Władysław Gomułka’s policy towards Germany between 1945–1970

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The importance of the German question in Poland’s foreign policy during the period after 1945 cannot be overestimated. It was in fact a key issue which impacted on Poland’s relations with the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the German Federal Republic (GFR) and with the Soviet Union, both after World War II and after the breakthrough of 1989.

When in December 1970 Willy Brandt, the Chancellor of the German Federal Republic and Józef Cyrankiewicz, the Prime Minister of the Polish People’s Republic signed a normalisation treaty, the one which came to be known as the Treaty of Warsaw, this represented Władysław Gomułka’s lifetime achievement. In his role as First Secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza – PZPR) from October 1956 Gomułka had consistently tried to secure for Poland guarantees of the western border. This could only be achieved if the two German republics (the German Democratic Republic and the German Federal Republic) and the international community agreed to respect the integrity of the post World War II border between Poland and Germany. The signing of the above-mentioned treaty confirmed that the Oder–Neisse line was henceforth Poland’s internationally recognised border and, at the same time, a confirmation that the GFR would not challenge the post-war territorial changes. To Gomułka this meant that Poland’s territorial security was guaranteed for the first time since World War II – the achievement had both a personal and a political dimension.

The period from 1944–1951

Władysław Gomułka’s political career can be divided into stages. In November 1943 he became the First Secretary of the wartime Polish Workers’ Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza – PPR) which operated in occupied Poland. On 20 July 1944 the first provisional administration (Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego – PKWN) was formed in the liberated
town of Lublin. This authority brought together Polish communists from the Soviet Union and some from the German occupied territories. Gomułka retained the post of party secretary, though his role in the establishment of the new post-war government was insignificant.

Bolesław Bierut, who returned to Poland from the Soviet Union at the end of 1943 and became President of the Polish republic from 1947 to 1952, and a team of Poles, also from the Soviet Union, dominated the decision-making processes mainly because of the links they had with the Soviet leadership of this time (Prażmowska, 2016, p. 123). In any case neither the PKWN nor the Provisional Government of National Unity (Tymczasowy Rząd Jedności Narodowej – TRJN) into which it transformed itself on arrival in Warsaw in January 1945 enjoyed any genuine freedom to formulate or implement Poland’s foreign policy. The pretence of the TRJN, being a provisional government, was played to the full with Bierut in his capacity as Poland’s President being invited to discuss and sign a number of treaties with the Soviet leadership. Poland’s post-war borders were decided at the Potsdam Conference (17 July–2 August 1945). Gomułka, who attended the conference, firmly believed that Soviet support for Polish demands – that German territories up to the Oder and Neisse line should be incorporated into Poland – had been crucial in overriding British and US objections (Werblan, 1988, pp. 276–278). The three wartime allies had agreed at the Potsdam Conference that the final decision concerning Poland’s border with Germany was to be postponed until a peace treaty with Germany was signed. For the time being though the previously German territories between the Oder–Neisse line and Poland’s pre-war border ceased being part of the Soviet occupation zone and instead came under the administration of the Polish state (Gelberg, 1978, pp. 205–206). The Potsdam signatories had at the same time agreed that the German population of the region should be removed from those territories.

At this stage Gomułka’s thinking on Germany was in line with policies presented by the TRJN at the Potsdam Conference and, furthermore, one which most Poles supported irrespective of their political allegiances. His views were in fact formed on the basis of the haunting wartime experiences as a result of which he identified Nazism as the biggest enemy of humanity. At the same time he accepted that Poland’s geopolitical situation was such that even though he had some personal reservations about Soviet aims – he accepted that Poland’s security was wholly dependent on Soviet assistance. Thus in some of the speeches which he made during this period these two themes are presented by him as reasons for Poland to re-
main closely allied to the Soviet Union. The little evidence we have of his thinking on Germany during the months following the end of hostilities suggests that he firmly believed in the need to destroy Germany’s capacity for aggression. Furthermore, he was of the conviction that in the long term only international collaboration would guarantee that German militarism would not resurface (Gomułka, 1971, pp. 40–41). The Soviet Union’s collaboration with the wartime allies was critical if European stability was to be guaranteed. German revanchism, according to Gomułka, could likewise only be held at bay if the three powers remained united. From the outset Gomułka took the view that the incorporation into the Polish state borders of previously German areas east of the Oder–Neisse line was to be permanent. In an article following the Potsdam Conference he intentionally misrepresented the decisions made there as a final agreement on the incorporation of the areas into Poland’s borders, whereas he must have known that the US and Great Britain merely agreed to Poland administering these areas (Ibidem, p. 48).

Within the TRJN, which functioned as a provisional administration until the first post-war elections which took place in January 1947, Władysław Gomułka held the portfolio of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for the Recovered Territories. The Poles adopted the use of the name Recovered Territories to indicate areas between the pre-war border with Germany and the Oder–Neisse line. More appropriately these areas should and were sometimes referred to as the Western Territories. The description of the region as ‘recovered’ was meant to convey the, historically inaccurate, impression, that the areas had in the past been part of the Polish Kingdom and had been merely separated from the Polish state.

Gomułka continued to be the First Party Secretary. His influence on policy making was limited at that time but in his role of Minister for Recovered Territories he was given a high-degree of freedom to formulate policies. The result was that while on the one hand he had no input into foreign policy decisions, his views on Germany and his critical assessment of Soviet relations with the Poles offer us a reliable insight into his thinking.

Although the Soviet authorities had supported Polish requests that previously German territories east of the Oder–Neisse line should be incorporated into Poland’s borders, there were many contradictions in the way these areas were treated by the local Soviet military commanders. The Ministry for Recovered Territories was established in November 1945. Before the signing of the Potsdam Treaty the Soviet military authorities
considered the previously German areas as coming under their jurisdiction and that meant that all industrial capacity was dismantled and transported to the Soviet Union. Nonetheless nothing changed after Potsdam even though formally the areas were to be administered by the Poles (Skrzypek, 2002, pp. 80–81). This meant that in his efforts to consolidate Polish control over previously German areas Gomułka had to contend with a lack of security, Soviet dismantling, theft and pillaging by Red Army soldiers as well as pilfering by Poles. Nevertheless for Gomulka this was not just an issue of appropriation of goods which the Poles needed. It was a larger issue of establishing the Polish state’s control over the Western Territories and in effect meshing them into the territorial and administrative structure of post-war Poland. This meant the removal of Germans, colonisation by Poles from Poland and from Polish territories which had been incorporated into the Soviet Union, as well as restarting economic activities.

Władysław Gomułka’s thinking on land distribution makes it clear that while he wanted the area to be fully integrated into Poland he believed fundamentally in creating economic stability as a precondition of that process. This was the reason why he insisted that land should be allocated to individual farmers and that the farms should be larger than was the allocation norm in the Polish territories. Ultimately Gomułka was able to insist on allocations of between 7 and 15 hectares.

In 1948 Gomulka fell out of favour. In August 1948 he was relieved of his function of First Party Secretary. On 2 August 1951 he was arrested and placed in detention. The accusations, never formally put to him, were that he represented a nationalist deviation within the Party (Prażmowska, 2016, pp. 164–167).

The period from 1956–1969

In December 1955, as part of the de-Stalinization process, Władysław Gomułka was released from detention. He was invited to attend meetings of the Central Committee of the Party. This culminated in his being invited to
a meeting of the Politburo (abbreviation for Political Bureau, the chief executive body of the Communist apparatus) on 12 October 1956.

When asked to speak, Gomułka took the opportunity to review Soviet-Polish relations and the way the Soviet Union had treated Poland over the German question. He felt that the latter issue was indicative of the imbalance between the two states. Gomułka reminded the party leaders that the Soviet Union had handed over to Poland territories east of the Oder–Neisse line, but then had proceeded to dismantle the productive capacity of the region and as a final insult, demanded that Poland pay reparations to the Soviet Union for the region. The insult rankled with Gomułka even more so as one of the members of the Politburo was Marshall Konstantin Rokossovsky, who the Poles had been obliged to appoint as Minister of National Defence even though he was a Soviet and not a Polish citizen. In 1945 Rokossovsky had been the Soviet military commander of the areas which then became the Recovered Territories. At that time when Gomułka had repeatedly asked him to curb the dismantling and to impose discipline on the Red Army soldiers, Rokossovky ignored him and generally treated him as a person of no consequence. In 1956 Gomułka returned to the point he had made earlier, namely that the German issue was as much a Polish concern as it was a Soviet one and Poland had to be treated as a partner in all talks concerning the future of Germany.

On 17 October 1956 the crisis in the Polish party leadership deepened and Gomułka was appointed as First Party Secretary. When on 19 October a Soviet delegation headed by Nikita Khrushchev flew uninvited into Warsaw Gomułka confronted them. After a number of stormy discussions the Russians departed convinced that the Poles would deal satisfactorily with the situation which appeared to be engulfing Poland. One of the important reasons for Khrushchev leaving the Poles to deal with their problems was because he had received an assurance that Poland would not leave the Warsaw Pact. What united the Soviet leaders and the new Gomułka led party was agreement on the German question and with that on the role which the Warsaw Pact would have to play in the future.

The importance of the German question to Gomułka is further confirmed by the fact that when the new Polish party leadership travelled to Moscow on 17 November 1956 the German question was discussed con-

3 Further see: AAN, PZPR, Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the PZPR, V-41, 12 October 1956.
tinuously during all meetings. As long as the German issue was not resolved, Poland would remain dependent on Soviet support. But what Gomułka intended to do was to renegotiate the way the Soviet leaders treated the Poles and furthermore to confirm this in the context of the Warsaw Pact. Gomułka personally prepared notes and responses to the draft of the new treaty which was to henceforth regulate relations between the Soviet Union and Poland. In his notes he questioned whether by undertaking to support each other Poland was in fact obliged to defend Soviet borders. He would return to this issue in future years. For the time being he had obtained an assurance that the Warsaw Pact would be responsible for Poland’s western border, in effect the border with Germany. What he nevertheless hoped to still discuss in the future was the question of who would be financially responsible for the cost of stationing Soviet troops in Poland. Gomułka also believed that the structure of the Command of the Warsaw Pact was in need of reform so as to give all the members equal rights to define the policies of the military organisation (Anon., *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego*, 1998, pp. 15–18).

During the years which followed the German issue continued to be a matter which troubled Władysław Gomułka. He never convincingly felt that the Poles were in charge of the negotiations, and furthermore he felt that Khrushchev was pursuing a global policy in which Polish interests and the German question tended to be downgraded in favour of topics which increasingly mattered more to the Soviet Union. At the same time lingering in Gomułka’s mind was the constant suspicion that Khrushchev preferred to support the GDR rather than Poland because there he could score propaganda victories whereas the economic situation in Poland was merely an internal matter.

In June 1950 the GDR had recognised Poland’s claim to the Oder–Neisse border. This was in every respect a pyric victory because the GFR continued to maintain that the border of 1937 was the legal one while the 1945 border was only a temporary one. But even in the GDR the post-war border was not a matter to which the ruling party referred with any degree of confidence as it was only too well aware of the lack of public support for the border agreement with Poland (Skobelski, 2010, pp. 340–341). This led Walter Ulbricht, the head of the GDR, to try and discredit

4 Further see: AAN, PZPR, Office of the First Secretary of the Central Committee, XIA-71, 8 November 1956.
Gomułka in the Soviet leaders’ eyes (Ibidem, p. 344). When Gomułka found out that the Soviet Union supplied the GDR with more consumer goods than it did to Poland, he was so angry that he never forgave Khrushchev.

Władysław Gomułka had a genuine commitment to maintaining peace in Europe and this sentiment was reinforced when he observed the remilitarization of the GFR. It has been suggested that his unease at the way the Soviet Union appropriated the role of the key mediator of the German issue was increased with the emergence of the arms race. He apparently feared that the Soviet Union would site nuclear weapons on Polish soil which would preclude any future agreement between Poland and the GFR (Ibidem, p. 354). But the GFR was not responsive to Polish attempts to restart talks on the long-term German settlement. In 1957 it looked as if the situation was becoming more confrontational when in response to Yugoslavia recognising the GDR the GFR broke off diplomatic relations. This led Gomułka to declare that were the GDR and GFR to jointly make commitments that they would not site nuclear warheads on their territories, then Poland would make a similar commitment (Gomułka, 1971, pp. 137–142). This was the beginning of an idea for the demilitarization of Central Europe which he developed further.

In his continuous efforts to obtain approval for Poland’s post-war western borders Władysław Gomułka tried also to woo the west European powers. One of the reasons for this policy was his abiding distrust of Konrad Adenauer, Chancellor of West Germany, whom he held responsible for the failure to open successful talks with Great Britain and France. Nevertheless in 1959 it looked as if Charles de Gaulle was willing to break ranks and to try and persuade the GFR to agree to talks on the issue of the Oder–Neisse border (Tebinka, 2010, pp. 64–66).

During the Geneva talks in May – June 1959, to which Poland was not invited, it was the Soviet Union that spoke on Poland’s behalf. When the next stage of the Geneva talks collapsed in May 1960 the issue of Poland’s borders did not progress further. On 27 September 1960 Gomułka made his only ever trip outside Europe. This was to attend a meeting of the XVth Session of the United Nations where he made a speech in which the German issue was dominant. As he put it to the session, it was not the division of Germany that was the source of possible conflict in the world but the remilitarization of the GFR. He followed this up with a suggestion that the demilitarization of the region was the only way of averting a future crisis (Gomułka, 1971, p. 214). He returned to his point on 30 September 1960
when he delivered a reply to the speech made earlier by the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. In it Gomułka reminded the meeting of the United Nations that Poland had put forward as proposal for the creation of a nuclear free zone in Central Europe (Ibidem, p. 225). This proposal which came to be known as the Rapacki Plan was not taken up by the international community, and Poland abandoned it. Not surprisingly during the Berlin crisis in the summer of 1961 Gomułka supported Khrushchev to the point of agreeing with the building of the wall (aka the Berlin wall). In the diplomatic game which Khrushchev was playing in his effort to force the western power and the GFR to the negotiating table Gomułka was willing to consider the possibility of Soviet troops crossing Poland and even approved full Polish military collaboration for any action which the Warsaw Pact approved (Skrzypek, 2005, pp. 238–239). On the other hand he was not prepared to sanction economic support for the GDR (Tebinka, 2010, p. 79).

During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 the Polish leaders, in common with other leaders of states of the socialist bloc, were excluded from consultation. That did not prevent Władysław Gomułka from formulating strong views on the advisability of the Soviet Union becoming involved in a confrontation with the United States. His distrust of the Soviet leader was accentuated by rumours that Khrushchev had been planning a trip to Bonn. This had not been agreed with the Poles. It has been suggested that Gomułka’s policy of mediating between the Soviet and the Chinese leaders might have been caused by his sense that the only way of forcing Khrushchev to include the Poles in negotiations on the German issue was through forging strong links within the bloc of socialist countries (Skrzypek, 2005, pp. 295–296).

On 14 October 1964 Khrushchev was removed from power and Leonid Brezhnev replaced him. During the first meeting with the new Soviet leader Gomułka listed his grievances against Khrushchev. Germany figured high on the list of issues which the previous Soviet leader had either mishandled or not been attentive to. Gomułka complained that Khrushchev had been planning to open talks with the GFR overlooking the fact that the German issue was not solely a Soviet problem but one which was also of vital importance to Poland. He felt that Khrushchev had not supported the Polish plan for partial demilitarization of Central Europe and instead tried to use the Warsaw Pact in his conflict with China. Soviet involvement with Cuba had been a distraction from the much more important issue of how to open talks over Germany. Finally Gomułka requested that
Brezhnev should treat Poland as a partner in all talks concerning Germany. The new course in Soviet-Polish relations was confirmed by the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Aid in which the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact stated their commitment to Poland’s security and to the defence of the Oder–Neisse border.

During the following years Gomułka faced a number of internal crises, one of which related to the German issue. In November 1965 the Polish Episcopate issued a “Proclamation from the Polish Bishops to the German Brothers”. Without discussing the reason why the Polish Catholic hierarchy made this initiative, it is important to note that the point on which Gomułka focused was the Catholic Church’s attempt to interfere in state matters, namely foreign policy (Dudek and Gryz, 2006, pp. 221–223).

Other crises confronted Władysław Gomułka too: the emergence of the dissident movement, the reforms and intervention in Czechoslovakia and finally the consolidation of a nationalist wing in the party leadership under the leadership of Mieczysław Moczar. The latter led to a wave of anti-Semitism in Poland. These issues are outside the scope of this paper but they explain why Gomułka’s authority in the party leadership was compromised by 1969.

The year 1970

Poland’s involvement in the 1968 Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia enhanced Gomułka’s standing with Brezhnev. During the last two years of his tenure as First Party Secretary Gomułka focused on two issues, namely foreign policy and the economic situation of the country.

In 1967 the Soviet leadership indicated that it was time to open talks with the GFR. Poland agreed but on two preconditions – that the GFR would acknowledge the creation of the GDR and accept the Polish post-war western border. During the ensuing talks with the GFR these two preconditions were maintained steadfastly by the Soviet Union and, naturally, also by Gomułka and Ulbricht (Skobelski, 2010, pp. 432–433). Because Gomułka remained anxious about the Soviet Union’s willingness to protect Polish interests, Poland’s foreign policy objectives in relation to the

5 Further see: AAN, PZPR, Office of the First Secretary of the Central Committee, XIA 173, 26 October 1964.
German question were pursued through two channels, i.e. direct talks with the GFR and in the United Nations. During his visit to Moscow in October 1969 Gomułka heard that Willy Brandt, then the GFR’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, indicated to the Soviet Union that talks on the German issue could be started. Brezhnev informed Gomułka that it might be the right time for Poland to likewise open talks with the GFR (Anon., Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego, 1998).

From this point onwards the talks were conducted along two lines, between the Soviet Union and the GFR on the one hand, and between Poland and the GFR on the other. When on 12 August the Soviet Union signed a treaty with the GFR this created a framework for the Poles to conduct their talks with Brandt who in December 1969 became the Chancellor of the GFR. When the final text of the treaty was agreed and signed on 7 December 1970 (The Treaty of Warsaw was a treaty between West Germany and the People’s Republic of Poland) this represented a lifetime achievement for Gomułka. He believed that he had secured for Poland a guarantee of its borders and had removed the only real threat to Poland’s security. He also saw this as an assertion of Poland’s independent position in European relations, independent of the Soviet Union (Strzelecki-Gomułka, 2002, p. 84).

Conclusions

In popular opinion the diplomatic confirmation of the territorial changes of Poland’s post-war border has been overshadowed by the events in Gdańsk in 1970 during which 44 striking workers were killed. On 18 December 1970 Gomułka was forced to resign and Edward Gierek replaced him as First Party Secretary, ushering in a new era in Polish history. Nevertheless the importance of the Polish-German treaty of 1970 cannot be overstated. It did finally end the uncertainty of the post 1945 situation. Polish-German relations, as defined in the treaty, remain the foundation of relations between the two states up to the present day. After the reunification of Germany and the demise of the GDR the border issue was not reopened, testifying to its permanency.
Summary

The importance of the German question in Poland’s foreign policy during the period after 1945 cannot be overestimated. It was in fact a key issue which impacted on Poland’s relations with the GDR, the GFR and with the Soviet Union. Throughout his tenure as First Party Secretary, Władysław Gomułka invested heavily in trying to obtain international guarantees of Poland’s border with Germany. Only in 1970 was this finally achieved, forming a lasting foundation for future relations between the two states.

Keywords: borders, foreign policy, Germany, Poland, Władysław Gomułka

References:


