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West Germany's stance on the imposition of martial law in Poland

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The news of martial law having been declared in Poland reached the West German Chancellor during his official visit to the GDR. By a strange turn of history, on that very day on December 13, 1981, Helmut Schmidt, accompanied by the head of the East German Communist Party Erich Honecker, was fielding questions from journalists at a press conference. During the event, the Chancellor expressed his understanding for General Wojciech Jaruzelski's decision. While Bonn's position would later grow more critical of the Polish authorities, it still differed markedly from that of many other countries, particularly the United States. However, Germany was by no means the odd one out in Europe as a similar stance on the Polish events was taken by the authorities of France, Italy, Austria and Greece.

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the social-democratic/liberal coalition that had been in power in West Germany since 1969, sought to return to the détente policy that had previously been disturbed by the armaments policy of the USSR and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Bonn's indecisive policies, including that of distancing itself from US sanctions against the USSR over Afghanistan and of boycotting the Moscow Olympics, caused discontent in Washington. Bonn did not give up and engaged in, for instance, the Moscow talks between Schmidt and Vice-Chancellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Hans-Dietrich Genscher on one side and Leonid Brezhnev on the other in late June and early July 1980. The Polish labor strikes in the summer of 1980 and the establishment of the "Solidarity" trade union posed a further challenge for West Germany's eastern policy that had been geared towards maintaining the best possible relations with the Eastern bloc. Edward Gierek's visit to Hamburg scheduled for the second half of August never took place. Chancellor Schmidt had had an excellent personal relationship with the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, who was forced to resign after the signing of the August accords. At one time, he even said he would be happy to have Gierek fill a ministerial post in West German government.

The general conviction in the Bonn government was that the events had the potential to destabilize Poland and trigger a bloody Soviet intervention, eventually leading to a return to the Cold War, thus fully derailing the eastern policy launched by Willy Brandt and continued by Schmidt. Hence, Bonn's position on Poland's deteriorating domestic conflict was one of restraint and, in the case of the Social Democrats, of distancing themselves from "Solidarity". Schmidt himself openly expressed his dislike of the Polish movement. Speaking in jest in the fall of 1981, Schmidt and French President François Mitterrand agreed that Poles would rather go on strike than engage in honest work. Bonn pinned their hopes on the new Prime Minister Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, who they thought was

well poised to avert chaos in his country and liberalize domestic politics. In a confidential conversation in February 1981, Social Democratic Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia Johannes Rau (who later became president of West Germany) claimed that Jaruzelski was "the last bulwark against chaos and civil war. If Jaruzelski fails to get a grip on events in Poland, the Soviet Union will have no choice but to step in." All along, however, Germany kept reiterating its general offer to provide economic assistance to Poland.

When delegates to the September congress of Solidarity appealed for the establishment of free trade unions in other Eastern bloc countries, Chancellor Schmidt refrained from criticizing their message. However, SPD Chairman Willy Brandt did not conceal his irritation and publicly called on Poles to simply get to work instead of interfering in the affairs of other countries and spreading their ideas in a bloc well known for its peculiar political system.

A growing conviction in Germany was that a violent resolution of the Polish crisis by the country's communist authorities was inevitable and preferrable to a military Soviet intervention. All this time, care was taken to maintain good relations with Moscow. In November 1981, the federal government signed a contract for the supply of pipes for the construction of a gas pipeline from the Soviet Union to Western Europe. Two days later, on November 22, Leonid Brezhnev began his visit to Bonn.

The Schmidt government was particularly concerned with revitalizing relations with East Germany. On December 11, the Chancellor paid a three-day visit to the GDR, having postponed it twice due to international events. Little did Schmidt know that Honecker, who during the crisis a year earlier fervently supported an armed suppression of the Polish "counter-revolution", was preparing the National People's Army of the GDR for deployment in a possible intervention in Poland should the Polish military response, scheduled for December 13, fail to curb Solidarity's advances.

A few days later, Honecker told Jaruzelski that Schmidt took the imposition of martial law in his stride commenting that "sooner or later, order has [in Poland] to be restored and it is only appropriate that the Poles do it themselves. I hope the solution is going to be non-violent."

At a joint press conference with the East German leader, Schmidt stated that martial law had been inevitable and that: "Mr. Honecker has been just as perturbed to see that martial law has become necessary. I sincerely hope that the Polish nation will sort out its problems." These words, emphasizing that Schmidt and Honecker saw eye to eye on martial law, were well remembered in Poland. Schmidt added he trusted that "the Polish nation would solve its problems on its own, because other countries' economic and financial capabilities of assisting Poland certainly aren't unlimited".

The West German press overwhelmingly supported the view that martial law had been inevitable. Deputy Prime Minister Mieczysław F. Rakowski noted in his journal: "Germany's leading social democrats, as well as the editors-in-chief of *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit* and *Stern* have been composed and balanced in their views. I take this as a show of support for our policy". *Die Zeit*'s Editor-in-Chief Theo Sommer had this to say on December 18: "No matter how great it may be, the sympathetic support of the West for Polish reformers will never outweigh geographical facts (...). In the real world of nuances and shades of gray in which costs and benefits need to be weighed carefully, any "macho" reactions are absolutely inappropriate. The solutions [employed in Poland] have given the Poles, the Russians, and the West time to take a deep breath. Everyone is getting a chance, perhaps the last one." Three days later, *Spiegel*'s Editor-in-Chief Rudolf Augstein commented on the imposition of martial law in Poland in considerably harsher if not entirely anti-Polish tones, resorting to nationalist German stereotypes: "The blame for the Polish tragedy falls squarely on the Poles themselves. (...) Poles have repeatedly demonstrated their inability to govern themselves intelligently. (...) There are parallels between Piłsudski's coup of 1926 and Jaruzelski's attack of 1981. (...) The 'Solidarity' people centered around Wałęsa had been unable to stay a reasonable centrist course. The Communist Party remained patient until the last minute, perhaps even too long." In the first January issue of *Stern*, its Editor-in-Chief Henri Nannen wrote: "I am fed up with hypocrisy on Poland. (...) It was hypocritical to argue that Poles could somehow withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and create their own democracy along the lines of the West."

Willy Brandt showed an appreciation for General Jaruzelski's motives. In a television interview on December 28, he criticized the West's scathing condemnations of Poland's communist military regime as "empty platitudes" and denounced those who expressed them as "heroes at other people's expense". Helmut Schmidt, in his turn, said this in a statement to the press on January 3, 1982: "I believe that, by and large, Jaruzelski does what he believes is best for the Polish nation, as he is primarily a Pole. Being a military man comes second to him. Being communist is only surfaces as his third identity."

Meanwhile, the Bonn government made an effort to fine-tune its official declarations. In a statement made in the Bundestag on December 18, 1981, Schmidt said: "My heart goes out to Polish workers" after which he warned against interference in Poland. He wished that Poland would lift martial law in keeping with its obligations under the Charter of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), of which it was a signatory. However, the abolition of martial law was not demanded in a declaration adopted unanimously on the same day by all political groups in the Bundestag, with only a single abstention. Demands were made to release all internees and detainees, restore civil liberties and open dialogue with the reformers. An appeal was made to all countries to refrain from interfering in Poland. A resolution was passed that called on the federal government to suspend economic aid for Poland until repressions end. A call to the German public to aid the Poles triggered a campaign of sending packages with food and (partially used) clothing (the so-called *Polenhilfe*) to Poland.

The Schmidt government also distanced itself from the American sanctions imposed on Poland at the initiative of President Ronald Reagan, as proclaimed on December 23, 1981. On December 29, Reagan announced he would also sanction the Soviet Union, which he saw as the inspiration for the Polish martial law. On the same day, Bonn finally expressly demanded that the Polish authorities abolish martial law, release the internees and establish a dialogue with "Solidarity". The Schmidt government's condemnation of the sanctions drew criticism from the Christian Democratic opposition.

Poland and West Germany maintained diplomatic relations. On December 30, Deputy Prime Minister Rakowski flew to Bonn to meet with Vice-Chancellor Genscher. Significantly, this high representative of the martial law team chose West Germany as the first country to visit after the proclamation of martial law. The three-day visit to Warsaw in February by SPD Chairman Herbert Wehner, who was one of the party's leaders, could also be interpreted as putting an end to communist Poland's international isolation. Wehner held talks with Jaruzelski, Rakowski and others. During their course, the German Social Democrat expressed his understanding for the decision to declare martial law. However, rumor had it that the visit had not been consulted with the Bonn government. Soon afterwards, at an April SPD congress in Munich, the party voted against joining the US sanctions, although it did call on the Polish government to lift martial law, restore civil liberties and launch internal dialogue. The sanctions against Poland and the USSR and the construction of the Siberian gas pipeline constituted one of the main points of contention in West German-American relations for the remainder of the term of office of the Kohl/Genscher administration. Not even Reagan's visit in June 1982 changed that.

Chancellor Schmidt encouraged German citizens to send packages, mainly with food, to Poland. Such aid was hoped to mend relations between both societies and nations and was motivated morally as well as politically. The majority of food aid shipments forming part of the so-called *Polenhilfe* were dispatched to Poland by West German charities, church and cultural organizations, and professional associations (especially the Federation of German Trade Unions, DGB). The German Red Cross sent medications for the Polish healthcare organizations, among other items. A big contribution was made by West German Caritas. Packages and shipments were to go directly to private individuals as well as to parishes, which would distribute the goods among their parishioners. Some aid trucks smuggled printed materials to be used by the opposition. Packages from private individuals accounted for an estimated 10% of the aid.

In February 1982, at the request of the Christian Democratic opposition, Germany suspended postal charges for donations to Poland. As soon as June though, the Bonn government reinstated the fee arguing it cost the state budget too much. According to the Bundespost, some 14.4 million packages were sent to Poland between 1981 and 1984. For many Germans involved in the campaign, this was a way to make personal amends for the crimes of the previous generations against the Polish nation in 1939-1945.

The author of a German publication has estimated the aid at upwards of 1 billion Deutsche marks, although this number seems to be overstated. It should be noted that Poland received such aid from over a dozen other countries as well.

On September 17, 1982, the social democratic-liberal coalition crumbled. Hans-Dietrich Genscher's liberals formed a coalition with the Christian Democrats upon which the helm of the new government was taken by Helmut Kohl, the Christian Democratic leader. Kohl fundamentally overhauled the policy towards both Poland and the USSR. Relations between Bonn and Warsaw entered a new thornier phase: martial law was strongly condemned with occasional revisionist statements being made by members of Kohl's government. Federal Interior Minister Friedrich Zimmermann (CSU) said this at a meeting of the Bavarian section of the Federation of Expellees: "the federal government will not limit the German issue to West and East Germany alone – land across the Oder and Neisse Rivers will also be considered". This meant contending the inviolability of Poland's western border.