



Demonstration in front of the Soviet embassy. May 16th 1989 Photo: Andrzej Stawiarski, collections of FCDCN

ARTYKUŁ

## **Cracow spring of 1989**

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The “round table” is one of the most important symbols of the Third Republic of Poland, for part of the society a dignified example of political dialogue which began the process of democratising Poland, for others a symbol of betrayal and conspiracy of groups hostile towards Poland. During the talks, a wave of youth protests came through Cracow, demonstrating against the “round table” talks and demanding power to be taken away from the communists.

## **Words are thrown around in Warsaw, stones are thrown in Cracow**

Eleven days after the “round table” talks began, street riots took place in Cracow. On February 17<sup>th</sup> 1989, on the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the registration of the Independent Students’ Association, a rally of the academic youth took place in the Main Square. At the end of the manifestation, the gathered masses went to the Board of Education where they intended to present their postulates to the minister of national education, who was in Cracow at the time, regarding, among other things, the re-registration of the Independent Students’ Association. However, the minister was not at the Board, since at the time he was participating in a meeting at the 5<sup>th</sup> High School. The protesters decided to end the demonstration, yet the Motorised Reserves of the Citizens’ Militia, or ZOMO, attacked the already dispersing crowds. In response, the students went to the building of the 5<sup>th</sup> High School, broke inside, blocked all the exits and “took the minister hostage”, demanding all their friends arrested at the Board of Education to be freed. The youth’s demand was fulfilled following the intervention of the rectors of the Jagiellonian University.

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Around two thousand people took part in the manifestation, including five hundred students. In the official statements, the government media ironically summarised these events by saying that “words are thrown around in Warsaw, while stones are thrown in Cracow”.

The next rally was organised by members of the Polish Independent Confederation in the Main Square on February 21<sup>st</sup>. It was a protest against the trial of Václav Havel which was beginning in Prague.

## **“The Red Army will defeat the bourgeois”**

Two days later, on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, activists of the Independent Students’ Association, Fighting Youth

Federation, Confederation of Independent Poland and Freedom and Peace Movement organised a happening on the 71<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the creation of the Red Army. Students, dressed as Red Army soldiers, shouting the slogan “The Red Army will defeat the bourgeois”, marched from the Collegium Novum to the Main Square. The happening ended at the Freedom square, where the demonstrators threw cups with yoghurt and kefir at the statue of gratitude towards the Red Army.

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On the following day, on February 24<sup>th</sup>, the students, led by the Independent Students’ Association, Fighting Youth Federation, Confederation of Independent Poland and Freedom and Peace Movement, organised another rally at the Cracow square. Around a thousand people gathered and marched to the City Hall. Others joined the procession, until the crowd counted almost three thousand people. Troops of the Citizens’ Militia stood against the protesters. The students, hit with Militia’s batons, responded by throwing rocks and rubble at the officers. 350 officers were assigned to pacify the manifestation, they also used tear gas and water cannons. Street fights lasted for more than two hours.

These events were one of the most violent riots in the centre of Cracow in recent years. For the first time since 1984, tear gas was used against the crowds.

### **Mietek, sorry!**

On April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1989, a happening was organised by the youth of the Freedom and Peace Movement, Confederation of Independent Poland and Independent Students’ Association in which more than five hundred people participated. It was a “penitential march”, during which its participants expressed their “sadness” that the “round table” talks were interrupted. The gathered Poles wore penitential sackclothes and held banners

with inscriptions: "Take your hands off Mikhail", "ZOMO officers, have no fear", "Away with hooliganism and terrorism", "We are sorry that we are sorry", "We apologise to the healthy part of society", "TV does not lie", "Mietek, sorry!". From the Adam Mickiewicz statue, where around 1.5 thousand people gathered, the participants of the happening marched towards the USSR embassy, where they were met with a blockade of the Citizens' Militia. Using the officers' presence, the protesters organised a "street spectacle" and kneeled before them, pretending to apologise.



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## **Cracow May**

The "round table" talks ended on April 5<sup>th</sup>. One of their most important decisions was the announcement of conducting elections to the Sejm and the creation of the Senate. Before Poles went to the ballot-boxes, new riots took place in Cracow. On May 15<sup>th</sup>, the Student Initiative of the Freedom and Peace Movement organised a rally protesting the obligatory military training for students. The manifesting people marched to the building of the military prosecution at Rakowiecka Street, where they burned three military service books.

Around two hundred young people came down the Westerplatte Street to the Soviet embassy. The protesters threw coins at the building, shouting that "it's for a ticket" and covering the fence with slogans like "Soviets

go home”.

On the next day, another rally began at the Main Square, this time protesting the presence of the Soviet Army in the country. Around two hundred young people came down the Westerplatte Street to the Soviet embassy. The protesters threw coins at the building, shouting that “it’s for a ticket” and covering the fence with slogans like “Soviets go home”.

On May 17<sup>th</sup> and May 18<sup>th</sup>, demonstrations took place at the Main Square once more, also against the presence of the Soviet Army in Poland. The protesters moved from the Adam Mickiewicz statue to the Embassy, where the Citizens’ Militia and ZOMO intervened, this time also using water cannons. These were the first protests, following the Magdalenka agreements, demanding to remove the Soviet army from Poland.

The youth protests in Cracow lasted until the end of 1989. Under the slogans like “Boycott of the military training”, “Soviets go home”, and “We want freedom” they demanded the full democratisation of life in Poland.

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