

POLAND: A CRISIS FOR SOCIALISM

Martin Myant

Lawrence & Wishart 1982 hbk £9.95

ISBN 0 85315 557 7

It is difficult to watch the unfolding of the crisis in Poland without a sense of deep foreboding. A destabilisation of the second largest member-country of the Warsaw Pact, with the emergence of an anti-communist government, would upset the strategic equilibrium in Europe and be fraught with incalculable consequences.

Poland took the first steps along the road to socialism under inauspicious circumstances. War and Nazi occupation cost the lives of more than one in five of her people.



Nearly two-thirds of the country's mining and industrial establishments, over half its power installations and four-fifths of its transport were destroyed.

National sentiment — a legitimate reaction to over a century of Austrian, German and Russian domination, but frequently nurtured by nostalgic recollections of a 'Greater Poland' and illusory, idealised images of Poland's past — was strong. So, too, was a Catholicism tinged with matriarchy and a hierarchy deeply conservative in its political and social attitudes. Poles nursed memories of the Soviet Union's recovery in September 1939 of territories seized 19 years before at a time of Soviet weakness. They held the Soviet Union responsible for the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn and for the defeat of the 1944 Warsaw uprising. They saw communists as Moscow's puppets. Guerrilla bands operated in many regions, assassinating communists and government officials. In the words of a Polish communist, aptly quoted by Martin Myant, 'the working class had sufficient support to take and hold power, but in that period it did not have the majority on its side'.

Under communist leadership the Poles rebuilt their country out of the devastation and ruins of war and established new industries in previously backward areas. 'The extremes of poverty, associated especially with unemployment, were eliminated and the society they created was considerably richer and more egalitarian than the prewar Polish republic', writes Martin Myant.

Attempts to follow a 'national' road to socialism, based upon a broad coalition of democratic forces, pluralist and evolutionary in concept, foundered as the cold war intensified, strengthening the hand of those

who saw the 'leading role' of the Communist Party in authoritarian terms, who believed that the class struggle intensified as socialism was built and who rejected the possibility of any 'national' road distinct from that pursued by the Soviet Union under completely different historical circumstances. At the end of the 1940s 'monolithic' structures and highly centralised planning systems on the Soviet pattern were imposed, pursuing over-ambitious and autarkic programmes of accelerated heavy industrial development. Democracy atrophied. Political life degenerated. Those associated with earlier 'national' policies were executed or jailed. Freed for the correctives of criticism and debate, economic policy lurched towards unreality.

Martin Myant sees democracy as the central problem of Poland's crisis. He argues — optimistically, some may think — that Poland's crisis 'is not evidence of a failure of socialism in general, but of a particular model of socialism in which power is monopolised within one ruling party', in which 'no legal opposition is allowed and neither are there independent mass organisations that can criticise or challenge those in power'.

An opportunity to initiate a process of democratisation which could create 'a model of socialism in which the people had the final control over those in power' came in 1956, after the Soviet Communist Party's 20th Congress had denounced the Stalin

cult and its consequences and acknowledged the possibility of 'national' roads to socialism. The opportunity was lost and Poland has suffered a series of political and economic crises, the most serious and protracted of which began in 1980 against the background of a catastrophic deterioration in Poland's economic situation. Martin Myant sees the emergence of Solidarity as offering a new opportunity to initiate a dialogue leading to democratisation and economic reform.

The introduction of martial law (followed 10 months later by the banning of Solidarity and all other unions as a preliminary, it was said, to the launching of new union bodies) has made a solution more difficult: 'The road to democratisation has been blocked for the foreseeable future and that is a serious blow to socialism both in Poland and throughout the world'.

Martin Myant believes that the fairest assessment of Solidarity 'would seem to be that it was neither a definitely and consciously socialist organisation, nor was it anti-socialist. It had grown out of opposition to a particular model of socialism the failures of which were so dramatic that many people no longer associated anything positive with the term.' But a serious analysis of the Polish crisis 'cannot be a simple defence of Solidarity', he writes. Its 'deep and widespread hostility' to the Polish United Workers' Party (PUWP) and 'a common failure to appreciate both the depth of the economic

crisis and the realities of the international situation' made agreement more difficult. But he sees the greatest obstacle in the inability of the PUWP to institute a 'major and inspiring' programme of democratisation and reform which would give the mass of the population the feeling that they had a real say in major government decisions.

He also discounts the fear, voiced by General Jaruzelski when he announced the introduction of martial law, that the course events were taking could have culminated in civil war: 'only one firearm was found in the premises of a Solidarity member'. He attaches little importance to Solidarity's refusal to face up to the implications of Poland's economic plight, or to the growth of confrontationist trends within Solidarity some of which called for an escalating strike campaign, preparations for a provisional government and a review of Poland's relations with the Warsaw Pact.

Mieczyslaw Rakowski, a Polish Deputy Prime Minister, last October spoke of 'a fierce anti-communist campaign' being waged by 'the radical wing of Solidarity and warned that 'in Poland now, if you had an election to the Sejm (parliament) an anti-communist front would have the upper hand'. Martin Myant at one point refers in another connection to Rakowski's fundamental failure to understand the depth of the crisis'. Perhaps Rakowski understands it only too well.

Dennis Ogden

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