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Poznan protests of June 1956 in the documents of the CIA

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The spectacular social protest which broke out on June 28th 1956 in Poznan had no precedence in the post-war history of Poland. This unique picture was especially extraordinary due to: its scale, grassroots character, anti-system message and clearly brutal response of the Communist authorities resulting in many casualties.

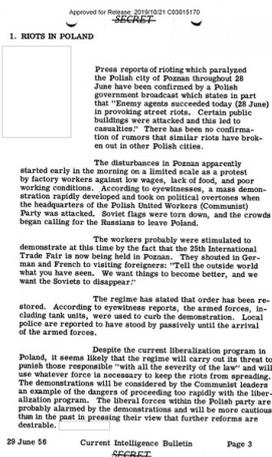
The geopolitical situation of the eastern bloc, at the time of the so-called thaws, caused the Poznan manifestation to gain international interest immediately, gathering the attention of the most important

political cabinets on both sides of the iron curtain. Therefore, it was not surprising that between June and July 1956 everyone wanted to get more information about "Poznan" which soon flowed to the desks of the leaders of the world's greatest powers and their lesser acolytes interested in Poland's situation.

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Literature of the Poznań protests of June 1956

In the rich library of the Poznan protests of June 1956 we will find a number of works illustrating the direct reactions to the manifestations formulated by various countries (by their administrative institutions, diplomatic facilities, parliamentary chambers etc.), at the forums of international organisations (i.e. NATO), by political parties, union boards or press agencies. One such example would be the fundamental monography *Paris, London and Washington look at October 1956 in Poland*, written by the precursor of such research on Polish grounds - prof. Marcin Kula. On the side note, it should be added that this historiographical "treasure", with only a few fragmentary exceptions, concerns analogical research conducted in regards of the countries of the eastern bloc neighbouring Poland, with a special consideration of the USSR.



**Poznan workers to foreigners
(during the International Poznan
Fair): "Tell the outside world
what you have seen. We want
things to become better, and we
want the Soviets to disappear".
Current Intelligence Bulletin, 29
VI 1956. From the collections of
the CIA FOIA Electronic Reading
Room**

Informative role of the secret services

While describing the international discussion caused by the Poznan protests of June 1956, the question should be asked about the role of the secret services working for individual countries directly interested in the knowledge of "Poznan". As much as it is improbable to make a breakthrough in this regard in the context of the Soviet archives, it is a different case with their American counterparts. All due to the program resulting from the *Freedom of Information Act*, under which the American CIA systematically declassifies, digitalises and publishes on its digital library (<https://www.cia.gov/library/>) selective materials from the Cold War. What is significant, is the fact that while digging through the large collections of the documents with some key words, it is very easy to find the CIA's files directly connected with the Poznan protests of June 1956.

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Current Intelligence Bulletin about June '56

Among the partially declassified "June" archives, the series of *Current Intelligence Bulletins*, prepared by the *Office of Current Intelligence CIA*, should be especially underlined.

The bulletin, until recently marked as "top secret", where essential agents' reports and intelligence analyses regarding the international situation were gathered, every day ended up at the most important desks at Langley. This, in turn, means that it can provide an insight into the information (or at least parts of it) gathered by the CIA on "Poznań" and show some corrections done within the intelligence reviews.

The importance of the Poznan protests of June 1956 for the American secret services is best exemplified by the fact that the information entitled *Riots in Poland* was placed first in the CIA bulletin from June 29th 1956. From the bulletin, it is clear that the Americans had expert knowledge on the social moods in Poznan and Greater Poland province at the time. They correctly evaluated, among other things, the sources of the protest

("against the low wages, lack of food and poor working conditions"),

its course and character ("political overtone").

What is most interesting, though, is the fact that the analysis' authors several times cited "the eyewitnesses' reports" which should somewhat raise questions regarding the nature of the presence of the "eyewitnesses" in the Greater Poland's capital. In this context, the report from the factory workers' demonstration at the International Poznan Fair is also quite interesting, as according to the CIA the workers were to directly say to the guests from the West, in French and German:

"Tell the outside world what you have seen. We want things to become better, and we want the Soviets to disappear".

Finally, it was feared that the Communist regime would harshly punish those responsible for "Poznan" and the demonstration itself be deemed "the example of the dangers connected with the too fast liberalisation of the system".

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1. THE POZNAN RIOTS

The Poznan riots of 28 June, which probably involved 15,000 persons, appear to have been brought under control, but conditions have not returned to "normal" as claimed by the regime. A dusk-to-dawn curfew has been imposed. Reports that riots occurred in other cities remain unconfirmed.

The Polish government's admission of 29 June that as many as 28 were killed and 270 wounded indicates the severity of the suppressive measures. By comparison, the East German riots of 1953 resulted in casualties of 18 dead and 100 wounded in East Berlin and 46 dead and 250 wounded in Rostock and Warnemunde.

Although the riots appear to have spread spontaneously, some planning and organization probably preceded them. There had been rumors that a demonstration or strike was to occur at Poznan's Skalin Locomotive Works, according to an official of the American embassy in Warsaw who returned from Poznan late on 27 June. Some of the demonstrators carried arms and banners, and were prompt in blocking the main streets into the city with trucks.

The regime has implied in a party newspaper editorial of 29 June that the liberalization campaign will continue. However, the riots may result in a slowing of the process and a weakening of the position of liberal elements who were reportedly gaining strength in opposition to the stricter policies of party first secretary Olsza. Several Polish sources in Warsaw have told the American embassy that the riots occurred "too soon."

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"A dusk-to-dawn curfew has been imposed". Current Intelligence Bulletin, 30 VI 1956. From the collections of the CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room

On the following day, June 30th 1956, *The Poznan Riots* were still on the top point of the CIA's bulletin. In the analysis, there were the estimated number of participants (definitely too low, oscillating around 15 thousand) and the number of victims repeated after the "Polish government" (38 people). Interestingly enough, "Poznan" was compared by the American analysts to the bloodily dispersed protests of 1953 which took place in East Germany. The report also stated that the American embassy in Warsaw, already on June 27th 1956, had the knowledge of the atmosphere of strikes in the capital of Greater Poland. No less surprising is the fact that the report's author came to the conclusion that, even though, the "riots spread spontaneously", they were "probably preceded by some amount of planning and preparation", as well as the information gathered "from several Polish sources in Warsaw" that the *the riots occurred <<too soon>>*.

Surprising is the fact that the report's author came to the conclusion that, even though, the "riots spread spontaneously", they were "probably preceded by some amount of

planning and preparation”, as well as the information gathered “from several Polish sources in Warsaw” that the *the riots occurred <<too soon>>*.

June's resonance

In July 1956, “Poznan” returned to the pages of the CIA’s bulletin several times more, although in time to less and less extent, which in the case of such source is very understandable. One example would be the bulletin no. 3 from July 1956 describing the *Poznan Situation* which pointed to the fact that the representatives of the US embassy visited Poznan. At the same time, the CIA’s analysts described the influence of June 1956 on the social moods of other *Soviet bloc countries*. That last thread is somewhat described in the July 4th bulletin, where the focus was put on the Yugoslavian authorities’ reactions to “Poznan” (*Yugoslavia chose the Soviet evaluation of the Poznan riots*), as well as in the July 6th 1956 number, where “Poznan’s” influence on the activities of the secret services in Czechoslovakia and East Germany was described.

The documents never before found nor used by historians, allow to some extent to fill in the blanks in the knowledge on the American reactions to the protests of the Poznan workers, although while reading them, it is worth stressing that they are written from the specific standpoint of the American secret services. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of the sources, despite their fragmentariness, definitely requires praise. At the same time, it seems they could become a valid pretext for researchers to conduct a wide-scale research on the international aspects of the Poznan protests of June 1956. After all, the realisation of such an undertaking is still waiting for its historian.

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