

Grim reality under Jaruzelski: what it means to live as a vassal

by Tadeusz Rejtan: Part II of a series

The ugliest feature of life in Jaruzelski's Poland is that, within five years, the outlook of the Polish population has shifted to one of deep cultural pessimism. Hardly anyone inside Poland lives with any hope for the future of the nation. The attitudes common to the past quarter century of cultural and moral degeneration in the West—living for individual gratification and for the present—have taken root in Poland.

This is not merely due to the political repression which began with Jaruzelski's December 1981 proclamation of martial law. Russian repression techniques are far more clever. Co-existing with the integration of Poland's industrial economy, infrastructure, and energy sector into the Soviet Union, and the savage repression of any organized political opposition, is virtually complete "freedom" to achieve individual gratification and degenerate hedonistic desires.

Concretely, Poles can travel to the West. The "troublesome" part of the population thus has the opportunity to defect—which tens of thousands do each year. Besides the political benefit of this emigration, the refugee wave helps the regime to evade the totally hopeless housing crisis. In 1985, the Jaruzelski regime admitted that it would take another 10-15 years before enough apartments could be built to guarantee every Polish family their own apartment. Mass emigration, which contains population growth in Russia's largest Roman Catholic neighbor, and alleviates the regime's housing shortage, is definitely in Russia's interest.

The mass travel of Poles to the West and heavy purchases of Western consumer goods, have created by far the biggest—and most open—black market in Eastern Europe. Buying and selling Western products in Poland has become a national pastime. The "dream" of becoming a *zloty* millionaire has in many cases replaced the earlier dreams of national revival and political freedom. This need not be the case for the future, but, unfortunately, has become present-day reality in Poland.

Poisoned by the collapse of investment

Poland under Jaruzelski has witnessed a collapse in investments to modernize its largely outdated industry. Every year the portion of industry which is obsolete increases. Be-

sides the obvious effects on product quality and labor productivity, this situation has plunged Poland into a very real environmental crisis. Poland, as a Russian colony, has an air and water pollution nightmare.

A recent report by the Polish Science Academy on the chemical pollution of the environment warned of an impending ecological holocaust. Already in 1983, the European Environmental Commission had rated Poland as the most polluted country in Europe. The Commission pointed out that the degree of poisoning of air, water, and soil is in no way related to the degree of industrialization of the country. It is not industry, but the system which, by adopting Soviet-dictated investment policies which reject modernization, necessarily pollutes.

The key industrial regions of Poland—Upper Silesia, the Legnice region of Silesia, the bay of Gdansk, the Krakow area—have become unfit for human existence. Leaving aside nitrogen and sulfur dioxide rates, the highest in Europe if not in the world, the lead content of fruit and vegetables threatens the population with massive lead poisoning. Whereas the maximum dose considered tolerable by health authorities is 3 milligrams per week, in some areas, salad contains 230 mg of lead per kilogram, cabbage 30, parsley 113, etc.

According to the Academy report: "In the junior high-schools of Upper Silesia, an alarming increase in the number of retarded children has been observed, and this can be directly linked to the increased quantity of heavy elements, especially lead, in the surrounding environment and in food-stuffs."

The state of the food processing industry is such that food poisoning and gastrointestinal infections have taken on epidemic proportions. Shortages of detergents and soap make maintaining a minimal level of hygiene—not only in the food processing and catering sector, but also in hospitals—almost impossible. Regularly, infants die in hospitals because of unsanitary conditions. And then, there is a chronic shortage of medicine and drugs.

The following figures on Polish life expectancy need no comment. According to the *Report on the Demographic Situation of Poland*, mortality is rising. It has reached levels

similar to those of the early 1950s. Life expectancy is declining: A 15-year-old boy today will have a shorter life span than a 15-year-old in 1956. Men between the ages of 30 and 40 have a life expectancy two years shorter than 30 years ago. Also significant is the very high discrepancy between male and female mortality. The discrepancy reaches 8-8.5 years as compared to less than 6 in Spain, another sad European record for Poland. Children born in 1980 will live statistically six years less than in most other European countries. The infant mortality rate is nearly three times as high as in the most developed European countries. But the most worrisome factor is the increase of mortality rates: 1984 and 1985 were the worst years since the end of the war in that respect. Is this the reason for Gorbachov's grinning when he delivered his speech at the Polish Party Congress?

With this as reality, it is no wonder that the population shows no enthusiasm for the blood, sweat, and tears program the Party and Jaruzelski have to offer.

This subjective factor represents one of the major "objective" reasons for the incapability of the communist regime to turn around the situation: To quote again from Ryszard Bugaj's article (cited in Part I):

"Sociological surveys contribute an explanation to the lack of improvement in the efficiency of the economy. We refer to such attitudes and features of social consciousness as: pessimism in the evaluation of the economy's future and skepticism about whether the government acts efficiently to overcome the crisis. Official opinion polls show that as many as half of the people surveyed think that the government does not undertake actions which could prevent a new crisis, and that up to 64% think that the policy followed up to now does not create the preconditions for coming out of the crisis. The state of social consciousness cannot but have an influence on the behavior of the workforce."

Pessimism drowned in vodka, drugs

This feeling of hopelessness and helplessness is the main cause behind the surge in alcohol consumption. Vodka drinking is reaching Russian proportions. In 1983, the statistical Pole (including newborn babies, children, and teetotalers) drank over 10 liters of vodka (between 40% and 50% alcohol) compared to 6 liters in 1960. That same year, 11% of the average Polish family's income was spent on Vodka (twice as much as 20 years ago). Imagine an American family earning \$20,000 a year, where \$2,200 is spent on bourbon or scotch. Since 15% of the government's revenue comes from the sale of spirits—three times more than 20 years ago—one can figure out how sincere its "anti-alcoholism" campaigns are. Here again, imagine 15% of the American federal budget revenues coming from taxes on alcohol sales. Polmos, the state liquor monopoly, consistently rates first in the "500" list of Polish state corporations.

But, as Stanislaw Nowak (probably the pen name for the former chairman of the Warsaw Sociological Association) writes in the underground monthly *Kontakty*:

"It is not only alcoholism that is a problem. Psychiatrists have warned that the incidence of nervous disorders is increasing. Of these, the most widespread . . . have as their central symptom the feeling that life is without sense or meaning. In some cases this produces psychosomatic disorders, and it seems that the occurrence of organic symptoms that clearly have a mental origin is notably increasing. . . . The non-satisfaction of many of the needs of the population, besides the significant deterioration in quality of medical aid . . . have produced as a side-effect, a large number of symptoms of deterioration of the nation's physical health. This factor has, in turn, affected the mental health of society as a whole, which indirectly intensifies further the negative effects of the crisis, to the extent that the very biological existence of our nation is threatened."

This process affects youth the most. *Tygodnik Mazowsze*, the underground weekly of Solidarnosc for the Warsaw region, reporting on the conclusions of an independent academic panel, writes: "The sociologists spoke about young people in dramatic terms. . . . Martial law and the economic collapse have made young people helpless, have caused atrophy of will power, and a disappearance of basic signs of activity. . . . Young people turn away from the world in fear for their own future and that of their country. . . . The generation of young people who arrived too late for the Gierek era (the 1971-76 period of relative growth), and for self-realization during the Solidarnosc period, is the first generation in Poland's history that neither believes nor hopes for a better life."

Another Warsaw underground monthly, *Vacat*, reports: "Drug abuse is spreading, both in the form of hard drugs, which have brought thousands of young people to total physical destruction, if not death, as well as soft ones, which result in physical dependency and personality destruction. There is a frightening development of drug-dependency among children; glue sniffing is spreading in high schools. Poland is becoming one of the countries in the world where drug abuse represents a dangerous threat. The response is minimal. It sometimes seems that the authorities consider the self-destruction of the young generation a lesser evil than its non-conformist activities.

"The mildest form of mass dependency, which is nevertheless destructive to youthful ambition, is the plague of youth music. Punks and others of that ilk claim that their lifestyle is a protest against enslavement, an act of defiance and a manifestation of their personality, but this form of negation is mainly self-negation, tantamount to a capitulation before the Reds, who could not care less about the infantile noises made by pop idols. What counts for the Reds is the fact that a majority of their potential opponents dull their senses with a noise with which they try to drown their complaints about the adult world."

This should be a clear warning to those who rejoice at the spreading of this evil kind of "Western" influence in the countries of Eastern Europe.