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978-0-521-36369-3 - Political Authority and Party Secretaries in Poland 1975-1986

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**POLITICAL AUTHORITY
AND PARTY SECRETARIES
IN POLAND 1975–1986**

Soviet and East European Studies: 63

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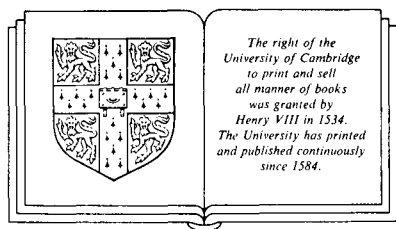
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The Open University



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New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by

Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521363693

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First published 1989

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Lewis, Paul G, 1945–

Political authority and party secretaries in Poland 1975–1986 /

Paul G Lewis.

p. cm. – (Soviet and East European studies)

Bibliography.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-521-36369-1

1. Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza. 2. Communism – Poland.

3. Power (Social sciences) 4. Poland – Politics and
government – 1945– I. Title. II. Series.

JN6769.A52L48 1989

324.2438'075'09 – dc19 88-23436 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-36369-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-12286-3 Paperback

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For Chantal, Nicholas and Simon

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Such people were devoid of any authority, not because they had been unlawfully deprived of it, but because they were no longer capable of wielding it. They were hollow shells with their insides eaten out.

Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*

No one can have faith in a party that will not believe in itself.

Stanisław Kania at the IV Plenum of
the PZPR CC, October 1981

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Preface

Recent Polish politics is often characterised as having well-publicised spells of popular unrest, unexpected leadership change and heightened political drama, separated by longer periods of relative political stability, uncertain economic development and the generally normal operation of what we understand as the 'communist system'. This impression is not in itself misleading, but it does not promise much for a better understanding of the processes that have governed developments in communist Poland and it is unlikely to offer a solid basis for political analysis. For one thing, the periods of relatively pacific, 'normal' politics are those which have seen the growth of forces and have generated the pressures that have brought about the periods of accelerated change and heightened political drama. A more detached view of Polish politics, and one which seeks to contribute some form of political analysis or explanation, must combine the two kinds of political activity in its analysis and base itself on a broader view of political processes.

Further, the contrastive view underestimates the significant continuities that have spanned the different political periods, and the similarities in both the tasks that have faced strategic groups in communist Poland over the longer period and the nature of their responses to them. This has particular relevance to recent developments, when the structural continuities that ran through the Gierek regime, the Solidarity period and the military administration have frequently been ignored to the detriment of a full understanding of the political dynamics of recent Polish history. This study therefore directs attention to issues of political authority and the role of key elements in the apparatus of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) from 1975 to 1986. It concentrates on the characteristics and activities of the secretaries heading the provincial party committees and on the role, structural location and performance of the committees over that period.

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It is a major part of this argument that the staff and political organisation of the provincial committees form a critical portion of the party apparatus, which itself acts as the major determinant of the nature of party work, the degree of party leadership and its effectiveness in terms of the overall operation of the system. The account begins with the major institutional reorganisation introduced by Gierek in 1975 in consequence of which, it is argued, the role of the provincial committees and their secretaries was reduced and their position further weakened by the adoption of inappropriate party policies concerning the provincial organ. The level of staff turnover that accompanied the institutional reorganisation meant that extensive information on the characteristics of the secretaries became available. It suggests additional reasons for the ineffectiveness of party operations at provincial level, itself a major contribution to the failure of the Gierek leadership and the partial collapse of the regime in 1980.

The weakening of the provincial committees and the position of their secretaries coincided with a critical decline in the party's authority, a certain political retreat and the redefinition of its leading role. Indeed, it is argued that to a great extent the party's authority and its capacity effectively to perform a leading role is determined by the status and performance of the provincial committees and their officers. The changes in this area that followed Gierek's 1975 reform therefore had a critical effect on the party's authority and leadership capacity. It is important, nevertheless, to distinguish this from any threat to communist power and the erosion of the power base of communist rule in Poland. There were, in fact, few signs of the latter during the mid-1980 crisis and awareness of this fact within the party hierarchy – not least in the provincial apparatus – contributed to the wide-spread official reluctance to depart from existing patterns of political behaviour.

In the period immediately following the fall of Gierek there was little inclination throughout the country to develop new modes of party leadership in keeping with the policy of political renewal newly adopted by the central leadership. The conversion of the central authorities to a less dogmatic form of political leadership and some measure of reform had a relatively small effect on the party hierarchy and the approach taken to both local party members and the newly formed Solidarity union. This contributed to the more aggressive actions taken by the union and to the growing sense of conflict in political life. It is quite possible that the imperviousness of the party establishment to change was of little consequence for the central leadership and that its espousal of political renewal was largely a tactical

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move. Nevertheless, in keeping with the commitment to a political (that is, non-coercive) solution to the crisis, further concessions were made by the leadership in the face of dissatisfaction within the party rank and file about the little progress made in the area of inner-party democracy.

It was only after the Bydgoszcz crisis and apparent moves made by a hard-line faction – backed, it appeared, by much of the provincial apparatus – to seize the leadership and change the political course that a firmer commitment was made by the ruling group to renewal and more concrete steps taken within the party to achieve it. These included the calling of an Extraordinary Congress, promised at an early stage but its organisation much delayed, and the election of new party organs and leaders throughout the hierarchy. Change among provincial secretaries was extensive, and the differences in the characteristics of the secretaries elected under conditions of unprecedented inner-party democracy from those appointed under more normal procedures of central party control suggested how the reconstitution of the party leadership might serve to reestablish its authority. Extensive changes were also made in the central party organs. But the apparatus of full-time party employees was less affected by these changes. The continuing prominence of their role in political life, in association with that of the top party–state leadership whose approach and actions retained major ambiguities, made more difficult the resolution of the authority deficit that the extensive changes which had taken place within the party organisation suggested might occur.

Within the party leadership conflict continued and the political solution to the ongoing crisis, which the Kania leadership had remained committed to, became an increasingly unlikely prospect. The evidence suggests that influential parts of the communist establishment, including major sections of the party apparatus and the provincial organisations, placed a higher priority on maintaining the existing power base of the communist system and perpetuating conventional methods of party–state rule than on continuing with a policy involving some measure of political accommodation. To the extent that the redefinition of the party's leading role and the establishment of its political authority on a broader social base might have meant some qualification of its control over those power resources, it was clear that many of those in leading positions preferred to preserve their contested monopoly and identify themselves with the realities of communist power rather than with the promise of party leadership and the exercise of political authority.

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These pressures moved the leadership steadily in the direction of the State of War and the reaffirmation of the considerable power resources that resided within the Polish party-state. Central party discipline was reimposed throughout the organisation. Even amongst those not identified with the party reform movement or associated with revisionist tendencies, this development was not welcomed without reservation. On the Central Committee some provincial secretaries were among the first to point out that not all the problems of the party were solvable by force and that the party should not neglect the process of establishing its authority by other means. These observations tend to confirm the close association of the provincial secretaries with this aspect of party rule and their sensitivity to the implications of party leadership.

Such qualms persisted and gained more publicity as the suspension of the State of War came under consideration, with both the effectiveness of party work and the low level of support for its activities continuing to cause much disquiet. The view that the apparatus had been responsible for many of the problems that contributed to the party's earlier loss of authority and its inability to regain it received some substantiation as military representatives intensified their efforts in the field of cadres policy and kept the apparatus under close scrutiny. Efforts to enhance party authority by gaining more support from the working class and involving it more closely in party activities bore little fruit, and the quality of party cadres has continued to be regarded as one of the main means by which the party might recover its political position and establish some new basis of political authority.

The account contained in this book ends with the party's X Congress convened in the summer of 1986 and the provincial conferences held throughout the country shortly afterwards. By this time, the position of the party and its leadership had been consolidated to some extent, but the party had certainly not established its 'leading role' or made good the authority deficit that had undermined its status in earlier years. The part it played in the political system continued to be a reduced one and there were signs that Poland's leaders were looking increasingly to other areas for the means to consolidate their rule. Although it lies outside the period covered in this study, it should be noted that a major new factor was introduced in this situation by the policies developed by Mikhail Gorbachev, particularly by the acceleration of *perestroika* announced at the Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (its ruling body) in January 1987. While its importance for the future development of the East European systems and their parties is evident,

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subsequent events have not yet made clear what the nature of its influence is likely to be. It is worth noting, though, that Gorbachev's proposals for the democratisation of the party and the reform of the CPSU's cadre policy indicate the international relevance of Poland's attempt at political renewal in 1980-81 which may, indeed, carry certain lessons for the leaders of other communist states.

Initial research on the Gierek reforms of 1975 began in 1979 and the study that has led to the production of this book has, like political life in Poland, passed through several phases since then. Many people have contributed to this process and I have benefited greatly from discussion of papers given in Britain, Australia and the United States, as well as the different meeting-places of the European Consortium for Political Research. Particular thanks for detailed criticism and encouragement are due to Ron Hill and Peter Frank, Michael Waller and Wiesława Surajska have also helped with their comments. The research committees of the Open University and its Faculty of Social Sciences have contributed with a number of grants over the years and have generally continued to be supportive of research during a period when teaching and research within British higher education have been placed under great strain, a state of affairs which unfortunately shows no sign of coming to an end.

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Abbreviations

CKKP	Centralna Komisja Kontroli Partyjnej (Central Party Control Commission)
CKR	Centralna Komisja Rewizyjna (Central Auditing Commission)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DiP	Doświadczenie i Przyszłość (Experience and the Future – discussion group)
KOR	Komitet Obrony Robotniczej (Workers' Defence Committee)
KPP	Komunistyczna Partia Polski (Polish Communist Party)
KW	Komitet Wojewódzki (Provincial Committee)
KZ	Komitet Zakładowy (Factory Committee)
MKS	Międzyzakładowy Komitet Strajkowy (Inter-factory Strike Committee)
MO	Milicja Obywatelska (Civil Militia)
MPA	Main Political Administration (of the army)
NIK	Najwyższa Izba Kontroli (Supreme Control Chamber)
NSZZ	Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy (Independent Self-Governing Trade Union)
PPR	Polska Partia Robotnicza (Polish Workers' Party)
PPS	Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party)
PRON	Patriotyczny Ruch Odrodzenia Narodowego (Patriotic Movement for National Rebirth)
PZPR	Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (Polish United Workers' Party)
ROMO	Rezerwa Ochotnicza Milicji Obywatelskiej (Voluntary Reserve of Civil Militia)
ROPP	Rejonowe Ośrodki Pracy Partyjnej (Regional Centres of Party Work)
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic

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WKKP	Wojewódzkie Komisje Kontroli Partyjnej (Provincial Party Control Commissions)
WKO	Wojewódzki Komitet Obrony (Provincial Defence Committee)
ZOMO	Zmotoryzowane Odwody Milicji Obywatelskiej (Motorised Units of Civil Militia)

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