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<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/7583,The-final-battle.html>

03.05.2024, 22:50

12.03.2021

The final battle

When did the most violent clashes with the Citizens' Militia took place in Warsaw before 1989? Was it in October 1957, after the liquidation of the "Po prostu" weekly, in March 1968, June 1976 or during the street protests during martial law?



None of these answers are correct. The correct answer is: on May 24th 1968, at the 10th-Anniversary Stadium, during the finishing of the 16th

stage of the XXI Peace Race. Even though, more than a hundred people got hurt in the fights which lasted almost 20 hours, these events remain a practically unknown episode of the Polish People's Republic history, until recently barely even mentioned.

Post-March party

The XXI Peace Race was taking place only two months after March 1968 – one of the most violent social-political crises during the Communist-era. Street protests took place in several dozen Polish cities – not only at academic facilities. After they were pacified, in the entire country, especially in Warsaw, there was a tense, stuffy, post-March atmosphere.

In the meantime, the course of the cycling competition helped heat the emotions. After the first stage, the Polish team was in the lead in the general classification, Zygmunt Hanusik won and Zenon Czechowski was the most active cyclist. However, Poles quickly lost their lead and the team from East Germany went up front gaining a 90 seconds advantage. The rest of the XXI Peace Race consisted of the Polish team trying to catch up with the East Germany team. In this regard, the second to last, 15th stage of the race from Puławy to Radom turned out to be crucial. During the individual race Poles firmly attacked and took the lead back. Before the last stage, from Radom to Warsaw, the position of Polish as the leader of the general classification seemed unthreatened. It was similar in the individual classification where there were no surprises expected: the East Germany cyclist, Axel Peschel had a comfortable advantage.

VIP lounge and the public

In the VIP lounge, in front of which the cyclists were to end the competition, sat many high-ranking party and state officials. Among them were – sitting in the order of their state-party hierarchy – Józef Cyrankiewicz, Stefan Jędrychowski, Zenon Kliszko, Ignacy Loga-Sowiński, Eugeniusz Szyr, Józef Ozga-Michalski, Artur Starewicz, Józef Tejchma, Józef Kępa.

The course of the final stage of the race brewed up the emotions among the nearly 100 thousand people gathered at the 10th-Anniversary Stadium which was located where today is the National Stadium. The fans impatiently listened to the information from the speaker on the course of the race. As Bohdan Rymaszewski – one of the spectators – recalled, huge tension was felt at the stadium, a distinct dislike towards the Citizens' Militia and whistles and boos were heard whenever the Soviet Union or its cyclists were mentioned.

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