

Communism in Poland and St. John Paul II

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2018 marks the 100th anniversary of Poland's independence. Since 1918, Poland has spent numerous years with this "independence," truly not being independent with the Nazis and the Soviet Union occupying them. The Soviet Union's occupation of Poland was a major event in Polish history. While religion was repressed during this time period, it did not deter the Poles from staying religious. St. John Paul II became Pope during this period of time and helped Poland to stay hopeful. Sr. Edyta, a friend of mine, who is a Sister of St. Hedwig in Krakow, lived during this time period and offers her personal experiences, which truly show the struggles that the Poles endured during this time. Furthermore, St. John Paul II helped to lead Poland out of communism and keep their faith strong.

After World War II the Germans were expelled via the Potsdam Conference. Poland was ethnically homogenous at this time, having few minorities. During this postwar period the communist Polish United Workers' Party under Boleslaw Beirut gained firm control over the country. The sovietization of Poland included terror, but also included the nationalization of industry and the expropriation, or the action of an authority taking property from its owner for public use, of privately owned land larger than 125 acres. Over the next few year Beirut's regime closely mimicked the Stalinist model in politics. This included placing key emphasis on heavy industry, collective farming, military affairs, culture, and the rule of the secret police. They eventually adopted a Soviet-style constitution in 1952.

The death of Stalin in March 1953 had major repercussions in Poland. Beirut died in 1956, and anti-Stalinist workers in Poznan went on a violent workers strike because they were oppressed. Wladyslaw Gomulka then came into power. This time period is called the "Polish October." Gomulka believed in the "Polish Road to Socialism," and convinced Nikita Khrushchev of his devotion to communism, and of the need for a reformist approach to strengthen its doctrine. After this the Polish and Russian governments began to collaborate more, especially with trade and military cooperation. At first there were no notable changes to society, but in the 1960s Gomulka started to become more authoritarian with his rule. His government oppressed the church, intellectuals, and any protests. This was clearly when Poland began to feel the reign of communism. Gomulka then became involved in an Anti-Zionist movement that caused purges within the government, and caused many people of Jewish descent to emigrate. In December 1970, major strikes occurred in shipyards in northern Poland in response to price increases. This led to bloody confrontations with demonstrators, police, and troops. After this Gomulka stepped down, and Edward Gierek came into power. His regime used selective intimidation, but really tried to improve Poland's living standards and economy. In 1978 Karol Wojtyla, the archbishop of Krakow, became Pope. He gave the Poles hope in this dark time. His visit in 1979 proved crucial to the Poles as it gave them a reason to hope and fight. A strike at a shipyard in Gdansk in 1980 led by Lech Walesa started the solidarity movement. The government was forced to recognize this movement as ten million people joined. It was unprecedented for the proletariat of a country to have a revolution against a socialist government. Gierek was replaced by Stanislaw Kania who was then replaced by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Jaruzelski introduced martial law in 1981 in an attempt to combat these

uprisings. This movement towards martial law imprisoned many prominent opposition leaders such as Walesa. After martial law was lifted the government still had trouble controlling the country. Father Jerzy Popieluszko began preaching hope and truth to the Polish people. A famous quote of his is "To live in Truth is the basic minimum of human dignity, even if the price to defend the Truth could be costly. You need to always remain faithful to the Truth. Truth can never be betrayed." His masses were always filled with overflowing crowds, and the communists were constantly watching and threatening him. In 1984 Father Jerzy was murdered by state police, who were charged with the crime. In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union. His rule led to the collapse of communism in eastern Europe. Solidarity was restored in 1989 and Poland was finally independent and free.

Life in Poland during communism was extremely difficult. Sr. Edyta lived through the end of communism. She says:

My childhood - the 80's I remember very well. It was the last decade with USSR-evident politics. In that communism times our life was very simple, I think. The enemy communist regime - was obvious. All people who was involved in politics represented the left-side of thinking. The underground movement, Solidarnosc (Solidarity) worked as a second source of information. The really Polish people were gathered around the idea of freedom - we had the underground magazines, books, meetings. I remember we heard on the radio "Wolna Europa," we were looking for the truth - we all known, that the official news, informations were lies. My father was involved in Solidarnosc on his place of work. He didn't tell us about this, I found it out only by accident - I saw on the envelope the sign of "Solidarnosc". I knew, I shouldn't ask him no more. I knew one time he took part in a protest and he was clubbed.

I remember in my kindergarten the first impression of our Russian "Friends" - all and learn about Polish-USSR friendship. Nobody of us wanted this. We knew that is the language of the enemy. But I knew the russian abc till today. In the memory of old people Russian soldiers were cruel, inhuman. We have in our memory the murder in Katyn (the Polish elite of soldiers, politics, doctors, scientists - 21 000 of people were shot in 1940)... [sic]

This quote from Sr. Edyta clearly shows the struggles that the people of Poland had to endure during this tough time. She continues saying that the life of a Polish person was focused on one thing, survival:

The life of average citizen of Poland was focused on simply needs: we had money, but there was no food to buy: Empty shelves. In addition almost all of products were rationed by means of "kartki" (ration stamps). Only in 1989 it was the end of meat ration stamps. Where was our Polish food? The most of them was exported to USSR. Our daily duty was to help our parents to stay in the queue. We had family in the country, so they helped us: I remember my father bringing us a half of pig (it was illegally to bring food from the country) ...At the same time there was many shops "Pewex" with all you needed ... The problem was, you could buy something only with... special alternative (unreal) currency - "bony towarowe" or US dollars It's no joke. The regiment wanted to intercept all US currency ...As children we were wondering why there is two class of people - one who could buy anything they wanted and us who was forced to gain anything. [sic]

She said that during this time her family lived in Warsaw. Her father worked as an engineer and her mother was in customer service at the electricity board. There was a process when trying to get food: "It was the first duty to buy something. We bought everything, no matter if we it needed or not. If you had something you could exchange with you neighbour." [sic] Sr. Edyta continues saying that even during these tough times she was able to stay religious: "Fortunately we had a great religious shepherds, Karol Wojtyla, Kard. Stefan Wyszynski. They were strong enough to resist the government. My family was in the Church, children in Poland got every year the same souvenir from USSR - the plastic clock (blue)with USSR sweeties (almost uneatable). On the school we were forced to learn Russian connected with." [sic]

This shows that even in this oppressed time the Poles were courageous enough to stay religious. Sr. Edyta attended Pope John Paul II's first visit: "The first visit was 1979. I was 2 years old and my mum told me, that I was with my father on the Plac Zwyciestwa, " [sic] "Pope John Paul II prayed: 'Come Holy Spirit and renew the face of the earth, this earth.' " This was symbolic of the effect he had on Poland. It allowed the Poles to be courageous with their faith and gave them hope of freedom in the future. She says that there were extremely difficult times with her religion during communism as well, such as: "The hard experience within the Church I remember, was the killing of Rev. Father Jerzy Popieluszko."

St. John Paul II's effect on Poland was true to Poland's people as Sr. Edyta recounts saying: "John Paul II was for us like our father. The most important person, who gave us hope to live in the truth, to live the values. He helped us with his being for us and with us. His words were strong." She even says that his visits impacted her personally: In 2000 I heard the words spoken to the youth gathered in Lednica: "Do not be afraid, put out into deep water" Lk 5, 1-11. Hearing that words I felt I can't stay home, I should follow Jesus in His pilgrimage on the Earth ...and I decided to joined our Congregation. [sic]

It can clearly be seen that St. John Paul II was an advocate for Poland during these dark times, and his impact can still be seen upon Poland today with all of the religious vocations. The connection between communism, Poland and St. John Paul II is clear and almost unbelievable. Throughout all of the struggles the Polish people endured during communism, they stayed strong and resilient. St. John Paul II encouraged them and lead them out of communism. He was truly their shepherd. This is by far the most remarkable event since Poland's Independence in 1918, and a testament to the Poles' faith.

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