

## **EXPERIMENT IN POLAND**

*Arthur Moore*

### **WARSAW**

Newspapers in the United States recently carried comparatively brief items about a ceremony held in Warsaw on April 19 to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto. For most readers, these items must have caused a brief moment of shock—shock at remembering the details of that struggle and a further uneasy sensation at the realization that they had so nearly completely forgotten the episode in what already begins to seem an ancient war.

In Warsaw itself the reaction must have been just the opposite—a sense of surprise that these events in which the city is still physically caught up and emotionally involved could have taken place fifteen years ago rather than five or four or three. For in Warsaw one can never forget World War II.

A Westerner's reaction to Warsaw when driving into the city from the airport is to wonder where the main city itself is located. There is, to be sure, the tower of the Palace of Culture whose Russian-built gingerbread dominates the city. There are throngs of people on the streets. But somehow the impression of a city does not come through. It is only gradually that the import of the often-quoted statistic acquires physical meaning—Warsaw was approximately eighty-seven per cent destroyed during World War II.

This does not mean that Warsaw is now a mass of rubble in the way that sections of East Berlin still are. There are certain areas where reconstruction has not made any appreciable dent and there are certain parts of the ghetto which remain a wilderness of levelled debris. The monument to the ghetto fighters stands bleakly in such an area. Some 300,000 persons still live outside the city because there is not yet sufficient housing for them.

Even so, the amount of reconstruction is remarkable. Construction has been undertaken at such a rate that many buildings have been put up and occupied without any outside finishing, so that bricks and mortar are the exterior decor. The old city (that

is to say, the medieval section) has been lovingly restored in exact detail—streets and squares of brand-new medieval buildings and churches. Blocks of apartments are rising or have risen over the ruins of the ghetto. Residential housing is struggling hard to meet demands.

What is lacking, of course, is the sense of history. An exact replica of a medieval building is a different thing from the building itself. Apartments put up to meet an immediate shortage are quite different from streets which grow up over centuries. One of the ancient great cities of Europe was destroyed and restoration cannot hide that fact.

Not that Warsaw tries to hide or forget what it has been through. One of the buildings that was not destroyed was the government building (now housing, I believe, the ministry of education) whose basement contained the "interrogation center" of the Gestapo. This basement, scene of torture and suffering, has been made into a museum. One enters down a flight of stairs into a darkened room illuminated by light entering through largely blood-red stained glass windows and a spotlight on two massive stone swords and a wreath commemorating the victims of the Gestapo.

Past this entrance, the rooms are kept much as they were. The cells stand open and are decked with flowers; the rooms stand empty but a typewriter contains a sample order in German. The main additions are illustrations of some of the scenes of violence that occurred in these rooms and, most poignant of all, enlarged photographs of scribblings on cell walls by men and women now long dead. All that is lacking (and mercifully so) is the loud music played to drown out the screams of the tortured.

Nor is this a solitary reminder of the miseries of war. It is difficult to walk many blocks in the center of the city without passing a plaque marking the spot where fifty or one hundred or two hundred or more Poles were killed (the plaques say "murdered") by the Germans during the Warsaw uprising. The plaques do not refer to the role played during the uprising by the Soviet armies which remained inactive across the Vistula River while thousands of Poles died fighting the Germans, but it can be safely assumed that this memory remains equally vivid.

With these memories so strong, it is even more extraordinary that during the "October events" of 1956 the students and workers of Warsaw demonstrated in favor of Gomulka even when the Russians threatened to ring the city with Russian troops. This is the kind of personal gallantry that defies all rational political calculations.

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There have been many explanations of the October movement. That Polish nationalism should have remained alive through the long and tragic history of that country is itself testimony to its intense vitality. This same history guarantees that against both the Russians and the Germans there are always plenty of grievances for the Poles to remember and resent in addition to the many recent ones.

There is another and incalculable factor deep within the Polish character which helps in explaining the mood of Poland today. It is best exemplified by the response of a number of Warsaw citizens when congratulated on the amount of reconstruction in the capital. "It has no style," they say and thus, with a shrug, dismiss the subject as being of no importance. This passionate insistence on style is the reason that Warsaw, despite its poverty and destruction, has an atmosphere almost intoxicating after the drab resignation of Prague or the iron rigidity of mind in East Berlin. The Czech capital, long one of the loveliest cities in Europe, has a run-down air of fatigue and exhaustion, while East Berlin, with its myriad flags and posters snarling defiance of the West, resembles nothing so much as a movie set of a satellite city in a bad anti-Communist film. Warsaw, by contrast, breathes a spirit of interest that pervades many of the details of life. It is apparent in the things that crowds gather to inspect in the shop windows (particularly the exchange shops where presents sent in from the outside may be sold), in the free use of design in the posters that placard the city (and which would cause a "Socialist realist" to have a heart attack), and in the personal selection of clothing to produce a striking and elegant effect often with very meager resources.

Culturally, the Poles look to the West. This is attested to not only by the popularity of such plays as those of Racine and Shakespeare but even by such latter day and lesser phenomena as *Kiss Me, Kate* and *Look Back in Anger*. The six thousand students who signed up to learn English at an adult education school (run, incidentally, by the Polish Methodists) did not do so merely to be able to read the *New York Times* or the *Manchester Guardian* or *Life* magazine, but the reading rooms and newsstands where these publications are available do not suffer from lack of patronage. In addition, the works of many writers available in Polish and English include, among such expected choices as Dickens and William Dean Howells, such startlers as Aldous Huxley and John Steinbeck. Jazz, inevitably, is quite popular and there are local performing groups as well as the serious record clubs who spend the long, snowy Po-

lish winter nights fervently discussing Gerry Mulligan and Dizzy Gillespie.

The outlook may be "Western" but the geography is "Eastern" and this is the tension of Polish politics. I do not mean geography here in a purely physical sense. The historical geography is also Eastern in a sense that profoundly affects relations with (particularly) the Russians and the Germans. The Poles very probably detest the Russians (and have the feeling returned) but they know that no matter what the course of history the Russians will remain at least on their doorstep if not indeed inside their living room. This accounts for many of the seeming lapses from the spirit of "October" that the Poles have accepted after fiercely demanding these very privileges now being again withdrawn—the suppression of *Po Prostu*, the crackdown on writers and other intellectuals, and the supplanting of the workers' councils. For the Poles know that they cannot have all they want. They walk a very difficult tightrope—a performance they find exhilarating as well as dangerous.

On the other hand, the West and particularly the United States may have a distorted idea of *what* the Poles do want. Basically, they want the sovereign independence of Poland. But to equate this desire with a return to the prewar status quo is a vast mistake. We do not make this status quo assumption in a mechanical sense—too many people and things have been killed since 1939 for that—but we do make this assumption when we talk in a vacuum about "liberty" and when we used to talk about "liberation"—before the Hungarians made the mistake of taking us seriously.

In essence, the fault of this policy is to assume that the nature of the Communist regime in Poland is "predetermined" and "fixed" absolutely, when in actuality it displays a combination of rigidity and flexibility which offers significant opportunities to the West if it is patiently approached with some knowledge of the factors that make it tick (including, most emphatically, ideological factors).

Communist governments are a notorious combination of idealism and cynicism—this is a truism but one that the moralistic approach of the United States seems unable to comprehend. By not being able to feel this distinction, we alternate between what can only appear to the Poles as self-approbation and brutal disregard of others. In the end, American foreign policy comes to seem not so much bad as irrelevant.

Sometimes, of course, American policy can also seem downright evil. Under the circumstances in Poland, it would be difficult to justify German rearmament to the Poles at all. We have failed to even try hard to prove that such a decision as to rearm

Germany was an agonizing one, made under desperate circumstances. (Perhaps, alas, because this is not in fact true.) This question of German rearmament is made to order for the Russians and they naturally exploit it to the full. To complain querulously that they are only interested in "propaganda" on this issue is a really irrelevant objection. The Poles are not worried about propaganda; they are worried about a rearmed Germany. When (for frosting on the cake) Adenauer and American policy insist upon nuclear weapons over the loud protests of even many Germans, then such wild "propaganda" charges as similarities between Adenauer and Hitler take on a certain false plausibility. German rearmament may be a necessity of Western policy but it is only fair to realize that in Eastern Europe this policy constitutes one of Russia's greatest assets.

These feelings about American policy remain true despite such U.S. measures as a loan to Poland and the help extended quietly by the Ford Foundation and others. What happens here as in so many places is that Americans remain popular but that the foreign policy of the American government seems to Poles to have no serious answers to the questions that are being asked.

"We have made many mistakes," a government official said to me. "We know that and we are working to correct them. Our people are exhausted, physically and mentally, from the efforts they have undergone. But there is no wish to go back to what Poland was before. None."

It seems to me quite likely that this statement is true. To accept such a viewpoint means not that we acquiesce in the present situation in Poland or accept Stalinism or even Khrushchevism as the end of Polish history. It does mean that we make a more serious confrontation of the rationale and mechanics of Communism than our present addiction to rhetoric indicates we are now attempting. Above all, it means that we convey to the Poles a more genuine interest in them and in their future (rather than in our projection of their future). The "experiment of October" may fail—present signs do not look too good for much of it, although the West may tend to underestimate the strength of what still remains in effect, that is, the strength of the liberalizing spirit.

A single example of this is the remarkable freedom of speech of the average Pole that one meets on the street or in a shop. This seems also true of Poles who are traveling or studying in other countries. If one looks startled at this, the usual explanation is "October." This candor is so widespread that it would be very hard to completely resuppress. But if the

spirit of October fails, we in the West must understand clearly why it failed. And woe be unto us if even a minor cause of such a failure can be laid to our lack of understanding and response.

No attempt to survey conditions in present-day Poland would be complete without mentioning the situation of the Roman Catholic Church. Officially, the government guarantees freedom of religion and protects the rights of all groups. The question within a Communist country always is what it means by "freedom" of religion. This particularly is a question in Poland, where the population is about ninety per cent (figures vary on the percentage) Roman Catholic, at least in background; where the only organization that is strong enough to challenge the government is the Church of Rome; and where there was a close tie-up between Catholicism and the previous regime, and where there has long been inculcated among the majority the sentiment that "if you're Polish you're Catholic."

As a result of the strength of such an opponent and as a reward for support of the regime at crucial times, the government of Poland instituted a policy of religious education for children that is incredible for an officially atheistic regime. By this policy, all children must attend state schools but their parents may request that they receive religious instruction. If twenty children from one religious group wish instruction, an instructor chosen by that group is allowed to teach such a class in the state school and at state expense. This applies to all groups and there are provisions for groups who cannot muster twenty children in one school. Yet in a country where ninety per cent of the population belong to one church, this obviously means that the Roman Catholic Church has been handed a large share in educating Polish youth by a government which declares itself opposed to the basic teachings of that Church.

What exists in Poland on the religious scene is a deep competition between Communism and Christianity. What renders this competition so significant is the deeper engagement each side permits itself. What will emerge remains to be seen but obviously this is one of the most significant encounters of our time.

The hope in Poland then is that this country might become a bridge between East and West. This is a hope, not yet a fact. To even keep the hope alive will require a dexterity and sophistication in our foreign policy that have in the past been sadly lacking. Circumstances limit what may be achieved in Poland. It will be too bad if one of the limiting circumstances is ourselves.