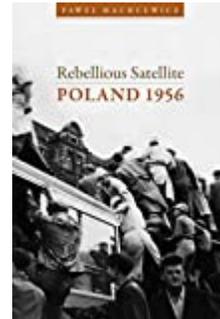




Paweł Machcewicz. *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956*. Translated by Maya Latynski. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xx + 280 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6205-2.



Reviewed by Péter Vámos (Hungarian Academy of Sciences)

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2013)

Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

Poland in 1956 “from the Bottom”

How does a peaceful crowd turn into a radicalized, revolutionary mob? How does a workersâ protest with economic demands grow into a rebellion against the regime? How does âthe peopleâ transform into âthe nationâ? And how do social movements influence âhighâ politics during a major national crisis within the Soviet bloc? In his excellent book, Paweł Machcewicz answers these questions and presents a detailed analysis of one of the most critical years in Polandâs postwar history, 1956. This is the revised and updated English version of the Polish-language book published in 1993 (*Polski Rok 1956*). The author introduces the Polish events from a new, âbottom upâ perspective. He focuses on the grassroots mass dimension of the events and not on political and international history. Policy changes at the top and international events are mentioned only in their relationship to popular reactions to them. Machcewicz argues that during a crisis and revolutionary situation when the Communist regime partly loses control over growing unrest, collective action, that is the spontaneous activity of the masses, can become a key factor shaping domestic devel-

opments and even their international consequences. This volume looks at the experience of 1956 from the perspective of participants and observers, which is very different from the image presented in the official press and history books.

The analysis is primarily based on Polish United Workersâ Party (PUWP) materials and public security documents coming from local levels. The author provides the reader with a general picture of societyâs mood and thinking by comparing âthe largest possible number of documents from both the party and the police to determine what they have in common and what they repeat most oftenâ (p. xix). He examines local security police reports on the political situation; the mood of the local population; and different forms of expression of grievances, including rallies and mass demonstrations on the streets or secret meetings in factories, at universities and on military bases, from all parts of the country. He studies different expressions of collective opinions and beliefs, such as anonymous reports, letters, and manifestos sent to the central party leadership. Even fliers, graffiti in public re-

strooms, and a sign on a telephone pole in a village serve as his sources.

The book enumerates the important events of 1956 in chronological order, devoting a chapter to all crucial events. First the author examines the consequences of the 20th Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) congress, which dealt a blow to the legitimacy of the Stalinist regime, played an important role in destabilizing the political system, and stirred up the hope for change. The importance of the congress lies in the fact that the political changes initiated in Moscow transformed into a national process that demanded a break with the past.

When the government relaxed pressure and made gestures, the people understood it as a sign of weakness. As a result, the taboo of silence was broken and the fear on which the totalitarian regime built its legitimacy was reduced. The political atmosphere was transformed and protest against the existing reality came to the surface. Poland's Stalinist leader Bolesław Bierut's unexpected death in March only strengthened the popular belief that the time for fundamental political changes had come.

Socioeconomic demands dominated the early phase of events, but political, religious, and national dimensions appeared simultaneously during the protests, and, during the third phase of street battles, national motifs became prominent. However, the principal characteristic of the mass movements was their inclusiveness. Moral, political, economic, religious, and national elements of the criticism were inextricably intertwined. As the author argues, "dividing slogans into political and economic categories makes sense analytically, but in reality they frequently appeared side by side" (p. 102).

As a specific Polish element of the anti-systemic social movement, Machcewicz identifies anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiments not only as the most dominant thread in collective political thought, which surfaced at every available opportunity in 1956, but also as a central part of Polish identity. Poles identified the Soviet Union as the direct successor of tsarist Russia, which participated in the partition of the country and occupied large territories that formerly belonged to Poland. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Katyn, and Soviet passivism during the Warsaw Uprising were all part of the Soviet Union's negative image. People blamed the Soviet Union for all the hardships they had to endure and "all demands, economic as well as political, were usually framed in anti-Soviet phraseology" (p. 102).

The author introduces the changes in the general

political atmosphere of the country and highlights the developments that led to the explosion in Poznan in June. The uprising culminated in a crackdown leaving dozens of demonstrators dead and hundreds wounded and creating shock waves throughout the whole country. Machcewicz demonstrates how popular reactions to the uprising contributed to the further reduction of public fear and to the radicalization of popular demands between July and September, and shows how the uprising played a role as catalyst for protest in many localities throughout the country.

The last two chapters are devoted to the Polish October, popular hopes tied to Władysław Gomułka's return to power, the aftermath of the October demonstrations, and the election campaign that culminated in the January 1957 elections and the overwhelming victory of the ruling PUWP. Machcewicz views the significance of the October mass movement in the fact that whereas the rebellion in Poznan was a politically radical and violent event, four months later demonstrators "did not strive to reject the existing political order by overthrowing the government. Instead, the protest was channelled within the system" (p. 200). He identifies the nationalistic factor as the cause of this change, "which during the Poznan rebellion had radicalized social protest, but in October had a moderating influence, which reduced the political challenge to the system" (p. 206). Gomułka had a key role to play in this process. The charismatic and skillful Gomułka, who was seen as the guarantor of Poland's independence from the Soviet Union, used his popularity to stabilize the regime and calm down the emotions of the masses. As the author claims, the PUWP leader "embodied society's hopes for positive change" and "became an almost mythical figure to the people" (pp. 207, 240).

The author concludes that 1956 is significant in the history of Poland as it "marks the distinct end of the era of large-scale mass terror and ideological mobilization" (p. 249). Repression was limited and tempered, and mass terror was substituted with selective repression. The policy toward the Catholic Church also underwent a significant change, which resulted in the reduced persecution of clerics, eased surveillance of church life, and less interference in the internal affairs of the church. Machcewicz identifies decreased ideological pressure as the most tangible and lasting change brought about by the events of that year. As a result of public demands, authorities abandoned their vision of the consistent Sovietization of Poland. The idea of a fully cooperative and nationalized agriculture was dropped and dependence on Moscow was reduced. Most Soviet officers and advis-

ers in the army and the security apparatus left Poland. regime turned into an authoritarian system.
In sum, this is a remarkable story of how a totalitarian

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Péter Vámos. Review of Machcewicz, Paweł, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26106>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.