

Isaac Deutscher and the Fate of Polish Communism

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The Polish Communists were savagely persecuted by Stalin in the 1930s, before he raised their party to power after 1945. Despite attempts at reform, their regime could never transcend its origins as a Soviet satellite state.

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Forty years ago this week, Poland’s independent trade-union movement, Solidarność, burst onto the scene after a wildcat strike wave. The movement posed a direct challenge to the Polish Communist regime, which temporarily granted Solidarność freedom to organize, but later drove it underground after imposing martial law in December 1981.

The spectacle of a powerful workers’ movement challenging a self-proclaimed workers’ state had a huge impact throughout the Eastern Bloc; in many ways, it was the beginning of the end for Soviet-style Communism.

The Polish historian Isaac Deutscher is best remembered for his classic biographies of Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky. But Deutscher was also a political activist in the Polish workers’ movement: first as a member of the Polish Communist Party, then, after his expulsion in 1932 for opposing Stalin’s policy, as a supporter of Trotsky’s Left Opposition.

In 1956, Poland attracted the world’s attention when a protest movement emerged to challenge the Stalinist regime that Moscow had imposed. That movement brought [Władysław Gomułka](#), an independent-minded Communist leader who had been imprisoned on orders from Stalin, to power in Warsaw. Deutscher hoped that Poland’s new rulers could lead their country toward an alternative, non-Stalinist model of socialism. The abridged extracts that follow give a sense of Deutscher’s hopes and subsequent disillusionment with the Gomułka experiment.

The first extract is drawn from an interview with the Polish journalist K. S. Karol, conducted in 1957. Deutscher wanted to help educate the younger generation of Poles about the suppressed history of the prewar Polish Communist Party, which Stalin had forcibly disbanded in 1938. Here, he discusses the party’s origins, how it came to be subordinated to direction from Moscow, and why Stalin ordered a purge of its exiled leadership.

–“The Tragedy of the Polish Communist Party” (1957)

Is it not true that the Communist Party began its political life in independent Poland with a certain moral disadvantage arising from its Luxemburgist tradition, which was opposed in principle to the struggle for national independence?

There is a little truth and a great deal of exaggeration in that. The situation was complicated. On the one hand, events had *to a certain degree* refuted the assumptions on which Rosa Luxemburg and her comrades had dissented from the “struggle for national independence.” On the other hand, however, Luxemburg and her followers had been alone in placing their hopes on revolutions in Russia, Germany, and Austria, the three empires that had subjugated Poland, rather than on an unending repetition of Polish nineteenth-century insurrections.

Contrary to Rosa Luxemburg’s expectations, Poland had regained her independence; but contrary to the expectations of her opponents, Poland had received it mainly from the hands of the Russian and German revolutions. History showed itself to be more cunning than all the parties; and that is why I do not believe that, in comparison with other parties, the Communist Party entered the phase of independence with any particular “moral handicap.”

How did the Communist Party react to the Polish-Soviet War of 1920?

The Polish party treated this war — as it had every reason to do — as a war of the Polish possessing classes (or of their decisive elements) against the Russian Revolution, and as an integral part of the capitalist powers’ intervention in Russia. The party felt it was at one with the Russian Revolution and obliged to defend it.

The situation became complicated after [Józef Piłsudski](#)’s retreat from Kiev. The Red Army’s march on Warsaw was a much more serious and more damaging moral handicap for the Polish Communist Party than had been all of Rosa Luxemburg’s real or imaginary mistakes taken together. The mistake made by Lenin in 1920 — let us call things by their proper name — was a real tragedy for the Polish Communist Party, because in effect it pushed the Polish proletarian masses toward anti-Sovietism and anti-Communism.

Nevertheless, after 1920 the party rapidly regained its strength — didn’t it?

Yes, to a certain extent. That does not alter the fact that the march on Warsaw also had certain permanent effects: it undermined the trust of the Polish working masses in the Russian Revolution. However, after 1920, the workers recovered fairly quickly from their first enthusiasm for Polish national sovereignty, and from the illusions that went with it. In the relatively freer atmosphere which followed the war, the working class had the opportunity to view the events more calmly.

It became known that Lenin’s government had done everything possible to avoid war between Poland and Russia, and that without Piłsudski’s march on Kiev, there would probably never have been any Soviet march on Warsaw. The Polish working class came to understand that Piłsudski, in 1920, was not fighting so much for Polish independence as for the estates of the big Polish landowners in the Ukraine, and also to satisfy his own dreams of grandeur.

The early years of the 1920s marked another increase in the influence of the Polish Communist Party, an influence which reached its peak in 1923, particularly in November, at the time of the general strike and the rising of the Cracow workers. For many years, I personally believed that in Poland, as well as in Germany, the year 1923 was one of a “missed revolution.” Now, after an interval of thirty-five years, I can no longer be so sure. In any case, we certainly had many elements

of a revolutionary situation: a general strike, the rising of the Cracow workers, the army going over to the side of the working class, and more generally, the country in a state of utter ferment.

The only factor, it seemed, which was lacking was the initiative of a revolutionary party which might have led the revolution to success. The Polish Communist Party did not show that initiative. In accordance with the resolutions of the Communist International, the party was then following a policy of united front with the Socialists. Up to a certain moment, this policy had produced excellent results, enabling the party to widen its influence, and introducing more vigor into the class struggle. But at the same time, the party leadership left the political initiative to the Socialists; and in the critical days of November 1923, this produced unfortunate consequences.

The situation became even more complicated because of events taking place in the USSR. At that time, the struggle between the so-called triumvirate (Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev) and Trotsky broke into the open. At once it took on extremely violent forms unknown hitherto in the movement. The European Communist parties were deeply disturbed. In the autumn of 1923, the Central Committees of the Polish, French, and German parties protested to the Central Committee of the Soviet party against the violence of the attacks on Trotsky.

Stalin never forgot or forgave this protest. Zinoviev, who was then president of the International, viewed it as a vote of no confidence in himself. Immediately, the Communist Parties of Poland, France, and Germany became involved in the internal Soviet conflict. The leadership of the International — in other words, Zinoviev and Stalin — dismissed from their posts the principal leaders of the three parties who had dared “to come to Trotsky’s defense.”

How did the party react to this first act of deliberate interference?

Passively, unfortunately. Many of its members were more or less in favor, and even those who weren’t did not oppose it. The attack on the displaced leaders was carried on with relative moderation and correctness of form — and this facilitated its acceptance. What was decisive, however, was the party’s psychological attitude — its misguided conception of solidarity with the Russian Revolution, its belief that any conflict with Moscow must be avoided, no matter at what cost.

The moral authority of the Soviet party, the only one which had led a proletarian revolution to victory, was so great that the Polish Communists accepted Moscow’s decisions even when Moscow abused its revolutionary authority. Stalinism was indeed a continuous succession of abuses of this kind, a systematic exploitation of the moral credit of the revolution for purposes which often had nothing to do with the interests of Communism but served only to consolidate the bureaucratic regime of the USSR . . .

What, in your opinion, were the reasons for which Stalin ordered the dissolution of the Polish party? The view which prevails now among old party militants is that Stalin was already preparing the ground for his 1939 agreement with Hitler, and that he liquidated the Polish party and sent its leaders to their death because he feared that they might obstruct that agreement.

This motive no doubt played a part in Stalin’s decision but does not explain it fully. It seems to me that no single motive or sober calculation can explain Stalin’s behavior in this matter. His irrational impulses were quite as important as his “rational” calculations; and he was impelled to act as he did by old grudges and ancient phobias, all intensified to the utmost by the persecution mania which gripped him at the time of the great Moscow trials, when he was settling his final accounts with the Leninist old guard.

In this frame of mind, Stalin saw the Polish Communist Party as the stronghold of hated

Luxemburgism — the Polish “variety of Trotskyism” — which had defied him as long ago as 1923; the party in which some leaders were close to Bukharin and others to Zinoviev; the party of incurable heresies, proud of its traditions and of its heroism; the party, finally, which might well in certain international situations become an obstacle on his road . . . and so he decided to remove that obstacle by the blade of the same guillotine which, working furiously, was already destroying a whole generation of Bolsheviks.

“October Revolutions, New Style” (1956)

In this extract from a 1956 article, Deutscher compares the Polish and Hungarian protest movements against Stalinism, and suggests that Władysław Gomułka’s leadership team has the potential to lead Poland on an independent path.

The background of the October events was very much the same in Poland and Hungary. In both countries, the explosion of the Stalin myth and the disintegration of the Stalinist police terror had put into motion vast popular forces impatient with the slowness and half-heartedness of official de-Stalinization and pressing for an immediate and radical break with the Stalin era.

Both in Poland and in Hungary, the movement grew from modest beginnings and gained scope and momentum until it assumed a nationwide scale. In both countries, the offended dignity of peoples reduced to the roles of Russian satellites had powerfully asserted itself, claiming its rights.

Yet the Poles and Hungarians struggled for political freedoms as well as for national emancipation, and they rose against the Stalinist police state through which Russia had dominated them. Last but not least, they revolted against an economic policy that had sacrificed their consumer interests to industrialization and armaments and had plunged them into intolerable misery.

The upsurge of nationalist emotion, the yearning for political freedom, and despair at the economic plight in both countries were common to workers, intelligentsia, students, civil servants, army officers, and the still numerous survivors of the old bourgeoisie. In both countries, all social divisions were for a time completely overshadowed by the single and all-embracing antagonism of the peoples at large to a handful of Stalinist diehards clinging to power . . .

There were, however, also vital differences between Hungary and Poland — differences that were to determine the vastly different results of the struggle in the two countries. In Poland, anti-Stalinist Communism was incomparably stronger than in Hungary, even in the heyday of Stalinism. Polish Communists, especially the older ones, had never at heart forgiven Stalin the blow and insult he inflicted on them in 1938, when he disbanded the whole of the Polish Communist Party, denouncing it as “a nest of Trotskyist *agents provocateurs*” and ordering the execution of all its leaders who had fled to Moscow from Marshal Piłsudski’s prisons and concentration camps.

Even in the years 1950–53, the Communist leaders of Warsaw used all their cunning to cheat Stalin and avoid staging trials in the style of [Rajk](#) in Hungary and [Slánský](#) in Czechoslovakia, and it was thanks to this that Władysław Gomułka lived on to fight another day. (Among the papers of [Bolesław Bierut](#), the Stalinist Polish leader who died early this year, were found documents in which he urged his subordinates to ignore Stalin’s insistent demands for Polish purge trials.)

No wonder that Polish Communist activists received de-Stalinization with relief and joy as a most congenial job, while [Mátyás Rákosi](#) and his men did their utmost to curb and delay de-Stalinization in their country. The Polish Communist cadres remained, on the whole, sensitive to popular moods and kept in touch with them, while the Hungarians were cut off from the masses and were blind and

deaf to the groundswell of political emotion in their country.

To the Polish Communists, the Poznań riots last summer came as a timely and salutary warning. Poznań made them aware of the gulf that had opened between their own ruling group and the working class. It made them realize that unless they, the Communists themselves, broke rapidly and radically with the Stalin era, Poland's de-Stalinization might be carried out against them by anti-Communists. Hence the Polish party did not use Poznań as a pretext for tightening screws. On the contrary, it pressed democratization and worked to narrow the gulf between the rulers and the ruled.

By far the most important Polish development since Poznań has been the rise of a strong movement for "industrial de-Stalinization" among the workers in the factories. This essentially Communist movement, which was to play a decisive role in October, found its main base in the factories of Warsaw, especially in the suburb of Żerań, and in the mines and steel mills of Silesia and Dąbrowa. The spirit animating this movement was closely akin to that which animated the Bolshevik masses of Petrograd and Moscow in the early days of the Russian Revolution.

The Polish workers were quick to translate the intelligentsia's call for de-Stalinization and democratization into specific industrial demands of their own. For them, democratization has meant first of all "the workers' direct control over industry" and the abolition of an over-centralized economic dictatorship by bureaucracy that had ridden roughshod over the workers' needs and rights.

The party leaders at first viewed with some apprehension this movement and its potential challenge to national economic planning, but the movement had an irresistible force, and they made their peace with it. It created something like a ready-made proletarian class basis for de-Stalinization.

Up to the Poznań riots, the intelligentsia led the movement for de-Stalinization. Afterward, however, the workers came to the fore, and the whole weight of the movement shifted from university halls, literary circles, and editorial offices to industrial workshops. These became the scene of something like a genuine revolution from below, developing just at the time when that "revolution from above" which Stalin had imposed on Poland was on the point of exhaustion and perhaps collapse.

In this lay the strength of Polish Communism during the October crisis. The workers came to feel for the first time that the promise of Communism might after all be fulfilled, that they might become masters in their factories, and that the words "a workers' state" might cease to be empty. They were and still are inclined to credit the new Gomułka leadership with the intention of carrying out this program and so are prepared to back that leadership against anti-Communist assaults.

Gomułka seems to be aware that the best chance of his survival in independence from Russia, and of the survival of Polish Communism in general, lies in that newly emerged native strength of the Polish working class. Twice when in danger he has already appealed to that strength: first on October 19, when he threatened Khrushchev, Molotov, Mikoyan, and Kaganovich, on their arrival in Warsaw, that he would arm the workers of Warsaw against any Soviet-inspired military coup; and then on October 22, when he sent the same workers — not the army or even the police — to disperse anti-Communist student demonstrations in the capital.

In this way, Gomułka managed for the time being to avert the threat of Soviet intervention and to check anti-Communism. The fact that he acted resolutely when threatened with Soviet intervention helped greatly to consolidate his position. For the first time since its inception, Polish Communism freed itself from the odium of being a Russian puppet condemned to remain forever in irreconcilable conflict with Polish national aspirations.

Until then, the Poles had looked and could look only to anti-Communists to assert what they regarded as their national interest and national dignity. Now, for the first time in its long, checkered, and tragic career, Polish Communism had assumed the role of the exponent of the national longing for independence. Faced with this situation, Moscow had to acknowledge Gomułka's ascendancy and to recognize that it was preferable, from its own viewpoint, that the heretical Communism of Gomułka, rather than anti-Communism, should find itself at the head of Poland's national resurgence.

“An Open Letter to Władysław Gomułka” (1966)

By the mid-1960s, it was clear that Gomułka's reform experiment had run its course. The Communist state had co-opted the workers' councils that emerged in 1956, and now launched a fresh crackdown on dissident intellectuals. In 1966, Deutscher composed an open letter to Gomułka, protesting against the imprisonment by his regime of left-wing opponents, some of whom had been accused of conspiring with Deutscher himself.

I am addressing this letter to you in order to protest against the recent secret trials and convictions of [Ludwik Hass](#), [Karol Modzelewski](#), [Kazimierz Badowski](#), Romuald Śmiech, [Jacek Kuroń](#), and other members of your party. According to all available reports, these men have been deprived of liberty solely because they have voiced views critical of your policy or certain aspects of it, and because they have expressed disappointment with the bureaucratic arbitrariness and corruption which they see rampant in their country.

The charge against them is that they have circulated leaflets and a pamphlet containing “false information detrimental to the state and its supreme authorities” — the public prosecutor, it seems, did not accuse them of any crime or offense graver than that. If this is the accusation, then the persecution of these men is disgraceful and scandalous.

Several questions must be asked. Why, in the first instance, have the courts held their hearings in camera? Surely, no matter of state security was or could have been involved. All the defendants have been academic teachers and students, and what they have tried to do was to communicate their views to fellow students.

Why have they not been given a fair and open trial? Why have your own newspapers not even summarized the indictments and the pleas of the defense? Is it because the proceedings have been so absurd and shameful that you yourselves feel that you cannot justify or excuse them; and so you prefer to cover them with silence and oblivion?

As far as I know, prosecutor and judges have not impugned the defendants' motives or cast any serious doubt on their integrity. The accused men have proclaimed themselves to be, and have behaved like, devoted non-conformist Communists, profoundly convinced of the truth and validity of revolutionary Marxism.

I know that one of them, Ludwik Hass, was, even before the Second World War, a member of the Communist, so-called Trotskyist, organization of which I was one of the founders and mouthpiece. He then spent seventeen years in Stalin's prisons, concentration camps, and places of deportation. Released in 1957, he returned to Poland so free from all bitterness and so strongly animated by his faith in a better socialist future that he at once decided to join your party; and he was accepted as a member.

No one asked him to renounce his past, and he did not deny his old “Trotskyist” views even for a

moment — on the contrary, he upheld them frankly and untiringly. This circumstance alone testifies to his courage and integrity. Do you, Władysław Gomułka, really believe that you have, in your “apparatus” and administration, many people of comparable disinterestedness and idealism?

Look around you, look at the crowds of timeservers that surround you, at all those opportunists without principle and honor who fawn on you as they fawned on Bierut, and as some of them fawned even on [Edward Rydz-Śmigły](#) and Józef Piłsudski. On how many of these bureaucrats can your government, and can socialism, count in an hour of danger, as it can count on the people you have put in prison?

Recently, your government claimed with a certain pride that there have been no political prisoners in Poland since 1956. This claim, if true, was indeed something to be proud of in a country the jails of which had always, under all regimes, been full of political prisoners, especially of Communist prisoners.

You have not, as far as I know, jailed and put in chains any of your all too numerous and virulent anti-Communist opponents; and you deserve credit for the moderation with which you treat them. But why do you deny such treatment to your critics on the Left?

Hass, Modzelewski, and their friends have been brought to the courtrooms handcuffed and under heavy guard. Eyewitness accounts say that they raised their chained fists in the old Communist salute and sang the “Internationale.” This detail speaks eloquently about their political characters and loyalties. How many of your dignitaries, Władysław Gomułka, would nowadays intone the “Internationale” of their own free will and accord?

I have been informed that before the trial, during the interrogation, the official who conducted it alleged that Hass and other defendants had worked in contact with me. I do not know whether the prosecutor took up this charge in the courtroom. In any case, the allegation is a complete falsehood.

Let me say that if the defendants had tried to get in touch with me, I would have readily responded. But the fact is that I have had no contact whatsoever with any of them. I have not even seen a single one of their leaflets or pamphlets. I judge their behavior solely from reports reaching me by word of mouth or through Western European newspapers.

I ought perhaps to explain that, since the Second World War, I have not participated in Polish political life in any way, and that, not being a member of any political organization, Trotskyist or otherwise, I am speaking only for myself. I should add, however, that on a few very rare occasions, I have broken my self-imposed political abstinence. I protested when you, Władysław Gomułka, were imprisoned and slandered in the last years of the Stalin era.

Knowing full well that I could not share all your views, I expressed solidarity with you. Similarly, I do not know whether I can fully approve the views and behavior of Hass, Modzelewski, and their comrades. But in their case, as in yours, I think I can recognize reactionary police terror for what it is and tell slander from truth.

Another occasion on which I allowed myself to have a say on Polish political matters was in 1957, when I explained in a special essay, “The Tragedy of Polish Communism between the World Wars.” You may remember that your censors, Stalinists of the so-called [Natolin group](#), confiscated the essay when *Polityka* tried to publish it, and that then you, Władysław Gomułka, ordered the essay to be widely distributed among party members.

In those far-off days, just after the “Polish Spring in October,” you held that Polish Communists ought to know my account of the havoc that Stalin made of their party, delivering nearly all its

leaders to the firing squad. You knew that I had been one of those very few Communists who, in 1938, protested against that crime and against the disbandment and denigration of what had once been our common party.

Moscow “rehabilitated” the Polish party and its leaders only after seventeen or eighteen years; and then you, Władysław Gomułka, apologized for having kept silent in 1938, although you had not believed the Stalinist slanders. I do not believe that you are right now in persecuting and imprisoning members of your own party and your critics on the Left; and I cannot keep silent.

May I remind you of your own words spoken at the famous Eighth Session of the Central Committee in October 1956? “The cult of the personality was not a matter just of Stalin’s person,” you stated then. “This was a system which had been transplanted from the USSR to nearly all Communist Parties . . . *we have finished, or rather we are finishing, with that system once and for all.*” (Your italics.)

But are you not to some extent re-establishing that system? Do you wish these trials to mark the tenth anniversary of your own rehabilitation and of that “Spring in October,” during which you raised so many hopes for the future?

In the name of those hopes and in the name of your own record, the record of a fighter and of a political prisoner under Piłsudski and Stalin, I appeal to you and to your colleagues of the Central Committee: do not allow this miscarriage of justice to last! Dispel the secrecy that surrounds the cases of Hass, Modzelewski, and their comrades. If you think that they are guilty of grave offenses, then publish the full report of the court proceedings and let it speak for itself.

In any case, I appeal to you to order an immediate and public revision of the trial. If you refuse these demands, you will stand condemned as epigones of Stalinism, guilty of stifling your own party and compromising the future of socialism.

Isaac Deutscher was a Polish historian whose works included *Stalin: Biography of a Dictator* and a three-volume study of Leon Trotsky: *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed*, and *The Prophet Outcast*.

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