

# HISTORY TEXTBOOKS FACING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES – CASE STUDY OF THE MARTIAL LAW IN POLAND

Joanna Wojdon

University of Wrocław, Poland

joanna.wojdon@uwr.edu.pl

## **Abstract**

*Martial law is one of the most controversial periods in the post-WWII history of Poland. Introduced on December 13, 1981 it ended the 16-month-long “festival of Solidarity”. Official reasons for its imposition were to prevent further degradation of Poland’s economy and social structures, but a threat of Soviet military intervention was also suggested. The opposition activists perceived it as an attempt of the totalitarian regime to save its falling position with the use of most brutal methods, unknown in Poland since the Stalinist period. The article is based on the analysis of contemporary Polish school history textbooks for all levels of education. It aims to present the strategies adopted by the textbook authors to deal with this controversial issue. The author will attempt to find answers to the following questions: Do the text book authors notice the controversies? Do they show one or more points of view? Do they ask students about their own opinions or about the opinions of their friends or relatives? Are the textbooks open for different interpretations or do they, explicitly or implicitly, prefer only one? How emotional is the text and other materials? How have the textbooks changed since the collapse of the communist regime in 1989?*

**Keywords:** Education under communism; Post-communism; Poland; Martial law; History textbooks; Controversies in education; Education reforms.

## **Introduction**

Dealing with controversial issues is a common practice for today’s historiography. Reflections on history, memory and historical memory lead to the conclusion that (almost) all reconstructions of the past are questionable and unstable, as they are only reconstructions, based on memories (that themselves may be far from the “truth” about what actually happened) placed in carriers (after selecting what should be remembered and what should be forgotten) that are used by historians as historical sources (interpretation of which can be distorted in multiple ways). As a result, the role of history

(and of a historian) has changed. Its task has shifted from establishing one, “scientifically approved” version of: “what did happen?” to presenting multiple perspectives on: “how can it be remembered and why?” – which obviously involves dealing with different memories and interpretations of the past (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003:1-21).

The aim of this article is to analyse the changing image of the Martial law of 1981-1983 in the Polish history school textbooks in the last two decades. On the one hand, the Martial law is treated as a case study that reflects general trends of school education reforms in Poland after the collapse of the communist regime. On the other hand, some ways of dealing with the Martial law, taken from the Polish textbooks can serve as examples of good practice in teaching controversial issues in general.

### **Why the case study of the Martial law?**

The Martial law of 1981-1983 is one of the most memorable and at the same time controversial events of contemporary Polish history. According to the opinion polls, more than 70 percent of the adult population recognised the date of 13 December (1981) as an anniversary of its imposition. And most people, at least over twenty years old, have clear judgment about general Jaruzelski’s decision to introduce the Martial law. Until recently, more than half of the Poles found it justified, while about 30 percent thought contrarily (Newsweek. Poland, 2011).

### **What is controversial about the Martial law?**

The most important question about the Martial law pertains to reasons and goals: whether it was aimed to save Poland, particularly from the Soviet or the Warsaw Pact intervention, or merely to save the communist system and the privileges of the communist elite. In the opinion polls, the Poles choose also such options as: to prevent the civil war and/or decomposition of the country, to destroy democracy, to destroy “Solidarity”, but also to rescue the Polish economy or to move towards a national reconciliation (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2006; Pacewicz, 2007; Newsweek. Poland, 2011).

Researchers who examined the Moscow archives argue that the Soviets had no intention to use their army in Poland and wanted their Polish comrades to

solve the “Solidarity” problem themselves.<sup>1</sup> That would suggest that general Jaruzelski in fact exercised the Soviet will and his intention was to save the regime and his own position both in Poland and in the Soviet Union (otherwise he could have been replaced by another Polish communist, more submissive to Brezhnev’s demands), and not to save his country.

General Wojciech Jaruzelski is therefore one controversial figure in the Martial law context. Another one is Colonel Ryszard Kukliński, an officer of the General Staff of the Polish Army who collaborated with the American intelligence since the early 1970s. He provided the Americans with thousands of top-secret documents of the Warsaw Pact, including the plans to introduce the Martial law in Poland. He fled from Warsaw in December 1981 and settled in the United States under the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) protection. A military court in Poland sentenced him to death for treason, in *absentia* in a secret trial. He regarded himself, contrarily, as a Polish patriot who acted to the detriment of the Warsaw Pact and of the Soviet occupant. If I refer to opinion polls again, we will see that the Poles are divided whether he was a traitor or a hero (Kurski, 2005; Rzeczpospolita, 2007).

Another controversy deals with the results of the Martial law: should it be noticed that the bloodshed and persecutions in general were rather limited, or should it be stressed that they should not appear at all in the civilized world. According to the findings of Andrzej Paczkowski (2007:270), about 20 people were victims of the Martial law, most of whom lost their lives in the first days.<sup>2</sup> Paczkowski further enumerates that 2874 people were put into detention centres during the first Martial law night of December 12/13, 1981; 5179 before December 22, and over ten thousand during the whole period between December 1981 and July 1983. Over 11 thousand more were arrested for political crimes, of whom about 5100 were sentenced to imprisonment (1396 by military courts). Almost 140 000 people were sentenced in shortened trials by special boards judging petty offences. Before December 22, 6307 people were asked to sign “loyalty oaths” at the police offices (refusal to sign resulted in detention). Probably about 55 800 employers lost their jobs, many others were degraded at work, among them many members of judicial staff, journalists, teachers and researchers (Paczkowski, 2007:45, 91, 98, 103-109). Statistics obviously omit all those who lost their lives or health not for political reasons, but due to Martial law regulations when e.g. ambulances could not

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1 This was proclaimed already in 1990s as one of the conclusions of the research made in the Moscow archives in 1992 by Vladimir Bukovsky (1999). According to this materials, it was Jaruzelski who asked for the Soviet aid if the Polish forces failed, and not the Soviet leaders who offered it.

2 Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (2006) gives higher estimates.

come in emergency, because telephones did not work.

### **Why in the textbooks?**

First, textbooks in Poland, like in many other countries, have been for a long time a dominating “pedagogical tool”, used every day by virtually all teachers and students. Hence, those books have a huge impact on the teaching process (Johnsen, 1993:164), but also on society in general,<sup>3</sup> and in case of history textbooks – impact on collective memory (Johnsen, 1993:173).

Second, textbooks become a powerful tool of educational policy for those who control them (Johnsen, 1993:69,106) and of the “politics of memory” in case of historical textbooks (Karlsson, 2007:18). They can tell us if and how the authorities tried to “weave a national historical narrative” (Rodgers, 2008:88). In the countries where textbooks are state-controlled, they have a status of an official, detailed interpretation of school curricula, and of the whole world as seen by the policymakers. Therefore textbooks can be regarded as documents of the policymakers’ intentions.<sup>4</sup>

Third, at the same time (not always deliberately) they reflect the real world in which they were created and that can be found hidden behind those intentional, official, “ideal” elements. This is how they become a historical source of their times (Sénécheau, 2006; Johnsen, 1993:114,118,133; Shapiro, 1997; Landau-Czajka, 2002:6-9).

### **How can school education present controversial issues?**

There are two major ways of dealing with controversial historical problems at school. According to the traditional one, that dominated under the communist regime, historical education should avoid controversial subjects and concentrate on proven facts and interpretations. Once it chooses them, they should be presented in the “objective” manner, with no doubts or alternative versions, using the authority of scholar achievements (Majorek, 1994:291).

In modern concepts of historical education much more attention is paid to familiarizing students with the ways how the past is reconstructed and with

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3 “Textbooks made Japanese”, states Galan (2008, 191). He also admits that “Japanese pupils rather than learning by means of their textbooks, have learned the textbooks, themselves”. To certain extent it might be true also in case of Poland. See also Johnsen (1993:132-134) and Galan (2008:195).

4 This concept was the basis of the research on propaganda on primary school textbooks in the People’s Poland by Wojdon (2000). Cf. Liskovskaya & Karpov (1999, 524) and Rodden (2005).

all the aforementioned nuances and multiperspectivity (Stradling, 2003). Historians' authority is used to show the effective means of reconstructing the past rather than to make pupils accept certain interpretations.

Passing from the former to the latter vision of school history corresponded with political changes in Poland. It can be best illustrated on the conceptual level, by the changes in school curricula. A section about the collapse of the Roman Empire in the 1977 curriculum (Instytut Programów Szkolnych, 1997:280) enumerated issues to be presented: "Internal decomposition of the empire. Eastern and Western Empires. Migration Period. Border defense. Barbarian invasions", while in 2008 (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 2008) it expects that a learner will "present the main historiographical concepts regarding the reasons of the collapse of the Roman Empire".

### **How were the reforms of 1989-1999 implemented into textbook practice?**

Before 1989 there was only one officially approved set of history textbooks for each level of education, published by one publishing house, and usually by one author for several years. The Martial law appeared only in the chronological appendix to the primary school textbook, and all a pupil could learn about it was: "1981: Imposition of the Martial law. Economic sanctions of the Western countries against Poland ... 1983: The Martial law revoked. Amnesty for the underground activists" (Szcześniak, 1984:398-399).<sup>5</sup> The main text of this book ended in July 1981, which was anyway much further than in the secondary school where, in accordance with the national curriculum (Instytut Programów Szkolnych, 1984:34-39), the closing date was set a decade earlier.

After the collapse of the communist regime in Poland in 1989, some old textbooks were re-written, omitting most striking propaganda accents. Only a few new books were published.<sup>6</sup> Neither school history nor education in general underwent revolutionary changes after the collapse of the communist regime in Poland. There were no actions like in post-WWII Japan where pupils tore out textbook pages with politically incorrect elements (Galan, 2008:189-191). One should keep in mind that the end of the communist rule in Poland was a result of the compromise between the communist and opposition leaders. This is why in many areas (including education) old solutions were

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<sup>5</sup> In the next edition of this book (Szcześniak, 1986), the Martial law is presented exactly in the same way.

<sup>6</sup> Parker (2003:163-164) points to economical reasons for such a situation: Reprinting old textbooks with some minor changes was much cheaper for the publishers who had to struggle on the newly-opened free market, with state subsidies withdrawn.

not condemned or discontinued immediately.<sup>7</sup>

New interpretations of the past events were the first to be introduced, before any revolutionary changes of the concept or system of education. In a 1990 edition of a secondary school textbook (Pankowicz, 1990:278), a pupil could read that “at the night of December 12/13 the State Council, ‘according to art. 33, point 2 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Poland’ [my emphasis], introduced the Martial law on the entire territory of Poland. Military Council of National Liberation was established, under the chairmanship of general Wojciech Jaruzelski”. If he repeated the class, the following year he would learn (from a book by the same author (Pankowicz, 1991:298-299) that ‘at the night of December 12/13 Military Council of National Liberation gained control over entire territory of Poland. With general Wojciech Jaruzelski in charge, “it was an unconstitutional and therefore self-appointed body”. Although the interpretations differed significantly, both were presented as the only possible ones: with no sign of doubts and without mentioning the changes that were introduced. The only slight reference to possible different interpretations was a list of four or five recommended additional readings – with only one book common for both editions.

Another secondary school textbook (Tusiewicz, 1994:283) adopted more open an attitude. Already in an introduction to a chapter entitled “‘Solidarity’ and the Martial law” it was mentioned that the Martial law is a controversial issue. Nine “problems for discussion” were presented at the end of the unit (Tusiewicz, 1994:323). More than a half of them dealt somehow with the Martial law controversies. The following problem statements were posed: ‘What important mistakes did the “Solidarity” trade union make in 1981? Was it possible to avoid them? Try to judge the decision about introduction, of the Martial law. Consider the circumstances and consequences of this decision. Compare the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968-1969 and in Poland between August 1980 and July 1983. Present the attitude of the Catholic Church in the period of 1980-1983. Prepare a balance of economical phenomena that appeared or developed at the beginning of 1980s.

Only after ten years, in 1999, a large-scale reform of education was introduced by the right-centrist government of Jerzy Buzek. It went far beyond corrections of wording in school textbooks (Parker, 2003).

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7 Poland is not an exception in a difficult process of settling with the past and building democracy simultaneously. May (2005, 226) points to the examples of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and Haiti. South Africa can also be mentioned here.

First, the new organizational system of education was introduced, with primary schooling shortened from eight to six years, a three-year long lower secondary level introduced for the pupils aged between thirteen and sixteen, and the duration of upper secondary education shortened from four to three years.

Second, national exams were set after each level of education, with uniform requirements, standards and procedures for the whole country. History was a part of a general test after primary school and of the “humanities” section after lower secondary level – compulsory in both cases. At the upper secondary level it was an optional, yet separate, examination subject.

Third, the system of textbooks approval changed.<sup>8</sup> Teachers could use any books they wanted during their lessons (or could use no books at all). However, the status of an “officially approved” textbook prevailed. The Ministry of Education placed a book on the official list when it received three positive reviews from professional historians and specialists in methodology of teaching history, and another one from a linguistic expert (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 1999).<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, new national curricula for all the school subjects were introduced. They reflected a completely new philosophy of education and were much less detailed than the ones developed under the communist regime. They provided only general guidance concerning the goals of education, with emphasis put on developing skills rather than instilling knowledge and gave a lot of autonomy to textbook developers and to the teachers who were supposed to adjust them to the schoolchildren’s capabilities and needs.

### **History education after the reform and the controversies regarding the Martial law**

History was to be taught on all levels of education. An introductory course started at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade (addressed to 10 year-olds). At primary school, history was combined into one subject with civic education, taught one or two lessons a week<sup>10</sup> which did not leave too much time for an in-depth analysis

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8 Similar changes were introduced in other post-communist states (Kovacs, 2000; Rodgers, 2008, 90;), while in the western Europe, according to Cajani (2009), the textbook policy is even more liberal, and a system of officially approved textbooks has been abandoned by many countries.

9 Today, it is the Ministry that chooses the experts from the list and that pays their honoraria (Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej, 2009).

10 Four hours during three years, which meant any combination of 1 lesson in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, 2 in the 5<sup>th</sup>, 1 in the 6<sup>th</sup>, or 1+1+2, or 2+1+1 respectively.

of historical events. The national curriculum formulated very few compulsory historical facts to be mentioned, not necessarily in the chronological order. That is why one of the analysed primary school textbooks did not mention the Martial law at all (curriculum did not require it), other did not devote more than one whole page to this topic. Unlike under communism, however, there were plenty of books to choose from that varied significantly in their content, structure and layout.

It was the lower secondary school where pupils were supposed to learn the first systematic, chronological course of history (taught as a separate subject, twice a week), starting with pre-historic times and ending with the most recent events. Textbooks covering the period of 1980s were assigned to the third grade, of sixteen-year-olds.

The authors usually devoted some space between a half and five pages to the Martial law and more willingly noticed divergent points of view – usually referring to memories of different participants of the events.

Two textbooks presented the memoirs of the 1981 events written by communist and opposition activists. Thus, some lower secondary school textbooks made pupils aware that different people may recall different aspects of the Martial law. An interesting method to show that one's viewpoint may depend on his occupation was an exercise with a photograph of a police unit ready for action. A pupil's task was to decide what title the photo could have if it appeared in an official, underground or foreign newspaper. This undoubtedly would be more exciting and at the same time beneficial for learners than simply putting the same picture with a description "police unit before action", as it appeared in two other books.

Another textbook encouraged pupils to collect memories of their relatives and other older people and to draw a comic about the Martial law in their village/town/city. An indirect way of using divergent memories was discussions among pupils on some aspects of the Martial law. The subjects for discussions proposed in the textbooks usually concentrated on the universal issues of the moral aspects of politics: whether authorities have the right to sacrifice civic freedoms in order to defend the country as a whole or what the effects of the Martial law were. A 'what-if' question that appeared in one of the books is worth noticing: what if the plans of limited military operations presented by Jaruzelski failed (would he give up or rather use more severe methods, hence who should be praised for the relatively low numbers of casualties: the regime that limited the military operations or the people who chose peaceful methods



of resistance). It is the only question of this type in the analysed texts, and the only reflection on the level of bloodshed beyond the bare statement about several people who were killed during the Martial law.

The upper secondary school history course, taught during two lessons a week, was supposed to be based on the knowledge acquired at the lower levels. Upper secondary school textbooks depicted the Martial law in the most sophisticated way. They provided pupils with many more factual details, dates, numbers and other data, and traced the road to the Martial law from at least autumn 1980. They also used much more different sources of divergent opinions.

Interviews with parents, other relatives or with any people old enough to remember the Martial law were often set as students' tasks. Subjective, personal dimensions of history was therefore shown. One step further, if compared to lower secondary schools, was to ask pupils to reflect on the quality of such sources (Radziwiłł & Roszkowski, 2002:298) which – under the teacher's guidance – could result in more general reflections on history and memory.

Other dilemmas of historians dealing with controversial material that may lead to divergent conclusions were also presented. The authors suggested, for example, that historians in general are (and probably will be) unable to solve the Martial law puzzle – especially the question of the Soviet threat, but also of the real intentions of the people in charge of the Polish United Workers' Party and of the Polish state. They showed the problems of the quality and availability of the sources, some of which were destroyed or ill-prepared from the very beginning. There was an exercise with putting pupils into someone's shoes: a simulation of the decision-making process of the authorities, whether or not to introduce the Martial law, using a decision-tree.

Debates on morality and politics were also proposed, like the judgment of general Jaruzelski's or the Catholic Church's attitude in 1981 and 1982, or can the 1989 compromise with the opposition excuse the communists' sins of the past. Not only the communists' deeds of 1980s were a subject of discussion and assessment, but also those performed by "Solidarity", especially regarding its rhetoric, more and more radical and targeting not only the Polish society, but also the working class of other Eastern European states. Didn't it provoke the oppressive reaction of the regime?

One thing that was almost completely missing in the picture of the Martial law in the analysed textbooks was the emotions – while teaching, and history

teaching in particular, is not a only rational process, but also an emotional one.<sup>11</sup> Using emotions in the teaching-learning process helps engage students and develops their emotional intelligence (Historical Association, 2007:8). Emotions could probably be present in the interviews and during the class debates, but textbooks were just factual, while the events of 13 December 1981 had been indeed dramatic.

In 2008 the project of a new educational reform was adopted by the Polish parliament. The most important change in history education was moving the post-1918 period from the last grade of lower to the first grade of upper secondary school. As a result, the Martial law is taught twice: at primary school to 12 year-olds, and in secondary school to 16 year-olds.

Little has changed in primary school textbooks regarding their presentation of the Martial law. They are as authoritarian in style as before, but more critical about the communist regime. Secondary school textbooks have changed significantly. Only two out of five analysed books published after 2010 mention any existing controversies. Others, like in the “very old school”, provide students with just one interpretation, critical about Jaruzelski and his military junta. No questions are asked that could raise any discussion and no emotions appear. Colonel Kukliński is mentioned more often than before, but only to inform readers that he passed the regime’s plans on to CIA. Nobody asks if it is good to collaborate with the foreign secret service. No textbook mentions any debates about him.

Of the two textbooks that present controversies about the Martial law, one does it in a form of a fictional Internet forum where one of the participants is mentioning the notion of the Martial law as a ‘lesser evil’ that saved Poland from the Soviet invasion (Brzozowski, 2012:249). The reply message argues that historians have proved that there were no plans of the Soviet invasion and therefore this argument is groundless. It is doubtful that such a form of presenting contradictory opinions may evoke real discussion. Only the book by Dariusz Stola (2012:204) tries to help pupils understand the arguments of supporters of the Martial law.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it is the only one that refers to external sources of information. Students are asked to enumerate arguments for and against the Martial law raised in the public debate.

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<sup>11</sup> I wish to thank John Hamer for this remark.

<sup>12</sup> In another textbook they are presented in a way that does not leave any room for doubts or discussion, like in the task: “Present the official and real reasons of introducing the Martial law” (Dolecki, Gutowski & Smoleński, 2012:364).

## Conclusions and other comments on the textbooks

Educational reforms, new textbook policy and the development of the market economy in Poland after 1989 brought tens of history textbooks available for each grade (by today the offer is smaller as only four to five large publishing houses have survived on the market). Interpretation of the past (including controversial events) varied between the authors. The influence of a single textbook apparently diminished if compared to the communist times. So, did the interference of the state in the teaching process. On the other hand, the role of a teacher grew significantly and his/her position changed: from a “propagandist” whose task was to transfer the only official textbook version of the past to the masses – to an independent creator of the teaching-learning process who can freely choose sources, interpretations and teaching methods.<sup>13</sup>

Transformation from the communist dictatorship to democracy in Poland meant the adoption of many elements of the western model(s) of education. They included multitude of textbooks, freedom of teacher’s choice, emphasis on developing learners’ skills and on critical analysis of different sources of information. Growing popularity of active methods of learning followed that was also reflected in the new examination procedures.

However, the most recent reform of education seems to step back from some of these achievements. Inclusion of the recent findings of historiography in the most recent school textbooks, that discredit the regime’s arguments in support of the Martial law, should be appreciated. On the other hand, the new texts are more authoritarian in style than they used to be in the previous decade. Whether it is due to the younger age of the readers, the more detailed curriculum or less space in textbooks, from the didactical point of view it is a regression.

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13 Recent surveys prove that Polish teachers generally approve freedom of choosing textbooks although some would prefer if the choice was limited to three to four publishers (Pańko & Wojdon, 2010:93-130).

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