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TYTUŁ: The Fascinating History of Polish Freedom

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In the latest history, there was no situation of any authorities of any country would declare a war against its society. One can say communism was a system where the authorities kept fighting against the society, using violence against the inhabitants, but to have martial law introduced on top of all that, this only happened in communist Poland in December 1981. The underlying cause was the fact that Poland was a vassal state to the USSR, and the authorities strived to keep the communist dictatorship at all costs, both at Kremlin and in Warsaw.

The formation of the “Solidarity” independent trade union in September 1980 constituted the greatest ideological and political challenge for the communist system. Unable to deal with the wave of strikes in August, the communist authorities agreed to legalise the organisation, which went beyond being just a trade union to form a mass opposition against the authorities. This was also an ideological scandal: in a country allegedly ruled on behalf of the “working class”, it was this social group that organised itself against the government. Over a year of struggle between the party authorities and the “Solidarity” led to weakening of the union in the late 1981, and to the society being tired with the economic crisis, whereas the pressures from Kremlin and the communist party’s strive to keep the power made the cabinet of General Wojciech Jaruzelski take this desperate step. The Martial Law was introduced on 13th December 1981 in violation of the communist constitution and under pressure of a Soviet threat, although now we know the Kremlin was bluffing.

As long as the obedience to the system referred to the matters of “civilian” life, the authorities remained effective for years. Yet when the “civilian” methods of enforcing the obedience failed, the matters acquired a new dimension. The “People’s” Polish Army established after 1944 was a hybrid force. The officers from before World War II were eradicated after the war, and substituted with soviet resources, or carefully selected Polish resources later, but absolutely loyal to Moscow. The diploma from soviet military universities acted as a patent authorising a career at higher levels of command.

Whereas the officers in the army were educated in the spirit of soviet “internationalism” and historical need for subjecting Poland to the USSR, millions of young Poles underwent two-year mandatory military service with rather mixed feelings. This was a mix of resentment against communism and the Soviets, humiliation with the coercion and political indoctrination, but also growing resignation and adaptation. Already in the 1960s, the song by Trubadurzy *Przyjedź, mamo, na przysięgę* (Come, Mother, to the Oath) did not evoke any objections, and the celebrated oath of loyalty to the “socialist homeland” with families attending was more generally treated as natural. Rationalisation of such coercion became increasingly widespread.

The introduction of the martial law placed the matter of loyalty in the army on a knife edge. The shameful decision on using force against one’s own nation led to a situation where military discipline ordered soldiers to act in the interest of the Kremlin, whereas conscience imposed a diversity of reactions, including doubts and even opposition. Such diversity was more or less proportional to the place in the military hierarchy. At the top levels of command, there were fewer doubts, whereas the privates had more reservations. Top command was educated in the spirit of Janissaries, obedient to Moscow, whereas recruits were often friends of “Solidarity” activists against whom they were now to stand in support of the police and secret forces. The shameful decision on introducing the martial law thus created a situation of coercion where hundreds of thousands young Poles faced a tragic choice between national apostasy and heroism.

Polish society survived that experience, but not without harm. Social resistance proved rather strong, considering the hopeless situation, but not strong enough to lead to an even greater disaster. Peaceful collapse of the communist system also gave way to compelling arguments not to ultimately assess and penalise the criminal decisions from December 1981. Ironically, General Jaruzelski was elected as President of Poland in July 1989. Apart from official condemnation of the martial law, the Third Republic of Poland did not actually, either morally or legally, hold the officers from the martial war accountable for their acts. Notwithstanding, however, whether this is still possible, it is necessary to clearly set the criteria for assessing the behaviours. In independent Poland, there should be no doubt as to what does or does not serve the country’s security and success.

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