

Tanks against “Solidarity”

Forty years ago, FC Liverpool won the European Cup, *Metallica* was formed, and Robert de Niro collected an Oscar Award for his outstanding performance in the role of Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. In Poland, 1981 was marked by another event: the communist regime declared a war against its own nation.

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The scenario was similar everywhere: loud pounding on the door, sometimes forced entry, vandalism of the apartment, threats, and even beating people up. There was usually just a moment to get dressed, followed by brutal separation from the family, and uncertainty about the future. This is how over three thousand internees remembered the night of 12th/ 13th December 1981, the first night of martial law in Poland. Leading activists of the “Solidarity” independent trade union were detained, but also people less involved in the democratic opposition.

Those arrested by the police and security forces that night included Antoni Heda, living in the village of Kanie near Warsaw. That distinguished partisan commander from the times of the German occupation and the post-war underground’s fight for independence had already been imprisoned several times in the 1940s: by the Soviets, by the Germans, and finally by their native-born communists. Shortly after his sixtieth birthday, he was again considered by the Red regime to be a threat to “national security and public order.” He was placed in a detention facility in Warsaw – Białołęka. Another centre, in Łęczycza, held a doctor from Łódź, Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the heroic uprising of 1943 in the Warsaw ghetto.

What happened in Poland that frosty December and in the following months is sometimes referred to as a war between Poland and General Jaruzelski. Wojciech Jaruzelski, top of the hierarchy in the communist government, declared a war against his own nation. He moved to bring out tanks to suppress society’s demands for independence, symbolised by the “Solidarity” movement which had assembled millions behind it. It was possibly the period of greatest terror and lawlessness since the beginning of Stalinist times. The government that claimed to be the “people’s” government again shot workers, just like in 1956 and 1970.

“Pacification” of the strike in the “Wujek” mine in Katowice on 16 December 1981 brought about nine fatalities. The number of internees across Poland approached ten thousand people. Prisons soon also got full. Ewa Kubasiewicz from Gdynia, participant in the strike and co-author of the leaflet calling for resistance, was sentenced to ten years imprisonment! Draconian sentences were also administered for offences such as painting “Down with communism” graffiti on walls.

In that difficult period all the world was talking about Poland. Communist regimes led by the Soviet Union backed General Jaruzelski. The West clearly sympathised with the persecuted. Manifestations of solidarity with the Poles took place in Paris, Munich, Rome, and even in distant Melbourne. An unprecedented wave of selfless humanitarian aid for Poland started to arrive. Parcels and transports with food, medication, and other donations flew to Poland from West Germany, France, and Sweden. Beneficiaries, including families of the repressed, could enjoy a moment of happiness in those dark times.

Pope John Paul II also expressed his solidarity with his persecuted compatriots during those sad months. “The strength and solemnity of power is expressed in (...) dialogue, not in the use of violence,” he appealed to Jaruzelski’s government. He asked for the “rights of every human being and citizen” to be respected and denounced the effects of the “unfortunate martial law.” On that Christmas Eve, the papal apartment window, well visible from St. Peter’s Square in the Vatican, featured a candle as a beacon of solidarity with the suffering nation.

The same gesture was taken up by Ronald Reagan in the White House. The President of the USA called for his compatriots to also light candles in their windows. “[...] we the people of the Free World stand as one with our Polish brothers and sisters. Their cause is ours, and our prayers and hopes go out to them this Christmas;” he said in his memorable address to the nation of 23 December 1981.

Those gestures by Pope John Paul II and Ronald Reagan are referred to in the campaign “Light the Light of Freedom” by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), the institution I have the honour to manage. On each December 13, we encourage Poles, and also people all over the world, to light a candle in their windows, or virtually on the Internet, to commemorate the victims of martial law. This campaign will be continued year after year.

Another action that resonated 40 years ago was the TV programme “Let Poland be Poland” broadcast on 31st January 1982 and watched by almost 200 million viewers in many countries. It referred to the Day of Solidarity with Poland announced by the American administration. Apart from politicians, it featured famous artists, including Paul McCartney, Kirk Douglas, and Frank Sinatra. The last of these even sang in Polish.

“Let Poland be Poland” gathered interest from the communist secret service in Poland. A video tape with the abbreviated version broadcast on West German TV is now kept in the IPN Archive in Warsaw as are other materials taken from the former security service. We also have hundreds of volumes of files from martial law to be made available to scientists and journalists, both from Poland and abroad. Owing to this heritage, we are not restricted to the sugared memoirs of Jaruzelski, who tried to present the martial law years later as a “lesser evil”, an attempt to defend the country against the alleged threat of Soviet intervention. Despite the mass destruction of files at the end of the communist regime, abundant materials have survived to undermine the narration pursued by Jaruzelski and his collaborators. Our scientists and educators often use these resources. It is through them that the truth about martial law slowly finds its way to an increasingly wider public domain.

After 1989, many Poles lived with a sense of transformational injustice. Those who opposed the communist regime often paid a high price for doing so: imprisonment, broken careers, sometimes emigration, destroyed private lives. Their oppressors and decision-makers from those times crossed through the systemic transformation with dry feet and lived undisturbed in free Poland. Nevertheless, in 2014 Jaruzelski was buried with honours at the Military Cemetery at Warsaw’s Powązki, the Polish Arlington. The Institute of National Remembrance attempts to make up for that negligence, as far as is still possible. Prosecutors from the Institute of National Remembrance are applying for a waiver of the immunities applied to those judges and prosecutors who prosecuted or sentenced members of the opposition during martial law and in the years which followed. We cannot take back the time, but to strive to restore elementary justice is the duty of a democratic state governed by the rule of law.

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