

Jaruzelski's martial law did not break the Poles. Our peaceful revolution changed part of Europe.

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When I started working as a journalist, martial law was ending in Poland. Several times, the weekly I worked for was not published because consent from the office for the control of publications and performances, the censorship bureau, was missing. Every third or fourth text, in turn, was published with amendments introduced by the censor. Poles who remember martial law also remember newspapers with empty spaces arising from texts that could not be published. They can also remember the characters: [- - -] inside the text, which meant that a fragment had been censored. External intervention was certain if one presented Western Europe in a positive light, questioned the dominating role of the USSR in the world, or even when one attempted to write about Katyń where 20 thousand representatives of the Polish intelligentsia, scientists, officers, and priests, were killed by the Russians after the USSR and Germany jointly attacked Poland in 1939. Finally, it was certain when one mentioned the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, during which the Germans murdered Poles, including women and children, while they burnt my city, Warsaw, as the Russians watched; keeping their troops on the other side of the Vistula.

During the martial law introduced by Wojciech Jaruzelski's communist government on 13th December 1981, the authorities not only exercised control over the media, including over private letters, by reading the contents, they listened to conversations over the phone and interrupted whenever political subjects were touched upon. I can still remember the voice on the phone saying: “this conversation will be controlled.” Importantly, it was not only about informing the authorities about protests and demonstrations that were considered political, but also about everything that inhibited building the “brave new world” in the Soviet spirit. Political issues included faith and religion, history, particularly that showing moments of glory on the part of the Polish Army, or great historical moments for Poland and the Poles. This was because the communists' goal was to destroy the memory of Polish history to build a community of states based on Soviet domination within the region (and globally in the future), as well as on Comecon – the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (defining what Poland could produce and what not, as well as the volume of goods manufactured that was to be sent to Russia).

Finally, political issues included asking questions in a world where the authorities presented ready and easy answers to almost all challenges, even the most difficult. Teaching curricula were castrated of all that could make one proud to be Polish. Attempts were made to show that Polish literature is unimportant, and that we should learn about Slavonic literature (meaning that from the USSR). Classic rules of economics were unimportant, what mattered was the “socialist economy.”

I remember that a professor in “socialist economy” also tried to teach me this, but after a heated argument he stepped back admitting he had to teach a subject nobody believed in. Even science was to be accepted in the spirit of the party, subjected to the Soviets.

Nevertheless, during martial law, nobody in Poland believed in socialism or communism any more, even among the most devoted political activists. Everybody saw it, and Polish society itself could sense that the system was inefficient and was dying out. Unaffordable prices, queues at shops, shortages... And at the same time, it was then that the screw of

political correctness was tightened to affirm communism and socialism. It was clearly pointed out how one could speak and think, and what thinking or speaking could lead to trouble, up to the loss of one's job or even prison in the event of notoriety through the repetition of dissident thoughts. Even pregnant women and old men were sent to high-security prisons.

Martial law meant food ration cards allowing one to buy strictly rationed volumes of meat, sugar, butter, as well as vodka, with famous "shops behind yellow curtains" to be entered exclusively by Polish communist activists (as well as foreign diplomats in Poland). That is why the aid for Poles, organised by probably all the nations of Free Europe, was so important. I still meet many French citizens, Austrians, Scandinavians, Dutch citizens, Spaniards, and Britons for whom the Polish "Solidarity" revolution, the fiesta so drastically ended by Wojciech Jaruzelski, was an important generational experience. They organised aid for Poles, loading cheese, tins, and also copiers and paper for independent presses, onto their trucks. Because, on the one hand, Poland lacked all these things, while on the other, this was what the heart dictated to the people of Free Europe. And rightly so, because "Solidarity" was not the winner of the revolution due to bullets, but rather it won due to the perseverance of the Poles and aid from the free world. I would like to thank our friends from the Free World for your aid at that time; aid that reached Polish parishes and was an important signal someone had remembered about us. It is owing to you that we could win.

Martial law also involved protests. Despite the presence of military troops in the streets, the militia chasing students, participants in religious ceremonies (unlike in France, in Poland the priests always remained close to the people, defending the most persecuted and those in need. Priests and the Church were on the side of the people, not the authorities). This involved shooting workers. It also involved the murders of children of anti-communist activists, with the communist militia killing priests, writers, and intellectuals.

Martial law was another point in the long history of Poland, history that strengthened the Poles. Sometimes, when I hear questions about why the Poles cannot simply agree to the living conditions or the terms for educating children and treatment of the family, work, or business, as created and imposed by others, I keep repeating to my French friends: learn about the history of Poland. We have been through a lot, and like other countries in Central and Eastern Europe have only recently been subject to the totalitarianisms of the 20th century and Soviet Russia. We know union being forced upon us. We know bureaucratic blah, blah, blah, and the censorship of thoughts, attempts to control words. We can start a copier, receive news free of propaganda, and we can bypass the message forced by the TV mainstream. We have loads of courage, as manifested by Rittmeister Witold Pilecki voluntarily going to Auschwitz to testify about the genocide by the Germans, a testimony that did not evoke any response from the West. We carry the strength of unity and the sense of solidarity with all the persecuted and in need, with others, as manifested by the recent acceptance of a great wave of Ukrainians fleeing from the war in Crimea and the Donbas, or the Belarusians seeking refuge from the despotic Alexander Lukashenko who brutally fights against his own nation.

Jaruzelski's martial law did not break the Poles. Despite the attempts to break us, we have won. This was a revolution that also managed to change part of Europe.

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