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The IPN on the 25th anniversary of introducing of the Martial Law in Poland



Martial law

Introduced twenty five years ago, on 13th December 1981, Martial Law was the crowning element of a dozen or so months of preparations. Its imposition had already been considered in August 1980, but at that time the idea was scrapped as being impossible to execute. From the start, the leadership of the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party) considered the August Agreements and the establishment of independent trade unions as a temporary concession. In the long term, an independent "Solidarity" could not be reconciled with the political system of the Polish People's Republic. The Party leadership

assumed that the union must be "disarmed" and subjected to the control of the PZPR. This was to be achieved by political means and in case of their failure, there was always the option of force. The main burden of preparations fell on the Ministry of National Defence (MON) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MSW).

Preparations

In October 1980, the MSW and General Staff of the Polish Army started work on preparing for the event of "W" (i.e. a state of war). During the State Defence Committee (KOK) meeting of 4th November, general Wojciech Jaruzelski informed that a "package of necessary legal acts concerning martial law" had been elaborated. The plans were subsequently fine-tuned in successive months. On 16th February 1981, the MON and MSW carried out a joint "staff game", during which they tested plans prepared by the General Staff of the Polish Army and the MSW. The leadership of the PZPR refrained from introducing martial law because of one fact - their anxiety as to the reaction of society. For this reason, from March 1981 onwards, the main emphasis was placed on developing propaganda and social engineering measures. However, the organisational preparations themselves were not neglected. Planning and staff-related activities were continued by the Polish Army until the end of October 1981, and by the MSW until the beginning of December 1981. The preparations carried on at the Ministry of Internal Affairs were significantly aided by the MSW Staff responsible for the operation code-named "Summer 80". This group was to coordinate the activities of all services subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in order to "ensure safety and public order throughout the country". When planning Martial Law, the Communist authorities attached considerable importance to public feeling, and the society's opinions on the activities of the authorities and "Solidarity" in particular. Thus, one of the most important tasks of the ministry connected with preparations for the introduction of Martial Law was to "mislead the opponents", "place the enemy in an embarrassing situation", "maintain an atmosphere of tension" and "whip up feelings, for successive strikes could be used as a pretext for imposing Martial Law". Among others, these actions resulted in the recording and dissemination of the Radom deliberations of the leadership of "Solidarity" at the beginning of December 1981. One must admit that these activities had the desired effect - sociologists noted that support for "Solidarity" fell from 74% in the second decade of September to 58% in the second half of November, and this was accompanied by a simultaneous increase in confidence in the government, from 30 to 51%. It would appear that public opinion surveys carried out in the Autumn of 1981 exerted considerable influence on the decision to implement Martial Law. In its preparations for the introduction of Martial Law, the MSW did not forget about "securing the rear", that is ensuring security for the families of officers and old-age pensioners of the Citizens' Militia and the Secret Police. Fearing public reaction, a self-defence system was organised for these people at their places of residence. The assistance of the Army (i.e. in the form of joint patrols) was also used to protect people connected with the MSW. It was also anticipated that the families of officers and MSW old-age pensioners would be relocated temporarily. These preparations attest to the nearly psychotic fear of society which

gripped the Communist authorities and the "establishment". This fact is also confirmed by the initiative aimed at establishing self-defence units (comprising members of the Party and state apparatus, as well as allied groupings), "the life or health of which could be threatened by enemy elements in the event of any adverse developments". Contrary to the stereotypes propounded by the Communists, "Solidarity" was and remained a peaceful movement. Independently of preparations for the imposition of Martial Law, including the detainment of the leading opposition activists, a completely new staff was being selected for the future "Solidarity", which was to be fully controlled by the authorities. This was to comprise moderate NSZZ "Solidarity" activists, selected by the appropriate services of the MSW and supplemented - obviously - by representatives of the ministerial spy network. Work on this scenario commenced in Autumn 1981. Following the imposition of Martial Law, talks were even held with the duly selected persons, but the authorities finally resigned from this idea. In all probability, the approach taken with respect to Lech Wałęsa - whom the authorities considered as "moderate" and detained separately, in better conditions than the remaining leaders of NSZZ "Solidarity" - was in line with this objective. However, the "electrician from Gdańsk" decidedly rejected all offers of cooperation. In consequence, he became the subject of a slanderous propaganda campaign. Acceptance for the imposition of Martial Law was provided during a meeting of the Political Bureau on 5th December 1981, leaving general Jaruzelski free to decide about the "W" hour.

13th December 1981

The session of the Council of State at which the legal provisions introducing Martial Law were approved commenced after midnight on 13th December 1981. However, the entire machinery of Martial Law was set in motion a few hours earlier. The order starting the operation code-named "Synchronisation" (actions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs as part of the imposition of Martial Law) was submitted to provincial commanders of the Citizens' Militia nine hours before. It commanded the commencement of operations even before the formal introduction of Martial Law. And thus, at 23.30 on 12th December 1981, the authorities were to start the operation code-named "Azalia", consisting in the occupation (jointly with soldiers of the Polish Army) of the facilities of Polish Radio and Television and the blocking of means of communication. Despite the concerns of its authors, the imposition of Martial Law was a success. The variant which had been under consideration since at least mid-March 1981, whereby "Solidarity" would organise a general strike, a part of the protestors would come out onto the streets, buildings housing Party committees and administrative authorities would come under attack during demonstrations, and "the possibility of assistance from the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact could not be ruled out", did not take place.

Rigours of the period of Martial Law

On the first night alone, more than 3 thousand people were detained, including nearly all members of the National Committee of NSZZ "Solidarity". 52 detainment/penal centres were created for the

purposes of Martial Law. During the period, 10,132 detention decisions were issued with respect to 9,736 people. According to data provided by the Ministry of Justice, detention facilities simultaneously housed a maximum of 5,128 persons, including 313 women (as on 21st December 1981). Detainment was applied not only to members and advisors of NSZZ "Solidarity", but also with respect to activists from other independent socio-political organisations (NZS, NSZZ RI, KIK, KPN, ROPCziO and others) and certain members of the PZPR, who were actively engaged in the "horizontal structures". Former leaders of the Party and state - with Edward Gierek being the most prominent - were also interned. As the rigours of Martial Law were eased, the number of detention centres was slowly decreased. Their inmates were also released, and this fact was readily used for propaganda purposes and in order to set members of the opposition at variance with one another. Attempts were made to "re-educate" the detainees. The most resistant were kept in isolation until December 1982. At the same time, warning talks were held with the internees. Persons who refused to sign a declaration of loyalty were all interned.

Joint People's Army and Citizens' Militia patrols appeared on city streets, supported by tanks, armoured personnel carriers and other military vehicles. An official censorship of correspondence was also introduced for the entire period of Martial Law; in actual fact, this measure was in force - with varying degrees of severity - throughout the entire period of the Polish People's Republic. The authorities militarised the most important institutions and plants, placing them under the care of military commissars. Polish Radio and Television were also militarised, and their operations limited; broadcasting of the II programme of TVP and the II, III and IV programmes of PR (Polish Radio) was suspended. The press was also suspended, however with the exception of two nationwide papers ("Trybuna Ludu" (The People's Tribune) and "Żołnierz Wolności" (Soldier of Freedom)) and 16 local Party dailies. Although the majority of titles resumed publishing during the course of Martial Law, the majority of journalists which they had previously engaged were ousted from the new editorial offices. As a result of the verification of journalists, approximately 1,200 were dismissed, while a further 1,000 were downgraded or otherwise punished. The Association of Polish Journalists - and, in fact, a great many other associations - was first suspended, and then dissolved. Similar purges, although on a lesser scale, were also taking place in many other circles, including the state administration and the educational system (higher education in particular). The intensity of the verification campaign differed, with the most renowned colleges being the least affected. Until the end of 1982, 20 vice-chancellors were dismissed. Students were also subjected to repressions. In January 1982, following a brief period of suspension, the NZS (Independent Students' Association) was dissolved. After the August manifestations, in September 1982 the authorities introduced a law whereby it became possible to delete from the register of students any person who had been sentenced by a court of law or a magistrates' court. Secondary school students could also be expelled. In certain instances, university departments and even entire secondary schools were suspended or closed. At the same time, the propaganda campaign directed against the opposition - and "Solidarity" in particular - was intensified. The objective was to disseminate the view that the introduction of Martial Law had been necessary, to gain public support for the activities undertaken by authorities, and "unmask the true

face and objectives of the opposition leaders". In order to establish the extent to which these activities were successful (although it should be remembered that they were started before 13th December 1981), we should view the level of acceptance of Martial Law as reported in public opinion surveys. In January 1982, according to data provided by the Centre for Public Opinion Research and Programme Studies of the Committee for Radio and Television "Polish Radio and Television", based on a poll conducted amongst randomly selected residents of Warsaw, 29% considered the decision of the Council of State as justified, while a further 22% deemed it rather justified.

General Jaruzelski

However, neither the Military Council of National Salvation, which was known as the "administrator of Martial Law" in official propaganda, nor the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the PZPR were the main decision-making centres after 13th December 1981. As in December 1970, the most important decisions were taken by an informal group. Leadership was exercised by the so-called Directorate, which was headed by general Jaruzelski. This also comprised the minister of internal affairs, general Czesław Kiszczak, the deputy minister of national defence, Florian Siwicki, the deputy Prime Minister, Mieczysław Rakowski, and three (out of nine) secretaries of the Central Committee of the PZPR: Kazimierz Barcikowski, Mirosław Milewski and Stefan Olszowski.

The approach of the authorities to the Church

This does not mean, however, that the Central Committee of the PZPR (although the Party did play an advisory role) did not provide the requisite guidelines and directives. The most important of these concerned the line to be followed with respect to the Catholic Church. On the one hand, the authorities considered the Church as an ally for "stabilising the situation" in the country, while on the other they tried to neutralise "hostile elements" within the hierarchy. Obviously, this did not lower the aversion which the Party leadership had of the Church. Generally, the stronger the opposition, the milder the approach taken by the Communists with respect to the Church. One of the more significant problems dogging State - Church relations following the introduction of Martial Law was the second visit of Pope John Paul II to Poland, which was called for by the Episcopate. This had been initially planned for 1982, but finally - due to the resistance of the authorities - it took place a year later. It should be noted, however, the authorities would have liked to postpone it even further. It may well be that postponement "ad calendas graecas" would have been the preferred option, but fear of the anticipated public outcry which this would have generated proved too strong. The government had a number of other ingenious ideas designed to "neutralise the harmful influence" of the Pope, such as shortening the visit to one day in Częstochowa or inviting John Paul II when the meteorological conditions would be least favourable, i.e. in October. In addition, during the second pilgrimage, in June 1983, the authorities accused the Pope of calling for a rebellion against the state and starting a religious war.

Social resistance

The most common form of resistance in December 1981 were sit-in strikes. The authorities turned their attention to eliminating these forms of protests and freeing the larger industrial plants, which helped influence public feeling in individual regions. As regards the striking workers, various actions were undertaken. Following the initial shock caused by the introduction of martial law, the opposition started to revive. In the majority of instances, local and national underground structures were headed by "Solidarity" leaders who had been in hiding since 13th December. Władysław Frasyniuk became chairman of the Regional Strike Committee for Lower Silesia, while Zbigniew Bujak took over the Mazovian Regional Executive Committee of NSZZ "Solidarity". In April 1982, both of them became members of the newly established Interim Coordination Committee of NSZZ "Solidarity". Underground publishing houses flourished. Whereas in the first days of Martial Law illegal publishing was a rarity, during the first half of February 1982 services of the MSW noted a threefold increase (in comparison with the first half of January) in discovered clandestine newspaper distribution. However, street demonstrations became the most visible form of social resistance in 1982. They were most widespread on 31st August 1982, on the second anniversary of the signature of the August Agreements. Obviously, the authorities tried to counteract all planned manifestations. People participating in demonstrations – as well as their purported organisers – were persecuted, arrested and detained. The authorities' greatest success was the failure of the TKK's appeal for strikes and demonstrations on the occasion of the second anniversary of registration of "Solidarity" on 10th November 1982.

The judiciary

The situation was "stabilised" not only by the power ministries (i.e. MON and MSW) and the "reawoken" PZPR, but also – and to a considerable extent – by the "purified" judiciary. Upon a motion of the Minister of Justice, Sylwester Zawadzki, the Council of State dismissed 25 judges, this due to their trade union activities. At the same time, 4 presidents and 5 vice-presidents of provincial and regional courts were dismissed due to the "improper fulfilment of duties". An analogical verification was performed at public prosecutors' offices, which operated outside of the structure of the Ministry of Justice; their supreme administrative body was the Chief Prosecutor of the Polish People's Republic. The following decrees of the Council of State, dated 12th December 1981, came into force: on special rules of procedure for cases concerning crimes and offences committed during Martial Law, on the transferral of cases concerning certain crimes to military courts of law, and on the modification of the system of military courts of law and military organisational entities of the Public Prosecutor's Office of the Polish People's Republic during the period of Martial Law. Summary and provisional procedures were also introduced. During the period from 13th December 1981 to 21st July 1983, courts of law sentenced 1,685 people for offences of a political nature, and 979 persons pursuant to Martial Law legislation. During this same period, military courts of law sentenced 10,191 people, of whom 5,681

on the basis of the Martial Law decree. The harshest sentences were meted out to persons who did not cease to be active in the trade unions, and organised strikes and demonstrations at the largest industrial plants following the imposition of Martial Law. At the same time, however, it should be remembered that some judges refused to pass sentences in political cases or when people were accused on the basis of Martial Law legislation, while others attempted to revert from the more severe summary procedure to the standard procedure. A few dozen public prosecutors refused to participate in hearings held according to the summary procedure. "Excessive liberalism" was the justification for commencing disciplinary proceedings against judges. Despite the purges carried out within the Militia, during Martial Law some officers deserted and escaped to the West (unfortunately, we have no clear data concerning the scale of this phenomenon). Party members – and not only rank-and-file – also rebelled.

The Party

Although the leadership of the PZPR decided to mobilise the Party during Martial Law, the exodus of members – which started after August 1980 – continued. It should be noted that the possibility of an in-depth verification of its members, including the implementation of the "Hungarian scenario" (i.e. the dissolution of the PZPR and establishment of a new party with a different name), was also considered. Finally, it was decided solely to "facilitate the departure from the Party's ranks of alien elements". On the one hand, the PZPR was abandoned by members disenchanted with the force-based solution adopted by the authorities, while on the other the organisation's ranks were cleaned of people who were excessively liberal or, worse still, sympathised with "Solidarity". The more radical activists of the PZPR also started to gain prominence. These people established Workers' Militia, Party Guards and Self-Defence Groups at local committees. The leaders of the PZPR used the period of Martial Law not only to protect and strengthen the system, but also to reinforce their personal authority and develop their own support. The Party authorities used the old tactic of "clipping the wings". Dismissals from posts or suspensions were simultaneously applied to both the so-called "reformists" and "hardliners". During Martial Law, work was intensified on the proper ideological education of Party members, the judiciary, Army, and various services of the MSW. This was all the more necessary as apart from the negative (i.e. in the opinion of the authorities) activities undertaken by certain officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a considerable number of them committed common crimes. These concerned not only beating detainees (a widespread practice at Militia stations) or starting fights when drunk, but also rapes, some of which were committed on minors and the mentally handicapped. The ranks of MSW officers were also plagued by extraordinary occurrences (suicides, accidents with firearms). For example, during the first six months of 1982, as many as 19 officers committed suicide, while only 14 had taken their own lives throughout 1981. As could be expected, these facts were carefully hidden from the public.

A balance of losses

It is frequently commented that Martial Law in Poland had a mild course. This opinion would seem justified if we take into consideration the number of fatalities. At the same time, however, we should note that de facto no complete list of fatalities has been compiled to date. We only know of the number of victims of the pacification of striking industrial plants and street demonstrations. There were, however, numerous others, which in all probability will remain anonymous. During the night from 12th to 13th December 1981, all telephone lines were cut off - not only those used by ordinary citizens, but also by emergency services: health care institutions (including the ambulance service) and the fire brigade. "Stifling the counterrevolution" turned out to be more important than protecting human life, and for this reason the telephone lines remained cut off during, for example, the Żuławy flood. Worth noting is the report of the Helsinki Committee on the abuse of human and citizens' rights in Poland, which covers only the first year of Martial Law. This makes very instructive reading indeed. And although it does not take into consideration a number of important effects of Martial Law, such as the wave of emigration and escapes, it still portrays Martial Law as one of the gloomiest periods in the history of the Polish People's Republic. Without starting a discussion as to whether it could have been avoided, we may state with conviction that it marked a wasted period for the whole country. Timid attempts at introducing economic reforms, made during this period, all failed miserably. According to official data, GDP in 1982 fell by 5.5%, while inflation increased by 100.8%. This occurred in spite of the lack of a "crippling wave of strikes".

Elaborated on the basis of the introduction to the book "Martial law in the documents of the authorities of the Polish People's Republic", edited by B. Kopka, G. Majchrzak

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