

# 16 POLAND (1980-9)

## Key Issue

- What was Poland's role in bringing about the end of communism in eastern Europe?

## POLAND: COMMUNISM IN CRISIS

Nuclear missiles were not Reagan's only answer to the 'evil empire'. He was also making secret plans to destroy the Soviet Union's empire once and for all, starting with Poland. Poland was a good choice. The Poles had disliked the Russians for at least two centuries. Also, the Roman Catholic Church was a powerful force in the country. About 80% of Poles were Catholic. From 1945 onwards, the Church had served as a reminder that **communism** was not the only thing to believe in.

By 1980, the Polish economy was in serious trouble. Workers went on strike as a protest at high prices, and food and fuel shortages. At the shipyard in Gdansk, workers demanded pay rises and improved benefits. They also wanted the right to form a free trade union which could negotiate working conditions with the government.

Their wish was granted: in August, Poland became the first eastern communist country to have a free trade union. It was called Solidarity. The leader of its ten million members was Lech Walesa. The USSR did not send troops in, partly because of world criticism of its invasion of Afghanistan. Also, late in 1980, the USA warned Brezhnev that, if the USSR invaded Poland, the USA would sell weapons to China.

## SECRET AGREEMENT

But Soviet leaders were worried and ordered a crack-down on the protesters. In December 1981, the Polish armed forces took over the government and General Jaruzelski became Polish leader. Riot police moved in with water cannons and troops used tear gas to break up meetings. Solidarity's leaders were put in prison. In 1982, the union was banned.

That might have been the end of the matter, but in June 1982 a unique meeting took place between US President Reagan and Pope John Paul II. He had become Pope in 1978 and he was Polish.

The two men believed they could work together to keep Solidarity alive. They planned to do it by secretly undermining the Polish government (see Source B). An American adviser described it as 'one of the great secret alliances of all time'.

They believed that, as a result, the USSR would lose its grip on Poland and the country could regain its freedom. If Poland became free, other communist states might follow.

From 1982-9, various western organisations provided money to help the banned union. Some of it came from the CIA. Solidarity also received equipment, smuggled into Poland by priests and foreign trade unions. It included telephones, transmitters, computers and video cameras.

Above all, Solidarity received advice on how to deal with the Polish government and the USSR. This advice was based on secret information which the USA received from Polish priests and even spies in the Polish government.

### BASIC RULES OF PASSIVE RESISTANCE



Solidarity's advice to workers to help create chaos (1982).

## THE POPE'S ROLE

When the USSR did not invade Poland in 1980, it was another turning-point in the Cold War. But Poland's path to democracy over the next ten years was not a smooth one. Solidarity was banned in October 1982, although prisoners were released soon afterwards. The Pope played a key part in achieving this.

In return for promising to visit his native Poland, Pope John Paul II insisted that:

- martial law should end;
- prisoners should be released;
- there should be independent trade unions.

Poland's leader, General Jaruzelski, introduced reforms to improve the economy and began to work more closely with the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, support for the Communist Party was falling: half of its members left. Those who stayed in the party were mostly Catholics and many read the underground newspapers. They would not have been Lenin's idea of typical communists.

## B SOURCE

Ronald Reagan, speaking in the 1990s.

*We both felt that a great mistake had been made at Yalta and something should be done. Solidarity was the very weapon for bringing this about, because it was an organisation of the labourers of Poland.*

## Questions

- Study Source A. Explain the importance of this photograph. Support your answer by referring to details of the photograph and your own knowledge. [6 marks]
- Explain why Solidarity played such a key role in the defeat of communism in Poland. [9 marks]

Explain how communism began to collapse in eastern Europe. Write a few sentences under the following headings:

- Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
- 'Star Wars'
- Crisis in the Soviet economy
- Role of Gorbachev
- INF Treaty.

## A SOURCE

Gdansk strikers at prayer, August 1980.





## THE EFFECT OF GORBACHEV

Both the Polish government and Solidarity supported Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Indeed, the union had wanted these reforms for some years. The communists were anxious to show they supported Gorbachev because they wanted to hold on to power.

But the government had become weak. At the first sign of opposition, it was willing to change its policies.

## SOLIDARITY LEGALISED

However, something was happening to the Polish economy: it was getting worse. Prices were rising and living standards were falling. The country owed huge sums of money abroad and could not afford to replace old industrial machinery. Production was falling. In 1988, an opinion poll showed that about a quarter of Poles wanted to emigrate to the West.

In January 1988, there were more strikes in protest at Poland's poor economic record. Workers demanded that Solidarity should be made legal again. Lech Walesa asked for talks with the government and the government agreed (see Source B).

The talks lasted for two months. In April 1989, a deal was struck: Solidarity would be made legal and workers would have the right to strike. More importantly, there would be new elections. Two-thirds of

the seats in the Sejm (parliament) would be guaranteed for communists and their allies; one-third could be contested by other parties.

## THE END OF COMMUNISM IN POLAND

Of course, the system was designed so that the communists would win. Despite this, it was an historic decision: the government had agreed to hold free elections for the first time since the war. They were also the first free elections in any communist country.

When the election was held, Solidarity won all 161 seats open to opposition parties. This left Poland in a strange position: the communists did not have the people's support; Solidarity did not have enough MPs to run the country. In effect, the communist leadership stayed in control.

But not for long. Jaruzelski (now President) tried to get Solidarity to join a coalition government but Walesa refused. Instead, two weeks later, Solidarity formed a coalition with two other parties and won a majority of votes in the Sejm.

The following day, Jaruzelski appointed a new government, which included Solidarity MPs. The new prime minister was Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a non-communist and Roman Catholic. It was the first non-communist Polish government since the Second World War – and the first in any Soviet satellite.



August 1989: Solidarity leader, Lech Walesa.

## EFFECT ON THE COLD WAR

The Cold War had happened partly because the USSR and USA had very different systems – communism and capitalism. To defend their views, each side had built up huge amounts of weapons. And each side had its supporters – the USA was supported by western Europe while the USSR was supported by eastern Europe.

But this situation was changing. Both sides had already agreed to arms cuts. If eastern Europe rejected communism, another reason for the 'war' would have disappeared. In the summer of 1989, Poland did reject communism – and Hungary was not far behind.

## HUNGARY

In May 1988, Karoly Grosz took over from János Kádár as Communist Party leader and there were big changes in the Party leadership. In January 1989, the government decided to rebury Imre Nagy (see page 15). Days later, it announced that an enquiry into the events of 1956 had shown that it had not been a 'counter-revolution' after all. They decided that it had actually been a popular uprising.

Early in 1989, it was agreed that other political parties should be allowed. Instead of sending in tanks to stop this, Gorbachev did the opposite: he agreed to start withdrawing troops from Hungary.

## WHY?

When Gorbachev came to power, he knew that the USSR had to find new ways of dealing with eastern Europe. So he abandoned the Brezhnev Doctrine (see page 34). In future, east Europeans would be treated as partners. The USSR would not send in tanks; instead, Gorbachev believed that each country should sort out its own problems (see Source C).

### A SOURCE

Communism's solution to huge queues for scarce goods for sale was not to have anything to sell, as you can see from this photograph, taken in 1981. A lack of quality consumer goods was a serious problem for the communist economies.



### B SOURCE

Walesa told those at the talks the following.

*There is only one direction. It must go towards a democratic system, towards the rule of law and the freedom of its citizens. Even if we cannot get all that, we have to start somewhere.*

### C SOURCE

Gennady Gerasimov, one of Gorbachev's advisers, explained the new policy in autumn 1989.

*The new doctrine is Frank Sinatra's doctrine. Frank Sinatra has a very popular song, 'I had it my way'. So Hungary, Poland, any other countries has it its own way. They decide which road to take. It's their business.*

## Questions

- Study Source A. Explain the importance of this photograph. Support your answer by referring to details of the photograph and your own knowledge. [6 marks]
- Explain why Poland became the first East European state to have a non-communist government. [9 marks]