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THE PERMEABILITY OF THE “IRON CURTAIN”: THE POLISH CATHOLIC CHURCH AS A FORCE OF DISSENT IN COMMUNIST POLAND

The article aims to examine the case of the Polish People's Republic during the Cold War, with a particular emphasis on the Catholic Church as the central institution of resistance to communist rule. Despite systematic pressure and the promotion of state atheism by the communist authorities, the Polish Catholic Church maintained its role as a spiritual center, a source of moral authority, and a key actor in shaping cultural, social, and political life. By doing so, it emerged as the most significant competitor to the state in the spheres of ideology and social influence. Along with other institutions and phenomena such as national identity, intellectual elites, the diaspora, culture, and trade union movements, the Polish Catholic Church contributed to the permeability of the “Iron Curtain”, the gradual erosion of the communist regime, and represented the core of the suppressed but still active civil society of Poland. The case of Poland demonstrates the broader role of religious institutions in preserving national identity and fostering collective resistance under authoritarian socialism.

The analysis of this paper employs a multidisciplinary approach that integrates historical, political, and cultural perspectives in order to assess the Church's position within Polish society and its impact on the weakening of the totalitarian system.

Keywords: totalitarianism, simple and closed systems, Iron Curtain, Poland, catholic church, national identity, civil society.

Introduction

The phenomenon of the ‘Iron Curtain’ is an essential characteristic of totalitarianism as a system moving in the direction of internal socio-political simplification and, accordingly, to relative closure and isolation from an unpredictable and complex environment.

According to the generally accepted definition, totalitarianism is a type of political system under which the state exercises complete (total) control and regulation over public and private life. The main historical examples of totalitarian systems are German Nazism and Soviet and Chinese (Mao Zedong era) communism. At first glance, the ideology of Nazism and Soviet communism seems to be two antagonistic doctrines. Having essential distinguishing features, they were

politically represented by polar opposite forces – extreme right and extreme left political parties, respectively. However, despite the radical rejection of each other, both Nazism and communism were characterized by similarities in the methods of functioning of internal institutions. They both destroyed personal freedom, individuality, and were also distinguished by a high level of external aggressiveness.

The essence of totalitarianism is an attempt to turn a complex socio-economic organism into a simple system through unification, that is, through the destruction of diversity as a basic characteristic of a complex system. It makes sense to assert that by its nature, the totalitarian system, in the process of its strengthening, tends to destroy various social and civil institutions in which it sees a threat to its domination. So, the essence of totalitarianism is the curtailment (ideally, complete destruction) of institutional diversity.

The totalitarian system destroys multi-party system and a civil society. It eliminates the diversity of views (including religious), and replaces it with an ideology which is the only correct view. This also means unfree mass media which work for propaganda. Ideology permeates the entire system of education and science. Ideology permeates art and culture, which are also intended to serve as tools of propaganda.

Even if the constitution formally enshrines freedom of religion, the latter becomes an ideological competitor of the official ideology. At the same time, the church is considered either as an enemy and must be destroyed, or it also begins to serve the existing regime to one degree or another. National identity also becomes a competitor of the dominant ideology explicitly or implicitly – and the concept of 'national' acquires a completely new meaning.

Marxism and the negation of complexity. A totality approach means non-differentiation, i.e. it denies social complexity. Under totalitarianism, a huge group of very different people are declared enemies. For example, the right wing (fascists/Nazis) considered the following groups to be “enemies”: Jews, communists, and those who were labeled as “inferior.” The leftists (communists) considered representatives of the church, the so-called “bourgeois” classes, and ‘nationalists’ to be enemies, who, in their view, were destroying the monolith of “proletarian internationalism”. However, this kind of generalization with the stigma of enemies echoes the Marxist theory of class struggle. In fact, the Marxist theory of socio-economic formations is a view of society as a simple organism consisting of only two antagonistic classes. On the one hand, his approach is an example of a distorted, because it is too simplified, interpretation of social history. On the other hand, the ideal of the Marxist view is a system that is even simpler, since communism implies the absence of classes (in fact social differentiation) at all. In other words, if, for example, the capitalist society in Marx's imagination were to be depicted with paints on a canvas, then this picture would look like a propaganda poster, since it would not have halftones and shades, but only a few colors such as black, white or/and red.

A simple system as a closed one. The totalitarian system, in its pure form, is not only simple but also closed in essence. The fact that the totalitarian system is essentially closed was eloquently asserted by Karl Popper in the very title of his work 'The Open Society and Its Enemies' (1945). In this book, he contrasts totalitarian ideology with democracy, which is associated with an open society.

In general, the internal complexity of a system is an important evolutionary response to the uncertainty and/or increasing complexity of its environment. For example, W. Ross Ashby's law of requisite variety asserts: in order to be able to resist variable unpredictable impacts of the external environment and, thus, to be conserved, the open system must have the requisite variety and complexity of its internal structure; only variety absorbs variety (Ashby, 1956, p. 206-213). On one hand, the internal (primarily institutional) heterogeneity of the system makes it more flexible and adaptive. This allows it to survive in conditions of active interaction with the external and unpredictable environment. On the other hand, in complex environments, a relatively simple system interacting with this environment risks losing its structure, which means it can be destroyed as a system.

Complexity of a system is a type of its immunity since it provides a feedback mechanism and homeostasis. In the case of a totalitarian system, its active interaction (economically, socially, and culturally) with the diverse world around it poses a threat to the system itself. Just like a living organism with a weakened immune system needs additional external protection, such as skin and clothing, a totalitarian system, as it simplifies internally, must also shield itself from outside influences. Thus, the establishment and strengthening of totalitarianism in the country is accompanied by the growth of its isolation and closure from other countries. In other words, between the totalitarian state and the rest of the world the walls (whether informational, political, and economic, or in the form of barbed wire) are growing.

The premise of this article is based on the assumption that there is a connection between institutional diversity and the openness of the social system. The purpose of the article is to explore this relationship (hypothesis) using the example of the Polish People's Republic during the Cold War. The main focus of the research is on the Polish Catholic Church, which, despite the atheism imposed by the official authorities, represented a serious competitor to the state in the realms of culture, society, ideology, and politics. As a result, the degree of institutional diversity in socialist Poland was higher than in the USSR. Consequently, the permeability of its individual "Iron Curtain" was greater. This, to some extent, explains the intensification of social movements in the late 1980s and the relatively quick and painless exit from under the Soviet "umbrella."

The battle for souls. A secular religion vs. the church

Historically, the Christian, first and foremost, the Catholic Church played not only a purely cult role. Over the centuries, it also performed important socio-economic functions, in particular, related to church land ownership and education,

which was under its control. The function of caring for the poor and the disabled was also historically assigned to the church. Overall, the church played a central role in the life of the communities, both organizationally and geographically (see, e.g., Occhipinti et al., 2024).

With the beginning of the modern period of history and the rapid development of science, the atheist worldview spread. Under these conditions, new institutions emerged and the economic functions of the state expanded, which led to the inevitable weakening of the role of the church in various spheres. The 20th century demonstrated progressive changes in the economic and social spheres, as well as the emergence of new political regimes based on authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies. These found expression in fascist, Nazi, and communist doctrines and practices.

It goes without saying that the totalitarian state, in its striving for the comprehensive control over public and private life, perceived the church as the main competitor in the struggle for the souls of its "believers". Displacing the church from its traditional niche became one of the key tasks of totalitarian regimes. This struggle took various forms – from militant atheism in the USSR to the declaration of a new (political) religion (Italy). Not only totalitarian regimes, but also authoritarian regimes (such as Italian fascism) openly proclaimed their ideology as a religion.

In Italy, in particular, according to Emilio Gentile, 'fascist religion placed itself alongside traditional religion, and tried to syncretize it within its own sphere of values as an ally in the subjection of the masses to the state' (Gentile, 1990, p. 230). The leaders of the fascist movement openly proclaimed their ideology as a religion. For example, in 1922, Mussolini proclaimed that fascism was a "belief which has reached the level of religion", and already in 1932, he stated definitively that 'fascism is a religious concept of life' (Gentile, 1990, pp. 234-235).

In the USSR, militant atheism was proclaimed within the official ideology and had a doctrinal character. The Karl Marx's statement 'Religion is the opium of the people' turned into a slogan and reflected the communists' attitude towards the church and clergy, who were portrayed as class enemies. That is why, the destruction of churches and the liquidation of religious representatives in the initial stages of the formation of communist regimes was a typical phenomenon. This happened in the former USSR (see, e.g., Babenko 2017), as well as in the first years after the Second World War in those countries where pro-Soviet puppet governments were established, as it was in Poland in 1949-1950. However, as Suzanne Hruby notes, "the church of Poland was never subjected to measures as repressive as those imposed by the Bolsheviks against organized religion in the Soviet Union" (Hruby, 1982/1983, p. 320). In the opinion of some researchers, the "success" of anti-religious campaigns in USSR was due to the existence of a powerful apparatus, which relied on agent-operational, repressive, informational,

and propaganda technologies of the state security bodies during 1918 – mid-1950s (Kyrydon, 2005).

Having declared atheism as one of the components of its ideology, the totalitarian communist model could not claim itself as a substitute for religion. However, Soviet political practices proved the opposite. The official Marxist-Leninist ideology actually performed a new secular religion, which permeated into all spheres of Soviet society.

According to Anatoly Khazanov, the Marxist theory, perceived as theology and further developed by Soviet Marxism-Leninism, was based on the Judea-Christian eschatological model and had all principal attributes of the latter. Among these attributes are the following: sacralisation of the Party and its elite, which, like the Roman popes, were infallible; numerous and life-long sacrifices of soviet people for the building of communism (with the hope for the delayed reward); the notion of sacredness and its corresponding symbolic representations (sacred historical events, sacred dates, sacred notions, sacred memories, sacred names, sacred graves, sacred places). As Khazanov writes, “even the Iron Curtain, that is the Soviet borders, was also proclaimed sacred” (Khazanov, 2008, p. 124.).

The secular Marxist-Leninist religion, like the fascist one, had its martyrs and saints. It created the own analogue of the 10 Commandments of God ("moral code of the builder of communism"), sacred symbols (e.g. hammer and sickle), iconostases (countless portraits of the communist leaders), places of worship (Red Square) and pilgrimage (Lenin's Mausoleum). It relied on its scriptures and punished its heretics with its Inquisition (NKVD/KGB). It practiced its own rituals and ceremonial meetings (parades and mass demonstrations on May 1 and November 7) used as a “tool in perpetuating the political status quo, hierarchy, discipline, and a way of inculcating the norms and values of the dominant ideology” (Khazanov, 2008, p. 124).

Deification of leaders. What is more important, this religion had its own gods, who were ardently believed in and worshiped by millions of the builders of communism. In political/secular religions, a national leader such as a Duce, Fuhrer or General Secretary of the Communist Party performed the role of god. As Khazanov notes, the cult of the Leader was an indispensable attribute of Marxist-Leninist secular religion, and the cult of Lenin, in particular, bore many religious characteristics, including the notion of immortality beyond physical death.

The farther away such a ‘god’ is from the people, the more divine he is. The longer such a "god" remains alive, the more "believers" are filled with conviction in his immortality. In this sense, the example of Stalin whose death was sincerely mourned even by the direct victims of the regime, is illustrative. The death of a large number of people in Moscow, during the farewell to the "leader of all nations", became symbolic. The idol required sacrifice. And although the exact number of the dead will never be known, according to various estimates, this number ranges from 100 to 2,000 people. In general, the number of victims of the Stalinist regime

is calculated by the millions who died during the famines, political repressions, and due to the Soviet (Russian) quantitative specificity of warfare (see, e.g., Snyder, 2010). From today's perspective, it seems incredible how, despite the suffering caused by Stalin's policies, "believers" continued to bow down before their idol. Achieving the "high goal" required sacrifices, which the cult's followers willingly made.

Obviously, the countries of Eastern Europe, after the establishment of communist pro-Soviet governments there, did not have such 'immortal' idols yet. The new political system with its institutions could not dislodge the church structures and church leaders from social life, since their authority among the parishioners remained unbroken. In addition, in the USSR, the death of Stalin also significantly shook faith both in the secular god and in the political power themselves.

Nikita Khrushchev's speech "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" at the 20th Party Congress of the CPSU, in February 1956, denounced the crimes, errors and 'cult' of Stalin. This speech was a turning point which struck a sensitive blow to the steadfast believers in their faith in communist ideals and idols. Despite the "secret" status, it went not only beyond the hall in which it was performed, but also far beyond the borders of the country. In Tony Judt's opinion, in Eastern Europe, the impact of Khrushchev's reported abjuration was even more dramatic. He notes that "Khrushchev's repudiation of Stalin seemed to suggest that Moscow would now look favorably upon different 'roads to socialism', and had rejected terror and repression as a tool of Communist control" (Judt, 2005, p. 311).

The Polish Catholic Church as an institution of national identity and unity.

When it came to Poland, in the battle with the church for people's souls, the communist authorities imposing their secular "gods," had to deal with a competitor much more powerful than the spiritual "poisoner-comforter" of the people. As Suzanne Hruby points out, for over thousand years, Polish nationality became closely identified with the Catholic faith, and Catholicism for Polish society was "a vehicle of cultural continuity and the expression of national identity" (Hruby, 1982/1983, pp. 289-299).

From the last (third) Partition of Poland (Rzeczpospolita) in 1795 to the proclamation of the Second Polish Republic in 1918, the Catholic Church remained an important social institution that allowed Poles to preserve their national identity in the conditions of the actual disappearance of Poland from the political map (Hruby, 1982/1983).

Both in the territory that used to be connected with Protestant Prussia (Poznań, Bydgoszcz, Toruń), and in the sub-Russian part related to Right-Bank Ukraine, the authorities did not dare to liquidate the Catholic Church, the majority of whose believers were ethnic Poles. In the conditions of the Habsburg Empire, the attitude towards all religions was distinguished by loyalty, which was documented in "The

Patent of Toleration” issued on 13 October, 1781 by the Habsburg emperor Joseph II. The reformation of the religious sphere involved the transformation of the clergy into state officials who had to educate loyal subjects of the empire. Catholicism united the Austrian government and its Polish subjects. Presumably, this fact (in addition to social factors) explained the preservation of the dominant position in Galicia by the Poles despite the quantitative dominance of ethnic Ukrainians in its eastern part (see Snyder, 2003).

The existence of the Second Polish Republic (Republic of Poland) from November 1918 until the Soviet-German occupation in 1939 ensured the preservation of a high social status for the Catholic Church. All church institutions and structures were restored. In 1925, the Polish Sejm and Senate ratified an agreement with the Vatican to regulate the position of the Roman Catholic Church in the state and establish relations with the highest Catholic institution (concordat) (see, e.g., Dylągowa, 2000, p. 237).

In fact, immediately after the declaration of the Polish state's independence, the Lublin Catholic University was established, which gained the position of an influential, not only religious, but also intellectual and general cultural center of the country very quickly. The study of religion became a mandatory component of school education in the Second Polish Republic. The general pastoral care of children and youth was a very important element of education.

The Greek Catholic Church, which remained the basis for preserving the national identity of Ukrainians living in Poland, as well as the Orthodox Church, along with other denominations, received practically equal rights with the Catholic Church and had the opportunity to keep their parishes and parishioners. Thus, in interwar Poland, the secular state demonstrated its agreement with the existence of the church as an important social institution that could influence the consciousness of citizens without monopolizing such influence.

However, in the world politics of the interwar period, the geographical location of Poland played a cruel joke on it. The leaders of the two totalitarian states, which aspired to world domination, once again played the "Polish card" among themselves. Western Ukrainian lands, which were part of Poland until 1939, came under the rule of the Soviet Union, the rest of the country was occupied by the German Nazis, and both totalitarian machines sought the destruction of Polish national identity.

In general, the relationship between the Catholic Church and German National Socialism, as well as with Italian fascism, is difficult to call unambiguous (see, e.g., Kertzer, 2022). Most of the Germans, who sympathized with Hitler and his ideology, were Catholics. Both German Nazism and Italian fascism, as an extreme right-wing doctrines, relied on the church, but did not reject it, unlike communism, which was on the extreme left and generally denied the church's right to exist. However, as Jonathan Huener notes in his book, *“The Polish Catholic Church under German Occupation: The Reichsgau Wartheland, 1939-1945”*, with the

invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, National Socialist Germany aimed at destroying the Polish nation and Polish national consciousness (Huener, 2021, p.1). This meant the destruction of the Polish state and Polish cultural institutions, among which the Catholic Church was a special target. For the Polish Catholic Church, the German Occupation brought nearly six years of discrimination, material deprivation, exploitation, and, for tens of thousands, death – whether by malnutrition, disease, deportation, incarceration, or execution. For example, out of more than 2,700 clergy from across Europe imprisoned in Dachau, two-thirds were from Poland, nearly half of them died there (Huener, 2021, p. 174).

It is significant that the characteristic feature of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 was its religious zeal. Catholic nuns dedicated themselves to prayer for the rebellion. The clergy performed functions ranging from chaplains of military units to caring for the wounded and dying. In particular, Norman Davies draws attention to these facts, and emphasizes the important role of the Polish Catholic Church as an integral part of the anti-Nazi struggle (Norman, 2005, p. 403-405).

According to Suzanne Hruby, the Polish Catholic Church emerged from World War II in an even stronger position. The church's record of resistance to the Nazi occupation and its suffering along with the rest of nation cemented its reputation as the guardian of the nation (Hruby, 1982/1983, p. 318). It is no accident that for the Poles, the Catholic Church was associated with the struggle for cultural survival and national independence. The establishment of communist rule in Poland was perceived by many Poles as alien control, and reinforced their view of the church as an institution that protected their historical, cultural and ethical values (Hruby, 1982/1983, p. 318).

From compromises to resistance: The position of the Polish Catholic Church during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Soviet leadership in Moscow was aware of the important role of the Catholic Church in the lives of the ordinary Poles. It did not forget about the strengthening of its positions during the Warsaw Uprising. However, we can assume that the consequences of the implementation of a several-year anti-religious campaign in the USSR, the persistent atheistic attitudes of the Soviet leadership, led to an underestimation of the importance of the Catholic Church and a failure to perceive it as a worthy opponent and/or a threat to the regime. This situation led to a certain weakening of external control in this area. The confrontation turned into an internal struggle between the Polish Catholic Church and the local pro-Soviet leadership.

After several years of searching for compromises, some agreements emerged that allowed for the definition of the limits of what is permissible for each party. The Vatican also tried to intervene in the situation, its leaders did not abandon their loyal subjects, and tried to help the Poles in their confrontation with the authorities. Thus, in June 1949 Pope Pius XII wrote an encyclical on the excommunicating the

members of the Communist Party and supporters of communism from the faith and the church (Hruby, 1982/1983, p. 320).

In response to the appearance of this document, the Polish pro-Soviet authorities prepared a decree on freedom of conscience, which allowed the prosecution for any coercion to religious practice. Such wording for sure could have been applied to any Catholic priest. However, realizing the influence/authority of the Catholic Church in the Polish society, the authorities tried to reach a compromise with the leadership of the church, trying to win its support. At the same time, the leaders of the Polish Communist Party made attempts to convince the leaders of the church of the need to sever relations with the Vatican, as an institution hostile to any communist structure.

The first compromise was reached in 1950. Primate Stefan Wyszyński signed the so-called Agreement with the government (Agreement, 1950). The church agreed to a demonstration of loyalty to the government, refused from the underground, and was obliged not to oppose the voluntary collectivization of the village. The government, in its turn, made certain commitments, most of which were not fulfilled. In particular, the state promised freedom of religion, freedom of the church press, the right to retain church schools and preserve religion in schools, the existence of Catholic orders and the possibility of pilgrimage (Agreement, 1950; see also Cieplak, 1969, pp. 19-20; Hruby, 1982/1983, p. 320-321).

Despite these agreements, the communist government constantly violated the obligations it had agreed to, in its characteristic manner. The teaching of religious subjects quickly disappeared from school curricula, and religious publications and societies, along with Catholic schools, ceased to exist (Dylągowa, 2000, pp. 206-237).

The situation that unfolded in Poland in the early 1950s is very revealing in terms of understanding the similarities between extreme political ideologies, particularly when it comes to diametrically opposed left and right doctrines. In its struggle with the Catholic Church, the communist Polish authorities decided to use the leader of the far-right organization – the Falanga National Radical Camp. It was Bolesław Piasecki who was released from prison in exchange for providing certain services and overseeing activities in the economic and educational sectors. He began to publish newspapers, and established the publishing institute PAX. The association of Catholics who cooperated with the Soviet authorities had the same name. Piasecki attempted to act as a mediator between the authorities and the episcopate. He exerted pressure on the episcopate to convince them to comply with the communist authorities (see, e.g., Dudek & Pytel, 1990; Engelgard, 2008).

After 1956, the weight of PAX decreased, along with the influence of B. Piasecki. This year holds a symbolic significance in the post-war history of Poland, as it is marked with the first concessions on the part of the Moscow leadership, and accordingly, with the defense of their rights by the representatives of Polish political forces. The new Polish leader, Władysław Gomułka, represented a "national face"

of the Polish communism for the Polish society, and his promotion was widely regarded as a gesture of hidden defiance on the part of the party, forced to choose between its own voters and the higher authorities in Moscow. Despite hidden aspirations for confrontation, the new Polish leader realized that de-Stalinization does not mean that Khrushchev is going to cede any territorial influence or political monopoly of the Soviet Union (Judt, 2005, p. 312).

From 1956 through the 1960s, the Polish Communist Government gradually undermined the church. Among other things, it imposed restrictions and censorship on the Catholic press, violated the church's autonomy to appoint bishops, and increased ideological pressure in schools, while restricting religious education even outside the school system. The church tried to resist the restrictions from the authorities, however, as S. Hruby notes, until the 1960s it "viewed its role as confined to spiritual, moral and cultural issues, and only rarely did it take a stand on political problems" (Hruby, 1982/1983, p. 322).

Since the late 1960s, church leaders began to address social and economic issues that transcended the internal interests of the church. In the opinion of Hruby, the growing social conscious of the Polish church, alongside with other reasons, was related to general changes in the Catholic Church worldwide, especially the influence of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The latter "encouraged attempts to redefine the proper relationships between the church and society at large and to explore new areas of concern and innovative styles of action" (Hruby, 1982/1983, p. 322; see also: Documents, 1965). This particular circumstance, distinctly demonstrates how the Polish Catholic Church, despite being oppressed by the communist state, acted as a relatively independent entity. It provided a channel of communication with the Occidental world with its democratic values and progressive changes in social relations.

The role of Pope John Paul II.

The next stage, associated with the 1970s, symbolized the deepening confrontation between Warsaw and Moscow. During this time, it was the Catholic Church and Pope John Paul II who came to the aid and played a special role in creating a window of opportunity for the Polish people.

Was it a fortunate combination of circumstances, or a manifestation of regularity? At that time, among the candidates for the papal throne in the Vatican, there emerged a figure whose importance and influence, extending beyond the religious sphere, can hardly be overstated. He was the first non-Italian head of the Roman Catholic Church and a representative of the communist world, traditionally viewed as antagonistic to the West. The Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyła ascended the papal throne and was proclaimed Pope John Paul II on October 16, 1978.

The Polish Pope almost immediately became the object of admiration of his compatriots, and the object of distrust from the representatives of the conservative Western world, and hatred by the Soviet authorities. Tony Judt describes him as energetic and charismatic "who would lead the Church into a new era, a pastor

rather than a Curial bureaucrat" (Judt, 2005, p. 585). It was the pastoral understanding of his mission that turned the Pope into a messiah who carried the word of love and freedom, denying both the right of communism to existing and the worst manifestations of market economics – self-interest and consumerism for its own sake.

According to Tony Judt, "The new Pope's Christian vision was rooted in the peculiarly messianic style of Polish Catholicism. In modern Poland he saw not only the embattled eastern frontier of the True Faith, but also a land and a people chosen to serve as the example and sword of the Church in the struggle against Eastern atheism and Western materialism alike" (Judt, 2005, p. 586). For John Paul II, compromise with Marxism was unacceptable. He spread this idea among Poles and representatives of other countries of the Eastern (Communist) Bloc. Only the Church, in his opinion, should remain the authority in the field of morality and public life.

Among the encyclicals of the Pope that reflect his views on the social sphere, his attitude towards humanity, his understanding of the meaning of labor and capital, and also the Iron Curtain, a special place belongs to *Laborem Exercens*. The text was written in autumn of 1981, during the confrontation between the Polish Solidarity and the communist regime. John Paul II emphasized the priority of man, the "subject of labor" over the capital. Contrary to the current government's Marxist principles, John Paul II confirmed the right to private property. At the same time, he emphasized the importance of providing social guarantees for employees and ensuring that they receive proper payment for their services.

It is worth emphasizing that John Paul II declared the "the right of association, that is to form associations for the purpose of defending the vital interests of those employed in the various professions" (Ioannes Paulus PP. II, 1981). Since such associations are known as labour or trade unions, he effectively demonstrated his support for the activities of the Polish *Solidarity* movement.

This text is also important for understanding the fundamental differences in how the Church perceived and related to the human being, as the Church during the studied period embodied liberal institutions.

In undemocratic (authoritarian/totalitarian) regimes, individuals with disabilities were silenced as if they did not exist, because they were seen as a violation of the "perfection" of such systems. Their lives were treated as "unworthy" (see, e.g. Vengerska & Kovalchuk, 2024). In contrast to this approach, one of the significant social priorities emphasized by the Pope was the prevention of discrimination against people with disabilities. He advocated for their right to employment.

The encyclical also called for the removal of restrictions on people's right to work in order to secure their own survival and that of their families: "*The right of people to emigrate in search of work must be preserved.*" This statement could be interpreted as a direct call for the dismantling of the Iron Curtain. John Paul II

proclaimed that one of the Church's principal tasks was to affirm the status of work as a means of preserving human dignity and to promote a spirituality of work that helps all people draw closer to God (see, e.g. Vengerska & Kovalchuk, 2024).

The Pope's activity was not limited to religious and philosophical writings alone. A distinctive feature of his papacy was his numerous pastoral visits around the world. In June 1979 he visited his native Poland. Some scholars argue that this event played a crucial role in the emergence of *Solidarity*, the first independent trade union in the communist bloc. This structure, founded in August 1980 and headed by Lech Wałęsa, turned into a powerful social and political movement and the main instrument of the Polish struggle against the Soviet system. According to Matteo Luigi Napolitano, the Pope believed that the central challenge facing Poland during the political crisis triggered by the declaration of martial law in December 1981 was to prevent Soviet intervention in the country's internal affairs. "The Pope gave a message: we are patriots first, and then communists and Catholics, so we all defend the homeland" (Napolitano, 2012).

According to many contemporaries, historians and politicians, John Paul II played a fundamental role in the fall of the Berlin Wall (see, e.g. Ruvigliani, 2019). In 1993, during an interview with journalists from Vatican Radio, Mikhail Gorbachev claimed that everything that had happened in Eastern Europe in recent years would not have been possible without the participation of Pope John Paul II and his significant role as a politician in the international arena (Gorbachev's interview, 1993).

Concluding remarks.

Since the mid-1970s, the political and economic situation in most Warsaw Pact countries had begun to display signs of crisis that were increasingly difficult to conceal. Participation in the arms race by the Soviet Union and its satellite states placed an unbearable strain on their economies, worsening already existing structural weaknesses.

The signing of the Helsinki Accords (Helsinki Final Act) in 1975 became a global event that provided a powerful impetus for strengthening human rights movements. Principle VII of this agreement, "Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief", proclaimed the need to respect such rights. According to Tony Judt, none of the signatories of the agreement was going to comply with the provisions, taking into account the fact that it was almost impossible to track. However, the realities turned out to be unexpected for most of the parties to the agreement. The emergence of the Helsinki Human Rights Movement demonstrated to the leaders of the signatory countries the desire of citizens, primarily of the so-called "socialist camp", to fight for their rights (Judt, 2005, pp. 502-503).

Almost immediately after the Helsinki agreement, an independent civil space began to form in Poland. Its development and influence are associated with the activities of individual intellectuals, first of all J. Kuron and K. Mazowiecki. They,

along with other supporters of socialist ideas, aimed to reform and humanize the existing system. Trade unions, in their opinion, had to gradually gain dominant positions in society. Their commitment to ideals resulted in the creation of the largest and most effective trade union in Eastern Europe. ‘Solidarity’, founded in August 1980 and led by Lech Wałęsa, spearheaded the protest workers' movements in Polish shipyards. These protests were strongly supported by intellectual leaders of that time not only in Poland but also beyond it. The Catholic Church, under the leadership of John Paul II, served as another influential mediator and conduit of communication with the outside world.

The totalitarian Soviet model needed the existence of the Iron Curtain to preserve itself, while the imperialistic nature of the USSR necessitated territorial expansion. However, excessive appetites eventually led to indigestion. Poland has become one of the most problematic acquisitions of this empire. Its different institutions and phenomena, such as the Catholic Church, national identity, intellectual elites, the diaspora, culture, and trade union movements, contributed to the permeability of the “Iron Curtain” and the gradual erosion of the communist regime. After all, Poland played a special role in the process of the destruction of communism and the fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s.

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**Возна Л. ПРОНИКНІСТЬ «ЗАЛІЗНОЇ ЗАВІСИ»: РОЛЬ ПОЛЬСЬКОЇ
КАТОЛИЦЬКОЇ ЦЕРКВИ ЯК ЧИННИКА ОПОРУ В КОМУНІСТИЧНІЙ
ПОЛЬЩІ**

Анотація

Стаття має на меті дослідити випадок Польської Народної Республіки в період Холодної війни, з особливим акцентом на католицьку церкву як центральну інституцію опору комуністичному режиму. Незважаючи на систематичний тиск і пропаганду державного атеїзму з боку комуністичних властей, Польська католицька церква зберегла свою роль духовного центру, джерела морального авторитету та ключового суб'єкта у формуванні культурного, соціального та політичного життя. Завдяки цьому вона стала найважливішим конкурентом держави у сферах ідеології та соціального впливу. Разом з іншими інституціями та явищами, такими як національна ідентичність, інтелектуальні еліти, діаспора, культура та профспілкові рухи, Польська католицька церква сприяла проникності «залізної завіси», поступовому розкладанню комуністичного режиму та представляла ядро пригнічуваного, але все ще активного громадянського суспільства Польщі. Випадок Польщі демонструє ширшу роль релігійних інституцій у збереженні національної ідентичності та формуванні колективного опору в умовах авторитарного соціалізму.

Аналіз, представлений у цій статті, застосовує мультидисциплінарний підхід, що інтегрує історичну, політичну та культурну перспективи, з метою оцінити позицію церкви в польському суспільстві та її вплив на послаблення тоталітарної системи.

Ключові слова: тоталітаризм; прості та замкнені системи; «залізна завіса»; Польща; католицька церква; національна ідентичність; громадянське суспільство

**Wozna L. PRZENIKALNOŚĆ „ŻELAZNEJ KURTYNY”: ROLA POLSKIEGO
KOŚCIOŁA KATOLICKIEGO JAKO CZYNNIKA OPORU W KOMUNISTYCZNEJ
POLSCE**

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza przypadku Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej w okresie zimnej wojny, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem Kościoła katolickiego jako centralnej instytucji oporu wobec reżimu komunistycznego. Pomimo systematycznej presji i propagandy państwowego ateizmu ze strony władz komunistycznych, polski Kościół katolicki zachował rolę duchowego centrum, źródła autorytetu moralnego oraz kluczowego aktora w kształtowaniu życia kulturalnego, społecznego i politycznego. Dzięki temu stał się najważniejszym konkurentem państwa w sferze ideologii i wpływów społecznych.

Wraz z innymi instytucjami i zjawiskami, takimi jak tożsamość narodowa, elity intelektualne, diaspora, kultura oraz ruchy związkowe, polski Kościół katolicki przyczynił się do przepuszczalności „żelaznej kurtyny”, stopniowego osłabienia reżimu komunistycznego oraz stanowił rdzeń stłumionego, lecz wciąż aktywnego społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Polsce. Przypadek Polski ukazuje szerszą rolę instytucji religijnych w zachowaniu tożsamości narodowej i mobilizacji zbiorowego oporu w warunkach autorytarnego socjalizmu.

Analiza przedstawiona w artykule wykorzystuje podejście multidyscyplinarne, łączące perspektywy historyczne, polityczne i kulturowe, aby ocenić pozycję Kościoła w polskim społeczeństwie oraz jego wpływ na osłabienie systemu totalitarnego.

Słowa kluczowe: *totalitaryzm, systemy proste i zamknięte, „żelazna kurtyna”, Polska, Kościół katolicki, tożsamość narodowa, społeczeństwo obywatelskie.*

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