Polish Anxieties, Soviet Apprehensions

Richard Sharpless
Lafayette College, Easton, PA

Stephen Lammers
Lafayette College, Easton, PA

Paul Mojzes
Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA, pmojzes@rosemont.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree
Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol1/iss7/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
POLISH ANXIETIES, SOVIET APPREHENSIONS

The authors of this article are Dr. Richard Sharpless (Socialist), professor of history, Dr. Stephen Lammers (Roman Catholic), professor of religion, both at Lafayette College, Easton, PA, and Dr. Paul Mojzes (United Methodist), professor of religious studies at Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA. They wrote this article after attending the Ninth Christian-Marxist Peace Symposium in Madrid, Spain, in October 1981.

A Russian who attended a symposium recently held in Madrid told a Polish story: "The Lord decided to take a look at what was going on down on earth. First, He took His telescope and zeroed in on the United States. He saw that the people were working very hard, that they were arming furiously, and that they were very frightened. God then decided to see what the Soviets were doing. He focused His telescope on the Soviet Union and saw that the people were working very hard, and that they were arming furiously, and that they too were very frightened. Now thoroughly alarmed, God decided, nevertheless, to get a third opinion. This time He took a look at Poland. At first He couldn't believe His eyes, so He looked more closely. Sure enough, He saw that the Poles weren't working, they didn't care at all about arming themselves, and they weren't afraid of anybody. Much relieved, God said to Himself, "At least my children in Poland still trust in Me!"

The story, told with more exasperation than humor, described something of the atmosphere at the Ninth International Christian-Marxist Symposium held in the Spanish capital October 21-26, 1981. While the American, European and Soviet participants expressed their viewpoints and traded charges and counter-charges over who was most responsible for the latest arms buildup, the Poles made a rather anguished and eloquent effort to get themselves understood, and to stay out of the line of fire.

In formal sessions of the Symposium, designed to bring Christians and Marxists together in dialogue on issues of peace and disarmament, and in intense private discussions, the Poles gave ample testimony that they weren't interested in armaments--at least Polish armaments--that they were indeed trying to work things out, and that they were very worried, despite appearances to the contrary. As a result of the Symposium, the American participants came away with distinctive impressions on how the Poles, and
the Soviets, view themselves, their relations with each other, and their perceptions of the Reagan administration.

Polish Concerns

It is extremely difficult, even for those who live in Poland, to describe with accuracy what is happening there at a given moment. The situation is fluid and dynamic, with events unfolding rapidly. Those close to the Communist Party, the Church and Solidarity agree that the country could go in any of several directions. They believe that there is great danger because no one institution, much less leadership group, really is in control of what is going on, especially at the regional and local levels. The situation even was described as being "revolutionary", in the sense that the smallest incident could spark a major outbreak.

The food queues, for example, have the potential for causing violent incidents that could spread quickly to other areas. The people are jittery and apprehensive, and the growing scarcity of food is a cause for major concern. This is especially true for those with children. For the older generation, accustomed to doing without meat, the problem is not as acute; but there is a pervasive fear of what effects the lack of adequate food might have on the young.

The greatest concern, however, is not over random, localized outbreaks. The major danger is from violence directed against Communist Party members. This simply would not be tolerated by the Soviet Union and would provoke intervention. The Soviets feel a tremendous sense of responsibility for defending their allies. Afghanistan serves as an example in this regard. It also might be remembered that attacks on the Communist apparatus provided the pretext for the intervention in Hungary. In general, the Poles feel that the Soviet Union until now has exercised a good deal of restraint from mixing in Polish affairs, except verbally to urge caution and moderation.

Many Poles believe that the Reagan administration aggravates their situation. They claim that there are elements in the U.S. government, not only limited to the intelligence agencies, who would welcome Soviet intervention because it could be used as an excuse for U.S. aggression elsewhere, or as a further justification for increased military spending.

Like other Europeans, both in the East and the West, the Poles are alarmed by Reagan's sabre rattling and negative attitude towards detente.
While they hold both superpowers responsible for the nuclear arms race, they fault the U.S. for the present buildup. They believe that a new arms race, into which Poland may be drawn, not only will limit their own possibilities for economic development—the only way out of their present crisis—but that the end of detente will circumscribe their freedom of action within the Soviet bloc. They agree with the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, Jozsef Lukacs, who believes that only detente guarantees the Eastern European countries maximum freedom to develop in ways best for their own interests.

The Poles argued that the social upheavals of 1970, 1976 and 1980 would have been impossible without detente. The lessening of tension between the superpowers in that decade resulted in internal relaxation in Eastern Europe, but especially in Poland, that allowed for the expression of dissatisfaction without immediate punishment from the Soviet Union. A new era of superpower confrontation and/or U.S. meddling in Poland's affairs would damage the continued trend towards liberalization. Instead of proving more space for democratization, it would give the Soviet Union justification for mixing in Polish affairs. The Soviets already believe that the U.S. is attempting to use Poland to further destabilize the Warsaw Pact countries.

An example of misguided U.S. policy cited by the Poles was that towards illegal emigrants. Many Poles travel to the U.S. (and Western Europe) on tourist visas, but find jobs and remain permanently. They leave for economic reasons, rather than political, and violate U.S. law by working. Yet U.S. authorities appear to tolerate this. The Poles noted that this causes a considerable morale problem at home, in addition to the negative effects upon the work force. They wondered aloud if this was not a part of U.S. "interventionism" to keep Poland stirred-up.

In discussions regarding internal developments, the Poles insisted that, while Poland was not "free", neither was it a totalitarian state. The major preoccupation was that the democratization process continue unhindered from outside; and that Poles be left alone to solve their own problems. One of them stated in a session: "We alone are responsible for what happened, and we must be allowed to find our own solutions!"

Three institutions, of course, figure in any "solutions". They are the Communist Party (Polish United Workers' Party), the Solidarity trade union
movement, and the Roman Catholic Church. Poland, it seems, cannot be
governed without some consensus among them. Unfortunately, they all are
divided over methods and goals.

The Communist Party is split into several factions, ranging from
hardliners to moderates and progressives. The leadership, however, appears
willing to admit that serious errors have been made, and that something
must be done to broaden the base of power. This means creating a mechanism
that will allow for some sharing of power without necessarily relinquishing
the Party's central role. The major problem, at the moment, is that there
is no agreement over how this is to be achieved.

At least two alternatives are under discussion. One would retain the
present party structures, but allow for greater sharing of power through
such means as broader representation and internal democracy. Under this
scheme there would be no new political parties. Another alternative is the
creation of a sort of Christian Democratic party, which in Poland would be
primarily a Roman Catholic party. Once formed, it would bid, not for sole
power, but for participation in government. The impression is that a
coalition government of some sort shows greater promise than even an
attempt of Solidarity to take power. It was remarked that there is an
element in Solidarity that simply wants to replace the Communists and rule
as they did. But it was felt that this wouldn't solve anything because
monolithic control, simply of a different brand, would be continued. It
almost certainly would provoke Soviet intervention, while a coalition or
popular front government probably would be acceptable.

Part of the interest in a coalition government comes from the percep­
tion that the Church has been one of the most responsible institutions in
the present crisis. One of the Poles interviewed insisted that the Church
was the single element of stability and the chief guarantor of social
order. There was some concern, however, that the Church recently has been
leaning too far towards Solidarity. Hope was expressed that the new Primate
of the Church would maintain the careful balance of his predecessor and
continue the Church as a moderating force.

Any attempt to form a Christian Democratic party is complicated by
divisions within Catholic political groups that go back, in some cases, to
before World War II. The Pax group, almost pro-Facist in their orientation
before the war, emerged in its wake as an eager supporter of the Soviet
Union, the most left-wing Roman Catholic organization in Poland, and the group which most eagerly sought to have its views coincide with those of the government. Because of that, their relationships with the Roman Catholic hierarchy were practically nil, and their popularity slim. The Christian Social Association formed when it broke away from Pax in order to provide some independence. A third group, Znak (Sign), also existed as the most independent and vigorous Catholic organization.

Events since 1980 have resulted in significant shifts of positions for these organizations. The strongly independent Znak group split, with one faction renaming itself the Social Democrats. Much preoccupied with the continued existence of the Polish state, it assumes a fairly cautious stance. It has five representatives in the Sejm (parliament). The old Znak group, which is strongly pro-Solidarity, is left without any formal representation, but with strong moral impact.

The Pax organization made a dramatic turn-about and formally follows the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. It now tends to be explicitly pro-Solidarity. The Christian Social Association, is now most identified with the present government. This group wants to proceed very cautiously, and for the time being supports the existing political structures.

Solidarity, like the Communist Party and the Church, also has divergent tendencies, as many commentators have noted. It is very de-centralized and, in many respects, the leadership in Gdansk is not in control of the regional organizations, a fact amply demonstrated by the recent wave of strikes. The re-election of Walesa to the leadership of Solidarity was aided in large measure by the workers in heavy industries who insisted on the continuation of present policies. But this does not imply that the national leadership is secure.

Solidarity, above all, was described as a movement against rather than for something. In this respect it resembles the vast populist movements, especially of Latin America, that have managed from time to time to appeal across class lines by mobilizing the feelings of resentment, material frustrations and powerlessness of constituencies as different as intellectuals, middle sectors and workers. It achieved leadership over nine million Poles, and created the largest organization in Polish history apart from the Church, by mobilizing against the bureaucratic form of communism.
responsible for the errors that led to the present crisis. It is believed that what provides Solidarity with its present unity is its oppositionist stance, and that if the organization achieves some measure of power it will begin to factionalize along traditional political lines.

This does not mean, however, that Solidarity is a movement against socialism. Though there are elements within the movement opposed to socialism, and many others in favor of some form of pluralistic democratic socialism, it would be a misreading of Polish events to assume that what most of Solidarity's members want is to turn the socio-economic system into some form of liberal capitalism.

Poland's internal divisions also show up in generational differences. The older generation, those who lived through World War II and know the political realities of the previous era, are terribly aware of the political and geographical place of Poland in central Europe, namely that it is surrounded by countries that belong to the Warsaw Pact. They understand that Poland is an immediate neighbor of the Soviet Union, which needs it for its own defense purposes. Additionally, they are concerned with the rapidity of social change in Poland, and would like to see some moderation of present trends.

The younger generation, those drawn to Solidarity, see things quite differently. In a sense, they are asking the older generation to step aside. They see a chance to remodel Poland just as the older generation did 30 years ago. They are not nearly as concerned about the Soviet Union. The younger generation believes that relationships like that can best be resolved by a vigorous unity among Solidarity's people.

A poignant example of generational conflict was reported by a Polish journalist, a veteran of many political campaigns. Like many Polish families, his own was deeply divided by developments since 1980. In an effort to reach an understanding with his son, and perhaps convince him of the danger of his ways, he discussed Solidarity and other issues through the whole of a long and tortured night. Finally, his impatient and exasperated son shouted: "Listen, you made your revolution! Don't try and stop me from making mine!"

Can anything bring the Poles together? Like most victims of history, they have a vivid collective memory. What unites most, if not all, Poles is the idea that they need a strong state. Their country has fallen prey to
partitions before, and they fear anything that weakens the Polish state itself, regardless of political hue. It is this fear that may eventually unite them again.

Soviet Anxieties

While the Poles were preoccupied with their internal situation, the Soviet delegation at the Symposium focused almost entirely on the implications of the Reagan administration's arms buildup. The Soviets, in the formal sessions and in private conversations, conveyed a convincing impression that they were genuinely concerned over the possibility of a new arms race and a nuclear showdown. Their anxieties and fears of the consequences, both internal and external, were quite evident. In some respects, they viewed the arms buildup of the Americans as not only a danger to peace, but as economic warfare against themselves.

The Soviets argued that the cost of gaining strategic "parity" in nuclear arms, finally achieved a decade ago, was very high for their society. The tremendous economic cost of catching up with the United States was paid for by sacrifices in the standard of living. Now they have achieved parity, and the living standard of the Soviet peoples has been rising; but a new arms race, which they feel they would be compelled to enter, would be difficult for their citizens and their allies to accept. They expressed concern over the psychological impact on morale, for example.

The Soviets left no doubt, however, that they would make every effort to keep up, regardless of the consequences. They obviously believe that if they lose strategic parity the U.S. will attempt to "force them to their knees" by trying to bring about a collapse of their system. They left the clear impression that if the U.S. begins to pull ahead in a new arms race they will be compelled to "take other measures" to prevent this.

One of the real fears of the Soviet Union, also expressed by the western Europeans at the Symposium, is the Reagan proposal to add Pershing and cruise missiles to the theater nuclear forces in Europe. They regard these as first-strike weapons, in no way a counter-balance to the SS20 missiles stationed in the western Soviet Union. The neutron bomb also is regarded as an offensive weapon, and the Soviets stated that the placing of such weapons in western Europe would compel them to manufacture similar bombs. Like most of the Europeans at the Symposium, they do not regard the neutron bomb as an anti-tank weapon, which the Americans claim it is, but
as an offensive device designed to kill off populations while leaving production facilities intact.

In responding to charges that they had conducted their own arms build-up in the past decade, the Soviets argued that their vast land frontiers, surrounded by hostile countries (e.g. China) made this necessary. The United States, surrounded by water and weak neighbors, doesn't require large standing armies. In this respect, it makes no sense to compare such weapons as the number of tanks. Interestingly, the Soviet concept of what constitutes a threat to their homeland is expanding. The U.S. buildup in the Indian Ocean, for example, is regarded as a provocation on their southern frontier.

With respect to Afghanistan, the Soviets made the standard argument that they were helping, though reluctantly, a socialist country that had called upon them for assistance. They insisted that their stay there was temporary. They explained their position as supporting progressives who were attempting to overcome a feudal society by providing such things as modern education, health care, social welfare, and promoting equality between the sexes. They called the opponents of the Afghanistan government "bandits", supported by the U.S., Pakistan and China, who were mostly interested in destabilizing the area and preventing the consolidation of a socialist regime. What upset the Soviets were the atrocities of the guerrillas, whom they accused of murdering physicians and school teachers, and such things as the blowing up of hospitals and schools. Though they didn't discuss their own methods, and failed to understand that their reasons for intervention were similar to those used by British colonialists in another era, the Soviets left the impression that Afghanistan was a nagging and difficult problem for them.

Convinced that the Reagan administration seeks military superiority, the Soviets strongly doubt that the U.S. government is interested in serious negotiations on arms reductions. They fear that the U.S. will simply use negotiations to buy time while it continues to arm. Nevertheless, the Soviets emphasized that they want meaningful negotiations, that they hoped for them, and that they continued to trust in their efficacy. On numerous occasions they repeated Brezhnev's statement that a nuclear war would be "suicidal".

What impressed the Americans at the Symposium who had previous exper-
ience of dialogue with the Soviets was not the logic of their arguments, which had been heard before, but of the thinly disguised anxiety that underlay them. They obviously are very concerned over the impact of another arms race upon their own society, some faults and weaknesses of which they admitted reluctantly. The Soviet economy is beset by serious problems that obviously cannot be solved by additional military spending. Additionally, there are Poland and Afghanistan, and the costs of aiding a bankrupt economy and sustaining a drawn-out guerrilla war which, as one Soviet delegate put it, "is no piece of cake".

The Ninth International Christian-Marxist Symposium ended in a somber mood. A Spanish people deeply divided over the issue of entering NATO, a fear-ridden Europe erupting in massive peace demonstrations, and a growing current of anti-Americanism is what the U.S. delegates left behind.

POST SCRIPT

The article was completed and about to be published when martial law was imposed in Poland, at least temporarily dashing the hopes for further liberalization and democratization in Poland. As the article reflects both the hopes and fears of many Poles it was decided to publish it as a record of the dynamics of the situation just prior to the drastic military intervention.