This is an unusual book: two historians, but at the same time two intellectuals who took an active part in the political history of Poland under communist rule and serve as witnesses of history “who were always on the opposite sides of the barricade,” discuss the Polish People's Republic (PRL, 1944-89), answering the questions of journalist Robert Walenciak, who leads the discussion (p. 5). Karol Modzelewski and Andrzej Werblan have many things in common. Both were born in the Soviet Union: Modzelewski in Moscow in 1937; Werblan in Ternopil (nowadays Ukraine) in 1924. Both are historians, though Modzelewski is a specialist of the medieval period, while Werblan dedicated his works to socialist Poland. Both have left-wing views and have been, to a lesser or greater extent, Marxists. Nonetheless, their political choices differ greatly. Werblan made a career as a party “apparatchik,” being a member of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR), deputy marshal of the Polish Parliament (from 1971 to 1981), a close adviser of prominent communist leaders, and a ghost-writer for Władysław Gomułka and Edward Gierek when they were first secretaries of the PZPR. Modzelewski was a figure of dissent. As a student he took part in the strikes that resulted in the change of leadership at the top of the PZPR in October 1956. In 1964 he wrote, together with Jacek Kuroń, an “Open Letter to the Party” in which he criticized democratic centralism. As a result, he was imprisoned. Modzelewski and Kuroń inspired the students’ protest of March 1968 and later became advisers of the Solidarity trade union, founded in 1980. It is said that it was Modzelewski who came up with the idea of the union's name. Once again imprisoned during Martial Law in 1981, Modzelewski spent altogether nine years in jail under the PRL, before he was elected senator as a result of the first “semi-free” elections of 1989.

Hence, Walenciak's idea to confront two witnesses who have played, through the whole history of the PRL, a major role in the opposition and in the camp of power, is very well suited. It is particularly useful given the Polish political and historiographical context, where the mainstream is dominated by publications with an anti-communist tone. The choice of the two protagonists of the book, who agreed to confront their experiences rather than to argue in ideological terms, favors a discussion of great quality, which highlights key events of the forty-five-year history of socialist Poland. The book consists of twenty-nine interviews, organized in chronological order: the end of World War II and the creation of a “new Europe” under Soviet domination; the seizure of power by the Polish communists; Stalinism; 1956
and destalinization; Gomułka’s “small stabilization” and the hopes it raised among “revisionist” intellectuals, such as Modzelewski; the students’ protest of March 1968; the workers’ strikes of December 1970; Gierek’s decade and the relative improvement of living standards; the Gdansk strikes of August 1980 and the birth of the Solidarity movement; Martial Law and the takeover of general Wojciech Jaruzelski; and finally, the political transition of 1989, which paved the way for a democratic Poland. This last part of the book is a bit disappointing, as it is rather short (less than twenty pages) compared to the other chapters. Given the ongoing vivid debates about the circumstances of the Round Table Agreements and their significance for the political order that emerged out of 1989, one would have appreciated to read a bit more not only about the events themselves but also about the way the actors view these events thirty years later.

The two witnesses are not on equal footing: Werblan is a historian specializing in PRL, whose testimony is based not only on his personal memories but also on a thorough knowledge of sources and archives, including those of the Soviet Union. He is also older than Modzelewski, who was only eight years old in 1945 and whose testimony only starts in 1956. Consequently, the first interviews are clearly dominated by Werblan’s words, with Modzelewski rather playing the role of a second interviewer. Later on, the roles are distributed as follows: to Werblan, the party’s life and foreign policy; to Modzelewski, opposition to the regime. The interest that each one has in the point of view of his counterpart makes it possible to bring out the political imaginaries of the protagonists at the time. Werblan and Modzelewski ask each other about their perception of things and their respective hopes.

If the book has been advertised by Walenciak and its editor as a confrontation between two witnesses with opposite views, in fact Modzelewski and Werblan agree on pretty much everything. They often offer similar interpretations of various events, even if they regularly provide nuances. Hence, Modzelewski congratulates Werblan for the famous speech he wrote for Gierek, when the first secretary of the PZPR addressed the striking workers in Gdansk in December 1970. More puzzling is the fact that both Modzelewski and Werblan agree that the introduction of Martial Law by Jaruzelski in December 1981 was the only option left, as Soviet military intervention was about to be triggered. To this day, historians argue on this particular point. At times, one has the feeling that some assertions deserve to be verified: for example, when Werblan suggests that the 1980 strikes were inspired by the security services in order to destabilize Gierek and to encourage a change of leadership (p. 384).

Nonetheless, the book provides two valuable testimonies, which offer a perception of events, but also depict the lifestyles and ways of thinking of two intellectuals in socialist Poland. Even if the distance of time means that there is probably also a part of reconstruction after the fact, the two historians make efforts to distinguish what they thought and felt at the time from what they have since learned. Putting the two situations in perspective, with two opposite points of view, makes the differences in perception of the same event clear at times. For example, the two protagonists recall what they were doing when Martial Law was introduced on December 13, 1981: while Modzelewski was arrested in a Sopot hotel, near Gdansk, Werblan had to give up a hunting trip.

Other parts of the book shed light on aspects of history that are little or not known. For example, they discuss the Balcerowicz Plan, whose “shock therapy” made it possible to restructure the Polish economy in the early 1990s and whose intellectual premises are reflected in the economist’s views in the 1970s, when he was thinking of modernizing the socialist economy. The passages on the relationship between Gomułka and Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, his main opponent in the
1960s, are also insightful on the relationship between the party and the Catholic Church. Finally, we learn that Gierek, despite the strikes of June 1976, had not given up raising the prices of basic goods. It is Leonid Brezhnev himself who would have called on him to renounce it in order to calm the protests.

To conclude, this book is essential reading for those who are interested in the history of the PRL but also more broadly the history of the Soviet bloc. Nevertheless, reading this book requires a certain knowledge of the history of the PRL: it is therefore not a beginner's book.

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