

Poznan: The Background

by BEATRICE KING

While this article was written by the author, who recently visited Poland, before the Poznan trials, we believe that it throws important light on what led up to the Poznan events and on developments arising out of them as well as out of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Foreign correspondents present at the trials have reported on the fairness with which they were conducted, the vigor with which counsel for the defense handled their clients' cases, and the mildness of the sentences pronounced by the court. We hope later to publish a fuller account of the trials.

LIKE VULTURES scenting the prey, the Western press swooped on the Poznan demonstrations to gorge themselves on "dead socialism" in Poland. Actually few of them were present at the occurrence. Their information generally came second, third, or even fourth hand, from centers that appear to exist solely for the purpose of misleading the

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world about the People's Democracies.

But the affair was serious enough. The official figures were 53 people killed and 300 wounded. For Poland whose people died in their millions in concentration camps, in gas ovens, in cellars and behind barricades in the fight against Hitler, for her to lose 53 men in peace time, killed apparently by their own people, is too horrifying to contemplate. The shock reached into every home.

The event can be clearly separated into two parts. One was the workers' demonstration wrongly informed that their deputation had been turned away by the Government in Warsaw. The other was the shooting from tanks and machine guns.

It is probable that in no country that had suffered from the Hitler occupation, was there so much demanded from the people on the cessation of war. In addition to the loss of 6 million, among whom were the flower of Polish life, the skilled and highly trained professional workers and administrators, the whole economy had been destroyed and schools were dismantled and ruined, cattle either sent to Germany or slaughtered, men, women and children sent to Germany to work as slaves. For

at least five years the people starved and resisted. It is important to recall this.

When the war ended, the people who hoped to get back their properties and their wealth, combined with the politicians of the West in an effort to prevent the radical change which alone could save Poland as a nation. For a time the country's forces, physically and intellectually, were engaged in the internal struggle for power. When finally the people won, and Poland set out on the road to socialism, the country immediately turned to rebuilding its ravished cities and its devastated economy. Rebuilding was soon accompanied by the building of new centers of heavy industry to lay the foundation for the country's economic independence. There was no let up. No breathing space. No time or possibility to recuperate after the terrible war years.

And because in the first flush of national pride, the first glorifying in freedom, people gave themselves willingly, the government continued to demand more and more without giving sufficient immediate return. The people were tired, very tired, strained almost to breaking point. The improvement in living conditions was much slower than they had expected, and the reasons for this were not explained adequately or sufficiently to the workers.

The demands for increased labor norms continued unceasingly. There seemed to have grown up a great gulf between the governmental apparatus and the men on the job in factory or mine. Often the democracy the new regime had promised turned out to be bureaucracy. And the Polish workers had had enough of bureaucracy. The Poles are a very proud and even wilful people. They

do not take kindly to discipline imposed from above. They held it was time they saw, here and now, some of the benefits they were being promised for the future. That many of them were even now better off than they had been under the pre-war regime was admitted to me on many occasions even a year ago. There were many however, who in respect to some foods and housing, were not so well off. The main thing however, was that they were tired with the strain of the demands being made on them. So the workers in the factory at Poznan sent a deputation to Warsaw to lay their grievances before the Government.

Before this happened, the 20th Party Congress in the USSR had had its effect in Poland, which in any case had been following its own national line to socialism. Thousands of political prisoners were almost immediately released. Without doubt there were many among them as bitter enemies on release as they were when imprisoned. They were a godsend to agents seeking at least to hinder, if they could not actually prevent, Poland becoming socialist.

The deputation from the factory was for some reason not received immediately. At once the rumor was spread that the Government—the people's Government—had refused to meet the workers' representatives. The workers in the factory decided to march through the streets in protest. It was to be quite orderly. But as the procession formed up machine guns appeared on the roofs. Young men with guns and revolvers started shouting slogans. Then tanks appeared. One asks where did the tanks and machine guns come from? Not from the factories. The workers do not have these weapons in their homes or in the factories. They do

not need them. They will not shoot their own people. The question has not yet been answered as to the extent to which the justifiable grievances of the workers were exploited with the hope of bringing about a serious rising just when the Poznan Fair was being held, and there were many foreign business men in the country.

Since the event, there have been searching inquiries into the causes, and there have been ministerial dismissals. There is now to be an easing of the demands made on workers and greater attention to consumer goods. This year the harvest is expected to be much better than the previous year when drought took its toll of yield. The recent cut in the armed forces and in arms expenditure, which was so great a drain on the country's resources, has released men and funds for industry and agriculture. Above all the political education of the workers, to give them an understanding of the situation, of the reasons for measures that have to be taken and sacrifices that may have to be made, is to be greatly improved. Certainly the Government and the Communist Party were shaken up by the event. But any hopes for an overthrow of the People's Democracy of Poland and a return to capitalism of any kind are completely out of the question. I was convinced last year of the firm support for the regime of the workers and of the intellectuals, who though they grumble, are ready to make their contribution to the new life. Nothing that has happened since alters my conviction. On the contrary, I am now more convinced than ever of Poland's success in building socialism.

The Polish Communist Party reacted quickly to the 20th Party

Congress of the Soviet Union and the measures being taken will lead to the genuine democratization of the country. Let us not forget that from even before Poland's division among Russia, Austro-Hungary and Germany, the country had no experience of genuine democracy. The essential security for democracy is only now coming within reach, and experience is being gained. Freedom of intellectual discussion, desirable and necessary as it is, does not of itself solve a people's daily problems, does not of itself lead to democracy. Speakers' Corner at Marble Arch in London, makes little if any contribution to the solution of Britain's problems. The really important and far-reaching effect of Poznan has been to make the Communist Party realize where it had gone wrong and admit it publicly. In the future the whole nation must be involved in building democracy, which means cooperation with all honest people whether outside the Party or not. Local leadership and local political education, in factory and in field is to be greatly improved by much better and freer lines of communication between the head and the body. There is to be no more exclusiveness among Party members. The National Front Organization is to be national in deed as well as in name.

With this change in political approach should be coupled the new approach in trade union activity as expressed in the report of chairman Wiktor Klosiewicz in which he stressed the necessity for the democratization of factory trade union organization. The old practice of ignoring members, of not consulting them, of frequently imposing decisions from above, must cease. The principle of collective work in the trade union is to be encouraged.

The response of the workers to all this has been immediate and possibly startling to some of the leaders. Workers are insisting on the removal of bureaucratic directors, and insisting successfully. Others are going further and recommending forcefully collective responsibility for the running of the factory, that the director appointed by the relevant ministry be also answerable to the directorate elected by the factory. A new draft law is to be presented to the Seym in October by the Central Council of Trade Unions, whose aim is to give the workpeople of any enterprise a considerable say in the management of the works.

One should not exaggerate the ef-

fect of the Poznan demonstration with its tragic consequences. The leaven of democratization had begun to work long before that, and before the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. The two events speeded up the process, released springs that habit had kept coiled. Increasing international security, increasing trade and the successful fulfilment of plans, have all been combining towards an easing of restrictions of all kinds, towards a greater trust in the abilities and wisdom of the ordinary people. But, as so often happens, the reactions to the changing situation was too slow at the top. The lesson is now being learnt thoroughly.

NEW YORK TIMES REPORTS POZAN TRIALS

“THE CONSENSUS of Western observers is that the Polish Government has so far made good on its promise of ‘fair and open’ trials for the accused in the Poznan riots. These observers have serious reservations about the code of justice under which the accused are standing trial, but the actual courtroom processes in their opinion have been conducted with scrupulous fairness. . . .

“No hindrances have been put in the way of foreign newsmen reporting the trials. Post office officials were instructed to give them the best possible service. . . . Polish authorities have provided facilities for broadcasts to the West. Western diplomats . . . have been allowed into all sessions. Three Western legal observers . . . have been treated as honored guests. . . .” (Sidney Gruson, *New York Times*, Oct. 1)

“Lenient sentences were pronounced today in the first verdict to come out of the major Poznan riot trials. . . . The same fairness and impartiality that had marked Judge Celinski’s conduct of the trial was evident in his verdict. The court, he said, had considered only the statements made in the courtroom where ‘the accused could talk freely, and had thrown out pre-trial interrogation at which the police allegedly had resorted to brutality. . . .’ (October 9)

“The Government has gained considerable credit at home for allowing complete freedom in the courts. The people of Poznan certainly did not expect it nor did the lawyers defending accused persons. Somewhat hesitant at first, defense attorneys have become progressively bolder as they realized that the Government meant to carry out its intention of permitting ‘fair and open trial.’

“The result has been a noticeable relaxation both among Poznan’s populace and the large militia corps assigned to duty in the city as the outset of the trials.” (October 11)