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POLAND'S MARCH CRISIS: THE INITIAL STAGE

By J. B. de Weydenthal

Summary: The March crisis was triggered by an incident in the city of Bydgoszcz in which the police used violence against a group of labor union activists. This paper provides an analysis of subsequent political developments. In particular, it describes the first reaction of the party's Politburo, which exonerated the culprits. It also presents the position taken by the Solidarity workers' organization and outlines the initial appeal by the Church for finding ways to defuse the tension. The paper is the first part in a series of papers dealing with the development of the crisis.

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The Fragile Peace

On February 11 General Wojciech Jaruzelski was confirmed by the Sejm as Poland's new prime minister. His appointment was received then with a certain degree of relief in many sectors of society, since the outgoing head of the government, Jozef Pinkowski, had obviously failed to stabilize political relations in the country and proved unable to defuse tension. At that time Jaruzelski's ascendancy to the top of the state's administrative hierarchy was also presented by numerous established political leaders, particularly the communist party's First Secretary Stanislaw Kania, as a major development toward an eventual resolution of the existing crisis. In his inaugural address to the Sejm, on February 12, the new prime minister himself called for a 90-day social truce in order to provide a foundation for the settlement of the existing political and institutional problems. (1)

- (1) For a general discussion of Jaruzelski's appointment see J. B. de Weydenthal, "Polish CC Plenum Names New Prime Minister and Adopts a Tough Line," RAD Background Report/53 (Poland), Radio Free Europe Research, 25 February 1981.

On March 17 the government provided the first authoritative report on its activities and accomplishments. The report took the form of a press conference conducted by Deputy Prime Minister Mieczyslaw F. Rakowski, a former journalist whom Jaruzelski put in charge of relations with the labor unions. Describing the scope of the government's activities, Rakowski concentrated on four specific areas. First, he pointed out that the administration had made "various decisions" which, having been publicized in the media, "suggested the government's willingness . . . to speed up the implementation of the resolutions" adopted by the party's Central Committee at its recent meetings. (2) Secondly, Rakowski asserted that the government had "mounted an effort" to conduct "a permanent dialogue" with society and its separate sectors and groups. Thirdly, he proclaimed that "the characteristic feature [of the government's activity] in the last month had been the intensification of contacts [between the administration and] the central bodies of all labor organizations." Fourthly, without providing any details Rakowski stressed that the government had "increased the level of its activity in the international arena."

Turning to the assessment of the government's accomplishments, Rakowski took a markedly cautious stand. He was content with making a rather vague remark that "there has certainly been an increase in society's hopes that economic and political stability will materialize and social strains will diminish." Yet Rakowski also admitted that

The problem is that these are only hopes. We cannot say, in view of the current situation in Poland, that any lasting elements of stability in our political life have already appeared. . . . We still live, and I am speaking about the last month, in an atmosphere of tension. Indeed, not a single day has passed without the need to take care of some localized conflicts arising from different reasons. There is still no time for the people working in the government to concentrate their attention on . . . a strategy for political action. . . . We are still exposed to . . . repeated strike alerts. . . . demands are frequently formulated in a very determined manner, but not all of them could be satisfied under current conditions.

Rakowski's observations were undeniably correct. Suffice it to say that during the days immediately preceding his conference there were major conflicts between the authorities and separate social groups in such diverse places as Radom and Lodz (central Poland), while new problems also emerged in several smaller communities. (3) At first glance, those conflicts might have appeared to be basically "localized," to use Rakowski's expression. Yet such an impression was wholly misleading.

(2) Radio Warsaw, 17 March 1981.

(3) See Polish Situation Report/5, RFER, 20 March 1981, Item 2.

The Increase of Tension

Indeed, political tension was mounting perceptibly in the entire country. This development resulted to a large extent from a new crisis in relations between the authorities and the Solidarity labor movement. That crisis arose from an incident in Bydgoszcz on March 19, when some members of the local city council as well as a group of Solidarity representatives who had been invited to take part in the council's deliberations were evicted by force from the council building by the police. Several Solidarity activists were physically abused and three of them had to be hospitalized with serious injuries. (4)

More important still, there was some evidence that the authorities' position toward the activities of the labor movement had hardened. The hastily convoked meeting between Solidarity's leader Lech Walesa and Deputy Prime Minister Mieczyslaw F. Rakowski brought no solution to the crisis. The meeting, which took place on March 22 in Warsaw, provided an occasion for a "very sharp" exchange of views between the two sides but ended without any agreement. (5) The official communiqué from the session said that the talks had been "suspended" only to resume on March 25. (6)

Concurrently, Justice Minister Jerzy Bafia went to Bydgoszcz to prepare an official investigation and possible negotiations with the workers there. According to Western press reports, Solidarity officials in Bydgoszcz prepared a list of demands, including a call for the removal of such officials as Deputy Voivod Roman Bak; the local police chief Jozef Kozdra; and the regional prosecutor -- all considered by the workers as responsible for the police action against Solidarity activists -- as conditions for the settlement of the crisis. Preliminary talks between the workers' organization and the government representatives led by Bafia failed to develop into serious negotiations because the minister reportedly "had no authority to sign an agreement on any demands. (7)

Bafia's trip to Bydgoszcz followed the completion of a preliminary investigation of the events surrounding the eviction of Solidarity activists from the voivodship council building. The report, which was prepared by a team of government experts led by Deputy Prosecutor General Jozef Zyto, has not been made public. Zyto intimated in a radio interview, however, that the experts had established that the police action, while "energetic," had been "correct, under the circumstances." Furthermore, Zyto said that "instances [of violence] had taken place outside and not inside the building," that it had been impossible to determine the responsibility for those actions, and that a "detailed investigation [of the incident] is being conducted by the office of the local prosecutor in Bydgoszcz." (8)

(4) For details on the Bydgoszcz incident see Polish SR/6, REFER, 7 April 1981, Item 1.

(5) UPI and APP, 22 March 1981.

(6) Radio Warsaw, 22 March 1981.

(7) Reuter, 23 March 1981.

(8) Radio Warsaw, 22 March 1981.

The Politburo Statement

The party's Politburo met on March 22 to establish a position on the crisis. The subsequently released communiqué on the meeting made it clear that the Politburo viewed the events in Bydgoszcz as an example of a general deterioration of social and political relations in the country. It said that Poland "has found itself facing a very serious threat because of the recent disruption of the efforts by the party, the state, and all patriotic forces of reason and responsibility to overcome social tension and to stabilize life." The communiqué reiterated that the party's policy was still "to achieve the normalization of life and to resolve social conflicts through political means by talks and agreements, patient explanation, and persuasion, taking public opinion into consideration." (9) In this context, the Politburo appealed to the public for a "cessation of all strike action," adding that "in this situation any announced strikes would have a clearly political character" and reminding the Poles that "it is the duty of all party members to counteract such strikes decisively and not to take part in them."

Turning to the assessment of the current political situation, the Politburo said that "contrary to the line of agreement and cooperation between the authorities and the labor unions, conflicts and tension are being fomented and have recently intensified for various reasons in factories, social groups, and regions." It squarely put the blame for that condition upon

people in our country who, motivated by extremism and adventurism, are attempting under various pretexts to provoke more and more tension and disrupt the normal way of life and work. Their action aims at undermining the social order, spreading distrust of the state authorities, and in particular distrust of the agencies of the police and the security service.

Pointing to the Bydgoszcz events as an example of such activities, the Politburo asserted that the "action by the law and order bodies in that city, conducted under the orders of competent authorities, was in accordance with the law." Such action contrasted, in the Politburo's opinion, with

efforts by many Solidarity activists to create, without waiting for an explanation of the facts and through the use of widespread publication of unverified and unconfirmed versions of the events, a state of social psychosis that has aggravated the social and political situation.

This, the Politburo proclaimed,

has been indicative of a growing tendency within Solidarity to politicize its activities and to take illegally upon itself functions belonging

(9) Ibid.

to⁷ constitutionally established representative and executive bodies [which] creates a state of anarchy [in the country].

There was no immediate response from Solidarity to those charges. The national leadership of the unions announced on March 22, however, that an emergency meeting of Solidarity's National Coordinating Commission would take place in Bydgoszcz on March 23 to set the movement's position on the current developments. This announcement was combined with an appeal to all branches of the labor organization to refrain from immediate strikes but to remain in readiness for some form of protest action (strike alert). The appeal was said to have argued that by refraining from strikes "the union would demonstrate its discipline and strength." (10)

It became apparent that both the authorities and the unions found themselves in a serious conflict. There was also no doubt that both sides remained determined to defend their interests and prerogatives. In this situation, any precipitous move by either the authorities or the union activists could have complicated problems even further.

As if to prevent that possibility from materializing, the country's Catholic Church issued an urgent call for social calm and caution. The appeal, made by Poland's Primate Stefan Cardinal Wyszynski during a nationally broadcast religious service on March 22, stressed that both the authorities and the citizens had to take all possible steps to avoid increasing tension. "The state authorities," the cardinal said,

must realize that they serve society and its rights to social freedom, and that they must fulfill its needs in accordance with the requirement to safeguard the physical and the spiritual well-being of each citizen. The authorities must take into consideration the consequences of each irresponsible step taken by the agencies of public order. (11)

As for the citizens, the cardinal reminded his audience

that everyone who strives to achieve the legitimate goal of social self-organization, as well as that of economic justice, must know that to fulfill those aspirations there is need for a great time interval, patience, and functional opportunities.

(10) UPI, 23 March 1981.

(11) Radio Warsaw, 22 March 1981.

In concluding his message, the cardinal again appealed for "a mutual will to agree upon the common rights and obligations" between the authorities and society at large.

Solidarity's Position

Two days later the leadership of the Solidarity labor unions decided to stage a warning strike on March 27 to protest the alleged unwillingness of the authorities to punish officials judged by the workers to be responsible for the mistreatment of several Solidarity activists in Bydgoszcz. The leaders of Solidarity also decided to call upon all union members to prepare for a general strike on March 31 unless the government entered into serious negotiations on the matter with the unions' representatives.

The decisions on the strikes were reached at a two-day meeting (March 23 and 24) of Solidarity's National Coordinating Commission. They appeared to be a compromise between a radical wing within the commission, a relatively large group advocating an immediate strike throughout the country, and its more moderate elements. The postponement of the strikes and the provision that they would be staged only if the government failed to respond appropriately were regarded by some observers as indicative of the continuing ability of the moderates to influence the unions' activities.

According to various Western press reports, the moderate elements in Solidarity's leadership were led by Lech Walesa, the chairman of the commission. (12) The leadership's decision on eventual strikes was made clearly dependent on the outcome of the future negotiations with the authorities. Indeed, the commission plainly indicated that the threat of strikes would immediately diminish if and when the government came to an agreement with the unions' delegates on ways of settling the Bydgoszcz conflict.

At the same time, the leadership of the workers' organization established its position on the resolution of the conflict. That position included a set of five specific demands:

- a. The immediate punishment or suspension of officials considered responsible for the Bydgoszcz incident;
- b. Permission for the peasants to form their own union;
- c. Security for union members and activists in their activities; and the unions' right of reply to any criticism of their work, this right to be exercised through the media;

(12) AFP, UPI, and Reuter, 24 March 1981.

d. The annulment of a government strike pay directive giving only half-pay to striking workers; and

e. The closure of all pending cases against people arrested for political opposition to government policies between 1976-1980, "even if in the light of existing laws their activities constituted offenses." (13)

Taking into consideration the obvious political sensitivity of these demands, it was obvious that the negotiations would be exceedingly difficult for both sides. This difficulty became even greater in view of the tough statements by the party's Politburo on the current state of relations between the authorities and the public, as well as the results of the government's preliminary investigation into the events in Bydgoszcz. In both cases, the official position was that the police acted in full accordance with the law. To make matters even more complicated, the decisions of Solidarity's National Coordinating Commission made it plain to all that the movement's leadership remained determined to defend the workers' interests and the position of the labor organization in the conflict.

By the same token, it was clear that the political stakes in the current crisis became sufficiently high for both the authorities and the unions to search for some form of compromise that would create conditions acceptable to both of them. After all, the two sides must have realized that the well-being of the country, the state, and society would clearly be in jeopardy if the conflict were allowed to grow much further.

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(13) Radio Warsaw, 25 March 1981; also AP and UPI, 25 March 1981; and Bernard Guetta in Le Monde, 25 March 1981.