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## **“To run? Where? And from what?”: The experience of Stalinist repressions in the biographies of members of the Polish party-government elite, 1949–1956**

**T**he aim of this article is to demonstrate the traumatic biographical experience of the members of the Communist movement in Poland resulting from the decimation of the higher echelons of the movement following the Soviet Great Terror purges of the late 1930s and the subsequent dissolution of the Communist Party of Poland (Komunistyczna Partia Polski, hereafter KPP) and its subordinate organizations by formal Comintern decree of 16 August 1938. For empirical material, the article uses biographies of

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214 Communists,<sup>1</sup> 22 Communist sympathizers/fellow travellers, and 5 Red Army officers, all of whom were part of the party and government elites<sup>2</sup> between 1949 and 1956, that is the period of the country's fiercest attempts to imitate and implement the Stalinist model of state rule. This allows the article to combine a reflection on the experiences of pre-war communists with an analysis of circles that held considerable sway over the shape of public life in post-war Poland. It is my belief that the crucial stage in the political socialization of Polish Communists, the cadres who would later come to comprise the core of the post-war regime, came about in the late 1930s. The fateful year 1938, during which the said socialization reached its peak, proved truly disastrous to the Polish Communist movement. This article will examine that experience from two discrete perspectives: objective (a type of repression) and subjective (its interpretations offered by victims and witnesses).

## 1937: Decimation

In my opinion, the initial assumptions outlined above, as well as an extensive body of literature on the subject, demonstrating a variety of interpretive tropes, release me from the obligation to provide a comprehensive reconstruction and interpretation of the genesis, the course, and the consequences of the Great Terror (Brzeziński, 1956; Chase, 2002; Conquest, 1997; Getty, 1985; Getty & Naumov, 1999; Priestland, 2007; Schlögel, 2012; Weissberg-Cybulski, 1990; Wiczorkiewicz, 2016). The fate of the KPP has not yet been the subject of an exhaustive and comprehensive study – the only attempt thereof was undertaken in the very twilight years of the Polish People's Republic (Maciszewski, 1989). It will be sufficient for the purposes of this article to reaffirm commonly known facts: in the second half of the 1930s, the instruments of state terror usually employed in the USSR against the enemies of the Bolsheviks or specific groups within the population (such as peasants) were turned against the very architects of the regime – the elites of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (VKP(B)). After arresting them on false charges including espionage and counter-revolutionary activity, the secret police tried and executed high-ranking party leaders, including Nikolai

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<sup>1</sup> Here, the term "Communists" implies members of the Communist organizations operating in the interwar period (either the Communist Party of Poland or one of its associated youth organizations).

<sup>2</sup> Here, "elites" are defined using the positional method as the combined body of people occupying high-level positions in formally defined political structures, in this case – the political apparatus and statutory bodies of the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) and government institutions. Defined as such, the party and ruling elites numbered 427 persons.

Bukharin and Lev Kamenev, 98 of the 139 members of the Central Committee per its 1934 roster, and 7–10% of the Red Army's officer corps. The wave of terror also touched scientists, artists, executives, and thousands upon thousands of ordinary Soviet citizens. It is estimated that about 1.3 million people were tried between 1937 and 1938, of which at least 680,000 were subsequently executed.

From early 1930s onwards, the Soviet Union was swept by a rising tide of xenophobia against all "aliens" (Chase, 2002). That xenophobia also affected the members of the Comintern's individual sections,<sup>3</sup> despite the fact that those sections were themselves subjected to Bolshevization and Stalinization, both of which were supposed to transform the disparate Communist parties into a disciplined army, sharing not only the idea of changing the world through revolution, but also particular norms of obedience and unceasing revolutionary vigilance (Chase, 2002; Kołakowski, 2009, pp. 368–370, 396–400; McDermott & Agnew, 1996, pp. 41–87; Sewell, 2012; Simoncini, 1993, pp. 31–33; Skilling, 1961).

In the second half of the 1930s, the wave of mass repressions struck the Comintern cadres as well as the international Communists, those residing in the Soviet Union and those called to Moscow from their home countries all over the world – from Germany, through Romania, to Japan (Conquest, 1997, pp. 441–446; McDermott & Agnew, 1996, pp. 146–149; Weitz, 1997, pp. 298–300). Around a thousand Polish Communists were rounded up and arrested, two thirds of whom subsequently perished in prisons or forced-labour camps. In total, around 75% of the members of the KPP's Central Committee and their deputies were purged (Kieszczyński, 1989, pp. 198–216; 1992, pp. 293–357). In an absurd twist, most were charged with espionage on behalf of the Polish Military Organization (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa, POW) – a secret Polish military organization disbanded in 1918, but "resurrected" by Soviet state security forces in the early 1930s (Cimek, 1990, pp. 113–116; Kochański, 2008).

Some of the KPP members who resided in the USSR attempted to deflect the threat to their own persons by participating in the widespread culture of denunciation (Chase, 2002, pp. 227–232; Cimek, 1990, pp. 117–120; Shore, 2008, pp. 123–129, 174–181). Polish Communists had difficulty accepting the possibility that their leaders could have been spies all along, but the adoption of such a notion was facilitated by deeply internalized faith in the Soviet regime and the Comintern, the norms of unquestioning obedience, the clandestine nature

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<sup>3</sup> The Communist Party of Poland, like other communist parties, was formally a section of the supranational Communist International, formed in 1919 and in later years increasingly subordinated to Soviet leadership.

of political activity where the rank-and-file of the movement had no idea who the leaders were, as well as the very character of the movement, where fraternity blended seamlessly with suspicion. Disoriented, members ultimately sought and embraced anything that offered them a rational explanation and reduced their cognitive dissonance (Kalicka, 1989, p. 161; Krzemień, 1982, p. 333; Nalewajko-Kulikov, 2009, p. 106; Schatz, 1991, p. 135). All this carries traces of a very human disposition – the refusal to acknowledge that what one has built their life, career, and life's vision upon may have very well been tainted from the start (Chase, 2002, p. 410; Wat, 1990, p. 65). Other forces, however, were at play, too. When a certain Communist activist began to openly criticize the show trials of popular Bolsheviks, she was "subject to such harassment that it nearly proved fatal", which means that her comrades brought both moral pressure and threats to bear against her. Less experienced activists were also rarely provided with a full picture of any given situation.<sup>4</sup>

## 1938: Dissolution

The Polish Communists were hit the hardest of all Comintern sections. It was the only one to be not just culled but finally disbanded as thoroughly penetrated by "provocateurs" (Cimek, 1990, pp. 127–131, 166–169; Kochański, 2008; Kowalski, 1975, pp. 384–433; Maciszewski, 1989). Scholars have identified a number of possible reasons behind the decision; one key factor at play which is particularly worth noting is that Polish Communists had very close relations with the Bolsheviks (McDermott & Agnew, 1996, p. 147). Prior to 1918, they operated within the same country, while Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPL) was an autonomous part of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDRP). Most senior figures in the Polish Communist movement were Lenin's companions and comrades rather than his acolytes – and they well remembered a time when the international proletariat was not led by Stalin. Therefore, both the movement elders and the younger activists who saw them as model Communists to be imitated, politically and personally, were seen as sufficiently "alien" to warrant their eradication as Polish spies and provocateurs – and sufficiently "ours" to be subject to the same treatment as the "old Bolsheviks".

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<sup>4</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN, Central Archives of Modern Records), Zbiór Relacji Dotyczących Ruchu Robotniczego (ZRDRR, Collection of Accounts Regarding the Workers' Movement), R-192, Fania German, Feb. 8, 1966, sh. 191; Stefania Olczak, Feb. 8, 1966, sh. 167.

For the Communists, the Party was more than just a political instrument. It was sacred, the essence of life. François Furet (Furet, 1996, p. 149) said that the Party had been hypostatized into a divinity of history, whereas Ken Jowitt wrote of its institutionalized form of charisma (Müller, 2016, p. 51). It was granted precedence over the individual, while its prosperity and success were to be the supreme moral imperative. Thus, service to the idea became service to the party which, in turn, became disciplined obedience to Party leadership (Hirszowicz, 2001, p. 45). The biographical trajectories of members were often similar: from accession inspired by non-conformist and altruistic dreams of forging a better world, to arriving at the notion that the inevitable revolution could only be brought about within the framework of one specific organization (Levy, 2001, p. 56). Besides, appeals for obedience, discipline, and ceding individual self-determination to the Party actually satisfied the needs and aspirations of many Communists (McDermott & Agnew, 1996, pp. 15, 25, 60; Werblan, 2009, pp. 33–36). It is difficult, therefore, to consider Bolshevization and Stalinization as two poles of the dichotomy of a "totalitarian" structure unidirectionally affecting passive individuals. The organization was both an army and a community, a genuine benchmark that offered a sense of belonging, security, and acceptance. It was commonplace to hear Communists compare the movement to immediate family (Krzemień, 1982, p. 166; Ludwińska, 1988, pp. 24–25). Furthermore, similar attitudes were rather prevalent during the era (Kijek, 2017, pp. 328–344). Naturally, not all movement members exhibited similar attitudes, and the relationship between the model of the ideal Communist and its real-life implementations was fraught with tension and inconsistencies.

The dissolution of the KPP in "the fateful 1938" proved, therefore, a tremendous shock, with the blow being dealt from where it was least expected to come. Emissaries from the USSR reported that the Polish Communists still trusted in the Comintern, but no longer felt compelled to accept its decisions (Kowalski, 1975, p. 432; Nazarewicz, 1989, p. 153). Some members resorted to suicide.<sup>5</sup> The demise of the party signalled the destruction of something fundamental, immediate, something that made many lives meaningful; people were disoriented, felt betrayed, bereft of home and family. As the Comintern resolution was read out in meetings, the mood was funereal and tears were shed. Suddenly, not only the *sacrum* and the community were gone, but so was the framework that had heretofore guided the movement, planned its future, and served as one of its organizing principles.

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<sup>5</sup> AAN, ZRDRR, R-114, Edwarda Orłowska, Nov. 27, 1961, sh. 30.

## The experiences of members of the Party and government elites

When it comes to the specific strains of experiences from the period, Polish communists can be split into four separate groups. The first comprises people who were executed during the purges. The second – people sent to prison or a labour camp, while the third comprised people who lost their closest relatives or people whose significant others survived prison or the gulag. The fourth category consisted of people who never suffered directly from such experiences. The latter included high-ranking party figures, who knew the persecuted members of the movement and were well-acquainted with at least some of the inner political workings of the process, as well as rank-and-file members of party cells operating in Silesian mines, Volhynian villages, or workshops across Kielce. All of them, however, regardless of personal standing, were profoundly affected by the dissolution of the party.

The party and government elite obviously included people from the three latter groups, those who not only survived to 1948 and had not severed their ties to the Communist movement, but ultimately ascended to top echelons of state power after the war. Their biographies evince a spectrum of experiences broad enough to allow us to draw conclusions that would apply not only to that particular group, but the entire Polish communist movement.

## The personally persecuted

Direct political repressions affected 17 members of the party and government elite: 13 Communists and 4 Red Army officers. The majority of arrested, eight people,<sup>6</sup> had spent most or at least a substantial part of their lives in the USSR, where they naturally gravitated toward the international Communist community (Schlögel, 2012, pp. 438–447). Moreover, their political socialization involved years of experience acquired in a country where the Communists were in power. From the early 1930s on, they were exposed to even stricter norms of internal discipline and vigilance than their compatriots in Poland, and also witnessed the transmutation of revolutionaries into bureaucrats (Fitzpatrick, 2012, pp. 26–27; Lewin, 1985, pp. 236–240).

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<sup>6</sup> Celina Budzyńska, Teodora Feder, Władysław Kotlarski, Eugenia Kubowska, Franciszek Mazur, Jadwiga Siekierska, Julian Tokarski, Elżbieta Zajączkowska.

Although the next three people, Ludwika Jankowska, Józef Kowalczyk, and Stefan Staszewski, had frequently visited Moscow throughout the interwar period, they were, first and foremost, lifelong "funks", that is cadres of the underground Communist movement in Poland. It was these "professional revolutionaries", fully committed to political activity, deployed wherever needed, veterans of multiple prison sentences, that comprised the core of the party ("On the Bolshevization of the Party", 1955, pp. 122–139). Jankowska and Staszewski were typical "funks", while Kowalczyk also served for many years on the editorial boards of legal, above-ground KPP publications. The careers of Zygmunt Modzelewski and Władysław Wolski, on the other hand, followed a very different trajectory. Both started in the 1920s doing underground work, but their paths diverged soon thereafter; Wolski worked mostly in the office of Stefania Sempołowska, who looked after political prisoners in Polish custody on behalf of the Russian Red Cross, whereas Modzelewski spent a dozen years in France, where Communists operated freely and legally.

Three members of the party and government elite were arrested in the USSR already in 1935 which, paradoxically, may have saved their lives – back then Polish Communists usually were not executed. Before leaving for the Soviet Union in 1929 for medical treatment, Julian Tokarski served in a variety of capacities, including Secretary of the Central Committee of the Young Communist League of Poland (Związek Młodzieży Komunistycznej, ZMK). He graduated from the International Lenin School, the official "professional revolutionary" training centre in Moscow, but did not return to Poland after completing his studies and instead worked in the Soviet party apparatus. In 1935, he was arrested and charged with membership in the Polish Military Organization. He later wrote: "The baselessness of it all (?) was evinced, at the very least, by the fact that the investigation was not concluded, that there was no trial nor could there be one, (...) and the sentencing papers (...) failed to specify the transgression for which I was to be sent for five years to a labour camp".<sup>7</sup> Tokarski served out his sentence on the Solovetsky Islands. Kowalczyk, in turn, was arrested in November of 1935, later spending time in labour camps in the Komi Republic and near Vologda until his release in 1939. The Latin he had learned in the Lviv gymnasium helped him secure a work assignment with the camp's medical staff.<sup>8</sup> The third detainee, Władysław Wolski, joined the revolutionary movement back in the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and

<sup>7</sup> AAN, KC PZPR (Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party), Biuro Spraw Kadrowych (BSK, Cadres Department), 237/XXIII-888, Julian Tokarski, addendum to biographical note, May 5, 1944, shs. 14–15.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Rotstein, e-mail correspondence with the author, Jun. 2, 2018.

Lithuania era. Wolski was far from the disciplined enforcer type; rather, he aspired to serve the movement in a more subjective, command-oriented capacity. He staunchly refused to submit to a self-critique session, an essential Stalinist ritual (Fitzpatrick, 2012, pp. 27–28) and after arriving in Moscow he chose to find employment that suited his learned trade of electric technician instead of consorting with the local political circles, with which he was in open conflict (Wolski, 1980, pp. 27–28).<sup>9</sup> Arrested in November of 1935, he was released from labour camp in late 1940 or early 1941.

As the Great Purge approached its zenith, eight more Communists were arrested. The biography of Jadwiga Siekierska, who spent all of her life prior to 1945 in Russia, is a tale of a daughter of a Polish shoemaker (and socialist) and her frenetic enthrallment with the revolution. For the teenaged educator, “working at school, tumultuous events in the country, shrewd reading habits, and dreams of a more meaningful life and love came together into a potent mixture of overwhelming thoughts and turbulent emotions” (Siekierska, 1960, p. 22). After getting involved with Polish Communist circles, she remained “euphoric, proud to have played a part in the reshaping of the world and proud of the sheer scale of the historic mission” (Siekierska, 1960, p. 77). She spent her later years teaching at a variety of Comintern political schools, and was arrested in June of 1937, on the same day as her husband, Stanisław Bobiński, KPP activist and writer. Bobiński was killed, whereas Siekierska ended up spending eight years in camps in the Soviet Far North.

A fairly exhaustive account of her own and Siekierska's fates can be found in the memoirs of Celina Budzyńska (Budzyńska, 1997, pp. 291–452; Torańska, 2004, pp. 21–37). With Jewish background on one side, nobility on the other, and insurrectionist traditions on both sides, her family had been closely associated with the socialist and communist movement since the late nineteenth century. Budzyńska wrote that what had prompted her to join the Young Communist League was the entirety of her fifteen-year life (Budzyńska, 1997, p. 155). In 1926, she settled in the Soviet Union with a KPP activist, Stanisław Budzyński. The couple spent their final months together watching their friends slowly disappear. One of them, not long before his own disappearance, tried to convince both Budzyńska and himself that maybe the accusations actually had some merit, for example when someone had a father in the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). When she retorted to her interlocutor that his own brother was involved with the nationalist movement, she was met with an outburst of panicked rage (Budzyńska, 1997, p. 272). When

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<sup>9</sup> Antoni Wolski, e-mail correspondence with the author, Sep. 21, 2018.



the NKVD finally took her husband in June of 1937, the last thing he told her was a plea for her to believe in his innocence (Budzyńska, 1997, p. 284). The secret police came for Budzyńska herself a month later. Her memoirs include a detailed account of her eight-year-long odyssey, from a cell filled with disoriented wives of "enemies of the people" through a string of forced labour camps, illustrating the entire gamut of human behaviours, everyday life in the Gulag, the author's profound fear for her two daughters, and her struggle to preserve her dignity.

Ludwika Jankowska was a long-time functionary of the Communist Party of Western Belarus, an autonomous organization operating within the greater Communist movement in Poland. In 1937, Jankowska began hearing alarming news from Moscow, where her husband Stefan Martens-Skulski still resided. Thinking that the reports on party activity she compiled had to be important, she put every effort into hastening her departure for the USSR. After arriving, however, she found her husband's apartment sealed by the secret police and her husband and son missing. Comintern officials told her, Jankowska wrote, "the child would be returned to me if I were still alive". The next day she was arrested and soon thereafter sentenced to eight years hard labour in the Gulag. Many years later, she wondered why she, her husband, and many others dutifully left for Moscow when ordered despite the doubts they had about the recall: "What else were we to do? Run? To where? And from what? From our own judges?"<sup>10</sup> This particular narrative illustrates the terrible consequences of socialization within the Communist movement. The "professional revolutionaries", many of whom considered the party their only north star, were terrified by the vision of having nothing and no one to rely on. They feared being labelled a subversive, a renegade, and were driven by the belief that they had to give all of themselves over to the movement.

Zygmunt Modzelewski was also recalled to Moscow from France in 1937 and arrested almost immediately after his arrival. In the course of the savage investigation, he was beaten and kept in a frigid cell in solitary confinement. The treatment ruined his health and probably contributed to his early demise (Modzelewski, 2013, pp. 14–15). After his release in July of 1939, he was not afraid to visit the home of Stefan and Wiktor Leder, who lost twelve of the seventeen deeply committed Communists in their family. They remembered his tears well (Leder & Leder, 2005, pp. 17, 253–254).

Stefan Staszewski, erstwhile secretary of the Young Communist League of Poland, ran into trouble soon after arriving in Moscow in 1934. First, he was forced into presenting a self-critique

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<sup>10</sup> AAN, ZRDRR, R-114, Ludwika Jankowska, Dec. 2, 1961, pp. 12–20.

for co-authoring a letter criticizing the KPP leadership, a grave transgression against the political culture of the movement which strove to stamp out diverging opinions in the name of absolute unity – in practice, however, factions and coteries were never truly eliminated. Staszewski wrote: "I failed to grasp my basic obligations to the party, and to understand that as a Communist and professional revolutionary I owe the party everything, including my life, but have no right to demand anything in return from the party struggling to survive under such terrible conditions" (Juzepczuk, 2017, p. 46). Was it a declaration rooted in profound conviction and a will to overcome these "impurities" (Halfin, 2003) or simply a tactic and a testament to ability to "speak Bolshevik" (Kotkin, 1997, pp. 215–237) to protect his own interests? At first, Staszewski was only reprimanded, but he was eventually stripped of his post and removed from VKP(B) ranks less than a year later. Although arrested in November of 1937, he was tried only in 1939. By that time, the intensity of the purges had already abated, which may be why Staszewski was ultimately sentenced to "only" fifteen years of hard labour despite being charged with membership in the Polish Military Organization (Juzepczuk, 2017, pp. 43–64).

Eugenia Kubowska, a biology student, arrived in the USSR in the late 1920s and later worked as a teacher and in a sovkhos in the Caucasus region, administered by her husband Jakub Cyterszpiller-Kubowski, a former high-ranking member of the Young Communist League of Poland. Kubowska was arrested in August of 1937 and sentenced to ten years, which she served out in a labour camp near Karaganda until her release in 1945. With her husband executed, her eight-year-old son was made ward of the state, while her newborn daughter died on the way to the camp.<sup>11</sup> Władysław Kotlarski was active in Poland up until 1924, after which he was assigned to the Moscow headquarters of the Krestintern. The posting also allowed him to acquire a university degree, thus elevating the social standing of former baker and the son of a worker. After being arrested in 1937, he spent eight years in a string of forced labour camps, including Ukhta. Elżbieta Zajączkowska joined the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania at the age of sixteen. In 1927, she moved to the USSR where she was a worker and party cadre, a mirror of her employment and position in Poland. After being arrested, she spent eight years in the Kolyma region.

The last two Communists were arrested only in 1940, but can nevertheless be considered belated victims of the Great Purge. Teodora Feder was a true international Communist. While still a gymnasium student from a good family, she grew enamored with the writings of Rosa

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<sup>11</sup> Jerzy Kubowski, telephone conversation with the author, Jun. 5, 2018; notes available in the author's records.

Luxemburg (she was also very interested in Maria Skłodowska-Curie).<sup>12</sup> Having arrived in the USSR in 1923, she was sent on behalf of the Comintern to China and France, and later served with the Soviet Embassy during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Franciszek Mazur hailed from a Ukrainian-speaking peasant-worker family, and served with the Imperial Russian Navy during the October Revolution. He later remained in the Soviet Union, where he graduated from university and ultimately became the president of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic's Supreme Court. In 1930, he was appointed to a leadership position in the Communist Party of Western Ukraine, another autonomous organization within the Polish Communist movement, which at the time was recovering from a major split (Radziejowski, 1976, pp. 139–239; Zajcew, 2015). Incarcerated in Poland, he arrived in the Soviet Union only in 1939. It is possible that his dissent with the official party line on Trotskyism, voiced in 1937, was denounced to the secret police, as he was finally arrested by the NKVD and charged with spreading "anti-Soviet" propaganda.<sup>13</sup> He was subjected to very harsh interrogations (Torańska, 2004, pp. 71, 76).

The party and government elites also included a handful of high-ranking officers of the pre-World War II Red Army. The most prominent was naturally Konstanty Rokossowski, but the group also included Jerzy Bordziłowski, Władysław Korczyc, Stanisław Popławski, and Bronisław Pólturzycki. During the Great Purge, the only one of them to escape repression was Popławski, who was only temporarily drummed out of the military. Korczyc was allegedly beaten with rifle cleaning rods and after a lengthy interrogation he began passing names from Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Trilogy* to his tormentors. Rokossowski suffered from a couple of broken teeth and fractured ribs (Wieczorkiewicz, 2016). All four officers were released before March of 1940.

## Repressions against family members

Ten Stalin-era Communists lost their spouses in the purges – both husbands and wives<sup>14</sup> they were married to at the moment of their arrest, as well as former partners they split up with shortly before the purges. The couples shared memories of past experiences and often had children together. The aforementioned Budzyńska, Feder, Jankowska, Kubowska, and

<sup>12</sup> Paweł Mandalian, personal account recorded by the author, Jan. 12, 2016; transcript available in the author's records.

<sup>13</sup> AAN, BSK, 237/XXIII-717, information, Feb. 13, 1945, sh. 7; biographical note, author unknown, 1944, shs. 11–12.

<sup>14</sup> Communist activists were rarely formally married, but usage of terms such as "husband" and "wife" among such couplings was widespread and common.

Siekierska lost their husbands. Except Feder's husband, who was a party cadre of Armenian extraction, all were KPP members. The purges also took the life of party ideologue Jerzy Heryng, husband of Maria Pieczyńska, a veteran member of the Polish socialist and communist movements, and the partners of three "professional revolutionaries", Romana Granas, Helena Kamińska, and Maria Kamińska.<sup>15</sup> In the latter three instances, however, I have been unable to ascertain whether they still were in these relationships at the moment of arrest; Helena Kamińska eventually located her son in a children's home only after 1939 (Kalicka, 1989, p. 179). Ostap Dłuski, a member of the highest echelons of the party, lost his first wife. But we can clearly see that mostly women were suffering the losses. Alongside the rather disparaging term "aunties of the revolution", applied mostly after World War II to older women who were dogmatically Communist, we could suggest a contrastive, much more tragic figure, that of the "widow of the revolution" (Bertram, 2017).

Seven people lost siblings. Out of the detainees, Siekierska and Staszewski lost a sister and brother, respectively, the former uninvolved with politics, while the latter introduced his brother into the Communist movement. The brothers of Józef Kowalski, Stanisław Radkiewicz, and Stanisław Tkaczow,<sup>16</sup> and the sister of Zygmunt Kratka were also executed. The brother of Jan Trusz suffered the same fate. The purges also took the life of Romana Granas' uncle, Aleksander Zawadzki's brother-in-law, and Władysław Matwin's uncle. With the exception of Trusz, a local activist from a small village near Chełm who combined politics with everyday farm work, and Matwin, a university student, most of the cadres mentioned above were veteran "professional revolutionaries", whose involvement with the Communist movement went back to the 1920s.

The sisters of Jankowska and Radkiewicz as well as Siekierska's brother managed to survive their prison terms in hard labour camps. The sister of Gertruda Pawlak-Finderowa, the brother of Maria Rutkiewicz, Wolski's mother-in-law,<sup>17</sup> and the first wives of Kowalczyk and Włodzimierz Zawadzki, the latter a colleague of Radkiewicz in the last party leadership before its dissolution, also managed to survive the purges. Zygmunt Trawiński, the first and later third husband of Celina Budzyńska, spent a total of twenty-one years in a variety of Soviet prison camps.

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<sup>15</sup> Bolesław Łukaszewicz, Antoni Lipski (the last head of the National Secretariat of the KPP), and Henryk Kossowski. For more on the fascinating biography of Maria Kamińska, see Bertram, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Ferdynand Tkaczow was a member of the KPP and its legal, above-ground structures, and later a member of parliament during the Second Polish Republic.

<sup>17</sup> Helena Bobińska, the first wife of Stanisław Bobiński.

## The witnesses of the decimation, the victims of the dissolution

This is how Roman Nowak, a miner by trade and later long-term KPP functionary, remembered the disorientation of Communists operating in Prague during the purges: "All of us looked at each other dirty, and suspicions ran high". They scratched their heads over the "charges" against party leadership and combed through their biographies, looking for "jobs, acquaintances, associates, or a general atmosphere" that would justify them. According to him, cadres travelling to Moscow were often fully aware they would be arrested on arrival, but they nevertheless wrote letters – he wrote one, too – asking to be recalled. Years later, he simply argued that they were all "suckers".<sup>18</sup> The narrative clearly demonstrates the extent to which the thinking of KPP functionaries was shaped by a conspiratorial vision of the world as well as the knowledge that the movement was penetrated by real police operatives; it also offers a closer look at the strategies they employed to rationalize their absurd reality. On the other hand, the story of Franciszek Fiedler, chief theorist of the KPP who spent most of his time in the West, clearly shows that not all of the party members were "suckers". Allegedly, when he was recalled from Paris, he feigned illness. Tadeusz Daniszewski, on the other hand, brought up the atmosphere in the country. When he was set to be released from prison despite rather serious charges, he began worrying that his irreproachable fifteen-year-long career in the underground movement and the Comintern offices would not be enough: "I'll keep writing new résumés, fill out surveys, but the spectre of my mysterious release will continue to cast a shadow over my revolutionary dignity and honesty". He was ultimately relieved when he was sent to the internment camp at Bereza Kartuska.<sup>19</sup>

Edwarda Orłowska, member of the secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Western Belarus, would not believe the news of the annihilation of the party leadership and attempted to continue to operate in order to demonstrate that the party carries on.<sup>20</sup> Jan Izydorczyk, another Central Committee member, allegedly refused to believe the charges levelled against the leadership and worried that a cloud of suspicion was also coalescing around him. It is said that this was the primary reason for his refusal to head for the Soviet Union in September of 1939 (Gomułka, 1994, pp. 447–448).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> All quotes from: AAN, Personnel file of Roman Nowak, 479/9, interview with Roman Nowak, Aug. 28, 1961, shs. 22, 24; addendum to interview, Oct. 9, 1963, shs. 9–10; Roman Nowak, personal account, Nov. 2, 1961, sh. 52.

<sup>19</sup> AAN, Personnel file of Tadeusz Daniszewski, 466/3, Tadeusz Daniszewski, *Między Mokotowem a Centralniakiem* [Between Mokotów and the Central Prison], sh. 45.

<sup>20</sup> AAN, ZRDRR, R-114, Edwarda Orłowska, Nov. 27, 1961, shs. 27–31.

<sup>21</sup> As a result, he spent over five years in German camps. Izydorczyk himself only said that he argued the pointlessness of resisting the Comintern resolution dissolving the party to his comrades. AAN, ZRDRR, R-191, Jan Izydorczyk, Oct. 22, 1965, sh. 6.

Marian Naszkowski, a young Polish teacher from Lviv, who became a "funk" in the oil-rich regions, said that back then he and others had trusted Stalin and the Soviet Union uncritically (Naszkowski, 1965, p. 110). The much more experienced Leon Kasman, a Communist since 1920 and later a teacher at the International Lenin School, believed that they had to wait out the situation (Torańska, 2004, p. 437). Wilhelm Billig survived his term with the help of his prison commune, which organized the the entire life of political prisoners. When he was released, he thought: "Sitting in prison was good. The ties that bound the collective, and the fact that the party was there and operated on the inside".<sup>22</sup> Leon Bielski, incarcerated in 1938, managed to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution with his fellow inmates, but he also saw a handful of Communists who could not handle the pressure and nervous atmosphere or tried to settle personal scores by accusing others of Trotskyism.<sup>23</sup> In his memoirs, Trusz only wrote about a "painful blow" and the hollow silence that befell his cell when the Comintern resolution was read out (Trusz, 1981, p. 92). Roman Zambrowski, out of prison at the time, pointed out the very personal nature of liquidating the KPP: as an "illegal" working under cover for the past ten years, he had neither a trade nor a home, and thus found himself in limbo (Zambrowski, 1965, pp. 401–402). Another "funk", Ferdynand Chaber, exhibited great discipline and decided to hide the printing unit from Leon Lipski, a member of the last party executive, who refused to acknowledge the Comintern's decision.<sup>24</sup>

The tension between holding onto discipline and succumbing to confusion also affected people outside the "professional revolutionary" circles. Jakub Berman, assistant to Professor Ludwik Krzywicki, scolded his wife when she expressed doubts about Moscow trials, claiming that her views were "like that of a naive mangle worker", that is devoid of the intransigence and consistency that characterized the ideal revolutionary (Tychowa, 2016, p. 22). Years after the purges, Pelagia Lewińska, a Cracow scouting activist and and close associate (but not a member) of the KPP, wrote: "Blinded by the unidirectional and ultimately unquestioned flow of information from Moscow, we threw our moral and political support fully behind the leadership of the International and the KPSS.<sup>25</sup> Breaking ranks would mean nothing less than desertion (...)"<sup>26</sup> Despair also swept

<sup>22</sup> AAN, ZRDRR, R-36, Wilhelm Billig, Nov. 26, 1956, sh. 10.

<sup>23</sup> AAN, ZRDRR, R-191, Leon Bielski, Oct. 22, 1965, shs. 49–53.

<sup>24</sup> AAN, Zbiór Akt Osobowych Działaczy Ruchu Robotniczego (ZAODRR, Collection of Personnel Files of Members of the Workers' Movement), 11294, Subfolder 1, Ferdynand Chaber, biographical note, Oct. 1967, sh. 2.

<sup>25</sup> The passage contains an anachronism – the VKP(B) changed its name to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (KPSS) only in 1952.

<sup>26</sup> Pelagia Lewińska, *Komuniści pod ostrzałem z dwóch różnych pozycji* [Communists Under Fire from Two Separate Positions], unpublished memoirs, copy available in the author's records, p. 83.

through the ranks of the Vilnius-based "Front" Academic Left Association, an organization of young intellectuals, unique in its embrace of its members' convoluted paths to Communist activism; the group enjoyed considerable public sympathy and was seen, rightly so, as the intellectual elite of Vilnius University. Kazimierz Petruszewicz, a biology doctor and "Front" member, wrote: "An incomprehensible, inexplicable blow. Something that we all lived for is crumbling into dust. (...) We're all alone. (...) We have comrades from past entities, but without the authority of the Party behind them, they're just that – comrades" (Petruszewicz, 1969, p. 509).

Comintern leadership outright declared that any effort to rebuild the party from the bottom up would be considered a provocation (Czubiński, 1985, p. 267). Thus, the Communists found themselves torn between the injunction and their own will to fight. Rural activists, such as Jan Klecha or Franciszek Zajęc, tried to exert ideological influence over farmer cooperatives and distribute progressive press to the peasants.<sup>27</sup> Irena Piwowarska, a hosier by trade, met up with Communists from her factory to "discuss political issues that simply continued to build up".<sup>28</sup> A handful of Warsaw-based engineers – Tadeusz Gede, Mieczysław Popiel, Bolesław Rumiński, and Marian Spsychalski – established an informal group that met up to discuss ideas and politics and raise money for political prisoners; the group even discussed printing its own magazine.<sup>29</sup>

## Out of prison and in power

Thirty-one people, around 7% of the entire party and government elite, as well 13% of the Communists, fellow travellers, and Red Army officers were either subject to direct Stalinist repressions,<sup>30</sup> or suffered the killing or imprisonment of their significant others. The scope of the experience, however, was much broader. The slaughter of party leadership and dissolution of the party itself engendered in the Communists a range of peculiar, often paradoxical dispositions.

The members of the party and government elite subject to repressions in the Soviet Union were usually released from labour or deportation camps in 1944–1945 and almost immediately received appointments to high political offices: Mazur was named head of the Organizational Department of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party (Polska

<sup>27</sup> AAN, BSK, 237/XXIII-881, Jan Klecha, biographical note, n.d., sh. 10; AAN, BSK, 237/XXIII-643, Franciszek Zajęc, biographical note, Sep. 12, 1953, sh. 12.

<sup>28</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, Centralna Kartoteka (CK, Central Records), CKXX/4963, Irena Piwowarska, biographical note, n.d., sh. 29.

<sup>29</sup> AAN, CK, CKXX/9752, Tadeusz Gede, biographical note, 1949, shs. 13–14.

<sup>30</sup> A handful of people were sent to labour camps, prisons, or into exile between 1940 and 1941.

Partia Robotnicza, PPR), Kowalczyk was named editor-in-chief of a string of PPR-affiliated magazines, while Budzyńska and Siekierska were assigned to the Central Party School staff. Mazur and Rokossowski were appointed to the Politburo of the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR) after its founding in 1948. At that point, already nine victims of direct repressions were either sitting on the Central Committee or were deputies of CC members (only Budzyńska was appointed to the Committee after Stalin's death). Five people (Kowalczyk, Kubowska, Mazur, Staszewski, Tokarski) headed departments or comparable sections of the CC, while three (Feder, Siekierska, Zajączkowska) served as deputy heads. Four of them served at minister level (Modzelewski, Rokossowski, Tokarski, and Wolski) and four served as deputy ministers (Bordziłowski, Korczyk, Kotlarski, Staszewski). Jankowska sat on the Presidium of the Central Party Control Committee, while Półturzycki was named deputy chairman of the State Committee for Economic Planning. People who lost their relatives or family members in the purges also occupied high-level positions: Zawadzki sat on the Politburo, served as Deputy Prime Minister and President of the Council of State, while Radkiewicz sat on the Politburo and served as Minister of Public Security. On lower echelons, there were Helena Kamińska, deputy head of the Party History Department, and Tkaczow serving as Deputy Minister of Agriculture. In this sense, careers of the members of post-war party and ruling elites mirrored those of the elites that emerged in the Soviet Union in late 1930s – owing their careers to Stalin who elevated them to positions previously occupied by "Old Bolsheviks" (Fitzpatrick, 1979; Nagle, 1975, pp. 9–11; Werblan, 2009, pp. 15–19; 52; Wintrobe, 2000, p. 227).

All these people, however, functioned under somewhat schizophrenic conditions. The new order they helped establish was patterned to a considerable extent on a system that was responsible for their own suffering. Kubowska, a Gulag survivor, headed the secretariat of the Central Committee under Bierut, Ochab, and Gomułka, earning the trust of all three (Werblan, 2009, p. 123). When her brother was still in a labour camp, Rutkiewicz served as a clerk taking down minutes of Politburo sessions. Budzyńska remembered one particularly surreal session, at which Bierut thoughtfully reminisced about fallen KPP comrades while they were still officially labelled provocateurs (Torańska, 2004, pp. 47–48). As a rule, however, Communists could not openly grieve the killings or express undesirable opinion. When filling out personal questionnaires, they were often advised against revealing their detention or trials in the Soviet Union in internal documents. Kowalczyk described his internment as employment "in a variety of economic institutions", while Feder termed



it a "break between jobs". Kotlarski's questionnaires either mention "a variety of odd jobs" or simply fail to bring up the existence of a gap in his résumé. Jankowska and Kubowska, on the other hand, openly wrote of their detention. Zajączkowska embraced something of a compromise, and simply said that from 1937 to 1945 she was employed in the Soviet city of Magadan, a reference that everyone "in the know" immediately understood. Feder and Kowalczyk openly admitted to having been "detained and imprisoned" and "coercively held" in the Soviet Union only in the mid-1960s.<sup>31</sup> Modzelewski told his son about his past only a couple of months before his own death in 1954 (Modzelewski & Werblan, 2017, p. 63). Although the KPP was officially rehabilitated at the 20th Party congress of the KPSS in 1956, KPP members still had significant gaps in their résumés, as evinced by the 1959 funeral of Kubowska, at which a Central Committee representative was supposed to read off an account of her life – the part describing her detainment in a labour camp was torn off the page, while the sentence opening the following section, "None of that broke the spirit of our dear comrade Genia", was crossed out.<sup>32</sup>

## Paradoxes of loyalty

For obvious reasons, this article will not be exploring the subset of people whose experience of the 1937–1938 period led them to drift away from or reject Communism. Moreover, we should bear in mind that the overwhelming majority of Communists and members of the post-war ruling elites did not leave comprehensive records that would offer insight into the views and opinions they held in that particular period. Regardless, we may still attempt to retrace the mechanisms that drove the members of the party and government elite and hundreds of their comrades to remain actively involved with the Communist movement despite their profoundly traumatic experiences, as well as the different life strategies they adopted after the war.

In 1938, disoriented Communists found themselves in an anomic situation, facing a breakdown stemming from an acute disjunction between cultural norms and goals and

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<sup>31</sup> AAN, CK, CKXX/6256, Teodora Feder, personal questionnaire, Dec. 12, 1948, sh. 11; personal questionnaire, Nov. 25, 1965, sh. 26; AAN, BSK, 237/XXIII-876, Ludwika Jankowska, personal questionnaire, May 5, 1945, sh. 5; AAN, BSK, XXIII-409, Władysław Kotlarski, personal questionnaire, Jan. 3, 1946, sh. 8; personal questionnaire, Mar. 23, 1949, sh. 12; AAN, CK, CKXX/11476, Józef Kowalczyk, biographical note, Jan. 30, 1946, sh. 8; personal questionnaire, Jan. 7(?), 1964, sh. 23; AAN, BSK, 237/XXIII-146, Eugenia Kubowska, biographical note, n.d., sh. 13; AAN, BSK, 237/XXIII-436, Elżbieta Zajączkowska, personal questionnaire, Sep. 14, 1945, sh. 13; personal questionnaire (1948/1949), sh. 17.

<sup>32</sup> AAN, BSK, 237/XXIII-146, shs. 10–12.

the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with those norms (Merton, 2002, p. 216). In this context, a particular paradox has been pointed out by William J. Chase. Emphasizing the extent of the fear and uncertainty that swept through the Communist world in the wake of the purges, Chase argued that Stalin, already seemingly super-human, could be perceived as both a threat and, paradoxically, the only bulwark capable of keeping the chaos at bay. Later, that larger-than-life quality – in tandem with the belief in the righteousness of the Soviet way – was further reinforced by Stalin's triumph in World War II (Chase, 2002, pp. 32, 404–405). Matwin's notes clearly evince the duality – although he lost an uncle to the purges and in 1942 tried to join the Polish non-communist army created in the USSR, the death of Stalin hit him harder than the death of his own father.<sup>33</sup>

For many members of the movement, leaving was impossible for psychological reasons – their socialization revolved around the belief that the world was fundamentally hostile toward them. Some even severed their ties from their previous support points: families, education, trade. The Communist idea organized their world, while the Party offered them the impression of having historical agency, in some cases even considerably elevating their social status (and that even before the war, because underground “professional revolutionaries” were essentially intellectual workers). For some, this was something of a biographical trap, because the Communist movement was the only community they knew, which provided them with a consistent ideological system and a trade, while the Soviet Union, regardless of its sins, was the only bastion that could withstand the onslaught of fascism and reactionary forces in a world so thoroughly polarized (Holzer, 2001). The party was, as I already mentioned above, something more than just an organization they were members of. In 1945, Maria Kamińska wrote down the following in her biographical note: “I have given my entire life to the party and I owe all of myself to the party”.<sup>34</sup>

After 1944–1945, the opportunity to reshape and rebuild Poland made it even harder to consider leaving the Communist movement for good. In Feder's eyes, Poland was a paradise compared to the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> Budzyńska believed that “the idea itself was just, but the Soviets perverted it. (...) I was sure it would be different here at home”. On top of that, she wrote: “Out of the very depths of despair, where I had to struggle to preserve what I had left of my dignity every single day, I had suddenly surfaced (...). A miracle happened... I became

<sup>33</sup> AAN, Personnel file of Władysław Matwin, 16, *Władek – „Autobiografia”* [Władek – An Autobiography], Sep. 1994, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, CKXX/4776, Maria Eiger, biographical note, Mar. 15, 1945, sh. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Paweł Mandalian, personal account recorded by the author, Jan. 12, 2016; transcript available in the author's records.

a legitimate human being again, reborn: my daughters were no longer children of an 'enemy of the people', I was surrounded with sincere, good people, I had a demanding but very interesting job. And all of that I owed to the party" (Budzyńska, 1997, pp. 458–459). Siekierska said that the fact that the Warsaw of 1945 resembled to her the Moscow of the 1920s, where "people were raw-boned, but a strange fire burned in their eyes", actually helped her deal with her own personal tragedies. Teaching new cadres and "yearning for activism", she felt she finally regained a degree of "usefulness to society and the party".<sup>36</sup>

The post-war attitudes of many members of the party and ruling elites elude unequivocal interpretation. The courageous and deeply principled revolutionary Maria Kamińska distanced herself in 1945 from her murdered friend Tadeusz Żarski because "he tried, as it turned out years later, to establish a counter-party group in service of the Sanation [Polish government]".<sup>37</sup> Did she truly believe that or did she just assume that the Party spoke the truth? Or was she coerced to do it? A couple of years later, when the Party censured another enemy – Gomułka – she wrote a denunciation letter against him (Spalek, 2014, pp. 699–702). Kubowska, a member of the Party leader's inner circle, disapproved of the decision of her friend, who joined the ranks of the Ministry of Public Security in the late 1940s. Although not outwardly bitter at the time, in the last weeks before her death she spoke with the said friend about the most difficult experiences in her life (Zatorska, 1985, pp. 216–217, 304, 374). As is the case with many other Communists, we will probably never get to learn how she viewed her own choices. What we know, however, is that she never talked about her detainment in the camps, not even with her son, and that – unlike Matwin – she was not much disturbed by Stalin's death.<sup>38</sup>

Jankowska, who had heavily suffered under Stalinism, was rather hostile towards the victims of another pursuit of an "internal enemy" as they were released from prisons after Stalin's death. It is possible she felt no kinship with them, or that she was simply afraid to show it. After Khrushchev condemned the "cult of personality" and rehabilitated the KPP, her attitude underwent a dramatic shift (Sowińska, 2017, pp. 297, 306, 310–311). Did she adapt to the new course of the Party – or did the fear finally disappear? Władysław Wolski's biography was similarly rife with contradictions. After his release from the camp and the Sikorski–Mayski Agreement (1941), he tried to get in touch with representatives of the Polish government-in-exile present in the Soviet Union, probably under orders from

<sup>36</sup> AAN, ZAODRR, 10415, Subfolder 3., Jadwiga Siekierska, *Niezapomniane lata, niezapomniana szkoła* [Unforgettable Years, Unforgettable School Education], shs. 30, 35.

<sup>37</sup> AAN, CK, CKXX/4776, Maria Eiger (Kamińska), biographical note, Mar. 15, 1945, sh. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Jerzy Kubowski, telephone conversation with the author, Jun. 5, 2018; notes available in the author's records.

the NKVD (Przewłocki, 2005).<sup>39</sup> In the 1940s, he served in high-level but not essential government positions, and in 1950, he decided to openly oppose the PZPR leadership, a move which resulted in his dismissal from the Central Committee and removal from the Party. Before making his move, he sought the backing of "Soviet comrades", but ultimately failed (Szumiło, 2014, pp. 279–284). Even during the peak of Stalinism, he continued to speak out about the labour camps (Kott, 1995, pp. 191–192).<sup>40</sup> It seems that his detention did nothing to temper his ambitions and his proclivity for political gamesmanship.

## On different sides

According to poet Aleksander Wat, old KPP cadres kept fond memories of their murdered leaders and continued to "speak of them tenderly" (Wat, 1990, pp. 130, 233). They hated the Soviet Union for the purges and the shame of having their party dissolved, but most of these emotions were allowed to surface only after 1956. Czesław Miłosz wrote that one of the reasons Poland maintained "a sort of compassion for the powerless" throughout the darkest years of Stalinism was the "burning hatred that the old Communists had for their persecutors" (Miłosz, 1990, p. 315). The bitter memory of the 1937–1938 period may also be one of the reasons why the struggle to purge the "right-wing nationalist deviation" in the 1950s was not as violent as it could have been (Modzelewski & Werblan, 2017, p. 75). In the memoirs of Romana Granas, published in 1958, the warm and affectionate stories of her old comrades are suddenly interrupted by the words: "And then came 1937" (Granas, 1958, p. 113). In 1956, Granas and Budzyńska were both active proponents of democratization, a disposition that a dozen years later led them to become opposition sympathizers. Although Staszewski ultimately trod a similar path, before Stalin's death and the resulting thaw, he was widely known as a rather ardent enforcer of the radical policies of the PZPR leadership (Budzyńska, 1997, pp. 474–489; Torańska, 2004, pp. 193–211).<sup>41</sup> Naturally, these particular attitudes were not driven exclusively by the memories of the Great Purge – contributing factors included the failed hopes of October of 1956 or the shock of March of 1968.

<sup>39</sup> Konrad Banaś, *Władysław Wolski. Meandry kariery komunistycznego działacza 1944–1950* [Władysław Wolski: The Meandering Career of a Communist Cadre, 1944–1950], master's thesis, University of Łódź; copy available in the author's records (Banaś, 2016, pp. 27–29).

<sup>40</sup> During one commemorative assembly at the Party History Department, he remarked that his stay in a Soviet prison camp granted him a more objective, unbiased view of the realities of the 1930s. AAN, R-143, Władysław Wolski, Mar. 16, 1964, sh. 120.

<sup>41</sup> Personal account of Łukasz Bobiński recorded by the author, Apr. 15, 2016, recording available in the author's records; Paweł Mandalian, personal account recorded by the author, Jan. 12, 2016; transcript available in the author's records.

Not all the victims followed a similar template, however. The interpretations offered by Robert Conquest, standing in rather stark contrast to Wat or Miłosz, emphasize the double standard of Communist morality: reluctance to purge insiders and indifference toward the suffering of outsiders – the non-Communists (Conquest, 1997, pp. 38–40). The ranks of the PPR and the PZPR also included people who found themselves power-drunk or who internalized the norms and values of Stalinism without reservation, not despite its authoritarianism, repressiveness, and its radical approach to all things “enemy”, but precisely because of them. Compiled in 1944, the personal file of Tokarski included a note that because of the repressions he suffered, he still “has not overcome his distrust towards the Russian officers and members of the VKP(B). In conversations with the political officers of the Brigade, he revealed his apprehension over the potential VKP(B) hegemony in the political organization of the Polish Army”.<sup>42</sup> Already in 1956, however, he was, like Trusz, associated with the anti-reformist Natolin faction in the Party, which sought ever closer links with the Soviet Union (Szumiło, 2014, pp. 329, 380; Żukowski, 2012).<sup>43</sup> In his memoirs, published in the 1970s, his incarceration was summed up in a brief note appended with a declaration spelling out his unwillingness to relive it (Tokarski, 1973, pp. 222–223). Was it just a necessary step that was supposed to lessen the censor’s incursions or the result of deeply held beliefs?<sup>44</sup> Although Rokossowski and Mazur were tortured during the purges, both were still considered the main champions of Soviet interests in the 1950s, although the latter allegedly loathed Stalin (Torańska, 2004, p. 123). The two attitudes were not exactly mutually exclusive. Much more unambiguous is the account offered by Stanisław Brodziński, a tailor’s apprentice and Communist League of Poland’s Youth<sup>45</sup> activist in the 1930s, unaffected personally by the purges and later affiliated with the Natolin faction in the 1950s; in the twilight years of the Polish People’s Republic, Brodziński elaborated on Stalinist vigilance, aimed especially at fellow Communists: “To give an example, Stalin said that building DneproGES [Dnieper Hydroelectric Power Station], took the work of thousands of men, but that work could easily be undone by one man. (...) That’s how I understood Stalin back then and that

<sup>42</sup> AAN, BSK, 237/XXIII-888, Major Sokołowski, personal profile, Jun. 26, 1944, sh. 15.

<sup>43</sup> In 1956, the Natolin faction posited implementing a limited range of political reforms, mostly centred around personnel changeovers and political appointments; this approach was opposed by the Puławy faction, whose members called for a more comprehensive liberalization of the system.

<sup>44</sup> As an aside, we may note here that after the war he got married to Jankowska. The influence of shared memories on such personal accounts is, unfortunately, difficult to assess.

<sup>45</sup> The name assumed by the Young Communist League of Poland in 1930.

is how I understand him today".<sup>46</sup> The account seems to attest to the fact that the scope of the Soviet leader's policies, including a sweeping and brutal remoulding of society itself, sat quite well with the needs of certain individuals.<sup>47</sup> Somewhere between the two extremes, and far from any faction, stood Józef Kowalczyk, who remained loyal to the Party until his dying day and had no regrets whatsoever about the events from his past.<sup>48</sup> The same applied to Ferdynand Chaber, the paragon of discipline back in 1938, who continued to enforce the policies handed down by the current Party leadership until the very end of his political career (Rakowski, 1999, p. 77).

## Generational experience

Regardless of the motivations and embraced strategies, all of the figures described above were probably long accompanied by pervasive fear: for and of themselves (Chase, 2002, pp. 228, 239). And, naturally, fear of Stalin, the NKVD, the Soviet Union, a paranoia that still somehow blended with profound fascination and love. High-ranking Communists may have believed they were still prime targets for political repression and that another blow may come at any moment – although it is possible that they tried to steer away from such thoughts, convinced of their own innocence. Survival was not guaranteed, not even for the most faithful; if there was any approach that improved one's chance for survival, it was strict discipline and conformist embrace of Stalinist norms (Chase, 2002, p. 276). For Polish Communists, the 1937–1938 period was a lesson in distrust and eagerness for mutual denunciation (Samuś, 1995, p. 186).

The individual experience of the imprisoned wife of an executed member of the Central Committee of the KPP had to be different from the experience of a local party cell secretary operating in the rural areas near Rzeszów. The suffering of 1937–1938 failed, however, to eclipse the members' earlier experiences and their socialization within the Communist movement – they were a crucial element that drove the cohesion of the movement as a whole. Both memoirs and historiography usually put the greatest emphasis on 1937, the year when the purges reached their peak in terms of the number of arrests and executions, but for many Polish activists, the "fateful year of 1938", when their Party was taken away from them, proved to be an equally profound

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<sup>46</sup> AAN, ZAODRR, 8612, Stanisław Brodziński, personal account, Feb. 10, 1987, sh. 74.

<sup>47</sup> Brodziński was surprisingly consistent in his approach: in the 1960s, he joined the new Communist Party of Poland, which gathered dogmatic Communists who considered Gomułka and his team to be traitors and revisionists. For his actions, Brodziński was sentenced to prison.

<sup>48</sup> Maria Rotstein, e-mail correspondence with the author.

shock and a source of confusion for years to come. Using categories developed by Jan Garewicz (Garewicz, 1985, pp. 138–153), I would label it a generational experience, affecting a specific group as a whole and serving as its reference point for subsequent experiences and a foundation of its collective memory. Despite its collective character, it drew strongly on individual experience, such as suffering, harm, and confronting evil. The difference between Garewicz's original concept and our application thereof is that the experience of Polish Communists did not presume allying oneself with one specific side of the moral dichotomy – instead of clarity, it offered confusion and ambivalence – and as such rarely involved any cathartic elements. The essential products of the experience included engendering or entrenching of a specific docility with regard to Soviet Bolsheviks: entailing, on the one hand, a sincere internalization of Stalinist ideology and norms of behaviours, and a profound fear, coupled with the ability to adapt to shifting circumstances and concealment of opinions and emotions, on the other.

*Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz*

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## ***Uciec? Dokąd? I przed czym?***

### **Doświadczenie represji stalinowskich w biografach członków polskiej elity partyjno-rządowej lat 1949–1956**

Tematem artykułu jest szczególny element doświadczenia politycznego polskich komunistów, jakim był stalinowski terror wobec ich grupy przywódczej w drugiej połowie lat 30. oraz rozwiązanie Komunistycznej Partii Polski uchwałą Prezydium Komitetu Wykonawczego Kominternu z 16 sierpnia 1938 r. Bazą źródłową tekstu są biografie 214 członków międzywojennego polskiego ruchu komunistycznego, 22 jego sympatyków oraz 5 oficerów Armii Czerwonej, którzy w latach 1949–1956 należeli do polskiej elity partyjno-rządowej (EPR). Autor przedstawia losy 17 osób, które w okresie czystek stalinowskich były aresztowane i osadzone w więzieniach lub łagrach, a także odnotowuje wszystkie przypadki utraty przez członków EPR ich znaczących innych: partnerów i krewnych. Pokazuje, w jaki sposób komuniści w Polsce odbierali ówczesną atmosferę i w jaki sposób reagowali na rozwiązanie partii. Ostatnia część artykułu poświęcona jest postawom represjonowanych członków EPR w okresie powojennym, kiedy uczestniczyli oni w budowie nowego porządku polityczno-społecznego, oraz ich pamięci zbiorowej związanej z losem KPP. Wychodząc poza opis historyczny, tekst stanowi próbę interpretacji przeżyć członków analizowanej grupy z drugiej połowy lat 30. w kategorii doświadczenia pokoleniowego oraz kluczowego elementu socjalizacji politycznej, kształtującego dyspozycję do specyficznej i niejednoznacznej pojętności

względem patronów radzieckich: zinternalizowanej wiary w system, współwystępującej z umiejętnościami przystosowania się.

**Słowa kluczowe:**

komunizm; ZSRR; Komunistyczna Partia Polski; czystka; doświadczenie; terror; socjalizacja; elita

## **"To run? Where? And from what?": The experience of Stalinist repressions in the biographies of members of the Polish party-government elite, 1949–1956**

This article is devoted to a specific political experience of Polish communists – Stalinist terror against their leadership in the second half of the 1930s and the dissolution of the Communist Party of Poland (KPP) following the resolution of the Presidium of the Comintern's Executive Committee (16 August 1938). The study is based on the analysis of the biographies of 214 members of the Polish communist movement in the interwar period, 22 fellow travellers and five Red Army officers, all of whom were members of the Polish party-government elite in the years 1949–1956. The article presents the stories of seventeen people who were arrested and imprisoned during the Stalinist purges, as well as the cases of those who lost their significant others: spouses and relatives. The author shows how the communists in Poland responded to the atmosphere of that time and how they reacted to the dissolution of the party. The last section of the article is devoted to the attitudes of members of the Polish party-government elite after the Second World War, when they actively participated in the establishment of the new socio-political order, and their collective memory related to the KPP's fate. Going beyond the historical description, this paper makes an attempt to interpret the phenomenon under consideration as a generational experience and the key element of political socialisation which shaped their disposition to specific and ambiguous submissiveness to their Soviet patrons: an internalised faith in the system combined with an ability to accommodate.

**Keywords:**

communism; USSR; Communist Party of Poland; purge; experience; terror; socialisation; elite

**Note:**

This is the translation of the original article entitled "*Uciec? Dokąd? I przed czym? Doświadczenie represji stalinowskich w biografach członków polskiej elity partyjno-rządowej lat 1949–1956*", which was published in *Adeptus*, issue 12, 2018.

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