Chapter Four
A Line of Blood

The events of 1968 weakened Gomułka. Opposition to his rule was growing within the bureaucracy, even as discontent simmered below and the economy stagnated. Colonel Adam Sucharski:

There was no doubt that Gomułka had to leave. Quietly, even lower-level Party secretaries spoke of factions in the Central Committee. The leading players and the wider circle of activists, including the secret police and the first secretaries of the basic Party organisations, the managers of various departments in the city council, the directors of larger companies, knew that something was wrong in the Central Committee.

Gomułka's proposals to deal with economic stagnation meant that sacrifices had to be borne again by the already burdened workers in the form of longer hours and harder work.1 Expenditure for safer working conditions, sanitary installations and social facilities in factories virtually ceased. Housing construction lagged and the waiting times for apartments grew. Increasingly, the responsibility for crucial social infrastructure – such as schools, roads and housing – was shifted from the state towards communities and individuals.2 Poland had disastrous harvests in 1969 and 1970, while imports of grain for livestock were severely curtailed, forcing a cut in the animal population, which meant that meat prices were substantially raised.3

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Krzysztof Kasprzyk noted to me, ‘meat at that time began to play the crucial role as the strategic “political” grocery’.

On 12 December 1970, large price increases took effect,\(^4\) including foods coveted for the holidays. In Poland, an average of 58 percent of salaries went towards food; the price rises brought this figure closer to seventy percent, and created a precipitous drop in real wages just before Christmas, which is normally a time of significant expenditure and vast food spreads.\(^5\) Since the standard of living had remained stagnant for a decade, this move threatened much of the hard-won gains of the post-war period. Especially hard hit were lower-paid workers, who spent an even greater share of their earnings on food. Some workers faced ‘a spectre of hunger’.\(^6\) While prices were lowered for some manufactured goods – for instance, televisions and stereos – these were luxuries that many workers could still not afford.\(^7\) The prices of other consumer goods, such as clothing, went up substantially.\(^8\) When word of these prices spread, initially at Party meetings, Wałęsa reported that a woman complained that times had been easier under Hitler, and that she did not know how she would manage with three children.\(^9\) Yet Gomułka did not permit any questioning of his policy. Edward Gierek, Gomułka’s successor, recalled that:

> At the meetings of the Politburo, to which I went reluctantly in the last years, Gomułka was capable of screaming and insulting his most important co-workers... At the last meeting of the Politburo before the unfortunate December price rises... Jędrychowski [the Foreign Minister] brought him to blind fury with his question: ‘Were the social results of the price rises thought through thoroughly?’ This question... ignited a half hour tirade on the subject of trying to teach him Marxism.\(^10\)

In the shipyards on the Baltic seaports, the anger sparked by this move was underlain by conflicts between labour and management. There had been talk of closing the ship-building industry,\(^11\) and during the late 1960s the norms were regularly raised, requiring workers to produce more. Then, in an attempt to complete a ship quickly, the management forced some workers to work as long as 36 hours. A human error had allowed fuel to leak and ultimately to explode, trapping some twenty-two men in the ship’s hold where they were burned.

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\(^4\) Blazynski 1979, p. 7.
\(^5\) Majkowski 1985, p. 75.
\(^8\) Blazynski 1979, p. 7.
\(^9\) Wałęsa 1987, p. 60.
\(^10\) Rolicki 1990.