PATRONS! Episode 7 of 1956 is out NOW! We’re having a ball detailing this eventful year, and in this episode the Polish situation comes further under our microscope, so remember to join in if you want to learn more! Head over to www.patreon.com/WhenDiplomacyFails today!

Episode 7, Soviet Sickles examines the continuing deterioration of the Polish situation as the consequences of Khrushchev’s speech were fully felt. As Polish citizens dared to ask more and more questions, and to criticise the Soviet order, on their lips was one figure above all – Vladislav Gomulka. Gomulka was one figure among many who had been disgraced and imprisoned during Stalin’s numerous purges. Gomulka, it was said, was too vocal a critic, and too independent or nationalistically inclined to rule Poland in Moscow’s name. Now though, the Polish people were calling for him, and they were demonstrating on the streets in increasing numbers to do so.

Here we detail how the Soviets dealt with this challenge in one of their most sensitive satellites, and what the major concerns of Polish citizens were in light of the revelations of the secret speech. The story involved a face-off between Gomulka and Khrushchev, as the latter made a stormy visit to Warsaw to see for himself in late October exactly what had gone down in Poland. Khrushchev left not with Gomulka’s head, but with a tacit acceptance of that man’s leadership. The question of why this occurred holds several fascinating answers, so make sure you join us here as we attempt to unpack this incredible episode in Soviet-Polish relations.

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Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to 1956 episode 7. Last time we looked at how the fallout from the secret speech began to pervade the stability of one Soviet satellite in particular – Poland. To say that Poland had had a bad time during the 20th century is a little bit like saying that atomic weapons are dangerous, but as we saw, the Poles had more than a few reasons to be peeved about the situation. When a factory demonstration in the medieval city of Poznan escalated far out of the control of the Soviet authorities, resulting in the entry of the Red Army, a big ugly scene and the loss of nearly a hundred lives, it was clear that something needed to be done about Poland. Poznan had merely been the latest in a long line of actions, and there was only so much that the Soviets could take before they felt their security undermined and their position threatened.

While not all demonstrators called for a total removal of the Soviet influence, and most simply wanted a communist message which would actually benefit Poland, a sizable number of those that protested did wish to break with Moscow. In any event, it is unlikely that the Soviet leadership could tell the difference. Dissent was dissent, and it had to be crushed either way. In this episode, we’ll see how the Soviet Union attempted to do that, as for a few months, Poland became the talk of the world.

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‘Stalin was Poland’s executioner!’ came the voice, a small voice, but strong enough in its content to further up the ante and put everyone on edge. Was all this too far? It was late March 1956, and after attending the funeral of Boleslaw Bierut, the Soviet delegation led by Khrushchev had returned to Moscow a few days before. While in Warsaw, Khrushchev had unnerved his Polish ‘peers’ by challenging them with several questions, including the tricky one of who would succeed Bierut, but also on the issue of disseminating the contents of his speech. So it was that Edward Ochab, Bierut’s successor, took up the task of spreading the word, with results like these that tended to shock and worry the Polish authorities, rather than ease their concerns. Khrushchev plainly had wanted Poland to become acquainted with the contents of his speech, but it is not known how he would have reacted to such a strong statement. It was one of many hundreds of thousands of vivid reactions to the contents of the secret speech, recorded and then sent to the Polish Communist Party’s HQ.

After this fact was bellowed out it was soon followed by others all across Poland. To take one particularly heated example, on 26th March at Szczecin [sche-zin] Technical University, the 40 comrades assembled asked 110 questions, all of which were written down and sent back to the Party’s HQ as normal. Those present to answer questions complained that the exercise seemed more like the Party on trial than Stalin under fire. The questions also displayed a central lack of trust in the Soviet Union and in the claims made during the speech. ‘What is our guarantee against a reversion to Stalinist methods?’ one member asked. ‘Why are 90% of generals in the Polish Army Russians? People heard them talking only Russian at Bierut's funeral’, asked another. ‘What the Polish-Russian Friendship Society lacks is friendship’, came one particularly provocative statement, in reference to the treaty of friendship signed between both states, which had effectively given Stalin licence to plunder Poland in the past, on the basis of this ‘friendship.’

The heart of discussion, described by the confidential report as ‘an attack on the policy of our party’, concerned the status of Poland's own communist leadership. ‘How can we trust Politburo members who have been there for six or seven years to carry out what they now profess?’ ‘Why did Khrushchev stay on in Warsaw after Comrade Bierut's funeral: didn't he select our Central Committee First Secretary?’ ‘In this new situation, don't we need to call a Party Congress?’ It was reported that the final stages of the meeting had spiralled out of control well before proceedings closed at 2 a.m. Many workers expressed incredulity at the ‘Stalin alone’ explanation. Moving to expressions made in the Gdansk shipyard, it was asked ‘How was he [Stalin] able to decide everything? Where were other members of the Politburo?’ One disillusioned communist regretted: ‘It turns out we were not members of a militant Marxist party but merely mindless marionettes.’

Asking a question which to this day deserves a convincing answer, speakers living on the coast were also concerned about territorial issues: ‘Why does Kaliningrad [Konigsberg] belong to Russia rather than Lithuania or Poland? There is no historical basis for its present attachment [to Russia].’ ‘The war with Finland was illegal’, went another report, ‘the USSR had seized territory from Finland to secure Leningrad’, thereby implying that such territory should be returned – an obviously impossible demand. ‘Poland is not a sovereign state because the USSR has military air-fields on its territory. The nation does not realise this’, insisted other workers. The official explanation was pathetically unconvincing and deliberately vague. ‘The Warsaw Pact is a bit different since it facilitates military cooperation'. A speaker in the capital commented: ‘At the Potsdam Conference, Stalin guaranteed Polish boundaries, east and west. What will happen now?’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Indeed, ‘what will happen now’ remained the key question not merely for the agitators in Poland, but also for the leadership in the Polish communist Party and further afield in Moscow. By far the most dominating theme to emerge from the sampling of question revolved around the Soviet Union’s new leadership, and by extension, the leadership of the Polish communist Party. If Stalin was like the great blight that had warped Marxist ideology and ruined Poland, how could it not be guaranteed that any men who served during his regime did not suffer from the same ailments? Did these figures not need to be punished or removed also? Regarding the Soviet Union, Poles asked of Molotov, of Malenkov in terms of their individual guilt, while on the other end of the spectrum, it was deduced that since many individuals had been labelled as guilty under Stalin’s regime, the death of the man of steel surely meant that such figures could be welcomed back, right?

If aspects of Stalin’s decision-making could be criticised, and if it was accepted that he had been wrong on many counts, then how long would it take for affairs to be reorganised? As if demonstrating the gap between fact and propaganda, some people asked whether this whole Stalin business was connected to the break with Yugoslavia. Others wondered that since Khrushchev had praised Tito’s road to socialism during his speech, did that mean other proponents of a national, native road to socialism – such as that advocated by Vladislav Gomulka up to 1948 – would be pardoned, or even listened to?[[2]](#footnote-2) The mention of Gomulka, as far back as April 1956, was the first hint of a common theme that was soon to dominate the cries of the protesters. Gomulka had been a political victim of Stalin’s arbitrary justice, and a proponent of countries finding their own way towards communism.

Since this had conflicted with Stalin’s monopolising hold over communism’s processes, Gomulka had been removed, but he plainly had not faded from the memories of those that began to ask after him in increasing numbers. Asking after Gomulka and asking questions which were becoming increasingly difficult for the Party to convincingly answer gelled with the mood in Poland, which over spring and early summer represented something of a torrent of political discussion and interest not seen in years. As one account put it:

The healthy wave of criticism, the increased volume of discussions at party and non-meetings, discussions in the press – the whole great debate in which practically all participating – proves that a never-ending, national conference of political activists problems of socialism is taking place.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the face of a clearly increasing bravery on the part of Polish citizens to ask meaningful questions, Edward Ochab, the new Polish Party Secretary, tried to put a brave Party face on events, by noting that Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th Congress had had a ‘tremendous impact on Poland and of the world, whose toiling masses were taking them up in a constructive, Leninist spirit.’[[4]](#footnote-4) However, this spirit was increasingly turning towards the bonds which tied Poland to Russia, as much as it was turning against the very notion of Soviet rule. If Stalin’s reign had been an unfortunate blip on the communist radar, and if Stalin had been wrong to dismiss Gomulka’s national road to socialism, then didn’t it also follow that Gomulka had been right, and that a road to socialism nationally guided by the Poles themselves was possible? If these deductions were valid, then why did Poland need the Soviet authorities to tell them what to do at all?

The May Day celebrations were something of a litmus test for the Soviet-Polish relationship. It would be a handy means by which the mood of the country could be measured. Traditionally, workers, peasants, students and the like would be expected to march in their millions across the country, and to unfurl large pro-Soviet banners and chant the approved Soviet slogans. This time around though, it was noted that the marches ‘lacked militancy’ according to a secret Soviet report, and that a full 2 million less people had gone out to march across the country than in the previous year. Not only had Khrushchev’s speech done damage to the faith or to the fear of the people in communism, it had also encouraged them to look for alternatives. Most striking was the insistence by some students that they should be permitted to listen to Radio Free Europe, and that rather than 1st May, it should be 3rd May that Polish parades would be held. What was the big deal with 3rd May? Well it had been 3rd May 1793 that the PLC had adopted its revolutionary liberal constitution in the face of Austro-Russo-Prussian opposition. It led almost directly to the partition of the Commonwealth into oblivion, but now there were calls for that defiant date in Polish national history to be symbolically adopted.

Before long news reached Khrushchev that all was not well in Poland. Reacting to the news that the turnout had been far less on May Day this time around, the First Secretary was able to start giving the Polish ambassador grief as early as the May Day Party lunch in Moscow. Khrushchev shook his finger at the ambassador, and he accused the Polish people of turning their backs on the Soviet Union, saying:

We are going to fight against that. You have your sovereignty, but what you are doing today in Poland is against your sovereignty and against socialism. We deeply regret the death of comrade Bierut who was a communist internationalist. [Edward] Ochab has allowed anti-socialist elements to have their own way in Poland. They need to be rapped across the knuckles.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Khrushchev was far from the only one to use such language. After the events of Poznan demonstrated just how deep the agitation and anger among Poles truly went, Poland’s premier gave the now infamous statement to the effect that:

Every provocateur or maniac who dares to raise his **hand** against People's rule may be sure that, in the interest of the working class, the interest of the working peasantry and intelligentsia, in the interest of the struggle to raise the standard of living of the people, in the interest of the further democratisation of our life and in the interest of our Fatherland, the authorities will chop off his hand.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Poland’s neighbours also nervously at what had happened in Poznan, with many blaming foreign elements. Hungary’s Stalinist relic of a leader, Matyas Rakosi, who we’ll spend some time looking at in a few episodes, took the opportunity to criticise capitalist imperialist involvement in Poland, insisting that ‘a few days before the Poznan Fair, the Americans had sent many groups of parachuting, armed saboteurs’ adding that it was ‘the most seriously organised attack against our peoples’ democratic order and against the working class we have seen for some time. The enemy’, Rakosi continued, was ‘trying to sow confusion between the Party and the worker classes.’ A Hungarian Party resolution noted that:

The Poznan provocation is a warning to every Hungarian worker and every honest patriot firmly to oppose attempts at trouble-making and to help the unfettered development of those forces which, on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and in the spirit of the Twentieth Congress, lead our People's Democracy.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Events moved rapidly in Poland as the native Party attempted to deal with the fallout. While Soviet media across the bloc condemned the Poznan event as the work – obviously – of foreign agitators, few Poles who had participated in the Poznan revolts and who had watched it be brutally crushed saw it as anything other than a beginning. Now that fear of the Soviet system was loosened, the status quo appeared more and more impossible to accept. Throughout April Vladislav Gomulka was visited by his peers, and by the end of the month he was coming into the political limelight. In a bid to appease the people, on 8th August, Gomulka was allowed to return to the Party as a fully-fledged member, and he began to capture the frustrations and incredulity of the population in several speeches both to the Polish Party and to the public, which only increased his popularity and decreased the strength of the Party. Somehow, with some rhetorical trickery, Gomulka made himself seem like a patriot, a communist, an anti-Stalinist and a nationalist politician all at once.

His skill was twinned with the actual practical lessons learned by the Party leadership since June, as the protests against the Soviet domination were gradually adopted by the Polish Communist Party. The Party’s identification with the protestors, and their echoing of the need for greater debate in the public sphere, gave the Polish people the opportunity to see the Communist Party as the vehicle for their liberation from Soviet or Russian domination. This process of seeing the Party not as a foreign enemy but as a native institution of which Poles could be proud, was massively aided by the announcement in late September that the Party planned to elect Vladislav Gomulka as their First Secretary during the Eighth Party Congress over 18th to 21st October.

The news that Gomulka would be appointed to such a position greatly pleased the population, who had increasingly come to see Gomulka as their national saviour. This confidence in the Party, restored in large part thanks to Gomulka’s skilful traversing of several conflicting issues, enabled him to claim that the Party *did* stand for the Polish road to socialism, and that change *was* forthcoming. However, it did not calm the agitation of the Polish people, even if it reduced its violent, angry edge. Throughout the entire country, as earlier in Poznan, people expressed a fierce hatred of the security police. Meetings called for the dissolution of the State Security Committee (KBP), and the punishment of its most brutal and guilty functionaries. Demands were formulated to reveal the identity of informers for the security police at workplaces. Those suspected of collaborating were frequently assaulted.

In many localities, crowds gathered outside the headquarters of the security policy, shouted hostile slogans and broke windows, before running off. A phenomenon similar to that in June and indeed to what had taken place years before in 1949, was the outburst of religious feeling. In August, over one million Poles gathered at Jasna Gora, the Catholic holy site in southern Poland, where exactly 300 years before, King John Casimir’s religious fightback against the Swedes had so symbolically begun, thanks to the unexpected resistance of the monks, students and rabble who defended that monastery from the invaders.[[8]](#footnote-8) Religious songs were sung during public meetings, and the most frequent demands concerned the release of the Primate, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, imprisoned in 1953, the reinstatement of bishops previously arrested or suspended from their dioceses, the re-introduction of religious instruction in schools, and the placing of crucifixes in classrooms. Twinned with the religious was the national; just as had happened in Poznan, the strongest feature of mass mobilisation was nationalist sentiment which became the predominant tone at a majority of public meetings and demonstrations. At the symbolic level, this was expressed by the singing of patriotic songs and the national anthem, the call for the return to the traditional version of the national emblem, the white eagle, and the restoration of traditional uniforms in the Polish army.

National emotions were also expressed as specific political and social demands. They invariably concentrated on the dependence upon the Soviet Union and the Soviet presence in Poland. Universal demands were made for the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the dismissal of Soviet officers from the Polish armed forces, including Marshal Rokossovsky, who was regarded as the most humiliating symbol of Soviet domination. The return of the eastern territories annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939, and a public explanation of the Katyn massacre were demanded as was the punishment of those responsible for that crime. There were widespread demands for the abolition of Russian lessons in schools and their replacement by instruction in Western languages. Even when meetings and demonstrations raised socio-economic issues, these were usually related to the Soviet question. Thus, the low living standard in Poland was blamed on the Soviet Union, and prospects for its improvement were connected with the ending of Soviet domination and exploitation.

It helped that peoples’ feelings were captured and communicated by several editorials in the press, which over September and October had enjoyed decreasing standards of censorship. With many Polish periodicals now able to write what they liked, they tapped into the mood prevailing through the country at that time. After so many years of Stalinist rule, where the state media was left as virtually the only organ through which people received their news, this relaxation was felt with immediate effect. Pamphlets and leaflets echoing the sentiments of the more risqué articles were also handed out without restriction, and Poles were able to express themselves on a national and political level not seen since perhaps the 1920s. It must have seemed as though the Communist Party in Poland had lost all control, but in fact they were attempting to draw the energy out of the revolt by granting its agitators their more acceptable demands. Gomulka would then be able to pacify whatever discontent remained once he was elected in October, and the Polish citizenry would then go back to their daily lives more satisfied than before, content that the authorities had listened, and happy to continue living in the Soviet bubble in all but name. If this was the Polish Communist Party’s plan though, they didn’t communicate it to their masters all that well.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Hours before the 8th Party Plenum in Warsaw was due to open on 18th October, a sole plane was detected in Polish airspace which soon landed. Off the plane stepped several Soviet VIPs, including Anastas Mikoyan, Molotov and most notably, an irate Nikita Khrushchev. The First Secretary had travelled all the way from Moscow to Warsaw to find out first-hand what the Polish vassal was doing, and precisely where it found the gall to behave so defiantly. Khrushchev’s anger was based on several points, not least the fact that the Polish government had repeatedly failed to crush any outward signs of dissent since Poznan. What was more, Khrushchev did not want Gomulka, the independently-minded Polish nationalist, to lead the Polish Communists. He had accepted Gomulka’s rehabilitation, but he would not countenance giving this popular figure the Polish reins.

*NYT* journalist Sydney Gruson noted that the mood in Warsaw on the crisp morning of 18th October had ‘cloaked Warsaw in a false display of serenity’. Gruson sensed that a great tumult was soon to close in on the Polish capital – his senses proved accurate.[[10]](#footnote-10) Unbeknownst to the Polish communists, Russian tanks were moving towards the suburbs of the capital, and Soviet generals in Polish service had been given orders to seize key points in the city to prevent any kind of scenes as seen in Poznan from ever happening again. Lists of enemies to the Soviet interests were drawn up, and Vladislav Gomulka’s name was in the top echelons of Soviet enemies. Gomulka was rousing the Polish people against their Russian masters, and he would have to be punished. Khrushchev had spent the hours in the air planning what to say to the Polish upstart, but the journey had only made his more and more angry. Perhaps deep down, Khrushchev regretted the words he had spoken in the secret speech, and he longed for a time when everyone feared Stalin’s ghost as much as they feared the secret police. However he felt about that fateful event though, Khrushchev aimed to patch up this latest act of insubordination, and at the centre of his crosshairs was Gomulka.

Vladislav Gomulka was a ‘tough, humourless and rather austere 51 year old’, according to one historian.[[11]](#footnote-11) On the surface, Gomulka seemed like every other Soviet sponsored puppet brought to power on the credit of the Red Army. Indeed, Gomulka had experience of dealing with the Soviets before, when he had served as First Secretary up to 1948. Yet, Gomulka was quite unlike his peers, even if his profile appears to have much in common with a Bulgarian, Romanian or Hungarian despot. From the beginning, whether he opposed the far right regime of Marshall Pilsudski in the 1920s, or whether he was fighting against the Nazis in the doomed defence of Warsaw in September 1939, Gomulka remained an ardent, committed Polish nationalist. It was hard for anyone born and then living through Poland’s fleeting experiment with sovereignty not to want to hang onto its key concepts after the SWW.

While embracing communism and working for the furthering of that ideology after 1945, Gomulka never approved of that version of Stalinism which forced all others to bend to Moscow’s will. Gomulka had always insisted that a Polish road to socialism was possible; he spoke of a ‘Party of the Nation’, which would ‘unite the nation and live for that nation.’ Identifying with a national version of communism made him a natural admirer of Yugoslavia’s Tito, which became a terrible crime after 1948, when Stalin decided he didn’t like Tito very much. Gomulka’s rivals ousted him on the basis of his Titoism and rightist deviations, and the former FS was likely only saved from execution by Stalin’s sudden death in March 1953. If Poles remembered Gomulka then, they remembered him as a man who had always advocated a Polish version of the communist message – a governing style which would not compromise Polish sovereignty in the name of Russian interests.

His dismissal and arrest painted him as a devout anti-Stalinist and a sincere patriot, though had he not been removed in 1948 it is entirely possible that he would still have been in place by 1956, with very different results. Perhaps because the people needed someone to look to above all, Gomulka fit the bill. While he was far from a charismatic, inspiring figure which accounts would later claim, Gomulka retained an understanding of the necessary conflicts and contradictions between Polish society, Polish communism and the Russian relationship which in the end, proved to be his greatest weapon against Khrushchev’s bombastic entrance in the morning of 18th October. Gomulka’s experience in dealing with Soviet figures prepared him well for the encounter, largely because he understood that the main reason Khrushchev had travelled all this way was not out of a sense of anger, but of fear. With NATO having expanded to include West Germany only two years before, Moscow remained immensely sensitive to any notions of its Warsaw Pact being weakened. By approving the removal of the Soviet figures in the Polish military, since this was one of the Polish rallying cries, Gomulka was simply giving the agitators what they wanted. To Khrushchev though, this suggested that Poland was planning to leave the Warsaw Pact, and it could not be tolerated.

In aggressive or forceful acts like the one perpetrated by Khrushchev, we often forget that the Soviet Union was here acting from a position of weakness. It was only Gomulka and his circle who knew of the end goal; it was only his circle who had communicated the extent of their reforms. Moscow had been told surprisingly little of what the Polish leadership planned to do, and in this silence Khrushchev had begun to sweat as he imagined the worse. In Khrushchev’s defence, the months before – between the religious displays, the anti-Russian slogans, the calls for liberalisation of the media and the demands that Poles should be allowed to, essentially, go their own way in socialism – hadn't exactly been times of calm. To an extent though Gomulka knew he would have to let the fallout from the secret speech run its course. It is entirely possible that he planned to communicate his intentions once the passions and fire of the populace died down, in a bid to cool Moscow’s jets, but with the arrival of the Soviet hierarchy in Warsaw, he was now thrust into this position early.

From a truly PR perspective, Gomulka had far more advantages than one might have expected. While Soviet arms and armour were advancing on the capital, Gomulka understood that these actions were only being used as a last resort, and were being undertaken because Khrushchev didn’t know what it was that Gomulka was planning. In addition, because Gomulka was in tune with Soviet security concerns, and because he was well-appraised of events, he knew that Moscow felt NATO to be a threat, and that Warsaw Pact was paramount to the Soviet sense of security. Gomulka did intend to acquire reforms in the political, social and economic life of Poland, and he did genuinely desire a withdrawal from the old reactionary, repressive politics of the past, which evidently did not work and had only caused bitterness. What Gomulka was not was a nationalist determined to pull Poland away from the Soviet Union; it was because he appreciated Soviet fears, and because he had no intentions whatsoever of making these nightmares come true, that Gomulka suspected he would be able to disarm whatever Soviet delegation walked through that door. Fortunately for Gomulka’s political legacy and his head, he proved correct in this.

While they ended as well as could be expected under the circumstances, the talks did not begin well. Khrushchev made a point of sweeping past the waiting Polish figures – among them the current FS Edward Ochab and Vladislav Gomulka – shaking hands with the Soviet appointed Marshall exclaiming ‘these are the people on whom I rely’, before turning to the Poles and shaking his fist ‘We know who’s the enemy of the Soviet Union!’ Gomulka later recalled that Khrushchev never lowered his voice throughout, so that everyone from the airport security to the chauffeurs could hear what he was saying. Khrushchev had sent approval for Soviet warships to gather near Gdansk, and for Soviet planes to prepare to take off. One wonders whether Khrushchev expected the entirety of Poland to erupt in revolt – it seems more likely that the Soviet FS believed that a strong, determined show of force would be necessary.

The group travelled to the Belvedere Palace in Warsaw, where the final King of Poland had ruled. As the Soviets freshened up, the Poles approved Gomulka as FS. At 11AM on 18th October 1956, the two sides finally got together for some uncomfortable talks. Gomulka later recalled that ‘we told each other the truth, face to face, what they think of us and we think about their moves.’[[12]](#footnote-12) For an hour the atmosphere remained strained, and at noon, Khrushchev deliberately let it be known that Soviet arms and armour were moving on Warsaw. This revelation did not stun the Poles into capitulation as Khrushchev may have hoped though, instead, true to his convictions, Gomulka remained resolute about Poland reserving the right to choose its own government and to conduct its own affairs.

‘Do you consult us about the make-up of your Politburo or Central Committee?’ Edward Ochab asked Khrushchev. Gomulka et al emphasised their heartfelt objections to the Soviet influence in the Polish military, but added in a cushion upon which they could softly land. The Soviet military domination was intolerable, Gomulka explained, because it demonstrated that Moscow distrusted Poland to keep to its treaties and promises – Poland, Gomulka insisted, was destined to remain within the Pact which bore its name. ‘Do you think you are the only ones who need friendship?’ Gomulka asked, continuing that:

As a Poles and a Communist, I swear that Poland needs friendship with the Russians more than the Russians need friendship with the Poles…without you we could never continue our existence as an independent state…Everything’s going to be alright in our country, but you must not allow Soviet troops to enter Warsaw, because then it will be extremely difficult to control events.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Khrushchev later recalled that Gomulka’s passion and enthusiasm for the Soviet-Polish partnership had persuaded him that Gomulka, contrary to his initial opinions, was right for the job of Polish FS after all. That evening, Khrushchev and company flew home, the tanks turned around, and the crisis was seemingly averted. After a short meeting, Gomulka addressed audience in a long speech which was later edited for radio. His speech was an attack against everything wrong which had been done to Poland over the last several years, and it was also a rallying cry for Poles everywhere not to lose heart, and to have faith in the government’s socialist Marxist message. By and large, it seemed that his audience ignored the parts of the speech they didn’t like – Gomulka a few times emphasised the need Poland had for firm friendship with the Soviets – and that they latched onto they parts they could agree with. Roars of enthusiasm greeted Gomulka’s claims that Poland should be a fully independent member of the Soviet cooperative, and that Moscow must respect and honour this right of Poles to their own sovereignty.

Over the next week the mood continued to escalate towards what appeared on some level like a kind of revolution. Crowds in Poland’s major cities continued to denounce the Russian influence – one scene nearly became fatal when crowds bumped into a confused Russian patrol still residing in a Warsaw suburb. Yet, for the most part, the enthusiasm and zeal for Poland alluded consistently to the person of Gomulka; now that he had managed to send the Soviets away, and the leader of the Soviet Union no less, Gomulka’s star could only rise. On 24th October, a week after the Soviets had flown home, Gomulka was still dealing with the fallout of what had occurred, complicated still more by the rumours which accompanied what had actually been agreed to, and the increasingly violent events underway in Budapest.

It was on the afternoon of Wednesday 24th October 1956, to a crowd of 400k people, that Gomulka attempted to both defuse the situation and rally the people even more behind him. ‘It seemed that, for once – the nation was united’, noted a local Party official. From the balcony of the Palace of Culture and Science, which had been given by Stalin to the people of Poland as a gift, Gomulka addressed the sea of faces from 40 feet above them. The crowd chanted his name, waved banners and sang the old national anthem. Again, the selective hearing of the crowds helped his cause – silence greeted Gomulka’s calls for a ‘wholehearted friendship’ with the USSR, while calls for ‘democratisation’ and the heavy emphasis on Polish sovereignty drew rapturous applause. Additionally, Gomulka’s cherry on top that Khrushchev was ordering Soviet soldiers out of Poland, and that it was now up to the Poles to decide their ‘whether we need Soviet specialist and military advisors’. Gomulka attempted to call for an end to the protests which continued to linger on, but for the moment, these calls would be unsuccessful. Poles marched on the Soviet embassy after listening to Gomulka’s speech but, after hearing reports of what was happening in Budapest, they marched the Hungarian embassy instead to pledge their support.

What was happening in Budapest was the crushing of hope and the ruining of dreams – a fate which Gomulka believed he had avoided through a careful towing of the socialist line. In a few episodes we’ll examine what factors saved Gomulka but doomed his Hungarian part Imre Nagy to the gallows, but for now, it is worth asking that important question – what exactly had compelled Khrushchev to decide that all was well in Poland after all? How had the enraged Khrushchev been pacified and disarmed by Gomulka, when originally he seemed to be baying for his blood? Was it simply as Khrushchev had said, that he noted Gomulka’s passion and zeal for Soviet socialism, and that this had saved him? All of these are important questions, and answering them involves a detour through, surprisingly enough, the PRC. All of this we will do in the next episode, as we finally bring the Polish experience to its proper conclusion. Until then, this has been 1956 episode 7. My name is Zack, you are a lovely Patron, thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon!

1. See Tony Kemp-Welch, ‘Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and Polish Politics: The Spring of 1956’, pp. 189-190. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cited in Tony Kemp-Welch, ‘Dethroning Stalin: Poland 1956 and Its Legacy’, p. 1269. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 1270. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Simon Hall, *1956*, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Paweł Machcewicz, ‘Intellectuals and Mass Movements. The Study of Political Dissent in Poland in 1956’, pp. 366-369. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cited in Simon Hall, *1956*, p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*, p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cited in Simon Hall, *1956*, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cited in *Ibid*, pp. 281-282. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)