

Pope John Paul II: a political obituary

By Marius Heuser and Peter Schwarz
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Amidst the media barrage depicting Pope John Paul II as a contemporary saint and uncritically presenting the pomp and mysticism of the Vatican's funeral rites, almost nothing serious can be found about the personality of John Paul II or his real role in contemporary history. The political issues and concerns that dominated the life of Karol Joseph Wojtyla and consumed his 27-year papacy are barely discussed.

The Roman Catholic Church has been a bedrock of political reaction for centuries, first as a pillar of the feudal order, when it opposed the Protestant Reformation, and later as a bulwark of bourgeois rule. Regardless of the individual qualities of the man who sits at the head of the Church, his role is intensely political.

In John Paul II, the papacy found a figure who combined deeply reactionary views—in both politics and religion—with considerable experience in dealing alike with capitalist states and Stalinist regimes. He marshalled that experience to play a pivotal role in the convulsive events of the past quarter century.

Karol Joseph Wojtyla was born on May 18, 1920 in the town of Wadowice in Poland, the son of a former officer of the Austrian Empire. He lost his mother at the age of 9 and his father when he was 21. Considered a good pupil, he began studying philosophy and literature in Krakow in 1938 and developed a lively interest in theatre. Under the German occupation, he was forced to carry out hard labour. During this period he decided to join the priesthood. In 1942 he joined the underground seminary in the Archdiocese of Krakow.

On November 1, 1946 he was anointed as a priest. He spent the following two years in Rome, where he attained a doctorate in the theology and mysticism of St. John of the Cross. He continued his studies in Poland. Following his graduation, he took up a teaching assignment at the Catholic University of Lublin in 1954.

On September 28, 1958, he became bishop and in 1964 archbishop of Krakow. This was a critical year in the life and fortunes of the Vatican. The death of Pope Pius XII that year brought an end to a reign that had badly discredited the Church by virtue of the pope's collaboration with fascist regimes in Spain, Italy and Germany, and the Vatican's refusal to oppose the extermination of European Jews.

Pius XII was succeeded by Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) and Paul VI (1963-1978), who oversaw far-reaching changes in Catholic ritual and religious practice, including the conduct of the mass in the vernacular and other liberal reforms. John XXIII and Paul VI also sought to disassociate the Church from the anti-Semitism that had been implicit in Catholic doctrine.

In the post of archbishop of Krakow, Wojtyla came into conflict with the Polish Stalinist regime. Wojtyla did not question the latter's political rule, but insisted that the Catholic Church retain its ideological influence. Thus, he was able to ensure the building of a church in the new industrial city of Nova Huta. In 1967, Wojtyla was appointed cardinal.

Wojtyla's selection as pope on October 16, 1978 created something of a sensation. For the first time in 455 years, when the Dutchman Adrian VI occupied the chair of St. Peter for one year, a non-Italian stood at the head of the Catholic hierarchy. After several drawn contests between two Italian aspirants, in the eighth ballot, 94 of the 111 cardinals cast votes in

favour of the Polish candidate. At 58 years of age, the new pope was unusually young.

The political meaning of this decision was unmistakable. Since the end of the 1960s, both the advanced capitalist nations of Western Europe and the Stalinist-ruled countries in Eastern Europe had been repeatedly rocked by violent social conflicts. Wojtyla's predecessors John XXIII and Paul VI had sought to respond to the social upsurge with reforms of the Church's doctrine and internal regime.

In the first half of the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council had opened the way for such a course with a certain loosening of Church dogmas and the acceptance of a greater role for bishops and the laity. John XXIII had also introduced a more relaxed policy with regard to the Soviet Union, and his initiative was continued by Paul VI. Both sought to establish closer cooperation with the Stalinist regimes.

Albino Luciani, who as John Paul I took over from Paul VI in 1978, wanted to continue this course. But after just 33 days in office, the new pope was found dead in his bed. The exact circumstances of his death were never clarified because the Vatican refused to allow an autopsy of the corpse.

The assumption of the highest Church office by Wojtyla represented an ideological and political turning point. The new Church head was soon regarded as a pope of restoration, who turned the Church more openly into a force of opposition to the modernising spirit of the times. He promoted a cult of the saints and the Virgin Mary, to which he was personally dedicated, advocated a rigid social morality, strengthened the authority of Rome over the dioceses, and disciplined numerous critical theologians. Politically, the appointment of a Polish pope represented a challenge to the Moscow leadership under Leonid Brezhnev.

At the time of the papal election, the conflict between the working class and the ruling Stalinist regime in Poland had escalated dramatically. Since the bloodily repressed workers' rebellion of 1956, Poland had been wracked by a series of conflicts. In 1970, a strike wave against price increases forced the resignation of the party and government leader Wladyslaw Gomulka. His successor, Edward Gierek, had to withdraw the price increases.

In 1976, Gierek sought again to increase prices, resulting in strikes, mass demonstrations and struggles on the barricades. In the ensuing years, the Committee for the Defence of Workers and founding committees of independent trade unions were formed, and in 1980—after a renewed strike wave against price increases—these organisations coalesced to become the trade union Solidarity, which won the following of millions of workers.

The emergence of a powerful workers movement in Poland was followed with great concern by governments East and West. The spread of the Polish movement to the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries would have not only threatened Stalinist rule, but also inspired new militant struggles by workers in the West. A wave of such struggles had been curbed in the mid-1970s by the united efforts of the Social Democratic and trade union bureaucracies.

Characteristically, the German chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, a Social Democrat, consistently supported the government of Gierek against the Polish workers. Schmidt even maintained a personal friendship with

Gierek.

John Paul II was quite conscious of the danger of violent revolution in Poland and Eastern Europe. He sought to insure that Stalinist rule was overturned from the right, not the left, by supporting a pro-imperialist leadership within the Polish working class. In this effort, he was aided not only by the CIA, but also the various AFL-CIO foreign operations that were allied with the CIA and the US State Department.

The hostility of John Paul II and the Church to Stalinism is equated by the media with devotion to democracy. This is a grotesque distortion. The pope presided over an institution that had been the most intransigent opponent of democracy for over 500 years, going all the way back to the emergence of Protestantism, when the Catholic Church sought to uphold the power and wealth of the clergy as a feudal estate.

The Church's animus toward Stalinism was not due to the antidemocratic, caste-like rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy as such—all that was perfectly in keeping with the inner operations of the Church itself as an institution. The Church hierarchy itself is a caste, which originated in pre-capitalist society and is now rooted in capitalist social relations.

The Catholic Church is, after all, the largest single property owner in the world. Hence the Church supported bloody Latin American dictatorships, which upheld capitalist property, but opposed Stalinist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe that were based on nationalized property.

On this fundamentally reactionary basis, the Catholic Church openly sided with Solidarity. Less than eight months after his appointment, the new pope undertook his first "pilgrim's journey" to Poland, followed by additional visits in 1983 and 1987. In January 1980, John Paul II granted an audience to a delegation of Solidarity members led by Lech Walesa. Drawing from different sources, the Vatican gathered at least \$50 million to support the trade union in the ensuing years.

The aim of the Vatican, however, was not to support the social demands of the workers. Rather, it sought to keep the movement under the influence of reactionary Catholic ideology and Polish nationalism, and ensure that it did not develop into an international challenge to the existing order. The Catholic hierarchy, whose experience in defending authority and order spanned one-and-a-half millennia, was highly aware that a popular movement such as that which had developed in Poland could not be tamed through passive means, but had to be actively influenced and turned in a different direction.

The appointment of a Polish pope already signified a stabilization of Catholicism in Poland. Wojtyla never tired of referring to his Polish roots, flattering Polish nationalism and presenting Poland as *the* Christian nation. Before a jubilant crowd at Warsaw's Victory Square in June 1979, he praised the contribution made by "the Polish nation to the development of humanity and mankind," which could be understood and appreciated, he said, only through Christ. His lecture culminated in the sentence, "There can be no just Europe without an independent Poland on the map of Europe!"

Without the pope's intervention in Poland, events would hardly have taken the disastrous course that ultimately led to mass unemployment and bitter poverty for Polish workers. Initially, there existed not only Catholic, but also strong secular and socialist tendencies in the Solidarity movement. These, however, lacked an effective perspective for opposing the Stalinist regime.

The intervention of the Vatican contributed substantially towards bringing the movement under the control of the Catholic-nationalist wing around Lech Walesa—a man who combined his reputation as a militant workers leader at the Lenin Shipyard with a large dose of bigoted Catholicism. Walesa himself has openly acknowledged the role of the pope. In 1989, he declared: "The existence of the trade union Solidarnosc and myself would have been inconceivable without the figure of this great Pole and great man, John Paul II."

While the pope gave political and financial support to Solidarity, he

sought to hold it back from an open confrontation with the regime. Time and time again he called for moderation and restraint. As confrontations with the government became more violent, Solidarity increasingly intervened to restrain and control the workers.

Walesa constantly stressed that Solidarity was not striving for power: "We do not want to govern, but rather seek acknowledgment by the government, and we want to check them when they are governing to make sure they do a good job." Wojciech Jaruzelski, who in December 1981 proclaimed martial law and arrested thousands of workers and Solidarity leaders, later openly acknowledged the restraint shown by the pope. In a television interview on the occasion of the death of the pope, he said: "He refrained from inciting social emotions at that time."

Later, the pope appeared increasingly worried about the speed with which, after the collapse of the Stalinist regime, Solidarity discredited itself before the working class as its leaders came to power and oversaw the reintroduction of capitalism. John Paul II feared, with some justification, that the influence of the Catholic Church could suffer as a result, and that the new order would be endangered.

In visits to the country in 1991 and 1993, he warned against simply copying Western capitalism. During his last journey to Poland in 2003, he was even more blunt. When one forgets the price that was paid for liberty, he said, one is not far from "anarchy." He lectured the Solidarity movement to keep out of politics, and pointed to glaring injustices in Poland—wages not paid, small businesses wiped out, workers denied holidays and time with their families.

The decision by the Catholic Church to name a Polish pope was closely connected with a change of course in American foreign policy towards the Soviet Union. Under President Jimmy Carter and, even more openly, under his successor Ronald Reagan, détente gave way to confrontation.

As archbishop of Krakow, Wojtyla had already maintained an intensive exchange of letters with Polish-born Zbigniew Brzezinski, who took over as national security advisor during the Carter administration. Brzezinski, who had attended the funeral of Wojtyla's predecessor as the official American representative, stayed in Rome for the entire period of the 1978 papal election that placed Wojtyla at the head of the Church.

This cooperation was intensified under the presidency of Reagan. The American ambassador to the Vatican at the time, James Nicholson, speaks of a "strategic alliance" between Washington and the Vatican against the Soviet Union. According to information gathered by the journalists Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi, who wrote a book on the secret diplomacy of the Vatican, CIA Director William Casey and Deputy CIA Director Vernon Walters held regular confidential discussions with the pope starting in 1981. The main topic was CIA financial and logistic support for Solidarity.

The ruling bureaucracy in Moscow reacted to the combination of intensified external pressure and growing internal social pressures by initiating the policy of capitalist restoration. The ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev to the head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had its origins—as ironic as this may seem—in the same objective changes that brought Wojtyla to the holy seat in Rome. The events in Poland had deeply shaken the Kremlin bureaucracy. In the end, it sought to prevent a similar development in the Soviet Union by creating new bases for its rule through the introduction of capitalist property. This was the essential significance of Gorbachev's perestroika.

In December 1989, Gorbachev became the first and only secretary general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to have an audience in the Vatican. Three years later, Gorbachev praised the role of the pope with the words: "Everything that happened in these years in Eastern Europe would have been impossible without the presence of this pope."

While John Paul II draped his interventions in Poland and Eastern Europe in the garb of "liberty" and "independence," the reactionary essence of his political orientation was revealed openly in South America.

There he sided with the ruling elites and disciplined so-called “liberation theologians” who had lined up with the oppressed in their struggles against right-wing military dictatorships.

In the course of his first visit to Nicaragua in 1983, John Paul II publicly reprimanded the priest Ernesto Cardenal who, together with two other priests, held ministerial posts in the Sandinista government. In 1995, during another visit to Nicaragua, the pope condemned the Iglesia Popular (People’s Church) and what he called the mistaken ecumenism “of Christians engaged in the revolutionary process.” At the same time, he elevated the right-wing archbishop and bitter opponent of the Sandinistas, Miguel Obando y Bravo, to the post of cardinal.

Numerous liberation theologians were sacked from their posts by John Paul II and replaced by conservative bishops or priests. Writes François Houtard in *Le Monde Diplomatique*: “Grass roots church groups which had come into being in South America characterised by autonomy and the protection of the interests of the poor were isolated and even destroyed in some cases. Priests who sided with them were removed and forbidden access to community facilities, and occasionally new groups were set up under the same name...”

At the same time, supporters of right-wing dictatorships ascended to the highest offices of the Church. The papal nuncio to the Argentine military dictatorship, Pio Laghi, and the nuncio to the Chilean military dictatorship, Angelo Sodano, are today both cardinals.

Sodano had praised Pinochet’s despotic and murderous rule in Chile with the words: “Masterpieces can also have small errors. I would advise you not to dwell on the errors of the painting, but concentrate on the marvellous general impression.” When an arrest warrant for Pinochet was issued in 1998 while the former dictator was in London, the pope himself publicly supported the Chilean fascist general.

The beatifications of Pope Pius IX, an avowed anti-Semite, Pope Pius XII, who had collaborated with the Nazis and the Mussolini regime, and Cardinal Stepiak, who was close to the fascist regime in Croatia during the Second World War, are further typical expressions of the right-wing convictions of John Paul II.

In his Church policies, John Paul II was, even from the standpoint of the extremely conservative doctrines of the Catholic Church, a reactionary. He set out to reverse the spirit, if not entirely the letter, of the reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

First, there is his cult of the Madonna and the saints. With 473 beatifications, he has created more than twice as many new saints as his predecessors over the preceding 400 years.

The encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, which dictates sexual mores, rejects not only abortion, but also any form of contraception. Every sexual act not aimed at reproduction is considered to be immoral. Even condoms are condemned—a policy that is all the more socially destructive and inhumane given the devastating AIDS epidemic in Africa and many other parts of the world. In Germany, against strong resistance by bishops and Church members, the pope insisted that the Church withdraw from committees that advise pregnant women as part of the country’s framework for legal abortion.

The conservative personnel policy of the pope has also repeatedly led to conflicts. He sparked controversy by imposing conservative bishops on several dioceses, e.g., Wolfgang Haas in Chur, Joachim Meisner in Cologne, Hans Hermann Gröer in Vienna, and Kurt Krenn in St. Pölten. Critical theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Eugen Drewermann, Hans Küng and Tissa Balasuriya have been gagged with prohibitions banning them from publishing their works and preventing them from teaching.

The Swiss theologian Hans Küng, who was banned from teaching in the Church following an article in 1980 critical of the pope, describes the internal atmosphere of the Church and the role of John Paul II as follows: “[The pope is] the authority behind an inflationary number of beatifications, who, at the same time, with dictatorial power directs his

inquisition against unpopular theologians, priests, monks and bishops; above all, believers distinguished by critical thinking and energetic reform are persecuted in inquisitorial fashion. Just as Pius XII persecuted the most important theologians of his time (Chenu, Congar, de Lubac, Rahner, Teilhard de Chardin), so too has John Paul II (and his grand inquisitor Ratzinger) persecuted Schillebeeckx, Balasuriya, Boff, Bulányi, Curran as well as Bishop Gaillot (Evreux) and Archbishop Hunthausen (Seattle). The consequence: a Church of surveillance, in which denunciation, fear and lack of liberty are widespread. The bishops regard themselves as Roman governors instead of the servants of churchgoers, the theologians write in a conformist manner—or not at all.”

While critical voices have been silenced, the fundamentalist and strictly hierarchically organized Opus Dei order has been able to extend its influence in the Church hierarchy. A number of its members have been appointed bishops and cardinals. The order now commands considerable influence in the Curia, the central administration of the Catholic Church, and could play a significant role in the selection of the next pope.

Opus Dei was founded in 1928 by Josemaria Escrivá in Madrid. With a worldwide membership of 80,000 the order is relatively small. It flourished during Franco’s rule in fascist Spain, where Opus Dei representatives occupied up to 10 ministerial posts.

Escrivá, who was beatified by John Paul II in 2002, only 27 years after its death, once described Hitler as the “saviour of the Spanish Church.” The order is organized along the lines of a secret society, with its own code of conduct that extends from a vow of silence to frequent praying and self-castigation with a scourge and belt. It propagates a cult of masculinity and leadership, defining women as “inferior” and demanding their subordination and strict obedience.

In contrast to many of his predecessors, John Paul II pursued an open policy with regard to other religions. He was the first pope to visit a Protestant church (1983), a synagogue (1986) and a mosque (2001). Every year since 1986 a world prayer meeting has taken place at which different religions pray together. In 2000, the pope visited the Holocaust memorial in Israel and asked pardon for the sins committed by Christians in the course of Church history—without repudiating Pope Pius XII’s silence on the Holocaust.

These outward displays of tolerance, which arose in the first place from the need to strengthen religion as a pillar of a crisis-ridden bourgeois society, stand in stark contrast to the intolerance exhibited by John Paul II in his teachings. Just two years ago, the pope issued a ban prohibiting the taking of communion jointly with other denominations, and the statement “Dominus Jesus” supported by the pope denies that the reformist church is a church, while criticising other religions for their substantial defects.

Notwithstanding his right-wing views, John Paul II was always deeply conscious that the Church can fulfil its function as a prop of the established order only if it postures as a protector of the oppressed. He wrote numerous texts on Catholic social doctrine in which he denounced capitalist excesses and social evils. On a journey to Cuba, he sharply criticised neo-liberalism and its effects.

This criticism was in no way directed against the capitalist order itself. Since socialism first emerged in the late nineteenth century as a significant force in the working class, the Catholic Church has attempted to counter its influence by articulating a social doctrine that, while condemning socialist revolution, makes limited criticisms of capitalism and speaks sympathetically about the plight of workers and poor people. John Paul II worked very much within that tradition. Thus, he rejected socialism in principle as an atheist doctrine in the Encyclical “Centesimus Annus.”

The clear position taken by the pope against the first and second Iraq wars must be seen in this connection. With its one-and-a-half-thousand-year-old tradition, the Catholic hierarchy thinks in longer time spans than bourgeois politicians fixated on the short term.

The Vatican is aware that the ruthless conduct of the US in the Middle East threatens in the long-run to destabilise the entire capitalist world order—including the Catholic Church.

Shortly before the outbreak of the second Iraq war, the pope received the Iraqi vice prime minister, Tariq Aziz, a Christian, and sent envoys to Washington and Baghdad in an attempt to prevent the war. He condemned it with the words: “The war of the strong against the weak has more than ever before revealed the deep divisions between rich and poor.”

John Paul II’s rhetoric of peace and social harmony, which contrasts starkly with his ideology and politics, together with his more than 100 trips abroad—undertaken with great care for their propagandistic value—have played a role in the expansion of the number of Catholics during his term. Membership of the Catholic Church is now given as over a billion, of which half live in South and North America.

These figures cannot, however, conceal the immense crisis in which the Church finds itself. The growth in Church membership has not kept pace with the overall growth of population. Church membership as a proportion of the population is growing only in areas where Catholics are a small minority, including Africa and parts of Asia. In proportionate terms, it is stagnant in Latin America and declining in Europe and North America. In Latin America it is widely noted that the Catholic Church is losing ground to various evangelical Protestant groups.

Notwithstanding the efforts of the media to virtually canonize John Paul II, the Church’s grip on broad masses of people continues to decline, and the Catholic clergy remains badly discredited, even among those who consider themselves Catholics. The loss of active and committed parishioners is reflected in a financial crisis facing the Church in the number of countries. In the US, Catholic schools are being closed down in some major cities, including Detroit.

This crisis has been intensified by the recent sexual abuse scandals involving priests and Church officials. It is now clear that John Paul II sought to conceal widespread sexual predations against children that occurred during his reign.

His role in covering up these abuses in the American, Irish, Austrian and other Churches, and then downplaying their significance once they were disclosed, underscores the hypocrisy of the Vatican on questions of sexual mores. It stands in sharp contrast to the Church’s incessant moralizing when it comes to the normal sexual practices of ordinary people, and underscores that the primary concern of John Paul II and the Vatican as a whole was to defend the clerical caste and its power, authority and immunity from scrutiny.

John Paul II was a charismatic figure, who was able to somewhat offset the protracted decline in mass support for the Church and hold the institution together. His departure will intensify the internal and external pressures on this ancient, sclerotic and reactionary institution. The absurd lengths to which the media is going to use John Paul II’s death to promote the Church is itself a contradictory expression of the crisis of that institution, and the bourgeois order which it defends.

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