PATRONS! Out now is episode 8 of 1956! This episode here details the Chinese involvement in the defusing of the difficult Soviet-Polish relationship, and it’s a fascinating chapter in history you won’t want to miss, so be sure to head over to www.patreon.com/WhenDiplomacyFails to find out more!

Episode 8, The Star Pupil continues our story from last time, as the Polish situation presents us with a few more questions which require our attention. Vladislav Gomulka had managed to persuade Khrushchev that his leadership would not come at the expense of the Soviet control over the Polish satellite, but that it would on the contrary guarantee Polish loyalty to Moscow after some limited reforms. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this chapter in Soviet-Polish relations though was the notable involvement of the Chinese in the equation. The Chinese, it emerged, were very interested in seeing that other peoples travelled their own ‘road to socialism’ as they had done. A Polish road to socialism would validate the unique Chinese experience of struggle over the last few decades, and it would also confirm that Moscow didn’t have the authority to dictate how a communist satellite would feel.

Under the Chinese direction and approval, Poland’s limited revolution and Gomulka’s leadership would be safe, but only because, as we’ll see, Gomulka had zero intentions of truly changing any status quos. Unfortunately, Gomulka’s tenure in office was not destined to be a completely wholesome one. His behaviour over the 1960s would confirm that he was far more loyal and far less independently minded than his initial behaviour may have initially suggested, yet in 1956, Gomulka was the right man for the Polish leadership, and so long as the Polish people agreed, Poland was to be kept within the Soviet orbit, and Gomulka was to be the star pupil of the tumultuous year of 1956, especially in comparison to his Hungarian counterpart Imre Nagy, who we’ll meet in the next few episodes.

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Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to 1956 episode 8. Last time the Polish situation continued to occupy us, as we brought our narrative through to the events of the Polish spring. Armed with a very short temper and strong language, Khrushchev confronted the traitorous Polish leadership in mid-October and demanded answers and action in equal measure. It was at this tense stand-off that Vladislav Gomulka’s approach paid off – the Soviets left, the tensions eased, and Gomulka’s star was propelled into the pantheon of Polish national legend, as the man who had stood up to the Russians, as the man who had forced the Soviet soldiers out of the country by words alone. In this episode, we conclude our analysis of this heady event, and take a bit of time to examine the contradictions and goals inherent in Gomulka’s policy towards the Soviets.

If you were left scratching your head a bit after last time, and if you were left wondering how Gomulka managed to present himself as a representative of Polish freedoms in spite of his clear capitulations and concessions to Moscow, then you have come to right place. In the context of this quest, we’ll also examine what it was that compelled both the Polish and *Chinese* communist parties to talk to one another during this period, and what each hoped to gain. It is a chapter of history as obscure and odd as it is forgotten, so I hope you enjoy this multi-layered look at Poland’s spring. I will now take you to late October 1956…

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It had been a particularly intense stand-off, and Vladislav Gomulka may well have been emotionally drained by the end of it, but there was doubt that having stood his ground, he had effectively won the day. Moscow would never admit it of course, but the very fact that he remained in place, and that Soviet tanks were not converging on Warsaw, testified to Gomulka’s reserves of patience and talent for reading his adversaries. Of course, other factors were at work in the background, and of particular interest to us was the Chinese contribution to keeping the Soviet-Polish relationship on speaking terms. Still though, it was a remarkable achievement for Gomulka, the 51 year old lifetime communist, and until 1970 he remained in power as Poland’s FS.

I had wanted to present this event as a kind of guiding light for Polish nationalism, or as something for Poles to be proud of, or even as something to cheer myself up with in this otherwise very dark period of European history. I wanted this to be a victory for Poles, who needed something to cling to after all they had been through. Unfortunately though, a quick look at what followed 1956 reveals Gomulka to be just as barbaric and repressive as any other communist peer. While he rode the wave of enthusiasm in 1956, and while he may at one point have held Polish interests close to heart, through the 1960s Gomulka was more concerned with clinging to power, and with propping up the lagging Polish economy. To do this he permitted persecution of the Catholic Church in return for Soviet subsidies, and drew attention to the minute Jewish population in Poland, offering them up yet again as a kind of scapegoat. In 1970 he was forced to retire after bloody strikes in some coastal regions caused outcry when Gomulka ordered the striking dock workers shot. He died in 1980, by then largely forgotten.

Gomulka’s example was unfortunately typical of the history of the Soviet Union. While bright lights did exist in the satellite states, and we will meet some of them soon enough, far too often these bright lights were dulled by fear, by acceptance of the status quo or by a desensitisation to the horrors of the system they ruled over. It’s very hard to look at someone like Gomulka and feel happy with him for standing up to Khrushchev in 1956, when I know what he would become shortly thereafter. Then again, I’m not here to be his friend or his judge – I think I’ll leave that to the many capable Polish historians who have already examined his questionable legacy. In the event, it wouldn’t be until 1989 that Poland would break out from the Soviet ties which bound it. Solidarity, a movement which would take on a life of its own in the 1980s, was the real event to be proud of, and it is perhaps fitting that the battered, victimised Poles should have one of the most important roles in destabilising and then destroying the Soviet system which had so limited and devastated them for so much of the century.

We can’t let Gomulka ride off into his deeply flawed sunset though without first answering a few pertinent questions about those events in mid to late October 1956. Last time we touched on a few of these questions, when we wondered how it was that Khrushchev gave into Gomulka, and permitted him to walk free. Khrushchev, we’ll recall, arrived in Warsaw baying for blood. He was furious that the Poles seemed to be going into business for themselves. What was more, because he’d been given so little information on what was going on in Poland, the Soviet FS naturally assumed the worst. When he arrived though, Gomulka absorbed Khrushchev’s blows with remarkable bravery, likely because he knew, as we theorised, what Khrushchev’s greatest fears were. Because Gomulka knew how far he was going to go, and because he knew that he had no intention of fulfilling Moscow’s worst fears by breaking off from the Warsaw Pact, Gomulka proved a capable host. More than this, Khrushchev’s arrival and prompt exit provided Gomulka with an invaluable propaganda boost.

When pondering the situation, it is worth looking at the official explanation Khrushchev gave for his exit from Warsaw without Gomulka in chains. In short, Khrushchev arrived in Warsaw to find a Polish communist who was far less of an independent, traitorous bogeyman that Moscow had allowed itself to believe. Khrushchev noted in his memoirs that: ‘We believed him [Gomulka] when he said he realised we faced a common enemy: Western imperialism. We took his word as a promissory note from a man whose good faith we believed in.’ Gomulka's later orthodoxy in domestic politics, and repressive career as an elder statesman in the Soviet bloc, confirmed their judgement. Second, the very real fear of Polish resistance may have acted as a deterrent. Khrushchev later recalled that, despite Marshal Rokossovsky's assurances that the Polish army would obey his orders, the number of regiments on whom they could rely was unclear. ‘Of course, our own armed strength far exceeded that of Poland, but we didn't want to resort to the use of our own troops.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Reading between the lines, what Khrushchev may have feared was a spectacle taking place, where Polish insurgents dug in and attempted to resist the foreign onslaught yet again from their wounded capital, as they had done 12 years before. From a military strategic perspective, it is worth considering that Khrushchev was concerned at the pace of events underway in Budapest, and that, for the sake of these strategic reasons, he sought to pacify the Polish situation to avoid a conflict on two fronts. Hungary’s revolt will concern us in the next few episodes, but for now it suffices to underline the fact that Budapest’s deteriorating situation and the problems it posed to Moscow on a strategic and PR level was a situation which Khrushchev wished to avoid if at all possible in Poland. Perhaps because he had expected the situation to be so bad, the mild figure presented by Gomulka disarmed Khrushchev, and led him to focus his attention on the far more worrying situation in Budapest.

Yet, there is a third reason other than Khrushchev’s positive impressions of Gomulka and his security concerns. We touched briefly on the role which the PRC played in influencing the Soviets to ease off on the Polish communists, and for the remainder of this episode we’re going to examine this fascinating aspect of the Polish revolt in more detail. This examination will take our narrative up past 1956 through to 1957, but even though this takes us somewhat far ahead, as a study it is useful because it sheds light on a largely forgotten aspect of communist diplomacy during the Cold War, and it helps to anticipate what was to come in the realm of Sino-Soviet relations, which began to deteriorate steadily after 1956. If you’re ready for this change of pace then, let’s begin.

It may have been Edward Ochab, Poland’s caretaker FS in between the late Bierut and Gomulka, who contacted the Chinese first. In his memoirs, Ochab gives a refreshingly plausible account of his conversations with Beijing (in late September 1956). This act was a mutual effort to break through the glass ceiling imposed on Warsaw by its own political and geographic isolation. Ochab, to his credit, was sensible enough to discern no real scope for further options with his immediate neighbours: Czechoslovakia and East Germany’s leaders were ‘too limited’. Tito was ‘too remote’ and in any case the Poles wouldn’t meet Tito officially until 1957). This left China as ‘something of an independent factor’, as Ochab later wrote. At the same time, Ochab conceded that Beijing perhaps overestimated Poland's significance in the Eastern bloc. With hindsight though, we can say that the same was probably true of Warsaw's estimation of the Chinese.

Beijing had been distanced from Moscow during the anti-Stalin campaigns of the spring, and Mao had been a vocal critic of Khrushchev’s new course and efforts to undermine the concept of the cult of personality. Since Mao was in the process of building a cult of personality, he understandably viewed Khrushchev’s actions as hostile to his national interests. With this in mind, and perhaps aware that an eventual breach with Moscow was inevitable, Mao instructed that any other communist attention was to be welcomed. But Poland also gave Beijing a good chance about ‘great-power chauvinism’ to the Soviets, and this complaint may well have influenced Khrushchev to deal with the Poles less harshly than he otherwise would have.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Chinese were eager to support the Poles for another reason other than wanting another communist friend. The Polish ‘road to socialism’ and the independent path advocated by Gomulka with the rights for independent thinking and freedom of action therein was similar to what had happened in China and Yugoslavia. Of course Poland was already a scion of the communist bloc by this point, but this didn’t mean that she shouldn’t be entitled to implement reforms or adjustments according to her national interests, as Mao continued to do. The Chinese foreign minister Zhou Enlai had rang Moscow during the course of the Polish October, and had emphasised a few key points to the Soviet figures on the other side. As the historian Tony Kemp-Welch wrote, Zhou emphasised:

That fraternal Parties should base relations upon equality, which had been lacking in the Polish-Soviet case. Fraternity was between brothers: intra-bloc relations should not resemble those of father and sons. Sovereignty should be respected, but so too should the Soviet Union’s ‘leading role.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

Gomulka had made several ideological concessions to Moscow as well. He had noted how the 20th Congress had sent ‘an animating, sound current through the Party mass…As silent, enslaved minds began to shake off the poison of mendacity, falsehood and hypocrisy.’ Gomulka had also been eager to emphasise, in his conversations with both the Soviets and Chinese, that people hadn't taken to the streets of Poznan in June, or to Warsaw thereafter, to protest against the notion of a ‘People’s Poland’, but instead to protest against ‘the evil which is widespread in our social system’.[[4]](#footnote-4) It was a careful balancing act to distinguish between giving Poland limited independence and freedom of action to pursue its own road to socialism, while still acknowledging Soviet overall leadership. In the same vein it was a balancing act in Warsaw for Gomulka to reform Polish communism without going too far. But if we’ve learned anything from Vladislav Gomulka by now, it’s that he was able to traverse the contradictions and complexities of the Soviet system, and that he was able to take advantage not just of Soviet fears, but also of Chinese needs.

The forgotten Sino-Polish relationship was regularly commented on in the Polish state media even before Zhou Enlai’s phone call in October. Throughout 1956 the Party’s official organ, the Polish *Workers Tribune*, had noted on the ‘progress’ of Mao’s latest brainchild, the Hundred Flowers Bloom policy. The Hundred Flowers had been launched in April 1956 in a bid to re-energise the Chinese Communist Party by opening it up to the public. For the first time, the Chinese people were allowed to offer their own opinions on the Party and recommend changes to its structure and policy. Intellectual opinions were welcomed, and it seemed that Mao, for a time at least, was mellowing. Within a year the whole campaign would be exposed as nothing more than an effort to weed out critics of the regime, but to Gomulka and to the Poles, China’s Hundred Flowers example provided them with legitimacy and guidance. Look at what the Chinese comrades are doing to reform their party, Gomulka could say – isn’t it better to reform the Party with the help of the people?

In mid-September 1956, the *People’s Tribune* commended the Chinese for their ‘creative application of Marxism-Leninism’, which they had achieved by taking into consideration the special social structure, tradition and concrete conditions of each country. The Chinese policy was interpreted by the Poles as anti-dogmatic, and something to be emulated. On 30th September in the *Tribune* elaborated further on what it had meant by a creative application of Marxist-Leninist teachings:

Creative – this means not relying on dogmatism and blind imitation of existing examples, but applying the living theory of Marxism-Leninism to existing and concrete conditions of its (Chinese Communist party's) country. For living Marxism-Leninism is not a dogma, but a direction of action. It is not a collection of prepared and permanently fixed formulas. It is a constant searching for solutions, relying on scientific analysis of the changing situation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Thus in 1956, the Poles could stand on firm ideological ground. The Chinese were doing it, they were finding their own unique, nationally tailored road to socialism, so why can’t we? The Polish Communists might have been encouraged by the successful assertion of independent policy by Communist China, especially since the Chinese reciprocated, by offering up the Polish actions as evidence that their own Hundred Flowers campaign had imitators and adherents elsewhere. The two regimes could thus offer one another legitimacy, which meant that both talked about each other a surprising amount through late 1956 as the Polish October reached its conclusion.

In actual fact, Edward Ochab, Polish FS until Gomulka’s appointment, even made the effort to travel to Beijing in the week before the Eighth Polish Communist Party plenum took place. While there, the *NYT* was able to report that Zhou Enlai had reassured Ochab that Poland should go ahead in their efforts to obtain independence regarding internal affairs and to develop their own socialist system as the Yugoslavs had done.[[6]](#footnote-6) It was widely interpreted at the time in Western circles that China's encouragement had caused Ochab to decide on appointing Gomulka, since he felt confident in China's support. This confidence in Chinese support, one could argue, reinforced Gomulka’s nerves when he met with an enraged Khrushchev. At the same time though it is important not to get ahead of ourselves, since a lack of solid evidence doesn’t exactly spell the truth out to us. As the historian George P. Jan in his article on Sino-Polish relations during the period wrote:

To what degree the Chinese encouraged the Poles to challenge Russian control before October, 1956 and just how the Poles interpreted Chinese support are more matters of speculation than concrete evidence. It would be an exaggeration to say that without Chinese support the Poles would not have dared to start the October Revolution in 1956. However, it is safe to assume that Chinese encouragement and support did play an important part in preventing Russian military intervention in Poland as in the case of Hungary.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Rather than certainties, we are forced instead to deal with maybes and perhaps. We can deduce that Chinese ideological and moral support made Gomulka and company certain that they were treading the right course, but there was no question of Chinese practical support in the event that the Soviet Union decided to invade Warsaw, as it did in Budapest. Indeed, we will see in later episodes that the Chinese approached the Polish and Hungarian revolts in very different ways. For several reasons, the Hungarians were not approved of, even while their actions could reasonably be discerned as following the same inspirations as the Poles, yet even after their spring, the Polish relationship was still important enough in China to make regular news. In light of Gomulka’s journey to Moscow in early November, and his negotiation of a mutually acceptable agreement, China’s *People’s Daily* commented on the Soviet-Polish relationship, and what it meant for international communism. The *People’s Daily* referred to the Russo-Polish meeting as a conference, but in reality it was a further attempt by Gomulka to patch things up and emphasise his commitments to Moscow. The following was published on 20th November 1956:

The relationship among the socialist countries must be consistent with the principles of complete equality, respect for territorial integrity, respect for the country's independence and sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. It must be consistent with principles of solidarity, friendship, mutual benefit, mutual help, mutual promotion of economic development, and common struggle against imperialist aggression. However, the establishment of these principles does not mean that there will be no mistakes in violating these principles? The Soviet-Polish Conference proved that the mistakes made in the mutual relations among socialist countries must be corrected and can be corrected completely.... From now on, among the socialist countries, if only the bigger countries are careful to guard against the mistake of big power chauvinism (this is of chief importance) and the smaller countries are careful to guard against nationalism (this is necessary), then the solidarity and friendship based on equality among socialist countries will certainly be further strengthened and developed.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Chinese insistence on complete equality, while maintaining the leadership position of Moscow in all communist questions, makes for a strange, contradictory picture. One could hardly enjoy equality if the bare facts pointed to the domination of one power over the other. As was generally the case in the communist message though, a degree of denial and pretending was necessary. Even if Moscow knew it was the leader, and even while Mao was content to acknowledge this, the Soviets were required to act as though they were on an equal footing with everyone else, whether Moscow negotiated with the smallest satellite or the PRC itself. On 2nd November 1956, with the progress of the Hungarian revolt not yet clear, Beijing issued the following statement on affairs within the Soviet bloc:

The people of Poland and Hungary in the recent happenings have raised demands that democracy, independence and equality be strengthened and the material well-being of the people be raised on the basis of the development of production. These demands are completely proper. The correct satisfaction of these demands is not only helpful to the consideration of the people's democratic system in these countries, but also favourable to unity among the socialist countries.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In time it became clear that the satisfaction of Hungary’s demands would have detached it from the Warsaw Pact, removed Soviet influentials and likely brought about a great destabilisation of the USSR, and so Beijing would later clarify and roll back on its support of the Hungarians. Zhou Enlai would visit Poland in January 1957, largely for the sake of helping to consolidate the Soviet communist grip on its satellites, and to demonstrate a common solidarity with Moscow. Gomulka was initially apprehensive about the Chinese visit, but it proved to be a great boost to his prestige. It also proved to be a further demonstration of Chinese support for the Polish ‘road to socialism’ – a gesture which proved to Moscow that the Chinese did care about the prospects of their satellites, and that they expected them to get fair treatment, as the Chinese expected themselves. The joint Sino-Polish statement on the talks put it that:

The delegations of both countries state that the common idea of building socialism is linking the countries of socialism. Mutual relations between them should be shaped by the principles of proletarian internationalism and based on a community of ideology and aims. At the same time, relations between socialist countries, as independent and sovereign states, should be based on the principles of respect for their sovereignty, non-interference with their internal affairs, equality and mutual benefits.

Indeed the time was particularly sensitive because ‘elections’ were underway in Poland, during which time the people were expected, and in the end did, vote for Gomulka’s popular brand of communism. This would prove to be the last such election in Polish political life, but Gomulka didn’t care because it granted him the legitimacy he desired. The arrival of the Chinese was further proof that foreign powers were paying attention to the Polish example, and Gomulka was keen to emphasise his gratitude to Beijing, as his People’s Tribune carried the following story on 17th January 1957:

The visit of the government delegation from People's China occurred during a particularly important period for us, a few days before the elections, in which the nation is to confirm its will of solidarity and expanding the October democratic transformations.

Adding to the weight of this article, a few days after the signing of their official accord, Gomulka said the following:

We can only be grateful to our Chinese comrades that they understand the principles of Marxism-Leninism the same way we do. They understand the same way we do the principles of the international proletariat, and they feel the same as we that all countries and workers' parties and Communists should act in common toward the realization of a common goal, by taking into consideration the specific roads to building socialism, peculiar to each nation.

Indeed, the whole event had been a masterful exercise in political propaganda and mutual gain. The Poles benefited from the support of the Chinese, because they felt they were morally reinforced against Russian threats, and Moscow refrained from forcing the issue. The Polish leadership also appeared prestigious thanks to the Chinese visit, and Zhou Enlai’s praise of the Polish governing model also gelled well with the image Gomulka was attempting to create. On the other side of things though, Zhou Enlai was able to communicate in the clearest of terms how important it was for Gomulka not to rock the communist boat and go too far, as the Hungarian had done. The Chinese gained much prestige as well from this activity, and their public image as a kind of unofficial arbiter in the communist world soared.

In reality of course, the nationalist communist Gomulka would never jeopardise the good thing he now had going. Having demonstrated to the Polish people his willingness to listen, reform and liberalise the flawed, unwieldy Polish system, he was more than willing to also demonstrated to his Soviet masters that he had no intention of going his own way in world affairs. In domestic reforms and political alterations, Gomulka was firm and eager to make Poland’s own road to socialism work. In terms of the global strategic position of Poland in the European and the Soviet camp though, and in terms of Warsaw’s central geographic importance to the Warsaw *Pact*, Gomulka never intended to threaten this Soviet flank and force Khrushchev’s hand.

These facts ensured that everyone seemed to benefit from the Polish October. As a culmination of several months of political and domestic strife, Gomulka’s prestige was further raised by the gradual petering out of the demonstrations, and the acceptance of the Polish populace of the limited reforms on offer, especially when the Hungarian devastation greeted them, and Western involvement was plainly not coming. The Polish people, for a while, settled into a new phase of positivity, which would soon be replaced by more of the same complaints and urges for change. Gomulka was the star pupil for now, and especially in comparison to his Hungarian neighbours, but this could not last forever.

In the next episode, we’ll begin our analysis of that troublesome neighbour, as we ask a long-form question of why. Why was it that Budapest lay in ruins after asking too much, when Warsaw glittered with prestige after demanding just the right amount? What had the Hungarians done wrong, and what could they have done to have achieved limited satisfaction such as that seen in Warsaw? Was it even possible to compare the two, and what was the net result of the Polish and Hungarian ruptures when taken together, and measured against the security and stability of the Soviet system? For the next few episodes we’ll be tackling these questions, as we take a trip to Soviet Hungary. Until then though my lovely patrons and history friends, my name is Zack and this has been the 8th instalment of 1956. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon!

1. Cited in Tony Kemp-Welch, ‘Dethroning Stalin: Poland 1956 and Its Legacy’, pp. 1273-1274. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Ibid*, pp. 1274-1275. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, p. 1274. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, p. 1274. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in George P. Jan, ‘SINO-POLISH RELATIONS, 1956–1958’, *The Polish Review*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Autumn, 1961), pp. 93-106; p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The New York Times*, October 16, 1956, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. George P. Jan, ‘SINO-POLISH RELATIONS’, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)