

March '68 *and Its* *Aftermath*

in Polish Popular Music

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ABSTRACT

The events of March 1968 in Poland can be viewed as four overlapping threads (i.e. lines of development): 1) factionalism in the ruling party, 2) the intellectuals' protest against the government's cultural policies, 3) a student revolt, 4) an anti-Semitic campaign, all in the wake of international events in 1967–68. These developments intertwined in a series of events, the most notable of which were the pacification of students by the *milicja* (state police) on 8 March and the forced emigration of thousands of Polish Jews as a result of the anti-Semitic political campaign. In this paper, the author examines the period's popular music which reflects the events of March '68. The limited number of songs is a consequence of the prevailing conditions in Polish popular music at that time. The rock genre remained the domain of teenagers, recordings were subject to restrictions, and the recording process remained under the control of the censorship. As a result, popular songs (in the broadest sense of the term) that deal with the theme of March '68 are part of the independent legacy of the so-called 'student culture', preserved outside the mainstream, mainly in oral tradition. Maciej Zembaty's 'Pan Prokurator ma rację' ['Mr Prosecutor is Right'] is analyzed here as a case study of a March '68 protest song. It has been paired with Andrzej Zieliński and Agnieszka Osiecka's song 'W żółtych płomieniach liści' ['In the Yellow Flames of Leaves'], which is often referred to as a rock song reflecting the events of March '68.

Keywords: popular music, protest song, March 1968, rock, Polish music history

In 1968, youth protests swept across the globe. They originated in youth movements in the United States of America, spread to Czechoslovakia (in January), to Italy, Brazil, England, and Poland (in March), France and Japan (in May), Yugoslavia (in June), and other countries. Popular, especially rock music was an important medium for the expression of these protests. Songs were created and sung during the protests, many of which were recorded afterwards and gained widespread fame.¹ Examples include The Rolling Stones' 'Street Fighting Man', Leo Ferré & Zoo 'L'Été 68', Aphrodite's Child 'Rain and Tears', and the anthology of songs titled *Paris in The Spring*, among others.

Investigation into the influence of the Polish 1968 protests on Polish rock music might suggest that the event had limited impact on this musical genre. Analyses of the reception of songs created by rock bands during that period and in the following years reveals that only one

such a piece is frequently mentioned by event participants, journalists, and scholars in connection with the events of that year. This is 'W żółtych płomieniach liści' ['In the Yellow Flames of Leaves'], written by Agnieszka Osiecka and Andrzej Zieliński, performed by the Skaldowie band featuring Łucja Prus.² Nevertheless, even in this case, the references are not entirely unambiguous. This subject will be discussed in more detail later in this paper. The apparent contradiction between the popularity of rock music among Polish youth and its evident lack of engagement with the major social issues and historical moments of the time warrants examination.

In order to provide an adequate analytical framework for this case, it is essential to consider the following factors. Firstly, it is crucial to acknowledge that the Polish protests of 1968 exhibited distinctive characteristics when compared to those in other European countries, the United States of America, Japan, and other regions. In his study of the protests that took place during the Polish March of 1968, recognized historian Jerzy Eisler claims that this event 'consists of several different – not necessarily connected, indeed at times mutually exclusive and contradictory – storylines, which differ radically depending on who is looking at March '68 and for what purpose'.³

The primary context concerns – rather than one of the storylines mentioned by Eisler – the reception of international tensions of a political nature, namely the Six-Day War in June 1967 but also the news of international student unrest in early 1968. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, an anti-Israel and anti-Zionist campaign, also anti-Semitic in nature, followed in 1967–68 and later. The USSR provided support to Arab countries, a precedent that was subsequently emulated by the Eastern Bloc, which adopted an anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish stance as a consequence. In Poland, this international policy resulted in the persecution of Polish Jews. This was a so-called 'dry pogrom', as there was no direct violence.⁴

² Agnieszka Osiecka and Andrzej Zieliński, 'W żółtych płomieniach liści', in Various Artists, *Opole 70. Mikrofon i ekran*, LP, Polskie Nagrania Muza 1970. Also in: Skaldowie i Łucja Prus, *W żółtych płomieniach liści*, EP, Polskie Nagrania Muza 1972.

³ Jerzy Eisler, '1968: Jews, Antisemitism, Emigration', *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, 21 (2009), 37, <https://doi.org/10.3828/polin.2009.21.37>, accessed 30 Oct. 2024.

⁴ Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany, 'The poetry of the "dry pogrom" – March 1968 in Polish poetry (a reconnaissance)', *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 6 (2017), 1–24.

¹ See: Beate Kutschke and Barley Norton, eds, *Music and Protest in 1968* (Cambridge, 2013). See also: Detlef Siegfried, 'Music and protest in 1960s Europe', in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, eds, *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956–1977* (New York, 2008), 57–70.

Nevertheless, it was effective and led to a mass exodus of Polish Jews, who were sacked from their jobs, threatened, and forced to leave. The anti-Semitic campaign that was conducted during and around the March '68 events can be identified as the first 'thread' or storyline.⁵

The second thread of the March events was characterized, according to Eisler, by factional infighting within the Polish communist party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza [Polish United Workers' Party]). It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive account of this complex situation. Be it sufficient to note that a conflict arose between Władysław Gomułka and his government, which may be labelled as the Old Communists, on the one hand, and two other Communists factions: Mieczysław Moczar's 'former partisans' group and Edward Gierek's 'young group from Silesia'.⁶ For all those conflicted politicians, the idea of Polish Jews being a threat to the state (sometimes considered as Israeli spies) and to the Polish identity, was a convenient way of identifying 'enemies' in the opposed political factions. Notwithstanding the mutual animosities between these groups and the actions that followed verbal condemnation, the use of anti-Semitic rhetoric constituted the above-mentioned first strand of March '68, particularly relevant and still significant many years later.

The third thread, as Eisler indicates, may be interpreted as a protest of Polish intellectuals against the cultural policies and actions pursued by the ruling party in the mid-1960s. These actions resulted in the withdrawal of the relative freedom of speech that Poles had been granted by the government in the aftermath of Stalin's death. One of the pivotal moments that catalyzed this protest was the Ministry of Culture's decision to take off a play production at the National Theatre.⁷ *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve] by the key Polish nineteenth-century poet Adam Mickiewicz was cancelled at the end of January 1968 on the grounds that it was anti-Soviet. This apparent manipulation (and introduction of censorship)

was indicative of the direction which the ruling party's cultural policy was taking. It provoked a major outcry among intellectuals, artists, and other people involved in Polish cultural life.

The cancellation of *Dziady* gave rise to a series of events which constituted the fourth thread or element of unrest. In February, student protests against taking off the Mickiewicz production provoked a response from the pro-government authorities at the University of Warsaw, which expelled or dismissed the main protest leaders from the university. This in turn led to further protests taking place throughout Poland in early March. It was then that students began to occupy principal academic and university sites, and the *milicja* (communist police) responded with brutal force, dispersing the crowd. As the student actions were a primary concern, this thread of development was most relevant to popular culture and popular music and may be compared to its foreign counterparts. The difference was subtle: In Poland, it was less about students' lives or individual freedom, and more about opposition to the official communist policy towards Polish culture and Polish Jews. The student protests can be thus viewed as a piece of a larger puzzle – possibly not its largest or most significant element.

In light of the distinctive characteristics of the Polish March '68, it is crucial to observe that rock music created and consumed in Poland during that era, starting with the music industry and record production, exhibited notable differences from the rock genre as experienced beyond the Iron Curtain. Records were crucial to the transmission of music and the message it conveyed. In the 1968 Poland, it was nearly impossible to produce, record and sell vinyl records containing expressions of social protest. This was so because at that time (in the late 1960s and early 1970s) the Polish rock (and not only) music industry was subject to state control, while private and commercial record production was prohibited.⁸ Furthermore, the content of the records to be produced was censored even before the recording sessions. Band members' representative had to obtain approval from the censor regarding song lyrics in order to be able to proceed with the recordings. It was virtually impossible to smuggle direct, explicit references to any political or social unrest, such as the events of March '68, onto the

⁵ Jerzy Eisler describes these four 'threads' in various publications, including: Jerzy Eisler, 'Marzec 1968', *Marzec '68. Dodatek specjalny do "Rzeczpospolitej"* (7 Mar. 2008), 5.

⁶ Detailed analysis in: Jerzy Eisler and Daniel S. Mattern, 'March 1968 in Poland', in Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert and Detlef Junker, eds, *1968: The World Transformed* (Cambridge, 1998), 237–252.

⁷ Tom Junes, 'The Polish 1968 Student Revolt', *Voir plus loin que mai: les mouvements étudiants dans le monde en 1968*, Apr. 2018, <https://dossiers-bibliotheque.sciencespo.fr/voir-plus-loin-que-mai-les-mouvements-etudiants-dans-le-monde-en-1968/polish-1968-student-revolt>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

⁸ Renata Pasternak-Mazur, 'No Country for Sheer Entertainment. Cultural Politics of Socialist Poland, its Conceptual Scheme, and Vision of Popular Music', in Patryk Gałuszka, ed., *Made in Poland* (New York, 2019), 24, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351119221>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

music records. This may explain why the Polish March theme is missing from Polish songs.

Right, but what about circumventing censorship by means of allusions or innuendos? It would have been possible. Songs could be created and circulated outside the record market (e.g. played at concerts without radio and TV broadcasts). This would have been brave and risky, as political allusions decoded by party members could lead to forced disbanding of a rock group, or difficulties could pile up for the band. The example of Plastic People of the Universe (from Czechoslovakia) proves that one could imagine rock groups expressing protest in songs, despite the expected consequences.

The point is that although rock (called 'big beat' or *muzyka młodzieżowa* [youth music] at that time) was just as popular as one could assume, it was not fully developed as a language of artistic expression in terms of formal complexity, sonic diversity, or harmonic and melodic structure.⁹ Influence of psychedelia or progressive rock was hardly discernible. The same goes for the lyrics, which were mostly about love, sadness, and teenage problems. One cannot find any Polish song lyrics from that time comparable in depth to those written by Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Lou Reed, or Joni Mitchell. In other words, even though it was facing the onset of substantial stylistic changes, Polish rock in 1968 was still mostly influenced by the early songs of British bands such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Animals, and The Kinks, with occasional traces of blues and soul music (Motown, Stax).¹⁰ Most importantly, it was primarily targeted at, and consumed by, teenagers and secondary school students. One can safely claim that, while some university students would listen to rock for fun and entertainment, the majority of performers and audiences of Polish rock music were too young to engage in and comprehend the nuances of the March '68 events and to incorporate them into the music they liked. The Polish March '68 was all about adults or young adults, not about kids and their rock and roll.

But focusing on rock music as the main field of rebellious expression is not valid. Rock-centrism – like ethnocentrism – is misleading.¹¹ In order to find all

traces of rebellion and protest, it is necessary to examine a broader spectrum of popular music, understood here as 'non-classical' and 'non-traditional'. Older audiences were more involved in the so-called *kultura studencka* ['student culture'] than in rock, and in various areas of student culture (theatres, musical theatres, cabarets, song clubs) popular music was understood more broadly than the somewhat limited rock-and-roll genre.¹² It included the art song tradition of older generations, with its sophisticated, frequently poetic lyrics or poems set to complex melodies. Moving away from rock-centrism, we can find examples of popular music created in 1968 (and beyond) that indeed concerned the March events. These were songs sung to the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar, in a manner close to American folk music in the vein of early Bob Dylan. Interestingly, this was actually the common point between 'big beat' and student culture. Maryla Rodowicz, one of the would-be stars of Polish popular music, began her career in student clubs, performing a repertoire that included songs by Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan.¹³ The rock scene focused on the acoustic guitar sound and folksy tunes, while student culture took a lesson from the sincerity of untrained voices, group singing, and engaging lyrics.

In archives regarding the Polish March '68, there are documents concerning this kind of songs, mostly in the form of songbooks, though some of them were also preserved as amateur recordings. A comprehensive study would call for a detailed archival search, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, even preliminary examination reveals songs not discussed to date from this point of view. By way of case study, I will focus on Maciej Zembaty's song 'Pan prokurator ma rację' [Mr. Prosecutor Is Right] also known by its incipit: 'Towarzysz Wiesław ma rację, mamy w Polsce demokrację' [Comrade Wiesław is right, we have democracy in Poland]. Zembaty, a stage artist remembered today for his career between the early 1970s and 2000s, was a performer, cabaret singer, but

Allan Moore and Paul Carr. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 636pp. ISBN 978-1-5013-3045-2', *Popular Music*, 40/2 (2021), 297–299, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143021000349>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

¹² Pasternak-Mazur, 'No Country', 31.

¹³ Mikołaj Lizut, 'Niepolityczne wybryki Maryli Rodowicz', *Wysokie Obcasy*, 24 (2008), <https://wyborcza.pl/7,76842,5325976,niepolityczne-wybryki-maryli-rodowicz.html>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024. See also: Jakub Antosz-Rekucki, 'The Wind Knows the Answer. Ideological Transformations of Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" in Polish', *Acta Neophilologica*, 2/25 (2023), 55–77.

⁹ Mariusz Gradowski, 'Rock and Roll Styles and Genres in Poland (1957–1973)', *Musicology Today*, 13/1 (2016), 109–110, <https://doi.org/10.1515/muso-2016-0003>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

¹⁰ Mariusz Gradowski, *Style i gatunki polskiej muzyki młodzieżowej (1957–1973)* (Warsaw, 2018), 149–157.

¹¹ I use this term after Simon Frith. Cf.: Simon Frith, 'The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rock Music Research. Edited by

Table 1. 'Pan Prokurator ma rację' aka 'Towarzysz Wiesław ma rację'. Lyrics by Maciej Zembaty as transcribed from the Polish Radio Archives recording. Translated by MG.

Verse 1:	How the censors took down <i>Dziady</i> / The Writers' Union began its deliberations. / Only one big flaw: / The PZPR doesn't know / what they discussed.
Chorus:	Comrade Wiesław is right / We have democracy in Poland. Comrade Wiesław is right / Democracy is here.
Verse 2:	At twelve o'clock some civilians turned up / They didn't say anything to anyone, / just slapped us in the face. / Hard, oh, hard.
Chorus:	Mr. Prosecutor is right / We have democracy in Poland. Mr. Prosecutor is right / Democracy is here.
Verse 3:	The labor activists / were brought to the capital / The Rector welcomed them with bread and salt / though they preferred vodka.
Chorus:	Minister Moczar is right / We have democracy in Poland. Minister Moczar is right / Democracy is here.
Verse 4:	Gołędzinów tried to influence the students. / It still brings a tear to my eye... / Those poor students! Gas is gas.
Chorus:	Mr. Prosecutor is right / We have democracy in Poland. Mr. Prosecutor is right / Democracy is here.
Verse 5:	It remains debatable / whether it was the ORMO. / Judging by the uniforms, however, / it was ORMO beating. Hard, oh, hard! ¹⁴

also a songwriter. In 1968, at the age of twenty-four, he studied Polish philology and literature at the University of Warsaw and took an active part in the March events. He wrote the lyrics of the above-mentioned song during the occupation of the University's Polish Studies building.¹⁵ His new narrative, which describes the course of events at the University in an ironic and satirical manner, presents

the story of the pacification of the student rally that took place on 8 March 1968. The text is uncensored: it mentions beatings by the ORMO *milicja*, the use of tear gas, the shameful pro-government behavior of university officials. The text clearly states which side of the conflict was right.

Zembaty's lyrics were set to the folk melody of 'Bal u weteranów' ['Veterans' Ball']. The choice of music is significant here: in keeping with the principle of protest song effectiveness and its ability to make the audience sing along, the choice of a well-known tune was a rational choice. It also had a humorous effect because this folksong, which originated in Lviv before the Second World War (then Lwów, a city in Poland at the time) and represented urban folklore, tells (in most of its variants) the story of a party with much drinking and dancing. Its Polish titles and lyrics vary, but the comic portrayal of several characters at a merry event remains the same. In order to shed light on the character and status of this song, let me refer to three important recorded versions of 'Bal u weteranów' under different titles, which contributed to the popularity of the song in the 1920s–30s and in the post-war decades:

- 1) 'Polish folksong. Bal u Weteranów. Piosenka lwowska' [The Veterans' Ball. A song from Lviv]. Performed by: Polski Kwartet Ludowo-Narodowy [Polish National Folk Quartet], cond. Marek Windheim, Columbia 18273-F, 1928 [78 rpm].
- 2) 'Tirli-Tirli'. Performed by: Gustaw Cybulski with orchestra, Syrena 508a, 1926 [78 rpm].
- 3) 'Polka Maryska' [The Mary Polka]. Performed by: Zespół Revellersów Ich Pięciu [Five of Them, The Revelers' Band], Polonia Cat. 132, 1926 [78 rpm].

14 'Jak cenzura zdjęła „Dziady” / Związek Literatów / Rozpoczął obrady. / Tylko jeden wielki feler: / Nie wie PZPR / Co w tym jest. Chorus: Towarzysz Wiesław ma rację, / Mamy w Polsce demokrację.

Towarzysz Wiesław ma rację, / Demokracja jest. O dwunastej się zjawili / Jacyś tam cywile. / Nic nikomu nie mówili / Tylko w mordę bili / Fest a fest.

Chorus: Pan prokurator ma rację ... Przywieziono do stolicy / Aktyw robotniczy / Witaj Rektor chlebem, solą, / Choć ci wódę woła.

Chorus: Minister Moczar ma rację ... Usiłował Gołędzinów / Na studentów wpłynąć. / Dotąd iza się w oku kręci / Biedni ci studenci. / Gaz to gaz.

Pozostaje kwestią sporną, / Czy to było ORMO. / Ale sądząc z uniformów, / Jednak biło ORMO. Fest a fest.'

'Piosenka studencka "Towarzysz Wiesław ma rację, mamy w Polsce demokrację"', [anonymous performance and undated recording from the Polish Radio archives], *Marzec '68 – serwis specjalny Polskiego Radia. Kronika wydarzeń: 18 marca, 7/03 (2018)*, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/155/2723>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

15 The song was improvised by Maciej Zembaty and lyrics were written down by Marek Barański, as claimed by Maciej Zembaty in an interview by Przemysław Szubartowicz, 'Maciej Zembaty: wyznaję, TW Rademenes to ja', *Onet.pl*, 16/07 (2007), <https://kultura.onet.pl/film/wywiady-i-artykuly/maciej-zembaty-wyznaję-tw-rademenes-to-ja/dpvj5l4>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024. See also: Janusz R. Kowalczyk, 'Maciej Zembaty. 16.05.1944 – 27.06.2011', *Culture.pl*, 13 July 2023, <https://culture.pl/pl/tworca/maciej-zembaty>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

Table 2. The song 'Defa', to the melody of 'Bal u weteranów'. Kalicka and Olearczyk, *Polskie pieśni*, 231–233. Translated by MG.

Verse: This morning, I was woken up by two civilians, / They were shedding crocodile tears over me, / They were looking through my stuff, and promptly I heard the command: / 'Come to Zacisze' [jail], one, two, three. / Because it is a custom in Poland at the end of April, / that people are locked away, hard, oh, hard. Chorus: Mr. Prosecutor is right, / we have democracy in Poland, / Mr. Prosecutor is right, / there is democracy in Poland. [repeated after each verse] Verse: In Zacisze, they took away all our possessions: / Ropes, shoelaces, ties and braces. / For once a person sees how enticing that place is, / They will hang themselves willingly, one, two, three. [...] Verse: Then two civilians turned up in the cell, / with suspicious kissers and legs like sticks / They didn't say anything to anyone, just hit [us] in the face, / just hit [us] in the face, one, two, three.¹⁶

Apart from these cheerful recordings of the original song, with varied lyrics revolving around the main theme of partying, there is also an interesting variant of the song with new lyrics set to the same melody. It is included under the title 'Defa' (song lyrics credited to Justyn Jaszuński) in the anthology *Polskie pieśni rewolucyjne z lat 1918-1939* [Polish Revolutionary Songs from 1918–1939].¹⁷ Let me quote three verses and chorus.

The song refers to the situation in Poland before the Second World War. As Kalicka and Olearczyk explain, in prewar Poland mass arrests of revolutionary working-class activists typically took place on days preceding traditional workers' festivities, particularly before May (Labor) Day. Under police custody, the detainees were often beaten. Attempts were made to make them believe that there was supposedly incriminating evidence against them, and they were threatened with severe sentences. Usually, however, after a few days – that is, by the time 1 May had passed – most of the detained activists would be released.

The similarity between the lyrics of this prewar version and those of Maciej Zembaty's song is definitely no coincidence. Zembaty must have been familiar with this version, and he adapted it to a new socio-political

context. As a student of Polish language and literature, he was interested in prison folklore. Zembaty collected prisoners' diaries and private songbooks, as well as printed collections of such songs. He also wrote his dissertation on prison musical folklore, 'Współczesny literacki folklor więzienny' [Contemporary Literary Prison Folklore].¹⁸ It is very likely that he came across the cited 1950 edition and decided to use it as a source of inspiration during the events of March '68.

An analysis of Maciej Zembaty's 1968 protest song reveals interesting traces of the transmission of this popular tune, as represented in Figure 1. A folk melody of unknown origin (possibly composed in the nineteenth century, judging by its characteristics) become popular as an urban folksong. This local popularity led to recording sessions and resulted in national recognition (both in Poland and among Polish expatriates). At the same time, the prewar communist (or at least socialist) version gained a different sort of popularity among some political groups. All of these variants inspired a young student to create another version concerning current events. It is worth noting that the paths of this tune's transmission and transformation resemble those to be found in American folk tradition, where for instance 'I'll Overcome Someday' became 'We Shall Overcome'.¹⁹

As analysis of other 1968 student protest songs exceeds the scope of this paper, let me only mention the most striking examples of such pieces. 'Zaśpiewajmy pieśń ponurą' [Let's Sing a Grim Song] is based on '¡Ay Carmela!', one of the most famous songs of the Spanish Republican troops during the Civil War, originating in a nineteenth-century folksong, 'El Paso del Ebro'. Polish students used this catchy tune in 1968 with new lyrics: 'We sing a

16 'Dziś mnie rankiem obudzili jacyś dwaj cywile, / Ronili nade mną łezki krokodyle, / W gratach moich się grzebali, a w tem rozkaz słyszę: / „Chodź pan na Zacisze” raz, dwa, trzy. / Bo to w Polsce z końcem kwietnia taki zwyczaj jest, / Że się ludzi wsadza fest a fest. –

Chorus: Pan prokurator ma rację, mamy w Polsce demokrację, / Pan prokurator ma rację, demokracja jest.

Na Zaciszu odbierają nam dobytek wszelki: / Sznury, sznurowadła, krawaty i szelki, / Bo jak człowiek raz zobaczy, jak tam jest ponętne, / To się wiesza chętnie raz, dwa, trzy. [...] Potem w celi się pojawili jacyś dwaj cywile, / Mordy podejrzone, nogi jak badyle, / Nic nikomu nie mówili tylko w gębę bili, / Tylko w gębę bili raz, dwa, trzy.'

17 Felicja Kalicka and Edward Olearczyk, eds, *Polskie pieśni rewolucyjne z lat 1918–1939*, (Warsaw, 1950), 231–233, https://bibliotekapiosenki.pl/publikacje/Kalicka_Felicja_Polskie_piesni_rewolucyjne_z_lat_1918_1939, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

18 Kowalczyk, 'Maciej Zembaty'.

19 Victor Bobetsky, 'The complex ancestry of "We Shall Overcome"', in Victor Bobetsky, ed., *We Shall Overcome: Essays on a Great American Song* (London 2015), 1–14.

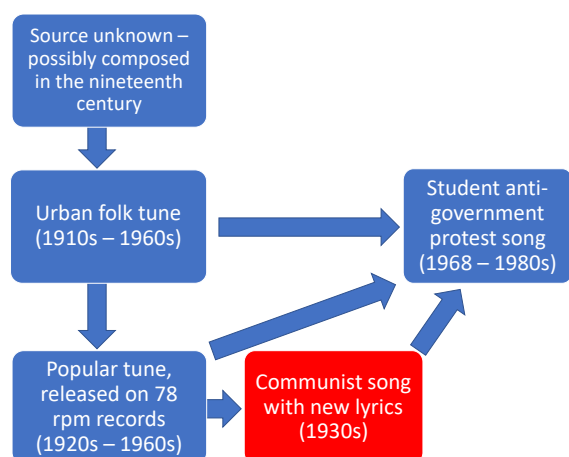


Figure 1. Tune transmission and transformation.

somber song, / we don't give a sh*t about the politburo, ay Carmela! We also don't give a sh*t about the central [party] committee with its secretariat, ay Carmela!' ²⁰ Poet Natan Tenenbaum (1940–2016), then a student participating in the March events, wrote original lyrics set to the well-known tune from the popular comedy 'Ewa chce spać' [Eve Wants to Sleep]. ²¹ The song 'Plebiscyt' [The Poll], also known as 'Kto dziś największy w Polsce szubrawiec' [Who's the Biggest Scoundrel in Poland Today...], sung in a folk manner, contains all the lyrical rage that Polish rock missed at that time. After the initial statement ('They quarrel in the town of Kłaj, / they quarrel in the city of Warsaw, / They quarrel from the Bug River to the Nysa River / and ask who is the biggest scoundrel in Poland today? Who's the biggest motherf****r today? Hey, motherf****r'), the lyrics go on to provide a vivid gallery of government members, pro-government media employees, and pro-communist university leaders – all of

whom are awful enough to deserve the noble title of the greatest scoundrel in Poland. Interesting songs related to March '68 were also composed years later, in the wake of those events: 'Doświadczenie (Marzec '68)' [The Experience (March '68)], written and performed by Jacek Kaczmarski, presents the events from the point of view of himself as a child witnessing the protests and the *milicja* intervention. ²² 'Ballada o morzu' [Ballad of the Sea] by singer-songwriter Krzysztof Kelus, who was arrested after March '68 allegedly for co-organizing protests, reflects on the post-March experience of imprisonment, which the listener may read between the lines. ²³

As mentioned before, 'W żółtych płomieniach liści' has also been listed in context of March events. Written in 1969, the song was very popular from 1970 onwards, after it won the Journalists' Prize at the Opole Festival '70. In the context of the above-listed direct musical responses to the protests, it is striking just how vague the references to March '68 are in 'W żółtych płomieniach liści'. The song was nevertheless regarded as a musical comment on the socio-political situation. Journalist Krzysztof Masłoń recalls:

When I asked Łucja Prus about the 'March' message in 'W żółtych płomieniach liści', that well-known singer made a very surprised face. She recalled that her fellow musicians from the band Skaldowie associated the lyrics (describing 'a great commotion among birds') with eroticism rather than politics. It so happened, however, that this beautiful ballad was considered as an intellectual reflection on the aftermath of March 68, due to the presence of a line about 'temples burning with shame'. ²⁴

It is not clear who was supposedly ashamed and why, as the lyrics do not specify this, nor can they really be interpreted in romantic or erotic terms. It has to be said, though, that at that time even the slightest hint at an innuendo (real or imagined) was taken by listeners as a social or political statement. The lyrics are as follows: 'There is a great commotion among birds, / Some fly away, some stay, / On the meadow they stand as on a stage / Will they live on, will they survive?', and in other place: 'And I have greeted a person at times / Though my temples [i.e.

²⁰ 'Zaśpiewamy pieśń ponurą, / w dupie mamy politburo, aj Karmela! / W dupie mamy też poza tym / KC wraz z sekretariatem, aj Karmela!' See: 'Piosenka studencka "Zaśpiewamy pieśń ponurą w dupie mamy politburo"', [an anonymous performance and undated recording from the Polish Radio archives], *Marzec '68 – serwis specjalny Polskiego Radia. Kronika wydarzeń: 16 marca*, 7 Mar. 2018, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/155/2723>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

²¹ 'Piosenka studencka "Kto dziś największy w Polsce szubrawiec"', [an anonymous performance and undated recording from the Polish Radio archives], *Marzec '68 – serwis specjalny Polskiego Radia. Kronika wydarzeń: 17 marca*, 7 Mar. 2018, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/155/2723>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024.

²² Jacek Kaczmarski, 'Doświadczenie (Marzec '68)', *Kaczmarski.art.pl*, [official homepage], <https://www.kaczmarski.art.pl/tworczosc/wiersze/doswiadczenie-marzec-68/>, accessed 3 Nov. 2024, released on *Głupi Jasio*, CD/MC, Pomaton 1991.

²³ Jan Krzysztof Kelus, 'Ballada o morzu', in *Kawał w bok od szosy głównej (Piosenki ze starych kaset)*, CD/MC, Altmaster 1998.

²⁴ Krzysztof Masłoń, 'Tak blisko od serca do papieru; kruchy świat Agnieszki Osieckiej', *Rzeczpospolita*, 63 (1997), 17.

head] were burning with shame, / And entrusted to God / What is still burning in my memory'.²⁵ 'Commotion among birds' was commonly understood as an allusion to the forced emigration of Polish Jews to other countries after March '68, in which case the 'temples burning with shame' would be the shame of those witnessing such injustice and unfair treatment but being unable to stand up against it.

The connection between the Skaldowie song and March '68 is nevertheless more complex than one might think. As Maciej Kuster pointed out in his lecture delivered during the *Unisono w wielogłosie* conference, Agnieszka Osiecka's lyrics for the 1969 song are a reworking of her long poem published in the magazine *Przekrój* in 1967.²⁶ Does the fact that it was published before March '68 disprove the songwriter's possible later intention to allude to the March events? Not necessarily. The poem was written before March, but it was reworked into song lyrics months after the protests, at the time of the forced emigration. Kuster notes that the original poem also dealt with the issue on its own terms, as it was written in the wake of the anti-Semitic campaign sparked by the Six Day War. The fact that this shameful campaign continued after the March events made the transformation of the poem into a song relevant to the post-March atmosphere. Osiecka decided to retain some poetic visions as lyrics while discarding others. Meaningful images of departing birds, shame and bidding farewell – remained. As no commentary from the author herself is known, it is easy to understand why these poetic motifs were perceived as allusions to March. This kind of intersubjective interpretation was based on shared experience as well as on the intellectual tradition of reading between the lines as the *modus operandi* of any attentive listener/reader in the communist era. If something could be an allusion, it was definitely interpreted as such.

Despite the initial impression that the events of 1968 had no impact on Polish popular music, there is evidence that they did. In order to fully understand the influence

of these events, however, it is necessary to move away from the rock-centric perspective and examine the songs created and performed within the student culture. Protest songs present in that cultural space were in fact bolder than the majority of Polish rock music of the time, and certainly most direct than the subtle poetic lines of Agnieszka Osiecka and Skaldowie's pop-rock hit. What was intended, and what was only considered as a reference to 1968? With no freedom of speech at that time, and with strict censorship even before songs were recorded for release, it comes as no surprise that no direct mention or clear allusions are to be found in officially released rock song lyrics. Given the youthful status of rock music at that time (Skaldowie were in fact one of the few bands that moved towards complexity and artistry of rock), one should not be too harsh on Polish rock. We should not compare it to the rock scene from behind the Iron Curtain, which was involved in the events of 1968.

Finally, for a fuller understanding of the impact of 1968, it is necessary to consider not only the musical output from that period but also the socio-cultural changes that become apparent when the careers of selected artists and bands are examined. It is evident that the events of March 1968 had a significant impact on the Polish rock music scene. The subsequent forced emigration, resulting from the anti-Semitic campaign, effectively brought the careers of numerous promising vocalists and musical groups to an end. This aspect requires further investigation. It is nevertheless clear that, in the aftermath of March '68, the Polish scene saw the demise of several bands, including *Następcy Tronów* from Szczecin, *Śliwki* from Łódź, *Czarne Koty* from Żary, *Estrada Młodzieżowa* from Świdnica, and *Bokary* from Gdańsk, as well as numerous other artists, including *Alkany* from Wałbrzych, *Tułacze* from Warsaw, soloists and musicians such as Fryderyka Elkana, Michał Hochman, Marian Lichtman, Efraim Shamir, Natan Walden, Adam Szladow, and many more, who also merit further investigation. It is evident that Polish popular music and Polish rock suffered a significant loss of artists following the March '68 events. The number of interrupted careers, as well as the absence of (unwritten) lyrics and (unsung) songs, both indicate the profound impact of 1968 on Polish music culture. Those who lived through that era on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in a free and democratic society, had a markedly different experience.

²⁵ 'Wśród ptaków wielkie poruszenie, / ci odlatują, ci zostają / Na łące stoją jak na scenie, / czy też przeżyją, czy dotrwają? / [...] I ja witałam nieraz kogo, / chociaż paliły wstydem skronie / I powierzałam Panu Bogu / to, co w pamięci jeszcze płonie.'

²⁶ Agnieszka Osiecka, 'Walc pierwszy. W żółtych płomieniach liści', *Przekrój*, 1181 (1967), 1. After Maciej Kuster, 'Skaldowie 1970. Dialektyka romantyzmu czyli trzy rozczarowania', unpublished paper, *Ogólnopolska Konferencja Naukowa 'Unisono w wielogłosie 13'* (Korfantów, 2022).

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