

# The Solidarity Decade

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The Solidarity Decade began for me when, as a backpacker barely out of his teens, I visited Gdańsk in the summer of 1980. Too young to sense the undercurrents of unrest that were simmering in the working-class areas of that port city, I was content to confine myself to the main tourist sites. I vaguely remember one of my distant aunts with whom I was staying grumble around the shortages of everything, the crumbling infrastructure and the many broken promises of the puffy-faced party apparatchiks who were running the country. But wasn't that what the Poles were best at? Always complaining, always pessimistic, always bitter about how they were betrayed at Yalta and ended up on the wrong side of history.

I left Poland before the shipyard strikes began—something I would regret deeply when I began my career as a journalist several years later. Yet who in their right mind could have predicted that the political landscape of Poland was to change so quickly and so fundamentally? The Polish people in those tumultuous days of the Solidarity movement, martial law and beyond would prove my negative perceptions wrong. They would turn out to be brave, well organised and sure of their convictions—both political and religious. They were not about to be taken for fools by their communist masters and thankfully they were not going to listen to some of the advice coming from their so-called supporters in the West, concerned more about what an angry Soviet bear might do to teach those hot-blooded Poles a lesson than the fundamental human and civil rights that the workers, intellectuals and farmers were fighting for.

From an Australian perspective, the events in Poland took on a surreal edge. Here was a workers' movement revolting against a workers' state. Here was Lech Wałęsa, the Solidarity leader, signing the Gdańsk agreement granting workers the right to form a free trade union using a giant pen bearing the likeness of the Polish Pope, John Paul II. The incongruities kept coming. The Catholic Church never reneged on its central role in pushing for political freedom—something that hardened labour leaders in the West, schooled in Marxist theory, took time to digest. Some 700 000 members of the Polish United Workers' Party—almost one-quarter of the total membership—joined Solidarity. Just prior to the

introduction of marital law, even peasants were demanding the right to form their own free trade union. The Soviets, it turned out, were just as unprepared for responding to the events in Poland as were many Western leaders.

Malcolm Fraser, the Australian Prime Minister at the time, responded to the deteriorating economic crisis in 1981 by supporting the collection of food and other essentials to be sent to Poland. And when martial law was declared, he opened the door to Polish refugees. To his credit, he did not follow the line of appeasement taken by then Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, who stated that martial law 'isn't bad' if it prevents civil war.

My first personal encounter with Solidarity was to come in the Polish summer of 1984. Martial law was no longer in force but the apparatus of repression was stronger than ever. I remember being chased down side streets in the old city of Warsaw by baton-wielding militia breaking up anti-government demonstrations and spontaneous street marches. I joined the thousands of people who attended church services led by the charismatic Polish priest Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, who would shortly afterwards be murdered by the secret police, his body dumped in the Vistula River.

Those were the days of *samizdat* and underground music tapes. As a foreigner who spoke Polish, I was expected to do my bit helping to distribute crudely printed copies of *Gazeta* and cassette tapes by singers such as Jan Kelus. It was clear, even to an outsider like me, that the 16 months of the Solidarity period had had a profound psychological effect. All layers of society—workers, intellectuals and farmers—had been touched by that momentous period. All age groups—from schoolchildren to the elderly—felt compelled to organise themselves in opposition to the failed party-state. Those Poles who found themselves abroad when martial law was declared or chose to emigrate after being released from detention did what they could, sending money and food parcels, helping smuggle parts for underground printing presses, putting pressure on their host governments not to let the Polish regime off lightly. Once it had been declared bankrupt by the strikes of August 1980 and then by its resort to martial law, the party-state had lost all legitimacy. Its days were well and truly numbered.

These days, repressive regimes are rarely taken by surprise, as testified by the recent popular uprisings in Burma, Tibet and Iran. If the Solidarity movement can be credited with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet-style communism then the successful uprisings of the 1980s have also taught repressive regimes that the overwhelming use of state-sponsored repression can keep a regime in power almost indefinitely. Another legacy, however, of the Solidarity decade endures: the knowledge that civil society rooted in the

defence of fundamental human rights and what Hannah Arendt identified as the original grace of revolution—the human capacity for beginning new things—will never be completely erased.