

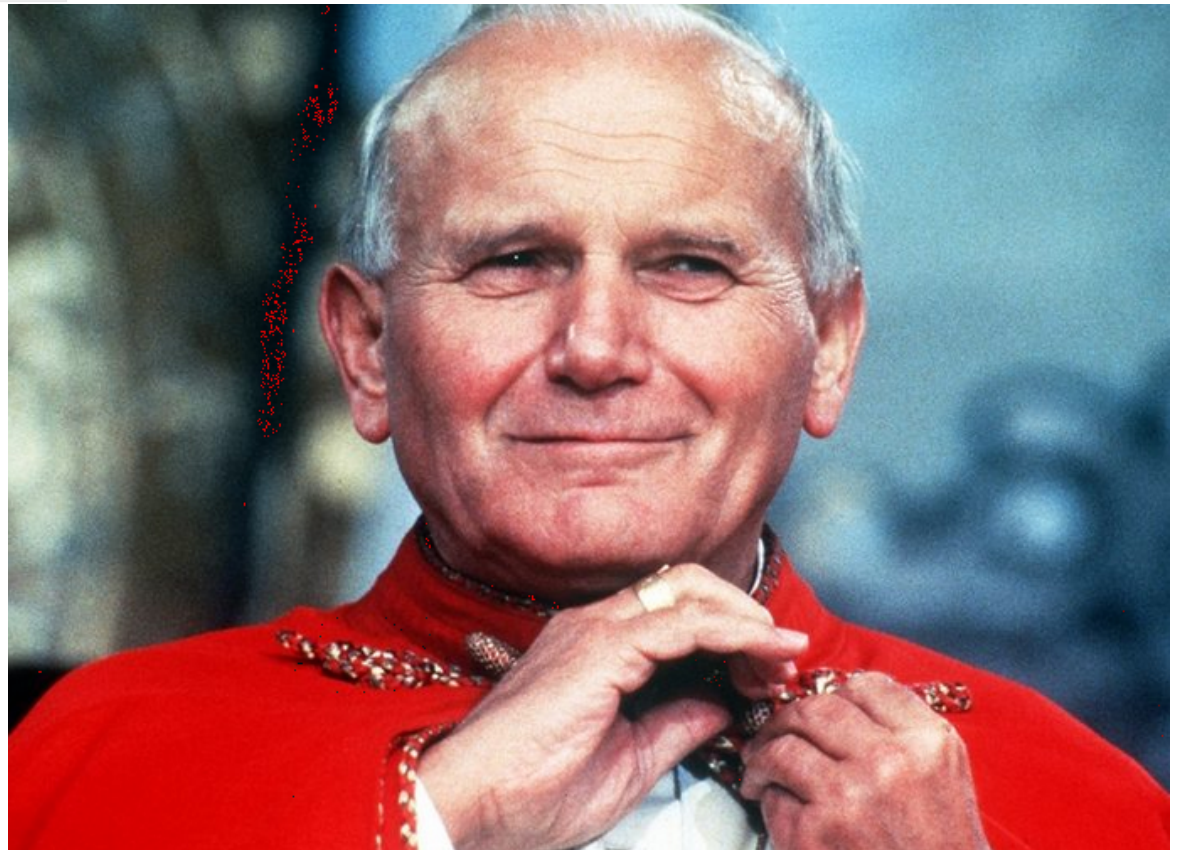
POLAND

Attack on Wojtyła: a stack of lies based on 'red' dossiers

WORLD

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**Włodzimierz
Redzioch**



In the country where Saint John Paul II was born there are forces that have always resented the man who was first Archbishop of Krakow and then Pontiff. Until 1989, it was first and foremost the apparatus of the communist regime in Poland that did all it

could to diminish the impact of the Pope's pastoral action in his homeland. But the same political forces continued to criticise John Paul II even after the democratic turn in 1989, allying themselves with liberal anticlerical circles and 'open' Catholics who resented the 'conservative' line of the Church.

During John Paul II's pontificate, the attacks were linked to his teaching on sexuality, the defence of life from conception to natural death, the role of women in the Church, his 'anti-communism'; but it seemed that these topics could not dent the gigantic figure in his homeland, where he was spoken of with the utmost respect. Yet, under the radar, forces were at work in Poland that wanted to destroy "the myth of Wojtyła", first and foremost linked to the influential newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Direct attacks on the Polish saint began to appear on the pages of this left-wing liberal newspaper, with contributions in particular from former priests like Stanislaw Obirek: unfortunately, his increasingly vulgar and primitive attacks were neither countered nor stigmatised. In Poland, they have forgotten the rule of Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda genius, according to which something will always remain of endlessly repeated lies. And so certain lies concerning the figure of John Paul II began to be perceived as truth.

But there was also another factor that facilitated the action of 'deconstructing' the figure of the Pontiff: the factor of time. For more than a decade, people have been working in the world of information in Poland who did not know John Paul II directly and could not appreciate his charisma, work, and teaching. What is more, a veritable media coalition has been formed with the aim of breaking with the legacy of John Paul II. A coalition consisting of the aforementioned *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the weekly magazine Newsweek, TVN television and the Onet portal (Newsweek and Onet are linked to the Swiss-German media giant Ringier Axel Springer).

Unfortunately, the cases of real and alleged abuse of minors by priests and the accusations against the hierarchy of tolerating paedophilia have provided a formidable weapon to strike at the Church and John Paul II. And in these days in Poland, we witness the peak of attacks against the figure of Wojtyła.

On 8 March, Agora - the same publishing house as *Gazeta Wyborcza* - launched the book *Most Grievous Fault. John Paul II Knew About It*, by Dutch journalist Ekke Overbeek. This is the marketing slogan: "What the Church hides about John Paul II". The weekly magazine Newsweek has launched the accusation with a cover featuring the Pope's photo and the headline: "The hidden truth about paedophilia". Subtitle: "By hiding the sex crimes of his priests, he behaved like the communist *apparatchik* of the Church". To add insult to injury, TVN broadcast a report by Marcin Gutowski on Wojtyła's

alleged responsibility for tolerating paedophile incidents during his time as Metropolitan Archbishop of Cracow.

But the massive attack, well synchronised as one can see, does not end there:

the media brought up the story of the alleged sexual abuse committed by Cardinal Adam Sapieha, for many years Metropolitan of Krakow. During World War II, the cardinal organised a clandestine seminary in which, among others, his two successors, Karol Wojtyła and Franciszek Macharski, both ordained by Sapieha, studied. It is insinuated that Wojtyła "learned" tolerance towards abuses from his "mentor" Sapieha; there are those who maliciously imply that perhaps there was "something" between Wojtyła and the elderly cardinal who liked him so much. It is a completely false story that reveals how all journalistic ethics have been lost. It is worth analysing.

The lies about Cardinal Sapieha's alleged homosexuality and his alleged abuse of seminarians were published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The accusations are based on statements made by Anatol Boczek, a collaborator priest of the communist regime who wanted to organise a party-controlled national Church in Poland. Boczek belonged to a group of so-called patriot priests and was in open conflict with Cardinal Sapieha when he wrote his statements for the Polish secret service. He was suspended by the cardinal precisely because of his collaboration with the communist regime. Boczek was an alcoholic and his statements were so blatantly false that not even the communists dared to use them to target Sapieha at the time. He was eventually removed from the list of collaborators.

It must be remembered that the 1950s were the years of the height of repression against the Church by the communist regime. Cardinal Sapieha died in 1951 and immediately afterwards the communist authorities had the bishops of the dioceses of Katowice and Cracow arrested, and subsequently organised the mock trial of the priests of Cracow, typical of the Stalin period.

To credit the lies of the collaborator of the communist regime, the cardinal's chaplain, Don Andrzej Mistat, was also brought in. His testimony, extracted from the archives of the communist secret service, is supposed to be proof of the cardinal's homosexual tendencies. But no one today explains that that testimony was written by Fr Mistat in the secret service offices. He was arrested, badly beaten, and under threat when, uncertain of his fate, he made this statement. This kind of testimony, extracted from priests, was used to organise mock trials against bishops. So one can only admire the shrewdness of Father Mistat who, risking prison and having to write something, came up with sexual accusations that probably seemed 'harmless' to him. What value

do these kinds of secret service documents have? They should have no legal value, but meanwhile they are publicised and used by the media as 'certain' evidence of guilt.

The media make further purely disparaging accusations: the fact that during the war Cardinal Sapieha housed seminarians in his palace allegedly is 'proof' that he was homosexual, but the same media conceal the information that the seminary buildings had been occupied by the Germans.

The attitude of the editors of the weekly magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny* founded by Cardinal Sapieha, is extremely saddening: they wonder whether the young Wojtyła was molested by the cardinal. These iconoclastic theses reach the height of falsehood but do not serve to convince historians who can easily refute them: their aim is to destroy the authority of those who are in fact authorities for us, ordinary Catholics, who usually do not have the tools to verify these shameful lies. Attacking a person who died seventy years ago does not allow a fair defence because people do not know the historical context of the facts, the political conditioning, etc. This is what the circles that launched the attack on Wojtyła count on.

It must be strongly emphasised that by attacking Cardinal Sapieha they mean to attack the figure of Saint John Paul II. Monsignor Jan Machniak, professor at the Pontifical Theological Academy in Krakow, says: "To attack John Paul II and the people connected with him is to destroy the great legacy that the Pope left not only to the Church but to the whole of Humanity. We must bear this in mind as we read the 'sensational' news about Wojtyła that reaches us from Poland these days.