

Tadeusz Kisielewski, *Październik 1956 — punkt odniesienia. Mozaika faktów i poglądów. Impresje historyczne (October 1956 — A Point of Reference. A Mosaic of Facts and Views. Historical Impressions)*, Warszawa 2001, Wydawnictwo Neriton i Instytut Historii PAN, 466 pp.

Tadeusz Kisielewski's latest book is not a classic historical monograph. The author states this at the very outset (p. 5), saying that his study is "an attempt to present the activities of communism and their results in three important different fields: in the work and activity of creative authors, especially writers; in relations between religion in general, in particular the Roman Catholic religion and Church, and communism; and in the field of law and the administration of justice, with much attention paid to some occurrences in social and economic life". These three fields have not been given equal attention: 230 pages have been devoted to the literary field, 140 to the religious one, and 80 to the legal sphere.

I dare say that more than a half of the text consists of variations on or, as the author calls them, impressions of the meeting held by the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) on January 19, 1959 which examined the situation in the administration of justice and in the writers' milieu. Kisielewski focuses his mind on the period shortly before and a few years after October 1956, that is, the years between 1955 and 1960. The period cannot be defined precisely for the author moves freely in the history of Poland and the USSR, his frequent digressions ranging from the 19th century to the present times. This is why the book, though extremely interesting, is sometimes difficult to read. To cite but one of many examples: the section dealing with the legal system in the Polish People's Republic contains quotations from K r o - p o t k i n 's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. This method of narration is interesting for it shows that the institutions in the Polish People's Republic and the people who created them were not so original as we used to think. They had a broader and older genesis than we would have thought.

The author did not adopt the method of an "archive-worm". The sources documents, few as they are, come from the Archives of Modern Records and they are mainly minutes of the meetings of the Political Bureau of the PZPR Central Committee from the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. This modest archival base is justified by the nature of the author's reflections: 1. some matters dealt with by him lack archival documentation while others are known from reliable studies or published collections of sources; 2. he makes use of another type of materials, selected subjectively. The last few semi-autobiographic books published by Kisielewski show that he likes to express his opinions freely and is not afraid to do so. Moreover, since he has deliberately chosen the method of

equipping his reflections with many references which seem to be but loosely connected with the main current of his narration, the reader receives more than is indicated by the title. For instance, in connection with the "letter of 34" intellectuals, the author characterises other currents of political opposition in Poland, such as the group called "The Movement", the Workers' Defence Committee, the Movement for the Defence of the Rights of Man and Citizen, etc.

What is characteristic of the source base of the book is the inclusion of many interviews, press statements, reminiscences and memoirs written after 1989. This applies in particular to the literary part of the reflections. This is interesting for it means that the historians' discourse on the Polish People's Republic has been enriched by a category of sources which have been rarely used on such a scale. The first to do this on a similar scale was probably Henryk Słabek in his study on writers¹. The book includes many quotations from the works and statements by such persons as Czesław Miłosz, Adam Schaff, Peter Raina (in connection with his frequently quoted volume of documents on State-Church relations), Jerzy Giedroyc, Władimir Lenin, Stefan Kisielewski, Stefan Żółkiewski, Stefan Wyszyński and John Paul II. As regards foreign authors, Kisielewski freely quotes from studies, memoirs and literary works by writers who have discussed the Soviet reality, to mention Victor Suvorov (his opinions seem to be making a career among Polish historians), Pavel Sudoplatov, Andrzej Nowak, Venedikt Yerofeyev, Władimir Bukovsky. But the most frequently quoted person is naturally Władysław Gomułka, which is fully justified in view of the title of the book.

The author's language, sometimes highly emotional, indicates that the book is deeply personal, that Kisielewski has departed from the pattern of the classic monograph. For instance, he speaks about Władysław Gomułka's "mean intentions" and calls his interpretation of a document "extremely repulsive" (p. 342). But such expressions are not frequent.

What in my view is particularly valuable in Kisielewski's description of the "moulders of Polish souls" is his critical analysis of the literary milieu at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties. The reader has the impression that the author has little sympathy for the behaviour of Polish writers and their way of thinking. In comparing studies by historians with such contrary outlooks as Barbara Fijałkowska and Bohdan Urbankowski, he tries to prove that in fact they did not differ in their evaluations of the most important characteristics of the writers' milieu.

In his appraisal of the attitudes of not only writers but of intellectuals in general, Kisielewski often goes against fashion and the milieu's norms. Stefan Żółkiewski is for him not only, and not mainly, an oppositional literary expert with a "good March 1968 page" to his credit, but first and foremost a party functionary active on the cultural front who in 1950 drew up lists of scientific workers with notes suggesting who should be left at the university and who should be transferred to some other place. Juliusz Kleiner and Stanisław Pigoń were among those listed in the latter category. It was Żółkiewski who in 1959 drafted a plan in which he proposed that only selected writers should be awarded literary prizes, including state ones, and enjoy publishing facilities. For Kisielewski, Adam Schaff is not mainly a Marxist revisionist who tries to clear his name in the memoirs he has been writing in the last few years, but first and foremost the founder of the Institute for the Training of Scientific Cadres and a man who tried to blackmail the Partisan "Kultura" when Giedroyc withdrew his support for Gomułka after the dissolution of "Po prostu". As Kisielewski writes, Schaff "was a lord and master, to use a well known saying, and a lord and master is an open-handed person. This was a frequent trait of dignitaries in People's Poland,

¹ Henryk Słabek, *Intelektualistów obraz własny w świetle dokumentów autobiograficznych 1944–1989* (The Self-Portrait of Intellectuals in the Light of Autobiographic Documents 1944–1989), Warszawa 1997.

who otherwise were chicken-hearted. Schaff was no exception". Kislewski demythologises some subtle intellectual attempts to explain Polish writers' commitment to communism. "A ketman's attitude" and "Hegelian sting" are replaced in his analysis by more prosaic motives which years later were revealed by some of the heroes described by the author (p. 208).

In his reflections on writers, the author also writes about the events of March 1968, which in his view were a political contest, a form of the younger communist generation's struggle for power. Kislewski condemns anti-Semitism, but also cites examples of philo-Semitism which were motivated by self-interest. He says that it is basically wrong to accuse a whole society, a whole nation, of anti-Semitism or anti-Polonism (p. 136). It is a pity that the subject of folk anti-Semitism has not been discussed more fully.

In the chapter dealing with State-Church relations the author focuses on the conflicts in 1956-1960. In his view, the years 1956-1957 and Gomulka's good relations with the Church were a specific kind of *NEP* (New Economic Policy introduced in the Soviet Union in 1921). In his opinion, the Church's policy in post-war Poland was determined mainly by the Church's paramount role in pre-war Poland, reflected in the ideology of Catholic Poland (p. 248), the strength of the universally accepted stereotype that a Pole was naturally a Catholic, the folk character of Polish Catholicism and the possibility of a more liberal development of communism in Poland after October 1956. Kislewski methodically analyses the successive stages of the struggle between the State and the Church. What is interesting is that in his interpretation of well known facts and events he goes further than the young historians in the Polish People's Republic did in their classic studies on State-Church relations. He recalls that the agreement of April 1950 aroused great resistance, as was reflected in the dispute between the Cracow metropolitan Adam Sapieha and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. In his view, the agreement was the second important attempt at a tactical agreement between anti-communist forces and communists, the first having been made by Stanisław Mikołajczyk.

In the third part, which deals with law in the Polish People's Republic, Kislewski examines the problem of private property and socialist economy. He emphasises the differences between the Polish economic model (private agriculture) and that in the other states of the bloc.

It is difficult to review Kislewski's study because of its personal character. The book is something between an historical monograph and a publicistic study. It seems that in the author's intention it was to be a pretext for his own intellectual settlement of accounts with the Polish People's Republic and, more broadly, with communism. "Communism, which lasted several dozen years in Poland", he says, "infected the nation and society; only the most resistant organisms managed to defy the plague. In a new mutation the plague has been transferred into the Third Republic, mainly as a result of a compromise reached by the élites of two previously hostile sides in the momentous year 1989. It has developed on the basis of «savage», ruthless capitalism and a helpless democracy, liable to instrumentalisation". For obvious reasons such a statement is a kind of the author's creed and cannot be evaluated scientifically. Similarly, though for other reasons, it is difficult to polemise with the assertion that the documents of the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are "in a way, the true history of People's Poland. At the same time, these documents present only incomplete knowledge about countries and their societies, a specific knowledge at that. There is no contradiction in this statement".

However, if we ignore the publicistic layer of the book and focus on its substance, the most interesting fragments seem to be those concerning the points of contact between literary life and the party. The author has shown and profoundly analysed the complicated process of implementation of the party leadership's aims in the writers' milieu and the reactions the party endeavours aroused. It turns out that three years after the Polish October the *PZPR* did not

renounce the ambition of steering, and intervening in, literary activity. This seems to be the most solid proof of the author's main thesis that the year 1956 did not mark a turning point in the development of communism in Poland.

Some of the author's statements and interpretations are controversial or require supplementation.

The liquidation of workers' councils calls for a broader analysis in the light of latest research. There is no doubt that political motives played the main role. However, it is worth remembering that the way the councils functioned embarrassed the economists who were trying to reform the Polish economic system after October 1956. It turned out that in enterprises run according to the new model there was no room for councils with such large powers as those enjoyed by the new councils. Moreover, support for the councils kept declining because of their growing bureaucratisation, and workers' influence on decision-making became smaller and smaller².

I would also dispute the author's assertion that the failure of collectivisation was due only to the attitude of peasants (p. 378). It is an indisputable fact that peasants' resistance played the main role, a role that can hardly be overestimated. But it is worth remembering that the slowdown of collectivisation, especially after the Gryfice (1951) and Lublin affairs (1953), was also a result of the disorientation of provincial authorities who, especially after the death of Stalin, preferred to apply too little rather than too much pressure.

What requires supplementation is the interesting story of Gomułka's fight against economic crimes, which led to the much publicised case of Stanisław Wawrzecki, who was sentenced to death in 1965 for corrupt practices in meat trade in Warsaw. On the basis of documents issued by the Ministry of Justice and kept in the files of the PZPR Central Committee, the author analyses the initial effects of this campaign in 1957. The case calls for a more comprehensive explanation. It cannot be excluded that at the root of the campaign lay the opinions of ordinary people, who protested against the high incomes of the "private enterprise", and a successive wave of strikes which spread in Poland in the summer of 1957. It is difficult to say whether Gomułka and his new team really believed that the bad material situation was due to corruption and abuses or whether the campaign was only a populist trick (since we cannot make it better, let us make it more equal). What is indisputable is that special structures were set up first at the people's councils and later (end of 1957) at the party committees to fight against larceny, speculation and corruption. Between November 1957 and April 1958 the party teams examined 10,956 cases. Party sanctions were applied against 9,112 persons, of whom 5,809 were expelled from the party, and 3,225 motions for dismissals were lodged. 65 per cent of the persons who were punished were white-collar workers, mostly in posts of authority³. Though the campaign against corrupt practices could not change their mechanism or minimise their incidence, it constituted an important element in building the image of the new team.

Kisielewski's book is interesting intellectually and original. It makes interesting reading not only for professional historians but also for a wide circle of readers interested in the history of the Polish People's Republic.

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² For more details see *Robotnicy '56-'57: czy rozczarowane komunistem? (Workers 1956-1957: Disenchantment in Communism?)*, in: *Komunizm. Ideologia, system, ludzie*, ed. T. Szarota, Wydawnictwo Neriton, Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warszawa 2001, pp. 325-337.

³ Archives of New Records, KC PZPR, XI/281. Note on the activity of party teams set up to combat abuses of power and corruption, April 1958, k. 53-55.