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Report from the All-Polish Conference “Far from the Centre. August 1980 in the South of Poland in the Light of Actions of the Communist Party and Security Service”, Katowice, 24–25 September 2020

The Institute of National Remembrance commemorated the 40th anniversary of widespread strikes in Poland by the two-day research conference under the title “Far from the Centre. August 1980 in the South of Poland in the Light of Actions of the Communist Party and Security Service” which was held in Katowice from 24 to 25 September 2020. The strikes in August ‘80 led to the emergence of the “Solidarity” trade union which is one of the unprecedented phenomenon in the modern history of Poland. This nearly ten-million-member social movement undermined the foundations of the communist system. The Polish United Workers’ Party, then-ruling in Poland, in line with the Marxist and Leninist ideology, was supposed to be the emanation of the working class. In the summer 1980 the communist power faced one of the toughest challenges in its history, that is the need to curtail several hundred strikes which were initiated by the workers who massively lined up against their “representatives”. At the beginning they focused on the economic demands, but later on they pushed for political reforms which were most dangerous for the stability of the system.

The conference in Katowice concentrated on the social and political situation in the south of Poland at that time. This event was organised by four branches of the Institute of National Remembrance situated in Southern Poland, namely those in Katowice, Kraków, Wrocław and Rzeszów. The reunion of historians,

political scientists, and the witnesses of history in the making, took place in one of the elegant venues in the Upper Silesia, that is the concert hall Katowice Miasto Ogrodów (Katowice the City of Gardens). This place was also of high symbolic importance because in the communist-ruled Poland this building was the Centre for Ideology and Education of the Workers' Staff (Centrum Kształcenia Ideowo-Wychowawczego Kadr Robotniczych). You need to know that the recording of the debates was published on the Institute's website.¹

The conference was opened by dr Mateusz Szpytma, Vice-President of the Institute of National Remembrance. He stressed that the emergence of the "Solidarity" Trade Union (NSZZ "Solidarność") was one of the events of major importance in the 20th c., because this social movement, immense and independent of the communist party, expressed aspirations for freedom of not just the Polish society. Dr Szpytma also added that research on the importance of "Solidarity" has been crucial for over 20-year-old Institute of National Remembrance for many years.²

¹ See: <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/111128,Konferencja-naukowa-Z-dala-od-Centrum-Sierpien-1980-na-poludniu-Polski-w-swietle.html> (20.02.2021).

² See, inter alia: *Encyklopedia Solidarności. Opozycja w PRL 1976–1989*, vol. 1, ed. M. Łątkowska, Warszawa 2010; *NSZZ "Solidarność" 1980–1989*, vol. 2: *ruch społeczny*, ed. Ł. Kamiński, G. Waligóra, Warszawa 2010; *NSZZ "Solidarność" 1980–1989*, vol. 3: *Polska północna*, ed. eidem, Warszawa 2010; *NSZZ "Solidarność" 1980–1989*, vol. 4: *Polska zachodnia*, ed. eidem, Warszawa 2010; *NSZZ "Solidarność" 1980–1989*, vol. 5: *Polska środkowo-wschodnia*, ed. eidem; Warszawa 2010; *NSZZ "Solidarność" 1980–1989*, vol. 6: *Polska południowa*, ed. eidem, Warszawa 2010; *NSZZ "Solidarność" 1980–1989*, vol. 7: *Wokół "Solidarności"*, ed. eidem, Warszawa 2010; *Dokumenty władz NSZZ "Solidarność" 1981–1989*, developed by J. Olaszek, Warszawa 2010; *NSZZ "Solidarność" Małopolska w materiałach Służby Bezpieczeństwa. Wybór dokumentów*, developed by C. Kuta, Kraków 2011; *Encyklopedia Solidarności. Opozycja w PRL 1976–1989*, vol. 2, Warszawa 2012; P. Pleskot, *Kłopotliwa panna "S". Postawy polityczne Zachodu wobec "Solidarności" na tle stosunków z PRL (1980–1989)*, Warszawa 2013; *Świat wobec Solidarności 1980–1989*, ed. P. Jaworski, Ł. Kamiński, Warszawa 2013; *Drogi do "Solidarności"*, ed. F. Musiał, Kraków 2015; *Solidarność 1980–1981 w kraju i w Wielkopolsce. Szkice do portretu*, ed. K. Brzechczyn, Poznań 2016; M. Dąbrowski, *NSZZ Solidarność Ziemia Puławska w latach 1980–1989*, Lublin 2016; J. Olaszek, *Podziemne dziennikarstwo. Funkcjonowanie głównych pism informacyjnych podziemnej "Solidarności" w Warszawie w latach 1981–1989*, Warszawa 2018; *Ogniwa zakładowe i sekcje branżowe NSZZ "Solidarność" 1980–1989*, ed. Ł. Sołtyśik, G. Waligóra, Wrocław–Warszawa 2018; *Encyklopedia Solidarności. Opozycja w PRL 1976–1989*, vol. 3, ed. G. Waligóra, Warszawa 2019; K. Brożek, G. Surdy, *Solidarność Walcząca*, Warszawa 2020; K. Dworaczek, *NSZZ "Solidarność" w PKP w latach 1980–1989. Przykład Dolnośląskiej Dyrekcji Okręgowej Kolei Państwowych*, Wrocław–Warszawa 2020; *Encyklopedia Solidarności. Opozycja w PRL 1976–1989*, vol. 4, ed. J. Olaszek, Warszawa 2020; J. Jurkiewicz, Ł. Kobiela, *Jedna dekada – trzy epoki. NSZZ "Solidarność" na Górnym Śląsku i w Zagłębiu Dąbrowskim*

The conference was initiated by the general theme session entitled "Polish People's Republic before August 1980" which was led by CEO of the Rzeszów Branch of the INR dr Dariusz Iwaneczko. The first speaker, dr Michał Siedziako, outlined the general social and political situation starting from the introduction of state administration reforms in 1975 to the outbreak of strikes in the summer 1980. The lecture specifically addressed the situation of the communist authorities, and, specifically, the Polish United Workers' Party and its government. The relations between the Church and the political opposition just before the strikes were described in a very interesting manner by dr Łukasz Kamiński. The scholar from Wrocław underlined that the political situation then was very well diagnosed by the Polish Episcopate headed by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński. Polish Catholic Church hierarchy were fully aware that the crisis exploding then was above all related to the issues between the authorities and the society, while the economic matters seemed less important. A significant part of his address dr Kamiński devoted to the description of the mechanism of self-limitations of the Church and the democratic opposition struggling for independence. Dr Tomasz Kozłowski showed the attitude of the Party's leadership towards the strikes in the summer 1980, stressing that the authorities underestimated the situation in the initial period and the gravity of the erosion process inside the Party itself. The lecture of the last speaker, dr. Grzegorz Waligóra, was focused on the Security Service's actions against the pre-August political opposition in the summer of 1980. In his speech he stressed that the political strategy of the political police of the communist state against the striking workers was ineffective in the time analysed.

In the next two discussion panels speakers delivered lectures on the workers' protests in the South of Poland. The first lecturer of the discussion panel led by Prof. Filip Musiał, Director of the Kraków Branch of the Institute of National Remembrance, was Adam Gliksman. The Vice-Chair of the Małopolska Provincial Board of the "Solidarity" Trade Union addressed the specific issues of the strikes in the Małopolska province in the time analysed. In this part of Poland the workers' protests were relatively peaceful and short. Andrzej Malik focused on the actions of the Factory Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party and the Security Service against the protests and the emergence

w latach 1980–1989, Warszawa–Katowice 2020; J. Olaszek, Podziemna sieć społeczna. Casus z dziejów konspiracji solidarnościowej, Warszawa 2020; "Karnawał" po amerykańsku. Ambasada USA w Warszawie wobec wydarzeń w Polsce od sierpnia 1980 r. do grudnia 1981 r., ed. P. Pleskot, Warszawa 2020.

of the “Solidarity” Trade Union in the Vladimir Lenin Metallurgical Foundry in Nowa Huta. The researcher from Kraków showed that not the entire steelworks staff initiated protests due to the high number of communist activists there. Dr Rafał Opulski in his lecture focused on the activity of the Kraków Committee of the PUWP against the striking workers in August 1980. What was specific at the time was the fact that in the initial period the board of the communist party underappreciated the scale of the unrest although that they received information about severe workers’ discontent. Dr hab. Cecylia Kuta pronounced the last lecture in the panel on the activity of Security Service against the protests in the summer 1980 and the emergence of “Solidarity” in the capital of Małopolska Province. Her thesis was that the Security Service in Kraków efficiently dealt with the unrest only in the first period of the legal activity of the trade union.

Next discussion panel was led by Director of INR of Wrocław dr Andrzej Drogoń. The first lecture in this part of the conference was devoted to labour unrest in the Katowickie Province in the summer of 1980. A characteristic feature of the political situation there was a significant number of strikes. Dr Jarosław Neja quoted the Security Service estimates showing that from August to September 1980 strikes broke out in the region or they were initiated in factories which employed nearly 900 thousand employees. In turn, Łukasz Sołtysik showed in his lecture complex circumstances involving the organisation of strikes in the Lower Silesia province where in two hundred factories from 80 to 120 thousand people protested. The speech of dr Dariusz Iwaneczko concerned labour unrest in South-Eastern Poland in the summer and autumn of 1980. A significant part of his lecture concerned a several-day protest at the WSK PZL Mielec factory which – according to Director of INR in Rzeszów – played a crucial role for the success of next strikes in the factories in the provinces of Rzeszów, Tarnobrzeg, Krosno and Przemyśl. Dr Tomasz Greniuch closed the first day of the conference by analysing the industrial actions in the Śląsk Opolski province, where in August and September several factories were on strike. The protests in Opole province are the proof that in the summer of 1980 not only factories in large cities were on strike, but also those in smaller towns.

The second day of the conference was devoted to all the aspects of the strikes in summer 1980 which were discussed on the previous day. In the discussion panel led by dr Nej the issues of emergence of “Solidarity” in the Bielsko province were shown by dr Dariusz Węgrzyn. The description of the variety of attempts made by the authorities to influence the “Solidarity” policies which was called

the "civilising procedures" was a significant part of this lecture. In the next speech dr Dariusz Węgrzyn quoted the documents and official press showing the issues of emergence of "Solidarity" in South-East Poland. A citation from "The Nowiny" paper was, according to the speaker, a good example of the attitude of the party towards "Solidarity" in the analysed period: *The party should lead, the government – rule, and the trade unions effectively supervise all issues of the working people*. In the views of the speaker the emergence of the independent trade union triggered a severe crisis in the party, which was impossible to overcome then. Łukasz Sołtysik showed the Communist Party and the Security Service actions in the face of the emergence and development of the "Solidarity" in Jelenia Góra from September to November. A major part of his speech concerned a significant agreement signed by MKZ "Solidarność" and the party as well as the state authorities on 20 September. Dr Zbigniew Bereszyński discussed a variety of actions taken by the power against the "Solidarity" in the Śląsk Opolski region, including the party's attempts to use scarce materials and infrastructure to enforce political subordination. A very interesting part of the lecturer's speech was the invoking of personal experience of the researcher who was a trade union activist then. The last paper in this part of the conference was devoted to the Security Service activities in the Przemyskie province at the time of the social unrest in summer 1980. A part of the Artur Brożyniak's speech focused on the description of strikes in two major regional centres, that is in Przemyśl and Jarosław.

In the course of the discussion panel led by dr Bukala, the participants continued to deliberate on the topic of the emergence of the "Solidarity. In the first paper delivered by dr Piotr Wierzbicki, the speaker revealed the history of the discussed social movement in Nowy Sącz on the basis of the documents kept by the regional museum, and in the next paper Rafał Bednarczyk used the documents from Tarnów. A staff member of the Zakłady Azotowe" noted that the "Solidarity" in Tarnów had up to 75 thousand members while there were 640 thousand such members in the entire Małopolska Region. Dr Monika Komaniecka-Łyp focused on the questions of the emergence of the "Solidarity" in universities and research institutes in Kraków. The researcher stressed the importance of the Kraków centre among all academic institutions in Poland. Despite continued surveillance of the Security Service "Solidarity" succeeded in obtaining high level of autonomy. Dr Drogoń addressed similar issues in his lecture showing the initial periods of the "Solidarity" at Silesian University which was called at the times of communist Poland "a red university".

After the lunch break in the next part of the conference the participants discussed the origins of the Independent Student Association and the reactions of the Association for the Spreading of Secular Culture with regard to the events in August 1980. Dr Kamil Dworaczek was a contributor of the first paper. After showing the statistics, he described the history of Independent Student Association in the south of Poland. Dr Bogusław Wójcik discussed the impact of strikes in then-August on the most faithful adherents of Marxism-Leninism. The researcher from Rzeszów pondered on the ideological crisis of the *nomenklatura* on the example of the Association for Spreading Secular Culture which at the end of 1979 had 370 thousand members. Again, the two last speeches were related to the Independent Student Association. Dr Tomasz Kurpierz addressed the issue of the origins of the student organisation in the Katowicke province, and Małgorzata Gliwa – relations between the Independent Student Association and the “Solidarity” in Rzeszów.

A discussion panel was the closing event with the participation of the witnesses of history in the making under the title “The Importance of Strikes of Summer 1980 in the South of Poland for the Political Situation in the Polish People’s Republic”. The debate was led by dr Drogoń, who was detained in the period of martial law by the communist authorities due to his activity in the Independent Student Association. The inhabitants of the Małopolska Region (Andrzej Szkaradek), Śląsk (Andrzej Rozpłochowski), Podkarpacie (Adam Śnieżek) and Dolny Śląsk (Tomasz Wójcik) took part in this debate. Though most speakers in the conference were the researchers from the Institute of National Remembrance, representatives of other institutions and factories took part in the event, e.g.: University of Wrocław, District Museum in Nowy Sącz, NSZZ “Solidarność”, and “Solidarity” at Zakłady Azotowe in Tarnów. The two-day debates contributed to raising the awareness of a variety and significance of the questions occurring due to the social unrest of August ‘80.