

Dangerous gamble on Polish unrest

by Rachel Douglas

Some geopolitical strategists in London and elsewhere have decided to goad the Soviet Union at a most inopportune moment and in a most sensitive place: Warsaw Treaty Organization member Poland. They are claiming that a wave of strikes in Poland this month, which occurred after a steep rise in meat prices, means the time is ripe for profound reforms and political changes in that country—and that the U.S.S.R. is too stung by world protests against its Afghanistan intervention to react.

The plan enunciated in the current issue of the London *Economist* is extremely dangerous. If the Soviet Union was touchy about the destabilization of Afghanistan on its southern border seven months ago, it will hardly remain calm when Poland is shaken.

The editors of the *Economist* and the political and banking circles behind them know this perfectly well. They are aiming to provoke a violent Soviet response to unrest in Poland! A Russian military move to save the leadership of Edward Gierek would blow to smithereens the dialogue continental Western European leaders have opened with Moscow for the sake of saving détente.

It would also be a likely trigger for world war. European leaders, including West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, have voiced concern in the past that a destabilization in Eastern Europe could have results far more serious than anything else short of Chinese armies marching into Siberia.

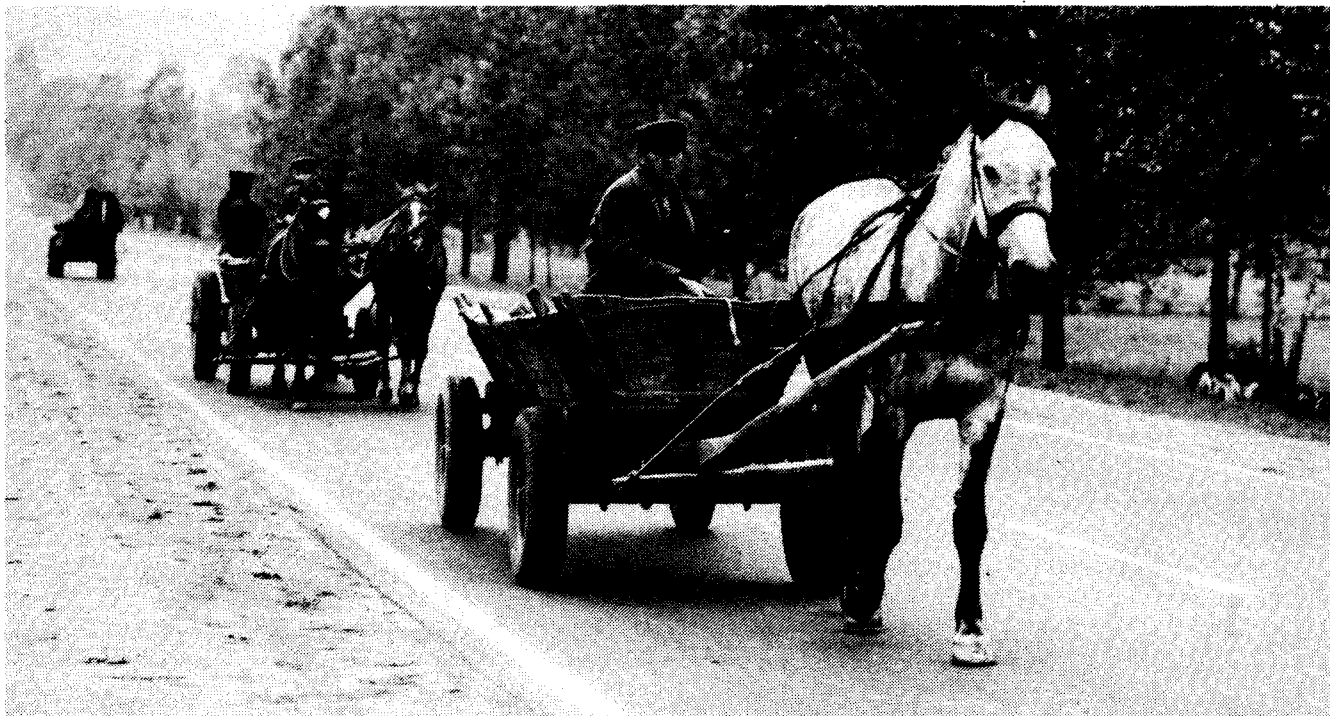
The *Economist* is very specific in its prescription for Poland. The Poles, it recommends, should proceed with

“a new realism,” “burrowing away the ground” below the ruling party structure. The *Economist* forecasts, and urges, the institutionalization of the “groups of genuine workers’ representatives” born during this month’s strikes into a trade union system that could bargain with the authorities. Furthermore, the press should be uncensored—“let liberalism be regularized.”

The *Economist*’s prescription for Poland is the “Yugoslav model”—political liberalization and “workers’ self-management” within the strictures of an economic crisis, leading to membership in the International Monetary Fund or submission to IMF-style economic conditionalities imposed by Western banks directly.

The *Economist* is not presenting an abstract scenario. There is a group of dissidents in Poland, known as the Workers Defense Committee (KOR, for the Polish initials), which is trying to make the current strikes into a lasting movement. The KOR has been the main source of Western reports on the unrest. Its leaders, Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik, are closely tied to British university and London-based émigré circles. Its members make contacts in struck plants and attempt to incorporate them into a nationwide network.

In the Polish government and press, too, British networks have gone into action. A July 5 editorial by Mieczyslaw Rakowski, head of the liberal weekly paper *Polityka*, regretted that Polish society “has still not been psychologically conditioned to make sacrifices,” in effect appealing to the Polish social science community to launch a large-scale campaign to accomplish this goal.



Poland's agricultural backwardness created the destabilization potential.

Photo: Sygma.

The social sciences in Poland are presided over by Academician Jan Szczepanski, an associate of London's Tavistock Institute.

Economic pressure

The immediate cause of the strikes in Poland was a hike in meat prices instituted July 1, although the government had predicted months earlier that the hike would be necessary, in order to reduce the government subsidy of meat prices. In 1976, when a 50 to 70 percent increase in the artificially low prices on meat and sugar was attempted, workers tore up train tracks and sacked an official building in one city.

This year, the government could not postpone the decision. The state budget was strained to the breaking point by the combined pressures of a negative growth year for the economy in 1979, a hard currency debt payments schedule of close to \$7 billion in 1980 (70 percent of export earnings), and the latest in a long string of crop shortfalls necessitating the purchase of grain from overseas. The chronic problems of the farm sector, which is made up of small, privately owned farms with backward technology, were compounded by bad weather, as they will be again this year because of heavy rains and flooding.

Some of Poland's international creditors are putting the squeeze on just as the leadership attempts to cope with the strikes. Poland has been unable to obtain a \$500 million loan on the Euromarket from a consortium of British and Americans banks. The negotiations are

stymied not only over the amount and rate for the loan, but because the lenders are demanding access to more information on the Polish economy than ever before released, a foot in the door to exacting IMF-style conditionalities.

The Poles have, however, secured nearly half a billion dollars in government credit guarantees from West Germany, earmarked for new machinery imports, not refinancing. Reportedly, they also quietly refinanced a \$312 million French export credit. The continental European governments clearly know that stability in Poland is worth a price.

The most severe strike, which tied up the city of Lublin for four days, was settled with a 10 percent raise for transport workers, the group which had led the walkout and demanded compensation for the higher cost of meat. As sporadic walkouts continued in other parts of the country last week, party chief Gierek toured the Silesian coal district to rally his most reliable base of support among skilled industrial workers. Gierek appeared on television with the agriculture and retail trade ministers to discuss supply problems and policy in detail, while the party newspaper *Trybuna Ludu* called on "all patriots" to maintain "calm and order" for the sake of the nation.

The potential for destabilization is being watched very closely in Moscow. At the height of the July unrest, the Polish Politburo issued a statement that "the friends of Poland are worried," an obvious reference to the U.S.S.R. On July 28 Gierek flew to Moscow.