

Institute of National Remembrance

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We are telling the world about Poland: the President of the Institute of National Remembrance on Polish December 1970 and on how it echoed in the world

Millions of readers on several continents are to receive another text about the recent history of Poland: the Institute of National Remembrance is once again contributing to "We Are Telling the World about Poland" project initiated by The New Media Institute, in which scientists, historians and politicians, not only from Poland, share their opinions on our country's recent past. As part of commemorating December 1970, President of the Institute of National Remembrance Jarosław Szarek, PhD, in the text "**We Are Deeply Aware of Our Shared History**" explains how members of anti-communist oppositions from Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia and Hungary supported each other on the way to truth and freedom, and how interconnected the histories of Central European countries are.

In the weekend edition of the "L'Opinion" daily of 11-12 December 2020, the special "Dossier Pologne" insert features a text by the President of the Institute of National Remembrance "**We Are Deeply Aware of Our Shared History**".

Jarosław Szarek, referring to December '70, observes,

Ignazio Silone, the Italian socialist writer who had been seduced by communism years before, said, 'Their struggle shall not be in vain, as there is a lot to suggest that it has sent reverberations as far as Rostock and Königsberg.' Although it would be hard to measure the impact of December 1970 in neighbouring countries, it is certain that each rebellion left its mark - what started as a small scratch on the monolith of the Soviet empire would develop into a deepening fissure, albeit not immediately visible.

and on the Prague Spring of 1968, writes,

It was then that Natalya Gorbanevskaya unfurled a banner with the words "For our freedom and yours." The slogan appeared for the first time in Poland during the November Uprising of 1830-1831 when it was written on banners in Polish and Russian. It accompanied our struggle for freedom on many occasions thereafter to acquire a new meaning at the end of the twentieth century.

The article appeared in the 25th issue of the "Wszystko co najważniejsze" monthly and on the www.wszystkoconajwazniejsze.pl website. It has been translated into English, French, Spanish and Italian.

The current issue also contains "The Unknown War in the Heart of Europe" by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, analyses by outstanding international intellectuals, such as Professor Michel Wieviorka's "Common Experiences Bringing the Countries of Central Europe Together" or Professor François Hartog's "The Renaissance of Central Europe", as well as texts by Bernard Guetta, Renato Cristin, or Imre Molnar.

The New Media Institute, publisher of the "Wszystko co Najważniejsze" monthly, is active in promoting Polish history through the "We are Telling the World about Poland" campaign. The Institute of National Remembrance is one of the partners in the initiative.

In order to connect history and modern times, we have already shared essays on, among others, the history of "Solidarity" or Poland's way to independence, widely promoted by international media. According to PAP Media Intelligence, over a billion readers learned about "Solidarity" and the ideas of the movement that overthrew communism and has become deeply embedded into the Polish DNA. Previous texts by the President of the Institute of National Remembrance, Dr. Jarosław Szarek, presented, among others, the history of the Battle of Warsaw in 1920 or profiled Captain Witold Pilecki in over 30 countries in both hemispheres.

More "We are Telling the World about Poland" stories by Jaroslaw Szarek:

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We are deeply aware of our shared history

by Jarosław Szarek, PhD, President of the Institute of National Remembrance

A quarter of a century after the end of the Second World War, shots were fired again and people were killed in Gdansk, the very place where the war started. This time, deadly force was used by the communist police and soldiers to suppress workers' protests against a rise in prices announced just before Christmas in December 1970. From Gdansk the revolt spread to other port cities of Szczecin, Gdynia and Elbląg. Several dozen were shot dead and over one thousand

wounded. The scale of the protests forced Moscow to change the communist leaders who governed Poland since 1956.

Ignazio Silone, the Italian socialist writer who had been seduced by communism years before, wrote: "Their struggle shall not be in vain as there is a lot to suggest that it has sent reverberations as far as Rostock and Königsberg." Although it would be hard to measure the impact of December 1970 in neighbouring countries, it is certain that each rebellion left its mark – what started as a small scratch on the monolith of the Soviet empire would develop into a deepening fissure, albeit not immediately visible.

The awareness of common history shared by the nations behind the Iron Curtain is imprinted in many moving memories. In the autumn of 1956, Polish freedom protests awakened Hungarian dreams of independence. When those dreams were being crushed by Soviet tanks in Budapest, Poland responded with a wave of aid, medicines and blood, offering words of comfort and support.

To this day, consciences are stirred by the gesture of eight Russian dissidents who were the only ones to rally in Moscow's Red Square in August 1968. They were arrested at once, put on trial and then spent the following years behind bars and in forced labour camps. They protested against the suppression of the Prague Spring, a Czech and Slovak push for freedom that was quashed by almost a quarter of a million Soviet soldiers supported by troops from the Polish People's Republic, German Democratic Republic, Hungary and Bulgaria. It was then that Natalya Gorbanevskaya unfurled a banner with the words

"For our freedom and yours." The slogan appeared for the first time in Poland during the November Uprising of 1830–1831 when it was written on banners in Polish and Russian. It accompanied our struggle for freedom on many occasions thereafter to acquire a new meaning at the end of the twentieth century.

This act of defiance carried out by a handful of Russians – lost in the sea of almost 250 million indifferent or hostile Soviet citizens – was as important as the strike of the thousands of Russian workers in Novocherkassk in June 1962 that was ended by volleys of machine-gun fire. It marked out the road that was taken in each of the nations within the Soviet empire by those few unbowed people who reached for the "simplest, most-accessible key to our deliverance which is NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE LIE! Should the lie come to the world, should it dominate everything, let us stick to the minimum: let it reign supreme but NOT THROUGH ME!" to quote the words of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the author of the *Gulag Archipelago* and Nobel Prize laureate.

The road that was "hard on the body, but the only one for the soul" was always followed by the Russian dissident Vladimir Bukovsky who spent 12 years in prisons, labour camps and psychiatric hospitals. He explained his choices in the following way: "<But why me?> wonders every person in a crowd. All alone, I am powerless. And thus, all of them are lost. <If it won't be me, who will it be?> wonders the cornered man. And he saves them all. This is how man starts building his own castle."

Such castles were erected by the founders of Helsinki groups in Russia,

Ukraine and Lithuania or the signatories of "Charter 77" in Czechoslovakia, all of whom often spoke up together in support of the common cause. In Poland there were the members of the Workers' Defence Committee, Movement for the Defence of Human and Civil Rights, Free Trade Unions, Student Committees of Solidarity, Committees for the Self-Defence of Peasants, Confederation of Independent Poland, publishers of such samizdat journals as: "Kronika Wydarzeń Bieżących" [Chronicle of Current Events], "Kronika Kościoła Katolickiego na Litwie" [Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania] and "Ukraińskie Wieści" [Ukrainian News] as well as numerous independent Polish publishing houses, notably the Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza [Independent Publishing House], all of which used free speech to crush the wall of lies.

The power of truth was witnessed first-hand by the millions of people who rallied during John Paul II's pilgrimage to Poland in June 1979 when he cited the shared, centuries-old heritage of Christianity - Europe's "eastern lung" including Croatia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary, Russia and Lithuania.

A dozen or so months later, all eyes turned to Poland. In the summer of 1980, Gdansk and Szczecin, the same cities where strikes erupted ten years before, became the leading centres of the emerging "Solidarity" movement. One of the first demands made on the Polish Coast was to erect monuments commemorating those who were killed in December 1970. Unveiled on the tenth anniversary of the rebellion, the three powerful, over-forty-metre-high Gdansk crosses with anchors on top

have remained one of the city symbols.

The words of a December song from 1970 were coming true: "Mothers do not cry, it is not in vain / A black ribbon's flying over the shipyard today / For bread, freedom and a new Poland / Janek Wiśniewski fell." Janek Wiśniewski's real name was Zbigniew Godlewski and he was an eighteen-year-old student shot dead in Gdynia. The picture of his body carried on a door with bloodied white-and-red flags at the head of a protest march became a symbol of December 1970.

The emerging "new Poland" brought hope to other nations enslaved by Moscow. It was already during the August strikes of 1980 that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn sent greetings to Polish workers: "I admire your spirit and dignity. You are setting a wonderful example to all nations living under the yoke of communism."

"Solidarity" was aware that it crowned the struggle to resist communism carried out not only in Poland, but also in the entire Soviet bloc and that the fight continued. Hence, in the summer of 1981, during a convention of "Solidarity", which had almost 10 million members at the time, a message was sent to the working people of Eastern Europe to ensure them that "we are deeply aware of our shared history." Even though it triggered a hysterical reaction in Moscow, the document provided moral support to all those who, undeterred, had held up the banner of freedom for years.

The feeling of shared history also motivated the many words of consolation and encouragement after the introduction of martial law in

Poland in 1981. Russian writers such as Vladimir Bukovsky, Vladimir Maksimov, Viktor Nekrasov and Natalya Gorbanevskaya were again proud to cite the "slogan born a hundred and fifty years ago during the Polish uprising of 1830: <For our freedom and yours!> Long live free and independent Poland! Long live »Solidarity«!". Similar voices were heard from the representatives of other nations in the Soviet empire: Czechs and Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians and Belarusians...

It was specifically moving to read the words sent by the imprisoned Ukrainian dissident Vasyl Stus tortured to death in 1985 in the Soviet labour camp in Perm: "It is so uplifting to see Polish defiance in the face of Soviet despotism (...). Poland sets an example to Ukraine (...). Poland opens a new era in the totalitarian world to prepare its downfall. I wish all the best to the Polish fighters, hoping that the police state will not put out the holy fire of freedom on the 13 December." Indeed, the fire kept growing and soon brought freedom to millions of people in the Soviet empire.

The text is published simultaneously with the Polish journal of opinion "Wszystko Co Najważniejsze" as part of the project "We are Telling the World about Poland". Other language versions are available for download below.

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