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13 December: Martial law imposed

After the signing of the Gdansk agreement between workers and communist authorities in August 1980, it seemed that the communist regime would abate. Once the NSZZ ‘Solidarność’ (Independent Self-Governing Trade Union ‘Solidarity’) had been registered, workers joined the union en masse, followed by farmers from across Poland. In the spring of 1981 Solidarity had around ten million members, including around 800,000 of those leaving the PUWP. In January 1981, Wojciech Jaruzelski became Prime Minister of the Polish People’s Republic. The situation was tense. Inside the country, concerns pertained mainly to the deteriorating living conditions, which led to successive strike actions and workers’ protests.



The Kremlin-based Soviet authorities were worried that communists in Poland were losing grip on society. Besides Solidarity there were other organisations and social movements, e.g. the Independent Students’ Union, Confederation of Independent Poland or Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia. In the light of the documents known today, the Soviets did not plan to invade Poland. Incidentally, the communist authorities in Poland were promising to manage the emerging social movement involving millions of people themselves.



In March 1981, the militia roughly treated Solidarity activists in Bydgoszcz leading to ‘S’ announcing a protest in the form of a general strike. At the same time, the dreadful climate was enhanced by the fact that military exercises, ‘Soyuz 81’ of the Warsaw Pact, were taking place in Poland at the time. Despite the intimidation, the strike action went ahead as planned.

In May, the momentary appeasement of the public mood was disturbed yet again, that time around with the news of the assassination attempt against Pope John Paul II, attributed to the Kremlin from the very beginning. As Poland’s primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński had died on 28 May, Polish Catholics (i.e. around 95 percent of Polish society) were in mourning.

A Solidarity congress took place in the summer, with the union’s activists hotly debating whether to negotiate compromise solutions with the authorities and build ‘better socialism’ or follow the radical objectives in terms of free state, free general election and democratic liberties. The state authorities watched such discussions with great concern, realising that a union of ten million members constituted in fact a potent social movement posing a real threat to the PUWP’s retaining power. ‘S’ authorities

started to receive information that preparations were in progress to take the army to the street against the people.

In the night of 12 December 1981 the 'Fir' operations began: arresting and putting in prisons and detention facilities several thousand union and political activists. In the morning of 13 December, Wojciech Jaruzelski publicly announced the imposition of martial law, an entirely lawless act, even in the light of the constitution of the Polish People's Republic, with the body that introduced it (the 'Military Council of National Salvation' or the WRON) entirely non-constitutional. It is even difficult to call that martial law a coup d'état as it was not an overthrowal by state authorities. Power remained in the hands of the same people, now granting themselves the right to limit the freedoms enjoyed by society and impose a military regime. The operation of social organisations was suspended, many plants militarised, and curfew introduced. The army went into the streets, with military vehicles and tanks present in towns. A ban on strike action, assembly and leaving one's place of residence was enforced.

A strike in the 'Wujek' coalmine was pacified on 16 December. The authorities ordered that shots be fired at the protesters and nine people died. It became clear to everybody that the communists would not hesitate to use the army and militia to murder people. The WRON achieved its objective: Polish society was intimidated.

The opposition started underground activities. The press was published, journals and flyers distributed clandestinely and there were attempts at strike action. A massive role in supporting the opposition milieu was played by the church. Priests organised meetings of the opposition, collected clothes, food and medication for detainees and their families while religious services celebrated in many churches dedicated to the patriotic cause turned into protests. There were many skirmishes with the militia and ZOMO riot troops. The total number of martial law victims is unknown, yet historians estimate it at several hundred. One of the most infamous communist crimes of martial law was the beating of the secondary school graduate Grzegorz Przemyk who died two days after the incident.

In June 1983, Pope John Paul II visited Poland again. After a year and a half since the imposition of martial law it was a sad pilgrimage, during which the Pope tried to console the Poles. He also met with Lech Wałęsa released before the end of his prison term. In July, martial law was officially lifted. The detained opposition activists were released, excluding a dozen or so key figures awaiting a trial. After nearly two years of a military regime society was exhausted by a permanent sense of threat. People realised that the lifting of martial law did not mean a change of those in power or the direction the authorities pursued.

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References: