The fortieth anniversary of the so-called March Events that occurred in Poland in 1968 provides an opportune moment for reflecting on their meaning. At the same time, it must be remembered that the “March Events” sum up many different, not necessarily connected, and sometimes contradictory tendencies. In practice, all they had in common were the time (Spring 1968) and place (Poland).

Observers looking back on the March Events concentrate on whatever aspects personally impacted them the most, or on the crowd they kept company with. Thus, it is not surprising that the youth uprisings are the most salient memories for the students of 1968. Protests in one form or another were held in nearly all institutions of higher learning in Poland, with street demonstrations and violent clashes with the state police occurring in several cities.

The student component of the March 1968 events is often compared to the wave of student protest in the West. However, despite a range of apparent similarities (university strikes, vigils, clashes with the law), the Polish events can only be accurately compared to the reform movement that was taking place in Czechoslovakia. Under the banner of freedom, the Polish students struggled for the same values and goals as their Czech and Slovak brethren.

The students in the West, on the other hand, were battling a different state system. They did not first need to fight for the freedoms of speech and assembly as these were fundamental principles of a democratic state. Still, it is worth noting that, despite these differences, French students in May 1968 made a point of emphasizing their solidarity with their Polish counterparts by chanting “Rome, Berlin, Warsaw, Paris!” Moreover, the French translation of the “Open Letter to the Party” by the intellectual leaders of the movement, Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, was then one of the most popular readings at the Sorbonne.

Nonetheless, it must be borne in mind that the students in the West could be sure that their protests would be widely covered in the national press—and with a modicum of goodwill—whereas Polish students, who lived in a country where the state had nearly monopolistic
control over the mass media, could not count on such coverage. Instead, they were forced to challenge an onslaught of misinformation, lies, and slander in the press, on the radio, and on television.

Whereas student leaders in the West immediately became heroes of the crowds, often becoming even more popular than rock stars or athletes, their Polish counterparts, subject to political baiting and persecution, were thrown in prison. Utilizing leftist rhetoric, the Polish students struggled to democratize and liberalize the communist system, as well as for the right to acknowledge the true nature of their circumstances.

Their efforts contributed to the development of the concept of the “68 Generation.” Many people from this generation went on to become anti-communist activists in the 1970s and later activists and advisors in the Solidarność trade union movement.

**Attack on artists, scientists, and Jews**

Many people in the Polish worlds of culture, science, and arts perceive March 1968 and the years following from a different angle, namely, as a pogrom against the intelligentsia. Authors and scientists—often extremely well-respected and highly esteemed individuals—were brutally attacked in the media. Such open attacks, like party functionaries, not only denied the ideological and moral integrity of those they maligned but also called their professional qualifications into question.

Finally, those who left Poland after March 1968 often associate the era with the disgraceful anti-Semitic campaign, which officials ineffectively disguised as a form of “anti-Zionism.” Anti-Semitism has long roots in European history and will most likely continue to exist, but it was difficult to openly espouse such beliefs in post-Shoah
Europe. In democratic countries, these elements have often been pushed to the margins of society where they can only anonymously voice their opinions in small niche publications. In communist Poland, with preventive censorship and a police force that guarded the interests of the state, the publication of anti-Semitic materials was officially banned but, as it turned out, not impossible.

In the context of Polish communism, anti-Semitism was able to find its way onto the front pages of the newspapers as well as onto prime-time radio and television in 1968. As a matter of fact, from as early as the beginning of the 1960s, the Ministry of the Interior had begun to exhibit a growing interest in the Jewish community, even though no more than 30,000 Jews or people of Jewish heritage lived in Poland by the middle of the decade. In the spring of 1968, Jews were “cleansed” from practically all areas of public life: the party apparatus, national and regional governmental offices, state administrative bodies, the armed forces, mass media outlets, the educational system, as well as cultural and academic communities. This wide-scale “aryanization” of the security apparatus (as the operation was called internally) had already begun a few years before but now grew more intense. In Warsaw alone, between March and September of 1968, close to 800 people were dismissed from leading posts, whereas between 1965 and 1967, about 600 people had been.

**Emigration of intellectuals from Poland**

In this political climate, 15,000 people emigrated from Poland between 1968 and 1972. This emigration is significant not so much in terms of the number of people as in their intellectual caliber: of the 9,570 adults who applied for emigration, 1,832 of them had university degrees and another 944 were students. Of those who wished to emigrate to Israel (at the time, it was the only emigration destination one could indicate, even if one did not truly intend to go there at all) 217 were former university employees and 275 had worked at various academic institutions. This wave of emigration was therefore very much an emigration of the intelligentsia.

Those who initiated the anti-Semitic campaign surely failed to consider, 25 years after German Nazis had carried out the Holocaust on Polish ground, how the international public would regard their actions. The West judged the campaign uniformly negatively, and a wave of protests broke out. For this reason, Poland at that time had an undeniably bad reputation in many countries.
March 1968 witnessed one of the deepest political and social shocks in Poland since the end of World War II, and the many aftershocks have affected events up to the present day. The year 1968 ushered in a decline of communist ideology in Poland, and thereafter, ideological zeal lost ground to cynicism, opportunism, and impassive pragmatism. At the same time, Poland evolved into a nationally homogeneous state to the greatest extent ever. Over those years, a new political elite sprouted up and began to challenge the communist regime. As indicated already, many representatives of this new elite played an active role in the system transition toward the end of the 1980s and continue to be major players in the Polish public scene even today. Assessing the balance of events from the present perspective, we can now plainly see the overarching outcome of Poland’s 1968.

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