

1 Communist power and party authority in Poland

Polish experience and communist authority

The political history of modern Poland has been marked by a number of features that appear to distinguish its experience from that of its communist neighbours. It did not suffer the worst rigours of Stalinism in the fifties and has retained both a thriving Catholic Church and a high level of private land ownership in the agricultural sector; its political leadership has shown considerable instability and has proved to be susceptible to shifts in the popular mood and manifestations of public opposition; its economy, while capable of short bursts of growth, has not been able to sustain a balanced form of long-term development and has suffered the worst crisis yet seen in the European communist states. All this has often been ascribed to the unpopularity of the post-war regime and the consequent rejection of the Soviet-imposed political order – in short, to the weakness of communist power in Poland.

Although by no means wholly untrue, this view has had to be revised in the light of the pronouncement of a State of War in December 1981 and the reinforcement of the political order by means which were indeed unorthodox but which were by no means uncommunist in either inspiration or subsequent orientation. The sources of state power, it appeared, had been sapped neither by the conflicts of the Solidarity period nor by the confusion and disagreements that had served further to undermine the leading role of the PZPR (in English, Polish United Workers' Party). The pronouncement of the State of War and installation of a militarised regime demonstrated the difference between the power of the associated party-state apparatuses and the authority claimed to be inherent in party leadership. The distinction was only slightly blurred by the assumption of the party first secretaryship by General Jaruzelski (already Minister of Defence and Prime

2 Communist power and party authority in Poland

Minister) less than two months before the military initiative. It will be my argument, then, that the peculiarities of Polish political life have been associated less with the insufficiency of political power in communist Poland and more with the inability of the party leadership to acquire and exercise political authority.

Until the recent Polish developments, this distinction has not been clear and there was little incentive to emphasise the difference between party-state power (including that exercised through the military hierarchy and the police and security apparatuses) and the authoritative nature of party leadership, which is able to achieve its ends through inspiration, exhortation and generally non-coercive means. The dual nature of power in communist party-state systems, characterised by Politburo control over party organisation, government structure and military hierarchy, has served both to secure relatively effective communist rule and to demonstrate party leadership as the general embodiment of political authority. The pervasive importance of party membership and party office holding, centralised control of *nomenklatura* appointments, and the overlapping roles of party and state institutions similarly have helped to make such a sharp distinction impossible to draw and, in any case, tend to reduce its political significance.

To this extent party authority has been regarded as a relatively unproblematic aspect of political leadership and communist rule. It has either been seen as emanating from the fact of 'actually existing' Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe and the inevitable dominance of the local communist party, or it has been considered to flow from the consolidation of the East European communist systems and the gradual accretion of some normative basis for communist rule. As Rose has put it, 'The longer a regime can remain in power, the more the turnover of generations works to its advantage', the East European countries in the late sixties, he considered, providing 'interesting tests of this hypothesis'.¹ Prevalent theoretical conceptions of political legitimacy and the apparent stability of the Soviet and associated systems have, notes Pakulski, 'led to increasingly frequent suggestions that it involves legitimate authority'.² Meyer, too, lists a number of factors serving to strengthen the authority of communist systems.³ Major features of Marxist-Leninist ideology and conventional communist practice have acted to sustain the credibility of such observations.

According to the orthodox formulations of Marxism-Leninism the party claims powers of general leadership and reflects the belief in overall party supremacy. This has been the case regardless of the

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capacity of the party to exercise exclusive leadership and irrespective of the extent to which the claim has received social acceptance. The party was barely mentioned in the 1936 Soviet Constitution, although the mention it did receive was sufficient to assert its unqualified supremacy over all organisations of the 'working people, both public and state' (Article 126). In terms of political practice the leadership of the party is meant to be of a general rather than detailed kind, and while understood to be in charge of matters, the party and its personnel are not intended to become involved in routine administration and management. But it has been a persistent tendency for communist parties and their officers to become enmeshed in such kinds of activity, for the understandable reason that administrative and managerial structures rarely if ever work precisely as party leaders would wish. The principle of dual subordination, whereby the office holder within the communist state system is accountable to a formal superior for the specific performance of his duties and to a party body or official for the general success and tenor of his performance, is therefore a source of some confusion. The contradictory nature of the party's role is summed up in Tarkowski's statement that 'the party has the *right to interfere* in the activities of economic and administrative organisations' (emphasis added).⁴ The persistence of this interference and the evident disquiet of party leaders that their staff get unnecessarily involved in administrative detail has led some analysts to conclude that the ambiguities implicit in such relations as those between party and state institutions constitute a major political problem.⁵

But this ambiguity can also be a source of political strength and a force working to sustain the authority of the party rather than to undermine it. The lack of clear, hard and fast rules determining behaviour and the fuzziness of the criteria adopted by party supervisors seem 'to provide a major constituent of the kind of "rationality" peculiar to' what Bauman calls 'partynomial rule'.⁶ It is, according to Moore, one of the peculiarities of the communist system that there 'apparently exists a vested interest in confusion, and particularly confusion in the allocation of authority.'⁷ A further benefit of this confusion has been the coalescence of the power of the party-state apparatuses with the authority of the party and the status accorded to it by virtue of its formal leading role. It helps to disguise the coercive basis of party-state power and underwrites party authority with the real power implicit in the operation of the diverse apparatuses of communist rule. At the same time, particularly in the contemporary period, there are forces which seek to dispel this confusion and resolve

4 Communist power and party authority in Poland

the ambiguity. One of the risks they carry is that clearer definition of the nature of the authority associated with party leadership shows the tenuousness of its base. Attempts to clarify authority may also prove, therefore, to be a destabilising factor.

Problems of communist authority

One factor that has served to redirect attention to problems of communist party authority, now somewhat distant in time but still a major background condition, is the restricted role of the security organs imposed after the death of Stalin and the search for new forms of political rule. An obvious consequence of this was the leadership's reduced reliance on coercion and the attempt to formulate a more positive mode of party leadership. In the Soviet Union at least, the full consequences of this change have taken some time to work themselves out. Thus it was in the Brezhnev years, wrote one observer, that there emerged an 'open disregard for law, coupled with an apparent decline in the fear of authority', although a major impetus to the process was the post-Stalin 'deterrorisation'.⁸ With the political conflicts that broke out in several East European countries in the early post-Stalin period it was evident that the problems of communist authority and party leadership were more acute. In contrast to some commentators Gitelman, in 1970, detected 'an "authority crisis" confronting some Eastern European polities at present, and others in the foreseeable future'.⁹ Involved in the crisis were a complex of factors: the declining rate of economic growth, increasing social differentiation, generation change, general lack of political development.

Such problems are also evident in Soviet society, although they have taken longer to take a more acute form. Nevertheless, problems of economic development were becoming more pronounced in the 1970s and increasing doubts were expressed about the effectiveness of party leadership. In 1981 at the XXVI CPSU Congress, Brezhnev himself agreed and affirmed that 'many shortcomings in economic activity are due to a lack of a smooth-working system of control and to armchair leadership'.¹⁰ Subsequent action, particularly that taken by Andropov and Gorbachev, has demonstrated that the Soviet leadership has become more, rather than less preoccupied with the inadequacies of party authority and its lack of effectiveness. Apart from the more specific factors noted above, there are more general reasons why communist leaders should be paying more attention to their authority. As Nelson has put it, 'Without leadership authority, the power to rule

will erode as the implementation of a ruler's policies will be difficult or impossible except through the inefficient and costly application of force.¹¹ The irony is, however, that leaders' attempts to legitimate their rule by establishing diverse bases of popular support may raise questions about their claimed right to rule and act to undermine their authority. Nowhere was this clearer than in Poland where a range of strategies was pursued with consequences that were frankly disastrous.

But despite the growing importance of authority in communist systems, academic interest in its nature and prospects for development has been relatively limited. One exception has been Breslauer's study of Soviet politics in terms of Khrushchev and Brezhnev's strategies of authority-building. He sees the Soviet leader acting in two ways in the attempt to acquire authority: 'As problem-solver he attempts to forge policy programs that promise to further the goals of the post-Stalin era. As politician he attempts to create a sense of national élan, so as to increase the political establishment's confidence in his leadership ability'. Ineffective authority-building strategies are not necessarily politically fatal, but they do damage the leader to the extent that he fails 'to persuade influentials within the political establishment of his problem-solving competence and political indispensability.'¹² This conception of authority-building has certain limitations. It is concerned largely with elite politics and deals with the establishment of authority within the ruling group, a process of perhaps greater importance in the Soviet Union than in Eastern Europe where broader social groups have played a greater role in politics. It is, too, concerned essentially with the authority of individuals rather than that of the party and its capacity to exercise political leadership, the theme that has occupied our attention so far.

In the context of the elite politics discussed by Breslauer, authority-building denotes the process by which leaders seek to legitimise their policy programmes and demonstrate their competence or indispensability as leaders. In line with our discussion above it has emerged as a process of considerable importance in the post-Stalin period, when extensive use of the police apparatus is no longer used to keep the elite in order. The situation is somewhat more complicated when the broader social context is viewed. This is made clear in Rigby's description of an authority system as a 'particular pattern of legitimacy combined with a particular structure of power, the two being as closely intertwined as norm and expediency tend to be on all levels of social behaviour'.¹³ The institutional character of the East European systems

6 Communist power and party authority in Poland

also exerts an influence here: 'the all-pervasive presence of the state makes for a range of pressures and constraints which cannot be classified as either coercion or consent'.¹⁴ The bureaucratised nature of communist systems has prompted extensive reference to Weber's discussion of different forms of authority. The bulk of Weber's writings, though, were set down immediately prior to the formation of the first communist state and, while eminently suggestive in their allusion to different forms of rule, it is clear that none of his pure forms of authority capture the essence of political relations in communist societies. Instead of the meritocratic, technical criteria for recruitment and promotion characteristic of the bureaucratic type, communist procedures tend to emphasise political and ideological qualifications.¹⁵ The typical structure of traditional authority, that of patrimonial rule 'involving a ruler and a personal administrative staff', in many ways recalls communist practice. Certainly during the Stalin period it could be argued that the source of the authority of the party official was not his office but 'the fact that his continuing to occupy the office . . . was a public mark of the Leader's favour'.¹⁶ But practice here has changed since Stalin's death, and it is hardly possible to argue for a predominantly traditional basis to communist authority.

Bauman's solution to this problem is to develop a fourth notion of legitimation derived from neglected, earlier periods of Weber's work – that of *partynomial* authority, which is 'intimately attached to *Wertrationalität* (value-rationality).¹⁷ But in terms of the more general social context this conception, too, meets several difficulties. It involves, for one thing, at least some acknowledgement by significant portions of the population of the validity of the party's claim to leadership in terms of future achievement and the construction of communism, and some legitimation on this basis. It is difficult to believe that this kind of belief is present to any significant extent or that it acts as a genuine basis for authority in contemporary Eastern Europe. It is the problems encountered in the attempt to link party leadership with any social values that have created major difficulties for the construction of party authority in Eastern Europe. Increasingly, party leadership is being justified in terms of instrumentality and negative argument rather than on the basis of any existing values or positive reasoning. But, in the understanding of many theorists, it is the latter features which characterise any solidly constituted political authority. '*Auctoritas*', states Friedrich, 'supplements a mere act of will by adding reasons to it', and Watt also emphasises that 'Reasons of some kind are associated with authority of every kind, though they may not always be good reasons.

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Problems of communist authority

7

To obey a command, we must have some reason for doing so, and this is true even when we turn out to have been obeying an impostor.¹⁸

It is compliance involving consent and some rationally based agreement between rulers and ruled that characterise authority relations, and it is this that enabled Arendt to describe authority as producing 'an obedience in which men retain their freedom'.¹⁹ It is this kind of obedience that has often been lacking in Eastern Europe as has most obviously been demonstrated by the military interventions in East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland. That is not to say that reasons for obedience and other grounds for compliance have been altogether lacking, but rather that they have not been strong enough to sustain the level or form of compliance required by East European rulers. Such reasons in Eastern Europe have been either relatively weak or have proved unconvincing in the light of experience. In their absence arguments based on the unyielding character of communist power have had to be used and the resilience of communist rule has had to be relied on to generate its own form of authority. To some extent this has not been unsuccessful. Referring to the building of the Berlin Wall and the lack of United States intervention in the Hungarian revolution, Meyer has claimed that 'the authority of communist regimes grew considerably after all hopes for an alternative that might have existed in the minds of some citizens had been dashed'.²⁰ Moore notes, on psychological grounds, that 'People are evidently inclined to grant legitimacy to anything that is or seems inevitable no matter how painful it may be. Otherwise the pain might be intolerable'.²¹ Staniszkis, too, has described Poland's political life as a 'system legitimated mostly by a lack of alternatives'.²²

But while such political facts have acted as potent inducements to quiescence and obedience they are not far removed from the exercise of power itself and are not really the same thing as acceptance of the reasons that underlie the establishment of a more genuine form of authority. For this reason, claims to technical competence and effectiveness, particularly with respect to economic development, have been prominent amongst East European leaders in the post-Stalin period. Apart from the obvious benefits of a materially satisfied population, party-imposed rewards and punishments, in Nelson's words, 'become rational when a regime exhibits competence'.²³ Competence, further, makes inequalities associated with the structure of power more acceptable within society: 'effectiveness, especially in services to the public, legitimates authority, and ineffectiveness makes the privileges of authority galling'.²⁴ This has had the effect of placing a strong

8 Communist power and party authority in Poland

political charge on economic performance and on those responsible for its administration – a factor by no means absent elsewhere. In a situation of weakly established political authority, though, this has given rise to numerous instabilities. Peabody's recognition, that 'In a system of well-established authority, men of great ability are less in demand', has proved to be highly relevant to Eastern Europe.²⁵ Kadar's skill has appeared to be a major factor in restoring the political order in Hungary and achieving some form of legitimacy, while Gierek's maladministration of the economy made a considerable contribution to his political demise and the public collapse of party authority in Poland.

State and authority in Poland

Recent developments in Polish political life have pushed to the fore conceptions of authority which make scant distinction between the imposition of state power and the exercise of political authority. It is, indeed, only sensible to recognise the close relationship between the two qualities in political context, and we have argued above that there is a deep-rooted and particularly close (if indistinct) relationship between the two in communist political systems. Nevertheless, particular attention has been paid to this link in some recent party writings in Poland. For example, it was opponents of socialism who maintained that 'strong authority should no longer exist under socialism'. It is officially recognised that 'coercion is characteristic of the authority of power, as is the conviction about the inevitability of power itself.' Moreover, 'power does not only not lose but even gains in authority when, under specific conditions, it acts using coercive means' – in a case, for example, when it liquidates an attack on the socialist system.²⁶ Such a view is not in itself particularly notable. It is interesting, however, to find it expressed in Jaruzelski's Poland which has had by force of circumstances to abandon the conventional conception of socialist authority flowing from an ill-defined notion of party leadership.

But throughout the period of communist rule in Poland, the idea of party authority has never been very distant from that of state power and the *raison d'état* that has been associated with the post-war settlement in Eastern Europe. Only for limited periods has it been realistically linked with ideas of consent and popular support, or with policies consistently applied to create such support. The weakness of such a basis for the exercise of party authority grew more pronounced through the years and during the successive leadership crises. At times

it grew to be virtually indistinguishable from the threat of Soviet military intervention and, eventually, the contradiction involved in the attempt to base domestic party authority on external military power became overwhelming. As Stanisław Kania noted at the IV Plenum of the Central Committee in October 1981 (the meeting at which he was replaced as party leader by General Jaruzelski) 'the concept of *raison d'état*, although so vital to our political thought . . . can only signify inevitability, while we are really concerned with the great positive opportunity for a socialist Poland in a socialist community'.²⁷ Members of the leadership had not been slow to appeal to this well-established principle from the onset of the August crisis: Central Committee member Ryszard Wojna had threatened a further partition of Poland if free trade unions were recognised, while Mieczysław Rakowski (in less lurid tones) delivered a speech in the *Sejm* (parliament) which was reproduced in the paper he edited under the title, 'The Supreme Value – Our State'.²⁸

The chequered history of the Polish state, and different views on the nature of its authority, thus served to play a major part in the set of ideas called on to establish and sustain the authority of the party in communist Poland. An important feature of the version of Polish history presented as part of this picture was the instability of the state and the consequent need for a strong state apparatus, under party leadership, in the contemporary period. There was some basis for this view. Founded towards the end of the first millennium, the Polish state gained in strength through to the twelfth century. Surviving the threats posed by the Teutonic Order and Tatar invasions, it became particularly prosperous in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, laying the basis for the impressive cultural and social development of the Renaissance period. But already part of this development had been achieved at the cost of monarchical concessions to the gentry and aristocracy. This, while proving no threat to state security for many decades and creating a climate of civil liberty and tolerance, was to prove fatal to the survival of state power in later centuries.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in order to secure military aid and constitutional concessions, the Polish crown began to grant certain immunities from taxation, an early form of habeas corpus and an agreement to legislate in key areas only with the agreement of the nobles. With the growing grain boom in the Baltic area, economic factors combined with political privilege to encourage an untrammelled class development of the gentry. As a result of this conjuncture, Anderson argues, 'the early and abundant good fortune of the *szlachta*

10 Communist power and party authority in Poland

in a sense paralysed their capacity for constructive centralization in a later age.' As internal and external problems grew they defended their early gains with increasing disregard for national welfare. In the mid seventeenth century they achieved the notorious *liberum veto* whereby a single negative vote in the aristocratic parliament could counter any new legislation and 'paralyse the state'.²⁹ In a worsening international situation, Poland became increasingly unable to resist the influence and encroachments of its neighbours. In a series of partitions, Russia, Prussia and Austria succeeded in dismembering the country. As a result of the third partition in 1795 the Polish state ceased to exist and was not to reappear for a century and a quarter.

It was clearly the failure to develop a centralised modern state that played a large part in the sequence of developments that led to the disappearance of Poland as a territorial entity. Many of the libertarian and associated impulses within the gentry that had contributed to the demise of the Polish state were repeatedly harnessed in patriotic movements against the occupying forces of the foreign states. Patriotism and the rise of a modern Polish nationalism were thus restricted to actions against state organisation, whilst the growth of a national awareness amongst the peasantry and, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the growing working class took place in the absence of any state institutions that could claim to represent those ideals: 'the more patriotically inclined a Pole was, the greater was his hostility to the government and law of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. No matter what mental or real purposes a man may have had, there was a danger that by acting in accordance with law, "within the system", he was helping to keep Poland unfree.'³⁰ Thus Polish nationalism embodied a strong anti-state element and, it is often claimed, a generalised suspicion of state power and authority. Moreover, in terms of political techniques and the skills of government, Poles had no chance at all for sixty (in the case of the Austrian territories) or a hundred years (in that of the Russian) to participate in central parliamentary bodies. On this basis a certain Polish proclivity towards anarchy has been detected, and it is clear that there have not been favourable conditions for the development of habits of obedience to political authority.

Despite the undoubted strength of Polish nationalism it was due to a largely fortuitous combination of circumstances, the virtually simultaneous collapse of the three East-Central European empires towards the end of the First World War, that a Polish state reappeared in the twentieth century. But even with the reestablishment of the Polish state national sentiment could run counter to the consolidation of its