

The Fall of Communism: The Polish Experience, 1980 - 1990

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## Introduction

The fall of Communism across Eastern Europe, and the subsequent break-up of the USSR with the liberation of its various satellite states (including Poland) was one of the most remarkable sequence of events in modern history. It was remarkable in two basic ways. First, the rapidity and completeness of the collapse of Communism had not been forecast, indeed, the Soviet Bloc was seen as an impenetrable monolith for much of the Cold War. Second, except for in Rumania, the multiple 'revolutions' that occurred across Eastern Europe during this time period achieved their ends with very little blood spilt. While some violence did occur in Poland, it was mostly sporadic in nature, and power passed out of Communist hands without the full-scale bloody revolution that had been predicted.

This dissertation will consider the fall of communism from a number of viewpoints. While its ultimate crash occurred quite quickly, the stresses and strains that led to its demise had been building up for a number of years. From the economic woes that started to spread across the Communist bloc in the late 1970's onwards to the million person masses with the new Pope John Paul II in 1979 (Brittanica, 1991) to the renewed arms race created by President Reagan's policies, the Communist Bloc, and Poland in particular was pushed nearer and nearer to the breaking point. Ultimately the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev to power tipped the balance.

Any analysis of the fall of Communism between 1980 and 1990 must take into account Polish history as a whole. For the fall of communism did not occur within a vacuum, and the various manners in which different countries dispensed with the system stem as much from deeper (and longer) historical currents as from the particular circumstances of the 1980s.

Poland is situated in what may be regarded as an unfortunate position within Europe. Unprotected by natural geographical borders such as rivers, mountains or oceans, Poland has

been subject to the whims (and invasions) of much larger and more powerful countries for centuries. In this context, the Communist rule that resulted from the end of WWII was just another in a long run of imposed regimes upon the region.

But this weakness had not always been the case. For several centuries during the Middle Ages Poland was one of the most powerful countries in Europe. But as the Renaissance took hold and as the balance of power shifted westwards, its fortunes waned. By the 1600's the days of Polish power were long gone. Nearly four centuries ago Polish armies were having to repel the attentions of more powerful enemies. Thus in 1633, the Poles survived through the talents of one Wladyslaw IV, who pushed back intended invasions from the Turks, Russians and Swedes.

Distant Polish history is not of too much relevance to this study, but it suffices to say that its geographical position has led Poland to being an easy target for a number of powers. In the eighteenth century Napoleon invaded Poland as part of his plan to dominate Russia, only to be fought back. Its involvement in the two world wars in the Twentieth Century would lead to the brutal invasion of the Nazis, followed by a partition of the country between Germany and Russia, before the former attacked the latter. For two years (1942-1944) Poland came under a purely German rule, before the Russians pushed them back and ended up essentially staying once WWII was finished. The history of Poland up until this time is perhaps best summed up by the title of a book about the unfortunate region: *God's Playground: A History of Poland* (Davies, 1982). Poland has been invaded, occupied, played as a pawn in geopolitical games of chess between larger powers, and largely run roughshod over for centuries.

It is a remarkable feat of will and imagination that has maintained a sense of the Polish people's "identity". It is this "identity" that was as important to the fall of Communism as

anything else. Knowledge of a previously glorious past, while perhaps hazy as to the details, runs passionately through the psyche of the Polish people.

## CHAPTER 1. Polish History 1945-1980

### (a) The Early Communist Era

As the Russian army inexorably pushed German forces during 1943, Stalin, the Soviet leader, was already planning for a Communist Poland. It is clear that "as early as November 1941 a small group of Polish Communists parachuted into German-occupied Poland" (Britannica, 1991) , and by late 1942 Stalin had ordered the formation of the National Home Council (Krajowa Rada Narodowa, KRN). This was to form the new government of the Polish People's Republic (PPR) under an old Comintern politician, Boleslaw Bierut.

As increasing amounts of Polish territory fell from German into Russian hands, FDR and Winston Churchill made a fateful but perhaps inevitable decision. At the Yalta Conference of February 1945, they agreed to essentially abandon the legitimacy of the government-in-exile in London in favor of Stalin's new Provisional Polish Government of National Unity, that was to include members of the exiled government but also "other Polish democratic leaders from within Poland and abroad." (Yalta, 1945) The phrase from abroad was perhaps most important, as it assured that Stalin's attempt at bringing in "Poles" who were sympathetic to his new regime would be successful.

While the Iron Curtain that Churchill was to famously speak of later was mostly created by Stalin's Russia, it was also a result of the complicity, if not outright support, of the United States and Britain. On the last day of 1944 the Lublin Committee was reorganized as a provisional government, and the Polish Government of Unity was formed within weeks of the end of the war in Europe. Before this, on April 21st, Morawski had signed in Moscow a Polish-Soviet Alliance that was to bind the two countries for the next forty-five years.

The most important feature of this brief history of how Poland fell under Communist rule is that the government that resulted, while officially a government of "national unity" was in fact a government of enforced "national unity". Ordinary Polish people had not been consulted (nor, to be fair would they have expected to be consulted at this time) on the constitution and ideology of the new government. Communist rule had never been their choice, and it was the lack of this choice that would ferment for decades.

Stalin quickly and efficiently Sovietized Poland in the period immediately following the war. First, elections were postponed. Second, farms of more than 124 acres were expropriated - thus eliminating a whole class of landed gentry. Third, all industrial establishments with more than 50 employees were nationalized. Fourth, mass arrests of political leaders and potential opposition. Within a few years rifts between political parties had been essentially silenced by the creation of the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP). The PUWP would be in power until the fall of Communism in 1990. Under its various leaders (Gomulka, Gierek, Jaruzelski) "communism" was, at least officially, the bedrock ideology and practical measure of the government of Poland.

Before dealing with how communism fell within Poland, it would be sensible to both define the word "communism" and then to consider whether such a system ever really existed in Poland. The word communism can be defined in several related, but importantly contrasting ways. Thus "Communism" is: 1. An economic system characterized by collective ownership of property and by the organization of labor for the common advantage. 2. a. A system of government in which the state plans and controls the economy and a single, often authoritarian party holds power. B. The Marxist-Leninist version of Communist doctrine (Heritage, 2001, p. 179).

At least officially the PPR did have the first part of definition 1, that is, the collective ownership of property. But whether the labor force was organized to the common advantage

or to the common disadvantage is more problematic. The one-party, often one-man State (definition 2) that Communism often seems to degenerate into often counters and basically contradicts the idealistic vision of definition 1, and the overall system that the Marxist-Leninist ideology seems to produce often turns into the butchery of Stalinism. So it may be argued that "true Communism" never existed in Poland, or anywhere else for that matter. The contradictions and tensions produced by Communism's various characteristics perhaps doomed it to failure. It was a failure based upon a beautiful idea - a brotherhood of all people - but a failure nevertheless.

#### (b) Doctrine versus Reality: The Catholic Church

The Communist doctrine had it that the people should have "no other gods than me" (god in this case being the Communist Party), but in reality Poland remained a deeply religious country. There was an obvious contradiction between at least some Communist ideals and those of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is ironic that the policies of both Nazis and Communists actually brought about an increase in Roman Catholicism while they were trying to achieve the opposite. Polish borders shifted to the west after WWII and the population that was shoved into those borders was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. (Demerath, 2001) While spiritual religion was officially banned in all Warsaw Pact countries, it was by-and-large tolerated in most of them due to the apparent impossibility of completely ridding society of them, and also the pragmatic fact that the churches preached, at least for much of that time, the separation of that which was owed to Caesar (ie the Communist government) and that which was owed to God (the Church). The Church acted as a largely stabilizing force within overwhelmingly Catholic Poland.

The latter was to change profoundly by the 1970's, because in the 1980's the Catholic Church would play a profound and important role in overthrowing the Communist

government. As Demerath (2001) puts it, "the Polish Catholic Church played a major role, in cooperation with the Solidarity labor movement." (p. 31) What led to this profound change? First, it must be remembered that politics and Catholicism are hardly strangers. The Catholic Church has had an almost millennium-long history of political involvement, indeed, its very nature was more political than religious for many centuries. In more recent years, the Church had played a still controversial role in at least turning a blind eye (if not directly aiding) the mass deportation and murder of more than three million Jews during WWII. One of the reasons that Poland was so Catholic during the 1945 -1980 period was the fact that the Holocaust had reduced Poland's Jewish population from near 3,000,000 before WWII to perhaps 50,000 today (Hannan, 2004). These are uncomfortable facts perhaps, but they are facts nevertheless.

Polish Catholicism has always been a unique blend of devout religiosity mixed with an ill-defined Nationalism. As Hannan (2004) puts it, "for many Polish Catholics, the Catholic Church is the repository both of transcendent, universal truth and of the values and lessons of Polish history." It remained the repository of perceived religious truth throughout the Communist period, but only sprang forth with the values/lessons of Polish history when the time was right. Had the Catholic Church supported the 1956 or 1970 uprisings against Communist power (in which c. 70 and 100 people were killed respectively) then it might have suffered greatly. But it did not.

The rise of the Catholic Church to a renewed political power in Poland occurred largely through the little-known Cardinal of Cracow, one Karol Wojtyla, who surprisingly ascended the Papal throne in 1978, after the previous occupant had died just a few weeks after being elected. The new Pope John Paul II was relatively young, showed an adept understanding of the media world, combined deep religiosity with a brilliant intellect and was, most importantly, both Polish and outspoken.



What was his importance to the growing challenge to Communism by the late 1970's? Firstly, the fact that a Pope had been drawn from an officially atheistic society made a laughable mockery of Communist claims to an ideological monotheism. Secondly, he gave a voice to a Polish Catholicism that had not been treated as badly as other churches had behind the Iron Curtain. The Polish Catholic Church "had been allowed to continue functioning as a kind of safety valve to relieve the pressure on the unpopular Communist regime." (Demerath, 2001, p. 32) Still basically intact, the Polish Church had a leader: the most powerful Catholic in the world. Third, he represented an apparently non-hypocritical moral voice that did not pick and choose which ideologies he would support and reject according to political expedience. Thus Pope John Paul II spoke out against the ideologies and politics of communism, Marxism, feminism, imperialism, relativism, materialism, fascism, racism and unrestrained capitalism (Davies 1996). The only "-ism" that he seemed to support was that of Catholicism, as was befitting his role.

Pope John Paul II visited Poland for the first time as Pope in June 1979. He spent nine days in the country, spoke at 32 separate events and often had gatherings of more than a million people at to listen to him. This was a massive success. Often ignored, but of importance to this study, was the quiet praise given to the Polish government for its civility and restraint during the Pope's visit. Part of the reason for the Polish government's reticence regarding the new Pope was the fact that he never openly attacked Communism, indeed, he never took overtly political stances on any subject - but rather spoke in broad terms. This is how he attacked so many of the "isms" mentioned previously.

In his first visit to Poland as Pope he mentioned constantly the need of mankind to "live in truth" (Vatican, 2006). He sought to live be example, saying that he followed the famous saying of the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid: "a man is born on this planet to give testimony the truth." (Vatican, 2006) It was this simple avowal of the "truth" that made John Paul II so

revolutionary and potentially incendiary for the already fragile Communist system. As Andrew Nagorski puts it, "nothing could be more subversive to a Communist system based on lies." (Nagorski, 2005)

(c) Poland on the Brink of Change: 1980

What were the lies that were the foundation of Communist domination of Poland in 1980 First, it was becoming increasingly clear to all concerned that the Communist economic system simply was not working. By 1980, "the Polish people were facing food shortages, rationing of electric power, and insufficient housing." (Britannica, 1991) This was not a sudden descent into economic ruin. In 1976 the centrally-controlled economy was on the brink of collapse because of the disparity between the high costs of goods that needed to be imported and artificially low prices demanded of the Polish population.

On June 24, 1976 the government announced increases averaging 60% on many staples, and the following day industrial workers went on strike. The next day Jaroszewicz (Chairman of the Council of Ministers) went on television to say that the price increases were being withdrawn. While many of the protestors were tried and imprisoned, this brief episode had given a powerful lesson to all sides. First, the economy was relentlessly artificial (and thus weak) in nature through the central control of prices. Second, Polish workers could rise and bring about change. Third, the government felt unable to deal with such an uprising in the ruthless manner of 1956 and 1970.

Polish intellectuals appealed to the government for more freedom and a more open flow of information to guard against such shocking and unexpected price rises and the subsequent protests. While carefully worded to suggest that the intellectuals were trying to avert further unrest (and thus support the government), their statements showed that a new force for change was arising in Poland along with the workers and the church. The church, industry and

intellectuals, together with the growing forces pushing for change in the world as a whole, started to bring pressure on the Polish government.

By mid 1980 the economic situation in Poland had become desperate. The top leadership was mediocre in general and unable to deal with the economic crisis in particular. The change from Jaroszewicz to Babiuch as premier in the summer of that year did little to increase confidence. On August 14th, 1980 the entire workforce of more than 18,000 workers went on strike at the Gdansk Lenin Shipyard. This industrial action spread to other industrial plants along the Baltic coast and eventually to the Silesian coal mines. This was a worker's revolt on a scale that had not been seen in Eastern Europe.

The strikes were organized and led by a trade union federation called Solidarity that was founded in the Lenin shipyards, and was led by a genuinely working-class leader, Lech Walesa, who was an electrician by trade. While officially trades union in basis, Solidarity ended up attracting a broad range of people (often with conflicting views) who shared a common desire to rid Poland of its Communist government. Thus people from the Catholic Church, members of the anti-Communist Left, trades union members and supporters of non-violent change were all drawn to the movement as an umbrella organization that might have the power to remove the Communists.

The mixture of ideologies that led to Solidarity is perhaps best characterized by an incident that occurred outside of the Lenin shipyard on August 17th, 1980. As a new list of demands was attached to the gates of the yard, a Roman-Catholic priest delivered a mass. The link between the Catholic Church and the movement for freedom was thus crystallized. The demands of the workers had grown from a mere request for the reinstatement of a popular crane operator (Anna Walentynowicz) who had recently fired too much broader measures. Thus the MKS asked for the right to create independent trade unions, for the government to respect constitutional rights/freedoms, for a dismantling of the privileges afforded to

Communist Party members and for actions (not listed) to improve the economic conditions of Poland.

The firing of the crane operator, and of Lech Walesa had been a fulcrum around which other forces revolved. These two people were a catalyst for changes in Poland, the forces for which had been building for decades. The conjunction of economic crisis, John Paul II as Pope and the rise of Solidarity would eventually become an irresistible force. But as with all change, those who stood to lose the most from the fall of Communism (members of the Party and their sponsors in the USSR) also resisted the most. Hindsight may suggest that the victory of Solidarity and the eventual collapse of the Soviet bloc was inevitable, but this is far from the case. Other reform movements, such as Czechoslovakia in 1968, had been ruthlessly and violently crushed (Spielvogel 2011). The same could easily have occurred in Poland.

Solidarity gained remarkable and speedy gains as 1980 progressed. Babiuch was removed, to be replaced by Jagieski, who was to negotiate with Walesa. The fact that within a few weeks an unknown electrician had risen to a position in which he could negotiate with the Polish government was remarkable; but it can only be understood through the massive expansion of the movement behind him. On August 31st the two leaders signed an agreement stating that the new self-governing trade unions would "adhere" to the constitution and recognize the central role of the PUWP. Meanwhile, all of Solidarity's demands were met.

If the Polish Communist Party did not realize what the agreement implied (and it seems to have been both reluctant and powerless to do so) the Soviet government did. The Soviets directly warned the Poles that some elements within the country were attempting to overthrow the Communist party, and Gierek became conveniently ill, to be replaced by Kania. If the Soviets had hoped Kania would have a stiffer hand, then they were to be disappointed, as on October 24th the government formally recognized Solidarity. By this time it had 10,000,000

members (much of Poland's working population) and had spread to rural areas, where Rural Solidarity (boasting 3,000,000 members) would be recognized the next year.

The significance of the rise of Solidarity and the apparent surrender of the Polish government to its demands would be difficult to overestimate. While Solidarity had agreed to follow the Polish constitution, thus recognizing the supremacy of the Polish Communist Party, the fact that it had stood up to that same Party and won every concession that it asked for belied the agreement. The Polish Communist Party could not occupy a position of central power while Solidarity had such a massive and growing membership. By the middle of 1981 more than 25% of Poland's total population had joined Solidarity, and its activities had moved far beyond its original premise.

As Walesa wrote a few months after the stunning 1980 victory "history has taught us that there is no bread without freedom . . . what we had in mind were not only bread, butter and sausage, but also justice, democracy, truth, legality, human dignity, freedom of convictions, and the repair of the republic." (Walesa, 1981) The initial part of this speech stems firmly from a working-class movement, the latter from more idealistic motivations that echo what John Paul II had said in Poland just a over a year before.

By the end of 1980 Poland had been placed on a path that would result in the demise of Communist rule. There was, however, a long way to go. To quote Churchill regarding another struggle, "this is not the end . . . it is not even the beginning of the end, but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning" (Churchill, 1942) The concessions gained by Solidarity in 1980 were indeed the end of the beginning of the struggle against Communism.

## CHAPTER 2. The Early 1980's: The Growth of Solidarity

The myth regarding Solidarity is that its rise to power could be plotted on a graph as a single line moving effortlessly upwards until it gains political power in the late 1980's as Communism fell. The reality is a more complex and dangerous rise, full of rumor, fear and misunderstanding.

The sheer complexity of what was occurring in Poland at that time can be gleaned from a Chronology that can be found in one of the few books that details the rise and struggles of Solidarity to be published before its eventual victory was assured. This book, *Konspira: Solidarity Underground* (Cave, 1990)<sup>2</sup> may be used as both a primary and secondary source. Primary, because it was essentially a document produced while the movement was still actively struggling, and secondary, because it provides a detailed examination of how members of the group thought and acted during this troubling times. Turning to the Chronology:

- December, 1977: President Jimmy Carter visits Poland.
- October, 1978: Karol Wojtyla, archbishop of Cracow, becomes Pope John Paul II.
- June, 1979: Pope John Paul II makes triumphant visit to Poland.
- June-August, 1980: Labor disturbances throughout Poland culminate in the seventeen day occupation strike of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk. The emergence of Lech Walesa as a national leader and signing of the Gdansk agreements in August 31, which set the stage for the legalization of Solidarity, the Eastern bloc's first independent trade union. Gierek is replaced by Kani who will himself be soon replaced by the defense minister, General Wojciech Jaruzelski.
- October, 1980: Czeslaw Milosz, Polish born, is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

- December, 1980: Installation of a monument honoring the workers massacred in Gdansk a decade earlier.

Thus the sheer complexity of the events leading to the rise of Solidarity is encapsulated. The visit of Jimmy Carter to Poland, almost as unexpected as Nixon's going to China a few years later, illustrated that there was possibility of contact and even dialogue between the two super-powers. This was before the days of Reagan's talk of an "evil empire", but Carter's visit did single that chinks in the curtain were perhaps being seen. The 1978 coronation and 1979 visit of Pope John Paul II provides an impetus to forces that had already been occurring within Poland.

The winning of the Nobel Prize and the erecting of a monument to those workers who were killed attempting a similar uprising to the one that Solidarity had successfully organized showed the cultural and even intellectual underpinnings to the movement. Politics, while often talked of as the art of the possible, is also the art of the imagination. Symbols such as the monument to workers massacred by the Communist Party were potent rallying cries for the new movement, and a reminder of the hypocrisy of a government that claimed to be totally dedicated to the rights of the worker gunning them down when they dared to contradict the Party.

Symbolic acts of defiance without a reality backing them up rarely have a lasting effect<sup>3</sup>, but in the case of Solidarity, the monument was a fitting tribute, both to the men who had died in 1970, but also to the movement (genuinely mass and people-led in nature) that was currently occurring. Moving on to the rest of the chronology:

- March, 1981: A police riot leads to a growing crisis, against the backdrop of the serious threat of a Soviet invasion, which is only resolved through a last-minute compromise.

- September, 1981: Solidarity's First National Congress, consisting of delegates representing 10 million members, convenes in Gdansk. It stipulates a program, and elects a National Commission.
- December 11-12, 1981: Solidarity's National Commission meets in Gdansk amid growing crisis.
- December 13, 1981: General Jaruzelski imposes a "State of War", interning thousands of activists, including Lech Walensa and almost all those who attended the National Commission meeting.

A comparison of 1980 and 1981 would suggest that the classic Newtonian principle that every action will have an equal and opposite reaction is as applicable to History as it is to Physics. Solidarity had succeeded beyond its most hopeful dreams in 1980, but in 1981 that very success led to a crackdown based upon the reality of its strength rather than the vision of its dreams. The session of December 11-12 1981 has been well-documented by some of its participants. This documentation provides a rare glimpse into the workings of a resistance movement at a turning-point in its history. It reveals that personality, foibles, emotions, rumors and other less desirable aspects of individual human personality have as great an effect on historical occasions as the massive social, political and cultural forces that seem to move them.

Zbigniew Bujak eloquently sets the scene by saying that on the early evening of December 12th someone proposed a motion that anyone who wanted to leave the meeting early would need to get permission from the National Commission. Bujak says, "the bastard who proposed that motion . . . I'd like to . . . I don't remember who it was, but in retrospect, I think the Security Service must have been watching directly what was going on in the shipyard, because what happened there was crucial for their entire strategy during the early phase of martial law." (Cave, 1990)



He then describes Walesa as in a strange mood, he had "stopped saying anything, . . . he sat there as though resigned, seemingly far away." He continues, "Lech was ready to make enormous compromises in order to preserve or save Solidarity . . . for this reason, every time the discussion became more radical, he looked at everyone with disapproval, even pity." (Cave, 1990) Walesa is portrayed as a visionary whose followers have abandoned him: "he simply knew, or sensed, more than the others." (Cave, 1990)

What Walesa knew, or more correctly, sensed, was that martial law was coming to Poland. It seems as though the majority of Solidarity were flushed with the success of the previous year, almost intoxicated into the a-historical judgment that they were invincible. Some of the more educated members of the movement, such as Viktor Kulerski, had forecast more than a year earlier that there could be no compromise with the Party and that some wider clash was inevitable. These were the people who had "a broader historical view of many issues." This man also illustrates the complexity and lack of homogeneity within Solidarity. He said to a friend that "he used to say that ever since he began to work in Solidarity he felt like a Jew who'd got on the wrong train - as was obvious from every station he went through - but despite that couldn't decide to get off because, after all, he was finally going." (Cave, 1990)

This is a remarkable analogy for a Pole to make, and a reader may wonder whether this "train" is in fact on the way to a death-camp rather than liberation. The historical context of a nation that had seen millions of its citizens murdered less than fifty years before provided an awesome and fearful shadow cast from the past that showed what could happen to Solidarity. But this might also be interpreted as an allusion to the fact that the vast majority of Jews did not resist what was occurring to them during the Holocaust. Passivity does not necessarily lead to safety, so Solidarity's activism might actually be the safest rather than the most dangerous route to follow.

With the institution of Martial law that immediately followed the National Commission the government appeared to have taken charge once again. As Judt (200%) puts it, "on the one hand, the declaration of martial law had re-asserted the authoritarian rule of the Communist Party . . . on the other hand, the suppression of Solidarity and the silencing of its leaders did nothing to ease the country's underlying problems." In fact martial law isolated Poland in general and the Party in particular because of the almost universal international condemnation that it created. It limited the Part's economic options even more as it could no longer use imports to bale the economy out in as easy a way as it had before.

Martial law in Poland lasted until July 1983, and it was a period of relative stability within Poland, but all the while the tensions that had been building to create the Solidarity movement still remained. As Jandt (2005) puts it, "the country had passed from a brief flourish of relative liberty in 1981 into martial law, followed by a lengthy, uncertain purgatory of repressive semi-tolerance that finally unraveled in a re-run of the previous decade's economic crises." Perhaps most important is what did not happen during Martial law. When Jaruzelski declared martial law on December 13th 1981, Solidarity was banned and its leaders, including Lech Walesa, were imprisoned. However there was not a violent crackdown on the new political movements.

Had a figure such as Walesa risen before the mid 1970's it is likely that he would have been openly killed or perhaps he would have died from mysterious circumstances in prison. But in 1983 Walesa was imprisoned in reasonably comfortable surroundings, and there was never a hint of physical threat against him. While this shows a perhaps admirable tolerance on the part of the Party, is also showed a perceived weakness. The only way to rid the Party of a problem such as Solidarity was to imprison him under such conditions that he would come out of prison a broken man, or to simply kill him.

This Machiavellian, essentially amoral approach is what had succeeded within totalitarian societies before (and it would again), but the mere imprisonment of leaders and banning of Solidarity showed that the Communist leadership's "hearts were not in it." Jaruzelski's declaring of Martial Law may be viewed as the opposite of a repressive move in some senses, it may be regarded as the least forceful option that would prevent Soviet intervention within the country. In a remarkably honest appraisal of a meeting that he had with Soviet leaders (including Brezhnev and Andropov) just before he declared martial law, Jaruzelski paints a portrait of men unavoidably lost in the past:

" ...these old guys didn't realize the sacred flame was beginning to sputter. They couldn't understand that the Polish people had begun to question the dogmas of the system. The concept that the trade unions were no longer just a transmission link of the Part was heresy to them."  
(Bernstein, 1996)

While Jaruzelski's account may be self-serving in many ways (his memoirs of the time read as if he would like to have been a Solidarity leader rather than the repressor that he actually was), it is clear that the threat of Soviet invasion was at least perceived to be very real at the time.

Whether the Soviets actually would (or could) have invaded in reality is unclear and perhaps irrelevant, because the fact is that Jaruzelski left the meeting with the belief that intervention would most certainly occur if he did not succeed in cracking down on Solidarity. While Solidarity may have been silenced during the early 1980's, it is clear that the Polish Communist Party did the least it possibly could to avoid Soviet invasion. Whether this lack of violent action was due to inability or reluctance, or some mixture of the two, is unclear, but martial law resulted in a quieter political mood in which tensions within Poland were merely masked rather than solved.

### CHAPTER 3. John Paul II and Poland in the early 1980's

The visit of John Paul II to Poland in 1979 had, as already discussed, catalyzed forces that were already in place. His reaction to the strikes of 1980 was in many ways even more direct and remarkable than his words had been the previous year. As the 1980 strike was in full swing, the Pope read two prayers publicly in St Peter's Square, and then followed them with an explanation, in case anyone in the audience (including those in the USSR and Poland) had failed to glean the rather obvious message: "...these two prayers show that all of us here in Rome are united with our compatriots in Poland, with the church in Poland, whose problems are so close to our own heart." (Bernstein, 1996)

This was as close to an endorsement of the strike as the Pope could get. As Poland seemed to be starting on the path that would spiral down towards Soviet intervention, the Pope wrote an open letter to the Cardinal of Krakow in which he stated: "The common opinion of nations who love peace is shown by their conviction that the Poles have the undeniable right to resolve their problems by themselves and with their own resources." (Bernstein, 1996)

This was tantamount to stating that if the Soviet's intervened then they would not be a "peace-loving" nation. Such an accusation from the head of the Catholic Church against an officially atheistic country might not have caused too much sleep to be lost in the Kremlin, but the suggestion that the Poles have "the undeniable right to solve their own problems" at least implies that Poles might have not only the right, but the duty to enforce this principle by any means necessary.

By the time Martial law was about to be declared, and the threat of Soviet intervention appeared to be at its highest, rumors started to spread in the world's press that the Pope might actually personally intervene in the event of a Russian invasion. Personal intervention implied that Pope John Paul II would place himself (in person) between the Russian forces and the

Polish people. (Bernstein, 1996) Looked at with the hindsight of history this seems a somewhat improbable scenario, but the fact that the rumor was spread so widely throughout the world's press was a brilliant way for the Vatican to show how seriously the Pope took the idea of a Soviet invasion of his homeland.

One of Stalin's most famous comments was that "the Pope has no divisions", meaning that Popes no longer have armies to command and thus could essentially be ignored. John Paul II did not have armies to command in a literal sense, but the moral authority that he was beginning to wield, among Catholics and non-Catholics alike, was becoming a formidable force. He might not command divisions but it seemed as though he could at least give pause to the opposition's.

The Pope's reaction to the declaration of martial law was a vociferous rejection, once again stating his alliance and sympathies with his "compatriots" and also stating that the truth should, and would, always win in the end. Relations between the PWP and the Catholic Church remained tense but stable until 1983, when the Pope announced he was coming on another visit to the country. The Jaruzelski regime was understandably nervous at the prospect of the Pope returning to Poland, with the seemingly inevitable religious, cultural and political energies that he would create. But the regime did not try to ban his visit. Some (see Jundt, 2005) have suggested that the regime could not have banned the visit because such a ban would have caused more tension and upheaval than any actual visit could. Perhaps it can be better explained by the hesitant, reluctant and impotent characterization of the government that suggests that the Party knew that its days were numbered and that it was merely biding time before another crisis led to its downfall.

The Pope, in a fascinating diplomatic move, agreed not to make any speeches that openly mentioned Solidarity, nor to make any political speeches at all. He agreed, stating somewhat ambiguously that he would be arriving "at this sublime and difficult moment for

my homeland." (Bernstein, 1996) The mixture of sublime and difficult was perhaps an example of the Pope's ability to say more through avoiding an overtly political statement than any politician can through the most vitriolic sound-bite. The difficult clearly refers to the present state of martial law in Poland, and the sublime (together with its normal religious connotations) to the possibility for change for the better. There is something blithely optimistic within the Pope's statement, as if the eventual victory for what he constantly referred to as "the truth" (without ever expanding on what he meant) was inevitable.

Within his speeches the Pope was, as might be expected of a religious leader, as good as his word, at least as good as the letter of his word. In one major speech however, he allowed the word solidarity to slip in, although it was not as a reference to the political organization Solidarity, but rather to "solidarity", with a resolutely small 's': "Call good and evil by name . . . it is up to you to put up a firm barrier against demoralization, to assert the fundamental solidarity between human beings." (Bernstein, 1996)

The sentence received what was observed as a "very loud round of applause" (Bernstein, 1996) that seemed out of character for the generally subdued audience. They understood very well what the Pope was actually referring to.

Jaruzelski, writing a few years after the visit, stated "it is significant that soon after the pope's visit in 1983 martial law was lifted." (Bernstein, 1996) Once again the Pope had acted as a catalyst for a change that was already brewing. He seemed to have the ability (whether conscious or not) to go to Poland at precisely the right time to effect change.

The Pope was not, in this temporal manner at least, infallible in his choices of time and location. Two years before his visit to Poland in 1983 Pope John Paul II was shot (on May 13th) and escaped death by the less than an inch that the bullet missed his heart's aorta. Rumors at the time linked the Soviet Union to the attempt on the Pope, but nothing was proved until 2005, when East German secret-service files were released that seemed to

suggest that the Soviets were directly responsible for the assassination attempt. The files suggest that the KGB ordered the killing, and the responsibility was handed off to the Bulgarian secret police, who hired the eventual attempted assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca. (Il Gornale, 2005)

The reasoning for the Soviet's pursuit of the Pope's death is logical, if ruthless:

"... the Soviets wanted the pope killed because his death seemed to be the only way to decapitate Solidarity. With the pope dead, the reasoning went, Solidarity could be smothered by the Polish authorities without the Soviets incurring the lasting international opprobrium that intervening militarily would have brought." (Bernstein, 1996)

The fact that the Soviets almost certainly ordered the assassination attempt is revealing on a number of fronts. First, it illustrates the very real threat that the Pope was seen as creating to not only the Polish government, but to the whole of Communism as well. The Soviets did not tend to assassinate world leaders because of a natural caution in such matters. The Pope, while he may not have commanded any divisions (and thus made a soft target with no fear of retribution) was still a world leader of profound influence. Risking the scandal and outrage that a direct Soviet link to the death would have caused was apparently worthwhile if the Pope could be removed from the scene. Once again, this may have been a perceived rather than an actual power being wielded by the Pope, but it was just as real all the same.

The assassination attempt reveals that the Soviets no longer felt either comfortable or able to invade a satellite state in order to preserve the Communist system. In 1968 the Soviets had felt no such compunction in invading Czechoslovakia, but by the early 1980's the situation was profoundly different. Assassination of a figure-head was, rather misguidedly, seen as more effective than outright invasion by this time.

The Pope felt that the bullet missing killing him by such a small margin showed that the assassination attempt was a miracle from God, showing how he was being preserved for a higher purpose. Higher, perhaps, than being the Pope. It is important to note that another

world leader, this time more secular in nature (President Ronald Reagan) also survived an assassination attempt in this time period. The fact that both the Pope and the President had escaped death by less than an inch was confirmation, apparently to both men, that Providence was saving them for some important mission. The two actually discussed the matter when they met.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the USA in general, and between the Pope and Reagan in particular, is essential to understanding the wider forces that were working to bring about the downfall of Communism in Poland. In a letter to the American Ambassador in Rome, the Church addressed its position:

The Vatican recognizes that the U.S. is a great power with global responsibilities. The United States must operate on the political plane and the Holy See does not comment on the political positions taken by governments. It is for each government to decide its political policies. The Holy See for its part operates on the moral plane. The two planes (politics and morality) can be complementary when they have the same objective. In this case they are complementary because both the Holy See and the United States have the same objective: the restoration of liberty to Poland (Riebling, 2005).

The Pope and Reagan had a similar vision for Poland, but one that could not be openly admitted, as Reagan discovered when he committed the diplomatic faux pas of using the Church's letter as evidence of its support for his policy later that year. The Catholic Church specifically denied its direct support, and further established its independence by stating that both the USA and Russia were equally responsible for what it regarded as the immoral arms race.

Whether the Pope really regarded the Catholic Church's primary mission as being on the moral plane is uncertain. It does seem unlikely that such an astute and careful man did not perceive the overtly political nature of many of his comments vis--vis Poland. This is not moral commentary that happens to coincide with various political ends, it seems deliberately



political. The skill with which Pope John Paul II could be overtly political without appearing to be, thus preserving his moral authority, was remarkable.

#### CHAPTER 4. The Jaruzelski Interlude 1982 – 1988

Under martial law draconian restrictions on civil liberties occurred: the Party closed the universities, imprisoned thousands of Solidarity activists and generally returned Poland to a conventional totalitarian state, or at least the image of one. The fact that Lech Walesa was freed by the end of 1982, less than twelve months after he had been imprisoned, showed that the small group of men in control in Poland were either hopelessly out of touch, deliberately fooling themselves or resigned to the fact that at some point Communism would indeed collapse.

Jaruzelski felt comfortable enough (or uncomprehending enough) to claim that Walesa was a "former leader of a former union", when asked by the Western press why he had released him (Davies, 1982). The former General was now presenting himself to the world, and to the Polish people, as a moderate reformer who was prepared to modernize the system to a certain extent while firmly insisting on the central position of the Party. Within that Party there were, however, highly conservative, hard-core Communists (dismissively called 'hardheads' by Poles) who thought that Jaruzelski was being too conciliatory towards Solidarity activists. They also resented "the interference of Jaruzelski's fellow generals in the affairs of the civilian party apparatus." (lcweb2, 2006)

None of the Party were happy when Lech Walesa received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, just months after being released from jail. The prize, and the publicity, prestige and recognition that it brought with it, showed that Solidarity had not been killed by martial law, but rather had been put into a sort of enforced hibernation. It was not a matter of whether it would wake up, but rather when.

A highly embarrassing (for the Party) incident occurred in 1984, one which showed how Jaruzelski was not entirely in control of his own government apparatus, and the violence

of which reminded the world of a darker time in the totalitarian Communist past. The incident revolved around Father Jerzy Popieluszko, a Catholic priest who had gained considerable recognition as a spiritual adviser to Solidarity. The priest was murdered under suspicious circumstances and soon evidence appeared that showed that he had been abducted and shot by Party secret policemen. The incident resounded around the world, acting as a symbol for the repressive (and sometime violent) nature of Communist rule. The priest, who had both practically undertaken and symbolized the link between the Catholic Church and Solidarity that men such as the Pope could not formally solidify, now became a sort of folk hero for those fighting oppression throughout the world. On a more practical level, it was a disaster for the Jaruzelski government that was already weak because of the incompetence, corruption and basic lack of tenability within the Communist system that they stubbornly held onto.

By the mid 1980's it seemed as though Poland was in something of a stalemate, as it was "mired in frustrating deadlock, with no reasonable prospect of resuscitating the stricken economy or achieving political harmony." (lcwebb2, 2006) After the Pope's visit most of the provisions of martial law were lifted and the country was officially no longer in a "state of war". A general amnesty was granted, but several hundred political prisoners (most Solidarity-related) remained in jail. In July 1984 another general amnesty was granted (which would have been unneeded if the first one had been genuine) and within a couple of years nearly all political prisoners had been released.

There was, however, a continuation of the general harassment of political agitators and Solidarity activists. Solidarity as a movement remained officially illegal and its publications were banned, but as all of its major leaders were now free, this illegality was of limited efficacy. The disparity between the official reality and the actual reality was steadily widening. Events outside of Poland were soon to push the country to the edge of complete transformation.

On March 11th, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union, representing a complete change from the "old men" that Jaruzelski had talked about in the meetings with Soviet leaders before the imposition of martial law. Gorbachev was, more than anything else, a man of pragmatic vision who saw that the imminent collapse of the whole system of planned economies required drastic action. Gorbachev carried out several different reform programs aimed at transforming the Eastern Bloc. First there was perestroika, an economic program that allowed state enterprises the freedom to adjust output according to consumer demand. In a clever compromise, Gorbachev ordered that state enterprises had to fill state order, but could then do what they wanted with all the remaining product. They also became self-governing and self-financing, needing to meet the costs of raw materials, factories and wages from their own production. Essentially, Gorbachev was introducing a proto-Capitalist economic system.

The results of Perestroika were less than stellar in the first few years of its institution as "the elimination of central control over production decisions, especially in the consumer goods sector, led to the breakdown in traditional supplier-producer relationships without contributing to the formation of new ones . . . instead of streamlining the system, Gorbachev's decentralization caused new production bottlenecks." (Curtis 1998) Further, the new system "bore the characteristics of neither central planning nor a market economy . . . the Soviet economy went from stagnation to deterioration." (Curtis 1998) And when the Soviet economy started to deteriorate, so did that of Poland.

The Polish authorities could no longer depend upon supplies from the Soviet Union to buoy up the sinking ship of their economy. These problems were worsened because Gorbachev's system of glasnost, in which there was a broad opening of freedom of speech, the press, politics and culture in general inexorably spread into Poland. The people were suddenly more vociferous in their opposition to the policies that were impoverishing them and, most

importantly, unlike in 1980/81, the Soviet government was encouraging such dissent rather than threatening military intervention.

Gorbachev's relaxation of political, ideological, and social control was mirrored by Poland in late 1986, as more than 200 of the remaining political prisoners were released. Lech Walesa, realizing that this was the time to act (rather than before) quickly created the first Solidarity structure that was both legal and public with his Temporary Council of NSZZ Solidarity. Suddenly many local Solidarity chapters spontaneously woke themselves from their enforced hibernation and in October 1987 the Country Executive Committee of NSZZ Solidarity. While Solidarity members were still discriminated against by the government it was internal divisions that were becoming more threatening. Solidarity became increasingly divided between moderates (led by Walesa) who wanted to negotiate a peaceful end to Communism, and more extreme elements who wanted an anti-Communist revolution that might well have involved violence (Jundt, 2005).

As 1988 drew to a close it had become clear to all Poles that the economy had become even worse than it had been before the first protests in 1980. The planned economy was producing useless goods that no-one wanted at wasteful prices. Money to support the ailing economy was drying up and many supermarket shelves were bare with long lines waiting for what goods there were. Another uprising was about to occur, and this time it would bring irreversible changes to Poland.

## CHAPTER 5. New Strikes, the Round Table Agreements, and the Fall of Communism: 1988-1990

In April 1988 new strikes broke out, this time starting at the Stalowa Wola steelworks and soon spreading to the shipyards. This strike was temporarily broken by the government, only to reappear in May. The strikes spread throughout the summer until much of Polish economy was at a standstill. At this point the government decided that it was time to negotiate rather than to attempt to break the industrial action by force. With no Soviet Union breathing down their necks, and distinct lack of will to carry on a system that clearly was not working, the Minister of Internal Affairs agreed to meet with Lech Walesa in order to negotiate an end to the strikes. They ended the following day.

It was now clear that power was inexorably flowing into the hands of Solidarity. A minority of Solidarity leaders still wanted a violent revolution, but with Walesa's growing ability to gain what the movement wanted through negotiation these voices lost whatever influence they had ever had.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of 1989 the so-called Polish Round Table Agreement occurred during negotiations between Lech Walesa and Kiszczak. The talks that were agreed to at this meeting took place among fifty-six representatives of all sides from February to April 1989. General Jaruzelski, ever hopeful, tried to co-opt the leadership of Solidarity into his own Party, and thus keep power by diffusing the situation.

The talks, symbolically taking place around a massive "round table" (with not-so-subtle allusions to the famous equality promised by King Arthur's similarly shaped table) legalized Solidarity, and allowed them to put up as many candidates as they wanted for the Polish Senate. They were only allowed to contend for 35% of the seats in the lower house, the Sejm. While pre-election forecasts suggested the Communists would win, in fact there was a landslide for Solidarity. It won 92 out of 99 Senate seats and all 161 seats it was contending in

the lower house. Had it been allowed to contend all seats it seems likely that Solidarity would have won more than 95% of the seats going.

The Communist Party (the PZPR) was left virtually powerless, and the first non-Communist Prime Minister of Poland, Bronislaw Geremek, was chosen from the lower house. His acceptance speech spoke of a "thick line" (Jendt, 2005) that would be drawn between the Communist past and the Solidarity-led future. As Jendt (2005) puts it, "in hindsight the outcome of the round-table was a negotiated end to Communism, and at least to some of the participants, that much was already clear ... but no-one anticipated the speed of the denouement."

### Conclusion

The socialist system that occurred in the Eastern Europe in the mid 40's has failed to win people's hearts and minds. Hopes that socialism with its domination of public ownership would lead to a society of social justice, the elimination of human exploitation, and general well-being failed. In practice, the abolition of private property and the absolute dominance of state property provoked total social indifference to the results of their work. State property belonged mostly to the bureaucratic structures. As the result, state economy declined drastically. It was no longer capable of ensuring the immediate needs of population. Monopolization of power of the Communist party resulted in the establishment of undemocratic political system that deprived people of basic civil rights. It was clear that the system calling itself "socialist camp" would not last long. Its failure was only a matter of time that required the maturation of internal forces that could start fundamental changes, witnessed in the end of 80's.

The speed of the ultimate breakdown of Communist was remarkable, but it can be explained by the fact that the Communists had been holding on to power through a relentless artificiality for nearly a decade. Once the bonds of the Soviet Union were released and the people were actually allowed a free vote, the pent up frustrations and will to change that had been growing within them burst into a massive rejection of Communism. Universal support for a political party seldom occurs in a free election; perhaps the 1989 election is best characterized as an almost universal rejection of Communism rather than universal support for Solidarity.



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