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THE CHURCH AND THE STATE IN POLAND AFTER WORLD WAR II: THE BACKGROUND

Andrzej Korbonski

Executive Summary

Throughout most of its modern existence, but especially since the communist seizure of power after World War II, the Polish Catholic church has enjoyed a reputation, particularly in the West, of being the sole bastion of liberty and freedom successfully preventing the communists from establishing total control over the society. The purpose of this paper is to offer a background for a discussion which intends to challenge this view by postulating that in the period under discussion (1945-1995) the Polish church was primarily guided in its policy by its own institutional interests, which, among others, entailed at times a significant degree of cooperation with the communist regime.

It may be argued that the behavior of the Polish church in the forty-odd years since the communist seizure of power after World War II has not been heroic but largely opportunistic. I also believe that the time has come to put to rest the myth of the fighting and suffering church, struggling for its survival against overwhelming odds. The supposedly apolitical character of the church is another myth that needs to be scrutinized carefully. All available evidence points to the church being a powerful institution whose influence has ranged far and wide, including that of politics.

It is also clear that the Polish church as an institution has had certain institutional interests that it wanted to safeguard and preserve. It may be suspected that if the church leaders openly acknowledged the presence and importance of these interests, the church’s policy of relative accommodation with the communist regime would generate much less criticism among some of the faithful. It was the opportunistic policy of the church that has created growing resentment and declining popularity among the Polish people who have been accustomed to look at the church for moral leadership, regardless of the price that the church might have to pay for standing up to the regime.
Executive Summary

Poland in April 1994 appears to be a country in the middle of a serious socio-political crisis. Considering that five years ago it was generally perceived as a strong candidate to achieve a successful transfer of power from the communists to the opposition, and that could serve as a model for the other countries in Eastern Europe to follow, the obvious question is what went wrong. This essay attempts to answer that question by focusing on three problems that contributed to the crisis. They were the failure to start reconstructing a civil society, the inability of the ruling elites to overcome the difficulties of the post-communist transition, and the crisis of institution-building. As a result, despite a relatively healthy economy and secure international position, Poland is faced with a need for some drastic action that would put it on the right track and propel it toward the establishment of a stable and viable democracy.
I. THE CHURCH AND THE STATE IN POLAND AFTER WORLD WAR II: 
THE BACKGROUND 
ANDRZEJ KORBONSKI

Introduction

According to a well-known dictionary, a mythology is a body of "ill-founded beliefs held uncritically, especially by an interested group." (1) This definition appears suitable for my purpose which is not to explode myths surrounding the Polish Catholic church but to raise some questions and challenge some conventional wisdoms about the church that have not only become firmly embedded in public consciousness but have also influenced and, at times, dominated Western perception of, and policy toward, Poland. Exploding myths might be fun but it would be too easy. Rather, I hope to provide some fresh insights into the activities of the church and to examine the interaction between it and the state since the end of World War II.

The task at hand is not going to be easy, because of the still incomplete data base and the need to separate fact from fiction. In addition, the study must guard against becoming too polemical since attacking accepted dogmas and revealed truths is a highly controversial task which is likely to generate hostile reaction. The discussion is bound to be criticized by those who believe that raising unpleasant questions about sacred cows such as the Catholic church is counterproductive and that it plays into the hands of the "enemy."

Despite these caveats, I feel that the task is worth doing, if only as the first step in the direction of a more detailed and balanced analysis of political institutions and processes in Poland which heretofore have escaped closer scrutiny or received one-sided treatment. I also believe that it is important to correct some misperceptions that have dominated Western thinking about events in Poland and the role of the Catholic church in these events.

The imagery that had accumulated about the Polish Catholic church has been most impressive. Historically, the church has been viewed as the most important standard bearer of freedom and liberty and as a repository of Polish national traditions and values. Especially during the partitions period (1795-1918), the church has acted as the key instrument of national integration, spearheading the process of nation-building which appeared to have been interrupted at the end of the 18th century, preventing the Polish nation from becoming submerged and/or absorbed by its neighbors, and contributing signaliy to the regaining of Poland's independence in 1918.
During the difficult two decades between the two World Wars, the church stood firmly by the side of the Polish government that was faced with a multitude of problems that frequently defied solution. After 1945, the church from the start became a bastion of opposition to communist rule and in the late 1940's it emerged as a "besieged fortress," a persecuted and martyred institution, valiantly struggling against overwhelming odds to ensure its survival and autonomy. During the forty year period since the communist takeover, the church was led by outstanding individuals who by virtue of their personality and character ended up by competing successfully with the communist leaders for the leadership of the entire Polish nation, despite considerable personal hardships.

As during the partitions time, the church acted as a guardian of Polish national values, obstructing the process of stalinization and sovietization, and as a result it succeeded in making Poland a rather unique member of the Soviet bloc, which enjoyed significant autonomy not only in religious affairs but also in such socio-economic sectors as agriculture. During that time the church has always championed the cause of liberalization, both that which originated from above and that which was initiated at the grass roots level. The impressive growth of political opposition after 1976 could not have taken place without the active support of the church, and the visit of Pope John Paul II to his homeland in the summer of 1979 was probably one of the most important contributing factors to the birth of "Solidarity" a year later.

The Polish Catholic Church: Myth and Reality

Prior to the partitions time, there is really no convincing evidence of the Polish church playing a truly leading role in preventing or delaying the decay and eventual collapse of the Polish state. On the contrary, a good case can be made that in their obsession to make Poland a true antemurale Christianitatis, the church leaders, whose political power has not been inconsiderable, have, in fact, accelerated the process of decline. The very costly wars against the Turks clearly drained the energy and resources of the Polish nation and the commensurate gains, if any, proved to be insignificant. Moreover, the Primate of Poland and the higher clergy who ex officio sat in the Polish senate, proved to be as corrupt and amenable to foreign influences as the rest of the nobility and political establishment. This was particularly true for the Primate who as an interrex exercised royal powers between the elections, and who was only too willing to sell the Polish crown to the highest bidder. In at least one case, two senior Polish bishops were actually hanged during the insurrection of 1794, for being Russian agents.
During the partitions time, there is again no persuasive evidence of the church playing a crucial role as a nation-builder or a repository of traditional Polish values. In fact, the higher, and occasionally the lower clergy often identified themselves with the partitioning powers, which was clearly the case in Austrian-ruled Galicia. The situation was somewhat better in the so-called Congress Kingdom of Poland, which was part of Russia, but even there the role of the church in the anti-Russian uprisings of 1830 and 1963 has been insignificant. To be sure, the position of the church was not helped by the attitude of the Vatican, which clearly sided with the partitioning powers and which did its best to discourage any struggle for independence. The only known case of a high ranking Polish church official being actually arrested and persecuted was that of Archbishop Ledochowski of the Poznan-Gniezno diocese, located in the German controlled part of Poland, but his arrest was part of Bismarck's Kulturkampf and not because of his being a Polish national leader. In 1916, the Archbishop of Warsaw, Kakowski, was made a member of the Regency Council established by the Central powers to prepare a blueprint for an independent Polish state under German and Austrian control, but here again there is no evidence that he had played a major role in furthering Polish national interests.

Even if we accept the notion that the church has been at least partly engaged in preserving the national character of the non-existent Polish state, its cost proved to be very considerable. As a result of launching the notorious slogan, "A Pole ergo a Catholic," the church very quickly became a major source of antisemitism and it remained that way until the present.

As was to be expected, the first democratic Polish constitution of March 1921, granted the Catholic church a privileged status among the other organized religions in the country. Interestingly enough, instead of showing some gratitude to the new state, the Polish church surrendered to the Vatican in the concordat signed in 1925, without properly safeguarding its own and the nation's interests. On the other hand, the church utilized its hegemonic position, especially in the area of education, by furthering antisemitism and discriminating against the other Christian religions. The record shows that the church was not in the forefront of a fight to re-establish democracy in the wake of the 1926 coup but that, in fact, it showed considerable sympathy for right-wing groups. Not surprisingly, its strongest criticism was reserved for the communists and other left-wing groups.
The behavior of the church during World War II, except for the territories annexed by Germany, can hardly be called heroic. The Primate of Poland, Cardinal Hlond, escaped from Poland in September 1939 together with the government, leaving the church leaderless. The reasons behind his escape remain obscure, especially since he did not accompany the government-in-exile to London but remained in freedom in France, except for the last few months of the war when he was interned by the Germans. Even though many Catholic clergymen were executed by the Germans, especially in Western Poland that became incorporated into the Reich, the clergy in Central Poland, known as the Generalgouvernement, was essentially left alone to perform religious duties and was not singled out for prosecution.

Despite the fact that the church in the Generalgouvernement escaped mass persecution, there is no evidence of a major church resistance to, and/or protest against German atrocities against the Jews, except for some monasteries which provided refuge, particularly for Jewish children. The few exceptions, such as the Archbishop Sapihea of Krakow or Reverend Godlewski, the head of a Catholic parish in the Warsaw ghetto, essentially proved the rule.

During the process of the communist takeover of Poland after the war, the church remained largely passive. It did not protest too strongly against flagrant breaches of law by the communists, it did not defend loudly the political opposition and it did not condemn the notorious Kielce pogrom of July 1946. It is quite likely that the passive behavior of the Church was in response to a somewhat benign policy of the communist regime which did its utmost to preserve certain customary rituals involving the church and which did not include church lands in its comprehensive land reform of 1944.

The process of the gradual surrender of the church began in the late 1940s with the state takeover of Catholic schools, welfare and charitable institutions, followed by the seizure of church lands and the abolition of the Catholic youth organizations. Total surrender to the communists took the form of the church-state agreement of April 1950. The agreement was concluded in the face of relatively little political pressure and it took many, including the Vatican, by surprise. As was to be expected, the government’s interpretation of the agreement differed from that of the new Primate, Cardinal Wyszynski, and gradually additional pressure was put on the church. Interestingly enough, the high point in the church-state conflict of the 1950s was reached after the death of Stalin in the arrest and imprisonment of Primate
Wyszynski in September 1953. There is no record of widespread protests by the clergy who took a loyalty oath to the government and remained docile for the next several years.

Following the changeover in October 1956, Wyszynski was released and almost immediately threw his considerable prestige behind the new communist leader, Gomulka. The church’s support proved to be particularly valuable in the parliamentary elections of January 1957, which were intended to show Gomulka’s strength vis-a-vis both the Soviet Union and his hard line opponents within the Polish party. In return, some of the strictest anti-church laws were eliminated.

It is probably no exaggeration to say that between 1957 and 1970, Poland was ruled actually by a duumvirate of the First Secretary and the Primate. Admittedly, the relationship was far from being smooth and the symbiosis was anything but idyllic, as illustrated by the fight about religious instruction in public schools, the sharp conflict in 1965, caused by the well-known conciliatory letter of the Polish bishops to their West German counterparts, and by a similar quarrel a year later on the occasion of the 1000th anniversary of the Polish state which has traditionally been identified with the introduction of Christianity into Poland, which the communists refused to celebrate.

While conflict rather than collaboration prevailed throughout most of the period, the Polish church did not suffer any of the indignities born by the Catholic church in the other East Central European states. Possibly because of that there was a distinctly muted church criticism of, or objection to, the antisemitic witchhunt of 1968 and to the bloody suppression of the worker strikes on the Baltic coast in December 1970.

It appears that the church had no difficulty in accepting the new party leadership following Gomulka’s ouster in 1970 and a new duumvirate of First Secretary Gierek and Primate Wyszynski initiated a true live-and-let-live relationship. Actually, Gierek favored an even closer rapprochement with the church, and when the latter raised some objections to the constitutional revisions introduced by the communists in late 1975, Gierek was willing to compromise. When Primate Wyszynski reached the retirement age of 75, the Polish party urged the Pope to let him continue as the head of the Polish church. The 1970s also witnessed the beginning of direct contacts between the Holy See and Poland with a view of re-
establishing diplomatic relations and party leader Gierek was invited to meet with the Pope Paul VI in the Vatican in December 1977.

Possibly in gratitude for a generally preferential treatment, the church stayed out of politics throughout the 1970s. There is no evidence of the church hierarchy taking the workers' side in the demonstrations of June 1976 and in lending its support to the creation of KOR, the Worker Defense Committee, and other opposition groups. In fact, there is some suspicion that the church was less than enthusiastic about KOR and some of its statements on the subject struck an implicit antisemitic note.

Finally, there is little doubt that the visit of Pope John Paul II to his native land in the summer of 1979 was a watershed event, triggering the birth of "Solidarity" a year later. Nonetheless, the visit can be interpreted less as a result of a tremendous pressure by the church and more as an integral part of Gierek’s attempt to reach a modus vivendi with the church at the time when his own political future was very much at stake.

Conclusion

On the strength of the above brief summary, it may be argued that the behavior of the Polish church in the forty-odd years since the communist seizure of power after World War II has not been heroic but largely opportunistic. I also believe that the time has come to put to rest the myth of the fighting and suffering church, struggling for its survival against overwhelming odds. The supposedly apolitical character of the church is another myth that needs to be scrutinized carefully. All available evidence points to the church being a powerful institution whose influence has ranged far and wide, including that of politics.

It is also clear that the Polish church as an institution has had certain institutional interests that it wanted to safeguard and preserve. It may be suspected that if the church leaders openly acknowledged the presence and importance of these interests, the church's policy of relative accommodation with the communist regime would generate much less criticism among some of the faithful. It was the opportunistic policy of the church that has created growing resentment and declining popularity among the Polish people who have been accustomed to look at the church for moral leadership, regardless of the price that the church might have to pay for standing up to the regime.
NOTES


2. For an excellent analysis of Polish-Jewish relations during the latter partitions period, see Frank Golczewski, Polnisch-Jüdische Beziehungen 1881-1922 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1981).

3. I was told in Warsaw in September 1980 that the decisive vote in favor of the Pope's visit was cast by Stanislaw Kania, at that time the Secretary of the Central Committee in charge of the military, police and church affairs, who in the same month (September 1980) took over from Gierek as the leader of the Polish party.
II: POLAND FIVE YEARS AFTER THE ROUND TABLE

Andrzej Korbonski

Introduction

If, in the middle of January 1994, a visitor from another planet were to descend upon the capital of an East European country, he or she would have been treated to an outburst of anti-Americanism, seldom encountered in the post-World War II history of the region. The anger caused by the refusal of NATO to offer full membership to that country, was accompanied by accusations of betrayal, sellout and a "second Yalta." The idea of Partnership for Peace, announced by President Bill Clinton at a NATO meeting in Brussels in January, was received with contempt as a meaningless gesture and a poor substitute for full NATO membership. In addition, there were dark hints about the revival of a sinister conspiracy between the White House and the Kremlin, directed against Eastern Europe. Even though the NATO decision was a collective one, and although the record showed that some of the key West European members of NATO, such as France, Germany and Great Britain were even more opposed to the idea of expanding the alliance than the United States, the ire of the people, from the president of the republic, through the media down to the person in the street, appeared to be especially focused on the United States as the main villain.

Were our visitor to return some two weeks later, in early February, he or she would have witnessed a rather spectacular street demonstration by tens of thousands of workers marching through the center of the city in protest against the government's economic policy. The demonstrators, who came from all corners of the country, carried signs and shouted slogans, such as "Down with the government," "Down with the communists," and, occasionally, "Down with the Jews. It was really a rather dramatic display of mass dissatisfaction on the part of the working class, clearly out for a face-to-face confrontation with the government.

If the same visitor were to come back for the third time at the end of February, he or she would have been greeted by still another angry outburst, this time directed against Russia. Not only was the Kremlin accused of sabotaging the country's entry into NATO but newspaper headlines and television commentators were openly talking about the revival of Moscovite imperialism, the return to the old hegemonic relationship, the re-establishment of the historic Russian sphere of influence, and the growing military threat on the part of the Kremlin.

The country was Poland, roughly five years after the signing of the historic Round Table agreement in April 1989, which initiated the "domino effect" that ultimately led to the collapse
of communism in Eastern Europe. It was Poland, once again at odds with both the East and
the West, and once again faced with workers' discontent that ominously echoed the tense
atmosphere of 1980-1981. It was a country that outside observers described as "a volcano
before the eruption"¹ and insiders referred to as a country on the road to self-destruction.²

What went wrong? What follows is an attempt to deal with this question, based on the

Poland, five years ago, seemed to have an excellent chance of making it, certainly a
better chance than the other countries in the region. Although, to be sure, its economy was in
worse shape than those of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, in every other respect the country
appeared as a good candidate for a relatively smooth transition. It had a tradition of a
successful anti-communist opposition; a vigorous mass political movement in the form of
Solidarity; a dynamic intellectual elite allied with a working class; a large individual peasantry
which, although politically passive, still retained control over 80% of farm land; a rapidly
growing incipient entrepreneurial class; a powerful and largely autonomous Catholic church;
and a divided, uncertain and hesitant ruling party which had clearly run out of ideas and was
only too willing to find a way of sharing power with the opposition. Altogether then, it was
not surprising that of all the countries in the then-Soviet bloc, it was Poland which was the
first to experiment with the idea of a Round Table, bringing together the government and the
opposition in an effort to arrange for a peaceful transfer of power from the former to the
latter. As is well known, the Polish Round Table in time became a model for similar
negotiations elsewhere in the region.

At this point a certain comment is in order. It concerns the phenomenon of "the
advantage of being the first." History is full of examples showing that a country that is
innovating may reap short term benefits but that in a medium- to long-run these gains tend to
be largely dissipated as other states, learning from the mistakes of the pioneer country, begin
to gain "advantages of being the second." This certainly was the case of Hungary learning
from the mistakes of the Czechoslovak economic reformers of the mid-sixties in preparing their

own reform blueprint a few years later, and in 1989 it was Hungary again that learned some useful lessons from the experience of the Polish Round Table.\(^3\)

Being the first, Poland had no model to emulate and had to innovate by itself. This meant that, on the one hand, the Polish experiment generated some excessively optimistic expectations, not only in the East but also in the West, and, on the other hand, it also suggested that if mistakes were made during the transition period, the Poles had no one to blame but themselves. I mention this to ensure a certain sense of proportion in judging the success or failure of the Polish transition. Too many Western observers have been guilty of undue optimism regarding the transition in Poland: when it did not quite work out, the failures were equally, or even more so, exaggerated.

Turning now to that went wrong in Poland in the past five years, I want to resurrect once again the by now tired or tiresome concept of "communist legacy." The record shows that next to the notions of "transition to democracy," or "post-communist transformation," the term "communist legacy" has been used (or abused) to explain just about everything that has been happening in the former communist world in the past few years. What I want to do here is, in a way to disaggregate the concept and to focus on only three of its components: the failure to embark on the construction of a civil society; the failure to accelerate the creation of a new ruling elite or a political class; and the failure of institution building. All of these failures are obviously inter-related and they all stem from the destruction of the Polish socio-political scene wrought by nearly 45 years of communist rule. The focus will be on politics and society: economic transition deserves a separate treatment and economic issues will be brought into the discussion only when necessary.

**The Absence of Civil Society**

After decades of neglect, social scientists on both sides of the old Iron Curtain, rediscovered the notion of civil society. Despite some serious difficulties with conceptualization, the idea took off with unprecedented speed and soon became generally accepted as the key to solving Eastern Europe's problems with the democratization process.\(^4\)

The concept came into fashion during the emergence of Solidarity in Poland and then

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experienced a triumphant revival in the early 1990s when the presence of civil society was proclaimed as a necessary condition of a successful transition to democracy.

I have argued elsewhere that the concept of civil society, seen as a web of autonomous associations, independent of the state, bringing citizens together in pursuit of their common interests, was not particularly innovative. Still, it has considerable analytical utility in a paradigmatic sense, especially in its focusing on two sets of issues - the public versus private virtues and the concept of citizenship - both of crucial importance for the achievement of a stable democracy.

Looking back at Poland, it may be argued that in its post-World War II history, the only time one could speak of a civil society becoming institutionalized, albeit in a highly embryonic state, was the period 1976-1981. It was the period which witnessed the birth of the Workers Defense Committee (KOR), the Confederacy for Independent Poland (KPN), the Movement for the Protection of Human and Civil Rights (ROPCiO), the Greens, Amnesty International, the Helsinki Watch Committee, the "Flying University," a highly successful samizdat and, to top it all, Solidarity. As mentioned earlier, it was this rather amazing proliferation of autonomous associations that attracted the attention of western scholars who then proceeded to rediscover the idea of civil society.

And yet, as shown by the striking success of martial law in December 1981 in destroying the above network, the emperor had no clothes: the seemingly impressive conglomerate of groups and associations proved to be highly fragile and collapsed like a house of cards under the onslaught of military rule. I would postulate that the two main reasons for the weakness of this quasi civil society was the predominance of private over public virtues and the absence of a fully developed notion of citizenship. Moreover, I am prepared to argue that the post-communist Poland of today still largely exhibits the same characteristics as those of more than a decade ago: there is still a clear hegemony of private virtues and the notion of citizenship is still in its embryonic form.

Briefly, it is generally agreed that the dominant public virtues - tolerance of other people's views, ability to compromise, willingness to enter into association with other fellow citizens, respect for others' ethnic or religious background - are the necessary ingredients of a successful democracy. In contrast, private virtues - distrust of others, unwillingness to compromise, dislike of, and contempt for, other people's ideas, and preference for narrow

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affinity groups at the expense of broadly based associations - make the establishment of a democratic order much more difficult and time-consuming.

Poland in the spring of 1994 strikes me as a society which continues to display the characteristics of an uncivil rather than civil society. Although, on the surface, there exists a most impressive proliferation of voluntary associations of all hues, ranging from gays and greens to a fascist-like lunatic fringe, the public virtues of tolerance, mutual respect and compromise are largely absent. Instead of trying to work together in an effort to find a mutually acceptable solution to a multitude of most pressing problems facing the country today, the various parties, groups and individuals are pursuing their special narrow interests in total disregard of the common good. The associations which more than ten years ago formed the embryonic civil society have been either swept into the dustbin of history or remain as pale shadows of their former selves. Even the Catholic church, which supposedly preaches tolerance and respect for individual rights, has become a tower of intolerance, insisting on protecting its own interests at the expense of others, and contributing to the continued polarization of Polish society.

It may be argued that five years is too brief a period to expect major progress on the road to constructing a true civil society, especially in light of Ralf Dahrendorf’s admonition that the process itself is likely to take three generations. Fair enough, and yet what concerns me is a total lack of interest in this issue on the part of the Polish ruling elite. Listening to the political dialogue full of invectives, innuendoes and insinuations, or watching or reading the mass media which seem to thrive on conflict rather than conciliation, one gets the impression that the political class is perfectly satisfied with the existing state of affairs and does not see any pressing need to initiate a process of what may be called civic education to lay the foundations of a true civil society.

The other aspect of civil society is that of citizenship. It seems to be particularly relevant since the Polish term for civil society is a citizens’ society (spoleczenstwo obywatelskie). The concept of citizenship embraces a set of rights: civil, political and economic. For the purpose at hand I want to focus on the first two, leaving the question of economic rights for another discussion.

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6The most telling albeit a pathetic example is that of Solidarity which in the middle of 1993 voted to bring down the Suchocka cabinet, the last in the series of post-Solidarity governments, only to find itself badly beaten in the September 1993 elections. It is now trying to make up for it by threatening to destabilize the country through a series of wildcat strikes.

7Dahrendorf, Reflections on the Revolution in Europe, p. 93.
It may be argued that historically speaking, the notion of civil rights, meaning the respect for and protection of individual liberties and freedoms, has not been well developed in Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe or, for that matter, in some of the countries in Western Europe such as Germany. It was part and parcel of the traditional political culture that emphasized respect for authority and stressed individual obligations rather than rights.

The situation in today's Poland in this respect can only be described as bizarre. In the absence of a post-communist constitution and in the presence of a dilapidated and often corrupt legal system, many groups and individuals interpret their civil rights as giving them license to engage in all kinds of questionable activities. While I would hesitate to call the present situation legal anarchy, one look at the daily press or television news suggests that the country is well on the way to a serious breakdown of law and order. What is rather horrifying about all this is that no one seems to care, certainly not the ruling elite whose business it should be to see that laws are obeyed.

While one could argue that the breakdown of authority and rising lawlessness is not confined to Poland, there is an aspect of the whole issue of civil rights there that raises serious questions. It has to do with the treatment of the former communist ruling class by the successive post-solidarity governments. What I have in mind here is the policy of the so-called "thick line" proclaimed in 1989 by the first non-communist government of Prime Minister Mazowiecki. The apparent rationale for it was the avoidance of witch hunting that would have destabilized the country, and the policy of "let bygones be bygones" was presumably partly motivated by the basically insurmountable task of decommunization and partly by a newly discovered respect for individual rights.

From its very beginning the decision proved highly controversial and contentious and it contributed to creating still another schism in Polish society. A case can be made that in the circumstances it was the only logical thing to do and yet by hindsight the decision not to penalize the members of the former elite was poorly defined, was taken too hastily and it went much too far in offering blanket forgiveness to the communists. The Poles could proudly point to the fact that unlike in the former East Germany not a single university professor was purged for his party membership, and that unlike the Czech parliament the Polish sejm refused to proclaim the Polish communist party to have been a criminal organization. But the exaggerated emphasis on protecting the individual rights of Poland's former rulers led to a situation that as of now only a single high secret police official, responsible for countless deaths and tortures of
political prisoners, has been brought to trial, which has now been dragging on for months,\(^8\) and that, moreover, according to a draft law, the victims of communist persecution may end up enjoying fewer retirement benefits than their persecutors.\(^9\) So much for individual rights and respect for law and justice.

What about political rights as a part of the concept of citizenship? Here I would include, above all, the right to participate freely in political processes, such as elections, and the right to join political parties and interest groups. Here again, the record is rather dismal. It shows, for example, that unlike the Czechoslovak voters in 1992 or the Ukrainian voters in 1994, the Polish electorate did not rush to the voting booths in overwhelming numbers and that the only country that could claim an even lower elections turnout was Hungary.\(^10\) This is clearly a telling testimony to a low level of interest in politics on the part of an average Pole and can be explained in two ways. I agree partly with Ken Jowitt who once again blames the "Leninist legacy" as being responsible for the creation of a "ghetto political culture" which perceives politics as something dangerous that ought to be avoided. "Political involvement meant 'trouble'."\(^11\) I would also concur with George Schopflin who focuses on a low level of political literacy on the part of the East European citizenry, resulting from what he calls "social infantilism" practiced by the communists throughout more than forty years of their rule.\(^12\)

The act of voting under the communists became, over time, a ritualized primitive gesture which even the unsophisticated voters ultimately considered as utterly meaningless. Given the chance of not casting their ballots, they took advantage of their newly found freedom and stayed home in record numbers. In the Polish case this act of defiance was reinforced by the belief that regardless of the outcome of the elections nothing of substance is likely to change, by the continuing mistrust of the government, which did little or nothing to narrow the chasm

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\(^8\)Ironically, the record of communist governments in this respect appears better than that of non-communist ones. At least, following the 1955 disclosures of the abuse of power by the secret police, several high-ranking officials were brought to trial and sentenced to prison. This is yet to happen in post-communist Poland.


between the rulers and the ruled, and by an excessive, even by East European standards, proliferation of political parties which made the choice difficult. As a result, instead of being a homo sovieticus, an average Pole was rapidly becoming a homo apoliticus.\textsuperscript{13} This aversion to politics may have also been responsible for the strange phenomenon of "collective amnesia" which enabled the Polish voters to support the former communists only a few years after inflicting upon them the rather devastating defeats of the 1989 and 1990 elections.

To conclude, it is clear that during the five year period since the conclusion of the Round Table negotiations in Warsaw in April 1989, little or nothing has been done to lay foundations for a healthy and vigorous civil society. Private rather than public virtues continued to play a dominant role in shaping public consciousness, and the notion of citizenship, an equally important factor in shaping a democratic future was either distorted or abused or, at best, becoming irrelevant. Considerably more could have been done in this respect and the blame for neglecting it can be laid squarely at the feet of the Polish ruling elites.

The Failure of the Political Class

According to the conventional wisdom prevailing in the West on the eve of the Round Table that began formally in February 1989, Poland was in much better shape than the other members of the Warsaw Pact to achieve a smooth transfer of power from the communists to the non-communist opposition. One of the key factors was the presence of what seemed to be a highly sophisticated and experienced elite or political class, well tested in regularly challenging and occasionally defeating the communist rulers.

Whereas elsewhere in the former Soviet bloc the communists effectively succeeded in atomizing the respective societies and in destroying almost completely all vestiges of independent initiative, the Stalinist system which accomplished all that, appeared considerably less oppressive and onerous in Poland than elsewhere in the region. Regardless of the reasons for the "soft" treatment, one of its results was the presence, in 1989, of a remarkable counter-elite which managed to survive the communist rule. Moreover, many of its members were hardly newcomers to political battles: some of them acquired their spurs already in October 1956, others in March 1968, and still others in December 1970.

\textsuperscript{13}It may be speculated that this phenomenon may have been at the back of President Walesa's mind when he proposed, prior to the 1993 elections, the formation of a Non-Party Bloc for the Support of the Reforms (BBWR) which tried, albeit without much success, to capitalize on the voters' apparent disgust with petty party politics.
Important as that was, there was still another crucial consideration that strengthened the counter-elite that was about to face the communists across the Round Table. Whereas in such countries as Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Hungary the opposition leaders were almost entirely recruited from the professional and literary intelligentsia to the exclusion of workers and peasants, in Poland the opposition intellectuals succeeded in building bridges, first to the industrial working class in 1976 in the form of the Workers Defense Committee, and then, a few years later, to the peasants by way of the so-called "Rural Solidarity." To be sure, these were tenuous bridges whose strength and importance could be (and were) exaggerated, yet, especially in contrast to the other countries in Eastern Europe, the Polish anti-communist political class appeared much more experienced and broadly based, and because of that it gave rise to some unduly optimistic expectations. The communists' agreement to the idea of starting a dialogue with the opposition was also interpreted as indicating the strength of the counter-elite.

Much has been written about the Round Table and its proceedings and I have nothing to add to it. It has become fashionable, especially within the Polish Right, to see the Round Table as a major defeat for the opposition and a victory for the communists who seemingly managed to hoodwink their interlocutors into accepting a less than a favorable deal. While I do not agree with this wholesale criticism, which included references to some "secret deals," I am afraid that there is more than a grain of truth in the accusation that the opposition leaders did not do as well as was to be expected.

The fact is that despite the lengthy experience in opposing the regime, the counter-elite arrived at the Round Table essentially unprepared and without much of a vision of its own. Considering that many of its members have been engaged in fighting the communists for decades, one would expect them to develop at least a framework or a blueprint of a future non-communist Poland, and yet they came to the conference empty handed. It may be guessed that over the years their attention was focused primarily on matters of sheer survival and that their preoccupation with purely existential problems precluded them from engaging in planning for the future. There was one significant exception, illustrated by the program of Solidarity proclaimed in 1981 but the imposition of martial law put the whole issue way down on the list of priorities.\textsuperscript{14} In the absence of a program or a political formula, the Solidarity leaders could

\textsuperscript{14} There was another significant exception, that of the Balcerowicz plan. Apparently, the work on the detailed outline of the plan, which was enthusiastically accepted by the Polish Sejm in 1989 and which is still basically adhered to today, got started by Balcerowicz and his colleagues at the Main School of Planning and Statistics in Warsaw in the late 1970s. Leszek Balcerowicz, \textit{800 dni-Szok kontrolowany} (Warsaw: BGW, 1992), pp. 1ff.
do no better than to react to communist proposals, such as the re-establishment of the office of the president or the resurrection of the Senate as the second parliamentary chamber.

It was all rather sad. Instead of a confident and assertive group, the opposition leaders seemed to kow-tow to the communists. They appeared to be almost incredulous to be accepted as equal partners and too stunned to engage in real bargaining. They clearly overestimated the communist strength and, not surprisingly, were afraid of a hostile reaction of the Kremlin. This, in itself, was rather amazing: considering their long experience in challenging the communists, they should have known that the decision to start the Round Table could not have been made without Moscow's *imprimatur*. Besides, there were plenty of signals suggesting that the Soviet Union favored the negotiations. All this was ignored and all the opposition apparently wanted was to achieve legitimacy at all cost, regardless of the less than perfect final outcome of the negotiations. In this respect the contrast with the Hungarian Round Table was quite striking.

But worse was to come. It is a well-established fact that the victory of Solidarity in the June 1989 elections took both sides by surprise. But here again, instead of capitalizing on their victory, the new ruling elite appeared hesitant and uncertain, and rather than push confidently ahead and dismantle the old communist system, it engaged in a series of deals and compromises with its defeated enemy, including the previously mentioned "thick line" which came to haunt them a few years later. It soon became clear that the new elite was simply not up to the task of governing the country and that were it up to them, they would have been more comfortable in the role of a loyal opposition. But, alas, it was not to be.

The events that followed, including the disintegration of Solidarity, could have been predicted and were probably inevitable. What was not inevitable was the behavior of the new political class which to this day does not seem to have learned anything from its earlier experiences, even despite its electoral defeat last September. Let me illustrate.

There were 57 Round Table negotiators who met on February 6, 1989: 29 of them represented the communist government and its allies, 25 represented the opposition and the remaining three were delegated by religious organizations. Today, five years later, 13 Solidarity leaders, or about one half of their original strength are politically active, either as Sejm deputies or as journalists or commentators, whereas only four of the communists are still around, of whom two (Kwasniewski and Miller) are leaders of the Social Democratic Alliance.

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15I find some historical analogy between that attitude and the attitude of the German SPD after the proclamation of the Weimar Republic in November 1918, when the Socialists most reluctantly took over the reigns of government in Berlin.
(SLD) which won the September 1993 elections. The main Round Table was accompanied by a series of smaller sub-tables focused on concrete political, social and economic issues but I suspect that if their membership were to be taken into account, it would not have affected the final result to any significant degree. And that result was that the Solidarity elite ended up dominating the Polish political scene from September 1989 through September 1993, or four out of the five year period under discussion. It follows that this elite bears considerable responsibility for what has happened in the country under their rule.

And it is not a pretty picture. It is, after all, the Solidarity or post-Solidarity political class that contributed not only to the split within the movement itself but also to the virtual demise of the organization and of its ethos which made Poland of the early 1980s a model to be emulated. Worse still, the same elite destroyed the bridges to the working class and the peasantry that it took a long time to build. They were also responsible for the excessive fragmentation of Poland’s political life and the proliferation of political parties which had neither a program nor a membership but served mostly as vehicles to satisfy the egos of their individual leaders. Instead of learning from their mistakes, they continued being arrogant, power hungry and increasingly remote from the rest of Polish society, strongly convinced of their righteousness.

They were also uninterested or unwilling to listen to outside advice. In sharp contrast to post-communist Czechoslovakia and Hungary, whose leaders jumped at the chance of enlisting the help of their emigre countrymen in the West, the Polish political class refused to do so. Despite the presence of numerous emigre specialists in various walks of life, only too willing to help, only a very small handful was actually approached. It is hard to tell whether it was the sheer arrogance of the political class or its insecurity and fear of being threatened by the emigres, but the fact remains that a useful opportunity was unnecessarily lost.

Even the shock of the September 1993 electoral defeat did not seem to matter much. For a while it appeared as if the lust for power would persuade the post-Solidarity elite to join the victorious communists in a coalition government. Ultimately, however, wiser heads prevailed and the post-Solidarity elites represented in the Democratic Union (UD) and the Labor Union (UP) decided to remain in the opposition.

In this respect one has to give credit to the current ruling elite, recruited from among the former communists and their allies, the Peasant Party (PSL). Considering the situation they were in five years ago, their comeback has been close to remarkable. The former communists,

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in particular, managed rather successfully to shed the ballast of the past, which included the purging, voluntary or not, of most of their past leaders, and to present an attractive new image to the voters as a young, pragmatic and dynamic new party. After only six months in power it is too early to speculate on their future performance but their record as a parliamentary opposition in the past few years gives some ground for optimism. In contrast, the behavior of their coalition partners, the Peasant Party, leaves much to be desired. In some respects it resembles the behavior of the post-Solidarity elite: they are arrogant, power hungry and visionless. What makes it worse is that they are also short of talent, extremely parochial and obviously eager to assert their hegemony over their communist coalition partners in repayment for the indignities suffered as a puppet party or a transmission belt during forty years of communist rule.

So much for the top elite. Unfortunately, the situation within the middle-ranking and lower echelon elite is probably even worse. To some extent it is understandable: a five year period is not long enough for a total overhaul of the administrative apparatus. Furthermore, the policy of the "thick line" militated against a wholesale purge of old personnel. On top of that, there was obviously a shortage of qualified replacements. Still, even in those circumstances more could have been done and the situation in the Polish Foreign Ministry can serve as an example. The record shows that the personnel policy conducted by the minister in charge, who survived the five successive post-Solidarity governments, has been close to being atrocious, and the anti-American and anti-Russian outbursts, mentioned at the outset, were to a large extent the result of the naivete, low level of professionalism and basic lack of knowledge on the part of the ministry. The excuse offered that there were simply no qualified people to draw upon sounds hollow. While the situation in the Foreign Ministry may be an extreme one, there is evidence that things are not that much better elsewhere, including the Presidential Office, the National Security Bureau, and the Ministries of the Interior and National Defense.

A word about the church elite. The Catholic church was one of the chief beneficiaries of the communist downfall and it also gained from the demise of Solidarity with which it has competed during the 1980s for the leadership of the struggle against communism. With Solidarity in the doldrums, the church, its status and its frequent disclaimers to the contrary, plunged into politics head on, trying to recoup some of the losses it suffered in the past. Its gains were quite spectacular and included re-instatement of religious instruction in schools.

\textsuperscript{17}While teaching a doctoral seminar in Warsaw in the winter semester of 1993-94, I was told by my students that their chances of finding jobs in the Foreign Ministry or other related agencies were practically nil because of the extremely slow turnover, with members of the old nomenklatura blocking most of the positions.
tough anti-abortion legislation and imposition of the so-called Christian values on mass media. In this process, the church elite headed by the Primate and the episcopate became de facto an important component of the Polish political class, sharing the same characteristics with its lay counterpart and, in some respects, becoming even more arrogant, assertive and intolerant than the rest of the political class.

What emerges from the above is a picture of an elite or a political class which instead of attending to matters of strategic national importance, has been behaving irresponsibly, engaging in personal squabbles, fighting for individual privileges and benefits, and pursuing narrow special interests to the detriment of national concerns. Its selfishness, egoism and narrow-mindedness have been rampant, and matters of vital national importance are habitually neglected. Despite the dire need of new talent, elite circulation is blocked and as a result bright individuals turn away from political and governmental careers, seeking advancement in private business and professions. As a result, the political class is stagnating and offers little hope for an early change.

Finally, it is also the post-Solidarity elite that is guilty of contributing to the third crisis under discussion, that of the failure of institution building.

The Failure of Institutions

Poland in the spring of 1994 presented an image of a political system in disarray. The President has been quarreling with both the government and the Sejm, and the political discourse was gradually changing into name calling that brought little honor and respect to both sides. Within the cabinet, the fragile truce between the two coalition partners, reached in the wake of the so-called Borowski affair, appeared on the verge of unraveling. Moreover, for weeks the country had no finance minister as the President vetoed the latest candidate. There was also a major conflict between the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Defense regarding Poland’s policy toward Russia, with a representative of the latter contradicting a rather conciliatory approach advocated by the former. Then there was the divisive issue of the concordat with the Vatican which promised further to polarize the parliament and the society at large. Next, there was the highly respected head of the Constitutional Tribunal complaining basically of the functional illiteracy of the Sejm and, finally, there was the Minister of the

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Interior refusing to open secret files of the past misdeeds of the secret police. When one adds to it the continuing strike threats being issued by Solidarity and the growing corruption within the police and the judiciary, the overall picture appears dismal. Perhaps the only institution that managed to stay above the political infighting was the Polish armed forces, although even here there were growing voices advocating, so far unsuccessfully, more civilian control over the military.

I think that by now there is a considerable agreement to the effect that the single major source of the institutional squabbles has been and is the absence of a constitution that would clearly define the relationship between the three branches of the government and spell out the procedures for solving jurisdictional conflicts. The existing, so-called "Little Constitution" of 1992 is little more than a fig leaf and, as illustrated by the above examples, is itself more of a problem than a solution. Thus, a question can be raised why after five years of post-communism Poland still has no new fully-fledged constitution and has to rely to some extent on its Stalinist constitution of 1952.

I remember being in Poland in September 1989 at the time of the swearing-in of the first post-communist government, when the discussion focused on the need to come up with a new constitution as rapidly as possible. The process of constitution-writing seemed to present no problem. After all, the Polish Sejm in March 1921 managed to pass a constitution which still ranks high among constitutional lawyers and it did so at the time when the country was barely tasting the fruits of independence after 123 years of captivity, not to mention the narrow victory over the Bolsheviks. The universally accepted deadline for the new constitution was to be May 3, 1992, marking the 200th anniversary of the "glorious" constitution of May 3, 1792. Obviously, the deadline was not kept and the next question is, why not?

As suggested by one of Poland's foremost constitutional experts, the two main, interrelated obstacles on the road to a new constitution were the question of having the draft, prepared by a constitutional commission, approved by a two-third majority of the Sejm, and then gaining popular acceptance of the final product.20

By now, there is also considerable agreement that it was the Sejm elected in June 1989 that had the best chance of producing a decent constitution, but the "contractual" parliament, conscious of its limited legitimacy, failed to do so. The next Sejm, elected in 1991, was too fragmented to generate the necessary two-thirds vote and it succeeded only in passing the previously mentioned "Little Constitution" regulating the relationship between the executive

and legislative branches. The present coalition that emerged from the 1993 elections has the constitutional majority that could approve a new charter but here a new obstacle made its unexpected appearance. It was a claim that the current Sejm was not truly democratic since, as a result of the new electoral law, almost one-third of the electorate, representing the right side of the political spectrum was essentially disfranchised.

This is clearly a disingenuous argument as no parliament in the world has ever been truly representative. It is even more so, considering that in September 1993 close to 50% of eligible voters refused to cast their ballot. Still, regardless of the validity of the argument, it represents another delay in solving the constitutional crisis that has been haunting the country for the past several years.

The key question here is whether Poland is to be governed by a presidential or a parliamentary system. Without going into the merit of each of them, until a decision is made, the country is bound to be treated to a spectacle of a guerrilla warfare between the President and the Sejm.21 With the presidential elections approaching and the current incumbent apparently eager to repeat his 1990 victory, the intensity of the conflict is likely to escalate, further weakening the institutional fabric of the country.

Needless to say, the biggest casualty will probable be the Sejm, which instead of dealing with the multitude of strategic issues, gets caught up in the increasingly personalized quarrels between the President and the leaders of the former communists. An already complex situation is becoming even more complicated by the growing suspicion of an implicit alliance between the President and the current Peasant Party Prime Minister, eager to enlist presidential help in establishing his ascendance over his communist partners.22 The ultimate result may be a steady descent of the Sejm into immobilism, impotence and, ultimately, irrelevance. This has already happened to the Senate which, according to all predictions, is going to disappear from the scene once a new constitution is finally passed.

So much for the legislative branch. The situation in the executive and judicial branches is not much better. The individual cabinet ministers have all been members of the post-Solidarity elite, which has already been discussed. One of the early cherished ideas entertained by that elite was the creation of a Western-type professional civil service, replacing the notorious nomenklatura. The record shows that none of these ambitious plans have materialized and in


some government agencies hardly a dent has been made in this respect. To make things worse, the new government has reversed the earlier trend by making the central and local bureaucracy even more politicized than before, as shown by the rapid replacement of regional administrators by often inexperienced political appointees. The fact that the chief beneficiary of this turnover is the Peasant Party presents still another manifestation of its growing domination of its Social Democratic allies. The same seems to be holding true for the judiciary which, moreover, suffers from an acute shortage of qualified personnel.

The only other institution which requires a comment is the church. The previously mentioned arrogant and overbearing behavior of the church elites was bound, sooner or later, to affect the public image of the church. The unseemly haste and secrecy that accompanied the signing of the concordat in 1993 further reduced the esteem in which the Catholic church has been held by the public and to no one's surprise, the church was one of the major losers in the September 1993 elections, despite trying to maintain a relatively low profile. The various conciliatory gestures recently undertaken by the episcopate did little to improve the church's image which continued to decline.23

Thus, there is little doubt that in the spring of 1994 Poland is suffering from a major institutional crisis that is threatening to undermine the still relatively fresh foundations of the democratic system. Together with the failure to stimulate the growth of civil society and the failure of the political class to provide an efficient leadership, the crisis is likely to escalate and the question is, what can be done to stop the rot?

Conclusion

The above is such a melancholy story that I may be accused of presenting a highly biased, distorted and prejudiced picture of the Polish situation. After all, the state of affairs in the other post-communist countries in Eastern Europe is no different and mostly even worse than in Poland. The presence of a fully developed civil society is a rare luxury that only a very few countries in the world can enjoy. One finds selfish and corrupt elites everywhere, including such bastions of democracy as the United States and Germany, not to mention Italy. The institutional crisis is hardly confined to Poland, the crisis of authority and law and order, whether personal or institutional, has become a global phenomenon. If true, then Poland in early 1994 should not be singled out as an exception but simply viewed as a country suffering

the pains associated with the process of socio-political and economic development and modernization.

The reason for my rather critical assessment of Poland’s rocky progress on the road to democracy was mentioned at the outset. It had to do with a set of overly optimistic assumptions and expectations regarding the country’s relative point of departure in the process of systemic transformation.\textsuperscript{24} The endogenous variables have already been discussed but the exogenous factors also appeared to favor a smooth transition. The country was not in conflict with its neighbors and for the first time in many years or even centuries it had secure borders. While the process of the withdrawal of the Russian occupation army took longer than anticipated, unlike most of the countries in the region, Poland was essentially a homogenous state without having to deal with a highly vexing problem of ethnic minorities. While economically Poland was in a worse situation than its neighbors to the west and south, it had one major advantage over them in the form of an embryonic private entrepreneurial class with considerable capital accumulated in the flea markets of Istanbul, Vienna and Berlin, which could prove most useful in the process of transition from a centrally planned system to a private market economy. All of these factors combined to create an image of a country ready to take off in the democratic direction.

Admittedly, it was a somewhat distorted picture and I tried to throw some light on the reasons behind the distortion. If the analysis has any merit the final question concerns the ability of the country’s elites to get back on the right track and to pick up where they left off five years ago. I do not have a ready answer to that and I can only hope that the common sense and the political instinct that guided Poland to become the first serious challenger of the communist rule, and a model to be emulated by others, will once again re-assert itself to lead the country out of the crisis it has found itself at the present time.