Rokossowski Coming Home:  
The Making and Breaking of an (Inter-)national Hero in Stalinist Poland (1949–1956)  
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At the beginning was the Great Terror of 1937/38. It meant both the arrest of a Soviet officer of Polish origin, Konstantin Rokossowski, and the destruction of interwar Polish communism. While Rokossowski was freed before the German invasion and survived to serve as a distinguished commander in World War II, Polish communism did not recover from Stalin’s onslaught. It had to be reinvented and rebuilt during the war, and it underwent nationalization, Stalinization, and de-Stalinization in the period between 1941 and 1956. This essay uses the tenure of Rokossowski as Polish Minister of Defense between 1949 and 1956 to shed light on the tension between nationalist rhetoric and Sovietization and the ways in which Polish society and popular opinion reacted to these processes.

Keywords: Stalinization, nationalism, internationalism, ethnicities, Polish–Soviet relations, Stalinist Slavism  

The Communist Party of Poland (KPP) was a stronghold of internationalism during the interwar years, and it paid dearly for this position, which fed into its unpopularity at home and contributed to the downfall of the the Party in Moscow. The KPP presented the ethnic diversity of interwar Poland; minorities were overrepresented in its ranks. The party’s internationalism meant it promoted the establishment of a Polish Soviet Republic as well as a revision of the Western border in favor of Germany. Clearly, these were untenable positions that were not acceptable in Polish society. Polish–Soviet relations had been hostile from the beginning, and neither side had forgotten the war fought in 1920. Still, the 1930s saw a further deterioration of relations. Being associated with anything Polish, even Polish communism, could well be a death sentence in Stalin’s Russia. In 1938, the Comintern officially dissolved what was left of the Polish Communist Party. To the USSR, Poland had become an enemy nation in a much broader sense. Beginning in 1937, Soviet citizens with Polish ties or

1 On the life of Konstantin Rokossowski, see his popular biography: Sokolov, Rokossovskii. On his political standing in Communist Poland, see Noskova, “K. K. Rokossovskii v Pol’she,” 79ff. Since this essay focuses on his time in Poland I use the Polish spelling of his name.  
2 Shore, Caviar and Ashes; Simocini, The Communist Party of Poland; Schatz, Generation.
of Polish ethnicity were victims of “mass operations.” After the annexation of Eastern Poland, the kresy, in 1939, excessive anti-Polish policies continued; thousands of ethnic Poles and other people from the region were deported to Central Asia and Siberia. The Polish elites were the main targets of these repressive measures; the massacre of Katyń stands out as the apogee of these violent policies. Surprisingly, in the midst of this terror, Comintern chieftain Georgi Dimitrov reflected on the revival of Polish communism.

In May 1941, Stalin and Dimitrov proposed the reestablishment of a Polish party. After the German invasion, this matter gained additional urgency. In August 1941, Moscow determined the format of the new organization. It would be called a “worker’s party,” and its program would be similar to the programs of European labor parties. The new party was to abstain from internationalist rhetoric, hold a distance from the USSR, and avoid Marxist ideology. Still, the events of recent years and the traditional hostility between Poles and Russians would weigh heavy on any relaunch of Polish communism. However, with the support of Dimitrov’s apparatus and of a few committed Polish exiles who had survived the terror, the new party was founded. In accordance with Stalin’s ideas it was named Polska Partia Robotnicza (PPR). One of its Polish founders, veteran communist Alfred Lampe, expressed his doubts about the new mission. He understood that anti-Soviet consensus was the foundation of Polish politics, and he found it hard to imagine a Poland that was not anti-Soviet. The Polish raison d’état would have to change. He warned against violent Sovietization: “The way that Russia went in 1917 is not the way Poland should go in 1943.”

The founding document of the PPR appealed to the national sentiments of the Polish population. It called for the establishment of a “national front” against the German occupation and advocated an alliance with the Soviet Union. Yet the PPR was officially in favor of Polish sovereignty; an expansion of the USSR was no longer advocated. Rather, the promise was made that a new Poland would be established with new borders, a nation-state that would be closely allied with the USSR. Thus, Stalin and Dimitrov created a new type of communist statehood: not a universal communist federation like the USSR that

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4 Gross and Grudzińska-Gross, “W czterdziestym nas matko na Sybir zesłali...”
6 “Notatki Alfreda Lampego [August 1943],” in Archiwum Ruchu Robotniczego, 33. On the founding of the PPR, see: Gontarczyk, Polska Partia Robotnicza.
could potentially serve as the nucleus of a global communist order, but rather a communist nation-state, founded on and bound by ethnicity, not ideology.

**Nation-State Building and Stalinist Slavism**

The communist nation-state under Soviet patronage was founded in Lublin in July 1944. The Lublin manifesto reflected both the nationalism and the limited internationalism of the times: it combined the PPR’s national front rhetoric with the pan-Slavism that had been characteristic of the Soviet war effort.\(^8\) The history of the Warsaw Uprising, which began shortly after the proclamation of Lublin in order to prevent Sovietization, deepened the divide in Polish society: clearly the sacrifice of members of the AK (*Armia Krajowa* – Home Army) and Stalin’s unwillingness to support their struggle marked yet another point of contention.

The establishment of communist rule in Poland was violent and repressive.\(^9\) In contrast to neighboring Czechoslovakia and Tito’s Yugoslavia, there were neither pan-Slavic nor Russophile traditions on which the communist party could build.\(^10\) While the opposition and the remnants of the Polish Underground State were being suppressed with the help of the Soviet security apparatus, the PPR began to establish its propaganda machine.\(^11\) From 1944 to 1947, the party made an effort to convince primarily the Polish elites, the *inteligencja*, of the importance of an alliance with the USSR. Slavic committees and a society for friendship with the USSR were established in 1944 to spread the Slavic message.\(^12\) Stalin’s persona soon became a prominent figure in postwar Poland; the nation’s gratitude to him for the liberation of the country was emphasized.\(^13\) All of this took place within the discursive frame of a pan-Slavism that allowed for a limited internationalism from Warsaw to Prague and Belgrade, dominated by Moscow. Initially, the postwar Soviet empire rested on the foundation of shared enmity with Germany, gratitude to the Red Army for the liberation of Central Europe,

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10. For a comparative perspective, see Behrends, “Stalinist volonté générale,” 37–73.
13. See Kupiecki, “Natchnenie milionów.”
and the promise of national sovereignty within the Soviet sphere of influence. The tension between nation and empire, between sovereignty and dependence, soon came to haunt Stalin’s postwar order.\(^{14}\) By embracing nationalist rhetoric and bringing local traditions back into the picture, Moscow thought it could combine Lenin-style control with Wilsonian rhetoric of self-determination. In the long run, this proved to be one of the fault-lines of the Yalta order.

In 1945, the party leadership understood the limits of its legitimacy. During a Central Committee plenum in April, the functionaries came to a mixed assessment of their strategy. Jakub Berman, the *éminence grise*, called the propaganda “weak.”\(^{15}\) In May 1945, Władysław Gomułka, the PPR’s general secretary, complained that the Polish people were not ready for the limited Slavic internationalism represented by the regime: “Many see in Russia just a continuation of the old Russia—and the legacy of the old Russia, war, centuries of repression undermine the psychology of the nation. The restructuring of these attitudes will take a long time.” Gomułka’s main point was the failure of the PPR to convince the populace of its national credentials. The PPR was still seen as a foreign agent, something its leader desperately tried to change: “The masses should see us as a Polish Party, they should attack us as Polish communists, not as an agent [of the USSR].”\(^{16}\) Gomułka almost certainly expressed the mood of broad segments of the population. His view corresponded with a popular joke of the times that offered an alternative reading of the acronym PPR: *Platne Pachołki Rosji* – “paid servants of Russia.” The regime found it hard to gain legitimacy; even after the war was over, a sense of uncertainty remained.\(^{17}\) During these years, many continued to believe that the nationalist propaganda was merely a cover for the “internationalist” solution to come: the incorporation of Poland into the USSR as its “17th republic.” Both underground publications and reports in the party-state archive point in this direction.\(^{18}\)

Clearly, Moscow’s idea of combining nationalism and communism had its limits. It could not—even if this was Moscow’s intention—break the chains of popular memory. The history of Polish–Russian relations, the history of communism after 1917, and the events of the Katyn massacre constantly

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\(^{14}\) For an elaboration of this argument, see Behrends, “Nation and Empire,” 443–66.

\(^{15}\) “Protokół posiedzenia KC PPR z dnia 27 kwietnia 1945 r.,” in *Protokoły posiedzeń sekretariatu KC PPR 1945–1946*, 22.


\(^{17}\) See for an analysis of demoralized postwar Polish society, Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga*.

\(^{18}\) See e.g. Chudzik, Marczak, and Olkuśnik, *Biuletyny Informacyjne*; see also the collection: Biblioteka Narodowa, Warsaw. Konspiracyjne druki ulotne.
undermined the official narrative. In Poznań in 1945, people could choose on the first anniversary of the regime whether they wanted to attend the official celebration or an open air mass with Cardinal Hlond, the Primate of Poland. While 3,000 people attended the official celebration, some 30,000 joined Hlond in prayer.\textsuperscript{19} Almost a year later, on May 3 1946 in Krakow, the regime’s supremacy in the public space was tested again. The city’s population, including many university students, intended to celebrate the anniversary of the Polish constitution of 1791, a date of long-standing national significance and a public holiday with an anti-Russian flavor. The regime, on the other hand, tried to establish May 1 as a new Soviet-style celebration throughout Poland. This competition led to a confrontation in Krakow after the regime banned the public celebration of constitution day. Police clashed with demonstrators and cleared the public arena by force.\textsuperscript{20} Traditional Polish nationalism was no longer tolerated, and instead of May 3, May 1 was introduced as an obligatory holiday.\textsuperscript{21} The regime was willing to fight for cultural supremacy on the streets.

\textit{Accelerated Sovietization: 1947}

The onset of the Cold War and the firm hold on power of the party ended the more pragmatic approach that the regime had taken since 1944. It gave way to the utopian vision of a fully Sovietized Poland.\textsuperscript{22} As had been the case in Stalinist Russia, the Polish regime now tried to mobilize the entire body politic. The official culture was supposed to penetrate all layers of society.

An early example of the regime’s new offensive was the first national convention of the Polish–Soviet Friendship Society (TPPR), held on June 1–3, 1946 in Warsaw. Here, the official new blend of nationalism and internationalism was presented to the Polish public. 2,500 delegates from all over the country assembled in the capital to present the official doctrine of “friendship with the Soviet Union.” Henryk Świątkowski, the TPPR chairman, underlined that friendship with the USSR was not limited to Polish communists. Rather, it was the task and the desire of the entire nation. Friendship with Moscow was more than a mere slogan. It had to become a “movement” that united the entire Polish

\textsuperscript{19} “Pismo generała-majora Michaiła Burcewa,” in Polska-ZSRR, 136–38.
\textsuperscript{20} Mazowiecki, \textit{Pierwsze starcie}.
\textsuperscript{21} On 1 May, see Sowiński, \textit{Komunistyczne święto}.
\textsuperscript{22} Behrends, \textit{Die erfundene Freundschaft}, 131–34.
public behind this cause. Józef Cyrankiewicz, minister and PPS politician, declared friendship with the USSR to be part of Poland’s raison d’état. Clearly, this new urgency was partially due to the Cold War, which left its mark on internal Polish politics. The party-state needed to show its readiness to act and its firm ties to the Soviet camp. But there is another way of looking at the changing face of repressive politics in postwar Poland. The mobilization campaigns that started in 1947 can also be interpreted as a sign of strength of the party-state. With the armed insurgency put down, the new borders more or less under control, and the legal opposition beheaded, the Polish regime could use its resources for an extensive propaganda campaign. In May 1947, the Central Committee decided to give the friendship propaganda even higher priority. This decision, however, was not implemented until October. As a consequence, every party member was supposed to become an agitator for friendship with the USSR. Even remote parts of Poland and hostile segments of the populace were now to be reached. Essentially, national mobilization for the internationalist cause was supposed to be unlimited. The next goal of the propaganda apparatus was the celebration of the October Revolution. The festivities were not merely political education. An internal document states that one of the purposes of the events was to deepen “the feeling of cordial friendship with the USSR and the understanding of Soviet cultural achievements, and [make clear] the lasting and decisive importance of the USSR for a sovereign life.” The Stalinist state aimed to establish strong emotional bonds with its eastern neighbor. Czesław Milosz would write in 1951 that there was a certain point when the propaganda for Russia turned into worship of the Soviet Union. 1947 was the point when a more pragmatic mode of Sovietization was abandoned for a more radical version with utopian undertones.

The first highlight of the Stalinist radicalization was the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the October Revolution in the autumn of 1947. The

24 Sprawozdanie Wydziału Propagandy i Prasy za m-c maj 1947 r., Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), KC PPR, 295/ X-3, 35–42.
26 Instrukcja Nr. 48 w sprawie akcji przygotowawczej do 30 rocznicy Rewolucji Październikowej, September 15, 1947, APK, KW PPR, Nr. 208, 46.
27 Milosz, The Captive Mind.
campaign strove to mobilize all of Polish society: on the anniversary of the revolution, there were to be lectures in all Polish cities and towns, down to the level of villages. The festivities were intended to teach Poles that the October revolution—not independence—had freed them from “hundreds of years of slavery.” At the end of 1947, TPPR chairman Henryk Światkowski emphasized his belief that most of the reeducation had already been accomplished. He expected that the remnants of distrust that dated back to the era of Czarism would be overcome in 1948. In the period of High Stalinism, the functionaries of the party-state were supposed to express their unlimited trust in their own propaganda. Światkowski serves as a good example; he set the utopian goal of turning the Polish population into a community of supporters of the USSR within before the end of the following year.

In 1948, the new Stalinist course targeted not only the population. PPR secretary Władysław Gomułka, who had spoken in favor of a “Polish road to socialism,” (which at the time was the official line of all parties), was purged in 1948. He was condemned for allegedly having shown “mistrust towards the USSR.” From then on, state and party needed to be represented by leaders who stood for the great friendship between the two states. Mieczysław Moczar expressed the new credo for all party members: “The Soviet Union is not only our ally, that is a slogan for the people. For us, comrades, the Soviet Union is our fatherland [nasza Ojczyzna], and I cannot define its borders, today they might be behind Berlin, tomorrow already at Gibraltar.” The Soviets, however, remained skeptical of the Polish efforts. The Sovinformburo criticized the Polish party for its tolerance of “nationalism” in the population. They felt that propaganda for the USSR should be intensified. In August 1949, the Kominform demanded a concerted effort in Poland against Anglo-American propaganda.

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28 Instrukcja Nr. 48 w sprawie akcji przygotowawczej do 30 rocznicy Rewolucji Październikowej, September 15, 1947, APK, KW PPR, Nr. 208, 46–49.
29 Świątkowski, “Cel i zadania miesiąca wymiany kulturalnej,” 3.
31 “W sprawie odchyleń prawicowego i nacjonalistycznego w kierownictwie partii,” in Protokoły posiedzeń Biura Politycznego KC PPR, 245–53. On the purge of 1948 see also Spałek, Komuniści przeciw komunistom.
34 “Pis’mo sotrudnika kantsetiarii sekretariata Informbiuro V. I. Ovcharova,” 161–62.
Rokossowski’s Homecoming: The November Campaign of 1949

According to Boris Sokolov, Joseph Stalin chose to make Soviet Marshal Konstantin Rokossowski Polish Defense Minister in order to have trusted eyes and ears in Warsaw. Stalin invited Rokossowski, who had served as commander of Soviet Army group North in Poland since 1945, to his dacha and made him an offer he could not refuse. The decision was delivered to Warsaw on October 27. The conflict with Tito had reminded Stalin how fragile his power abroad could be. The appointment could be read as a sign of Stalin’s distrust towards the Polish party and its leadership, of course. But there were certainly more aspects to the decision: Moscow clearly craved control of the Polish Army. It wanted to ensure that the second largest army in the empire would be modernized, loyal, and battle-ready if the Cold War turned hot. The scenario in Asia, with the military victory of the Chinese communists and the Korean War, suggested that military conflict might flare up again in Europe. Rokossowski could exercise control over the Armed Forces and report to Stalin on the party. And through his public position, Rokossowski would serve as a constant reminder of the limited sovereignty of communist nation-states. The army, traditionally viewed as the core of independent Polish statehood, was put firmly under Soviet control. Yet, publicly, a different story was told: the tale of the Marshal’s homecoming.

Even before being appointed Minister of Defense, the Soviet Marshal was a well-known figure in the communist-controlled People’s Republic of Poland. He had liberated the northern part of the country during World War II, and he had remained in Poland to command Red Army troops who remained stationed in Silesia. As Supreme Soviet Commander in Poland, he had been turned into one of the symbols of Polish–Soviet friendship. Loyalty to the USSR manifested itself in carefully stage-managed gestures of the population towards him. During the winter of 1949, several Polish towns made him an honorary citizen. During the autumn of 1949, Stalinist Poland once again was dominated by the annual

35 Sokolov, Rokossowski, 470–71.
36 Noskova, “Rokossovskij v Pol’she.” According to Sokolov and Noskova, Rokoswski remained a political outsider in Poland. His main accomplishments were of military nature.
38 See e.g. “Robotnicy śląscy u Marszałka Rokossowskiego,” Przyjaźń 8 (1947): 24; “Pomorzanie u marszałka K. Rokossowskiego,” Wolność, May 9, 1949; “Z całego serca... Delgacja Gliwic w gościnie u
friendship campaign, the “month of Polish–Soviet friendship.” The population was encouraged to familiarize itself with and embrace Soviet culture. Literature, the arts, film, and political education *sensu strictu* played an important role during these weeks. It was to be a special year because the campaign would last even longer than it had in previous years: after the month of friendship, which officially ended on November 7, the celebrations of Stalin’s 70th birthday would begin.\(^{39}\) Thus, the autumn of 1949 would be one of constant mobilization around the USSR and its leader. Rokossowski’s appointment as Minister of Defense and Marshal of Poland was announced on the final day of the friendship campaign, right before the anniversary of the October Revolution.\(^{40}\) This was no coincidence. The scheduled date in the regime’s calendar signified the importance of the event. Furthermore, the news could be spread in the controlled setting of the October celebrations. The propaganda and the security apparatus would be on the alert, and this would reduce the risk of spontaneous protests or rioting. The official appointment was not made until November, giving the party-state a few weeks to prepare the event. The campaign around Rokossowski focused on reinventing his public persona and his vita and welcoming him home as a Polish Patriot. On the day of his inauguration into office three short biographies were distributed: one was issued by the state publishing house, one by the youth organization and one by the Ministry of Defense. The party’s publishing house *Książka i Wiedza* even polonized his name on the cover: in accordance with Polish orthography they spelled his name Rokosowski instead of Rokossowski.\(^{41}\)

All three officially released biographies constructed a contrast between his vita and the fate of the Polish nation. Rokossowski could be a communist patriot because he had not played any role in the ill-fated interwar Polish republic. Instead, he had chosen the Soviet side in 1917, defended Soviet power during the Civil War in Russia, and risen in the ranks of the Red Army. According to this leitmotif, he had had to abandon his nation because it had chosen the wrong path. A nation that had erred had lost its son, who had only been able to come


39 The Stalin-cult had been introduced in 1944, but it gained more prominence in 1947, when cultic veneration of the Soviet leader became obligatory at official events. Cf. Behrends, “Exporting the Leader,” 161–78.


41 Cf. Żołnierz wolności ludu wolności Polski; *Marszałek Rokossowski; Konstanty Rokossowski*. See also “Życiorys Marszałka Rokosowskiego,” *Przegląd Wydarzeń* 14 (1949).
home because the nation had returned to the right path of history. It was now the lost son’s duty to guide his country further along the right track. According to the official narrative, it was beneficial to have chosen the Soviet side as early as possible; it was also important to emphasize this because so many Poles had suffered under Soviet rule.

According to the official narrative, Rokossowski was born in Warsaw, the son of a railway worker. As a youth in Warsaw, he had become part of the Polish workers’ movement. During World War I, he was drafted into the Imperial Army, and he left his homeland during the retreat to the east. In Russia, he sided with the revolution, defending it in the civil war and, through determination and hard work, rising to the position of general. Rokossowski’s exemplary heroism during World War I resulted from his closeness to both Stalin and common soldiers on the frontline. Furthermore, he had decisively intervened in the battles of Moscow, Stalingrad, and Kursk. His participation in the liberation of Poland was emphasized, as was his urge to help the uprising in Warsaw, which was sabotaged by the leadership of the Armia Krajowa. His vita was constructed along similar lines in all three biographies.

The texts were also garnished with anecdotes which were supposed to convey his Polishness. Poles meet him during the war and they are drawn to him because they recognize him as a compatriot, even before he speaks and despite his Soviet uniform. One story has Rokossowski correct a translator, which prompts a Polish lady to shout: “How well he speaks our tongue [jak fajnie po naszemu gada],” while another one claims: “I am sure, yes, he is a Pole, one of our workers from Warsaw.” The inhabitants of eastern Poland were said to be proud that a Pole had led the armies that liberated them. On the way to Berlin, the friendship between the Polish people and their lost son strengthened. Because of his heroic deeds, the biographers insisted, Marshall Rokossowski represented the best traditions of Polish freedom fighters. He was portrayed as continuing the national struggle that had started centuries ago. He was the embodiment of the “most sacred traditions of the Polish struggle for freedom,” fought under the battle-cry “for our freedom and yours [za naszą i waszą wolność].” The Polish nation saw in him “the proud traditions

42 The birthplace of Rokossowski is to this day the subject of dispute. In official documents he sometimes gave Warsaw, sometimes the Russian Velikie Luki near Pskov. See Sokolov, Rokossovskii.
43 Marszałek Rokossowski na czele Wojska Polskiego, 29.
of Tadeusz Kościuszkos, Henryk Dąbrowskis [...] Karol Świerczewski-Walter, and many other great Poles [...]”

The biographies demanded a warm welcome for Rokossowski by the Polish public: “With pride, joy and trust, the Polish nation gives the leadership of the armed forces of our country into the hands of Marshal Konstanty Rokossowski, the great Pole, the glowing patriot and revolutionary, the faithful son of Warsaw’s working class, the servant and citizen of People’s Poland.”

The Central Committee issued an instruction to agitators that informed them of the official line: The Polish nation and the working class were urged to welcome the appointment as a strengthening of Poland’s security and its borders. It was argued that Rokossowski would work to strengthen Polish sovereignty because he would ensure an even tougher defense against “German chauvinists.” It was the task of the agitators in the field to counter the smear campaign against Rokossowski advanced by Voice of America and radio stations in London, Madrid, Hamburg, and Belgrade. Rokossowski was a national leader carrying “the Polish eagle on his hat [...] to the great joy of the Polish soldiers, who are proud of such a leader.” Rokossowski would make the “peace camp” even stronger, “from Peking to Berlin.” Thus, the national was intertwined with the international dimension of the event: the stronger defense of Communist Poland meant the strengthening of the whole Eurasian Soviet Empire.

In addition to the party and the TPPR, other mass-organizations were involved in the campaign. Związek Młodzieży Polskiej (ZMP), the party-state’s youth organization, told its members to attend local meetings, where Rokossowski’s biography would be studied. The result of these meetings was supposed to be a discussion which would lead to telegrams from all parts of the country in support of the Marshal. These instructions show how carefully the party-state intended to build up support for Rokossowski. The stage-management of public approval was part of the larger mobilization campaign to celebrate the October
anniversary. It was part of an effort to form opinion, contain resistance and expressions of disapproval, and exhibit public enthusiasm.

Nationalism and Internationalism: Some Excerpts from Official Reports

The population in communist Poland was faced with a fait accompli. Moscow had decided to impose its will, and the Polish party-state used the means at its disposal to ensure popular support for the decision. It is, of course, tempting to try to look behind the façade of the stage-managed public sphere. Clearly, the great shows of harmony and enthusiasm which have been so carefully orchestrated and controlled by modern dictatorships convey little about the mood of their populations. Similarly, the mass-media offers little useful information in this regard. They were more part of the show than a reliable source. The sources that historians are left with are either ego-documents, such as letters and diaries in which individuals recorded their thoughts and the views of other citizens, or the internal reports from various sources of the party-state. Clearly, each of these two kinds of sources is problematic in many ways. Neither can be used as a substitute for modern opinion polling, which was introduced in the twentieth century in liberal democracies.

The internal reports of the communist party-state constitute a specific genre. The people who wrote them (whether party members, functionaries of the security apparatus, or members of the mass-organizations) were not free to express their opinions. On the contrary, conventionally, reports alleged overwhelming support for the policies of the party-state. Like the mass-media, internal reports praised the leadership for its wise decisions. Still, internal reports would usually also refer to problems that had arisen, “misunderstandings,” and rumors or the activities of enemies of the people. Usually, they would highlight that the critics held a minority position, and the reports portrayed critics as backwards or alien to society. The language of the reports is as stereotypical as that used in the media. Even internally, discursive rules applied. Despite these limitations, internal reports can be a useful source that furthers an understanding

49 See e.g. Corner, Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes; Merl, Politische Kommunikation in der DDR.
50 Still, we should not underestimate their influence at home and abroad and the role they played for the (self)representation of the elites. Cf. e.g. Reichel, Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches; Gentile, The Sacralization of Politics; Falasca-Zamponi, Fascist Spectacle; Brooks, Thank You, Comrade Stalin!; Rolf, Soviet Mass Festivals.
51 Behrends, “Repräsentation und Mobilisierung.”
52 For a collection of rumors from Stalinist Poland, see: Jarosz and Pasztor, W krzywym zwierciadle.
of popular reactions in certain situations. While we should not read them as scientific surveys of the public mood, we can use them to extract certain (more or less random) sound bites from society. This allows us to venture hypotheses concerning which parts of the propaganda narrative were picked up, criticized, or ridiculed, both in private and in such public spaces, such as the streets, the workplace, or public transportation.

The Poles were not the only people monitoring the situation in the autumn of 1949. Soviet agencies observed the mood of the populace carefully. They noted that the appointment of Rokossowski as Minister of Defense revived fears among many Poles that they would be annexed and incorporated into the USSR. These anxieties surfaced in the persistent idea that Poland would become the “17th republic” of the USSR. This subject was also raised in a report of the Cominform to the Soviet Central Committee. The report included impressions from across Poland: it claimed that in the voivodship of Poznań many people were afraid that the rise of Rokossowski would mark the beginning of renewed mass deportations to Siberia. Obviously, the repressions of 1939/40 were still remembered. Two students in Lublin spread the rumor that Rokossowski had been deployed to quell a “mutiny” [bunt] in the Polish Army. People in the town in eastern Poland were certain that in a short time “all power” in Poland would belong “to the Soviets.” Even party members saw the appointment as the complete and final loss of sovereignty. A communist from Warsaw noted: “The goal behind the appointment of Rokossowski is the Russification and Bolshevization of the Polish Armed Forces.” According to the report, such fears were also widespread in other state institutions. Postal workers were speculating that their offices would soon be placed under Soviet control. Other citizens interpreted Rokossowski’s rise as preparation for war. Many feared that the outbreak of hostilities was imminent. Despite these findings, the author lauded the PZPR for its effective propaganda, and he or she characteristically concluded that the majority of the Polish working class supported Rokossowski’s new role.

The reports in the Polish archives also indicate that Rokossowski’s appointment came as a shock for many. Although these reports also stereotypically attest that Rokossowski enjoyed great support among the population, much of their content hints at people’s anger, fear, and confusion. People instantly started

54 The following examples are from: “Ze sprawozdania Wasylija Owczarowa,” in Polska w dokumentach z archiwów rosyjskich, 65–66. See also for secret police reports from the Polish IPN-archive Kamiński, Biuletyny dzienne, 432–40.
to prepare for war and crisis. Throughout Warsaw and the surrounding districts, women were buying basic commodities and foodstuff from local stores. They wanted to be ready in case of war and annexation by the USSR.55 Other citizens of Warsaw discussed the question of whether the Marshal was a Soviet or a Polish citizen. A resident of Lublin (which before 1918 had been a city in the Russian Empire) interpreted Rokossowski’s nomination historically: “Our little father the Czar gave his Prince Konstantin, and Stalin sent us Konstantin Rokossowski” [Car batiuszka dał nam księcia Konstantego, a Stalin przysłał Konstantego Rokossowskiego]. Officers from the interwar era suspected a purge of the Polish Army. From Szczecin, the party reported that the workers had reacted positively to the news, but whether the Marshal was a Pole or a Russian was a topic of discussion. They also believed that Poland would soon become the “17th republic.” A Pomeranian worker called the appointment of a foreigner as Minister of Defense a “parody.” Another citizen quipped: “There seems to be no post that a Russian cannot hold. I cannot grasp how a foreign citizen can become Marshal of Poland.”56 The narrative about the “son of Warsaw’s working class” did not convince everybody.

On November 10, the party reported from Rzeszów that people there had started to buy basic goods to ensure that they would be ready in case of war. Citizens of Krakow were sure that a Soviet ambassador had taken over power in Warsaw. They compared the situation with Western Europe: “France is ruled by the Americans and we are ruled by the USSR.”57 The Polishness of Rokossowski, which was one of the main claims of the party-state, was questioned. A former party member asked: “What kind of Pole spent his whole life in the USSR?” At Warsaw University and the capital’s Polytechnic School oppositional graffiti could be found: “Down with the usurper, down with Rokossowski!”58 A report from Wrocław stated that, while most comrades were in favor of the decision, doubts remained.59

A party report from the beginning of December attempted to summarize popular sentiment in Silesia. People there believed “a) Poland will become the

17th republic, b) Poland will be sold.”60 According to the report, the agitators were trying to instill calm. People in the Silesian town of Ratibor were worried that they would be forced to move: “The rumor is spreading that the whole area will be occupied by Soviet forces and the population will have to leave their homes.”61 Finally, the party committee from Opole, Silesia remarked that, “in conjunction with the appointment of Marshal Rokossowski, those opposed to our system and to the alliance with the Soviet Union spread the propaganda according to which the USSR has forced a Marshal upon us whose heritage and biography have [deliberately] been obscured.”62

The internal party documents and the Soviet reports from Poland show that the official biographies written before the nomination of Rokossowski anticipated when the decisive point would come: given the effects of many years of nationalist propaganda and the attachment of the population to national sentiments dating back to the times of the partition, the notion of sovereignty in Poland was crucial. The appearance of a Soviet Marshal in the Polish government undermined the government’s claim of independence from the USSR. In November 1949, the regime tried to master the propaganda battle by claiming that the Marshal was both a Pole and a Soviet internationalist; this position, however, did not convince many skeptics. The internationalist friendship propaganda had always preached Poland’s alliance with the USSR as a guarantee of national sovereignty. Segments of the population were inclined to interpret Rokossowski’s rise to power as a return to the communist internationalism of the interwar period. Back then, the Polish Communist Party advocated the country’s inclusion in the Soviet Union. It seemed plausible that the party could return to the policies of the 1920s. Additionally, Poles had centuries of experience with Russian imperialism. To many Poles, Bolshevik internationalism had seemed like little more than another metamorphosis of the Russian empire.

The Polish Troika and the Downfall of the Soviet Marshal in 1956

From the end of 1949 until his downfall during the “Polish October” of 1956, Marshal Rokossowski held a prominent position in the public culture of Stalinist Poland. After Stalin’s 70th birthday in December 1949, the Stalinist leadership

61 Ibid., 26.
62 Ibid., 28.
cult grew to almost Soviet proportions. But in Poland, the cult of the Soviet leader was supplemented with local cults. The propaganda placed the Polish party leader Bierut and Marshal Rokossowski to the right and left of “Poland's unbending friend.” This troika came to represent Polish statehood during the years of High Stalinism. On many occasions, pictures of the troika would appear on public buildings or at meetings and conferences. The chant “Stalin-Bierut-Rokossowski” echoed through many conventions of Stalinist Poland. The regime cultivated the Soviet Marshal as a symbol of its power, and he certainly served as a marker of loyalty to the USSR.

The troika represented the hybridity of the Polish state during Stalinism. It was not a Soviet republic, but it was also not a sovereign nation-state. It existed between nationalist rhetoric and Soviet domination. The invented biography of Rokossowski was a Polish version of Stalinist internationalism. It was a narrative designed to ensure Soviet domination. The plausibility of the narrative suffered from the gap between nationalism and internationalism, which could never be bridged. It had to be accepted, because in Stalinist culture such contradictions could not be discussed.

Recent research has shown that the military man Rokossowski was a rather poor politician. He quickly managed to isolate himself within the Polish leadership. His strength lay, rather, in the reorganizing and purging the Polish forces. Apparently, he was one of the initiators of the campaign against communists with Jewish backgrounds in the Politburo. Yet, this did not prevent him from falling from grace together with them in the autumn of 1956. Post-Stalin national communism had no place for the hybridity that he represented between Soviet and Polish identity. When the Stalinist narratives were questioned following Khrushchev’s “secret speech,” Rokossowski found himself at the center of popular criticism. In the spring of 1956, Poles began to be able to voice their discontent.

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64 On the Bierut cult, see: Main, “President of Poland or ‘Stalin's Most Faithful Pupil?’,” 179–93; Zaremba, “Drugi stopień drabiny.”
65 Another Polish–Soviet hybrid constructed by the propaganda state was Feliks Dzierżyński, the founder of the Cheka (Soviet state security organization). On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his death in 1951, he was portrayed as another icon of the Polish–Soviet friendship with a hybrid identity. Cf. Daniszewski, Feliks Dzierżyński. In the center of Warsaw, Plac Bankowy was renamed Dzierżyński Square, and a monument to “Iron Felix” was erected. See also: AAN, KC PZPR, 237/ VIII-183.
66 His lack of knowledge of Polish also played a role. See Noskova, “Rokossovskii v Pol'she” and Sokolov, Rokossovskii.
67 See Poksiski, Represje wobec oficerów Wojska Polskiego.
their concerns in public. The anti-Soviet mood on Polish streets could clearly be heard. The Marshal was seen as a symbol of Soviet domination over Polish matters. The internationalist campaign of 1949 and the years of promoting the Soviet Marshal in Poland backfired. The end of the Stalin cult also threw into question the role of Rokossowski in Poland. The symbolic death of the leader’s persona also left a mark on those associated with him. Political turbulence soon led to political turmoil behind the scenes in the party-state. Rokossowski was clearly associated with the Moscovite (“Natolin”) faction in this struggle. Yet, perhaps as important as the internal showdown was the destruction of his image on the Polish streets in 1956.

The party-state tried in vain to limit public discussion to the “secret speech” and certain crimes of Stalin and his entourage. As the year progressed, it became obvious that this attempt to control public discourse was failing. The dynamics of the discussion proved impossible to control, and in the spring and early summer the legitimacy of the entire postwar order in Poland began to crumble. Many former Stalinists in the party and inteligencja changed sides and repositioned themselves as reform socialists or national communists. In March 1956, the party organs in the provinces reported “sharp discussions” to Warsaw. Neither the massacre at Katyń nor 1939 was considered a taboo anymore. Workers in Stalinogród, the former Katowice, were demanding the removal of Stalin portraits and declared “Stalin is an enemy of the people.” The official discourse was turned against those who had long represented absolute power. In April of 1956, internal discussion of the PZPR and in major enterprises centered on subjects such as the Warsaw uprising of 1944 and the possibility of comparing Stalin and Hitler. Soviet-style mass-organizations, like the communist youth ZMP and the TPPR, began to disintegrate.

68 See Macheewicz, Rebellious Satellite; Behrends, Die erfundene Freundschaft, 341–48.
69 Macheewicz, “Der Umbruch 1956 in Polen.”
70 Rykowski and Władyka, Polska próba, 131–64.
71 Meldunki z terenu Nr. 21/ 1574, Zapoznanie aktywu partyjnego z referatom tow. Chruczczowa, 28.3.1956, AAN, KC PZPR, 237/VIII-3858, 182–90.
73 Meldunki z terenu Nr. 23/ 1576, Organizacja partyjna, 4.4.1956, AAN, KC PZPR, 237/VIII-3859, 1–12.
74 Behrends, Die erfundene Freundschaft, 336–37.
In June 1956, Poland was rocked by the violent uprising of workers in the western city of Poznań.\textsuperscript{75} Strikes and economic protests had quickly turned national and distinctly anti-Soviet. The local party headquarters was stormed by protesters, and Soviet insignia were destroyed and replaced by Polish symbols. The iconoclasm lasted through the morning and has been described as a “festival of liberation” by Paweł Machcewicz.\textsuperscript{76} The prison, the courts, and the local police came under attack, and the party-state began to lose control of the city. Demonstrators began to besiege the local representatives of the secret police as well. Policemen were denounced as “SS” or “Gestapo”; some were convinced they were “Russians in Polish uniforms.”\textsuperscript{77} From midday onwards, the party-state mobilized the Army in order to crush the insurgency with the use of violence. Clearly, as commander of the Army, Rokossowski bore responsibility for the use of force. The fighting, which lasted until the next morning, claimed more than 90 lives. 10,000 soldiers and several hundred tanks were needed to pacify the city. The escalation of the Poznań uprising shows how deeply unpopular the Soviet symbolism—the imperial discourse of Stalinist internationalism—was in postwar Poland. Poles were willing to risk their lives for the destruction of the symbols of Soviet domination.

The summer of 1956 remained turbulent in Poland. Regime change at the 8\textsuperscript{th} plenum of the Central Committee in October brought Władysław Gomułka to power and marked the beginning of national communism in Poland. His rise was accompanied by mass rallies on the streets of Warsaw and the downfall of Marshall Rokossowski. While the masses chanted traditional patriotic songs and hailed the new general secretary, who profited from his anti-Soviet charisma, they demanded the immediate resignation of the Minister of Defense. The anti-Soviet mood of the public led to a new, unprecedented wave of iconoclasm. Portraits of Rokossowski were among the symbols of power that were publicly burned. Among the slogans of the demonstrators were “Rokossowski go home,” “Rokossowski to the kolkhoz,” and “Rokossowski to Siberia.”\textsuperscript{78} All over the country Soviet symbols and TPPR propaganda were destroyed. The official universe of Polish Stalinism, carefully built between 1947 and 1949, was dismantled within a few days. The nationalist mood persisted through the winter.

\textsuperscript{75} See Makowski, Poznański czerwiec; Jankowiak and Rogulski, Poznański czerwiec; Białecki, Poznański czerwiec; Jankowiak, Poznański Czerwiec 1956.
\textsuperscript{76} Machcewicz, Rebellious Satellite, 87–124.
\textsuperscript{77} Makowski, Poznański czerwiec, 95–123.
\textsuperscript{78} All examples in Machcewicz, Rebellious Satellite, 158–213.
and led to occasional attacks on Soviet barracks and other remaining symbols of the despised empire. Still, Gomułka decreed in the winter of 1956 that Polish–Soviet friendship was here to stay, but not in the Stalinist version and without its most prominent personification.\footnote{Behrends, \textit{Die erfundene Freundschaft}, 347–65.}

\textit{Epilogue}

The second attempt at national communism in Poland left neither room for Jewish communists in the party leadership nor for Polish–Soviet hybridity. The Polishness of the new leadership had to be beyond any doubt. In 1956, Communist nationalism swept away what was left of the notion of Stalinism’s friendship of the people in Poland. Gomułka returned to power riding a wave of national sentiment.

Decades later, during the reign of Leonid Brezhnev, Soviet officers were allowed to publish their memoirs. Given the cult of the “Great Patriotic War,” which was initiated by the party-state, these texts were, of course, strictly censored. Konstantin Rokossowski found a way to avoid mention of the ambivalent Polish episode of his life. In his official autobiography he did not raise the subject of the turmoil of postwar Stalinism; rather, he concentrated on his participation in the defeat of Nazi Germany.\footnote{Rokossovskii, \textit{Soldatki dolg}.} The Polish marshal with Soviet origins, his meteoric rise in 1949, and his downfall in the turbulent year 1956 were not to be remembered in Brezhnev’s USSR. Stalinism and its aftermath in Central Europe had become an embarrassment which should not contaminate the biography of a Soviet hero of the “Great Fatherland War.”

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