

Summary of the doctoral dissertation entitled "The Last Great Amnesty". Prison riots in Western Pomerania in 1989

Acts of amnesty in post-war Poland were passed very often, mainly as an additional celebration of an important event, anniversary or significant changes in the life of the country. It also served the ever-increasing prison population in overcrowded prisons. The changes resulting from the fall of communism in Poland also affected the prison system. Protests concerning living conditions and social issues dominated the first half of 1989 in most prisons. The highest number of incidents broke out in penal institutions in north-western Poland, especially in Goleniów and Nowogard. In early September 1989, the spread of information about ongoing proceedings on an act of amnesty put aside all other considerations. Inside the prison system pressure was exerted to enact the widest possible scope of amnesty. Prisoners, oppositionists, the media, and some parliamentarians lobbied for it. At the same time, protests intensified in all Polish prisons. Those included such actions as the occupation of residential pavilions and production halls. The usual prison regime became practically non-existent. The central penal system authorities reacted by replacing wardens and district directors. In penitentiary institutions, inmates gained greater say through strike committees which influenced the decisions of the prison administration. The most spectacular event was a convoy of four prisoners from Nowogard and Goleniów for talks with the Minister of Justice. The solution to the deteriorating situation was the quick completion of work on the amnesty legislation. On December 7, 1989, the Polish parliament passed an act of amnesty, which excluded recidivists, who constituted the majority of Goleniów and Nowogard prison inmates. In both prisons, the convicts took over residential pavilions and later began to demolish and burn them. After several dozen hours, the rebels surrendered under the threat of force by anti-terrorist units. As a result of the rebellion, one person lost his life, and three buildings in Nowogard and two in Goleniów were burned down. Lengthy trials resulted in the convictions of several of the main ringleaders of the riots, but most of the prison population taking an active part in the riots were acquitted. Separately, there were trials against officers of the Prison Service who committed beatings of prisoners escorted to other facilities.