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A slip-up in Beirut. Polish weapons for ASALA

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During the times of the Cold War, weapons produced in the Polish People's Republic were often exported to many countries of the so-called Third World. They paid for them in foreign currency papers, which was much more profitable than contracts made with countries of the Comecon (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), which were realised with transfer rubles. Among the most significant buyers were Libya, Iraq, Syria, India and the Palestine Liberation Organisation. It is worth noting, that the aforementioned countries, excluding India, were all supporting international terrorism.

Apart from contracts signed on the government level, Polish weapons were also exported through brokers working for various paramilitary and terrorist organisations.

Most likely thanks to these brokers, some of the weaponry produced in the Polish People's Republic got in the hands of the terrorist organisation *Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia* (ASALA). This movement was established in 1975, in Beirut. One of its goals was to force the government in Ankara to admit to the Turkish genocide of Armenians. The group was also founded on the 60th anniversary of this tragedy. It was also no coincidence that the organisation was set up in Lebanon.

As a result of the genocide of Armenians, thousands of them emigrated to the Middle East and settled down, among other places, in Beirut. During that time, Lebanon was ravaged by an internal crisis, which soon transformed into a full-blown civil war, lasting until 1990. One of the sides of the conflict were Palestinians from the Palestine Liberation Organisation, who had their bases there, from which they launched attacks against Israel.

To destabilise Turkey

The Palestine organisations, especially the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, closely cooperated with ASALA and provided training and logistical help for it. Both sides shared similar ideologies, as both of them referred to Marxism. Some scholars also point to the Soviet inspirations, suggesting that ASALA might have been backed by the KGB, which intended to destabilise Turkey and push it out of NATO through terrorism.

Thanks to the secret support from the Palestinian organisations, ASALA was able to begin its bloody terrorist campaign against the Turkish authorities. Turkish diplomats were mainly the targets of attacks in other countries. Since 1975, until the middle of the 1990s, 46 people died in terrorist attacks committed by the Armenian terrorists, while around 300 people got wounded. Recently declassified CIA documents say that members of ASALA were regular recipients of the Polish armaments, which were later used in terrorists attacks. In August, 1982, two ASALA members opened fire from PM-63 submachine guns, known as "RAK" ["CANCER" in Polish], at an airport in Ankara. The same weapons were used in the shooting of the Turkish diplomatic facility in Lisbon.

Under the cover of Universal

American intelligence agencies suspected that Poles kept relations with ASALA through the Foreign Trade Enterprise Universal. Officially, only the Central Engineering Board (CENZIN) could engage in weapons trade in the Polish People's Republic. This institution was completely under the control of military services and was used by the Second Board of the General Command as a cover for military intelligence officers. On the other hand, it is worth noting that FTE Universal, apart from musical instruments and tourist equipment, also dealt with hunting gear, which included weapons for potential clients.

One of the CIA reports from 1984 said that in contrast to CENZIN, which mainly realised intergovernmental contracts, Universal's employees sold weapons mainly to "private" recipients, which included the aforementioned Armenian terrorists.

The Americans had a well-developed intelligence network in the Middle East. Hence, they found out that in August, 1981, one of the Universal brokers showed up at the same Syrian hotel where Hagop Hagopian, ASALA's leader, was staying. Was it an accident? That seems unlikely, since according to the CIA the meeting was arranged in order to hold talks on weapons deliveries. ASALA members reportedly asked for a quicker delivery of arms.

Two weeks later, the Lebanese services busted a transport of 473 Polish handguns, which were illegally smuggled to Beirut in the luggage hatch of the plane of the Polish LOT airline. According to the American services, the smuggling of weapons was the result of the aforementioned meeting between the representatives of Universal and ASALA and both these events were closely connected.

A slip-up

Indeed, materials gathered in the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance confirm there was a huge slip-up at the airport in Beirut, in which the services of the Polish People's Republic were involved. When on August 22, 1981, passenger plane PLL LOT from Warsaw landed in the Lebanese capital, a customs officer unexpectedly showed up at the unloading of the baggage. It was peculiar, because they never took part in such activities. Hence, he must have been tipped off in advance about the suspicious cargo. When the airport workers finally opened up the luggage hatch, the people gathered below saw an unusual sight. Hundreds of handguns were laying on the floor. Some of them were without any protective covers, some were wrapped in grey paper.

But this was not the end of surprises. When only the luggage handler grabbed the first suitcase, it tore apart due to the weight of its contents and even more weapons fell to the ground. Huge commotion broke out near the plane, someone called the Lebanese police and the passengers had to stay in the plane for some time.

Upon searching the all the luggage, apart from the handguns, the Lebanese services found 500 magazines and two grenade launchers wrapped in towels of the Warsaw Victoria hotel. Polish pilots were detained and questioned, but they were quickly let go since no one wanted to cause an international scandal. The news of the smuggling of Polish weapons did appear in some media in Beirut, but the matter was quickly swept under the rug. A civil war was ongoing in Lebanon, and countries of the Soviet bloc played a crucial role in delivering weapons to Syria and many Palestinian organisations which fought in the war.

Following the slip-up with the Polish weapons at the Beirut airport, military services did not even try to investigate the incident. In one of the reports, there was only a brief mention that weak bags were the cause of the mishap. The representative of the military intelligence of the Polish People's Republic in Lebanon, commander Stanisław Terlecki, codename "Safar", concluded:

"There were some problems with loading the luggage in Warsaw, which might have made the crew completely aware of what they were transporting. The transfer of luggage, which was supposed to be personal luggage, but was impossible to carry by a single person, must have caught attention. The actual cause of the revealing of the contents of the packages was the very poor technical state of the luggage, cheap locks, suitcases from artificial leather etc."

To this day, we don't know who was the final recipient of these weapons.

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