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Testament of lies

On 3 June 1992, Poland's interior minister, Antoni Macierewicz, sent lists of politicians and officials suspected of being former security police agents to parliamentary deputies. The list was drawn up on the basis of secret police files, with no other evidence against those named. In the bitter row that followed, President Lech Walesa was accused of being an alleged Communist informer. Within days the government was dismissed

I HAVE participated in a great many public debates about documents from secret police archives. Wherever the subject has come up in the old Communist world, it has created divisions in democratic circles. Yet the most reasonable position, it seems to me, must be: give priority to compassion and let justice follow.

Police archives are the legacy of all dictatorships. They contain material gathered over many years to describe and compromise suspects; they were intended as tools of blackmail. They are a time bomb. When they explode, they destroy. In Poland, Antoni Macierewicz's list of supposed agents has rightly been called 'a grenade hurled into a sewer' — whether it kills or maims, it is bound to spatter everyone with filth.

Is it not better at times to draw a curtain of silence over this swirl of human crisis and torment? Furthermore, are these archives trustworthy? Can we put our faith in documents prepared by Stasi informers, for example? Is their evidence an adequate criterion by which to pass judgement? No-one has convinced me yet that documents from these archives can be uncritically trusted. They were drawn up by people whose profession was falsification for the purpose of ruining others. If they destroy again today, we will be witnessing the posthumous victory of the totalitarian police.

The list circulated by Antoni Macierewicz injected poison into the

public life of this country: it brought suspicion, false allegations and slander. It saw the culmination of a power struggle waged by the government against the president and the principle of the rule of law. The debate that followed marked the clash of two political cultures. On one side stood those who thought that only the independent verdict of a court of law should disqualify anyone from holding an official post; on the other, those who considered a minister of internal affairs perfectly well qualified to pass a verdict — provided he came from the same political camp as themselves. The second grouping, which likes to call itself the ‘centre’ right and has widespread support from the Church, had already demonstrated its political style in its fullest glory.

Earlier, it had given myriad promises of political breakthrough and economic acceleration. There was to be de-Communisation and accounts were to be settled with the guilty. Instead, we saw incompetent government and personalised purges, which struck not at Communists but at representatives of other groupings in the anti-Communist opposition. We witnessed a progressive loss of stability in the army, the collapse of the entire field of home policy and irresponsible attacks on foreign policy.

This was accompanied by a brutal campaign of slander against people holding key positions in the country. We heard declarations from the former minister of defence suggesting that a coup d’état was at hand. This was why de-Communisation was to be indispensable. In fact it proved to be no more than the exchange of one set of generals for another — with similar political biographies, even though differently disposed towards the new leadership. Antoni Macierewicz’s revelation was the straw that broke the camel’s back. President Walesa’s swift reaction was justified: the state was under threat.

All this was the new phase of a war at the top, originally fomented in 1990. That was when the mechanism of false allegations, dishonest accusations and empty promises was set in motion. Then we heard for the first time in public lies about secret deals made during the Round Table talks. The latest revelations were to be the Finale: informers of the secret police (never, in fact, Polish-controlled) were to be outed by men of honour and ideals. Agents of foreign powers were to be unmasked.

As a result, the traditional shape of politics in this country has ceased to exist. There is no solidarity between groupings formerly in the anti-Communist opposition. None of the traditional categories — such as right and left — describe the political divisions in the Polish Parliament. Any

subsequent coalitions will serve short-term needs. We can only hope that their overriding aim will be concern for interests of the state.

And the genie is out of the bottle. The public accusations should be fully clarified, just as those responsible for making false allegations must be made answerable for them. The whole issue of secret police agents must be depoliticised immediately. It shouldn't remain accessible as an instrument of political struggle, even in the worthiest of hands. This aspect of contemporary politics is too important to be left to politicians. What is required is a body formed not of political figures, but of lawyers, historians and sociologists who would examine the authenticity of the documents and draw up a report based on their findings. This should expose in full the workings of the entire mechanism of crime and terror, the amorality of some and the suffering of others.

As for the archives, they should remain sealed for 50 years in order that no politician can be in a position to draw on them while fighting his political battles. □

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© Edited excerpts from articles published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 6 June 1992 and 19 August 1994. Translated by Irena Maryniak

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