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## **The Changing Dynamics of Oppression: Polish Repression Apparatus in the Years 1944–1956**

**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the Polish repression apparatus from 1944 to 1956, tracing its development within the framework of Soviet-controlled governance. Using a political science perspective, it investigates the mechanisms of state terror, ideological control, and institutional repression that defined the Polish People's Republic (PRL) during its formative years. Drawing on historiographical sources, the analysis is structured around the classical definitions of totalitarianism, particularly the models proposed by Carl J. Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Hannah Arendt. The findings demonstrate that postwar Poland adopted Soviet-style state structures, including mass surveillance, systemic purges, and ideological coercion, facilitated by the Ministry of Public Security (MBP). The study also explores the transition from Stalinist repression to the relative political thaw of 1956, highlighting the role of the Poznań protests and the rise of Władysław Gomułka. Despite the relaxation of some oppressive measures, the study concludes that while Poland evolved from a strictly totalitarian model to a more authoritarian regime, elements of systemic repression persisted. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on totalitarian governance, political transformation, and the role of security institutions in shaping postwar Eastern Europe.

**KEYWORDS:** light thaw, repression, totalitarianism, Polish People's Republic, soviet bloc

## Introduction

The proclamation of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*, PKWN) on July 22, 1944, via Radio Moscow—two days after its approval by Stalin—and the publication of the PKWN Manifesto effectively initiated a new government in Poland.<sup>1</sup> Although the Soviet authorities had previously recognized and collaborated with the so-called London government, particularly in the formation of the Anders Army, post-World War II Poland was to be placed under Soviet control. This task was entrusted to so-called "parachutists", Poles residing primarily in Moscow or other parts of the USSR, who were dispatched to Poland to establish a new administration. Orders and directives from the Kremlin played a decisive role in shaping the new system in the Polish People's Republic (PRL), which was modeled after the Soviet police state. The PKWN Manifesto declared that the only legitimate and democratically chosen authority was the National Council (*Krajowa Rada Narodowa*), which, until the election of a legislative parliament, functioned as the de facto governing body and the sole legal source of power in Poland. The manifesto referenced the fundamental principles of the March Constitution of 1921, treating it as the last legally binding constitutional act before 1944. Simultaneously, it delegitimized the London government and its delegation in Poland, accusing them of obstructing the fight against hitlerism<sup>2</sup>. The document served as a propaganda tool, calling for the struggle against the occupiers under the banner of the Polish People's Government, which was forming a new political system in collaboration with Moscow.

The birth of a new society, the subordination of individuals to the state, and the maintenance of this obedience required continuous control, the dissemination of fear and distrust, and a fundamental transformation of social structures. The redefinition of the individual, the elevation of the collective over personal autonomy, and the imposition of a state ideology necessitated the creation of a new security apparatus responsible for surveillance and repression. This article aims to analyze historical processes and institutions in Poland from a political science perspective. Drawing upon available historiographical publications and historical sources, the

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<sup>1</sup> Tadeusz Żenczykowski, *Polska Lubelska 1944* (Warsaw: Editions Spotkania, 1990), 19.

<sup>2</sup> The PKWN Manifesto, accessed February 11, 2025, [https://pbc.gda.pl/Content/85054/Nr\\_198.pdf](https://pbc.gda.pl/Content/85054/Nr_198.pdf).

author examines the nature of the Polish repression system and its dependence on the evolving political landscape of the USSR.

The article is guided by the following research questions:

- Was Poland a totalitarian state? If so, when did it cease to be one?
- How did changes in the Soviet Union affect the Polish repression apparatus?

To accurately interpret the concept of totalitarianism within this context, the author relies on the classical definition developed by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzeziński in their 1956 book *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. According to Friedrich and Brzeziński, a totalitarian state represents a distinct form of 20th-century dictatorship, an autocracy equipped with modern technology that enables mass surveillance and legitimization. Unlike classical dictatorships, totalitarian regimes are characterized by an ideology that functions as a comprehensive and obligatory doctrine. The authors define ideology as follows:

„An ideology is, therefore, a set of literate ideas — a reasonably coherent body of ideas concerning practical means of how to change and reform a society, based upon a more or less elaborate criticism of what is wrong with the existing or antecedent society. Where such reformist ideologies become potent, an ideology may also be developed to defend a society; such defensive ideologies contain a correspondingly elaborate criticism of the reformist or revolutionary ideologies.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Friedrich and Brzeziński identify six characteristics that a state must exhibit to be considered totalitarian:

1. A comprehensive ideology that dictates all aspects of human existence, requiring adherence from all members of society, even if only passively. This ideology is inherently future-oriented, envisioning an ultimate, utopian state for humanity. In this context, it often incorporates chiliastic elements, manifesting in the radical rejection of the existing social order and the aspiration to replace it with a revolutionary new system.

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<sup>3</sup> Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzeziński, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 88.

2. A monopolistic mass party that operates as a hierarchical and oligarchic structure, typically subordinate to an authoritarian leader. Despite its relatively small membership (usually not exceeding 10% of the population), the party plays a pivotal role in the political system. Its members, both men and women, demonstrate unwavering ideological commitment and absolute loyalty to the governing structures. The party either directly controls the bureaucratic apparatus of the state or functions as its superior political entity.
3. A system of institutional terror, encompassing both physical and psychological repression, serves as a primary mechanism of social control, enforced by the party and its affiliated agencies, including the secret police. Repression is not limited to explicit political opponents or declared "enemies" of the regime but also extends to arbitrarily selected social groups, fostering an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. The ruling authorities exploit advancements in modern science, particularly psychology, to refine techniques of mass manipulation and control.
4. Near-total state monopoly over mass communication, including the press, radio, and television, facilitated by technological advancements. Control over media ensures ideological hegemony, effective public opinion shaping, and the elimination of narratives that contradict the official doctrine.
5. Near-total state monopoly on the possession and use of military weaponry, mirroring the monopoly over information. This system eradicates the possibility of organized resistance and consolidates state dominance over society.
6. Centralized economic control, exercised through bureaucratic coordination of formally independent enterprises. Despite their ostensible autonomy, businesses remain subordinate to centralized state directives, encompassing labor unions and other organized social groups that, in democratic systems, would serve as mediators between citizens and the state.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, 22.

A different perspective on totalitarianism is offered by the prominent 20th-century philosopher Hannah Arendt, who, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, analyzes various manifestations of totalitarianism. Arendt moves beyond the conventional cause-and-effect framework, which she deems inadequate for historical and political analysis. Instead, she employs conceptual analysis, seeking the authentic origins of ideas and assessing the extent to which concepts have diverged from them.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Friedrich and Brzeziński, Arendt focuses primarily on social processes and individual agency, adopting a structuralist approach. According to Arendt, three elements are particularly characteristic of totalitarianism:

1. Mechanisms that allow individuals to be punished solely for their membership in a particular social group.
2. The incorporation of individuals into a system of terror, compelling them to engage in self-regulation and surveillance. Citizens of totalitarian states were expected to preemptively prevent actions that contradicted the regime's interests.
3. The eradication of the capacity for dissent and rebellion.<sup>6</sup>

This theoretical framework forms the foundation for the analysis of the Polish repression apparatus from 1944 to 1956. The article proceeds by examining the historical development of this apparatus, the methods of control it employed, and the extent to which it embodied totalitarian characteristics.

### **The First Years of Communist Poland**

The Polish Committee of National Liberation, established in 1944 as a provisional government, included within its structure the Department of Public Security, which was transformed in 1945 into the Ministry of Public Security (*Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego*, MBP). This

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<sup>5</sup> Luiza Kula, „Zjawisko totalitaryzmu w perspektywie dzieła Hannah Arendt”, *Zeszyty Naukowe Towarzystwa Doktorantów Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Nauki Humanistyczne*, no. 2 (2011): 133–134.

<sup>6</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, „Czy Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa była państwem totalitarnym czy autorytarnym?”, lecture, Warsaw, January 2011, 29 min, 56 sec., <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3RkLoqbIO2F3GhLvLQaZ9i?si=63a4334b4e354493>.

new institution was modeled after the Soviet security apparatus and was supervised by Stanisław Radkiewicz,<sup>7</sup> a Communist Party activist and a Soviet citizen, under the direct authority of Soviet General Serafim Nikolayevich Lalin<sup>8</sup>. Poland was soon covered by an extensive network of provincial, district, and municipal security offices, which would shape the social and political life of Polish citizens for decades.<sup>9</sup>

Numerous scholars indicate that the new political-economic order, characterized by the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat, altered the relationship between the ruling elite and the general population, which was perceived as a mass of superfluous individuals.<sup>10</sup> The attempt to forge a new society in the Soviet Union was a vast social experiment whose consequences reverberated throughout Eastern Europe. The new Soviet man, *homo sovieticus*, was expected to dedicate his life to the ideology, state affairs, and contemporary history.<sup>11</sup> The state was to be his "world, cosmos, and religion."<sup>12</sup> The term *homo sovieticus* was coined in the 1980s by Alexander Zinoviev,<sup>13</sup> who identified apathy and indifference as its defining characteristics—traits that arose from habituation to a life of hardship. This new individual was a subjugated entity, devoid of independent thought, replaced instead by absolute obedience to the ruling apparatus, the party, and the collective. Thus, the first criterion defined by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzeziński—that a totalitarian state must have a guiding ideology—was fulfilled. As the subsequent analysis demonstrates, Poland was a country entirely dependent on Moscow and was built by Stalinist envoys who simultaneously served as carriers of Soviet ideology.

In the initial years of the new security apparatus in communist Poland, Soviet advisers, known as "*sovietniks*," played a crucial role. In October 1944, 115 "qualified personnel" were sent to Poland to "cooperate and liaise with the PKWN Security Department." These advisers were

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<sup>7</sup> Łukasz Kamiński, „Aparat bezpieczeństwa i zbrodnie komunizmu”, *Polski wiek XX*, no. 3 (2010): 243.

<sup>8</sup> Józef Światło, *Za kulisami bezpieki i partii* (Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1954), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Kamiński, „Aparat Bezpieczeństwa”, 244.

<sup>10</sup> Eliza Kania, „Homo sovieticus – „jednowymiarowy klient komunizmu”, czy „fenomen o wielu twarzach?”, *Przegląd Polityczny* no. 3 (2012): 159.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Swietłana Aleksijewicz, *Urzeczeni śmiercią* (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2001), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Kania, „Homo sovieticus”, 162.

present in every district and provincial public security office.<sup>14</sup> Declassified documents reveal that they performed advisory, supervisory, and training functions. Soviet advisers remained active in the central Ministry of Public Security until 1956, demonstrating the extensive direct influence of the USSR on Polish affairs.<sup>15</sup>

The establishment of this organ in Poland introduced not only mass surveillance but also institutionalized terror based on NKVD practices. MBP investigators were granted judicial powers, meaning that the interrogation reports they produced carried legal weight. To extract confessions, inhumane methods were employed, including prolonged dousing with cold water, holding detainees in water-filled cells, forced water ingestion, crushing fingers in doors, genital mutilation, the application of electric shocks, forced starvation, stabbing with bayonets, and the rape of women and girls.<sup>16</sup> The early actions of the security services were directed against both legal opposition groups, such as the Polish People's Party and the Polish Socialist Party, as well as underground resistance movements, including the National Party. Repression also targeted the Catholic Church and conspiratorial youth organizations. Moreover, the MBP was tasked with eliminating the armed underground, whose members were often subject to extrajudicial executions.<sup>17</sup>

After the end of World War II and the establishment of Communist rule in Poland, former members of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) faced systematic persecution. In 1945, Poland came under Soviet influence, leading to intensified repression of AK veterans who had fought for national independence. Article 76 of the PRL Constitution illustrates this policy:

"The Polish People's Republic ensures comprehensive care for veterans of the struggle for national and social liberation."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wiesław Charczuk, „Instrukcja dla oficerów śledczych Urzędu Bezpieczeństwa z 1945 roku”, *Wschodni Rocznik Humanistyczny*, no. 7 (2010–2011): 378.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 378–379.

<sup>16</sup> Janusz Borowiec, *Aparat bezpieczeństwa a wojskowy wymiar sprawiedliwości Rzeszowszczyzna 1944–1954* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2004), 109.

<sup>17</sup> Kamiński, „Aparat Bezpieczeństwa”, 244.

<sup>18</sup> Konstytucja Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej uchwalona przez Sejm Ustawodawczy w dniu 22 lipca 1952 r., accessed February 12, 2025, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=wdu19520330232>.

In practice, however, this "comprehensive care" applied only to Polish troops who had fought alongside the Red Army, while independent Polish armed groups became undesirable elements after the Communist takeover. AK members and activists from the Grey Ranks (*Szare Szeregi*) were subjected to brutal repression by the MBP and NKVD. Many war heroes from the 1918 independence movement, the Polish-Soviet War, and other underground organizations were among the victims. According to scholars, approximately 24,000 individuals perished in MBP prisons, investigative detention centers, and labor camps. In response to directives from the Polish government-in-exile, the Polish Underground State sought to maintain a continued resistance against the Communist regime. AK loyalists often engaged in partisan activity against the state, for which they were persecuted and executed. MBP forces systematically surveilled AK veterans, employing various forms of coercion to compel collaboration. Those who refused faced brutal interrogations and the threat of reprisals against their families. The persecution of Home Army members had long-term consequences for Polish society. Many individuals feared state retaliation, leading to widespread distrust and an atmosphere of fear. For decades, the history of the AK was marginalized, rarely discussed in public discourse. In summary, the repression of AK activists after 1945 was a brutal manifestation of the Communist regime's struggle for power, in which it sought to eliminate all forms of resistance to its rule. The government actively suppressed elements of reality that conflicted with its official doctrine and the ideological agenda imposed by the USSR.<sup>19</sup>

The role of the Security Ministry of the PKWN, and later of the Ministry of Public Security, was also the propaganda dimension of repressive activities. The body's task was to identify and then recognize and neutralize the 'enemy', whose nature could be real or imaginary, overt or covert, internal or external. The militarization of phraseology led to the creation of fear in society against groups such as 'kulaks', 'class enemies', 'reactionary underground', 'profiteers', 'warmongers' and many others. Internationally, the nation was warned against 'foreign agents', 'saboteurs' or 'American imperialists'.<sup>20</sup> A special item in the catalogue of enemies was

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<sup>19</sup> Kamiński, „Aparat Bezpieczeństwa”, 246.

<sup>20</sup> Andrzej Zaćmiński, „„Identyfikacja wroga” w wyborach do Sejmu PRL z 26 października 1952 r. – metodologia pracy Ministerstwa Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego” in *Wybory i*



the Catholic Church and its representatives. By a decree of 5 August 1949, Catholic associations were dissolved, and less than a year later, the *Caritas* organization, which between 1947 and 1949 in war-ravaged Poland had organized and run 728 kindergartens, 964 care homes for children and the elderly, and 220 special care institutions for 11,627 children, was liquidated. Pastoral ministry was regularly obstructed, priests were murdered and arrested, and the state was subjected to a program of atheization.<sup>21</sup> In 1953, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was interned, and the intimidated Church allowed a new president of the Episcopate – Bishop Czesław Kaczmarek – to be imposed on it.<sup>22</sup>

From the perspective of the study of totalitarianism, it is not surprising that the communist authorities fought the Catholic Church. State ideology, communism as understood by Stalin, was to be the only acceptable explanation of the social order, and Catholic teaching was a dangerous counterweight that could become a centre of opposition.

### **The Unveiling of Polish State Terror**

The peak of the development of the Polish security service came at the end of the Stalinist era in 1953. At that time, the Ministry of Public Security consisted of eleven departments, divided into divisions, sections and local papers. The network of the security office included not only the institutions of the state but also some industrial plants controlled by agent employees. The agent network numbered 85,000 secret collaborators, and 5.4 million people, a quarter of the population, were considered ‘suspect elements’.<sup>23</sup> The terrorized population demanded accountability and a halt to repression, which was the result of the escape to the west of Colonel Józef Światło, deputy director of Department X of the MBP. Światło was tapped for a powerful propaganda campaign by Radio Free Europe when, in December 1953, he reported to the office of the Free Europe

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*referenda w PRL*, ed. Sebastian Ligarski and Michał Siedziako (Szczecin: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2014), 123–124.

<sup>21</sup> Tomasz Kaczmarek, „Systemy totalitarne dwudziestego stulecia jako prześladowca Kościoła”, *Studia Włocławskie* no. 19 (2017), 443–444.

<sup>22</sup> Antoni Dudek, „Kościół katolicki w Polsce w 1956 roku.”, *Polska 1944/45-1989: studia i materiały* no. 3 (1997), 104.

<sup>23</sup> Kamiński, „Aparat Bezpieczeństwa”, 245.

Committee in New York and expressed his willingness to tell the Polish public about his experiences of service in the Ministry of Public Security. The broadcasts, which aroused widespread public interest, forced changes in the security apparatus, confirming the veracity of J. Światło's confessions, which revealed abuses of power and exposed conflicts within its circles. To this day, the confessions are one of the main sources providing information about the security apparatus and the behind-the-scenes activities of the party until 1953. The author speaks directly about communist activists such as Lt. Col. Dobrzyński, who was killed in the prisons of the security services. He also confesses that senior MBP officials knew about the methods used by their subordinates and cases of torture and sadism, the abuse of the wives of activists linked to the Gomułka affair. The broadcasts make accusations against top state officials who used the X Department for their own political game. It was there that the files of all the top officials (except Bierut) were kept, which were prepared on behalf of party colleagues. Światło and his colleagues were also involved in the campaigns to falsify the 1947 and 1952 elections, for it was under their auspices that the electoral protocols with the relevant data were prepared. The subordination of society to the party is reflected in the mechanism described by Światło, according to which, when the head of the provincial security office writes a request to the prosecutor that the arrest of a person is demanded based on agency data – the prosecutor is obliged to impose the sanction in the form of an arrest.<sup>24</sup>

Also unprecedented for the Polish public is the information concerning the structure of the MBP itself. From the perspective of research into totalitarianism, it is worth looking at the range of tasks of the Ministry's individual departments.

Department I – Headed by a Soviet intelligence agent dropped into Poland during the occupation, Colonel Gajewski, this is the headquarters of counterintelligence.

Department II – Here, foreign correspondence is censored, and technical assistance is provided to other departments. The head of Department II is Soviet colonel Taboretsky.

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<sup>24</sup> Światło, „Za kulisami”, 1–3.

Department III – Under the direction of Polish director Colonel Leon Andrzejewski and Soviet advisor Sharaburin, it focused on combating all underground movements.

Department IV – This cell was set up to combat espionage, sabotage and diversion in light industry, agriculture and cooperatives. In reality, however, according to J. Swiatlo's account, it controlled these areas and intervened when deviations in their activities were observed. The Department is headed by Col. Galczewski, a worker from Lodz.

Department V – Headed by Julia Brystygerowa, Department V was responsible for invigilation and control over the Catholic Church. Moreover, it handled to safeguard PZPR from the hostile influence from abroad. Its director had an extremely prolific career in the NKVD, being a friend of Berman and Minc, an informer for the Soviet authorities in Lviv from 1939, and was called the fifth deputy minister of security.<sup>25</sup>

Department VI – Under the leadership of Colonel Dulias, it dealt with the organization and supervision of forced labor camps and prisons.

Department VII – Headquarters of the intelligence service abroad. The Polish director is a former Soviet officer, Col. Sienkiewicz.

Department VIII – Responsible for the control of land, water and air transport; headed by a Belorussian Communist Party activist, Col. Zabawski.

Department IX – Like Department IV, it was concerned with combating hostile actions within the industry. However, they were distinguished by their area of operation, as Department IX supervised heavy, chemical and metallurgical industries and was headed by Lt. Col. Górecki – a Pole.

Department X – Headquarters of agents concerned with ensuring the 'purity of party ranks' by collecting information and materials that could harm potential victims of the system. Department X dealt with combating any deviation from the PZPR, e.g. the so-called right-nationalist or Trotskyist deviation. The head of the department was Anatol Fejgin, who was under the direct control of the First Deputy Minister of Public Security – Roman Romkowski.

Department XI – Officially dealt with 'protection of religious denominations from Western influence and diversion', but in reality was

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<sup>25</sup> Departament-V-MBP.html. accessed March 25, 2025, <https://edukacja.ipn.gov.pl/edu/materialy-edukacyjne/teki-edukacyjn/konspiracje-mlodziezowe/sloownik-i-biogramy-postaci/165880>,

responsible for the fight against the Church. It was headed by a Soviet 'paratrooper', Lt. Col. Więckowski.<sup>26</sup>

The MBP also includes such cells as the Investigation Department, the Personnel Department, the Government Protection Department, the General Department, the Training Department, the Communications Department and the Military Bureau. All the bodies mentioned have one significant feature in common, for they are headed by people whose biographies are inextricably linked to Moscow. Światło points out that 'almost the entire Investigation Department is Russian.'

The broadcasts featuring J. Światło caused profound repercussions in the communist system. In addition to the dismissal of Stanisław Radkiewicz from his post, by decree of 7.12.1954, the Council of State abolished the Ministry of Public Security, and in its place created the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Committee for Public Security.<sup>27</sup>

Given the above facts, it does not require deep analysis to state that the Polish security system was controlled by the USSR authorities. Moreover, it was built on the model of the Soviet model, having its roots in the ChK (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution, Speculation and Abuse of Power). In the author's opinion, the terror described by J. Światło and the researchers cited in the first part of the paper fulfills the premise from *Totalitarian Dictatorship...* describing a system of institutional terror.

### **From totalitarianism to...**

The year 1956 brought in the context of Soviet repression not only the brutally suppressed uprising in Hungary. June 1956 saw the first mass strike and street demonstrations in the People's Republic of Poland in Poznań, which developed into violent opposition to the authorities. The protests, initially concentrated at the H. Cegielski, soon spread to the entire city. The authorities responded with brutal pacification, engaging military and police forces. Around 10,000 soldiers and 400 tanks took part in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 24–26

<sup>27</sup> Witold Gieszczyński, „Kryzys aparatu bezpieczeństwa w latach 1954–1956 (na przykładzie województwa olsztyńskiego)”, *Echa Przeszłości*, no. 18 (2017), 303.

the operation to suppress the protests. The communist regime downplayed the events, referring to them as 'June accidents' or completely ignoring them in the official narrative. Today, some researchers and participants in those events refer to them as the Poznań Rebellion, revolt or even uprising, emphasizing their groundbreaking nature in the history of resistance against the Polish People's Republic. i.e. bloody revolts of the Polish society on its way to freedom.<sup>28</sup> For years, scholars have been arguing about Poznań June. Debates concerned the number of victims, the nature of the demonstrations or the first shots fired. Today, we know that, as a result of the events, 57 people died and 650 were wounded.<sup>29</sup>

The cited events seemingly contradict H. Arendt's characterization of totalitarianism because, according to the researcher, in an ideal totalitarian state, revolts do not occur. On the other hand, researchers point out that Polish society in 1956 did not cross a certain barrier and thus avoided the scenario that befell Hungary. In the context of these events, W. Władyka writes about a 'self-limiting revolution', which consciously kept emotions under control, as it was aware of the possibility of Soviet military intervention.<sup>30</sup>

The year 1956 is considered by scholars to be a breakthrough because of not only the events described above and the relationship with the Soviet Union, which allowed Poland to realise freedoms and liberties to a greater extent, but above all the coming to power of Władysław Gomułka, who was considered the greatest political beneficiary of the changes.<sup>31</sup>

Władysław Gomułka's rule began in an atmosphere of hope for change, resulting from the so-called October Thaw of 1956, and ended with the dramatic events of December 1970, which led to his removal from power. It was a period full of paradoxes – on one hand, social hopes and attempts to make Poland independent from the Soviet Union, and on the other, the authoritarian consolidation of power and a lack of significant democratic reforms. Władysław Gomułka spent the years 1951–1954 in

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<sup>28</sup> Jerzy Eisler, *Polskie miesiące czyli kryzys(y) w PRL* (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2008), 19.

<sup>29</sup> Łukasz Jastrząb, „Problematyka "pierwszego strzału" w Poznańskim Czerwcu 1956 r.”, *Niepodległość i Pamięć* no. 23 (2006), 110.

<sup>30</sup> Wiesław Władyka, „Od Natolina do Natolina” in *Październik 1956 roku. Początek erozji systemu*, ed. Marek Jabłonowski and Stanisław Stępka (Pułtusk: Akademia Humanistyczna im. Aleksandra Gieysztora, 2007), 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

prison on charges of 'right-wing nationalist deviation'. He was expected to be released as early as 1953 and was exonerated in 1954. His political rehabilitation was one of the symptoms of the changes in the People's Republic of Poland. In October 1956, during the Eighth Plenum of the PZPR Central Committee, he was elected First Secretary of the Central Committee, which was enthusiastically received by the public. The prevailing mood at the time is well reflected in the reactions of some of Kraków's residents, i.e. students, academics and factory workers at Nowa Huta. The Red Army columns heading for Warsaw represented the greatest threat to the state in the history of the Polish People's Republic, which resulted in an alliance of workers, intelligentsia and even the police and army.

The main centre of October's hopes for change was the Jagiellonian University, where the Student Revolutionary Committee (SKR) was established in October to replace the Union of Polish Youth (ZMP), which had been dissolved at the Jagiellonian University. The combined committees of the UJ and the Kraków Medical Academy constituted the Revolutionary Youth Union (RMZ), which ran its radio station for a short period. Self-organized student initiatives replaced the ZMPs, and Kraków students held a march towards the USSR consulate. The stability of the system was shaken. October 1956 was a key moment in the history of Gomułka's rule. On taking power, he faced not only a political crisis but also the possibility of Soviet intervention. Nikita Khrushchev's arrival in Warsaw and the talks with Gomułka were important in preventing escalation. Gomułka successfully convinced Khrushchev of the need to leave the People's Republic of Poland in relative autonomy, which prevented Soviet troops from intervening, even though Czech troops were waiting for orders from the Kremlin at the Polish border. The public expected Władysław Gomułka to truly listen to the voice of the people and, in addition to restoring order and economic security, Poland would embark on the road to democratization and de-Sovietization. In 1956, there were many new, dedicated activists in the PZPR who, carried away by the October enthusiasm, wanted change, just like the nation.<sup>32</sup> In his memoirs, Gomułka referred to their activity emphatically:

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<sup>32</sup> Włodzimierz Janowski, „Młodzież i jej organizacje podczas wydarzeń politycznych w 1956 roku. Zarys problematyki” in *Październik 1956 roku. Początek erozji systemu*, ed. Marek

"They were shouters, demagogues, they talked incessantly about democratisation, about change, about some kind of revolution, whereas what we needed was obedience and order and in general, what to say, not any greater freedoms, but something quite the opposite."<sup>33</sup>

Gomułka's words allow us to conclude that the new leader did not intend to introduce reforms extending the scope of civil liberties and that the actions taken by the authorities were driven by the need to restore order. The decision to liquidate the Public Security Office, which should be seen as an image move, in fact not affecting the Polish system of repression, should be looked at from this perspective, as its competences were transferred to the newly created Security Service (*Służba Bezpieczeństwa*) subordinate to the structures of the Civic Militia (*Milicja Obywatelska*). The motivation to advertise the new government as less repressive was also due to pressure and reactions coming from abroad, as well as the general international situation.

On the other hand, there was unprecedented opposition to the falsification of history expressed in 1956 by J. Ambroziewicz, W. Namiotkiewicz and J. Olszewski, who published the famous text 'To meet people from the Home Army' in the weekly magazine 'Po Prostu'. The authors were the first in Poland to speak out in favor of the Home Army soldiers and stated that their evaluation must be positive and postulated the rehabilitation of the disgraced heroes and the creation of a 'Home Army legend', which is still present in Poland today. The weekly took up several other topics previously considered 'untouchable'. It not only described poverty and hunger but also several violations of the system, violations of basic human rights, ruined careers and the enslavement of the individual under the communist system.<sup>34</sup> The editors aimed their texts at young people and gradually began to see themselves as a force that could inspire change in the People's Republic of Poland. It should be noted that the People's Republic of Poland still had the Main Office for the Control of the

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Jabłonowski and Stanisław Stępka (Pułtusk: Akademia Humanistyczna im. Aleksandra Gieysztora, 2007), 141–155.

<sup>33</sup> Władysław Gomułka, *Moich czternaście lat* (Wydawnictwo im. Legionów Polskich, 1981), 14.

<sup>34</sup> Doiminika Rafalska, „Po Prostu i jego rola w 1956 roku” in *Październik 1956 roku. Początek erozji systemu*, ed. Marek Jabłonowski and Stanisław Stępka (Pułtusk: Akademia Humanistyczna im. Aleksandra Gieysztora, 2007), 68–69.

Press, Publications and Spectacles<sup>35</sup> (*Główny Urząd Kontroli Pracy Publikacji i Spektakli*), ensuring constant control over all content. Given this, every text was subject to censorship, and the consent of the party was required for any publishing activity. The censors decided to allow a text rehabilitating the memory of Home Army soldiers, which was a landmark event.

The achievements of October were, without a doubt, the dismissal of Soviet advisors, Soviet officers led by Marshal Rokossovsky and the opening of the border to the West. Moreover, some 7,000 political prisoners were released, and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński returned from internment. Researchers also point to the restriction of censorship and the making religious life more possible. The period of so-called 'light thaw' also brought wide-ranging reforms to the Security Office, as a result of which the function of Soviet advisors was abolished, the newly created Security Service was incorporated into the structure of the Civic Militia (thus abolishing the Office of Public Security), posts were reduced, and a significant number of agent staff resigned from their positions (11,500 agents in 1957). Indeed, the Khrushchev era was characterized by destalinization and at least an apparent break with the terror practiced under the previous leader. The year 1953, with the death of Stalin, marked the beginning of changes in the so-called Eastern Bloc, which gained momentum due to the escape of J. Światło, Khrushchev's paper,<sup>36</sup> the death of Bierut, the June events in Poznań and finally, the seizure of power by Władysław Gomułka. Khrushchev wanted to change the system of government, which required a critique of the past. Most Polish studies link just his delivery of the famous paper with the October transition in Poland.<sup>37</sup>

## Summary

Concluding everything that had been analyzed, the system introduced by Moscow in Poland after 1944 was based on massification, betrayal,

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<sup>35</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, „Czy Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa była państwem totalitarnym czy autorytarnym?”, lecture, Warsaw, January 2011, 52 min, 32 sec., <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3RkLoqbIO2F3GhLvLQaZ9i?si=63a4334b4e354493>.

<sup>36</sup> See: Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith, *Soviet state and society under Nikita Khrushchev* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Andrzej Skrzypek, „Związek Radziecki wobec wydarzeń 1956 roku w Polsce” in *Październik 1956 roku. Początek erozji systemu*, ed. Marek Jabłonowski and Stanisław Stępek (Pułtusk: Akademia Humanistyczna im. Aleksandra Gieysztor, 2007), 208.



aggression, fighting the free mind, the individual, aiming at unanimity, total submission of the people to the will of the party and the communist state ideology, on behalf of which acted a brutal and total, and therefore all-embracing, apparatus of repression in the form of the Department of Public Security, and then the Ministry of the Interior. Society was subject to surveillance and constant control, which was expressed not only by persecution but also by the activity of institutions such as the Main Office of Press, Publication and Audience Control, which subjected all content to censorship. The public only learned the truth about the system from illegally circulated accounts of a Security Office officer who, fearing for his life, saved himself by fleeing the country. Prior to that, Poles lived in a reality created for the purposes of the party, full of enemies and agents, while the repressive apparatus and the self-controlled society did not allow major revolts against the authorities. In the author's opinion, the political and social system in force in Poland reflected the characteristics of a totalitarian state and society. However, one should note the transformations that took place in the mid-1950s and their correlation with the events in the USSR. However, they did not lead to the complete abolition of totalitarianism, but only to the transformation of the regime into an authoritarian regime with some of the characteristics of a totalitarian state. Researchers to this day do not agree on the qualification of the Polish reality on the democracy-totalitarianism axis, but this article proves that, at least during a certain period, the Polish state was created along the lines of a totalitarian police state.

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## **Променљива динамика утњетавања: Пољски репресивни апарат 1944–1956.**

Рад анализира пољски репресивни апарат, пратећи његов развој у оквиру периода совјетске контроле (1944–1956). Користећи метод политичких наука, истражује механизме државног терора, идеолошке контроле и институционалне репресије у НР Пољској у поменутом периоду. Ослањајући се на историографске изворе, анализа је структурисана око класичних дефиниција тоталитаризма, посебно модела које су предложили Карл Ј. Фридрих, Збигњев Бжежински и Хана Арент. Налази показују да је послератна Пољска усвојила државне структуре у совјетском стилу, укључујући масовни надзор, системске „чистке“ и идеолошку принуду спровођену помоћу Министарства јавне безбедности (МБП). Такође, студија истражује транзицију од стаљинистичке репресије ка релативном политичком отопљавању из 1956. године, наглашавајући улогу протеста у Познању и успон Владислава Гомулке. Упркос попуштању неких репресивних мера, истраживање је показало да, иако је Пољска еволуирала од стриктно тоталитарног модела до ауторитарнијег режима, елементи системске репресије су опстали. Циљ рада је да допринесе ширем дискурсу о тоталитарној управи, политичкој трансформацији и улози безбедносних институција у обликовању послератне источне Европе.