

# Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/8395,The-65th-anniversary-of-Poznan-June-1956.html>

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## The 65th anniversary of Poznań June 1956



On Thursday, 28 June 1956, at 6:30am, the main factory siren was sounded in the Joseph Stalin Poznań Metal Works (ZISPO, then called the Hipolit Cegielski Metal Works). For workers present on site, distressed with their economic situation and disappointed with both deteriorating working conditions and their demands being ignored by the authorities, it was a signal to start a demonstration.

In silence, they walked out of their factories and marched towards the centre of Poznań, heading for headquarters of the authorities -the City National Council (MRN) and the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (KW PZPR) - so as to force them to put an offer

on the table and appeal to them to make concessions in order to improve both working and living conditions. "The Cegielski procession was headed by women working in stone and hand grinding railcar bodies. Ragged and skinny, wearing worn-down clogs, they looked like genuine convicts sentenced to hard labour. They were followed by assemblers and welders. "We walked calmly, without shouting anything ", recalled one of the participants. This was the beginning of a revolt by workers and residents of Poznań, caused primarily by harsh living conditions resulting from the implemented Six-Year Plan.

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## **Background**

In the early 1950s, nearly all aspects of political, social, economic and cultural life were subject to decisions of one party, i.e. the Polish United Workers' Party. A planned and state-controlled economy was introduced, with the Six-Year Plan (1950-1955) envisaged to be its spectacular success. It was implemented, however, at the expense of the population as it undermined living conditions. Since 1953, the standard of living has been gradually falling following wage reductions, higher work quotas, denied bonuses, reversed benefits, etc. Working conditions deteriorated and there were shortages of food and popular consumer goods. It bred discontent among all social classes alike. What people commonly feared was the powerful security apparatus with its thousands-strong army of officers, its main task being to crush any resistance and secure complete control over society for the PZPR. The main task of security offices was to be the "eyes and ears" and the "shield and sword" of the communist party. The death of Joseph Stalin

(March 5th, 1953) sparked changes in the communist Eastern Bloc of countries of Central and Eastern Europe; the process known as the 'thaw' began. As the widespread terror subsided, which had been present when Stalin was alive, people no longer lived in fear and started to assert their rights and demand better living conditions.

It was a period of many protests by discontented workers in Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic. On May 30th, 1953, there were workers' riots in the Skoda arms factory in Pilsen (Plzenské povstání) which was put down by security forces. On June 17th, 1953, construction workers in East Berlin began protesting against raised work quotas. A wave of strikes and demonstrations swept through 272 towns and districts of DDR, with democratic elections being one of the demands. The protests were violently suppressed by Soviet tanks. All these upheavals were triggered by workers' discontent with their poor living standards and the governing communist parties were perceived as the main cause of this.

The situation in Poznań and Wielkopolska was one of the most difficult in Poland. Farmers who owned medium and large farms found themselves on the verge of bankruptcy, which was an intentional consequence of the state policy pursued during the rural collectivization. It brought about reduced agricultural production and food shortages on the Poznań market. What is more, the authorities either closed down or cut the operations of some craft businesses, small industrial plants and traders, which, up to that point, had played a major role in more than one hundred towns of Wielkopolska, providing services mainly to agriculture. The newly established craftsman and supply cooperatives failed to meet the demands of the

public which suffered a lot from adverse living conditions. In addition, expenditure on health protection, education, municipal services and housing in Poznań and the province was lowered, and was explained by the need to develop other regions that were lagging behind economically. What came as an especially heavy blow for inhabitants of Wielkopolska was the shortage of food, with meat in particular. From August 1955 to May 1956, there was a permanent shortage of butter on the market and the shortage of coal was also a distress.

Since July 1953, ZISPO had seen a gradual increase of work quotas, incorrect calculation of payroll tax and terrible work organisation and factory management. The workers' discontent was growing and found its expression in protests to authorities, revived negotiations, sending workers' delegations for talks to Warsaw (among others with the Management Board of the Metal Workers' Unions and the Ministry of Machine Industry). ZISPO staff filed 4,704 motions to improve work organisation. At many meetings, mass meetings and rallies, workers would present their problems to factory management and party authorities. The situation in other Poznań-based enterprises was a similar story. The fiasco of the talks between a delegation of Poznań workers and state authorities held on June 26th, 1956 in Warsaw was one of the immediate reasons behind the decision to take to the streets. A further reason was the 25th International Poznań Fair that took place at that time in the capital city of Wielkopolska.

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## **Course of events**

In the early morning of June 28th, 1956, the procession of ZISPO

workers was joined by workers from the Rolling Stock Repair Works, Municipal Transport Company, Paris Commune Poznań Textile Works, Marcin Kasprzak Printing House, Poznań Harvesting Equipment Factory, "Wiepofama" Wielkopolska Mechanical Devices Factory and other companies. Thousands of protesters reached the square in front of the Castle surrounded by buildings which were seats of city and party authorities.

"Those who saw this procession, will probably remember it till the end of their lives", later said attorney Michał Grzegorzewicz during one of the Poznań trials. "When they walked in line in an orderly manner, they walked disciplined, with pride and with dignity. But let us not forget that it was not a crowd of strollers, a crowd of gawkers or a crowd of supporters [...]. It was a boiling and raging crowd walking, an angry crowd. As it built up, as the sound of their steps intensified, so did the temperature of emotions. Such a mood is like dynamite. Any spark becomes dangerous."

The demonstration slowly took on a national, anti-communist and anti-Soviet character. The following slogans were shouted: "We want bread", "We are hungry", "Away with workforce exploitation!", "We want a free Poland", "Freedom", "Away with Bolshevism", "—we demand free elections under the UN control!", "Away with Russkis", "Away with the Russians!", "Away with communists", "Away with the red bourgeoisie!", "We want God", "—we demand religious classes at school!". People were also singing the anthem, Rota and religious songs.

A delegation of protesters then went to talk with Franciszek Frąckowiak, the MRN President, requesting a visit of top state officials from Warsaw: either Józef Cyrankiewicz, President of the Council of

Ministers, or Edward Ochab, the First Secretary of KC PZPR. After the talks with the MRN President, the delegation went to the headquarters of KW PZPR. In a conversation with Wincenty Kraśko, the Secretary for Propaganda of KW PZPR, the request of a visit from Józef Cyrankiewicz in Poznań was made once again. Inspired by the delegates, Kraśko addressed the crowd. Some protesters went to MRN while others barged into the building of KW PZPR where they took down red flags and put up boards with slogans. Another group forced their way to the building of the Provincial Headquarters of the Civic Militia and talked police officers into joining the protest. Following a rumour that members of the workers' delegation had been arrested, the so far peaceful crowd stormed the prison at Młyńska Street in order to release the delegates who had allegedly been detained. In the prison building, they seized the armory; 80 units of weapons and ammunition were taken by demonstrators. Devices for jamming Western broadcasts were thrown down from the roof of the building of the Social Insurance Institution located at the junction of Jarosława Dąbrowskiego Street (at present Jana Henryka Dąbrowskiego Street) and Adama Mickiewicza Street. Protesters entered the building of the City Committee of PZPR at Mickiewicza Street. At the same time, a group of demonstrators headed to Jana Kochanowskiego Street to the building of the Provincial Office for Public Security (WUd/sBP), a symbol of oppression and widespread terror. The first shots were fired from the office windows and sparked street fights throughout the city. Because weapons had fallen into the hands of demonstrators, an exchange of shots between civilians and security officers began in front of the WUd/sBP building. The hours-long siege of the building and later

clashes continued until late in the evening all around the city. The building was fired on all night long from gun sites. During the day, armed groups of protesters disarmed police stations in Poznań and nearby towns in order to seize additional weapons and ammunition.

On June 29th, a majority of factories in Poznań did not open for work. Strikes were under way in factories in Luboń, Swarzędz and Kostrzyn. In the afternoon, a group of demonstrators attempted to get into the vicinity of the WUd/sBP building. Upon noticing tanks, the crowd dispersed.

The authorities decided to use the army to contain the workers' revolt: two armoured divisions and two infantry divisions, totalling over 10,000 troops, were sent to the city. General Stanisław Popławski, Deputy Minister of National Defence, was in command of the overall pacification of the rebellious city which lasted for the next two days. Together with a group of officers (Colonel Mieczysław Puteczny, Deputy Chief of Internal Security Corps, and Colonel Teodor Duda, Deputy Commander in Chief of Civic Militia), he took a military plane and arrived in Poznań on June 28th, at about 2:00 pm. 360 tanks were involved in the pacification.

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## **Persecutions and casualties**

On the evening of June 29th, Józef Cyrankiewicz, President of the Council of Ministers, in his famous radio address to the residents of Poznań said that „any provocateur or lunatic who raises his hand against the people's government may be sure that this hand will be chopped off by the people's government (...)”.

Historians cannot agree on the actual number of casualties of the Poznań June 1956. In 1981, it was estimated at 74. The latest research places the death toll at 57, whereas the investigation unit of the Institute of National Remembrance sets the figure at 58. In the literature, there is mention of 100 casualties; however, the authors fail to provide sources of evidence for it. The 13-year-old Romek Strzałkowski was the youngest casualty and became a symbol. About 650 people sustained injuries in clashes.

The persecutions of revolt participants started immediately. The first detentions were made during the suppression of the protests. Then, on the night of June 28th, Security Office and Civic Militia officers held large-scale detentions of the most active protesters, and they continued for many weeks. According to a report of the Security Office, a total of 746 people were detained by August 8th. Investigations commenced, with testimonies being obtained under coercion through physical abuse. In accordance with the official line of propaganda, the authorities decided to judge and punish not the members of the 'workers' current', but those who had committed legal offences during the revolt. In a press interview on July 17th 1956, Marian Rybicki, the Public Prosecutor General of PRL, hinted the use of the theory of 'two currents' both in the investigation and the Poznań trials. He stated: "The prosecution bodies exercise utmost prudence and fairness to differentiate in the course of the investigation between workers who joined the strike and demonstration upset with the failure to have their legitimate grievances redressed and trouble-makers, criminals and provocateurs". This was the direction that the investigations took, and court trials were supposed to corroborate this thesis of the official



propaganda. Indictments against 132 participants of the Poznań June 1956 were prepared and sent to courts for hearing (Provincial Court in Poznań and District Court for the City of Poznań). Eventually though, only three trials were held: the 'trial of three' (trial of a lynch mob that killed a secret police officer), the 'trial of nine' and the 'trial of ten'. The trials got a lot of publicity in Europe and all over the world, because they received media coverage provided by foreign correspondents. Representatives of embassies, including the US and France, were present in the courtroom. Attorney Stanisław Hejowski proved his erudition and political courage during the trials, and was consequently kept under surveillance and persecuted by the Security Service in the years to come.

The Poznań workers' revolt revealed a great aversion of the public to political authorities and regime. The Poznań June has also exposed insufficient legitimation of the communist authorities that were supposedly holding power on behalf of the industrial working class. It was the first mass rebellion of workers and inhabitants of a large town in the history of the PRL, with civilians being fired at from tanks and machine guns.

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## **Struggle for remembrance**

In 1957, Władysław Gomułka, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, made a recommendation before the first anniversary of the Poznań June to draw a "mournful curtain of silence" over it. Thus, official celebrations of the first anniversary of the revolt were very simple and quiet. In June

1957, the Poznań Church, together with its newly appointed archbishop Antoni Baraniak, brought back the memory of 'Black Thursday' victims in prayers during solemn religious services. Families of casualties received economic assistance. In October 1957, a Christian Charity Department was established at the Poznań Curia to give help to, amongst others, persons who needed financial support because of the 'Poznań accidents'. Via the Poznań Curia, they were also offered assistance by the editors of the Paris-based *Narodowiec* magazine of Poles in exile.

Between 1957 and 1980, there was silence in Poland about the Poznań uprising of June 1956. The first book addressing these developments was published in the West and was not available in Poland. It was a study by Ewa Wacowska, a journalist, entitled *Poznań 1956* and published in Paris in 1971. The author was an eyewitness of the events and when writing her book, she relied on the observations and notes she made at that time.

Aleksander Ziemkowski, Ph.D., Eng., an architect, town planner, spatial planner and designer, has played a great role in commemorating and documenting these developments. Over the years, he had been tireless in his efforts to collect documents and information about events and victims of the Poznań June. By 1980 and rise of 'Solidarity', he had been ready with his concept of a monograph about the June 1956 uprising. He organised a team of documenters to collect materials for the Poznań June 1956 monograph edited by Jarosław Maciejewski and Zofia Trojanowiczowa which was published on the 25th anniversary of the uprising. He collected inside stories from participants, witnesses and families, as well as persons belonging to

the government forces. He trawled through prosecution and court files also after 1989, in a free Poland. The results of the works that provided insight into the Poznań workers' revolt were reported in books he computer-typed himself for printing and published in a circulation of 20 copies, each with manuscript rights: *Poznański Czerwiec 1956. Relacje uczestników* (Poznań June 1956. Insiders' stories), [Poznań 1995] and *Pomnik Poznańskiego Czerwca '56. Wybór dokumentów* (Poznań June 1956 Monument. Selection of documents), [Poznań 1996] (republished in standard circulation in 2006 and 2008).

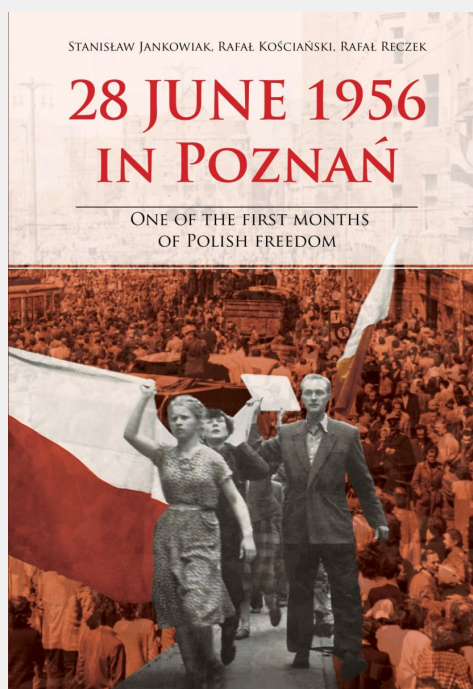
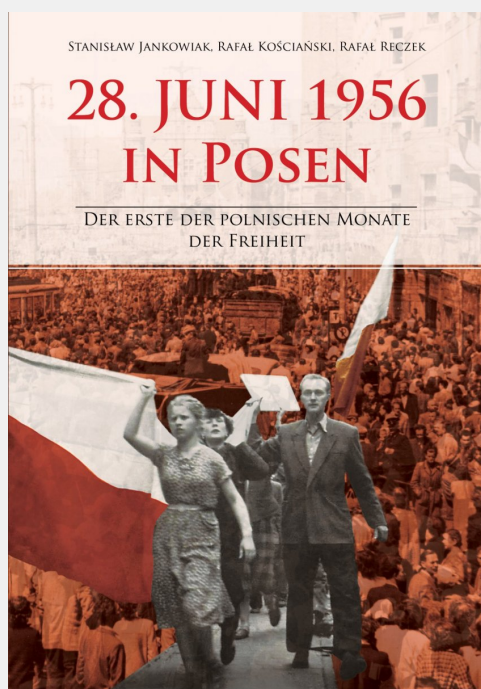
One of the very first initiatives taken by members of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" that was formed in Poznań, was to erect a monument in the memory of events from 25 years before. Soon, a Voluntary Founding Committee of the Poznań June 1956 uprising Monument was established. The unveiling ceremony of the monument, which was in the shape of two marching crosses, took place on June 28th, 1981, on the anniversary of protests.

On the same day, Archbishop Jerzy Stroba consecrated the 'Poznań Crosses' and prayed for the victims of the communist terror together with huge crowds of worshippers. After martial law was imposed on December 13th that year, the monument became a symbol of remembrance and resistance, and the area around it a territory of free Poles, a space where they protested against martial law, among by, amongst other things, singing patriotic songs, prayers, lighting candles or laying flowers. During his visit to Poznań in 1983, Pope John Paul II was denied a prayer under the 'Poznań Crosses' by the authorities. It was not until the collapse of PRL and the emergence of the 3rd Republic of Poland that one could freely write about the uprising

because archive sources, previously inaccessible, started to be disclosed,

Even today historians offer different definitions of the Poznań June 1956 uprising, often arguing on the most accurate name: a rebellion, an uprising or a revolt? Each of them has their supporters and opponents. Surely each of these terms comes closer to the essence of what happened in Poznań on June 28th, 1956 than names that had been used for years by the communist propaganda to depreciate the June'56, namely 'Poznań accidents' or 'Poznań events'.

Agnieszka Łuczak



The IPN's foreign-language publications on the 65th anniversary of the protests and the subsequent massacre were presented during a press briefing on 24 June 2021.

The press briefing on the new English and German-language publication, *28 June 1956 in Poznań. One of the first months of Polish freedom / 28 Juni 1956 in Posen. Der erste der polnischen Monate der Freiheit*, by Stanisław Jankowiak, Rafał Kościański, Rafał Reczek, of the Institute of National Remembrance and Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań, was attended by the Institute's President Jarosław Szarek, and the authors. The agenda concentrated on promoting the book and outlining the IPN's publishing projects in relation to the Poznań protests and massacre of June 1956.

At a support rally that took place on 12 July 1956 in Paris, the author of *The Plague*, Albert Camus, spoke about the situation in Poland,

In a normal country, police stations are not attacked to satisfy the demands of workers. We can only clap in support of this astute observation. Indeed, in a normal country, the rights of labour unions render it possible for the demands of workers to be met peacefully. But in a place where there is no right to strike, where legislation imposed on workers annuls with one fell swoop a hundred years of labour union achievements, where the government lowers the workers' wages, which are already barely enough to cover basic needs – what else is left but to shout and rebel?

On the 65th anniversary of the unrest, the editors of two volumes of source materials released in 2012 and 2016, which presented the causes, course and outcome of the protests of Poznań workers, prepared a dedicated monograph in English and German. The publication is addressed to foreigners who are interested in the circumstances of the 1956 Poznań Uprising.

The new release also touches upon the topic less popular with Polish historians, namely the reactions of selected communist bloc countries and the Western world, and discusses the policy of historical memory (English and German-speaking readers will learn that the people of Poland and the whole of Central Europe could attempt to restore the

memory of the heroes only after the emergence of the “Solidarity” Trade Union). The book’s rich content is supplemented with 63 illustrations, helpful in understanding the geography of workers’ protests and of the fights in the city, as well as 16 source documents.

The publication is the result of the cooperation between the Institute of National Remembrance, Poznań Branch, and the Department of History of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

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