

Wielgus collaborated with Stalinist secret service

## Poland: Archbishop's resignation exposes crisis of Catholic Church

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31 January 2007

The recent resignation of Stanislaw Wielgus as the archbishop of Warsaw has served to reveal the profound crisis of the Catholic Church in Poland. The church, which has traditionally formed a bulwark of reaction in Poland and played a significant role in channelling mass opposition to the Stalinist regime behind capitalist restoration, is increasingly losing influence.

Wielgus resigned on January 7 before taking his oath of office following the release of documents just days before that proved he had collaborated with the Polish state security services.

The government of the twin Kaczynski brothers (Lech is president, Jaroslaw is prime minister) is deeply split over the Wielgus affair. Sections of the conservative government camp—the Samoobrona party of Deputy Prime Minister Andrzej Lepper, the Catholic broadcasting station “Radio Maryja” and the primate of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Jozef Glemp—defend Wielgus despite his past collaboration with the Stalinist secret service. Others within conservative circles—such as the radical anticommunist newspaper *Gazeta Polska*, which published evidence of Wielgus's activities as an informer—have vehemently attacked him.

For the Kaczynskis, the exposure of this high-ranking Catholic dignitary has caused a considerable degree of inconvenience. Unable to fulfil their social promises and becoming increasingly unpopular, they are seeking to play the worn-out card of anticommunism. Scrutiny of everyone who holds public office for a possible secret service past is central to their government programme. The exposure of a high-ranking Catholic dignitary as an informer of the Polish security service has stymied the two Catholic bigots.

The Wielgus affair is only the tip of the iceberg. The Institute of National Memory (IPN) in Warsaw, which administers the secret service documents, assumes that 10 to 15 percent of all Polish priests were in contact with the SB (domestic secret service). Other estimates put the figure even higher.

According to the Polish newspaper *Dziennik*, documents show that the secret service penetrated the highest levels of the Church and even tried to influence the selection of primates. The secret service records list the aliases of 12 bishops who at the end of the 1970s were reporting on the internal proceedings of the bishops' conference.

This exposure makes clear that Wielgus and the other secret

service informants are not isolated cases. Despite the sometimes fierce conflicts between the Catholic clergy and the Stalinist regime, they were agreed on one fundamental question: both feared the development of a revolutionary movement that expressed the interests of the Polish population.

The Stalinist regime rightly perceived the major strike movements of 1956, 1970, 1976 and 1980 as threats to its rule. Since the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Catholic Church, which has a centuries-old tradition of the defence of the ruling class and private property, has served as an international bastion of anticommunism. It was no accident that the Catholic Church supported Franco's fascists in the Spanish Civil War.

When 10 million Polish workers formed the trade union Solidarnosc in 1980, the Church used its influence in this traditionally Catholic country to isolate the more progressive elements and to channel the movement into a nationalist dead end. With its long experience as a defender of power and order, it was conscious that it could not simply passively oppose such a mass movement, but had to seek to actively influence it in order to destroy it.

Pope John Paul II, nominated as the first Polish pontiff two years earlier, played a very active role in this process. In 1980, he invited a Solidarnosc delegation to attend an audience in the Vatican. Pope John Paul worked closely with the US intelligence services and used various channels to funnel at least \$50 million in support for the trade union. The substantial intervention of the Vatican contributed considerably to the fact that any progressive tendencies inside Solidarnosc were marginalised and the clerical-nationalist wing around Lech Walesa could dominate.

The Solidarnosc advisors and leaders who were influenced by the Church strove hard to prevent an open confrontation with the government. The more violent the confrontations with the government became, the more the Solidarnosc leadership intervened to rein in the workers. When General Wojciech Jaruzelski proclaimed martial law on December 13, 1981, locking up thousands of workers and shooting dozens, the trade union was completely paralysed.

For Jozef Glemp, then-primate of the Polish Church, the most important task was to maintain public order. In his 1982 Christmas address, he called on Poles not to break open “the wounds of the last year at Christmas.” He condemned certain measures of the

regime, particularly those carried out by local authorities, who he claimed did not have the agreement of the central powers. “Despondence and apathy, passion and despair are dangerous conditions for the soul,” he warned potential firebrands. “One cannot easily develop a social order on such unstable internal foundations.”

In 1983 and 1987, Pope John Paul II undertook two pilgrimages to his homeland, both times meeting with the ruling military power, General Jaruzelski. According to some reports, their meetings were quite heated. But the pope was primarily concerned with preventing a revolutionary development and guaranteeing capitalist restoration.

It is notable that the pope received Jaruzelski at the Vatican even after he was no longer head of government. In January 2002, Pope John Paul granted a two-and-a-half hour audience to the general, by then a private citizen.

And in January 2006, Vatican Radio announced: “The last communist president of Poland, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, will speak as a witness during the beatification process of Pope John Paul II.... In the beatification procedures for John Paul in the Krakow diocese, Jaruzelski, who imposed martial law in 1981, will speak particularly about the political profile of Pope Wojtyla.”

The fact that the general who headed the putsch appeared as a principal witness to help Pope Karol Wojtyla achieve sainthood says more about the actual relationship between Stalinism and the Church than all the official myths about the Church’s alleged resistance.

It is only logical that many men of the Church went one step further and served as informers for the Stalinist secret service. The Warsaw archbishop’s past does not seem to have disturbed Cardinal Ratzinger, Wojtyla’s successor.

In his resignation speech, Wielgus said he had informed the Vatican: “I have told the Holy Father and the appropriate Vatican authorities about the path my life has taken, including the part of my past that concerns my involvement with the contacts of the then security authorities, who were active in a totalitarian state that was hostile to the Church.”

The Vatican, for its part, has denied this. But similar accusations against Wielgus were well known for a long time. So far, however, the Church has largely prevented any real investigation of the archives.

Wielgus brazenly denied having any meetings with the Stalinist secret service—until the documents were published and proved the contrary. Among these papers is a written statement in which Wielgus pledged to monitor the exile Polish community, and in particular the Polish editorial board of the radio station “Free Europe” during a foreign study visit at the beginning of the 1970s.

In the following five years, it is said he met with the secret service about 50 times. According to a secret service report, he recruited informers at the Catholic University of Lublin, provided profiles of priests and scientists, and gave an evaluation of the mood of the teaching staff during the political crises of 1968 and 1970.

Wielgus denies that his activities harmed anyone. This is hardly credible, however, in view of his previous statement denying any contact with the secret service.

Just one day after Wielgus resigned, yet another high-ranking clergyman also resigned because of contact with the secret service. The prelate of the Wawel Cathedral in Krakow, Janusz Bielanski, offered Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz his resignation, who accepted it immediately.

*Newsweek Polska* has reported that numerous clergymen from the environs of Cardinal Dziwisz were put under considerable pressure to cooperate with the secret service. Dziwisz was chaplain to Karol Wojtyla, and after his election as pope became his personal assistant.

The publication of these documents has unleashed a fierce reaction. Many newspapers have called for a thorough exposure of the role of the Church. At the same time, there have been protests against such proceedings. Cardinal Glemp defended Wielgus with the words, “Even the apostle Peter made mistakes. He denied Jesus, and yet he was the first to lead Christianity.”

Even the head of the government, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, usually an aggressive proponent of exposing Stalinist informers, backedpedaled and defended Wielgus: “The guilt of the executioner should not be covered over by the guilt of those who have done bad things and were broken, but were nevertheless victims.”

The Polish Bishops’ Conference promised to allow the investigation of all the secret service documents concerning bishops. The results of this investigation, however, will not be made public and will only be shown to the pope.

The Wielgus affair is a symptom of the crisis of the Catholic Church in Poland. Its involvement with the most right-wing political circles and the catastrophic social consequences of the introduction of capitalism have discredited the Church in the eyes of many Poles. The Church is rapidly losing support in a country in which 95 percent of the population are baptised Catholics. Twenty years ago, over 80 percent of those in Warsaw went to church regularly on Sundays; today, it is less than a third. The Church has only been able to preserve its influence in the backward rural areas of eastern Poland.

For three decades, the Catholic Church was an important bulwark against all progressive social development in Poland. The present government—above all the Law and Order Party (PiS) of the Kaczynski brothers and the League of Polish Families (LPR)—rely on religious prejudices and backwardness in order to push through a brutal programme against the general population. The crisis in the Church threatens to topple the entire post-Stalinist regime in Poland. In this light, the head of government Kaczynski is quite correct when he says that the present crisis of the Catholic Church of Poland is also a “national crisis.”



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