

From Oblivion to Memory. Poland, the Democratic Opposition and 1968

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ABSTRACT

The so-called March events 1968 in Poland are not much known abroad, but also in Poland they were perceived first of all as a generational and biographical issue for a long time. They consisted of nationwide student protests and a massive anti-Semitic campaign, instigated by the propaganda of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). As a consequence about 15.000 Poles of Jewish background were forced to leave the country. The commemorations of 2008 showed that the March events are becoming part of the Polish collective memory.

Keywords: Poland. 1968. March events. Anti-Semitism. Dissidence. Memory.

Del olvido a la memoria. Polonia, la oposición democrática y 1968

RESUMEN

Los llamados “Hechos de marzo” de 1968 en Polonia no son demasiado conocidos en el extranjero pero también en Polonia fueron percibidos sobre todo como un asunto generacional y biográfico durante largo tiempo. Consistieron en protestas estudiantiles nacionales y una masiva campaña antisemita instigada por la propaganda del Partido Unificado Polaco de los Trabajadores (PZPR, el partido comunista en el poder). Como consecuencia, unos 15.000 polacos de origen judío fueron forzados a dejar el país. Las conmemoraciones del año 2008 muestran que los “Hechos de Marzo” están empezando a formar parte de la memoria colectiva polaca.

Palabras clave: Polonia. 1968. Hechos de Marzo. Antisemitismo. Disidencia. Memoria.

Nowadays past historical events or periods get increased attention by reason of its anniversaries. This habit gives us the opportunity to reflect history newly and look at things in a different light. New archive material and research results support the re-interpretation of contemporary history. But at the same time, the topics of contemporary history are especially in danger of getting absorbed by *politics of the*

past (Geschichtspolitik)¹. Transnational approaches as well as social and cultural influences become more and more important. Also the question how the examined period influenced the further generations awakes more and more attention.

“1968” was an important socio-political event in almost all European countries. It was carried by a generation that was entering in the political stage by the first time, in the East and in the West. They were people born at the post-war era and hadn't experienced personally the war. Considering the relevance of “1968” worldwide, one thinks rather about France, the USA or Czechoslovakia, but doesn't refer to Poland in the first place. But in fact, the political crisis of 1968 represents a main caesura in the history of the People's Republic of Poland. The so-called “March events” consisted of nationwide student protests, a massive anti-Semitic campaign, instigated by the propaganda of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), and an isolation —and defamation— campaign, infiltrating the whole society.

The 1968 crisis is to be valued as an important break, which resulted in an increasing distance to the ruling communist system in Poland in parts of the society. But they received less attention than those in the years 1956, 1970, 1976, 1980/81 and 1989. One reason can be certainly seen in the forced emigration wave, which expelled about 15.000 Poles of mostly Jewish background from the country. This experience followed close upon the brutally suppressed protests. Therefore the March events became a “lieux de mémoire of failure” for the moment. However the Polish political culture is dominated by a master narrative, which gives priority to the heroic and resistant parts of the Polish history. The picture of the suppressed student protests as well as the fact, that a majority in the Polish society looked indifferent or distanced to the incidents around —and even a smaller part let themselves instrumentalize against the students— don't fit into the picture of a resistant Poland. In fact the memory on 1968 should include the memory on those who supported the anti-Semitic politics or acted as bystanders likewise.

“1968” were the first major protests out of the Polish society after the intellectual protests and workers strikes in 1956². While 1956 workers as well as intellectuals got involved, the Polish state power managed twelve years later to isolate the student milieu from the workers. While the crises 1956, 1970, 1976 and 1980 started with workers' strikes, 1968 came from intellectual circles, first of all from the universities. That's why the crisis 1968 claims an exceptional position.

¹ A concept developed by WOLFRUM, Edgar, in: idem, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948-1990*, Darmstadt, 1999; RUCHNIEWICZ, Krzysztof: “Der Zickzackkurs der polnischen «Geschichtspolitik» nach 1989”, *Neue politische Literatur: Berichte über das internationale Schrifttum*, vol. 53, N. 2 (2008), pp. 205–223.

² MACHCEWICZ, Paweł: *Polski rok 1956*, Warsaw, 1993.

1968 in Poland

The Polish 1968 is a result of the specific political situation in Poland at the time just as a part of a more general international development, a significant change of generations, distinct shifts in the course of a cultural revolution and an already developed politicization through the protests against the Vietnam War.

As far as domestic policy is concerned, the Polish “1968” cuts into three areas: the student protests, the power struggle at the top of the PZPR, and a massive anti-Semitic campaign. Especially in the fields of politics and media, the protests were followed by a drastic change of personnel, which offered promotion prospects to many more conformist people. Because of the complexity of the events the whole population was affected, even if only a small part was directly involved into the protests itself.

The First Secretary of the PZPR, Władysław Gomułka, who still was the personification of the reformism in 1956, showed himself reluctant and tired of office in the end of the sixties³. This drove to a power struggle between the more pragmatic Edward Gierek, who established his reputation as First Secretary in Upper Silesia, and Mieczysław Moczar, the Minister of the Interior since 1964, considered a hardliner. Moczar reinforced his power by strengthening the ORMO, a paramilitary force of volunteers that usually supported the police (MO)⁴. In his position as the leader of the “Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy”⁵, the state-controlled veterans association in the People's Republic, Moczar ensured himself a broad support by opening it to the veterans of other Polish formations fighting in World War II. First of all, for the former members of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), the clandestine Polish army that had been subordinated to the London government in exile during the war. After years of being marginalized and even prosecuted, a great number of former fighters achieved official satisfaction, which they could connect directly with the person of Mieczysław Moczar. Finally, the Minister of the Interior stood in close alliance with the PAX association, an organization of pro-communist Catholics, headed by the well-known anti-Semite Bolesław Piasecki. PAX run a publishing house, too, and it had a broad range of media products to its disposal⁶.

Mieczysław Moczar turned with his politics of power extension first of all on the representatives of the reform course of 1956, of whom some had been well known politicians during the early post-war period. This critical potential of so-called

³ MACHCEWICZ, Paweł: *Władysław Gomułka*, Warsaw, 1995, p. 56.

⁴ *Milicja Obywatelska*.

⁵ *Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację (ZboWiD)*.

⁶ HAUSER, Przemysław and Stanisław ŻERKA (eds.): *Słownik polityków polskich XX wieku*, Poznań, 1998, pp. 267–269.

“revisionists” within the party was considered as particularly dangerous by Moczar, because of the risk of spreading among the Party members. This had to be prevented.

In the first half of the sixties there were some oppositional activities, following the ideas of the democratization movement of 1956⁷. Discussion circles, some of them with prominent members⁸, as well as open letters expressing criticisms had been the forms of action at that time⁹. The Moczar fraction, the so-called “partisans”, possessed all necessary instruments to determine the course of the party in the second half of the sixties¹⁰. Populist and dogmatic in their attitudes, they went back to an arsenal of stereotypes and prejudices that was anchored in the traditions of parts of the Polish society. They used them extensively. Their campaign was directed primarily against liberal politicians, intellectuals, artists and people working in media, accusing them of Zionism, German revisionism or of being pro-Americans. The anti-Semitism of the campaign —labeled as anti-Zionism— was of racist tone. Jerzy Eisler, a Polish historian who presented the first monograph on the March events in 1991, sees then some similarities to the paroles of the German National-Socialists¹¹. This anti-Semitism in Poland had no theoretical basis and was a useful instrument at hand of those, who had the authority of power. According to the sociologist Ireneusz Krzemiński the anti-Semitic campaign produced a new attitude towards the communist idea in parts of the society. The party couldn’t be considered anymore as a bulwark against xenophobia because it had included xenophobic elements in its politics¹². The action against the staff of the Great Universal Encyclopaedia (*Wielka Encyklopedia Powszechna*) illustrates the procedure: about forty members of the Encyclopaedia lost their jobs, among them the head of the State Scientific Publishers, (*Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, PWN*). Some of them had belonged to the “revisionists” in the fifties. But the stated reason was the encyclopaedia article about “concentration camps”, which arose harsh criticisms from the Ministry of the Interior in 1967. In their eyes the article

⁷ MICHNIK, Adam: “Wut und Scham. Versuch über den Revisionismus”, in Hans Henning HAHN and Heinrich OLSCHOWSKY (eds.): *Das Jahr 1956 in Ostmitteleuropa*, Berlin, 1996, pp. 192–204.

⁸ JEDLIŃSKI, Witold: *Klub Krzywego Kola*, Warsaw, 1989.

⁹ EISLER, Jerzy: *List 34*, Warsaw, 1993; KURON, Jacek and Karol MODZELEWSKI: *List otwarty do partii*, Paris, 1966.

¹⁰ LESIAKOWSKI, Krzysztof: *Mieczysław Moczar*, Warsaw, 1998; HOENSCH, Jörg K.: “Gegen «Revisionismus» und «Zionismus»”, in Hans LEMBERG (ed.): *Zwischen “Tauwetter” und neuem Frost. Ostmitteleuropa 1956–1970*, Marburg an der Lahn, 1993, pp. 79–92.

¹¹ EISLER, Jerzy: *Marzec 1968. Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje*, Warsaw, 1991; See too: EISLER, Jerzy: *Rok Polski 1968*, Warsaw, 2006, p. 117.

¹² KRZEMIŃSKI, Ireneusz: “Antysemityzm, socjalizm i «nowa świadomość». Długofalowe konsekwencje Marca 68”, in Marcin KULA, Piotr OSEKA and Marcin ZAREMBA (eds.): *Marzec 1968. Trzydzieści lat później, tom 1: referaty*, Warsaw, 1998, pp. 261–283, pp. 264–265.

paid too much attention to the Jewish fate but left too less space for the heroic deeds of the Poles¹³.

Also the theatre director Kazimierz Dejmek got into the focus of the campaign, when he staged in 1967 the play “Dziady” (“Forefathers’ Eve”), a romantic drama written by Poland’s national poet Adam Mickiewicz in 1823, which contains some anti-Russian invectives. The play was programmed on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet Revolution. Although the performance was accepted officially, reproaches from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs grew stronger in the end of the year 1967. They claimed the production would include anti-Soviet streaks. In January 1968 Dejmek informed the press about the cancellation of the play by the end of the month. This led to protests against censorship at that same evening in the theatre. After the curtain dropped a rally run through the Warsaw centre, in which the participants laid down flowers in front of the Mickiewicz monument.

The protest in the auditorium was arranged by members of a younger generation, who studied together at universities. They were oriented at the ideas of liberalization of 1956 in their search for new ways of thinking and expression. Descriptions of the time show a living environment that was perceived as grey and crusted¹⁴. The parents’ generation, having survived the war, seemed to arrange itself with the political circumstances. Every peace seemed to them be better than war. The war experience separated the two generations. The younger one was born into the existing post-war system and started naturally to criticize what they had found¹⁵. Differently to the German example the younger people didn’t meet the parent’s generation with accusations, but autobiographical descriptions of the time show a certain silence between both generations, an inability to talk. Younger people met in discussion circles and created there independent spaces for themselves, places to exchange opinions. At the beginning they assembled under the roof of the party and its sub-organizations, but when the party shut down these clubs, they met in privacy. The discussions went on. One important group of this new movement was the group of the “komandosi”, (“commandos”), which gathered around the young Adam Michnik. They met for discussions or went to public events to bring in their controversial questions and comments out of the anonymity of the audience¹⁶. At that time critical groups avoided to be accused of founding an oppositional association, which could have been estimated as an act of hostility by the state authorities¹⁷.

¹³ LEMPP, Albrecht: “Streit um Worte. Die große polnische Universalenzyklopädie auf dem Schachbrett der Politik”, *Ansichten*, N. 5 (1993), pp. 84–95.

¹⁴ KORB, Vikoria: *Ni pies, ni wydra. Marzec 68 we wspomnieniach warszawskiej studentki*, Warsaw, 2006.

¹⁵ EISLER, *Rok Polski 1968*, pp. 56–58; FRISZKE, Andrzej: *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945–1980*, London, 1994, pp. 225–227; MICHNIK: *Wut und Scham*.

¹⁶ FRISZKE: *Opozycja polityczna w PRL*, pp. 229–232.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 232.

Jacek Kuroń, who occupied an important position for the younger generation since he and Karol Modzelewski had addressed their oppositional “Open letter to the Party” in 1964, favoured a “politics of controlled open space”. He appealed to those who were interested in open discussion to seize the space that was offered by the party and its sub-organizations. While joining them, he hoped for modifying the existing official organizations¹⁸.

The demonstration in the Warsaw centre was dispersed brutally, about 35 persons were arrested. During the interrogation the officers presented personal documents to the students and showed how much information they had about the detained persons. In some cases the specifically arrested persons were asked about their Jewish origin or their supposed Jewish milieu¹⁹. The Minister of the Interior had collected data about Poles of Jewish origin back to the third generation and they used it now²⁰.

Two of the protesting students, Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer, both of Jewish origin, were expelled from the university because of the demonstration. This decision led two days later to protests at all Warsaw universities. In their petition and on posters the students stood up against censorship and for a democratization of the system. The protests were suppressed, and the strategy of the police illustrated how well-prepared they acted. Even the level of brutality seems to have been planned. In the suppression of the students’ protests the Police was supported by the volunteers of the ORMO.

Even though the ways out of the capital were blocked, the students’ protests sprawled to other university towns the next days. The Ministry of the Interior reacted to the openly expressed criticisms with massive anti-Semitic propaganda three days later. The propaganda denounced the students as privileged children of Party officials and secret agents of Israel. Any critical statement against the party was answered with such kind of stigmatization. There was no room for arguments. In those days, a Jew in Poland was not only who felt as a Jew or was of Jewish origin —Jew in Poland was who was designated by the party to be one²¹.

The most important accusation was spying for Israel and betraying Poland. Many people didn’t stand the pressure and applied for an exit visa. The propaganda regarded these decisions as an indirect confirmation of disloyalty against Poland.

¹⁸ KUROŃ, Jacek: *Glaube und Schuld. Einmal Kommunismus und zurück*, Berlin, Weimar, 1991, p. 329.

¹⁹ Szok. Rozmowa z profesorem Stefanem Morawskim, in *Krajobraz po szoku*, Warsaw, 1989, pp. 13–24, p. 19; Jerzy EISLER: *Marzec '68*, Warsaw, 1995, p. 23.

²⁰ EISLER: *Polski Rok 1968*, S. 115; for the state of research on this question: LESIAKOWSKI: Mieczysław Moczar, S. 294; STOLA, Dariusz: *Kampania antysemityczna w Polsce 1967–1968*, Warsaw, 2000, pp. 64–68; TYCH, Feliks: Das polnische Jahr 1968, in Beate KOSMALA (ed.): *Die Vertreibung der Juden aus Polen 1968. Antisemitismus und politisches Kalkül*, Berlin, 2000, pp. 65–79, p. 73.

²¹ POBÓG, Helena [Miroslawa GRABOWSKA], “Spory o Marzec”, *Krytyka*, N. 10/11 (1982), pp. 33–52, p. 37.

Exit visa were made out almost exclusively for Israel²². Jews in Poland became more and more isolated²³. To prevent solidarity within the society the party, besides the overwhelming press campaign, organized assemblies in fabrics, firms and on public spaces. These assemblies took generally part during the working time to ensure a complete attendance²⁴. The meetings were all relatively similar and had the purpose to attach people to the political line of the party²⁵. The Polish Press Agency (PAP) had the order to keep a record of the meetings. The countless photographs build a huge fund, which shows many similar assemblies of workers in front of changing backgrounds. The faces show mainly pure lethargy²⁶. These pictures contrast to the pictures of the protesting students with their faces full of emotions.

The anti-Semitic campaign intensified with the propaganda, the Polish state authorities acted against the students' protests and the openly expressed critics. The wave grew into a true witch-hunt, and it was beyond the power of the persecuted to change the situation. In fact the campaign affected the whole society. During some weeks about 700 persons lost their jobs at state firms and institutions²⁷. The personnel's bleeding at the universities was dramatic. The free positions were refilled with new staff, the so called "march lecturers", who used the chance for a professional advancement. Some of them functioned as an intellectual support for the politics of Moczar²⁸. As a result a great number of scientific authorities had to leave. Most of them went into exile, among them Zygmunt Bauman, Leszek Kołakowski, Włodzimierz Brus, as well as younger scholars like Aleksander Smolar or Jan Tomasz Gross.

The anti-Jewish politics of the Polish state, which had started already in 1967, achieved a peak in 1968/69. The Polish historian of exiles Dariusz Stola established the number of 12.927 people emigrating to Israel in the years 1968–1971²⁹. Among them should have been approximately 500 scholars, 1.000 students, 200 staff members of press and publishing houses, furthermore filmmakers, actors and writers. They had to pay for their exit visa and lost their citizenship the day they left the country.

Many members of the "komandosi" emigrated, partly directly when they were released out of prison. The compulsory migrations weakened the protest movement,

²² POLIAKOV, Léon: *Vom Antizionismus zum Antisemitismus*, Freiburg i. Br., 1992, p. 118.

²³ NIEZABITOWSKA, Małgorzata and Tomasz TOMASZEWSKI: *Die letzten Juden in Polen*, Schaffhausen, 1987, pp. 58–59 and 63.

²⁴ BUJAK, Zbigniew: "Robotnicy 1968", in *Marzec 68. Sesja na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1981* (Zeszyty Edukacji narodowej. Dokumenty), Warsaw, 1983, pp. 51–55, p. 54.

²⁵ ZAREMBA, Marcin: "Biedni Polacy 68. Społeczeństwo polskie wobec wydarzeń marcowych w świetle raportów KW i MSW dla kierownictwa PZPR", in: Marcin KULA, Piotr OSEKA and Marcin ZAREMBA: *Marzec 1968. Trzydzieści lat później*, pp. 144–170, p. 153–154.

²⁶ A selection of these pictures is held in the Archive of the KARTA Foundation, Warsaw.

²⁷ See PACZKOWSKI, Andrzej: *Pół wieku dziejów Polski 1939–1989*, Warsaw, 1998, p. 371.

²⁸ KRZEMIŃSKI: "Antysemityzm, socjalizm i «nowa świadomość»", p. 283.

²⁹ STOLA: *Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce*, pp. 213–218.

a fact that can be considered as a temporary triumph of the state power. Their mentors were imprisoned, went to exile, others were forced to ingress in the army or had to leave the academia. Some of these biographies became known, but most of them remained unknown, especially those who went to exile. The defamation politics isolated the victims. They had only limited possibilities to communicate this extraordinary situation to their fellow citizens. In order to escape from the isolation many of them didn't see another possibility than leaving the country.

The anti-Semitic propaganda campaign ended relatively abrupt on June 24, 1968. A directive from the press agency of the government stopped the attacks on Zionism³⁰. The official discourse replaced "anti-Zionists" again with "revisionists", the usual term for the political enemies of the First Secretary Gomułka. The state power didn't change its politics, only the speech, but nevertheless Gomułka seemed to come back into power for some time. The protest wave came to an end, the oppositional potential at universities was dispersed and the people seemed to be paralyzed.

The news about the suppression of the Prague Spring with active assistance of the Polish army reached the students some weeks later, during the holidays³¹. The effect was devastating. Writers like Jerzy Andrzejewski or Sławomir Mrożek protested. An unknown citizen, Ryszard Siwiec, a former teacher, wanted to establish an example and set himself in fire in a stadium in Warsaw on the 8th of September. He held a red and white flag with the inscription "For our freedom and yours. Honour and Fatherland" ("Za naszą i waszą wolność. Honor i Ojczyzna"). Ryszard Siwiec died four days later from the consequences of his injuries³².

With the news about the suppressed political project in Prague the protagonists of the March protests in Poland lost the political context for their activities. From the very beginning they had drawn upon Aleksander Dubček's example. They used for example the slogan: "*Cała Polska czeka na swojego Dubczeka*" – "Poland is waiting for its Dubček".

The March events 1968 in the perception of the Polish dissidents

The March events 1968 in Poland represent a crucial caesura for the Polish opposition. They destroyed the belief in the possibility to reform the Party from within and made clear that the space the Party offered to its members was not usable anymore. This change proceeded in two steps. Shortly after the March events

³⁰ PACZKOWSKI: *Pół wieku dziejów Polski*, pp. 369–370; FIK, Marta: *Marcowa Kultura*, Warsaw, 1995, p. 207.

³¹ TYCH, Feliks: "Polens Teilnahme an der Invasion in der Tschechoslowakei 1968", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, N. 36 (1992), pp. 18–25.

³² *Opozycja w PRL. Słownik biograficzny 1956–1989*, tom 2. Warsaw, 2002, p. 282; DAVIES, Norman: *Im Herzen Europas. Geschichte Polens*, München, 2000, pp. 186–187.

it was the massive anti-Semitism which made impossible to work within the Party anymore. After a period of new orientation, in the beginning of the seventies, the critical circles, which had found together again, started a debate about the impossibility of reforming the PZPR. They searched for new options of acting and new spaces to gather.

The end of the sixties is generally characterized by monotony and the lack of utopia. The Polish poet and essayist Adam Zagajewski called the years between 1968 and 1970 a “dreamtime for pessimists and worriers”³³. The protestors of 1968 were spotted and isolated. During this period they observed the brutal suppression of the workers’ strikes of 1970 in the seaside towns³⁴. And there are only traces of intellectuals welcoming the government takeover by Edward Gierek with the same hope than greater parts of the workers did³⁵.

The absence of the workers in 1968 on one hand and of the intellectuals in 1970 on the other has been burned into the collective memory of Poland³⁶. Andrzej Wajda, a famous Polish film director, expressed the mutual “silence” in two film sequences in his “The Man of Iron”, premièred in 1981³⁷.

A kitchen —a man inside—, a student storms into the kitchen, tells about the protests at the university and requests his father for supporting the students together with his colleagues. The father anticipates a provocation and wants his son to keep from leaving the house again. One day, he says, they will go together, but now is not the time. The son boils with indignation and shouts, before leaving the house: “Never! Never, listen, never! We are going nowhere together, I’m done with you”.

A second sequence illuminates a moment in 1970 at the coast. Workers are demonstrating and come along a dormitory. This time it’s them who request support of the students. After all, some of their fellow students were still in prison. A student group stays in one of the bedrooms, stunned, not able to move.

Different driving forces in both protests in a short time might take to the idea that both events had been only two different responses to the same political crisis. The historian Magdalena Mikołajczyk found this theory already in the first analyses that were published in clandestine publications —*samizdat*— during communist times³⁸.

³³ ZAGAJEWSKI, Adam: *Polen. Staat im Schatten der Sowjetunion*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1981, p. 153.

³⁴ EISLER, Jerzy: *Grudzień 1970. Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje*, Warsaw, 2000.

³⁵ THADDEN, Johannes von: *Krisen in Polen: 1956, 1970 und 1980. Eine vergleichende Analyse ihrer Ursachen und Folgen mit Hilfe der ökonomischen Theorie der Politik*, Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York, 1986, p. 158 f.

³⁶ LAEUEN, Harald: *Polen nach dem Sturz Gomulkas*. Stuttgart-Degerloch, 1972, pp. 35–36.

³⁷ *Człowiek z żelaza*. Directed by Andrzej Wajda, produced by Zespół X, Warsaw, 1981, 156 min.

³⁸ MIKOŁAJCZYK, Magdalena: *Jak się pisało o historii*, Kraków, 1998, p. 172.

Despite the politics of social isolation the state couldn't prevent a number of workers from supporting the students in 1968. They were mainly younger persons, who acted individually or in smaller groups. Marcin Zaremba verified in the documents of the PZPR that they chose their action space above all outside the own place of work. They supported the students with graffiti at walls, distributing leaflets and attending in students' rallies. But they showed that they were acting indeed in their role as workers by formulating paroles like "workers support students". Another example of a leaflet says: "The workers' class was and is at the side of the students, together with all Poles it is longing for Democracy and Freedom"³⁹. But they had only little chances to be heard. As a result one can say that the few workers that were active in the protests in 1968 were very aware of their social class, even if they were not able to act as a significant social group. Although there are already some texts about workers in 1968, the political role of them as a social group is still not entirely analyzed. In the usual perception the workers are hardly seen as agents in this particular political crisis⁴⁰.

The social division provoked by the state was taken as a quarrel between generations as well. For example, students signed one of their leaflets, which was addressed to the workers, with the words: "Students —your sons and daughters"⁴¹. In this political and social isolation the students of 1968 developed a certain consciousness of being a generation⁴². After having succumbed to the repression, this collective experience attached them in the future.

In the early seventies the crisis of 1968 was perceived as a defeat to a great extent. The students' circles were torn apart, at the universities only much smaller groups got together, debating about the seminars or about articles in exile journals. Interesting contributions to a broader discussion were copied and distributed. One seemed to "recognize" each other as part of the 1968 generation. Out of these circles emerged the first active dissident groups in the seventies, they discussed critically the political situation in the country⁴³. Among those who were politically active during the first half of the seventies was quite a number of former 68's students, but also some people who had been involved into the workers' strikes of 1970⁴⁴. Both groups didn't join until 1976, when intellectuals decided to support the workers after a new wave of strikes (Radom, Ursus, Płock) that were once more brutally suppressed.

³⁹ ZAREMBA: *Biedni Polacy 68*, pp. 158–159.

⁴⁰ FRISZKE: *Ruch protestu w marcu 1968*, p. 91.

⁴¹ *Wydarzenia Marcowe 1968*, p. 113.

⁴² "Refleksje rocznicowe", *Kultura*, N. 6 (1969), pp. 107–112, p. 107.

⁴³ EISLER, Jerzy (ed.): *Co nam zostało z tych lat... Opozycja polityczna 1976–1980 z dzisiejszej perspektywy*, Warsaw, 2003.

⁴⁴ FRISZKE: *Ruch protestu w marcu 1968*, p. 91; *Opozycja w PRL*, 2000 u. 2002; *Nasi w Sejmie i w Senacie. Posłowie i senatorowie wybrani z listy Solidarności*, Warsaw, 1990.

A debate about the March events had started already at the end of the sixties. The exile publishing house “Kultura”, with basis in Paris, published two volumes with oppositional leaflets and official statements to present a first documentation of the crisis of 1968. This publication can be seen as a first attempt of understanding what had happened.

The introductory essay to this collection was written by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who was forced to leave Poland as well in 1968. He opposed the thesis that the students came struck out of the conflict one year before⁴⁵. On the contrary, he assured that this generation had taken the responsibility for the fate of the nation in the style of the greatest national revolutionary tradition. This is, for Baumann, the crucial point in his assessment of the March protests. Focusing on the protest movement in the West, Bauman criticized them for failing to be aware of the repression of the Polish student protests. He described dismissingly the Western protagonists of the student movement as stars, always accompanied by television cameras, whose motivation had to be with a search of popularity and prestige. Of course, in pointing out the main difference between the situation in the West and in Poland he underlined that opposition is an important element of the Western political system. The students there had the right to express their free will⁴⁶.

With this text Bauman made an attempt already in 1969 to compare the conditions in which both movements acted, under which circumstances they emerged and which social function they fulfilled. While the students in the West earned a great deal of attention, those in Poland were beaten by the Police off the cameras. The newspapers wrote nothing but defamations prepared by the Ministry of the Interior for months.

The ones who appeared publicly had been aware of being in danger to go to jail. The Polish students did not only formulate the content of their protests, which was an alternative to the political reality, but also the way of expressing their demands and even of how to propagate their ideas under the conditions of a state opinion monopoly.

In the middle of the seventies the immediate perception of what happened in 1968 was followed by an analysis of the ruling political system in Poland⁴⁷. The place of these discussions had been first of all exile journals, published and distributed in Western countries but within Poland also, in a slowly growing clandestine publishing sphere. But even if the discussion took place especially outside the country, Polish authors contributed, too. Periodicals like the Paris

⁴⁵ *Wydarzenia marcowe 1968 z przedmową Prof. Zygmunta Baumana*. (Dokumenty, Nr. 25). Paris, 1969.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 16.

⁴⁷ DREWNOWSKI, Jan: “Socjalizm w Polsce”, *Kultura*, N. 9 (1970), pp. 25–39; KOŁAKOWSKI, Leszek: “Tezy o nadziei i beznadziejności”, *Kultura*, N. 6 (1971), p. 3–21; [Jacek KUROŃ] “Polityczna opozycja w Polsce”, *Kultura*, N. 11 (1974), pp. 3–21; MICHNIK, Adam: “Nowy ewolucjonizm”, *Aneks*, N. 13/14 (1977), pp. 33–48.

“Kultura” or the London “Aneks” became virtual meeting places for opinions from inner and outside Poland. The “Aneks”, founded among others by the brothers Aleksander and Eugeniusz Smolar, represented even a journal which emerged directly out of the 68-emigration.

In these analyses the ruling political system in Poland was considered as incapable of being reformed. Leszek Kołakowski, well-known philosopher and one of the theoretical mentors of the discussions of 1956, put new emphasis on the liberalization discussion with his thesis on “Hope and Hopelessness”⁴⁸. He proceeded on the assumption that a political opposition is necessary, even in socialism. He spoke against the widespread belief that the political system is unchangeable. He encouraged to go into political activities with an open mind. His ideas were incorporated in further concepts. Other influential contributions were Jacek Kuroń’s “Political Opposition in Poland” and Adam Michnik’s “New evolutionism”⁴⁹.

There were two developments within the growing dissident movement during the seventies that interacted constantly. On the one hand, a theoretical discussion about the political system and the possibilities of self-determination took place; on the other one, approaches for independent acting increased dramatically. It started with small circles, which discussed new ideas, referred them to others and started to publish key texts in *samizdat*. That’s how these groups went back to forms of independent acting, a tradition rooted in Poland in the time of the Partitions between 1775 and 1918 and in the underground resistance during the German occupation 1939–1945. In Lublin for example, students got helpful hints for their oppositional work during the lectures of Władysław Bartoszewski, who taught about the Polish resistance against the German occupation —and flavoured his remarks with several examples out of his own experiences in the clandestine movement during World War II in Warsaw⁵⁰.

Jacek Kuroń emphasized that the addressee of a dissident movement shouldn’t be the state power. 1968 had shown at the latest that there had been no interest on the side of the Party to respond properly on the arguments submitted by the dissident movement. In theory there was no need for opposition in communist systems, a theoretical basis that supported the Party in their monopolistic politics. Kuroń developed with others the concept of “social self-organization”, which focuses on shaping a movement within the society. The state power couldn’t be avoided, but the idea that publicity could offer the best protection under the circumstances of a state-ruled public sphere gained acceptance. The “self-organization” was an important step that produced a widening of the dissident base. Additionally the dissident movement made an important conceptual progress. Extending a base of publication,

⁴⁸ KOŁAKOWSKI: “Tezy o nadziei”; also published as Leszek Kołakowski: “Hope and Hopelessness”, *Survey*, N. 3 (1971), pp. 37–52.

⁴⁹ *Polityczna opozycja w Polsce*; MICHNIK: “Nowy ewolucjonizm”.

⁵⁰ EISLER: *Co nam zostało z tych lat...*, p. 35.

communication and education, they created an independent public sphere, which enabled to deepen topics that were excluded from the state dominated media and educational institutions. These separate spaces could be used to oppose other alternative interpretations to the state-promoted representation of history and politics. That's how the March events became a topic of public debates and of contemporary historiography already in the end of the seventies.

The rapid development of a pluralistic, widespread and creative dissident movement was pushed by two further elements. The division between the alternative protest groups and the rest of the society started to be overcome when intellectuals gave the protesting workers their support in various forms. They organized legal advisers for those in prison, collected money for the affected families and reported about strikes and the reaction of the state in a bulletin⁵¹.

The initial group, the "Worker's Defence Committee" (KOR), which was formed precisely for this purpose, became an important impulse for the movement. The decision to support the workers was connected with the reflection on both protests, 1968 and 1970. Through discussions about possibilities for a democratic opposition in Poland during the past years they realized that they must find ways for a common political vision. After creating KOR, which developed a widespread network around some persons known for the public, other activities deepened the course. An important example was the newspaper "Robotnik", that was established particularly to put a special emphasis on the situation of the workers in the country. Different forms were invented which fit into different milieus within the society.

Between 1978 and 1980 the dissidents established a "flying university": independent university courses that were open to everybody. They took place in private houses or churches and offered topics which represented official taboos. This "Society for Scientific Courses"⁵² merged in 1980 into the *Independent Self-governing Trade Union Solidarity* ("Solidarność"). Solidarność offered unimagined possibilities of political action during 13 months, until the party introduced martial law in December 1981. But the sphere of influence had been big enough in that time to deepen the independent structure and to erect some monuments in central places to commemorate the central uprisings and protests during communist times⁵³. Among those was a commemorative inscription, unveiled on the campus of the Warsaw University on the March the 8th, 1981, exactly 13 years after the March events started at that place. At the same time a lecture series took place at Warsaw University, re-considering the political crisis of 1968 from different perspectives. The papers were published by an independent publishing house, a first attempt to historicize the time. Even the first master's thesis on the topic was written during

⁵¹ *Biuletyn Informacyjny* KOR.

⁵² *Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych* (TKN).

⁵³ GENEST, Andrea: "Ein offenes Tabu? Polnische Denkmäler des Protestes gegen das kommunistische Regime vor 1989", *Horch und Guck*, N. 62, 4, (2008), pp. 28–31.

Solidarność time at the Warsaw University, and published independently, out of official channels⁵⁴. Although the Polish state tried to hold down the independent movements, it was not successful. The structures on the one hand and the experience of relative freedom on the other was already soaked up by the society.

Against this background, a highly emotional debate about the Poles as eyewitness of the Jewish genocide during World War II started in 1987. It focused also on anti-Semitism in the post-war period and therewith on the March events 1968. The literary scholar Jan Błoński had initiated it with his essay “Poor Poles look at the Ghetto” which he had published in the catholic weekly “Tygodnik Powszechny”⁵⁵. The following severe dispute had a similar relevance as the one about the murder of the Jewish inhabitants of Jedwabne in 1941, which started in the year 2000 with Jan Tomasz Gross’ book “Neighbours”⁵⁶. Gross, a well-known historian, was forced to leave Poland in 1968, too. But the discussion of 1987 characterizes the exceptional situation in communist Poland at the time, where the opposition had been able to create a public sphere for such a public discussion.

1968 in the focus of politics of the past after 1989

The social and political crisis of 1968 became only a subject of public free discussion in the democratic and pluralistic Poland after 1989. Because of the State monopoly of access to public during communist times, a fully public debate about 1968 and other controversial topics could take place only after the change of the system.

During the thirtieth anniversary of the March events (1998) a scientific conference could be attended, a meeting of emigrants took place at the Jewish Theatre in Warsaw and two memorial plaques were unveiled in the capital, and president Aleksander Kwaśniewski —a former member of the communist party— conferred a decoration on Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, both of them prestigious dissidents and members of the democratic opposition of Poland.

As we write above, both dissidents were considered as the precursors of the March events of 1968 with their “Open letter” to the members of the communist party, in which they expressed their analysis and their criticism of the bureaucratized socialism. They were punished with three and three and a half years in prison respectively. For many students in 1968 this text was a genuine Marxist base to formulate their own political positions. Both, Kuroń and Modzelewski, remained

⁵⁴ SIWEK, Anna: *Uniwersytet Warszawski w marcu '68*, Warsaw, 1989.

⁵⁵ BŁOŃSKI, Jan: “Biedni Polacy patrzą na Getto”, in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11.1.1987. An important part of the debate is documented in: POLONSKY, Antony (ed.): *My Brother's Keeper? Recent Polish Debates in the Holocaust*, New York, 1990.

⁵⁶ GROSS, Jan Tomasz: *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka*, Sejny, 2000; MACHCEWICZ, Paweł and Krzysztof PERSAK (eds.): *Wokół Jedwabnego*, T. 1: Studia. Warsaw, 2002.

important figures in the later democratic opposition and held important posts in politics in the nineties as well. They belonged to the founding elite of the Third Republic of Poland after 1989. Kwaśniewski chose these two personalities to honour them on behalf of the rest of the 68ers:

Thanks to Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski Poland is able to look itself in the mirror with a clear conscience. Their biographies are special pictures of those parts of the Polish *inteligencja*, which had accepted the logics of the People's Republic in the name of socialist and humanist values, to risk protesting openly against the dictatorship on behalf of the same values. Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski paid a high prize: repression, discrimination, and both of them were for nine years in prison. The courage and the consequences, which both of them went through for many years, brought them a huge credit of trust, which means a great honour for a politician. The order should be a symbol for our gratitude—the citizens of this Republic.⁵⁷

Kwaśniewski emphasized in his speech the responsibility of the communists for the repression politics in 1968. He remembered the events with “shame” and offered a first kind of satisfaction: he wanted to give back the citizenship to the people that had lost it in the moment of the compulsory emigration of 1968. But Kwaśniewski put this sentence in a very careful manner, while formulating that the citizenships were taken “in the course of a political decision”. He underlined in his speech the importance of freedom and tolerance for the new system, in which all Poles must live together. These were not only good wishes for the future, but a political necessity in a country in which the discussions about the past progressed rather half-hearted in those times. Kwaśniewski, having been already a politician during communist times, took the chance to recall the fact that the change of system in 1989 was possible in the known way because of a peaceful negotiated compromise. And his speech can be received as a decision for a society which should not be separated by the different political fractions of past times.

It was the first fully publicly expressed remembrance of the Mach events performed by a Polish government. Kwaśniewski remembered first of all the act of opposition and honoured the heroic, the resistant Poland, which fits perfectly into the Polish political culture. But two basic elements were excluded of his speech: while honouring both prominent politicians he neglected to name those who were victims of anti-Semitic politics, experienced repression and saw no other way than leaving the country. Only with some knowledge one could understand that those whose citizenship was taken “in the course of a political decision” were about

⁵⁷ Złaknieni wolności, zbrzydzeni kłamstwem. Przemówienie prezydenta Aleksandra Kwaśniewskiego po odznaczeniu Jacka Kuronia i Karola Modzelewskiego Orderami Orła Białego, in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, March 7–8, 1998.

13.000 Poles of Jewish origin. The term “Jew” was not mentioned in the speech, although Kwaśniewski apologized for the anti-Semitism at that time.

The persons behind the politics in 1968 as well as the precise actions remained untold. The Polish president put the successful opposition in the centre of his speech. The responsibility was referred to the communist system without particularised further explanation.

A memorial address is not the place for historical differentiation but it is an occasion for setting an example. Aleksander Kwaśniewski made use of his position in emphasising important conclusions out of history. His reaction to the debate about the murder of the Jewish inhabitants in Jedwabne in 1941 for example was controversial, but Kwaśniewski went to the village and expressed his concernment by apologizing. The ceremonial act in remembrance the March events 1968 can be classified in this approach to express responsibility for former injustice.

In analyzing this speech, the choice of the two former dissidents for honouring them with the Order of the White Eagle is astonishing. Kwaśniewski chose two persons who stayed in Poland. Both came from a socialist background and arrived after years of oppositional activities in a democratic confidence. Both were in influential political positions and had taken over responsibility for the transformation of the country. Kwaśniewski, who looks back on a career within the communist party, attempted to establish a close link with the former opposition. He himself had been a member of the Round Table that had negotiated the political changes in 1989. That's why the president didn't forget to mention that the democratization of Poland was possible because of both, the strong opposition and the reform oriented parts of the former communist party.

In putting emphasis on the students' protests as a part of the Polish dissident movement two important components had been disregarded: the people's support for the communist regime as well as their attitude towards the forced migration of about 15.000 Polish citizens. This setting of priorities illustrates that not all elements had already found access into the collective memory of Poland in 1998.

A look on the ceremonies in remembrance of the March events in 2008 shows a slightly different picture. The fate of the ones who had to leave the country in 1968 was visible, newspapers and television reported comprehensively. Warsaw was stage for manifold events explaining the past to the public. There were conferences, film screenings, talks with contemporary witnesses, a happening at the university as well as several artistic and historical exhibitions. President Kaczyński came to the university campus to commemorate in front of the commemorative plaque at exactly the same time when the buses with police had come into the campus forty years before. The book market presented new volumes on the topic, putting a special emphasis on the March events in different regions and towns⁵⁸. Another kind of newly published

⁵⁸ ROKICKI, Konrad and Sławomir STĘPIEŃ (eds.): *Oblicza Marca 1968*, Warsaw, 2004;

books about 1968 were biographies, especially of those who were forced to exile⁵⁹. The loss of a great number of creative and young people became a widely discussed topic in media and public and entered into the collective memory.

At the same time, the memory of the March events became a hotly contested topic within the politics of the past provided by the nationalistic-conservative government in 2008. The president invited several victims to honour them, but the invitation list was selected. One of the most important protagonists of the March events was demonstratively not invited: Adam Michnik. Not for the first time he became goal of a political strategy, in which members of the former opposition who had a socialist background, were blamed for. For this kind of thinking, everybody who stood in the past close to socialist or communist ideas gets no chance for changing mind anymore. This might be understood as ethical conviction, but in a country that is still in process of transformation into a democratic system it seems to be rather a political tactic. Former communists should be disavow at the eyes of the people, after having Aleksander Kwaśniewski for President for ten years. With the change of government in 2005 conservative parties became increasingly aggressive against the so-called post-communists.

Conclusion

The so-called March events 1968 in Poland are not much known abroad, but also in Poland they were perceived first of all as a generational and biographical issue for a long time.

Although meanwhile quite a lot research on the March Events has been published, it seems to be still the most unknown protest event in Poland. It is much less burned into the collective memory of the Polish nation than the protest events of 1956, 1970, 1976 or 1980/81⁶⁰. One reason can be found in the obviously different character of the protests of 1968 that were not carried out by workers. In consequence the political aims propagated during the events were different, too. In 1968 rather cultural and political demands than material ones stood in the foreground. The fight against censorship and for freedom of speech is fundamental for all, but

ANDRZEJEWSKI, Marek: *Marzec 1968 w Trójmieście*, Warsaw–Gdańsk, 2008; JANKOWIAK, Stanisław and Jan MIŁOSZ (eds.): *Marzec '68 w Wielkopolsce*, Poznań, 2006; HYTREK-HRYCIUK, Joanna and Wojciech TRĘBACZ (eds.): *Wokół Marca '68 na Dolnym Śląsku. Materiały konferencyjne pod redakcją*, Wrocław, 2008; SULEJA, Włodzimierz: *Dolnośląski Marzec '68. Anatomia protestu*, Warsaw, 2006; BERENDT, Grzegorz (ed.): *Spółczesność żydowska w PRL przed kampanią antysemitką lat 1967–1968 i po niej*, Warsaw, 2009; KWIEK, Julian: *Marzec 1968 w Krakowie w dokumentach*, Krakow, 2005.

⁵⁹ KORB: *Ni pies, ni wydra*; DASKO, Henryk: *Dworzec Gdański. Historia niedokończona*, Krakow, 2008; WISZNIEWICZ: *Życie przecięte. Opowieści pokolenia marca*, Wołowiec, 2009.

⁶⁰ EISLER: *Polski rok 1968*.

seems —at a first glance— more important for people from the academia. Zbigniew Bujak underlined this difference already in 1981 during a lecture session at Warsaw University, and marked it as an important difficulty in producing solidarity⁶¹.

The crises in 1956, 1970 and 1980 were at least successful in forcing the state power to some concessions, even if they lasted only for a very limited time and therefore happened to be only temporary.

Only “1968” seemed to be a “lieux de mémoire of failure”. The protests were suppressed, and the victims of the party-controlled anti-Semitic campaign remained isolated from the majority of the Polish society. A great number of them were forced into a decision for exile. For many of them, and not only the elderly ones, that was a tremendous break in their lives, of which not all were able to recover.

The fact that the 68-emigration became visible only after 2008 underlines the observation, that the mainly Jewish emigration of 1968 had no speakers’ position during the years in between. They seemed to disappear largely out of the attention and the debate within the country. Only some of the emigrants kept supporting the Polish dissident movement by publishing or translating key texts in the West or smuggling books and printing machines to Poland. They maintained the contact between the opposition and interested circles in foreign countries.

The reason why especially the events 1968 became an important orientation function in the later perception within the dissident movement may lay just in the apparent futility of these protests. Especially among the later dissident movement during the seventies and eighties, the reflection of 1968 provided for a process of reflection and self-discovery. The analysis of the system and the search for reasons for the failure of the protests of 1968 assisted in finding new options of acting in the struggle with the communist power.

One reason why it took almost forty years before the memory on 1968 entered in the Polish collective memory may be found in the March events itself. Especially the period of the sixties is characterized by a distinct ambivalence in major parts of the society. Autobiographies show a deep isolation of the victims of the anti-Semitic campaign, while groups of people supported the state authorities directly. Others benefited by moving up on positions in media and sciences, which had become free in the wave of repressions. This setting doesn’t fit into a master narrative, in which the heroic elements of the Polish history are still given priority. Further research should explore more accurately the widely differing behaviour of the ordinary people during and after the March events of 1968.

⁶¹ BUJAK: “Robotnicy 1968”.