

ARCHIVE

This issue of APH comprises articles on the society and social life in the former Polish People's Republic (PRL). The Archive section offers an article by Krystyna Kersten (1931–2008), first published in the last fascicle of 'Dwadzieścia Jeden', a periodical edited by intellectuals associated with the 'Solidarność' leadership team. The magazine was published outside the communist censorship system; its title (translatable as 'Twenty One') referred to the 21 Demands issued by the Gdańsk strikers in August 1980.

Krystyna Kersten's biography and scholarly output may serve as a showcase of the 'Pimpled' generation¹ in the humanities: an activist with the communist Polish Youth Association (ZMP) and a dogmatic Marxist in her student and early scholarly career years, she quit the Party and its ideology in the breakthrough year 1968, following the March events and the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia. She supported the Democratic Opposition in the 1980s, contributing – together with her husband Adam, an eminent historian specialising in Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – to the organisation and activities of the autonomous Society for Educational Courses (TKN); after the imposition of the martial law and de-legalisation of 'Solidarność', she was member of the team of the Catholic Church's Ministry for Working People (Duszpasterstwo Ludzi Pracy), which followed up the Society's mission. The seminars run and lectures delivered by her, along with samizdat or emigrant publications printed (including under a [male] penname – 'Jan Bujnowski', or 'Marian Wołoszyn') made her a respected authority as a reliable historian of the communist Poland, not yielding to political pressure.

In autumn 1981, Kersten wrote a popularising brochure on the political history of early post-war Poland ('Historia polityczna Polski 1944–1956'), which was due to be published as a supplement to the (legal) weekly 'Tygodnik Solidarność'. As the publication was thwarted by the martial law (imposed 13 December 1981), the book was published in 1982 by clandestine publisher 'Krag', under the author's own name. This short study revealed the lawlessness of the new political system in its first post-war years, the scale of counterfeiting, terror, and non-sovereignty of the state. Reprinted at least ten times, it turned into a 'second circuit'

¹ This description was used with young fiction authors and poets who in the late 1940s and early 1950s enthusiastically supported the new system and the socialist realism. Tadeusz Konwicki, Andrzej Braun, Wisława Szymborska, Wiktor Woroszyński, Witold Wirpsza were among them – editorial note.

bestseller. Again, in 1985, 'Krağ' issued K. Kersten's voluminous book 'Narodziny systemu władzy. Polska 1943–1948', which was reedited illegally several times and translated into English as 'The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland 1943–1948' (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991).

Kersten's articles written in the 1980s proved that she rejected the narrations proposed by the Polish communist authorities and was critical, at the same time, with respect to Polish national mythology: appreciating the reasons represented by diverse political orientations, she would not apply a black-and-white analytical pattern – so well-known to her from the time she was at the outset of her researcher career. She endeavoured to describe the reality of the consciousness of Polish society after WWII and the dilemmas of intellectuals, and considered the sense and value of resistance and adaptation to the then-new authority (a collection of texts titled 'Między wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem: Polska 1944–1956' [Between liberation and subjugation: Poland 1944–56], 1993). After 1989, she continued to deal with 'inconvenient' and painful topics, overgrown by erroneous interpretations; this approach is attested by the book 'Polacy. Żydzi. Komunizm. Anatomia półprawd 1939–68' [Poles. Jews. Communism: An anatomy of half-truths] (1992). In 1995, she became the first editor of a continuous series 'Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały' [Poland 1944/5–89. Studies and Materials], published by the Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences, the institution she was associated with in her entire career. Krystyna Kersten has gained considerable authority as a scholar and scientist, as well as in moral terms; this has won her attacks from followers of the departing (communist) political formation – and from the national anticommunist Right.

trans. Tristan Korecki

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Krystyna Kersten

TROUBLES OF A HISTORIAN

The questions I pose to myself can be worded thus: Does it make (any) sense to use the Right and Left categories in post-war Poland? Do these categories continually signify the existing ideological and political divisions? Can the use of these categories help recognise the Polish reality in its various dimensions? Or perhaps, the contrary is the case: being one of the crucial elements of the mock-up and dummy environment created by the communists, they are used to cheat oneself and the others, thus mystifying the real world?

While asking these questions, I know I am on a beaten track. The problem of how legitimate the Left vs. Right opposition has been raised for a long time now, not only in the recent years in Poland – and elsewhere, wherever communism thoroughly riddled and shook up the earlier systems and relationships. Back in the 1950s, Raymond Aron pondered:

Does the antithesis of Right and Left still have any meaning? The man who asks this question is immediately suspect. “When I am asked”, Alain once wrote, “if the cleavage between right-wing and left-wing parties, between men of the Right and men of the Left, still has a meaning, the first idea that comes to me is that the questioner is certainly not a man of the Left.” This verdict need not inhibit us, for it betrays an attachment to a prejudice rather than a conviction founded on reason.¹

Aron’s opinion, expressed in France in the first half of the 1950s, reflects a very important feature of the Left–Right relation after WWII: a blustering aggressiveness of the Left, contrasted against a loss of self-assertion on the Right; this latter development is understandable

¹ Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (Garden City, NY, 1957), 3.

taking into account the enormity of the philosophical, moral and political defeat it has incurred. The embarrassment of the Left, at least in the West, was impending but occurred at a later date. The voices from behind the 'Iron Curtain', news from a world inhuman, were stifled and clamoured down by petty propagandists and great philosophers deluded by the mirage of progress carried by socialism.

It would seem that those red-tinted illusions, so rampantly spreading in the country on the Seine River, should not have found a feed and appropriate climate for themselves. Rather than only reading and listening about the practices of the NKVD, Soviet labour camps, deportations, election rigging, repressions, lawlessness, and totalitarian bondage, Poles experienced and bore these torments personally. The communist propagandists cast insults at merited Left activists as well as Right politicians: all, stood in the dock at fake show-trials and suffered jailed.

And yet, up until today² – now that we have been through all these experiences, in Poland and elsewhere; and acquired all the knowledge – a strong tendency still prevails, not only in the ruling camp but also in dissident milieus, to preserve a left-oriented identity. 'Left' has a rather positive sign, whilst 'Right' – negative, still for many. It is worth considering where the sources of such an attitude lie. For it cannot be merely seen in terms of defence of their political and ideological provenances, or a desire to preserve the sense of one's own path in life, or loyalty to the ideals and values of the people who began their adult lives under the red banner, to the sounds of *The Internationale* – although this is certainly quite a momentous driver. There are two planes to be discerned on which the discourse about the Left and the options of the past keeps going these days: a defence of socialism as a proposal that, albeit spoiled, has at least partly preserved its values, versus a defence of the stance assumed by a considerable group of Polish Left men with respect to the system instaurated by communists, with everything this order implied and what was contrary to the Left ethos. For both discursive planes, the reasoning commences with acceptance of the premises determining the options and involvements: illusions are evoked that Polish socialism would differ from that implemented in the Soviet Union, along with hopes that lawlessness and violations would come to a stop once

² This essay was written in 1988 [editorial footnote].

the revolution wins; a myth of the origin, as opposed to the later distortions, is thus created.

I shall express a view that is provocatively extreme: in my opinion, in Poland, beginning with the year 1945, the Left and Right categories have increasingly been shifted to the sphere of magical thinking, turning into conjurations evoking spirits, good or evil ones. The notional scope of these categories is vague; their contours are nebulous. Thus, they are used and applied in a very casual way; those using them employ their own criteria to include or exclude various ideological and political formations to or from the Left, and Right. For instance, the Polish United Workers' Party would be a left-wing entity for some and a totalitarian and nationalist right-wing one for others – regardless of what one may deem to be a determinant of leftism. As is known, a number of diverse litmus papers for leftist and rightist orientation have been in use.

There have been quite a number of reasons behind the ambiguity of the Left and Right categories in Poland – and, probably, not only in Poland. The major reason is the collision of the cliché of Left as shaped in the political system of the 1930s and reflecting the sharply anti-totalitarian ethos of socialists and, to an extent, peasant activists and liberal democrats, against the totalitarian order imposed by communists who not only considered themselves leftist but indeed being legitimate children of the Left. The Polish stereotype of Left resists the recognition that, like fascism and Nazism were exteriorised, in certain historical conditions, from the nationalist Right, the Left gave birth to a Stalinist totalitarianism whose impact on leftists worldwide exceeded Mussolini's and Hitler's impact in rightist circles. In our thinking about Left and Right, we repeatedly blend the ideological and the political dimension, with a tendency for often inclining to the former – whereas, in reality, 'Left' is primarily a historically shaped political category that emerged in the late eighteenth century and functioned across the subsequent two centuries, corresponding with certain historical social and political arrangements, and ceasing to exist as they change.

This is not to say that I would be in a position to deny the Left vs. Right opposition as two dissimilar philosophies of the world, two antithetical approaches to human condition and the place of man in the universal order. When originally conceived in May 1789, then as symmetrical and antagonistic notions that reciprocally defined one

another, Left and Right proved dissimilar not only by their position in the French National Assembly, right or left of the chairman. The division was rooted very deeply, extending to interpretation of the world, system of values, social ethics, the sphere of symbolism, and even embracing mentality and customs.

The one invokes family, authority, religion, the other equality, reason, liberty; on the one side we have respect for order slowly evolving through the centuries; on the other a passionate belief in man's capacity to reconstruct society according to the data of science; the Right, the party of tradition and of privilege, versus the Left, the party of progress and intellect.³

Those sitting on the left believed in civilisational progress and in man's omnipotence with regard to Nature.

In this dimension, the Left vs. Right antagonism has certain universal and timeless elements to it. There will always and everywhere be such who desire to preserve the existing order and such who destroy it so that a new world, realising a chiliastic utopia, could be built on the rubble of the old one. Always and everywhere a dispute will go on between those who strive for freedom and those who consider it calamitous, at least when in excess; between adherents of egalitarianism and advocates of hierarchical arrangements. However, this kind of concept of the Left and the Right is unacceptable, at least for a historian. Superimposition of such a pattern of historical matter would have blurred the picture even further, rather than clarifying it. Let us stick to Left and Right as historical categories then.

It would be legitimate to remind that incessant translocations have become typical to both Left and Right since the late eighteenth century. The political formations that belonged to the Left at their birth tended to move rightward, giving way to new, more radical currents. The process has been continued until the present time, to an extent, although groups situating themselves left of communists play no important role any more. This, in any case, could confirm the statement that the categories of Left and Right have been exhausted, prove to be imitative, and have to yield to new beings that would define the various attitudes towards social challenges of the present and future. Taking into consideration the pace and depth of changes occurring over the last hundred years, this perspective seems natural and manifest.

³ Aron, *The Opium*, 5.

What I am particularly interested in is Poland and its peculiar form of Left vs. Right dilemma in the several past decades – the one that was shaped under particular conditions which were determined by the dependence on the Soviet Union and a ‘garrison-like’ character of the state, as Edward Ochab⁴ once described it. The communists’ monopoly rule warranted by Moscow implied atrophy of genuine political thought and a decay of the game of real political forces (unless one would perceive in-Party turmoil in such terms).

In that degenerated environment, the Left was represented by the ruling communist Party and the Right by its opponents, regardless of the views they professed: socialists and nationalists, peasant movement exponents and Christian democrats. Was this an act of usurpation on the part of the ruling communists and their allied political groups? To my mind, it was not. There is no model or pattern, in Paris or in Moscow, which, applied to a political movement or party, would tell us whether it should be classed as a Left or a Right. Communists functioned as the Left in the political lives of their countries, in political literature, in analyses of contemporary political thought. Stalinism is commonly defined as a leftist totalitarianism, as opposed to Nazism being deemed a rightist one. Aleksander Wat, a man of piercing intellectual insight, a penetrating discoverer of the mechanisms of the Stalinist system, pointed out to its inherent duality. He identified in it a ‘counternatural’ coupling of an order of humanistic values, humanity’s old eschatological daydreams about universal happiness, and socialist ideals, with tribal principles whereby the world is seen as a dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’: the aliens that need being ruthlessly destroyed.⁵ Wat consequently argued, very aptly indeed, that the role of *word*, and of the people creating it, was to use a verbal façade to veil the reality which increasingly reviled the ideals forming the cradle of socialism.

Nevertheless, the system proclaimed and constituted by communists in Poland proved far more ideologically incoherent. The Poles’ attitude toward the power that was imposed in 1944–5 stemmed, to a considerable degree, from the national values, in the context

⁴ After Bolesław Bierut’s death in 1956, Edward Ochab was elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party [PZPR], a post he held for seven months [editorial footnote].

⁵ Aleksander Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek* (London, 1986).

of the tribal 'us' vs. 'them' opposition, to follow Aleksander Wat's description. This attitude followed from a sense of threat to the national identity and culture in its time-honoured shape. Taking a discriminating look at the political divisions, beginning with the year 1944, one can easily conclude that the then-primary division into 'the democratic camp' and 'the reactionaries', described in terms of a Left vs. Right opposition, in reality discerned between those who identified themselves with the order established by the communists, or at least accepted it, and those who opposed it, whether as the legal opposition or in a conspiratorial way. Characteristically, the programmes compiled by conspiratorial activists are not unambiguously classifiable as Right or Left, although they were certainly closer to the national camp than the Polish Socialist Party, owing to their highlighting of the endangered national values and Polish Catholicism.

As I recently studied the Polish orientations in the early post-war period (1944–56),⁶ I have come to the conviction that already at that time the divisions set by the diverse attitudes to the situation Poland had encountered resulting from WWII screened off, if not dominated and, outright, pushed backwards, by the historical divisions spanning from the national camp in the Right to communists in the Left, through ideological-and-political currents identifiable between these two poles. The man, his/her milieu and organisation were primarily defined based on their attitude assumed on an ongoing basis against the authority formed by the communists – this being true for the period 1944–7. Later on, it obviously changed. The main dividing lines ran between: (a) the indomitable or stout-hearted – those who rejected any political compromise with communists, deeming them unrealistic and thus, detrimental; (b) proponents of partnerships within the Yalta system – those who constituted a peculiar formation consisting of the opposition combined with participation in the government that was *de nomine* a coalition government; (c) capitulators – those who recognise the inevitability of communist hegemony stemming from the irresistible dependence on the Soviet Union; and, finally, (d) those who identified themselves in ideological and political terms with the communist rule and with the constitutional system under implementation. These orientations

⁶ Cf. Krystyna Kersten, *Między wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem: Polska 1944–1956* (London, 1993) [editorial footnote].

took shape based on their relation toward the independence/subservience cause, otherwise describable as sovereignty – dependence on the USSR. Any other questions and issues were shrouded, as it were, by the shadow of this very basic dilemma.

This is not to say that I would be in a position to negate the existence of associations between the divisions ensuing from the tragic nature of the post-war situation and the deep ideological divisions anchored in the historically shaped social arrangements, and having their own history and tradition. Such associations certainly existed. The former divisions preserved their significance – but this significance was successively decreasing. While the Right was deprived of any say, the Left practised an acrobatics whose common denominator was the assumption whereby the Left was ‘us’ and the Right was our opponents; whatever we do is left-specific, by definition, for it is us, the genuine Left, who do it. This being the perception, the exclamation ‘Down with Bierut!’ could be classified by Gomułka as an expression of fascism; the Home Army represented a reactionary and fascist movement; the pre-electoral terror and vote-rigging were deemed democratic acts, and so on. Even in the verbal stratum, not to say in the sphere of action, communists used a peculiar incoherent patchwork of authentically leftist values and slogans drawn from other ideological systems.

The fact that the ruling camp usurped a monopoly of leftism while violating the ethos of the Left does not preclude this milieu’s provenance from the Left. There was no coincidence that men of the Left prevailed among ‘capitulators’ and Opposition members of the 1940s, whereas the majority of those descending from the Right is clearly seen amongst the ‘indomitable’. Compared to those of the Left, they had less in common with the programme proclaimed by the communists – and implemented, to a certain extent. Their consistently anticommunist stance enabled them to see things as they were, rather than yielding to illusions and deceiving oneself by believing in partnership relations, free elections and a possibility to preserve or reinstate civil liberties.

The reader should be warned about being overwhelmed by myths: as a matter of fact, several people representing an extreme Right entered into cooperation with communists – Bolesław Piasecki⁷ being

⁷ Before WWII Bolesław Piasecki cofounded the National Radical Camp [ONR] and after was the leader of the group coalesced around the *Dziś i Jutro* weekly, and

no unique in this respect. Those people did not consider the communists' antidemocratic attitude an obstacle – as opposed to socialists who found it so hard to accept law-breaking practices, destruction of civil society, and stifling of freedom. Not all consented to these developments, to be precise – just to mention Tomasz Arciszewski, Zygmunt Zaremba, Lidia and Adam Ciołkosz, or Zygmunt Żuławski.⁸ We are often inclined to evaluate the attitudes of the socialists through the prism of those who had yielded to the bondage: not being powerful enough to live according to what they believed in, they began believing in what they lived by.

Forty-five years have now passed since a system was implanted in Poland that was called people's democracy once, or real socialism some other time: a period that marks a thorough transformation of the economic and social structures. Poland has been through a revolution, however deformed it was. A qualitatively new society emerged, with its new arrangements and conflicts. It is true that the radical economic, social and political changes were not accompanied by mental changes, corresponding in terms of depth and scope. This is perhaps one of the reasons that the past tethers us, the Poles, so strongly.

This also holds true for the Left vs. Right division. The Polish political thought, getting revived with great difficulty, seems burdened with anachronous relics, taking into account the character of today's Polish society. The past-oriented attitude, whilst necessary to preserve a historical continuity, becomes threatening when excessive and when appearing in lieu of analysis of present-day relations. I moreover think that in order for ideas and their related programmes to get crystalised, one has to anticipate these elements of the reality which seem to be in their nascent state. 'Solidarność' has been an avant-garde movement, not only in the Polish dimension, probably because it is situated above the former Left and Right categories, heralding new currents begotten as a reply to the new challenges and threats. This is why the stubborn endeavours to rebuild some old political formations in Poland, originally formed in the nineteenth century, in completely different conditions, may be disturbing. In a democratic parliament,

of the PAX Association, a milieu described as 'progressive secular Catholics' who collaborated with the communist regime [editorial footnote].

⁸ Socialist activists, at home before WWII and in exile afterwards, opposed the idea to cooperate with communists [editorial footnote].

once such a body convenes in Wiejska St. [the seat of the Parliament in Warsaw], there will perforce be someone sitting on the Left and someone on the Right. Yet, are we really supposed to strive for reproducing or imitating the divisions from before half a century? I should hope that new divisions will emerge all the same, expressing the currents of the epoch that stands on our doorstep.

But perhaps I am wrong; perhaps Poland is still largely anchored in the nineteenth century?

trans. Tristan Korecki

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