

1. **Project Title**

The Legacy of the Polish Solidarity Movement

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2. **Keywords**

Conference
Interaction
Communication
Understanding

3. **Summary**

The project was a one day academic conference on the legacy of the Polish Solidarity Movement. A number of well renowned scholars and historians from Warwick University and outside presented a series of lectures, followed by debates on the phenomenon of Solidarnosc. The conference celebrated the 25th anniversary of the movement by highlighting its important ideals in its fight for freedom from oppression, protection of human rights and its action as a safeguard for universal human dignity. As this was an academic enterprise the underscore focused on the debates between the speakers and audience following each session. The large number of guest speakers enabled the conference to take up a multidimensional perspective by broadening the historical perspective into the sociological, political and cultural spheres of study. The event was divided into 4 sessions; the first dealt with the origins and beginnings of Solidarnosc in Poland in 1980 and the reactions of the Eastern Bloc to the organisation. This was followed by a session devoted to the analysis of the events in 1989 in Europe and Poland concentrating on the impact that Solidarnosc made with the political transformation in Poland and fall of communism in Eastern Europe. The fourth session of the conference examined the future of Solidarnosc as a means of spreading democracy and human right campaigns throughout the world. The closing session was conducted as a round-talk with the speakers and focused upon the legacy of the Polish Solidarity Movement and exemplified the conclusions reached by each session. The night was rounded up with a dinner in a restaurant in Leamington Spa for both students and speakers.

The outcomes of the conference revolved around three main aspects: education, academia and creativity and affected both organisers and participants. This forum of discussion about Solidarity has lead to the creation of projects on Polish related issues. Furthermore the conference served as a medium for developing new contacts in the academic and film world.

4. **Activities**

Last year, the Polish Solidarity movement celebrated its 25th anniversary through a number of conferences, concerts, film viewings, photographic gallery displays and political forums, which took place throughout Poland. Marcin Stepan, the President of the Warwick Polonia society, had the pleasure of attending one of the main international conferences held in Warsaw and was so inspired that he discussed the possibility of a student conference with high-profile speakers and critical debate

about the values, achievements and future role of the Solidarity Movement. This idea was picked up by Warwick Polonia, as the exec members formed the organisational core of the event.

During the conference held in Poland, Marcin met Dr. Zbigniew Pelczynski, an Oxford Emeritus, with whom the first plans were assembled. Dr. Pelczynski's aid was indispensable; he provided information and contacts to potential candidate speakers, agreed to participate in the event and help form the first outline. At first the Conference was to be divided into three themes; Past, Present and Future and the discussion panel would include prominent people such as Prof. Timothy Garton Ash¹, Baroness Caroline Cox and Neal Ascherson; all were participants in the summer conference. Armed with this outline the second step was to discuss the potential project with the History Department as this conference would be history enterprise, but more importantly the department would be able to provide credibility for the venture. At the same time there were various members of the history staff, who judging by their scope of research may have been interested in the conference. Consequently Dr. Christoph Mick, Dr. Robin Okey, Prof. Christopher Read and Dr. Iain Smith became involved in the project not only as speakers but as Chairs of the sessions.

Conferences in the humanities sphere of research at Warwick University occur quite frequently and it is one of the Humanities Research Centre's tasks to organise them. Susan Dibben, the secretary, was a vital asset in both the planning and actual stages of the conference. Ms. Dibben's vast experiences with conferences were indispensable as she presented the numerous issues which were to be tackled before and during the event:

- 1) venue
- 2) speakers
- 3) guests
- 4) finance
- 5) food and beverage
- 6) transport
- 7) publicity

In order to cut costs the venue was Warwick University room H0.51. As it took place on a Saturday the room booking was free. The room could house around 150 people, which was sufficient for our number of guests which turned out to be 82. The room had several advantages apart from being located on the ground floor, which facilitated the access. It allowed the usage of the main foyer, corridor, and classrooms as a reception, meeting point and area to serve drinks and refreshments. The room was equipped with standard lecture hall apparatus enabling the usage of power point presentations and film viewings.

The financial aspect of the conference is by far the most crucial as the resources mark out the possibilities of the conference. Luckily we were very generously sponsored by the Reinvention Centre but also by the History department, Students Union and Centre for Translations. Furthermore we charged academics £20 but students were free as this event was designed for them thus we wanted the maximum number. The HRC could not provide us with financial assistance as this conference was not a post-graduate one. Nonetheless they provided folders, name tags, signs, and pens and made it possible to use the Raffles Cafeteria for lunch. Although we had a choice of various catering companies we opted for Warwick Hospitality since they provided a warm meal. They were also employed for two of the

¹ Oxford University, Head of St. Anthony's College

breaks. The other occasion, we purchased tea, coffee and biscuits at Costcutter, thus cutting costs. The conference ended with a booked dinner outing to an Italian restaurant in Leamington Spa, where both students and speakers could interact. We funded the meal for 14 students. As with regard to the speakers, we were able to fully reimburse their travel expenses² and successfully cut accommodation costs by housing three of them at Dr. Smith's and Dr. Mick's residence.

The speakers list was not finalised until 2 weeks before the conference. Eventually there were 10 speakers, but only one remained from the 'original' plan – Prof. Pelczynski, as the others had prior engagements. To our fortune, after we began our publicity campaign in January two academics expressed great desire to participate in the event ; Dr. Guglielmo Meardi³ and Dr. Stefan Auer⁴. Naturally this led to a late reshuffling in the programme; nonetheless their presence added to the value of the conference.

The search for speakers was very long and difficult; firstly we contacted people who had been referred to us by the history tutors and people connected with the Solidarity Movement. As this was an academic conference the search focused mainly on top British universities and departments/research centres involved in the themes of the topic. Thus in some cases judgement of inviting the scholar was based purely on research of their profiles and field of expertise. In November 2005 the Polish Solidarity Campaign organised their own conference titled "Britain and Solidarity", which was attended by Marcin. At this event he met one of the speakers Prof. Francis Millard⁵ who later agreed to participate in the conference at Warwick. The experience of this other conference was extremely helpful as we realised the importance of breaks with refreshments and easy mobility throughout the room.

Advertisement for the conference was divided into two sections: within the university and outside it. Approximately four weeks before the event we started putting up posters, leaflets and flyers around the various university facilities. We asked the history, economics, sociology and politics departments to inform the students of the event via email. In the Learning Grid, on the large screen, we successfully installed a power point presentation and there was an article in both the student run newspapers BOAR and WORD. The conference was even publicised on Warwick University's main internet site as the headline story, which we consider to be our greatest success in the advertising sphere. This was accomplished with the help of Mike Neary who referred us to Casey Leaver, an employee responsible for maintaining the internet site. Promoting the conference outside the University was conducted mainly via email but with very successful results. Various institutions such as the Polish Embassy, Consulate and the Polish Cultural Institute posted information on their websites. Additionally we were permitted to use the emailing lists of the UACES⁶, BACEE⁷ and BASEES⁸.

We obviously faced a number of obstacles and challenges throughout preparation stage. The financial aspect; had it not been for the Reinvention Centre, the event would have not come to pass. Furthermore one of the greatest challenges was organisation of the programme. At first there was difficulty in finding suitable

²A return flight from Dublin to Birmingham, return flight from Glasgow to Birmingham, three train journeys and a local taxi ride.

³ University of Warwick – WBS

⁴ University College Dublin – Politics and International Relations

⁵ Essex University – Government Dept

⁶ University Association for Contemporary European Studies

⁷ British Association for Central and Eastern Europe

⁸ British Association for Slavonic and Eastern European Studies

speakers as the original plan had fallen through. However concurrently we could not send out too many invitations due to the time restrictions; this was a one day event. Ultimately with 11 speakers, each had 20-25 minutes for their speech as 30 minutes of each session was devoted to a discussion with the audience. Secondly, one had to take into account the limits of human physiology as the conference lasted from 9 till 1815, therefore a sufficient number of pauses were called for. Time management was a very important matter during the actual conference, with the aid of the chairs it ran smoothly.

5. Outcomes

From the educational perspective the conference organisers gained practical knowledge of organising a conference from the very onset to the final reports and articles about the matter. Academically, due to the interactive character of the conference, a forum was created for scholars, postgraduates and undergraduates to discuss the failures and successes of Solidarity. Furthermore this forum enabled the fostering of new relationships, which has led to new co-operations on other research projects such as a film documentary about the life of Polish survivor of the Russian gulags. The new President of the Polish Society was so inspired he decided to host a similar event the following year, except with a modern topic: Poles in the UK. The creative facet was reached through the new means of gathering knowledge as slide shows, film clips and power point presentation were used during the lectures and advertising campaign. Additionally the creative aspect interlinked with the organisational aspect of organising a conference starting from letters to speakers, actual layout of the conference area and ending with the finalised reports and conclusions. The usage of the Warwick University website is a milestone as very few undergraduate events have been promoted in such a fashion. The impact of our publicity was also evident in the local Leamington Spa newspaper "The Courier", which ran a story on the conference and stimulated an interest on Poles living in the town. In a wider sphere, an article by Maarten reviewing the conference appeared in the spring edition of Polish-Dutch cultural magazine "Biuletyn".