

The Polish Round Table 1989: Negotiating the Revolution

Andrzej M. Szewczak

The catastrophe and terror in the recent history of the Old Continent have precipitated unprecedented socio-political change witnessed, and experienced, by three generations of central-eastern Europeans. The collective political conscience of the continent was forged in the reconciliation of former belligerents, the dismantling of barriers assumed by newly broken alliances, and the construction of supranational structures of democracy. This required the work and sacrifice of a generation, living out shifting state ideologies; people who had to forego former prejudices and engage in a new, fluid dialogue, which had been formerly discouraged and repressed. Here, I reflect upon how the inauguration of a new, political dialogue at the executive level helped to establish today's democratic, pluralist, and markedly stable, Polish state.

For many Europeans, the fall of the Berlin Wall is the most recognisable symbol of democratic change in the last century. The image of thousands of Germans demolishing the literal manifestation of the political iron curtain became immediately associated with the dissolution of the Communist Bloc. Heavily tinted by the confused existence of post-war Germany, these indisputably powerful scenes helped the identity of the newly re-unified country to crystallise. East of the Oder, where the collapse of the old world order began, the Polish public had already started to build a narrative of its own democratic emancipation – based on the Round Table Agreement, April 1989.

The Communist Bloc has been crumbling for most of the 80's and the destruction of the Wall in November 1989 was a visible culmination of that deterioration. The decisive blows to the system were dealt by its own people, on the wave of social and economic unrest in the second half of the decade. The events of 1989 in Berlin were a direct consequence of the events in Poland. The Round Table Agreement was a result of a carefully orchestrated series of meetings between the Communist government of the People's Republic of Poland and the democratic opposition. These began with an air of national and historical import, in front of the state

Dr Andrzej M. Szewczak is a Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge's MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology. He has published broadly on Central European political history and takes particular interest in comparing Poland's interwar and post-war diplomatic relations.

television cameras, on 6th February 1989.

The representatives of the Polish government sat with the leaders of the then illegal opposition movement 'Solidarity', addressing the issues of growing social discontent in the country. The preceding year of 1988 saw a significant number of strikes and demonstrations, with thousands of Poles taking to the streets in protest against galloping inflation, food rationing and the suppression of the civic freedoms. Initially, the government considered calling for a state of national emergency and a clampdown on all political discourse. However, the extent and severity of the strikes forced those at the helm to approach the leaders of the opposition in search for a more measured solution. This attempt at establishing communication was unprecedented.

A similar political crisis nine years earlier led to the introduction of the martial law, in full secret support and guidance from the Soviet Union. Between December 1981 and July 1983 the members of Solidarity were jailed, and the streets were taken over by thousands of soldiers in heavily armed vehicles. The sealing of the country's borders, strict curfew, interception of telephone lines, postal censorship and brutal repression of dissent that ensued, plunged the country into a deep recession, aggravated by the general malaise of the disillusioned Polish society and harsh economic sanctions from the West. The martial law was viewed as a catastrophic failure even by the upper echelons of the Communist government and nobody in the country wanted to see this repeated. As a consequence, dialogue between the government and the opposition was sought.

On 31st August 1988, Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa met with the Minister of the Interior of the People's Republic of Poland, general Czesław Kiszczak. The General Secretary of the Polish Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Bronisław Dąbrowski, served as mediator. He was proposed by Solidarity and accepted by the Communists – a notable concession, indicative of either the decreasing power of their negotiating position *or* a genuine desire for non-partisan, meaningful dialogue. The meeting, held in absolute secrecy, led to Kiszczak's potential promise of the legalisation of Solidarity in exchange for Wałęsa's pledge to put an end to demonstrations led by the members of his organisation. They decided that the exact terms of the agreement would be discussed at a later session of talks – the Round Table talks – at the Namiestnikowski Palace in Warsaw, where the Polish Council of Ministers convened. Both sides agreed that political dialogue was necessary, though it took four more months of heated discourse, as well as a change in party leadership, before the talks could finally commence.

For the purpose of the televised opening and the closing of the sessions, the government ordered a construction of a special round table. This table was to

be installed in the main chamber of the palace to accommodate the delegates of the opposition and governmental factions. It was of simple, practical design, complimenting the frugal aesthetic of the time. Measuring 25 feet in diameter, it could seat 56 people and was given a respectable, deep-brown finish – merely a thin layer of oak veneer glued onto thick chipboard. The table was manufactured in 14 segments that join to form an empty circle inside, rather than a full disc – not a detail exceeding the bare minimum in the strictly rationed economy. Such was the haste with which the table was assembled that the craftsmen who made it did not even varnish its underside.

Creating an environment conducive to dialogue required careful stage design and both sides were acutely aware of this. The building of consensus is always preceded by the coming-down and reaching-out of all involved sides. As well as vast political transformation, Poland was in desperate need of new props, replacing those hastily disposed of; symbols of the dawning new order. The choice of a round table as the centrepiece for this televised spectacle sent an unambiguous message. This item of custom-made furniture became synonymous with the arrival of democracy, by means of dialogue, in Poland. Nowadays the table is displayed in Warsaw behind glass, for tourists to view and perhaps reflect on.

Yet, the symbolic parity of the Round Table was more of an illusion. In reality the members of the opposition remained targets for the secret service, and they were closely monitored throughout the duration of the talks. Their phones were tapped; clearly, one side had more access to the dialogue than the other. There were even attempts of sabotage carried out by agents of the ruling party, determined not to lose a firm and total grip on the situation. The leaders of the People's Republic of Poland did not want to upturn the Communist order in the country and wanted to rather incorporate Solidarity into the existing structures of power in Poland. Did they wish to listen to the other voice, or merely assimilate it? The answer is clear. Over the course of the talks the first democratic election was decided to be held in July 1989, with a quota system in place to guarantee seats for candidates from, or supported by, the ruling party. The government was eventually forced to acknowledge Solidarity's legitimacy – a concession not so willingly given, as had been implied in the earlier talks.

The elections of 1989, although formally won by the Communists because of the stipulation of the electoral system, exposed the truth of the total lack of public support for the regime. The state's control of the situation in the county was in fast decline. Additionally, the influence of the USSR on the politics of Poland was becoming gradually less pronounced, due to the Soviets' preoccupation with their own, internal problems. With dwindling support from Moscow, the Communists became quickly and suddenly aware of the precariousness of their own situation.

The elections, rather than unify the two fronts, brought about a parliamentary stalemate that lasted until September, when it was finally decided that Solidarity alone would be forming a minority government, with the reluctant support of their opponents.

Throughout that year, the Eastern Bloc was swept by a wave of similar events, bringing peaceful transitions of power to non-Communists in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Bulgaria. Success of Poland's Round Table served as the model for talks held in these countries and meant that political revolutions claimed no victims. By taking up the Polish model of dialogue, all managed to avoid the bloodbath that was the revolution in Romania, where domestic conflict, borne in the political climate impervious to all discourse, claimed over a thousand lives. Among the dead were the country's dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, and his wife Elena. The two were apprehended when trying to flee the country, and hastily put before a drumhead military tribunal on the charges of genocide and crimes against the Romanian nation. These were the two last people to have been executed in Romania. They died on Christmas day 1989, two hours after their trial began. In every other country of the Eastern Bloc, no one died as a consequence of the political turmoil in that year.

When the Poles elected Lech Wałęsa as President, a year after the Round Table talks, the new political fate of the country seemed firmly sealed. As time progressed, the Round Table became a by-word for the process of Poland's transition to democracy. Inasmuch as the status of that symbol remains undisputed, the historical assessment of the events has been a topic of heated debate ever since. The event shaped the political scene in modern Poland, as many of the people who were closely involved in the overthrowing of the regime have been in and out of power in the 26 years that passed. Political motivations of the talks' organisers have been questioned by some, the extent to which the both sides had to compromise has been used freely to undermine credentials, and responsibility over the effects of the talks has been thrown to and fro – as abruptly as the partisan carousel has turned between consecutive elections. The legitimacy of the dialogue of the Round Table talks, and the integrity of its content, is questionable. However, what remains uncontested is the pivotal role that the talks played in enabling any debate to be possible in the first place.