

The East German Response To Events In Poland

by

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Introduction

The imposition of a “state of war” — or in the western vernacular, “martial law” — in Poland on December 13th, 1981 was greeted with satisfaction by the leaders of the Warsaw Pact states. The crackdown followed months of mounting criticism and pressure from the Soviet Union and its satellite governments. This article will discuss the reactions of one of these — the East German — to the Polish challenge.

The emergence of an independent trade union — *Solidarność* or Solidarity — in Poland has changed the face of socialism in Eastern Europe. Before August 1980 it was usual to state that communist parties in Eastern Europe possessed power, backed up by the civilian and security police and the army, but that their authority or legitimacy varied from country to country, with the Polish United Workers Party (PUWP) only enjoying a low level of legitimacy. The upheavals of the past year there demonstrated that the Party’s hold on power was precarious. The Marxist-Leninist foundations of the People’s Republic of Poland are still standing, but with Poland now under military rule the structure is hollow. The PUWP is near to collapse, retaining perhaps as few as half of its membership. Although the Party was clinging to power in the autumn of 1981, authority had passed already to Solidarity and the more than thirty autonomous trade unions — speaking for the material needs of the population — and to the Roman Catholic Church, which caters to the nation’s spiritual needs. All of which presented a heretical challenge to the fundamental principles of Marxist-Leninist rule as interpreted and practised by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

How did other socialist states react to such happenings? May one assume that those parties which enjoy a high level of authority, such as the CPSU, could afford to cast a benign eye on the tergiversations of the Poles? By no means, since the attacks on the authority of the Polish Party affected the legitimacy of all ruling communist parties. No one is in any doubt that Poland will remain in Comecon and the Warsaw Pact and will continue to be called a Marxist-Leninist state. What is under discussion is the substance of Marxism-Leninism. But not all of the “socialist” states were equally hostile to the new Poland. The ringleaders in the anti-Polish campaign have been the USSR, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). During most of the first year of Solidarity’s existence the most severe critic was Czechoslovakia, often using exactly the same phraseology which the Poles employed in 1968 to condemn the events in Czechoslovakia. Initially, the Soviet and GDR presses reprinted the Czechs’ most vituperative material, but from the spring of 1981 the CPSU went onto the offensive on its own behalf. It is striking that the CPSU, the Party enjoying the highest level of authority in the Soviet bloc,

was joined by the Czech Party and the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) — parties retaining low levels of legitimacy — in exhibiting the greatest nervousness about Poland. The most relaxed response — it could be called a critical tolerance — came from the Bulgarians. The Romanian party has indicated that it will provide no economic help to Poland but is becoming more critical of developments, and the Hungarian party has tried to keep balance while always seeking to avoid Soviet criticism that it is “soft” on the Poles.¹

The East German View

The response of the GDR has varied over time: after initial hesitation, it favoured a Warsaw Pact invasion up to December 1980; then it convinced itself that Kania would put the PUWP back on the rails. But by May/June 1981 it had lost its confidence in the PUWP leadership and since has become very critical. If the message handed down to the party *aktiv* is taken as indicative of SED thinking, then the party rank and file were told that there was going to be an invasion until December 1980, then that Poland would succeed in reestablishing socialism, and since the summer of 1981 that Poland would go bourgeois — thus facing the GDR with the melancholy prospect of being sandwiched between a bourgeois Poland and a bourgeois West Germany.²

The SED reacted to the strikes in Poland in the summer of 1980 with an embarrassed silence. The Party printed only the views of the Polish government and underlined the orthodox Marxist-Leninist position that the communist party is the only true guardian of the interests of the working class. The first official SED commentary did not appear in the party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* until 4 September 1980, revealing how hesitant the leadership was. Neither Erich Honecker, Secretary-General of the SED, nor Kurt Hager, the chief ideologist, had been willing hitherto to publish their views. A GDR citizen could not have gained a clear picture of events in Poland had he restricted himself to the East German media. However those East Germans who were curious about Poland had another source of information, West German radio and television.

The SED's alarm at the widespread appeal of Solidarity manifested itself on 6 September 1980, the day on which Stanislaw Kania replaced Edward Gierek as First Secretary of the PUWP. *Neues Deutschland* printed what it claimed was a statement by the Polish military that they would intervene if anti-socialist attacks on the state did not cease.³ In fact the Polish military had made no such threat; *Neues Deutschland* had deliberately mistranslated the original Polish statement to prepare the GDR population for a military confrontation in Poland leading to intervention by the Warsaw Pact powers. Honecker's first official analysis of the Polish situation occurred in a speech at Gera on 13 October 1980, in which he adopted a hard line approach towards Solidarity and argued that socialism was in danger.

How does the SED explain the Polish phenomenon and the continued inability of the PUWP to reestablish its old authority? It places the blame fairly and squarely on the West, especially West Germany, claiming that

the roots of the malaise lie outside of Poland and extend through Solidarity to many aspects of Polish life. A constant theme is that Lech Walesa and his fellow trade unionists are in reality counter-revolutionaries bent on destroying the achievements of socialism in Poland and thereby aiming at the restoration of capitalism.⁴ Given this analysis does it follow that the SED is fully committed to the PUWP in its struggle with Solidarity and its attempts to remain loyal to the socialist commonwealth? No; indeed the SED has been one of the fiercest critics of the PUWP leadership for most of the period since August 1980.

This state of affairs has come about because the SED is very unhappy about the style of leadership — or to be more precise, the lack of leadership — of the PUWP elite. Stanislaw Kania and General Wojciech Jaruzelski, Prime Minister since December 1980, almost invariably received a bad press in the GDR. One of the exceptions to this occurred at the Tenth Congress of the SED in April 1981 when criticism of Poland was muted. It was left to Gerhard Muller, First Secretary of *Bezirk* Erfurt and Kurt Tiedke, First Secretary of *Bezirk* Magdeburg, second rank officials and hence men who are not concerned with formulating policy towards Poland, to voice concern. However the campaign picked up afterwards and reached a peak in June 1981.⁵ The visit of Mikhail Suslov, the chief ideologist of the CPSU, to Warsaw in April 1981 was an occasion when Moscow was able to underline its concern about developments in Poland and it was evident that the CPSU and the SED expected the PUWP to change course and combat the rising “anti-socialist” threat. This did not happen; instead Solidarity was given time on Polish radio and television and Rural Solidarity was recognised as the independent trade union of the nation’s private farmers. *Neues Deutschland* thereupon produced some hair-raising headlines on Poland: “Police station near Warsaw burnt down”; “Counter-revolutionary literature distributed in Warsaw”; “Solidarity leaders demand control over jails”.⁶ One PUWP comrade was quoted as saying that it was high time that an end was put to the disturbing situation which existed. The official GDR news agency, ADN, reported from Warsaw that more and more members were waiting for a “clear word” from the PUWP about how to defeat the “counter-revolutionary, anti-socialist forces”.⁷ The voices which were quoted approvingly by the GDR media were those of Stefan Olszowski and Tadeusz Grabski, and the so-called “Katowice Forum” was given prominence. Apparently both Moscow and East Berlin hoped that the dogmatists and the Stalinists in the PUWP would rally support against the “soft” policies of Kania and Jaruzelski. The CPSU sent another letter which stated that the PUWP was “gradually weakening in the face of internal counter-revolution”.⁸ This was a clear vote of no confidence in the leadership. At the Eleventh Plenum of the PUWP Central Committee, which met to discuss this letter, an attempt was made to remove Kania and Jaruzelski and replace them with Grabski as First Secretary and Olszowski as Prime Minister. The man behind the move was Mikhail Suslov, secretly in Warsaw at the time, according to east European sources. He failed since those around Kania decided not to abandon him and because Kania him-

self displayed some tactical skill during the plenum. East Berlin would appear to have expected a different result from the plenum since ADN reports from Warsaw on 10 and 11 June 1981 referred to the First Secretary not as Comrade Stanislaw Kania but as S. Kania, a clear signal of reduced esteem. When it became clear that he was staying ADN called him comrade and gave him his full title.⁹

At the extraordinary Ninth Congress of the PUWP in July 1981 the only speech which was printed in full in *Neues Deutschland* was that by Werner Felfe, the leader of the SED delegation. Only short extracts from the other speeches were published. Again it would appear that the SED expected Kania to be replaced since he was described as S. Kania or Kania early on. The secret election to the Central Committee and the fact that there was a multiplicity of candidates for election to the Politburo went unmentioned in the GDR media. Coverage of church affairs and agriculture was also very sparse.

In the field of foreign relations the SED's stand on the Polish crisis has done great damage to intra-German relations. The chief responsibility for the situation has been laid at Bonn's door and the GDR has consistently tried to prise the West Germans and the Americans apart. The SED Politburo gave the Institute of Politics and Economics the task of providing Warsaw with ammunition: a booklet entitled *FRG Revanchist Activities and Polish Demands* appeared on 4 September 1980. In it the institute accused West Germany of having designs on former German territory now part of Poland and of calling for the "liberation of the German eastern territories".¹⁰ Recently, however, Honecker and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of West Germany met to discuss differences over the Polish question and to improve strained relations.

Internal Measures

In order to restrict contacts with foreigners the GDR ended visa free travel to and from Poland in October 1980 and (until the military take-over) the permission of the East German police was required before a Polish guest could be welcomed. Polish newspapers are also confiscated at the frontier. Such was the resentment at the treatment of Polish citizens by the GDR authorities that the Polish government officially protested to East Berlin. The amount of money which has to be exchanged daily by a tourist in East Berlin was quadrupled and in the GDR was doubled in another move to stem the flow of Western visitors.¹¹

The GDR has extended considerable economic aid to the Poles and has joined the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in providing a total of over two billion dollars U.S. in credits. On 5 September 1980 *Neues Deutschland* reported that in response to a request from Warsaw the GDR had delivered raw materials, industrial equipment and consumer goods.¹² Poland was also able to purchase grain, butter, chicken and baby foods. Further deliveries were made in November 1980 and early 1981.

A striking factor about the SED's reporting of the Polish situation is its ideological rigidity. This is in stark contrast to the Czechoslovak crisis of 1968 when the SED projected its own model of developed socialism. Now

any form of pluralism is explicitly rejected and East Berlin is concerned to promote the Soviet model, indicating that no originality has surfaced. The fear of undermining the party's authority is so great that the shortcomings of the PUWP which precipitated the crisis are glossed over. The problem of corruption has not been mentioned and Gierek came in for only mild criticism. The whole dispute about the failure of the trade union to protect the interests of its members has been swept under the carpet. There have been many ideological conferences and indeed the Tenth Party Congress was designed to underline the fact that the GDR had no need for a Solidarity movement. It has been ceaselessly argued that the SED is the best guardian of the interests of the working class. However only old ideas have been aired; everything that has been said and is being claimed has in the past been uttered a thousand times already. The ideology appears incapable of rising to the Polish challenge and of giving birth to some original concepts. It appears old and weak and the youth of the country is bored with it. The party consistently complains that many FDJ youth movement members (encompassing two-thirds of the country's young people) are adept at expressing the party line at meetings while saying something different at home. The phenomenon of squatting has reached the GDR but the young people involved are being dealt with very leniently by the police.¹³

The Polish events have sown the seeds of uncertainty in the SED and this has led to the party becoming more aggressive. It was in favour of military intervention by the Warsaw Pact in 1980. According to a highly placed east European official, General Heinz Hoffmann, Minister of National Defence and Erich Mielke, Minister of State Security, argued in favour of immediate military intervention at the meeting of the Warsaw Pact in Moscow in December 1980. Leonid Brezhnev disagreed and personally rejected their appeal. Gustav Husak of Czechoslovakia was also said to be against military intervention at that time. If this information is correct — and other sources have repeated the same news — it reveals the great confidence of the military-security complex in the GDR. It is worth noting that it was not Erich Honecker, the head of the party, but two Ministers (both members of the Politburo it should be added) who argued the case for intervention. After the USSR rejected its advice the GDR has been content to follow Moscow's lead.¹⁴ However if the Warsaw Pact had decided to march in December 1980 it could have done so. Thirty-six Soviet divisions were ready and all conditions necessary for invasion had been met.

The GDR media have painted a picture of chaos and economic anarchy in Poland and this has fully confirmed the average GDR citizen's views on the Polish economy. Expressions such as *polnische Wirtschaft* ("a right shambles") and *Mistwirtschaft* ("a bloody mess") have been given a new lease on life. The SED has consciously reawakened the latent anti-Polish feeling among the population. However it should be borne in mind that GDR-Polish relations except during the 1970s have never been exactly cordial. The Poles have not forgotten that during every major crisis in Soviet-Polish relations the GDR has sided with the Soviets. Only once, in

1968, have they seen ideologically eye to eye on events in another socialist state. Even during the 1970s the GDR brushed aside Polish requests for closer economic ties and instead expanded trade with the Soviet Union. During the last decade the Poles did not endear themselves to the East German population. Their purchasing power was formidable and it was not unknown for them to sell some of the goods they had purchased in the GDR in other parts of the country at a profit. This led to the joke that the only way an East German could buy anything valuable was for stores to play periodically the Polish national anthem, thus allowing East German customers to the counter past the Poles, who, of course, had to stand to attention!

Not every GDR citizen regards Poland as an example of what to avoid. The *Arbeitsgruppe für Menschenrechte* in West Berlin has reported that Dr. Wilhelm Koch, a Weimar doctor, was sent to prison for four years for donating 10,000 Marks to Solidarity. It also stated that seven workers in Thuringia were arrested during the summer of 1981 for arguing in favour of a democratisation of the FDGB, the East German trade union, along the lines of Solidarity.¹⁵

The Polish events have disrupted East-West German relations and cost the GDR dear. There is now less likelihood of West Germany being magnanimous in providing large credits for economic projects in the GDR. On the other hand Poland has consistently failed to meet her export obligations to the GDR and this has forced East Berlin to import hard coal from the West, pushing up the country's hard currency debt. The confusion in the Polish economy has meant that deliveries of intermediate goods have also been affected, thus compounding the difficulties of the GDR economy.¹⁶

The SED leadership reacted quickly to Polish troubles in the past and the 1970 Polish riots led to the present emphasis on social policy, especially on housing and pensions. They suffered their own version of the Polish troubles when in 1979, in line with the industrial price reform, the price of some electrical consumer goods increased sharply. This caused "unrest for a certain time" among the population.¹⁷ It is not clear if the GDR consumers were acting deliberately in a "Polish" way so as to have the price rises rescinded, but in any case the government quickly cancelled the price rises. The present Polish troubles have led the GDR to adopt a very ambitious Five Year Plan covering the years 1981-85. Indeed the projected growth rates are the highest in any Comecon country with the exception of Romania. Whereas Honecker spoke a year ago of declining growth rates not being a disaster, talk now is all about raising living standards. Such is the addiction of the GDR population to consumerism, much to the regret of the SED, that Otto Reinhold, a leading party social scientist, has pointed out the danger of social conflict if growth rates slow down.¹⁸ Investment in industry and agriculture is being cut back to finance social policy with great emphasis being placed on housing — perceived by the SED as the most likely source of conflict. The inability of the GDR to pay its way in the world means that its foreign debt is rising inexorably with 40

percent of hard currency earnings annually needed to service this debt. The GDR economy is expanding but most of the increase goes to the USSR to meet increased energy and raw materials charges.¹⁹ Hence the Polish events could not have come at a worse time for the GDR. They have rendered ideology sterile and increased the insecurity of the GDR leadership. Poland is costing East Germany money which the GDR can ill afford to lose. Even if the East German economy expands at five percent annually this will increase living standards by only a small amount due to the continued deterioration in the balance of trade. Real social conflict is possible in the GDR if the population perceives that living standards are declining. The SED is thus committed to achieving economic growth at any price. The experience of the PUWP is a nightmare for the SED and this goes a long way to explain the hysterical tone of East German reporting of the situation in Poland during the spring of 1981.

The nervousness felt by the party leadership has led to a marked increase in the influence of the military-security complex in the GDR. The military budget is to rise by 8.4 percent in 1981, almost twice the rate of national income, thus underlining the fact that the military budget is gradually claiming a greater and greater share of state expenditure. Honecker has made clear that increasing military outlays will mean that "sacrifices" will have to be made. The march of the military-security elite into the Central Committee at the Tenth Congress of the SED was very noticeable and here Poland has been a contributory factor. The world of letters has even been affected. When the independent trade union is under discussion only the Polish word *Solidarność* may be used, never the German translation, *Solidarität*. Writers have been told that novels, plays and poems touching on recent Polish events will not be published.

Conclusion

The East Germans joined the other Soviet bloc states in lending immediate approval to the imposition of the "state of war" in Poland and in endorsing the military government's interpretation of events inside the country.²⁰ Given the nature of the Solidarity challenge this is hardly surprising. One of the lessons to be drawn from this state of affairs is that the Soviets and their bloc allies will not allow Soviet model Party rule to be destroyed completely. The primacy of the Party — "democratic centralism" in action — and the centrally planned economy will be kept afloat at all cost.

How this can be done in Poland remains to be seen. The old ways of running things have failed and are no longer acceptable to the Polish people. There is now no way that the authority of the PUWP can be enhanced by promising the people bread today and jam tomorrow. The population has learned that this can mean a crust and sometimes not even that. This means that Poland will have to elaborate a completely new political and economic system — and it is by no means clear that the Soviet Union will permit further experiments of that sort. The CPSU will insist on the rebuilding and revitalising of the Party behind the shield of military rule. But a renewed PUWP will have to work hard to restore its credibility and

legitimacy. The Polish rank and file, inside and outside the Party, will no longer tolerate a situation whereby the good times result in the Party leadership and the *apparat* being heaped with praise but bad times are blamed on the ordinary worker and party member.

Footnotes

1. See reports in *The Economist*, 18 Apr., 24 Oct., 1981; *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 21 Dec. 1980, 8 Mar., 26 Apr., 1 Nov., 8 Nov., 6 Dec., 1981; *New York Times*, 2 Jan., 1 Sept., 9 Nov. 1981.
 2. Information provided to the author by a low-ranking SED member.
 3. *Neues Deutschland*, 6 Sept. 1980.
 4. *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Apr. 1981.
 5. See for example, report in *New York Times*, 21 May 1981.
 6. *Neues Deutschland*, 9-10, 12, 14 May 1981.
 7. *Ibid.*, 21 May 1981.
 8. *Ibid.*, 13-14 June 1981.
 9. Reports in ADN, 10, 11 June 1981.
 10. German Democratic Republic, Institute of Politics and Economics, *FRG Revanchist Activities and Polish Demands* (Berlin, 1980).
 11. *Daily Telegraph*, 14 Oct. 1981; *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Oct. 1981.
 12. *Neues Deutschland*, 5 Sept. 1980.
 13. *Ost-Europa Info* (Hamburg), no. 2 (1981), pp. 35-44.
 14. Intervention rejected, the East Germans chose to pose as moderates, calling such intervention "unthinkable". See *New York Times*, 24 Dec. 1981.
 15. *Siegener Zeitung*, 20 Aug. 1981.
 16. *The Economist Foreign Report*, 28 Jan. 1981; *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Apr. 1981.
 17. *Der Neue Weg* (Magdeburg), 10 Nov. 1979.
 18. *Einheit*, no. 2 (1981), p. 105.
 19. East Germany's trade deficit with the Soviet Union over the years 1976-80 amounted to approximately \$4 Billion US. It's total foreign debt now totals about \$10 Billion US. See relevant sections in Martin McCauley, *Conflict Studies No. 132 — Power and Authority in East Germany: The Socialist Unity Party (SED)* (London, 1981), pp. 13-20.
 20. Associated Press Report, 16 Dec. 1981, quoting ADN's rebroadcasting of official Polish reports, 15 Dec. 1981.
- Note: The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of those West German specialists on the German Democratic Republic who discussed the subject matter of this article with him during the summer of 1981.