

NATIONAL SYMBOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF RITUAL: THE POLISH EXAMPLE

Amongst the many symbols that help to order collective thoughts and actions, national symbols are, after religious symbols, those which possess the broadest range and relate to a particularly important sphere of social life. These symbols are often deeply rooted in the traditions of the nation and at the present day they continue to play a role, frequently assuming greater significance in cases of the appearance and intensification of nationalism.

This paper aims to demonstrate the functioning of Polish national symbols under the present-day conditions of the communist state, to describe those of their features that arise from the particular situation of Polish society, and to indicate certain symbolic processes typical of dictatorships dominated by ideology.

Without dwelling on the long-running discussion of the definition of symbols and how they differ from other sorts of sign, I shall assume that a symbol is a type of sign which carries an emotional charge, the interpretation of which not only depends on reference to a particular code, but also stimulates thought and stirs feelings. The symbol, then, has special significance in the inspiration and ordering of human activity.

National symbols are *par excellence* public, according to the distinction made by Raymond Firth between public and private symbols;¹ they refer to values cultivated and shared by the whole

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¹ Raymond Firth, *Symbols, Public and Private*, London: George Allen & Unwin 1973.

nation, and also represent that nation. They are universal, at least in the sense that among the members of a given nation there exists an agreement that the given symbol represents the nation as a whole. In contemporary societies there usually exists a classical set of national symbols - emblem, flag and national anthem - which are officially recognised, unambiguously defined, and protected by law. Thus symbols have, in the most superficial semantic sphere, an ordering significance, distinguishing one nation from another and denoting the unity of the members of each nation. But they are also something considerably more important. In all countries national symbols are recognised as sacred both officially, in the legal sense, and by the informal scale of values. They have this property because they symbolise the permanence and identity of the nation, its greatness and its traditions, its ambitions and ideals. To use Durkheim's definition, these symbols express national solidarity. Thus the significance of actions relating to national symbols is the same as if those actions related to the nation as a whole.

Considering the exceptional capacity of national symbols for the generation and ordering of collective actions and remembering their universal range - going beyond the boundaries of particular professional, religious or class interests - these symbols become a central element in the majority of political rituals. Ritual is understood here in the same way that Victor Turner uses it, to mean 'prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers. The symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context.' To use Turner's terminology further, it may be said that in national culture and in the context of political ritual the symbols of which I speak are the dominant ones. 'Dominant symbols', according to Turner, possess three principal features: 1) condensation, involving the concentration of many potential meanings manifesting themselves in various contexts; 2) unification of disparate meanings in a single symbolic formation; and 3) polarization of meaning, by which the given symbol at one extreme of its meaning 'refers to components of the moral and social orders of...society, to principles of social organization ...and to norms and values inherent in structural relationships', while at the other extreme it refers to elementary feelings usually connected with the simplest natural associations evoked by the symbol.²

National symbols are indeed 'condensed' in the sense that in various contexts they may manifest various semantic aspects, evoking various elements of national tradition and various values, and may arouse various emotions from affection to despair, from

² Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1967, p. 19.

pride to aggression.

In considering the social functions and the various semantic aspects of national symbols, reference must be made to Firth's exhaustive study of flags. Many of his observations can be applied to all kinds of national symbols. As Firth writes, flags fulfil a role of decoration and display, expressing solidarity and the identification of the individual with the group. National flags usually express in symbolic form the principal values, ideology or aspirations of the nation. Firth quotes an Indian government pamphlet explaining the sense of symbols, in which it is written that 'The National Flag, the National Anthem and the National Emblem are the three symbols through which an independent country proclaims its identity and sovereignty and, as such, they command instantaneous respect and loyalty. In themselves, they reflect the entire background, thought and culture of a nation'. Firth further asserts that 'Flags are also capable of being greatly varied in shape and design, by use of different patterns, colour combinations and specific motifs. The adaptability of flags in display means that their symbolic value can appear over a great range of ritual occasions.... Because a flag is cheap to make or buy, easy to manipulate, observable by numbers of people at once, it is a prime vehicle for conveying attitudes towards a social unit, of which one is a member, or expressing other sentiments'.³

Polish national symbols, though similar in many respects to the majority of contemporary analogous symbolic representations of European nations, are distinguished by one essential feature, namely that they remained fundamentally unchanged from their very beginning. It is, as Firth emphasises, a feature of national symbols that 'a change in type of government may be symbolized by abandonment of the old flag and creation of a different one'.⁴ As a rule, a change of political system or of political leadership has brought with it a change of national symbols. Not only have nearly all communist countries adopted new symbols, but the same happened in France after the Revolution, in Italy, and in Germany after the Second World War. From the moment that democratic systems were introduced in the majority of European countries, the old symbols that had come from the ancestral signs of the monarchs were discarded.

In Poland things were different. The emblem and flag of Poland have their origin in the Middle Ages, and the exact time of their appearance cannot be ascertained. Historical sources record their existence at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The emblem of Poland precedes the flag, and so should be the starting-point of our discussion. The emblem depicts a white eagle with outspread wings, its head turned to the right,

³ Firth, *op.cit.*, pp. 341-2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

with golden talons and beak. Until the end of the Second World War the eagle wore a golden crown. It is set against the background of an evenly red shield. The emblem is derived directly from the coat-of-arms of the Piast family, who ruled Poland from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. The first Polish king Bolesław received, according to some historical sources, the sign of the silver eagle from the German emperor Otto III as a symbol of their mutual equality. During the Piast dynasty, the Polish state was formed. The eagle has been a popular symbol of power in Europe since Roman times. The reason was, of course, the features attributed to the eagle as the king of birds - the strongest, and the most powerful, independent and majestic. Polish sources indicate that in the period of the break-up of the kingdom into feudal principalities under the German emperors, the Piast eagle had no crown (see Figures 1 and 2). It was given one when, in the course of the unification of the Polish lands at the end of the thirteenth century, Prince Przemysław was crowned king, sovereign ruler of a Christian state, the equal of all other European rulers (see Figure 3). From this time, one may say that the crown on the eagle's head has been a symbol of the political sovereignty of the Polish nation. Later on, I shall consider the far-reaching contemporary implications of this fact.

Przemysław's coronation seal from 1295 depicted an eagle with a crown and carried around its rim the inscription: 'The Almighty himself hath returned the victorious signs to the Poles'.⁵ From that time right up to the present day, the white eagle has been the symbol, not of individual rulers or even dynasties, but of the nation and the state. The loss of the emblem, for example during battle, symbolised defeat and dishonour, as is clear from the 15th-century chronicle of Jan Długosz in his description of an event which took place during the great Battle of Grunwald in 1410 between the Poles and the Teutonic Knights. In the course of the battle, a great red standard with a white eagle symbolising the whole Polish army found itself in the midst of the fray and nearly fell into the hands of the enemy. Seeing the symbol in danger, the Polish Knights threw themselves desperately to the rescue, while the Teutonic knights had already begun a hymn of victory, judging quite rightly that the loss of the symbol would be the final blow administered to the Polish army. The Poles, however, recovered the standard and attacked the enemy with redoubled fervour in order to give vent to their patriotic feelings and to clear themselves of dishonour (Figure 4).

Despite minor formal changes, the eagle remained the emblem of Poland throughout the countless upheavals of Poland's history: it survived the partitions, the change of system to parliamentary

⁵ S. Russecki, S. K. Kuczynski and J. Willaume, *Godło, barwy i hymn Rzeczypospolitej* [The Emblem, Flag and National Anthem of the Polish Republic], Warsaw 1963.

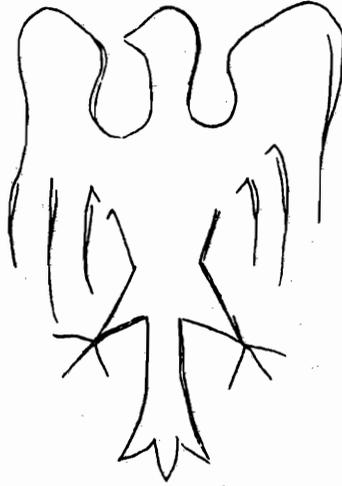


Figure 1: Eagle on the Shield of Prince Kazimierz of Opole (Piast Dynasty)

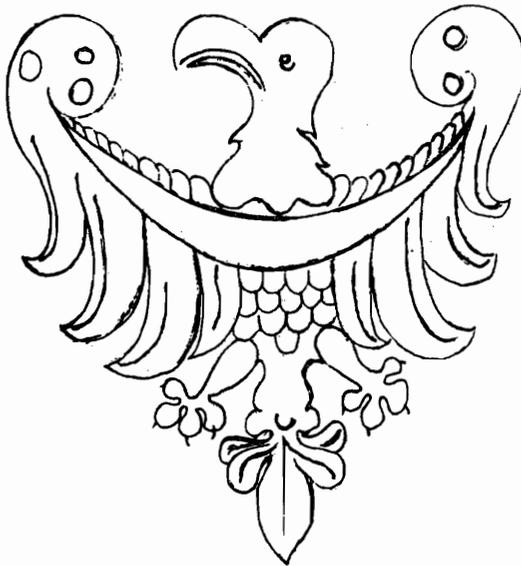


Figure 2: Eagle - The Emblem of Prince Henryk V (Piast)

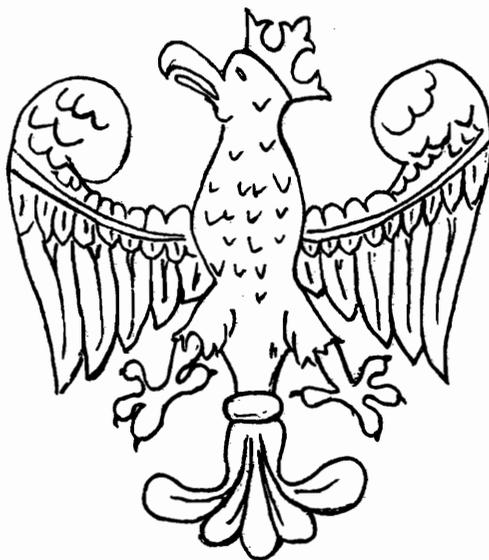


Figure 3: Eagle - The Emblem of King Przemysł



Figure 4: Eagle - The Emblem of Poland at the Time of King Władysław Jagiełło

democracy (Figure 5), and even, as I have mentioned, the imposition of communism (Figure 6). Its symbolic value, beyond the straightforward symbol of the eagle, king of birds, is not entirely clear. The red background is presumably linked with the royal purple, the symbol of the majesty of rulers. The white eagle is sometimes associated with the symbolic colour of good from Slavonic mythology, black representing evil.⁶ A more worldly explanation may be that on a real emblem, not a stylised one, the eagle was made of silver-plated tin, which when transferred to other materials yielded a white colour.

The Polish flag is composed of two horizontal bands, white above and red below. It comes historically from the heraldic colours of the emblem (the white of the eagle, being more important, above, the red of the background below). In the Middle Ages the national flag simply depicted the emblem. In the nineteenth century it assumed its present form. It is something quite exceptional on a world scale that the Polish flag does not possess a concrete symbolic significance of its own, independent of the emblem. As a whole it is a national symbol, but its individual elements do not represent concrete ideas. This is the case precisely because the Polish flag is so old and did not appear as the result of a conscious decision at a particular moment in history, like the flags of many countries, but is the product of a gradual evolution from the coat-of-arms. This, however, does not reduce its meaning as a national symbol.

The Polish National Anthem in its present form dates from the end of the eighteenth century. Previously, a role similar to that of a national anthem was played by various songs and primarily hymns, above all the 'Bogurodzica', a hymn originating in the thirteenth century and constituting quite possibly the earliest recorded literature in the Polish language. It was this hymn that inspired the Knights to fight in the Battle of Grunwald mentioned above. Its deeply religious and at the same time patriotic text is perhaps the first example of the close links between Polish national symbols and religious symbolism. The 'Bogurodzica' today no longer fulfils its ancient symbolic role, but another, nineteenth-century hymn, 'Boże coś Polskę' ('O God, who hath protected Poland'), an exalted prayer for the return of liberty to the fatherland, is sung to this day in churches and at various opposition demonstrations. During the partitions of Poland (1795-1918), this hymn was directed against the invaders and represented a symbolic expression of national solidarity and the struggle for national sovereignty. Nowadays it is still a popular religious song, having at the same time a strong patriotic character, and is sung on practically every occasion when both patriotic and religious feelings are expressed.

The music of Chopin, romantic and deeply rooted in Polish

⁶ J. Grzegorzewski, 'Godło nasze' [Our Emblem] *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 1920.

folk music, very often fulfils various symbolic functions, although it was never chosen as an official anthem. Recently, at the beginning of martial law, it was broadcast in the mass media as a delicate, subtle background of official speeches, obviously with the intention of stressing - but not too openly and straightforwardly - the truly Polish and patriotic character of the military government and its actions.

The present official National Anthem, the so-called *Dąbrowski Mazurka*, originated in 1797 as a song sung by the Polish legions fighting on the side of the French against the invaders who shortly before had deprived Poland of its independence. The author of the song was Józef Wybicki. The *Dąbrowski Mazurka*, sung to a tune taken from Polish folk music, has a strongly militant character, expressing a desire for armed struggle for liberty and recalling historical moments when Poles succeeded, despite early set-backs, in restoring their independence by force of arms. The text of the song underwent various minor changes, until in 1926, having become the official Polish National Anthem, it assumed its present character.

Apart from the above-mentioned symbols (emblem, flag and national anthem), which are found as a rule in every country, other signs may also be included amongst Polish national symbols, occurring less universally and having a shorter and less rich historical tradition, but possessing great significance and aiding the understanding of the sense of many symbolic texts appearing in Polish ritual. I shall indicate two such symbols here. The first is the anchor - a religious symbol of hope. The anchor appeared during the partitions of Poland as part of a tripartite set of concepts alongside faith (represented by a cross) and charity (whose symbol was a heart). During the Nazi occupation, there appeared a symbolic sign for *Polska Walcząca* or Fighting Poland, in which the letters P and W were joined to make a stylized anchor. More recently, after the outlawing in December 1981 of the Solidarity union (created in August 1980) and the introduction of martial law, this sign took on new life, after being transformed into *Solidarność Walcząca* (Fighting Solidarity), this time comprising the letters S and W. This symbol refers not only, as in the case of Fighting Poland, to the symbol of the anchor and the idea of hope but also, by analogy, to the Nazi occupation and the resistance movement against an alien power. Solidarity, being rather a national liberation movement than a trade union, adopted the anchor sign as a symbol of the continuity of the struggle for national independence.

The second symbol very often appearing in patriotic contexts is the Polish military uniform. The tradition of struggle for independence meant that the Polish uniform acquired entirely positive symbolic associations. It was linked with the time of greatness, independence and heroism, and its replacement with a foreign uniform was an omen of misfortune. Furthermore, the various characteristic elements of the uniform, evoking the one-time greatness of the Polish army, began during the partitions to function as symbols of the permanence and sovereignty of the army.

The characteristic wings worn by mounted knights in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries during the victorious battles with invaders, the characteristic four-cornered cap or *rogatywka* of the *ułan* (modern Polish cavalryman) - a head-dress that became part of the uniform of the Polish army at the time of independence - and finally the Polish curved sword with its special shape: all symbolise the Polish army in the service of the nation. As we shall see later, these military symbols are presently being used by the political authorities to try to legitimize their rule.

As I mentioned above, one characteristic feature of Polish national symbolism is its close ties with religious symbols. Despite Poland's traditional religious tolerance, Polish society was and is decidedly Catholic, and remains tightly bound to its religious tradition. It so happened in history that the nations threatening the political sovereignty of the Polish nation - Turkey, Sweden, Russia and Prussia - differed from it in terms of religion. Thus for centuries Polishness was closely associated with Catholicism. This found its symbolic expression in the uniting of national and religious symbolic elements into a single whole. In 1768-1772, for example, the anti-Russian military confederacy called the Bar Confederacy adopted as its symbol a white-and-red flag with a silhouette of the Virgin Mary. A sign surprisingly similar in form and symbolic meaning appeared during the recent state of martial law, when a lapel badge depicting Our Lady of Częstochowa on a white-and-red background became popular. During the partitions in the nineteenth century, particularly after the defeat of the armed uprising of 1864, there arose the custom of wearing black mourning jewellery, representing a combination of national and religious symbols (like the aforementioned symbol of faith, hope and charity). At present, one of the most commonly worn signs in Poland is a black and silver cross, on which, in the place of Christ, an eagle with a crown is crucified - a transparent symbol of the martyrdom of the nation.

The Catholic Church in Poland has generally taken the part of the nation in its struggle with various oppressors, and it is a tradition in Polish thinking to combine national ideas with religious ones. In the image of the world generally accepted in Polish society the two elements support each other mutually and are never in opposition to each other. Furthermore, in consequence of this association, not only are patriotic ideas enriched with a mystic element, but the concept of the union of the nation with the Catholic Church is expressed. This union was clearly visible during the Solidarity period, both in decrees, demonstrations and ritual and also in political activity. At present, now that the Catholic Church is once again the only legally operating political opposition in Poland, it fulfils a prime role in the ideological battle with totalitarianism, which, as we shall see later, has an interesting symbolic dimension.

At this point, some attention should be paid to the particular political situation and the specific character of the

ideology and symbolic political activity to be found at present in Poland. The communist authorities, like any authorities, devote a considerable amount of their activity to the affirmation of their legitimacy, their legal validity. The types of such legitimacy can be defined here with reference to Weber's classic division into traditional, charismatic and legal rules. The essence of communist power is that in justifying the reasons for its own existence, it can appeal neither to tradition, nor to the personal traits of its leaders, nor to generally observed rules of legal democratic behaviour and a subsequent social mandate. The one reason for the existence of communist authority is ideology, a certain vision of history, its guiding forces and its aims. Only by accepting this vision can communist rule be recognised as legally valid. Consequently, political ritual plays a fundamental role in the process of the legitimisation of communist power. It serves to create a certain kind of symbolic reality which replaces the reality of social existence and which is consistent with ideology.⁷ Political rituals organised by communists in the countries they govern therefore fulfil a function of strengthening and validating the political system: participation in the ritual introduces into a vision of the world of the masses an order consistent with ideology, helps that ideology to be accepted and organises activity in a direction consistent with it. Through mass participation in the ritual, whether forced or voluntary, be it through conformism or fear, an ideological creation of reality and a legitimisation of power are achieved. A characteristic of communist political ritual in its Polish version is the introduction of national elements. Fundamental orthodox communist ideology is anti-nationalistic, stressing instead class elements. However, the particularly turbulent history of Poland, full of heroic struggle for the independence and even the biological existence of the nation (inasmuch as it faced extermination during the Nazi occupation), meant that the good of the nation stood and still stands at the top of the Polish hierarchy of values, before peace, well-being or even religion. In view of this, the communists, in imposing their rule on Poland with the help of Soviet troops, decided against a systematic destruction of national values, and attempted instead to introduce them into the compass of their own ideological system. This process has manifested itself particularly clearly recently, after the arousal of aspirations to independence in the Solidarity period and the subsequent introduction of martial law.

Thus national symbols were introduced into communist political ritual, and appeared alongside class symbols and portraits of party and state leaders. This was ironically facilitated by formal similarity between the national flag and the flag of the Communist Party. In a hall or street decorated

⁷ I owe this point to Andrzej Flis (personal communication).

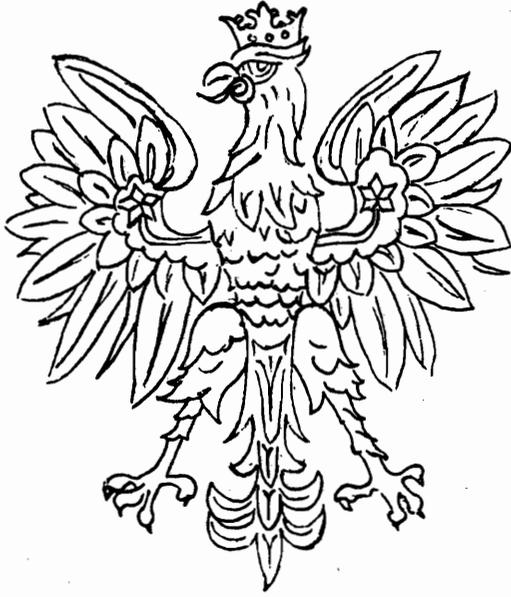
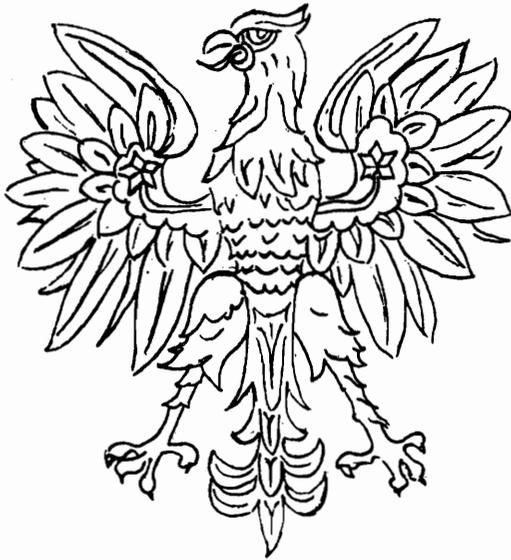


Figure 5: Eagle - Polish National Emblem 1927-1945



*Figure 6: Eagle - Polish National Emblem since 1945
(Note the absence of the Crown as in Figure 5)*

for the purpose of such a ritual, the colour red predominates, the white part of the national flag being less striking in relation to the red. The decision to retain unchanged the official national symbols (emblem, flag and national anthem) was motivated, it would seem, by a desire to exploit national ideology as an element strengthening communist ideology and contributing to the legitimisation of the new powers. The authorities, in using such symbols, were intended to be seen by society first as sovereign, independent of the USSR, and second as a native Polish power, coming from the nation, conscious of its links with that nation and working for its good. A change of official symbols would have confirmed the general intuitive feeling about the alien-ness of the communists as regards the nation, especially when considering the fact that after the Second World War the new state leaders arrived in Poland along with the Soviet army and *de facto* fulfilled the function of Soviet representatives. A strong argument in favour of such an interpretation is the particular form of the national emblem chosen by the communists, an eagle similar in appearance to the Piast eagle. Thus in Polish history every once in a while the memory is revived of the greatness of the Piasts, during whose rule Poland attained full state sovereignty and saw economic prosperity, and whose representatives, unlike the majority of later elected kings, were Polish. The Piast sovereign, therefore, was a symbol of a Polish sovereign. The Piast symbol represented first, a powerful and sovereign nation, and secondly, a nation ruled by Poles. The only change - and yet a fundamental one - introduced by the communists in the national symbols was to deprive the eagle of its crown. In the past, certain radical organisations had attempted to introduce just such a change, but had always stepped down in the face of resistance from the majority of society. This time, the communists used their absolute power to this end. They believed that removing the eagle's crown would symbolise the liberation of the Polish people from class hierarchy and the relics of feudalism. However, they ignored the important fact that the eagle's crown symbolised above all state sovereignty, that far back in history the eagle had been given a crown when the nation attained full independence. An eagle without a crown, then, was not just an egalitarian eagle but above all an eagle deprived of sovereignty. This too, it would seem, is the way society understand this symbol. In all opposition actions against the communists in which national symbols play a part, the eagle regains its crown. This does not signify nostalgia for pre-war times - it is not retrospection, longing for past greatness - but it looks forward, desiring to return political independence to the Polish people. Similar significance can apparently be attributed to the custom of veneration of royal tombs in Cracow Cathedral. This veneration signifies the desire to return sovereignty, symbolised in this context by certain kings known historically as powerful leaders of a great and free nation. The same veneration became customary in the case of the tomb of Marshal Piłsudski - a leader

of independent Poland in the period between the World Wars. School children used to decorate his tomb with their school emblems along with national symbols and red and white flowers.

Throughout the period of communist rule, national symbols have appeared, with varying degrees of intensity, in ritual situations organised by the state bureaucracy. Political meetings on the occasion of official public holidays, anniversaries or the condemnation of the 'enemies of socialism' are held in halls in which, alongside the red flag and busts or portraits of Lenin, Stalin, Marx, Engels and present leaders of the Communist parties of the USSR and Poland, there are also white-and-red flags and the national emblem, the *Dąbrowski Mazurka* being sung alongside the International. After the introduction of martial law, General Jaruzelski began his speech on radio and television with the words 'Poland has not yet perished', the opening words of the National Anthem. He emphasised then, and continues to emphasise, that martial law was introduced by the Polish army and that it was a sovereign Polish decision taken by the so-called 'Military Council for National Salvation' in order to save the nation. In this way, he was trying to exploit the positive attitude to the army traditional in Poland by saying that this time, as so often in history, the Polish army had fulfilled the role of saviour of the nation. The positive symbol of the army uniform was also used to calm rebelliousness. Even police patrolling the streets were often dressed in army uniforms, and television announcers also appeared in army uniforms when reading propaganda texts. This serves above all to draw attention to the symbolic meaning contained in the assertion that the Polish uniform signified the struggle for good and for the liberty of the nation. Jaruzelski even went so far as to bring back the characteristic military head-dress, the *rogatywka*, which was henceforth worn by the Guard of Honour. This head-dress had been banned after the Second World War as representing the 'bourgeois' army, but had remained in the popular consciousness as a symbol of a truly Polish uniform.

We can see, then, that the communist powers extensively and ably manipulate national symbols in the quest for legitimacy. But these symbols also play a leading role in the ritual of political opposition. Traditionally they are, as I have mentioned, associated with religious symbols. In times of relative social peace they appear in an opposition role, principally in churches. At moments of increased tension and open social protest they become visible on the streets, on the walls of houses and in public places generally, and on duplicated leaflets. National symbols appear here in a different function; being changed by appearing in different contexts, they no longer fulfil the role of strengthening and legitimising the political system, but on the contrary generate social emotions aimed against the unwanted authorities. In the context of opposition they first of all signify the polarisation of Polish society into, on the one hand the Polish nation, deprived of sovereignty and all political rights but vehemently demanding them, and on the other hand a

handful of communists possessed of the means of force and the support of the neighbouring power and ruling despite the wishes of the nation. Secondly, these symbols fulfil the function of integrating the nation, gathering together all its various sections on an ideological plane and uniting it in the struggle for sovereignty. And thirdly, they stir strong emotions, order them and turn them against the enemy, the political authorities.

Not without reason, then, they appear on every occasion of oppositional ritual, be it a mass meeting, a march, or a spontaneous gathering of people - for example, around a monument to fallen workers white-and-red flags appear, while the *Dąbrowski Mazurka* or 'Boże coś Polskę' is sung. Striking workers hang out national flags and wear white-and-red armbands to stress that in their protest it is a question of more than the particular interests of one or another group of workers. An attack by police units on a place of work on strike assumes the character of the storming of a bastion in which the nation is defending itself. The Solidarity union introduced a national flag into its own symbol, already designed in white and red. The 'Solidarity' sign takes the form of lettering in which the characters are styled to resemble a marching crowd with flag raised. After the introduction of martial law and the suspension and subsequent disbanding of Solidarity this sign was banned, and so instead people began to wear badges of a similar graphic design but of usually religious content. On walls there appeared the sign of Fighting Solidarity, recalling the symbol of the anchor - representing hope and the struggle for liberty. The monument to workers who died in Gdańsk at the hands of the police, built as a result of social pressure during the Solidarity period, takes the form of three crosses linked with three anchors - a symbol of faith and hope.

During and after martial law, as always during periods of the intensification of repression, the church became a centre for the organisation of political ritual. National ideas and symbols are present at the majority of services, and from time to time exhibitions are organised at which national and religious symbols are put on show in the context of political opposition. A good example of this was the crib organised during Christmas 1984 in a church in Nowa Huta. The centre was formed by an altar with Our Lady of Częstochowa against a white-and-red background. Alongside was a photograph of the Pope wearing a tragic, suffering expression. All around were candles wrapped in white-and-red sashes, the anchors of Fighting Poland and Fighting Solidarity, patriotic inscriptions centring on the words Poland, Nation, and Solidarity. An important element in this crib was the analogy with the homage of the Three Kings, where instead of the Kings there were three policemen dragging the body of a priest to the feet of the new-born Christ. This is a reference to the murder of Father Popiełuszko, the chaplain of Solidarity, by three officials of the secret police. The whole crib is a condensed, multi-elemental, politico-religious symbol of the struggle with communism.

While on the subject of the functioning of national symbols in the context of the opposition, a theoretical observation emerges connected with the various conceptions of the 'opposition-ness' of the use of symbols in democratic and totalitarian societies. In the above-mentioned study of flags, Firth asserts that in democratic societies the use of symbols by the opposition involves their desecration, their destruction or their being treated in a way recognised as humiliating, in any case violating their function as symbols of national solidarity, unity and permanence. It appears that the essence of the matter is that in democratic societies the opposition may be opposed to the state of society, its structure, its organisation and so on, and not just towards a particular group of leaders. As a result, the opposition may desecrate national symbols, which for them are symbols of what they would like to change. In totalitarian societies, on the other hand, the protest is levelled at the group of leaders who are ruling against the wishes of the nation as a whole, which is represented by national symbols. These symbols serve to distinguish the positively valued society from the negatively valued authorities; they represent solidarity and national permanence, and at the same time symbolise the opposition between nation and rulers. Therefore, national symbols, constituting for the nation sacred objects, are treated in opposition ritual with complete respect and veneration. Paying them homage represents a cult of national values, in opposition to the communist ideology which is the property of the authorities. Thus in Poland there is not the slightest indication of contempt for or animosity to national symbols. Their use by the authorities is treated as usurpation, and they themselves are the property of the nation.

Of course, the exponents of power see the dangers arising from the use of national symbols in opposition situations, and do not intend to tolerate it, for it is a feature of communist ideology to exclude any alternatives, since the existence of alternative, rival rituals would impair the legitimacy of the authorities, based exclusively on ideology and on the myth of its being universally accepted by society. The assuring of a monopoly in the sphere of political ritual has therefore become one of the principal subjects of concern for the authorities. This manifests itself through legal action and through the exploitation of conformism. The monopolization of national symbols is one of the means to this end; it is a question of the leaders having the exclusive freedom to decide where, when, by whom and in what situations national symbols may be used. The first step here was the decree of 1955 introducing fines or imprisonment for up to a year for illegal use of the emblem and colours of the Polish People's Republic. In the 1970s, along with the intensification of opposition political activity involving wide use of national symbolism, there was also an increase in the activities of the authorities in the direction of monopolization. In 1976, an amendment was introduced into the Constitution of the Polish People's Republic banning the use of national symbols in a way

incompatible with the intentions of the legislators. The use of the flag or the emblem or the singing of the National Anthem without the approval of the authorities had become a crime. This law was reinforced by a decree issued during martial law banning the use of all unregistered symbols (including, for example, the Solidarity badge). On the other hand, there exists a decree ordering the decoration of streets and even of private houses with national flags on the occasion of public holidays and other celebrations dictated by the authorities. A refusal to take part in this ritual also entails a fine. Of course, as I have mentioned, the purpose of all these decrees is not to secure respect for symbols, for no one in Poland seeks to abuse them. It is simply a question of the authorities assuring a monopoly of their use.

Thus, briefly, we may characterize the role of national symbols in Polish political ritual. They are an element in a very active political battle and at the same time contribute to the assurance of national permanence and unity, representing the values dearest to the nation. In this way, national symbols are not just a sign of belonging to a nation, nor just the object of a patriotic cult; they are alive as a central element in the most crucial social processes in Poland, ordering the thinking of great masses of people and fundamentally influencing their actions.

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