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GOMULKA'S LAST SPEECH TO THE WORKERS

Summary: Gomulka's speech in Zabrze, on the occasion of the annual miners' holiday on St. Barbara's Day, was his last appearance before an audience of workers. Looking back on that speech from the perspective of recent events, it is apparent that, even on December 3, the situation in Poland must have been very tense, that almost all the factors which later combined to cause the explosion and Gomulka's subsequent fall were evident even then. In any case, Gomulka's nonchalant attitude regarding workers' interests and ambitions -- a factor which, finally, 10 days later, was instrumental in forcing the issue -- was quite apparent in Zabrze.

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The events which have recently taken place in Poland and the current developments there, their dramatic course, the determined attitude of both sides -- the regime and the population -- bring to light conflicts whose origins go back some distance into the past. Recent studies(1) have discussed some of them. At present, only one factor need be pointed out; no

- (1) For example: Antoni Marek, "Agricultural Problems in Poland," Polish Background Report/23, Radio Free Europe Research, 3 December 1970; Polish SRs/57 and 58, RFER, 13 and 23 November 1970, Item 5 in both cases; and Polish SRs/61 and 62, RFER, 11 and 18 December 1970, Item 2, and Items 2 and 3 respectively.

more than an incident, which indicates how rapidly the conflict crystallized in recent weeks. This was Gomulka's speech given on the occasion of the miners' holiday in Zabrze on December 3.(2) This speech is of particular interest, since it marked Gomulka's last public appearance.(3)

Gomulka's speech at the miners' celebration had become a tradition. It so happened that criticism of a wrong policy regarding coal mining was one of the main accusations Gomulka made in 1956 against his predecessors. Since that time, mining in general, and miners in particular, have been the apple of the eye of the post-October economic policy. Gomulka's annual speech on St. Barbara's Day resembled a state of the nation address, given to the "leading branch of the working class." There was a practical reason for this demonstratively displayed trust in the miners, the tone of friendliness and intimacy which characterized his past speeches: a rise in the amount of coal mined represented a capital condition for growth of exports, and this, in turn, conditioned the fulfillment of the economic program as a whole. Gomulka's courting of the miners abated somewhat as the demand for coal declined, but later, the steady growth of demand from abroad, in particular since 1967, restored harmonious relations. To come back to St. Barbara's Day speeches, one should note the recurring critical remarks, particularly regarding productivity, but they never exceeded the tone of "heart-felt" remonstrances.

Against the background of this tradition, the last speech was somewhat surprising: dry, complaining in tone, actually tactless in several instances. Obviously, this is only a relative evaluation, but it is one that is supported by the tone and atmosphere of all those earlier speeches, incomparably warmer and unequivocally. Among other things, he noted that, in view of the very low profit rate, the normal five per cent capital levy would not be applied to the coal industry.

The last speech also contains limited expressions of thanks to the miners which were buttressed by promises of better consumer supplies for the region.

(2) Trybuna Ludu, 4 December 1970.

(3) Gomulka appeared twice more after that (during the visit of Chancellor Brandt in Warsaw and at the Sixth Plenum) but these were not public appearances. He did not make a speech during Brandt's visit and his speech at the Sixth Plenum (see footnote 1) was given after the troubles had begun.

The first subject in that portion of the speech devoted to the economy is the general fuel and power situation in the country. The most important point that emerged from Gomulka's deliberations on the subject was the announcement that there will be a further, rapid rise in coal production, reaching a total output of 160 to 165 million tons in 1975. This decision -- in the light of the existing, and probably continuous, demand -- seems quite reasonable but, at the same time, the expansion of coal output is in contrast with current developments in Western Europe.

In recent years, Poland has been one of the rare countries where the extraction of coal has considerably increased and this has permitted it, at a time of world-wide metallurgical coke shortages, to enter new markets. The permanent shortage of coke in Western Europe is responsible for the fact that Poland's possibilities of exporting coke and coking coal are still bright. In view of the demand for coal and the low wages paid to Polish miners in comparison to those received by their counterparts in Western Europe, the decision to increase coal extraction seems justified. However, there is the fear (and Gomulka's speech seemed to confirm it) that this decision was equally due to Gomulka's anxiety over further "burdening" the country with higher imports of crude oil, even though the substitute fuel was an economically cheaper energy source. His reasoning may be reduced to the following formula: we have no oil, but we have coal -- therefore, we must, in future, continue to develop our power supply heavily on the basis of coal.

Gomulka announced "appropriately increased" investments in mining. The rate of capital investments as related to total output, however, is to decline.

In the wide range of other economic problems, two main groups of questions clearly emerged:

1. The conditions necessary for increased effectiveness of the mining industry.
2. An appraisal of the present state of the national economy.

The Duel Between Gomulka and Mitrega

The first group of problems -- preceded by a broad elucidation of the present situation in the mining and power industries -- was, in fact, a long list of accusations against the mining industry. All in all, they created the impression that Gomulka "was calling Silesia to order," by demonstrating, among other things, that -- as in other industries -- there was still much neglect there, and uneconomical management. According to Gomulka, productivity in the mining industry has increased by only 18 per cent during the current five years, in spite of the fact that the capital equipment available per worker has increased by nearly 30 per cent. The productivity of the capital goods installed during that period has deteriorated. For the audience, the most painful point must have been Gomulka's statement that the current profitability level in the mining industry does not permit application of the same interest charge on capital (capital levy) in that branch of the economy as has been established for other industries. For this reason, a lower rate will be applied temporarily in mining, and meanwhile the miners "must make an all-out effort to obtain such improvement in economic results as would permit the mining industry to achieve (i.e., be subject to) the normal interest charge on capital goods" (emphasis supplied). Gomulka's attitude could be described as one that is adopted toward a "poor relation" who is maintained by income "transfers" from other branches of the economy. Even considering the manners prevailing within Eastern Europe, this was none too tactful, particularly in view of the fact that, in the last five years, mining has supplied for export 15 million tons of coal above and beyond the planned amount. In any case, expressing such reproaches on the occasion of a miners' holiday was highly untypical.(4)

- (4) The fact that, in the final effect, the mining industry will have a lower interest charge on capital goods may be viewed not as a sign of any concession to Silesian demands on the part of Gomulka -- although it may appear so -- but a simple facing up to reality: it is impossible to have a 5 per cent interest when the total profits hardly amount to 3 per cent at prevailing coal prices. If the rate were greater than current profits, the state would have to grant special allocations to mining and this is more than absurd, or to increase prices, a change which was resisted by the policy-makers.

The speech delivered on the same occasion by Jan Mitrega, Minister of Mining and Power, attested that Gomulka's seeming "tactlessness" had a broader basis, and that it was evidence of the deep controversy existing between the central administration and the Silesian authorities. Mitrega belongs to the group of economic activists who, in spite of joining the central administration, are maintaining their firm links with Silesia, and feel themselves bound by a certain feeling of solidarity with that region. In his speech, Mitrega conducted a dialogue of sorts with Gomulka, concentrating on highlighting Silesia's share in the development of the national economy. At the beginning of his speech, Mitrega thanked, in the name of the miners, the various institutions and voivodship committees, and in particular the Katowice Voivodship Committee, for their help to the mining industry, but omitted addressing such thanks to the national Party and government. Talking about the achievements of the mining industry, he cited several figures and indices, as if wanting to remove the impression made by Gomulka's complaints. Among other things, he cited the fact that, during the last 14 years, (which means since Gomulka's return to power), the extraction of coal has increased by 50 per cent, while the labor force has simultaneously decreased by 4 per cent. According to Mitrega, the relative drop in investments in the mining industry during the last five years amounted to 42 per cent. Directly after his triumphant listing of all achievements, he added: "Instructions given by Comrade Wieslaw /Gomulka/ with regard to a further raising of economic effectiveness in our mining activities will be fully adopted and put to use by us" (emphasis supplied). It was hardly surprising that his audience greeted this part of his speech with loud applause. As if further to dot the is and cross the ts, after making this declaration, Mitrega immediately went on to spell out the difficulties which plague the mining industry. These were: underinvestment ("as a result of depriving our mines of supplies from other industries"), insufficient housing construction, lack of help in improving technical progress ("we are not able by ourselves to cope with all the difficulties"), etc. "We face a particularly difficult situation in the mines producing coal used as an energy source, which work under a limited investment program inadequate to their needs and tasks." The central directives, and especially the new system of incentives, will be implemented with success, because "We have prepared ourselves for them with the unfailing support of our Party organizations and lower Party officials, with the support of the progressive mobilization of our technological-engineering and scientific

cadres, and of our workers' brigades" (emphasis supplied).

Against the background of Gomulka's speech, Mitrega's statements sounded like a protest on the part of a faithful but offended partner who has fallen into disgrace. The warm applause which greeted Mitrega's speech indicated that this was not merely a controversy between two centers of power. Instead, it created the impression that, for the first time, Gomulka was not appearing in the role of "prima donna" at the St. Barbara's Day festivities. It can be concluded that this was duly noted from the fact that Trybuna Ludu, on December 4, cut out the most critical parts of the above-mentioned portions of Mitrega's speech, which were originally included in Radio Warsaw's December 3 broadcast. Gomulka, however, must have been aware of the bad mood even then prevailing in Silesia, because, in that part of his speech in which he discussed the general economic situation, he found it necessary to assure his audience that at least the existing shortages in supplies "will be relieved here as far as possible."

The State of Agriculture

Rather surprisingly, Gomulka also cited figures concerning this year's bad harvest. As has already been shown on the strength of official data, (5) the drop in the harvest of the four grains amounted to about four hundredweight per hectare, which caused an estimated drop of about four million tons from the 1969 total (a year in which over 1.5 million tons of grain were imported). In his speech, Gomulka said that "the total harvest of the four types of grain is more than 2.4 million tons less than it was last year." On the basis of these figures, it would appear that the drop in the harvest amounted

(5) See Antoni Marek, "Agricultural Problems in Poland; Details and Implications," Polish Background Report/23, RFER, 3 December 1970.

While listening to Gomulka's speech, I recalled the occasion, many years ago, when one of the British ministers, in a speech delivered to British miners, said: "I ask each one of you to give me one more ton of coal and I shall conduct a foreign policy of which you will be proud." Here in Wladyslaw Gomulka's speech, the same accent has also appeared -- in other words, a clear linking of our economic achievements with our future political strength.

Although Gomulka's speech does not provide any real substantiation for the above-cited association, nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that, by applying this example to the problem of grain shortages, one can find an additional reason for the latest statistical volte-face, namely: since no one will give me these missing 2,000,000 tons of grain, let me at least hide the fact that they are missing.

Gomulka also mentioned in his speech that the USSR will supply Poland with 2,000,000 tons of grain from its current harvest. In the context of data given by Gomulka, this would cover 50 per cent of this year's shortfall in this field. However, in the light of figures published by other official Polish sources, it would cover only 36 per cent of this deficiency. The opinion expressed by Gomulka that this year's root crop and hay harvests, which were better than last year's, will help to rebuild the farm animal population is not substantiated by facts, because the increases in these harvests amounted to only 10 per cent over those of 1969, which had already been 15 per cent below those of 1968. This year's root crop and hay harvests, therefore, did not even reach the 1968 level.

Still another hypothesis might be considered. It was in Gomulka's interest to emphasize the dire situation in his talks with the USSR. Since this was of little help, having received no more than two million tons of grain, the higher figure was dropped. Under the circumstances, he "converted" the earlier figure of 4 million tons to 2.4 million, since otherwise the insufficient amount of Soviet aid might have increased anti-Soviet feelings among the population and this would be playing with fire. The fact that the bitterness caused by the failure in bargaining for more grain could have influenced the fatal decision to announce price increases prematurely is another matter.

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only to two and not to four cwt per hectare. (6) This would show that this year's average amounted to 19.7 cwt. Hard though it may be to believe, these figures differ basically from all official data other than those cited by Gomulka. (7)

This basic change in the appraisal of the scale of the bad harvest could have been due to various reasons, some of which, at least, should be taken into consideration:

1. The changed appraisal of the harvest on the basis of new, more detailed data (rather unlikely);

2. The propaganda apparatus has, for some reason, exaggerated the scale of the bad harvest, with or without Gomulka's approval (not very likely, but possible);

3. The decision was reached to hide from the public and from foreign observers the true situation for fear of political repercussions (the most likely possibility).

This last supposition would seem to gain weight in view of the fact that such a disastrous result in agricultural production must weaken the position of Gomulka as the man who was personally engaged in forcing through the present forms of agriculture in Poland. Moreover, it could further aggravate the already evident signs of panic on the internal market and could also weaken Poland's position abroad during the current, very vigorous political activities.

On the periphery of this case, it is worth citing an excerpt from a commentary broadcast by Radio Warsaw on December 4:

(6) The undisputed drop in the size of the total area sown to grain in the current year amounted to 400,000 hectares (Trybuna Ludu, 7 September 1970). This would correspond to a calculated drop in the harvest amounting to 865,000 tons of grain, and would leave the remaining drop of 1,535,000 tons as due to a poor harvest. This amount, divided by the total number of hectares sown to grain, would show an average per hectare drop in yield amounting to two cwt.

(7) Jozef Tejchma: "...three to five hundredweight per hectare, in some voivodships, even those which have good soil." Agencja Robotnicza: "...an average four cwt per hectare," as cited in detail in the report referred to in footnote 5.