

THE POLISH QUESTION

by

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In the century preceding the First World War, when Poland was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria, patriotic Poles ensured that "The Polish Question" was never allowed to pass out of sight. Since 1945 Poland has been an important permanent member of the Soviet Bloc, and until recently seemed likely to remain so. Suddenly "The Polish Question" is back with us again.

The main reason for this sudden change is that Poland has been Catholic and westward-looking for 1,000 years, and communist, anchored within the Soviet Bloc, for only thirty-five. Under the stresses and disappointments of the international recession large numbers of Poles are no longer content with their lot under the thirty-five year-old "New Order", and are protesting that changes are required. Furthermore, the emergence of a Polish Pope, after a thousand years of Christianity in Poland, has proved disturbing to the New Order in the long term, if not decisive in the short term.

Historical Background

Poland's history has been more painful than that of almost any other European country. A relatively small nation, Poland has found itself sandwiched between far more numerous Germans in the West and overwhelming numbers of Russians in the East. Polish territory on the north European plain has no natural eastern and western frontiers. Only to the south are there mountains, and in the north the Baltic. Until 1945 German territory separated Poland from the Baltic Sea, apart from a narrow corridor created after the First World War. Between the wars Poland was a complicated, heterogeneous nation, with large numbers of Lithuanians, White Russians, Ukrainians, Germans and Jews living uneasily, together with the main body of Poles, within the stragglng Versailles frontiers.

Earlier, between the 14th and 16th centuries, Poland was a great European power.¹ Covetous eyes were cast upon her territory in the 17th century, during which the invading Swedes did untold damage.² Without a hereditary dynasty the system of electing Polish kings became increasingly abused by acquisitive European powers. The ambassadors of France, Austria, Prussia and Russia spent great sums of gold in Warsaw in order to promote the prospects of their favoured candidates. At the end of the 17th century a Saxon king was elected, dividing his loyalties between Dresden and Warsaw. This king, Augustus the Strong, did not prove an effective ruler of Poland during the first third of the 18th century.³ Nor did his successors, Augustus the Second and Stanislas Augustus Poniatowski, the discarded lover of Russia's Catherine the Great. He spanned the last third of the 18th century until 1794, when the third and final partition of Poland, between Prussia, Russia and Austria effectively removed Poland from the map of Europe for the next century and a quarter. Napoleon,

anxious to use Polish soldiers for his own ends, resurrected a part of Poland and made of it a French puppet, but the Congress of Vienna erased Napoleon's creation and reestablished a Polish king. Unfortunately for Polish nationalists, the new king of Poland was also the Czar of Russia.⁴

Until an independent Poland re-emerged from the crucible of the first World War, the Polishness of the three parts of partitioned Poland was upheld to a large extent by the Polish Catholic Church, which earned for itself the reputation, which it has never lost, of being a Polish patriotic church. Throughout the terrible history of Poland, the Roman Catholic Church has never wavered, nor lost the people's confidence.

The Twentieth Century

Between the wars Poland was a vigorous, quite successful state. Marshal Pilsudski routed the Red Army in 1920 and drove it out of Poland. Prospects for the resurrected state seemed good until Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939. Within a month Poland had undergone the fourth partition, presided over by Hitler and Stalin, and had again ceased to exist.⁵ The Polish struggle against the Nazis was carried on mainly from France and then from Britain. The overwhelming mass of patriotic Poles hoped for the restoration of the Polish republic after liberation by the Western powers. It was not to be. Stalin was determined to impose on Poland a communist government of Russian choosing, and to incorporate Poland into the defensive bastion between Russia and the West, which he deemed essential to Russia's security. At Tehran and Yalta he induced Roosevelt and Churchill to agree that Poland should give up to the Soviet Union broad lands in the east including Wilno and Lwow, and he compensated with German territory in the west.⁶ Stalin's plan was carried out, leaving Poland a smaller, but better endowed and more compact and homogeneous country than before. Six million Poles had perished, half of them Jews. The thirty million or so survivors, resentful of having a communist government imposed on them, and of being locked into the Soviet Bloc, nevertheless settled down to rebuilding the country and upholding the Polishness of Poland. Reconstruction demanded all their energies. Until recently, it seemed likely that there would be no major change in this unsatisfactory but manageable arrangement in the foreseeable future, the short-lived disturbances of 1970 and 1976 notwithstanding.

Post-War Facts of Life

Poland has indeed become a significant power in the post-war world, though foreign policy has remained predictable and almost entirely under Soviet domination. A relatively soft policy towards the Poles on the part of the Kremlin, together with fear of Germany and of another partition, have kept Poland quiescent, though many voices within Poland have been asking for more independence within the Soviet Bloc.

Within, Polish society has been gripped by the communist party, which dominates the media, the security forces and the political machine.⁷ This situation has long been resented, but until recently there has been no overt challenge to the supremacy of the party, let alone any serious movement towards leaving the Soviet Bloc. Despite Soviet and communist party preeminence, Poland has remained a strangely uncommunist country, with 90 per cent of the people

practising Catholics, more than 80 percent of the land in private hands⁸ and the tendency to look westwards culturally and commercially largely unaffected by Soviet domination. Until his departure in 1980, Mr. Gierak had shown himself adept at dissuading the Russians from treating Poland too harshly (the standard of living is considerably higher in Poland than in the Soviet Union) and by using western credits he managed in the early seventies to increase year by year the real wages of the workers. Cars and apartments became available to more and more Poles.⁹ Gierak had to tread a narrow path between those demanding even more liberalism, and those warning against the perils of deviating further from communist austerity. Until recently he managed, in the difficult second half of the seventies, to keep the Poles broadly acquiescent despite a crescendo of complaints. Patriotism and patience were his slogans. He kept reminding the Poles that bad harvests, oil price increases and a recent recession in the west were factors beyond his control, but that Poland was amongst the first fifteen of industrial nations and would benefit from the fruits of investments made in the early seventies, if patience, patriotism and hard work could be maintained.¹⁰

Until 1980 the Gierak formula on the whole justified itself. Industrialization continued, poverty had been eliminated even if affluence had not succeeded it, and prospects for the future did not seem unduly dim. It looked as though tight alignment with the USSR and tight discipline imposed by the communist party would continue to be acceptable. Gierak demonstrated to the people that he respected the Catholic Church. He went to Rome in 1977 to visit the Pope, and stressed his regard for the Polish clergy and their contribution to upholding morality and social values in Poland. He openly welcomed the election in 1978 of Cardinal Wojtyla. Gierak and the Polish ecclesiastical hierarchy developed a grudging respect for each other as interdependent patriotic upholders of the Fatherland. They were aptly dubbed "Two oxen in a single Polish plough". Not caring overmuch for each other, they nonetheless plodded forward together, pulling in the interests of Poland.¹¹

The Challenge of 1980

But in 1980 the formula of the seventies ceased to work. Polish citizens, including the all-important workers, pronounced themselves dissatisfied with living conditions, and frustrated by the inability to protect their own interests. The difficulty of obtaining meat and other items considered essential sparked off resistance of an unprecedented strength and sophistication. Led by Lech Walesa and his colleagues, the protagonists of passive resistance asserted themselves. Many workers ceased to work, declaring that they would resume only if they were allowed to organize independent trade unions, if the church were allowed access to the media and if wages were improved.¹²

The 1980 crisis differed markedly from previous crises. Workers' uprisings in 1956, 1970 and 1976, all of which led to major economic concessions, were quelled by violence. In 1980 there was no dramatic explosion quickly followed by a change of policy or leader. Instead, there was a deliberate slow-down by the workers, culminating in a major work stoppage, a peaceful and well-disciplined process resembling nothing so much as Gandhi's tactics of passive resistance. The Poles clearly did not wish to repeat the mistakes of the Hungarian and Czech experiments in liberalization. The workers have stressed

that they neither wish to overturn the Communist system in Poland, nor to challenge the unity of the Soviet bloc.¹³ The government, likewise, did not aggravate the situation by resorting quickly to repression. They entered into a lengthy bargaining process which culminated in a clear victory for the workers. The Gdansk Charter provided for free trade unions, the right to strike, freedom of the press and numerous other concessions including the broadcasting of Mass and better wages.¹⁴ The crisis was not without its casualties, but the blood letting was political rather than human: Eduard Gierek, architect of the flawed economic miracle, was replaced as communist party leader by Stanislaw Kania. Many other party officials lost their positions in the four "purges" that have swept the party since the crisis began.¹⁵

It quickly became clear that the government could implement some of the concessions, particularly as regards the Church and better wages, although the latter threatened to bankrupt a treasury already heavily in debt. The creation of independent trade unions, however, presented fundamental difficulties. In a political system in which the communist party is supposed to be the sole representative of the working class and, by definition, the sole source of political authority, *trade unions should be nothing more than a transmission belt for party policy.* The Polish workers might state emphatically that they do not intend to challenge the leading role of the communist party or the fundamentals of the communist state. *But just such a challenge is inherent in the concept of free trade unions: they constitute a rival source of authority.* By December 1980, it was clear just how strong that rival power source would be: Solidarity, the umbrella union movement, claims some ten million members, with more clamouring to join. The communist party, by comparison, has only two million members.¹⁶

Neither the workers nor the government are eager for an ultimate showdown, for they are well aware that any further undermining of the existing regime would bring in the Russians. Even the Church, as befits an institution which thinks in terms of decades rather than days, has been a model of patience and restraint, urging the workers to exercise caution in their demands.¹⁷ The Soviet Union, for its part has demonstrated a remarkable degree of forbearance with the Polish Government which must, in their eyes, appear palpably weak. At the same time, they have demonstrated clearly their willingness and ability to act if the stability of the bloc is threatened. By early December, large numbers of Soviet, East German and Czech forces were reported to be deployed along Poland's frontiers. Should invasion become necessary, they are ready.¹⁸

As the Polish crisis enters its seventh month, the basic conundrum remains: can the Poles reconcile their economic and political aspirations with the constraints imposed by a system which has produced such a degree of disenchantment? The hope must be that the Poles themselves will work out a tolerable *modus vivendi*. No outside power wants to see Poland explode and none is able to solve the problem for the Poles. East and West alike are hoping that the Polish Question will be settled without violent conflict, for if violence erupts there would probably be no winners, and almost certainly there would be many losers.

Footnotes

1. Vaclav L. Benes and Norman G. J. Pounds, *Poland* (London, 1970), pp. 34-54.
2. *ibid.*, pp. 56-57.
3. *ibid.*, p. 59.
4. *ibid.*, pp. 60, 65-72.
5. M. K. Dziewanowski, *Poland in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1977), pp. 80-108.
6. *ibid.*, pp. 119, 122, 136-42.
7. Richard F. Staar, *Poland 1944-1962: the Sovietization of a Captive People* (New Orleans, 1962), *passim*.
8. George Blazynski, *Flashpoint Poland* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 113, 188-89.
9. *ibid.*, pp. 181-88.
10. *ibid.*, p. 333.
11. *ibid.*, pp. 340, 359.
12. *New York Times*, 18 Aug. 1980.
13. *Newsweek*, 24 Nov. 1980.
14. *Economist*, 6 Sept. 1980.
15. *Guardian*, 14 Sept. 1980; UPI/Reuter News Service Report, 3 Dec. 1980. It would be a mistake to place too much emphasis on the reshuffling of government personalities. In communist countries ministers can vanish from the government into the organs of the party or bureaucracy without major upset.
16. *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 1980; *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 9 Dec. 1980. Poland's 3.5 million private farmers are the latest group demanding permission to join solidarity.
17. *Time*, 22 Sept. 1980; *Newsweek*, 24 Nov. 1980.
18. *Newsweek*, 8 Dec. 1980.

UNDERSTANDING PROPAGANDA

by

Maurice Tugwell

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."¹

"Let the ruling class tremble at a communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!"²

These two excerpts, one from the American Declaration of Independence, another from the Communist Manifesto, illustrate the importance of propaganda in the service of revolution. They demonstrate too the neutrality of propaganda itself which, like a rifle or a warship, may be used for any cause, good, bad or indifferent. But, unlike most weapons, which inflict casualties and