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AUTHORITIES ADMIT CASUALTIES IN POLAND

By J. B. de Weydenthal

Summary: The Polish authorities have admitted that several workers were killed during a police attack on a mine in the Silesian coal region. The long-range political repercussions of the killing could make it much more difficult for the authorities to secure public acceptance of their rule; there is no doubt that the casualties of workers will not be easily forgiven and forgotten. The deaths in Silesia occurred exactly 11 years after several workers had been killed in the coastal cities of Gdansk and Szczecin. Those deaths were also remembered, and the 1970 experiences provided the foundations for the emergence and the development of the Solidarity labor movement.

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At least seven Polish miners were killed and thirty-nine others were wounded on December 16 during an attack by police and military troops on striking workers at the Wujek mine near Katowice. This was announced by the official media in a delayed report on December 17, many hours after the incident had taken place. Describing the event, in which 41 "police officers" were also reported to have suffered injuries, the media said that the security forces had been "assaulted by people armed with bars, picks, and axes." The troops responded with fire power. (1)

Explaining the immediate background to the attack on the mine, the media charged that the strike there had been instigated by "a group of irresponsible individuals, some of whom were not employed at the mine." The media also said that the authorities, including representatives of the military, had warned the workers before the attack about "the consequences of the strike." Even

- (1) Radio Warsaw, 17 December 1981; subsequent reports by the official media put the number of deaths at eight; six being killed in the mine and two dying in a hospital.

so, the media alleged, "the warning was not heeded and some strikers displayed aggressive behavior." The mine was reported to have been surrounded by heavily armed security forces for some time before the actual attack took place.

In another delayed report, the media said that 324 people, including 164 civilians and 160 policemen, had been injured during a street demonstration in Gdansk on December 16. The media claimed that "as a result of the action by security forces, groups behaving aggressively were dispersed;" (2) they failed to report, however, that demonstrations continued during December 17 and that at least one man died in the "action" by the security forces.

These two reports marked the first instances of official admission of violent encounters between the forces of the new militarized order and the workers, encounters in which both sides suffered casualties. Until now, the media had merely announced seizures of particular factories by troops, warned against the "irresponsible behavior" of unspecified social groups, and threatened the population with the "severe consequences" that might and would ensue from any failure to comply with the authorities' instructions.

The reports were unusually brief and delayed. Issued on the evening of December 17, they related to events that had occurred either in the afternoon hours of the previous day (in the case of Gdansk) or during the night of that day (Katowice). There was no explanation for the delay. It is clear, however, that the authorities were, and still are, trying to manage the news in such a way as to minimize the public's awareness of developments in the country and provide information on those developments only when absolutely necessary.

This assertion is supported by the fact, for example, that there have been no reports yet in the official media about top activities in breaking into numerous large factories that were being occupied by workers. According to Western press reports, instances of forcible breakings occurred in the Nowa Huta steel mill, the Warsaw steel mill, and some shipyards in the coastal cities. There were also reports about police and military actions against people in Katowice, where a group of women was reported to have been dispersed by armed units of the police, and in several university buildings in various parts of the country. There were repeated rumors that violence had been used in each of those cases. There were no reports in any of these instances, however, of casualties suffered by the security forces. This is, perhaps, why they did not merit any mention in news programs.

Indeed, in a special commentary on the tragedy in the Katowice mine the radio clearly underscored the "suffering" inflicted upon the security forces by "those who had wanted to provoke a clash so as to spill Polish blood . . . those, who well hidden in the shadows still believe in their impunity and do not hesitate to instigate fratricidal war," and put the entire blame for the violence on the protesters. "The forces of order did not seek the clash."

(2) Ibid.

according to the commentary, "since the state of war had been declared precisely to avoid clashes." It then went on to deplore the assault on the "security troops," who had even then "tried to use reason, but to no avail."

The commentary had little to say about the fallen workers. "The dead will not be resurrected," it said, adding that "no one will be able to restore the brutally attacked soldiers and policemen to health." Indeed, the main theme of the commentary, which called upon everyone to pay homage to "the casualties of that new Polish tragedy," was that a chance of "getting out of the difficult situation without bloodshed . . . has not entirely been lost." Expressing the hope that the events in the mine "would sober the provocateurs and show them that the road to confrontation leads nowhere," the commentary declared unequivocally that "the authorities will not turn back as there is no place to turn back."

A Retrospective Reminder

In a way, however, the authorities were turning the clock back. It could hardly escape anyone's memory that it was exactly on 17 December 1970 that the Polish government declared a state of emergency in the country. That step, as well as the news of brutal attacks by police and military troops on workers, led to a nationwide protest movement. The ensuing turmoil contributed to a thorough change in the party and government leadership, forced a change in official policies, and established the workers as a potent, albeit then still unorganized, power in the country's political life.

No one could doubt today that the events of 1970-1971 paved the way for subsequent successful workers' protests against the government and party policies -- for example in 1976 -- and eventually served as a symbolic foundation for the establishment of Solidarity in 1980. That much was fully acknowledged by the organizers of the popular labor movement when they commemorated the struggles of the 1970s by erecting a monument to the workers who had fallen in December 1970. The ceremonial unveiling of the monument took place on 16 December 1980 in Gdansk. It was attended by representatives of all social groups and institutions, including the authorities, the Church, and the Polish Army. Presiding over the ceremony, Solidarity's top leader, Lech Walesa, said that "the monument expresses the right to the recognition of the dignity of man, the right to the sense of sacrifice of those to whom we are now paying homage." (3)

Last December, Solidarity had once again been preparing to commemorate the events of 1970 by staging public demonstrations in many cities throughout the country. The decision was taken at the last meeting of the movement's National Commission in Gdansk; it

(3) See J. B. de Weydenthal, "Poland Asserts Its Identity," RAD Background Report/313 (Poland), Radio Free Europe Research, 29 December 1980.

was not to be implemented, however. Following the December 13 announcement by General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the communist party's top leader, of the imposition of the state of emergency, the situation dramatically changed. Lech Walesa was in detention, Solidarity's leaders were being held in various jails and "isolation" camps, and the army was running the country under the terms of a "state of war."

Once again, a mere year after the commemorative celebration, new of workers' casualties was recorded. This fact alone changed the nature of the current political situation, notwithstanding the authorities' protestations. How this will affect the development of the crisis now, and to what extent, is still impossible to say. Even so, past experiences suggest that the Katowice tragedy will not be quickly forgotten.

The Declaration of the Military Council

As if to provide a fitting reminder of the current situation, so similar and yet so different from those of either one or eleven years ago, the newly established Military Council of National Salvation issued a special statement on December 16 reiterating its goals and objectives. They include an affirmation of their resolve "not to return to the methods of government and the forms of social life that prevailed before August 1980." The 21 senior military officers who are members of the council proclaimed that "there must not and there will not be any retreat from that principle." (4)

At the same time, the council defended the current restrictions on civil liberties "as necessary, since the process of renewal had been undermined by forces that were opposed to socialism and the stability of the state." It then went on to say that "as anarchy is a contradiction to democracy, a decisive clampdown on lawlessness and anarchy is the first condition for resuming again the processes of renewal and reform."

Arguing that the only motivation behind the restrictions was "the welfare of the entire nation," and promising that "once order and legality are attained, reforms will be continued with a view to restructuring the mechanisms of social and political life in a manner that will be even broader and more comprehensive than before," the council declared that it was "determined to act for a radical restoration of the country's life." As if to provide a clue to its methods of implementing that goal, the council cited cases of "isolating" people whom it regarded as responsible for the crisis and of "purging" the apparatus of power of those who were "dishonest or incapable" of dealing with the requirements of the situation.

This affirmation of toughness was combined, however, with an apparently appeasing promise that "the council remains determined to continue the line of accord with every social force that stands for the superior interests of the socialist Polish state."

(4) Radio Warsaw, 16 December 1981.

To convey the impression that the military leaders mean business, the statement was issued against the background of several executive instructions, in which the officers ordered the government to "verify the suitability of administrative personnel at all levels" and called for "a thorough inspection of the activities of those economic bodies that were recently put under direct military control." (5) Furthermore, the council praised the activities of the "military operational groups that have been working throughout the country" and let it be known that "on the basis of their instructions, it [the council] ordered the removal of people who had proved incapable of efficient work from their positions in state administration."

Indeed, there have been no indications of any desire or willingness on the part of the authorities to reverse their policies of suppression and restriction. There have already been Western press reports that police forcibly dispersed several public demonstrations that were staged in Warsaw on December 17. (6) This time, however, tanks, water cannon, tear gas, and clubs were said to have been used. No full reports were issued on those developments by the official media.

Instead, there were many accounts of continuing arrests and detentions. Once again the main targets were Solidarity activists: those who had held offices in the movement, those who were alleged to have instigated the current strikes, or those who have shown themselves to be either opposed to or critical of the state of emergency. The latest victims only augmented the already long list of people who have been "isolated" so their presence in society would not interfere with the "superior interests of the country's security and well-being." The number of detainees and arrested is still difficult to determine; there is no doubt, however, that it runs to many thousands. And the "process of arrests," as it was aptly described by the government's press spokesman, Jerzy Urban, in his first "militarized" press conference on December 13, is continuing.

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(5) Ibid.

(6) AP, UPI, 18 December 1981.