



**Michał Przeperski**  
***Mieczysław Rakowski. Biografia***  
**[Mieczysław Rakowski. A Biography]**

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It is a platitude of sorts to say that biographies give us an insight into individual fates. Under a classic approach, these fates are chronicled according to the principle of “the man and their times,” while the events molding the life of an individual are seen through the prism of the period. The hero, together with their internally created virtues and vices, becomes a passive or active actor on the historical stage, where, conditioned by their own psychological and physical features, they now face adversity, now actively shape current affairs. But this approach is not the only one available: it is also possible to consider a man as a product of the system in which they are operating. From this perspective, what at a glance appeared to be an inherent personality trait is now a corollary of external, socially- and economically-conditioned stimuli. Under this approach, the biography of Mieczysław Rakowski, editor-in-chief of the “Polityka” weekly, a Polish People’s Republic prime minister, and – last, but not least – the last First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party, may easily turn into a study of the evolution of the communist system in Poland. This is an opportunity exceptionally well-taken: Michał Przeperski’s monograph is an extremely successful synthesis of both said approaches.

The author is a representative of a young generation of historians, but he already has noteworthy scholarly publications to his name. But most importantly, not only do his studies tackle such important issues as the communist authorities’ policy toward the press or Poland’s systemic transformation, but – crucially – they are more than just a simple factual reconstruction, instead offering an interpretation of the problems discussed. This, indeed, applies to the book reviewed, which is not a mere chronicle of Rakowski’s life, a temptation particularly difficult to resist in view of the publication of the latter’s ten-volume *Dzienniki polityczne*, which chronologically overlap with the best part of his adulthood. Przeperski’s book is, first and foremost, an evocative story of a major politician of the

Polish People's Republic. Importantly, even though the book is based on a Ph.D. thesis which the author defended at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and is, as such, a full-fledged scholarly text, its style is vivid and flamboyant, while the narrative does not progress along the lines of discussing documents in the chronological order, instead being a logical argument concerning the issues central to Rakowski's life. This is the book's unquestionable asset, as well as the manifesto of the author's methodological awareness.

Przeperski is not a pathfinder here: other recent publications breaking the mold of traditional historical narratives include Piotr Majewski's monograph on the Czechoslovakian crisis. However, such an approach to academic writing is only to be applauded, given the social role played by science, and particularly humanities (Majewski, 2019). A testimony to the importance of reaching as wide a readership as possible is the popularity enjoyed by books which describe complex issues in the form of simplistic depictions and far-fetched theories. Such an approach is usually justified by concluding that scholarly publications are usually written in a stilted style, while the way they present the material is an insurmountable barrier to an average reader. Therefore, the popularity of such "casually-written" books and its lack faced by their more academic counterparts is barely surprising. But Przeperski's book proves that history can be discussed in scholarly fashion without ignoring the needs of the reader unaccustomed to scientific jargon, and that the style of writing is as important as diligence, which is a trait of a good historian.

To be sure, the remarks concerning the methodological approach and the language of description have to be complemented with the substance which fills the frames thus established. The author performed a comprehensive archival search, covering the full scope of Rakowski's activity, which was indeed extensive. In a sense, he was the embodiment of the ideal of social advancement, which the Polish People's Republic propaganda flaunted: he went all the way from being a peasant's son to the top offices of the state and the communist party. This meant that a prospective biographer was facing a daunting task of recovering documents scattered across numerous archives that pertained to Rakowski's almost half-a-century-long political activity, and these had to be then thoroughly studied. Posing a challenge in itself was a critical analysis of Rakowski's journals released between 1998 and 2005, which – as the author demonstrated – for long parts bordered on the memoiristic.

There is little doubt that Przeperski emerged victorious from this challenge, even if his failure to search the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History in Moscow is slightly disappointing. The Soviets were gathering intelligence on the members of Polish communist elites, which is proved by relevant documents concerning Stefan Staszewski and Władysław Gomułka. Thus, it stands to reason to assume that Rakowski was also surveilled (Szumiło, 2015; Staszewski, n.d.). On the other hand,

particularly commendable is the author's thorough research at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, USA, where Rakowski's legacy is currently stored. Among it are also the original copies of the journals which served as the basis for the official edition, so studying them was absolutely essential for a critical analysis of Rakowski's biography.

Aside from the vastness of the source material, another mountain to climb for the author was considerable efforts the egocentric Rakowski invested in self-creation, the crowning achievement of which was precisely the publishing of his journals. The sources of this striving, other than the aforesaid blemish on Rakowski's character, were his constant attempts to reconcile two worlds: the communist politics and the Warsaw intelligentsia, to which he aspired with varying degrees of success and on which he tried to model his public image. A child of the new system and a man undoubtedly endowed with a politician's temperament, but not with an intellectual's insightfulness, in the mid-1950's, Rakowski was trying to self-identify as the latter so as to transgress the limitations of a party apparatchik. The tension typifying these struggles continued throughout his political career. It is instructive that the intelligentsia looked favorably on him through the prism of the episode which was the most problematic from the perspective of his political ambitions, that is, the party's antisemitic campaign in March 1968. By refusing to reprint Antoni Słonimski's prewar article, whose character was clearly provocative in the context of the party's antisemitic purge, Rakowski risked his career and at the same time contributed to the emergence of the legendary status of "Polityka" as the periodical which did not demean itself during the March events. However, Rakowski squandered this capital and came to be first and foremost remembered as the party's stern voice and a fierce opponent of "Solidarity," rather than as a critic of the party line. Perhaps it is this mismatch between his public reception and self-perception that sparked his publishing activity in the post-communist Poland, capped with the release of books in which he defended his life choices and his political camp.

The deconstruction of Rakowski's image is not the solitary outcome of Przeperski's research. The author's recreation of the politician's life is done with great attention to detail, but not at the expense of vividness. The last First Secretary was born in the family of a relatively well-off peasant, a fact that would give him a complex in the communist Poland. The Second World War, which he survived in Poznań, gave rise to his hatred for the Germans, who had murdered his father. He became part of the new system through the so-called Polish people's army, where he served as a political-educational officer. An indoctrinator who himself was being indoctrinated, he joined the Polish Workers' Party and became a human building block of the emergent system. His career accelerated in 1949, when he was appointed a full-time employee of the Press Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United People's Party. One of his main tasks was to oversee regional press. His true watershed moment was

1952, when he started studies at the Institute for the Education of Research Staff. For Rakowski, the school – whose aim was to develop party-affiliated scholars – was where he underwent complete political socialization in the Stalinist spirit. As a member of the Institute's party cell, he internalized the necessary rituals and the worldview which the communists would expect from a comrade.

The Thaw period did not shake him or plant in him the seed of doubt about the core of communism, since – as noted by Przeperski – Rakowski was an embodiment of the postwar Poland and treated the party as the point of political reference rather than the conduit of the idea. He welcomed Gomułka's second spell in charge of the party and actively supported what in popular perception was considered reneging on the October 1956 provisions. He was appointed editor-in-chief of "Polityka," which was seen as Gomułka's mouthpiece. Thanks to the backing from the First Secretary, which, however, was not unconditional, he remained at the helm and, more importantly, weathered the storm of the party's partisans fraction, which was very active in the 1960s. He also owed his longevity to his burgeoning political talents, but the process was not always progressing smoothly for him, for example in 1960, when his career could have ended abruptly, and he only survived thanks to Gomułka's intervention.

Deserving the highest praise is Przeperski's incisive analysis of the myth of Rakowski as an intellectual and a liberal, which was founded around that time. The author points to its debatable nature and relativity. This first persona was grounded in his scholarly aspirations, which Przeperski deems worthless from the present-day perspective. The other creation was supported by the network of acquaintances and his status within the executive circles. Against the backdrop of the party's antisemitic and anti-intelligentsia campaign in March 1968, Rakowski's "Polityka" came across to external observers as a periodical which had not "muddied itself." In the 1960s, by combining loyalty and contacts inside the party with his casual relationships within the "Warsaw elite," he developed the ability to cater for the needs of both these groups. However, his pipe dream about becoming the party intellectual standing by Edward Gierek never materialized.

The 1980s, which were the peak of Rakowski's political career, paradoxically coincided with the demise of both his image as an intellectual and eventually of the entire system which he was a representative of. Deputy Prime Minister Rakowski was known as a staunch opponent of "Solidarity," while his relations with intellectuals and foreign journalists were replaced by official party and government meetings, which enclosed him in an information bubble. The final nail in the coffin of Rakowski the liberal was the meeting held in August 1983 in the Gdańsk Shipyard, where he was terribly received, but for the party members he embodied vitality and irreconcilability toward the opponent. The final accord of his activity was the desperate attempts to modernize the system, which concluded

with the symbolic act of carrying out the flag of the Polish United Workers' Party at the party's XI congress.

This quick review alone shows the variety of subjects discussed by Przeperski. I would like to now focus on one which is not that obvious in the context of Rakowski's biography. It is tempting to take a closer look at Rakowski's evolution from the perspective of the changes of the communist system in Poland and its beneficiaries. A major asset of the book is its recognition of this aspect, whose presence in Rakowski's life gradually increased. The prospect of the communist "new class," whose journalistic depiction was presented by Milovan Djilas, and which Rakowski was clearly a member of (Djilas, 1957), definitely requires further research. The fates of the founders and beneficiaries of the system may be considered from different angles: first, through the prism of unfulfilled eschatology, an approach adopted by Yuri Slezkine (Slezkine, 2019); second, from the perspective of the mechanism of everyday operations, described by Krzysztof Dąbek (Dąbek, 2006). The "new class" notion recurs throughout the narrative about Polish communism, with the telling conclusion in the form of the erosion of support for the retention of the regime in the turbulent period between 1988 and 1989, when the system was already unstable to the point that the attempts to steady it – which Rakowski, ironically, also made – were futile. Thanks to Przeperski's book, these changes are clearly discernable on studying Rakowski's life. In this approach, the point of departure was obviously the period immediately after the war, whose inclusivity was underlined by an emotional Rakowski in August 1983, as he shouted to the Gdańsk shipyard workers that if it had not been for socialism, "many would be now herding cows, myself included!" He thus sang the praise of the system for allowing in ordinary people, from whom he himself came. This was supposed to be an alternative way of validating communism and winning it popular acceptance, while for Rakowski, it meant becoming an active part of the new system. In the subsequent period, Stalinism, which drew upon loyalty thus established, demanded the Manichean outlook on the world, followed by relevant actions, a principle to which Rakowski fully subscribed. Finally, the post-1956 era, which was the period of tension between the asceticism promoted by Gomułka and social aspirations to consumption, thwarted by Stalinism, was a watershed moment for the essence of the system itself, which from this point onward curbed its inclinations to meddle with the private sphere, but at the same time refused to satisfy its needs. In this context, Rakowski's visit to the United States in 1962 was a symbol, as it allowed Rakowski to taste the glamor of thriving capitalism, which let the people chase their consumerist aspirations.

The juxtaposition of flourishing capitalism with the direction in which the system was developing in Poland demonstrates the paradoxical nature of Polish reality, for at that time, Rakowski, a proponent of individual consumption and a socialist *bon vivant*, still believed that communism

was capable of self-correction, obviously with the consent of the Soviet Union. In a sense, this was illusion-laden idealism, its cut-off point being 1968, the year of the party's antisemitic campaign and the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia. Notes in a private journal leave no doubt that at this point, Rakowski's hopes for a refreshing impulse from within socialism had faded and were replaced with political pragmatism and loyalty for the system. Consequently, the pseudo-technocratic character of Gierek's rule and the resulting crude consumption appeared to be a natural successor of Gomułka's "little stabilization," and that enabled Rakowski to participate in this change.

Przeperski deciphers the cultural code constitutive of Rakowski's persona and shows him as a "product" of the contemporary system, bearing an indelible mark of each phase of the latter. From this perspective, it is possible to postulate the bourgeoising of the evolving communism, a phenomenon which Rakowski was a prime example of. He rationalized his relatively comfortable living conditions by invoking his contribution to erecting the system. Ideology, on the other hand, was something indeterminate to him, being rather a search perimeter to be navigated around with practical considerations in mind than a goal to be achieved. This ideology was not a promise (a false one, anyway) of abolishing inequality or forging a new man, which the system officially declared at the beginning. Rakowski was actually averse to egalitarian propositions and demanded that it be possible to satisfy both individual aspirations and consumerist desires. Thus, for Rakowski, a member of the "inner party," communism represented the necessity to understand personal power plays and possible directions of change, a system of government, and an obstacle to individual, materialistic, and snobbish fulfillment.

It is instructive that the drive for modernization which Rakowski was at the forefront of in late 1980s referred to the actions of Margaret Thatcher, and its political point of reference was Mikhail Gorbachev's liberal reforms and his *perestroika*. Paradoxically, from this perspective, it becomes apparent that the core of the system, that is, the desire to eradicate consumption by means of terror, completely disintegrated, and the system itself eventually controverted one of its ideological goals. Thus, studying Rakowski's biography makes it evident how clumsy communism was in its attempts to converge with the Western capitalism – it was the latter that was the point of reference, and, despite Nikita Khrushchev's rattling the saber, communism was not only losing this race, but was also forced into grotesque copycatting, while Rakowski, who held a top state office, was boosting his self-esteem, feeling affinity with western social democrats. Rakowski's biography bears out the global findings of Johanna Bockman, who concluded that in the sphere of economy, real socialism was ready to take on different forms, and the aspects of the market which increased productivity, as well as abrupt industrialization and central planning, fit this model (Bockman, 2011, pp. 173–176, 180–188).

Michał Przeperski's book encourages further research and the elaboration of the numerous issues taken up therein, and this aspect, as well as the depth of the analysis of source materials, testify to the significance of this publication.

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