem of a threat to Poland's independence; some of their representatives soon became well-paid bards of the new era.

⁵ 'Ketman', a term used by Czesław Miłosz in his *The Captive Mind* (the original Polish first edition: *Zniewolony umysł*, New York, 1961), chap. 3, was a principle, characteristic of Islamic culture, to applaud the official doctrine for safety, but to retain one's un-orthodox views and derive from it a sense of independence. [Translator's note.] The necessity to adjust to the new reality at least to a minimal extent did not rule out the posture of resistance *pro foro interno*. Sociologists distinguish here the so-called passive and active acceptance. Cf. also the remarks by Mirosława Marody, 'Przemiany postaw ideologicznych i przystosowanie w systemie komunistycznym', in Tomasz Szarota (ed.), *Komunizm. Ideologia, system, ludzie* (Warszawa, 2001), 127–8, and Mirosława Marody and Antoni Sulek (eds.), *Rzeczywistość polska i sposoby radzenia sobie z nią* (Warszawa, 1987).

Today we know well what the so-called real socialism meant, we know all about the crimes, not only of Stalin, but of the whole communist system, *ab ovo*. It is a fact, however, that no historian can deny or treat as a *post factum* of a fabricated legend that the communist utopia had a great power of intellectual influence, probably even more easily affecting intellectuals and professionals than ordinary people who were more down-to-earth in their assessment of the situation and therefore less prone to err in their judgement.⁶ In this context let us note a significant fact, which was, however, psychologically strange, that many pre-war ardent communists, including those (quite many) who had experienced the Soviet camps and Soviet reality, as well as some of the Polish vaguely leftist intelligentsia who lived through the war in the Soviet territories and had an occasion to acquaint themselves with the realities of Stalinism, either naively or on the principle *contra spem spero*⁷ — believed that in the Polish lands the realization of communism would be free of the ‘deviations’. It was in those circles that the ‘Polish specificity’ was discussed, or a possibility of a ‘third way’ and avoiding deplorable (though never mentioned in public) realities of the Soviet system, that allowed them to see in an optimistic light the beginnings of Stalinism in Poland.

If we want to take a global view of the postures of the Polish intelligentsia in face of Stalinism in the period from 1944 to 1954, we may distinguish a few main attitudes, with the general reservation that in the course of those ominous years both individuals and social groups changed these attitudes easily, which was quite comprehensible, considering the dynamic history of those years; besides, the boundaries between some attitudes (and especially motivations for actions) were not sharp-outlined, hence, because of a lack of sources and their analyses, it is difficult to rank many persons or even groups of the Polish intelligentsia in one or another category.⁸ Here is my attempt at presenting the scheme of divisions.

⁶ For many intellectuals ‘verbal reality replaced the actual one’ — Świda-Ziemba, *Człowiek wewnętrznie zniewolony*, 273.

⁷ Hirszowicz, *Pułapki zaangażowania*, 77: ‘The communist ideology, as any faith, made one refuse to believe the facts that disagreed with its principles’.

⁸ Jerzy Holzer in the collective work Marta Fik *et al.* (ed.), *Spór o PRL* (Kraków, 1996), 34, distinguishes four basic attitudes in the society of this era: a) opponents

1. A definite negation of the system imposed on Poland, combined with a will of consistent resistance (although its forms might differ, and, depending on the situation, be rather inconspicuous as facts). The attitude of resistance was characteristic mostly of a large section of those who were active in the structures of the Underground Polish State in the years 1939–45, and in the years 1944–7 continued various forms of conspiratorial or legal resistance to the communist power. Since the end of 1947, all the forms of armed or conspiratorial resistance had died down, and thousands of members of the Polish intelligentsia lost their lives, had gone to the Soviet concentration camps or prisons. By the end of 1948 any active, illegal resistance was effectively broken. Also the only large legal structure of the opposition — Stanisław Mikołajczyk's PSL (Polish Peasant Party) — was at the turn of 1947 reduced to the role of a satellite of the communist power. In this situation resistance, or rather rejection of the system imposed on this country, had to take new forms, less spectacular, less outspoken. In this situation, the organization that came to the fore was the Catholic Church and its structures, which until the 1950s retained a minimum freedom of action and independence (also financial) from the communist power. This form of resistance, not manifested but authentic, found its expression in the Cracow weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, the appropriation of which by the so-called 'progressive' Catholics from the PAX organization in 1953 — after Stalin's death — was a sort of summit of the Stalinist era in Poland. The last act of the development of totalitarian tendencies was the spectacular action directed against the Church, finished by the arrest of Primate Wyszyński.

What were the forms or symptoms of opposition to the regime since 1949? In the day of the greatest Stalinist terror, of the universal power of the security service and censorship, the only accessible form of resistance was mainly consistent avoidance of participation in the official manifestations of support for the regime, and a refusal to participate in its institutional forms (such as the party or youth organizations directed by the communists,

of the system, b) votaries of organic work, c) fanatics of the new system, d) conformists and career-seekers. The boundaries between those groups are not clear; it is, for example difficult to classify some groups of intellectuals described by Czesław Miłosz, who were neither typical votaries of organic work, nor career-seekers in the colloquial sense of the word.

the Polish-Soviet Friendship Society, and the like), or in public declarations imposed or supported by the authorities. Thus, in the intellectual and artistic circles, a complete passiveness of an author who either stopped publishing or resorted to topics and matters that had nothing to do with the affirmation of reality were the main forms of opposition. We must remember, however, that even if such an attitude did not entail direct personal repressions, it nearly always made the life of such a person difficult, sometimes deprived them of any possibility of earning their living, publishing or any work in their profession. A refusal to join the ruling party and its satellites, and other organizations that approved of the reality, required, in the case of persons holding some important social position or aspiring to join a profession surrounded by a vigilant party control, at least in the period from 1950 to 1954, taking a serious risk: in other words, what we might define as visible forms of 'internal emigration', might cause not only some kind of discrimination, up to the loss of a job, but also many other problems, also for a given person's family who were since out of favour with the authorities. Hence after 1949, the majority of the Polish intelligentsia, even if they did not approve of the new system in public, were still prone to respect the law of mimicry in the era of the great Stalinist terror; open criticism, was in fact a *sui generis* social suicide; even an anti-system joke might cost the untimely jester a few years in prison, and what was left for the less determined opponents of communism was only absenteeism from the more vociferous forms of apotheosis of the regime. Thus the avoidance of mass political meetings, of May Day marches (a rather risky move, even in normal places of work, colleges and schools), of any celebrations 'in honour' — all that may now seem an almost childish form of resistance — in those times might cost a lot.

2. The most widespread attitude (though it would be difficult to prove this in numbers) was, in my opinion, that of unenthusiastic passiveness, combined, however, with the necessity of accepting life in the conditions imposed by the era. People who showed that attitude, easily changed it into that of complete opportunism and tried to make a career within the structures of the new system. In the first place, everybody wanted to live. For a professional with serious qualifications this meant taking sometimes very important

posts, because of and expressing at least a minimal verbal acceptance of the new system. Those who found such an acceptance the easiest were engineers; it was perhaps even easier for physicians who in any situation were embraced by the ageless ethos of social service, usually free of the necessity of making dubious moral choices. An architect was reconstructing Warsaw, Gdańsk and Wrocław, an engineer built factories or bridges, railways and roads. Such activities, of necessity realized within the structures of the reality of those times, could easily bring approval of the authorities, and consequently a greater acceptance of this reality by the interested persons. Generally speaking, if they were members of the old Polish creative intelligentsia, with wide horizons, this acceptance was limited, but in their own opinion, necessary.

3. The attitude of an active acceptance of the new system certainly grew with time, though for various reasons. It was motivated not only by 'stupidity, fear and interest' but by an authentic ideological commitment. Apart from genuine communists (these were very few), the new system gained its supporters mainly among the young people from the countryside and some sections of the workers (rather from the territories where the Polish Socialist Party was not very popular before the war, like Silesia and Greater Poland; generally, we may say that this acceptance was easier in the territories distant from the Soviet Union and those that did not belong to Russia before the First World War).⁹ The new system started to be accepted — by stages — *nolens* or *volens* — also by large groups of the intelligentsia. Apart from the radical rural intelligentsia, we should mention here especially the radical non-religious intelligentsia of big cities. Finally, let us add all those who actively acceded to the new system from the rightist positions,¹⁰ and

⁹ As Miłosz remarked maliciously in 1945: 'What did those people in Warsaw know? They did not even know Russian...' — Czesław Miłosz, *Zaraz po wojnie. Korespondencja z pisarzami 1945–1950* (Kraków, 1998), 7–8.

¹⁰ The majority of the rightist Conservatives and National Democrats supported the new system motivated by the so-called *Realpolitik*, frustration with the West and Yalta, the eternally pro-Russian policy of Roman Dmowski and fantastic illusions they cherished of a possibility of disrupting the system from within, as it was done by the hero of Adam Mickiewicz's poem *Konrad Wallenrod* (it is worthy of note that such illusions were sometimes entertained by the Catholic PAX movement, otherwise dependent on the secret service). Hence the Polish reasons of State were invoked in various ways (even by Stanisław Stomma), hence hopes were set (for example, by Ksawery Pruszyński!) on a new Aleksander Wielopolski,

those who having no definite political views were directed above all by opportunism and a will to act.

It is worthy of note that the attitude to the communist power was largely determined by the earlier political engagement or lack of political activeness of a given person. While many members of the peasant party and activists of National Democracy and Christian Democracy easily agreed to collaborate with the authorities, the most reluctant rightists were especially those connected with the old ONR (National Radical Camp; during the German occupation National Armed Forces — NSZ). However, especially reluctant were large groups of the old Polish Socialist Party, especially its right wing, and people attached to the idea of Polish independence as it was represented by Józef Piłsudski. It was the latter, those cherishing the tradition of Piłsudski's legions, who principally made up the leadership of the AK (Home Army) and WIN (Freedom and Independence) that suffered most repressions on the part of the communist power. It was the ethos of the Home Army people, strengthened by the persecution of 1947–54, that shaped especially the spirit of Opposition. Also many conspiratorial structures of the years 1947–54 among high school pupils were derived precisely from the Home Army tradition, and the spirit of opposition in the scouting organization (ZHP) in the years 1945–8 was shaped by the legend of the Szare Szeregi (Grey Ranks, Polish scouting organization during the German occupation).

A few remarks must also be devoted to the periodic division of this era, since the rapidly changing situation of those years caused equally rapid changes in the attitudes not only of individuals, but whole strata. Here I should like to emphasize the following elements of the chronology of this era and their consequences:

1. The years 1944–7 on the one hand continued to be those of a firm resistance put up to the communist power, on the other hand, however, they saw the first stage of a largely successful process of 'winning over' the elite and the intelligentsia at large. This era was sometimes called that of a civil war in Poland. However, recently, emphasis has been placed on the fact that

hence the tolerant attitude to King Stanislas Augustus, or the ideological justification of collaboration in the writings of Aleksander Bocheński.

this was mainly a war waged by the Soviet forces, headed by the NKVD, against the resistance of the nation. I think that without sticking to the term of 'civil war' we should draw attention to the fact that in contrast to the period from the autumn of 1944 to the autumn of 1945 — in the later months of the fight against the Polish Underground, the forces that came to the fore were domestic — UB (The Ministry of Public Security), MO (The Citizens' Militia), KBW (Internal Security Corps) and LWP (Polish People's Army); the latter, which is indeed a surprising circumstance, was frequently headed by pre-war generals or colonels (for example Gustaw Paszkiewicz, Mikołaj Prus-Więckowski, Stefan Mossor, Brunon Olbrycht, and also men derived from the Home Army for example Franciszek Herman). The years 1946–7 strike us by their contrasts: the war has finished, but the heroic fight of 'the boys from the forest', deprived of any prospects, goes on; the illegal Underground is breathing its last, and Mikołajczyk's legal opposition as early as the autumn of 1946 has been stifled by massive terror. At the same time, however, millions of people are in the course of 'repatriation', the Western Territories (the so-called Regained Territories) are being settled, reconstruction of Warsaw has been taken up and — at least on the surface — cultural and scientific life is developing not only normally, but with an intensity that is intended to make up for the period of the German occupation: all kinds of schools and universities are overcrowded, young people go to holiday camps of various organizations, theatres, philharmonic halls and even lecture houses are packed, while the newly-printed books (censorship was initially interested only in current political topics) are being bought on the spot. Still, people in towns, forests and UB prisons perished every day, the loudspeakers transmitted the trials of the WIN leadership, and the PSL people were treacherously murdered. Many people still used forged documents, everybody tried to hide his anti-German activity during the occupation as well as he could. However, many essential elements of reality did not penetrate to the media, hence not everybody was aware of the complexity of the situation.¹¹ It is true that nearly everybody knew

¹¹ In fact only from 1949 onwards the new ideology '... became dominant in the universal public communication code' — Świda-Ziemba, *Człowiek wewnątrznie zniewolony*, 66.

about the concentration camps in Russia, as well as about Katyn forest, but with time the ranks of those who accepted the official version as true were growing. The young people who would soon fill the ranks of ZWM (The Union of Fighting Youth) — and later of ZMP (The Union of Polish Youth), were born about the year 1931, and did not remember much of pre-war Poland or know much of the world preceding the Nazi occupation, hence they were easily influenced by the propaganda of the new system.¹²

2. The turning point came in 1948 with the successive withdrawal from many promises of the previous stage, which started a great process of the total organization of social life according to the universally and obtrusively introduced Soviet models. December 1948 remains a symbolic date, with the merger of the newly-licensed Polish Socialist Party and the Polish Workers' Party into the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). At the same time this was a year when all the hopes for a Third World War or some political Anglo-American intervention turned out to be futile: for many people (this concerns mainly a number of those from the former Underground, who would find a controlled refuge in the pseudo-Catholic structures of PAX), this was the last moment of choice, that is of making a decision about becoming subordinated to reality, and accepting officially, with or without hesitation, the new system. Of enormous significance was the fact that a conviction took shape that there was no alternative for the Polish People's Republic. It is worth stressing that many of those people who had accepted the system, in the next period of 'setting order to personal dossiers' were sent to jail, although they neither wished nor felt capable of putting up an open resistance. It was the Polish People's Republic that called their loyalty in question, placing in jail many managers, engineers, various kinds of professionals, all those who had directed the reconstruction of the country in the first years, and now were replaced by new staff that had undergone social advancement.

3. The years 1949–53 were, formally speaking, those of the highest acceptance of the system in the manifested reactions of

¹² Hirszowicz, *Pułapki zaangażowania*, 105, cites the significant confession of Irena Szymańska (an outstanding editor): 'We were stupid, what is more — we wanted to be stupid. Wishful thinking obscured the world'.

society. In face of the massive terror, the law of mimicry ruled universally.¹³ Let us add, citing Piotr Wojciechowski:

The mythology of the official propaganda was rejected, still it penetrated gradually into the minds; few people believed in the linguistic genius of Stalin, but the slogans of egalitarianism, the cult of science and of heavy industry, the conviction that there is a contradiction between science and religion, were swallowed and absorbed easily.¹⁴

4. The years 1954–5, the last days of the classic era of Stalinism, were also the modest beginning of the ‘thaw’: some time after Stalin’s death the doubts and anxieties stifled before, started to come to the surface. The first political prisoners were liberated, without, however, the public acknowledgement of this fact. In May 1954 the first student satirical theatre ‘STS’ — a harbinger of the thaw — opened in Warsaw, and from November 1954 the later renowned ‘Bim-Bom’ student theatre started working in Gdańsk. Of crucial importance were the changes occurring in the USSR, which influenced the attitudes of some circles of the PZPR. As early as April 1955 appeared the Polish book edition of Ehrenburg’s *The Thaw*. Perhaps the most important preparation for the era of moral protest against the years of terror and enslavement were the revelations of Col. Józef Światło, the ex-dignitary of the Ministry of Public Security who defected to the

¹³ At the height of Stalinism, fear, not only of police repressions, dominated also in the Union of Polish Writers. Recently Joanna Siedlecka, in her article ‘Sam w pustej sali’, *Rzeczpospolita*, Plus — Minus Suppl. of 12–13 Aug. 2003, recalled the case of Jan Władysław Grabski, the son of premier Władysław Grabski, judged by his colleagues from the Polish Writers Union (ZLP) for his unpublished poem of 1953, which he incautiously showed to Natalia, the widow of the poet Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński. He discussed in this poem the sins and virtues of Gałczyński in a way far from the official line. It is worthy of note that not only the prominent figures of this era (Stanisław Ryszard Dobrowolski, Kazimierz Koźniewski), but also such writers as Anatol Stern, Jerzy Waldorff and Artur Sandauer took part in this campaign against Grabski, and neither Jan Brzechwa nor Eugeniusz Paukšta tried to save the author from the verdict. One can hardly doubt that they all and the assembled were generally directed by fear and opportunism. After this parody of a judgment passed on a poem Grabski himself wrote: ‘Overwhelmed and amazed I did not defend myself against the blows aimed at me and my *Ballad*, or against my colleagues — my neighbours, blind with fanaticism and intoxicated by their predominance and power’.

¹⁴ Cf. Fik *et al.* (ed.), *Spór o PRL*, 61.

West (Free Europe broadcasts from 28 September 1954). During 1955, though extremely slowly, to the accompaniment of faction struggle within the party, the grip of restraint was released. Of essential importance to the circles of the intelligentsia, also those so far connected with the PZPR, was the publication of the *Poemat dla dorosłych* [A Poem for Adults] by Adam Ważyk (August 1955). The work written, formally speaking, from the position of continued acceptance of communism (but without the glossing-over of its especially dirty spots) was received as an expression of a total disillusionment with the promises of the new system, a disillusionment — the point to be remembered — situated in the symbolic city of the ‘new man’, that is Nowa Huta near Cracow. Today the reader of this work may perhaps not fully appreciate its former significance, but the fact is that it was written by Adam Ważyk who had long been a vociferous glorifier of the system, but soon joined the group of definite ‘revisionists’ who condemned the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956 (*Qui tacent clamant*).

Let us try to sum up our deliberations. In 1945 the Polish intelligentsia found itself face to face with the construction of a totalitarian system at a moment when Poland welcomed the end of the Second World War with a mixture of joy and a sense of defeat and a loss of hope for sustaining her independence. In this situation some section of non-communist intelligentsia (especially its former rural radical circles) — not without some illusions — tried to find their place in the new system, while some others did it out of pure opportunism, not forsaking various objections *pro foro interno*. Here also belonged a large group, mainly of the rightist and Catholic provenance (National Democrats, Christian Democrats), who in the name of *raison d'état* and a necessity to be realistic, were ready to start some, limited co-operation. Those who cherished no illusions and who tried to continue their fight against the system in the years 1945–8, all those and many others, perished or went to prisons and concentration camps. Soon, however, side by side with those attitudes of the old intelligentsia who, generally speaking, usually not without vacillation, tried to find their place in the new reality, a new, energetic and quite large group of young professionals who gained their education due to social advancement appeared in 1948, mainly young

people from the countryside who in the years 1947–54 made up the main body of the communist youth organizations and who, having obtained some kind of diplomas, would become part of the intelligentsia from 1949 to 1954. It was in this group that the largest percentage of genuine adherents of the new system were found, people who generally were under the effective influence of the communist propaganda. It is worth noting that the main guard of the PZPR from the era of Gomułka and Gierek were recruited from those graduates of the years 1953–5. We must not forget, however, that to this group also belonged some more outstanding and not career-seeking persons who originated, from 1956 onwards, a strong trend of revisionism, later symbolized by the names of Karol Modzelewski, Jacek Kuroń, the editors of *Po prostu* weekly in 1956, or such writers as Wiktor Woroszyński or Jacek Bocheński.¹⁵ Let us conclude that it was the easiest thing to defile oneself with your pen, hence the attitudes of a ‘rank-and-file’ member of the intelligentsia, who only honestly worked in his profession, *nolens* or *volens* formally accepting the new system, did not attract so much attention. An ordinary professional in the provinces subordinated himself to the new power, for he did not see any other possibility of continuing his work, and after six years of the German occupation nobody felt he was fit to be a hero. However, although an intellectual who did not want to acknowledge the new system, found himself in the 1950s in a very difficult situation, still the examples of outstanding scholars such as Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Konrad Górski, Adam Vetulani, Henryk Elzenberg or Henryk Wereszycki who did not give up their views, exposing themselves to discrimination and many inconveniences, show that such a firm posture was possible, though difficult, and in the period of the summit of Stalinism outright dangerous.

Discussions about the so-called policy of lesser evil, the problem to what extent social opportunism produced some positive results, seem to have no end. Among Polish émigrés, for example, Konstanty Jeleński, and even Jerzy Giedroyc himself were moderate

¹⁵ Cf. Andrzej Friszke, *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945–1980* (Londyn, 1994), 67 ff., who points to the fact that a large group of the so-called ‘young communists’ of the Stalinist period, who are still seen in a negative light by their surroundings who did not share in their activity or enthusiasm for the regime, later changed their position into that of ‘critique within the system’, which sometimes led them to the negation of the communist system as a whole.

in their appraisal of human postures, while Gustaw Herling-Grudziński was a strict moralist. In fact, the era was marked by a wide range and many shades of attitudes. The stumbling-block for the rigorous judges is the fact that, especially in difficult and changing situations, human attitudes undergo an evolution. In other words, human postures were not consistent throughout the period from 1944 to 1956. Many people experienced a serious internal dilemma, which they, however, not always expressed in public, since during the height of Stalinism this was not possible. Only those who stayed in the prisons of the Polish People's Republic were free of such kinds of problems. It should be stressed and never be forgotten how many representatives of the best Polish intelligentsia, including many women, went through the prisons of the Polish People's Republic or USSR in the years 1944–56 and how many lost there their lives or their health.

On final reckoning, the saddest aspect of this period seems to be the shape of Polish literature. Still, due to the effort of intellectuals who were far from making concessions to the regime, something was achieved. Crimes and terror, however, did not meet with an adequate reply. True, Czesław Miłosz, or others could free themselves of the burden of subscribing to a lie, by choosing 'freedom in exile', but this was not possible for the nation as a whole, or its elite. What was left to a person who stayed at home, who could not protest against evil, was only to refuse taking part in solemn or degrading forms of its acceptance. And a few succeeded in this... Still, the majority of the intelligentsia, apart from showing no enthusiasm for the compulsory tributes to the era, did not show a will for fighting. This will was almost completely annihilated by the events of the years 1944–8.

Let us sum up the subject with a few emphatic statements:

1. The attitudes of the intelligentsia, for a certain time mainly the old, originating from the Second Polish Republic, and from the 1950s onwards of a strong group of the new intelligentsia derived from workers and peasants, throughout the period from 1944 to 1956 underwent rapid changes: from those of active and passive resistance, through adjustment to the new conditions up to the growing — for various reasons — acceptance of the new regime. This acceptance, different in various milieus, in some of them, even if they had been for some time blind or active votaries of

the regime, started to break down as a result of various types of disillusionment and a new way of looking at the realities of the system under the influence of such events as the death of Stalin, the uprising in the GDR, the liquidation of Beria, the revelations of Światło, and the beginnings of the thaw.

2. As I have already shown, both in the first years of the communist rule and later we should distinguish between the decisions made by people in public, in view of the reality of those times, and their real attitudes to the regime, more or less scrupulously concealed *pro foro interno*. I have already mentioned a number of such motivations and they should be kept in mind, with the principal reservation that the original motivation might undergo a change during this era, which was rich in changes itself. This concerns especially many people who, often due to their authentic professional career, changed their attitude of passive obedience towards the new power into that of increasingly more conscious and loyal spokesmen of the official line of the regime.

3. In sum, the range of attitudes both of the old and new intelligentsia was very wide. In my opinion, though there are no documents or quantitative sources to prove this *lege artis* — what prevailed for a long time was the attitude of Voltaire's *Candide*, that is the watchword: let everybody in these hard times cultivate his own garden. Such an attitude, supported by the ideology of choosing a lesser evil, and especially by the popular watchword of organic work, might create a protective umbrella (not always effective) against the repressions of the regime. There were also many varieties of other attitudes, for example the watchword of internal emigration, or of passive resistance. Active resistance, deprived of a minimum protection such as mimicry, became, with time, practically impossible. What came into play was of course the element of fear, which I personally consider as essential both for large groups of the intelligentsia before the end of 1948, and especially for a considerable body of the traditional intelligentsia menaced by massive political repressions since 1950. Finally, we could observe, of course, an authentic ideological engagement, full of naïveté, ignorance, or fanatic dedication to the accepted slogans. This attitude, at the beginning, was certainly represented by a small, though perhaps loud, minority, with time, however, the numbers of those engaged grew both among the

young members of the intelligentsia of the 1950s, and especially, and naturally, in the milieus embraced by social advancement. After 1956, some of them tried to break or effectively broke with the era of blind engagement, while others have remained in their, always socially advantageous, positions of the so-called 'party stalwarts' to this day.

(transl. Agnieszka Kreczmar)