The Solidarity Decade: 1980–1989

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What is called here the ‘Solidarity Decade’ covers the developments between September 1980, the beginning of the mass, organised, peaceful and negotiated dismantling of communist domination in the Soviet Bloc, and September 1989, the formation of the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe, and the beginning of the ‘contagious’ systemic transformation that initiated the domino-like fall of communist regimes in the region and the gradual transition to what Holmes¹ labelled ‘post-communism’.

While the Polish Solidarity was not the first mass protest against communist domination—it was preceded by mass anti-communist opposition in 1945–47 in Poland, in 1953 in East Germany, in 1956 in Poland and Hungary, in 1968 in Poland and Czechoslovakia and, again, in 1970 and 1976 in Poland—it was unique in many ways. The Hungarian uprising and the Prague Spring apart, the pre-1980 mass protests could be accurately described as spontaneous eruptions of public anger and frustration; they were poorly organised and politically ineffective—and were promptly suppressed or defused by the authorities. While they resulted in leadership changes, their impact was more cultural than political; they left behind important political memories, legends and traditions, but no political-organisational legacies.

Solidarity was different. It was a mass movement of unprecedented strength, political restraint and—at least initially—social discipline. At the peak of its popularity in mid-1981, Solidarity boasted about 10 million members/supporters—more than half the adult population of Poland. Moreover, this mobilisation was well coordinated, and it adopted the novel, yet familiar, form of a ‘free trade union’. In turn, the free union provided a protective political umbrella to scores of independent (though often ‘affiliated’) oppositional groups and initiatives. Also, unlike the former mass opposition, Solidarity was ‘anti-utopian’. Its initial ‘21 demands’ were sober and practical, and the reform programs that gradually emerged during the 1981 debates promoted the ‘well-tried’ Western liberal-democratic institutional solutions: trade union formation,

1 Holmes (1997).

civil liberties, citizen and employee rights, democratic procedures and, in the later stages of discussions, political pluralism and respect for private property. Above all, Solidarity stressed freedom of thought, expression and association, and non-violent, conciliatory strategies for action. All these elements proved successful in 1980–81 in breaking—albeit for only 15 months—the communist monopoly on political organisation, information and free expression. These 15 months of freedom, as argued here, were sufficient to start the irreversible political change.

The closing date of the Solidarity Decade—September 1989—was no less consequential. As argued by this author elsewhere in this volume (Chapter 9), it was the final stage of the historic ‘Breakthrough’ that initiated a new phase of change—a systemic transformation—accompanied by a largely unanticipated domino-like collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes. This was the proverbial ‘beginning of the end’: the end of ‘reforming socialism’ and the beginning of a ‘systemic transformation’ described by the leaders of the Solidarity government as ‘a return to Europe’.

One should also highlight the ‘external’ conditions of success. By far the most important was the political ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev and his reformist campaign of *perestroika* (rebuilding, re-formation) and *glasnost* (transparency, openness). While these permissive and liberalising policies were essential conditions of Solidarity’s Breakthrough, the dismantling of communism was never Gorbachev’s intention. *Perestroika* aimed at *reforming*, and thus strengthening, communism, rather than its abolition. The second factor was a parallel reformist drive in Hungary. The Hungarian reforms, however, were almost completely confined to the Communist Party apparatus and were initially directed primarily towards economic modernisation (introduction of market mechanisms). But precisely because of these differences, the reformist drive in Hungary proved both effective and complementary. It did not raise Moscow’s suspicion of Polish–Hungarian collusion, and it provided a good model of intra-party reformism.²

The Background

Why was Poland so central in building effective strategies of political dissent and, ultimately, systemic change? Almost all political commentators³ agree

2 As Ash (2009a, 2009b), Geremek and Żakowski (1990) and Wałęsa (2008) remind us that, even in late 1989, there was no certainty that liberal reforms would succeed. As late as August 1989, Polish communists were considering ‘a new variant of martial law’. While the German protesters gathered in early November in Leipzig and Berlin, the authorities had plans ready for violent suppression of protests.

3 Ash (1983, 1990); Ascherson (1981); Engel (2009); Lawson (2005).

that Poland was ‘the weak link in the socialist chain’ and that Poles have never felt at home in Moscow’s ‘camp’.⁴ Unlike the neighbouring societies, Germany and Czechoslovakia, Poland had not developed an indigenous communist movement that would provide a social embedding to communist regimes. Polish socialists, who formed the dominant political force in the inter-war period, were predominantly anti-Bolshevik—an attitude reflecting a long tradition of struggle for independence against Russia. This struggle was reinforced by painful memories of the Polish–Soviet war of 1919–21, the joint German–Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939, and the resulting partition of the country. Although throughout World War II Germany was considered the main enemy, Poles never forgot that more than one million of their compatriots were deported by the Soviets to Siberia, and that about 20 000 Polish prisoners-of-war (POWs)—mostly army officers and civil servants—were murdered on the explicit orders of Stalin in 1940–41. When Red Army troops entered Poland in 1944 in pursuit of the withdrawing Germans, most Poles treated them as both liberators and new occupants. These suspicions were again confirmed by the installation in Poland of the Soviet-sponsored communist government following the postwar contestation (1945–47), rigging of elections, suppression of the opposition, and the imposition after 1948 of the Stalinist system of a command economy and mono-party rule.

Poles had never reconciled themselves with this ‘Yalta order’, and the entire postwar period was punctuated by anti-Soviet rebellions: in 1945–47, 1956, 1968, 1970 and 1976.⁵ All were bloody and unsuccessful, bringing only short ‘thaws’. The eruption of the Solidarity movement in the summer of 1980 was seen as a culmination of protests, and as the final episode in this long ‘learning process’. It was the first attempt at mass, coordinated (solidary), organised, non-ideological and peaceful contestation—a ‘refolution’ (Ash’s term) or ‘self-limiting revolution’ (Staniszki’s term).

While triggered by an economic collapse that broke the morale of the party apparatus, the Solidarity mobilisation in 1980 was facilitated by long-term transformations in Polish society. In the postwar decades, Poland experienced rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, social mobility, and general socio-cultural upgrading resulting in high literacy, widened access to education and saturation by the mass media. These transformations—designed as boosters of social support for the new socialist order—backfired badly on their communist instigators. The young, skilled industrial workers turned into the harshest critics of the inept regime, while the peasant farmers, strengthened and rejuvenated by land reform, turned to traditional Catholicism. Perhaps most importantly, the

4 Stalin used to joke that socialism suits Poland like a saddle suits a cow—a condemnatory phrase repeated by most Poles with pride.

5 See, for example, Ash (1983).

communist authorities failed to gain support from the urban intelligentsia—the traditional ‘educated class’—whose important Catholic section spawned most important Solidarity advisers. After some initial successes (especially in 1956–57), the communists also failed to harness patriotic sentiments, particularly strong among Poles. Patriotism and Catholicism thus formed an ideological levy against the encroachments of the communist outlook, and the growing base for political opposition. This became apparent when the new post-Stalinist generation of well-educated, skilled and well-informed people started to come of age in the 1970s. This new generation—frustrated by shortages and inequities in distribution, irritated by the empty propaganda, and radicalised by the past failures at reforming the system—was less fearful and less politically complacent than their parents.

Unlike in neighbouring societies, Polish dissenters could also count on the protection and covert support of the Catholic Church. The influence of the church in Poland was founded on numbers—about 90 per cent of Poles have always declared themselves Catholics—and on the prestige of church leaders. The church emerged morally unscathed from the war and the Stalinist terror, and, from the late 1950s, it was allowed to shelter critics of the communist regime and protect oppositional initiatives. In fact, Polish churches were the only public spaces throughout the entire Communist Bloc where relatively unconstrained and critical public debates could take place. Even non-believers—members of the so-called ‘secular left’—enjoyed this protection. Consequently, the Catholic Church became a symbol and the main repository of democratic and patriotic aspirations. The election of the Polish Pope in 1978, and his strong stance on the issue of human rights powerfully articulated during his 1979 pilgrimage to Poland, had strengthened this identification even further. Popular aspirations for political freedoms and human rights combined with economic frustrations and demands for reforms, and with the commitment to solidaristic, non-violent action promoted by the Pope. The three fused into a new oppositional idiom that emerged with the Solidarity movement.

The Prelude

After steady economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, the Polish economy started to falter in the 1970s, mainly as a result of the inertia of the centrally managed economy, inept leadership, and mounting foreign debt. The communist ruling elite—the party-controlled *nomenklatura*⁶—started to show signs of political and intellectual degeneration: closure, corruption and ineptitude. When

⁶ The term ‘*nomenklatura*’ refers to the system of party-ideological patronage typical of communist regimes, and to the beneficiaries of this system: the party-administrative officials. It is used here in the latter meaning.

the communist authorities attempted to pass the costs of poor policies on to consumers through drastic price increases—especially on the eve of Christmas 1970—Poland exploded. Strikes and protests erupted, mainly on the coast, among the shipyard workers of Gdańsk and Gdynia, extending to the entire coastal region. The reaction of the authorities was brutal: they ordered police and the army to use live ammunition against strikers and peaceful protesters. Between 18 and 24 persons were killed. Hundreds were wounded, arrested and persecuted—especially after the outraged protesters started to burn Communist Party buildings.

This was the symbolic beginning of Solidarity. Police and army brutality, the lies of the propaganda, and the vicious persecution of protesters—all portrayed in Andrzej Wajda's epic film *The Man of Iron*—gave rise to the oppositional legend that bonded together diverse groups of protesters. It should not be surprising that the first demand of striking workers (in the same shipyard in Gdańsk—ironically named after Lenin) 10 years later, in August 1980, was the commemoration of their comrades killed and secretly buried in December 1970.

There was another important development. The strikers and protesters in 1970 realised that they were easy prey if they were isolated, unorganised and provoked to 'go onto the streets'. The 1970 protests did not spread to the other industrial centres, and were not supported by the urban intelligentsia (who were still traumatised by the anti-intellectual and anti-Semitic campaigns by the authorities in 1968). Moreover, the protests lacked coordination and their participants could easily be persecuted and intimidated. That provoked some famous advice given by a veteran dissenter, Jacek Kuroń: 'you should not burn party committees, but establish your own.' This advice was taken seriously and future protests—especially the wave of strikes in the industrial centres of Radom and Ursus in 1976—were confined to the factories and were much better organised. While they also fizzled out, the 1976 protests triggered a 'great convergence' of the oppositional forces, especially young industrial workers and the urban oppositional intelligentsia, as exemplified by the formation in 1976 of the Committee for the Support of Workers (KOR), and led to the formation of a nationwide free trade union. Both proved strategically successful. KOR turned into a wide social alliance spawning many future advisors to Solidarity. It also galvanised social support for persecuted dissenters, prompted the explosion of 'unofficial' (uncensored) publications and civic initiatives (including the underground 'Flying University') and—most importantly—propagated the 'free and independent' unions in major industrial centres.

Thus, while all neighbouring countries were in the grip of a 'political freeze', Poland was experiencing in the 1970s a wave of dissent and 'liberalisation from below', albeit tempered by the fear of Soviet intervention. Political groups such as KOR, the Movement for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights (ROB CiO),

and the budding and still clandestine independent unions printed leaflets, brochures, posters and manifestos. They publicised violations of human rights using as a protective shield the articles of the Helsinki Agreement, officially signed by Poland in spring 1975. Other groups started to follow their example. Discrimination against believers triggered the formation of the Believers' Self-Defense committees, mainly in the small towns and villages. Students' Solidarity committees emerged in almost all the major academic centres of Poland, especially following the murder by the secret police of a student activist and KOR supporter. The free trade unions led by charismatic worker-activists such as Lech Wałęsa and Andrzej Gwiazda formulated a Charter of Workers' Rights, publicised violations of civil rights, and criticised the complacent government-controlled unions.

All these initiatives were reinforced by economic frustrations. By the late 1970s, the Polish economy was being crushed under the weight of mismanagement and massive debt. It shrank by 2 per cent in 1979, 4 per cent in 1980, and by a staggering 13 per cent in 1981. Foreign debt skyrocketed from US\$1.2 billion in 1971 to US\$23 billion in 1980.⁷ Instead of becoming a 'second Japan'—as was famously promised by its communist leader—Poland entered a downward spiral of economic crisis and social chaos. Shortages of goods, including foodstuffs, became acute and chronic. Price rises, which traditionally provoked mass protests, were introduced surreptitiously, thus provoking public anger and suspicion. It was one such provocative 'price adjustment' announced on 1 June 1980 that triggered a wave of protest strikes—this time coordinated, confined to factories (thus difficult to quash by force) and directed by charismatic free union leaders.

As mentioned before, the main causes and circumstances of the Solidarity 'revolution' were either unique to Poland or at least more intense in Poland than in neighbouring countries. Yet the circumstances were not conducive to change. The Soviet Union was in the grip of a deepening social crisis and political 'freeze' symbolised by the infamous 'Brezhnev Doctrine'. In 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan, and, in the late 1980s, they organised manoeuvres on the Polish border (ominously named 'Friendship 1980'). Both the East German and Czechoslovak societies remained quiet—browbeaten and bribed into submission during the 'normalisation'. There was practically no opposition in East Germany and only a handful of dissidents in Czechoslovakia—most notably, members of Chart 77, a tiny movement that attracted less than 2000 supporters. Fear of losing their jobs, blacklisting, demotion and police harassment paralysed dissenters. Moreover, the economic situation in both East Germany and Czechoslovakia was always better than in Poland, with a particularly good supply of food—a point of envy among Poles. Hungary was in-between the Polish rumbling volcano

7 Beres and Burnetko (2009).

and the frosty political desert of East Germany and post-1968 Czechoslovakia. The Hungarian economy, directed after 1956 by Kadar's reformists, proved more successful than Poland's. Consequently, the Hungarian 'goulash communism' proved relatively popular, and political dissent there was weak and isolated, with dissenters promptly either expelled or intimidated. Thus, while the reformist factions inside the Hungarian Communist Party apparatus grew in strength, the independent opposition was weak, centred on a handful of intellectuals. Conditions in other Eastern European societies were even less propitious to mass protest mobilisation. In this situation, the eyes of the Western media turned to Poland—with rising curiosity, hope and anticipation.

What was Solidarity?

To most Western observers, Solidarity was like a psychological 'blot drawing'. The socialists and left-oriented commentators greeted it as an 'authentic working-class movement', perhaps even a harbinger of a long-awaited proletarian revolution; the labourites welcomed it as an embryonic 'free trade union movement', a vindication of a social-democratic strategy; the liberals admired it as a mass campaign for human rights; the worldwide Catholic community saw it as a Christian-inspired 'movement of moral renewal' inspired by the Polish Pope; peace activists hailed its programmatically non-violent movement; Prime Minister Thatcher and President Reagan saw in it a mass rebellion for liberty and against the 'evil empire'. Who was right?

Remarkably, all these interpretations contained a grain of truth, yet also some distortions. Solidarity was not *just* a 'free trade union movement'. Although originally coordinated by an independent trade union (labeled 'Solidarity'), it quickly escalated into a vast and diverse social protest movement that encompassed a wide array of civil groups, political bodies and social initiatives, all independent of the communist authorities. The free union became a protective political umbrella for these diverse groups and initiatives, ranging in orientation from left-socialists and liberals to conservative-nationalists. Because the union leaders (and their advisers) conducted the initial negotiations with the communist authorities, most protesters were treated as supporters of the 'trade union movement' and 'Solidarity' became a generic name for the entire mass movement and the related political activities.

Some oppositional groups were formally affiliated with independent (and multiplying) trade unions; some were linked by bonds of friendship, trust, mutual knowledge and occasional communication; some simply identified themselves with the general orientation of the movement, without any formal links with trade unions. All these connections were localised and rather

weak. While at the end of 1980 there was an informal consensus among most supporters and sympathisers about the '21 demands' articulated by the striking shipyard workers, there was no political strategy or even a common set of political principles shared by all Solidarity affiliates. Moreover, neither the union executive nor any single group controlled the direction or activities of the whole movement, though the authority of Lech Wałęsa was widely respected and (initially) seldom challenged.

As noted by many Australian observers, Solidarity was a typical mass protest movement unified by opposition (against), rather than affirmation (for), and this opposition had strong moral overtones. The protests were directed against social injustice, inequity, lies and oppression—all attributed vaguely to 'the authorities'. Thus, while it is true that the union leadership had acquired considerable political strength, this strength was difficult to transform into political influence, mainly because most of the political groups in the movement either lacked political aspirations or focused on a general moral critique of the authorities. There was also a political-pragmatic consideration. It was widely understood that the label 'political' was potentially dangerous, because it could attract sanctions. The communists were quite clear that they were ready to defend their monopoly on power by force, if necessary, even by encouraging a Soviet invasion. Therefore the adjective 'political' was avoided, and moral critique of the authorities dominated in public debates.⁸

Solidarity could hardly be described as a 'working-class movement', despite some sympathy for this label—used mainly as a camouflage and an attempt to embarrass the communist authorities claiming to 'represent' the working class. In reality, Solidarity was a wide and inclusive *social* movement. Statistically, the strongest support for Solidarity came from highly skilled urban professionals (teachers, engineers and doctors), as well as young industrial workers in large factories. The most statistically under-represented occupational categories were unskilled manual workers and routine white-collar workers, especially in small towns. In political-organisational terms, the strongest backing for Solidarity came from people who were believers and non-party members, while the strongest opposition to the movement came from the communist *nomenklatura*—party officials, top state administrators, as well as directors and managers of state enterprises. The ethos of Solidarity was predominantly national, moral and solidaristic. The very name clearly signalled commitment to social solidarism, rather than class struggle.⁹

8 Pakulski (1991).

9 For similar reasons, the adjectives 'national' and 'religious' also do not fit well the general ideological vector of the movement, though they do capture some of the aspects of dominant orientations among Solidarity supporters. It is true that the centrality of moral values and firm opposition to the communist regime made religion an important element of the Solidarity ethos. This is because Poles have always regarded national pride and religious faith as the antitheses of Soviet Communism, and because the Catholic Church has been

Some parallels can be drawn between Solidarity and the civil rights movement in the United States. Both opposed violations of justice, human dignity and democracy. Both also stressed religious values, evolved initially in churches, and involved charismatic priest-activists. Moreover, both movements endorsed the principle of non-violence and focused on the struggle against political domination and systematic violations of civil liberties. Perhaps because of these parallels, and the proximity between the ideals of Solidarity and the traditions derived from the American Revolution, the Polish movement was supported more strongly in the United States than in Western Europe.¹⁰ But there were also significant differences between the two. For obvious reasons, the civil rights movement in the United States was less inclusive, and it did not stress the issue of national autonomy, while these were central issues and preoccupations for Solidarity.

Was it, then, a protest movement of the young post-Stalinist generation rebelling against the discredited ideological shibboleths and the collapsing moral and political order? There is considerable support for this view. The activists represented overwhelmingly the generation brought up under the conditions of relative stability and security of the post-Stalinist era (1956–70). They were young—the average age oscillated between twenty-five and thirty-five. The initial push came, almost without exception, from the young and skilled urban workers in key industrial centres. The leading industries of the coastal region, with their advanced technology, large-scale organisation and regular contacts with the West, became a hatchery for free union activists and supporters. These young, skilled workers were also in a better position to observe the destructive consequences of the communist political patronage and inept central management. This new generation—more frustrated, less fearful and less tolerant of communist deceptions—was also less likely than their parents to tolerate political disenfranchisement.

closely linked with struggles for national independence. These connections gave a strong ‘critical potential’ to religious symbols and made the church a natural ally of the movement. Solidarity had also, however, appealed to, and was strongly supported by, the secular left, including old socialists and young secular critics, such as Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń.

¹⁰ The emphasis placed on moral unity, brotherhood and the dignity of man both reflected and further reinforced this affinity. Much of the Solidarity ethos was formulated and elaborated on in the writings and sermons of Father Józef Tischner, the author of the popular brochure *The Ethos of Solidarity*. Priests were central figures and religious communities were important elements of the movement. The principles of tolerance and non-violence, peaceful means of protest and resolution of conflict by negotiation—all of which became the core elements of the movement’s ethos—were introduced largely via these religious channels.

From Registration to Confrontation

Under the pressure of spreading strikes and social unrest, the communist authorities agreed, first, to negotiate with the Solidarity representatives and advisors, and then to formally recognise and register the 'independent and self-governing trade union'—the first in the communist world. This success immediately boosted the movement in other regions. On 17 September 1980, 35 independent trade unions applied for registration under the umbrella of 'Solidarity'. They were followed by dozens of branch unions and scores of independent civil groups. In January 1981, the movement spread into the country. Occupational strikes organised by farmers ended with the successfully negotiated Rzeszow Agreement, which gave private farmers the right to strike and form their own free unions. In February 1981, following academic strikes, the Independent Student Union was registered in Warsaw. 'Solidarity' created a protective umbrella for all these affiliated and allied bodies. A high degree of overlap in the organisational membership makes it difficult to assess their numerical strength, but it has been estimated that in early 1981 Solidarity had about 10 million members.

At the same time, the Communist Party—still three million strong in autumn 1980—was dissipating. The leadership was fractured between hardliners and reformists, and the rank-and-file members started to desert *en masse*. This dissipation was arrested in winter–spring 1981 when General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the then army chief, was appointed Prime Minister. This signaled the toughening of party strategy and the beginning of a steady influx of military officials into the party-state elite. The process of elite disintegration was arrested, though the members were still leaving the party ranks. When in autumn 1981 General Jaruzelski also took over the leadership of the Polish Communist Party (PZPR)—in addition to his position as head of state and of the government—it was clear that the authorities were getting ready for a violent confrontation with Solidarity.

In the meantime, Solidarity expanded horizontally by encompassing increasingly diverse civic initiatives, but the overall organisation and coordination was weakening. Widening regional autonomy and the weakening executive powers, made it virtually impossible for the union to make quick decisions about matters of national importance. The strong charismatic leadership of Lech Wałęsa still assured a degree of central coordination. The very personal nature of charisma, however, made the delegation of authority difficult. Moreover, by mid-May 1981, the movement started to expand beyond the bounds of the trade union formula. Demands for national autonomy—previously kept under wraps—were now voiced openly. Political groups formed under the protective umbrella of

the union started to call openly for political freedom and pluralism. Radical demands for self-management started to be voiced within central union bodies (the networks), backed by calls for privatisation of property.

These developments did not look radical to external observers, but on the ground in Poland they were considered an open challenge to the communist *nomenklatura*, especially since they coincided with radical grassroots pressures within the Communist Party itself. Pro-Solidarity ‘horizontal structures’ started to grow within the Communist Party organisations, thus increasing panic among the party bosses. The scared communist elite started to pressure Jaruzelski to act swiftly.¹¹

Meanwhile, the movement’s disintegration continued. The National Congress in autumn 1981 turned into a celebration of local autonomy and participatory democracy, whereby each delegate spoke on any point, every regional group had access to a microphone, and all debates were broadcast to the crowds outside the meeting hall. It was an intoxicating novelty to people who until then had operated within a censored partocratic culture. It also revealed, however, the precarious nature of the movement’s unity. Moralistic rhetoric dominated the speeches, while constructive analysis was rare. Above all, the congress revealed growing grassroots radicalism, political pluralism and ‘the proliferating profusion of all possible political permutations’.¹² The authority of Wałęsa was increasingly challenged by wildcat actions of local union bodies. Solidarity’s ability to forge a consistent program of reforms, and to implement it, was seriously impaired.

Thus, the power balance in autumn 1981 was almost the reverse of the spring configuration. The huge but fractious mass movement faced a scared regime that consolidated its ranks under the new military–party leadership that had been planning a violent suppression since spring. The fragmentation and radicalisation of the movement played into the hands of party-state leaders. And it was encouraged by party provocations: assaults on union leaders, propaganda lies, reneging on negotiated deals, blocking supplies and spreading rumours of imminent Soviet intervention. The communists rightly counted on exhaustion and fear—two powerful allies of authoritarian rulers.

At the beginning of winter, the stage was set for confrontation. It came in the early morning of 13 December 1981 in the form of a sudden imposition of martial law. A swift blitzkrieg by the army and police—portrayed as arresting anarchy and preventing/pre-empting Soviet intervention (‘the lesser evil’)—proved

11 As revealed by IPN in December 2009: in 1981 Soviet General Kulikov received a request from General Jaruzelski for Soviet intervention, but the request was refused. Predictably, Jaruzelski denied making such a request.

12 Davies (1982:75).

effective in the short run. Within days, the majority of movement leaders were arrested and detained, union offices were plundered, and a few resisting groups viciously attacked. About 30 people were killed. The free union was banned. The movement went underground for almost seven years.

The Legacy

Was Solidarity defeated, or was it a temporary setback? Most commentators were uncertain. Polish migrants and academics took an optimistic view. They acknowledged the effectiveness of martial law in suppressing the movement, but saw Solidarity's legacy as permanent. Solidarity could be suppressed, but not defeated, because it was too deeply embedded in Polish society. Moreover, reforms of the terminally ill centralist system were inevitable, with or without the free trade union. While for some Jaruzelski did what he (or any other communist dictator in his place) was expected to do—that is, obey Moscow's instructions and defend the communist *nomenklatura*—for others, he was an opportunistic loser, choosing confrontation where there was scope for partnership.

It soon became obvious that martial law was a political flop. Initially, the brutal suppression of dissent—especially the attacks by the notorious special police detachment, ZOMO—intimidated many Solidarity supporters. But the opposition survived. By May 1982, more than 6000 people were arrested and more than 130 000 were fined for political offences. In spite of the ban on free unions, imprisonment of activists, assassinations of dissenters (such as the famous Father Popieluszko), harsh penalties for opposition, and despite massive propaganda campaigns aimed at discrediting Solidarity, the movement was alive. Overtly, it was dormant, visible only in some spectacular publicity stunts, such as distribution of underground literature, poster campaigns and oppositional graffiti, and illegal radio and television broadcasts. Covertly, it was spreading the oppositional culture. Solidarity jokes, graffiti, songs, poems and artistic creations entered the cultural mainstream. There was an element of subterfuge; because the overt political activism was dangerous—it attracted harsh penalties—cultural contestation turned into the main expression of discontent. It was, in Freudian terms, a 'sublimated politics'.

The ban on free unions and political persecution of open dissenters had also initiated the process of serious reorganisation and revision of strategies within the movement leadership, and drew into Solidarity's orbit an increasing number of critical intellectuals, academics and experts in various fields of social science. While underground, Solidarity bifurcated into a small but lively underground

organisation and a growing though informal intellectual protest movement—the latter seeking political compromise and increasingly preoccupied with social and economic reforms.

This was hardly surprising. Mass social movements, such as Solidarity, tend to be politically fragile but culturally irrepressible. If suppressed politically, they form a strong cultural undercurrent, a powerful intellectual stream that inevitably erodes the political authority and legitimacy of suppressors. Good politicians know that—and Jaruzelski must have suspected that. He was scared (of Soviet invasion, he claims), and he was pushed to crush the movement by his comrades in Moscow (as well as in Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Sofia, and so on) and by the local communist *nomenklatura*. But he was incapable of charting an alternative, socially acceptable and credible course of reforms. It gradually became clear that the military suppression was unlikely to ‘work’, and that the party *nomenklatura* had no capacity to rule, let alone undertake serious systemic reform. Without a social compact that only Solidarity could deliver, no social stabilisation and no reforms were possible in Poland.

This realisation had come slowly and gradually. It started to dawn on the communist leaders after the ascendancy of Gorbachev. Ironically, many elements of Gorbachev’s policies followed the Solidarity postulates—a point not lost among the reformist communists. In the meantime, Poland was sinking into economic crisis. Solidarity continued its oppositional activities, mainly of a symbolic nature, while party leadership split into a pro-reformist camp, led reluctantly by Jaruzelski and Kiszczak, and the hardline (*beton*) faction capable of neutralising serious reformist attempts. The lesson learned from this gridlock (gradually undermined by Gorbachev’s reformist drive) could be summarised in three points.¹³

- The centrally planned economy, monopolistic party rule, and the heavily censored and administered culture are incompatible with the modern economy and society. The whole system needs to be radically overhauled—but without provoking a civil war and without undermining Gorbachev.
- Radical change cannot be accomplished ‘from above’ without a wide social compact, including Solidarity, and without a partnership between political leaders and the major oppositional forces. It also relies on Western support and assistance.
- While the authorities failed to form a reformist partnership with society, Solidarity failed to spawn a coherent and safe program of reforms. There was

13 The key elements were contained in the 1988 ‘Statement about the Dialogue’ prepared by the key Solidarity advisors, in the memorandum to Jaruzelski prepared in mid-1988 by the ‘team of three’ (Urban, Ciosek and Pożoga) and in the discussions of the party plenum in January 1989 (Codogni 2009:136–64).

too much protest and not enough affirmation. Solidarity should transform from a protest movement into a social reform movement.

This reflection, combined with Gorbachev's declaration cancelling the 'Brezhnev Doctrine' at the UN session in December 1988, created a new political climate—a combination of hope and social frustration, the latter aggravated by the deepening economic crisis.¹⁴ Social frustrations reached breaking point in 1988. The country became again a 'rumbling volcano', while the danger of Soviet intervention—the key political support and political alibi of the communist authorities—gradually evaporated.¹⁵

The eruption occurred in the form of two powerful waves of strikes, first in April–May and then in June–August 1988 (predictably, following arbitrary price hikes). Both waves included demands to restore free trade unions, with the most popular slogan 'No freedom without Solidarity'. Attempts to intimidate the strikers and/or bribe them into submission with pay increases had failed. At the same time, both Wałęsa and the church, buoyed by Gorbachev's supportive comments, repeated their appeals for 'compromise' on the three main issues: 'union pluralism' (code for legalising Solidarity), sociopolitical pluralism (free association and a multi-party system), and the joint anti-crisis (com)pact.¹⁶ This forced the authorities to agree to 'round table talks'—an initially vague term for broadly based negotiations with all opposition forces, including (the still banned) Solidarity. Wałęsa's continuous campaign to re-legalise Solidarity, and his brilliant performance in the televised debate with a leader of communist-controlled unions, helped to break the political stalemate reached in autumn 1988. The round table finally started in February 1989, led to the victorious elections in June, and resulted in the formation of the first non-communist government in September.

14 With inflation approaching 100 per cent and mass shortages of almost all goods forcing desperate shoppers, mainly women, to spend on average more than 1.5 hours a day 'hunting' for essentials (Codogni 2009).

15 Compare the thinly veiled threats issued by Soviet authorities in 1980 and 1981 (Wałęsa 2008:138–40) with Gorbachev's account of his triumphant visit to Poland during the 'hot' summer of 1988 (quoted in Wałęsa 2008:250): 'Unforgettable impression was made on me by talks with the Polish authorities, warm meetings with the shipyard workers of Szczecin, with farmers, with prominent intellectuals, members of the Church hierarchy, with young people...with enthusiasm welcoming the guest from Moscow. One can say that at this time a specific consensus was reached among all strata of the Polish society in regards of the Soviet Union. There is a base in treating this visit also as a beginning of a dialogue between me and Lech Wałęsa; as we learned then, Solidarity leaders appealed to their supporters to greet me as a [welcomed] Soviet guest...I listened carefully [to] the arguments for starting the Round Table, and I immediately felt how important, indeed path-breaking for the Polish society, this decision could be...and I wished my Polish friends success in this undertaking.'

16 As explicitly stated in the 1988 'Statement on the Dialogue', these three points became an informal program for Solidarity in 1988–89 (Codogni 2009:136).

Postscript

The rest is, as they say, history. The political trifecta of successful round-table negotiations, victorious elections and the formation of the Solidarity government amounted to a major ‘Breakthrough’ that not only initiated systemic transformations in Poland, but also promoted the Polish model of negotiated change and triggered the domino-like collapse of communist regimes in neighbouring countries. Within weeks, Solidarity-like protest and reform movements—combining demands for democratisation with pressure for national sovereignty—erupted all over the region. Thanks to the existence of the Solidarity ‘template’, they were remarkably swift: ‘what took ten years in Poland, took ten months in Hungary, ten weeks in East Germany, and in ten days in Czechoslovakia.’¹⁷

Paradoxically, the victory spelled the end of Solidarity in Poland, at least in its old social movement form. As anticipated, Solidarity lasted only as long as its main rival: the partocratic regime. Following the dismantling of the communist partocracy, the movement fragmented, spawned diverse political parties and faded into insignificance. The name remained immensely popular, and the claims of ‘continuity’ are ubiquitous. Soon after 1990, about a dozen political groups emerged claiming Solidarity’s ‘legacy’. There was a ‘reformed socialist’ Solidarity that favoured the ‘third way’ economic model, a centrist and secular Solidarity dedicated to parliamentary democracy and European unification, as well as a nationalist Solidarity-anchored party of Euro-sceptics. There was also a ‘Fighting Solidarity’ claiming the radical legacy of strikes, and a liberal Solidarity, pushing for a radical and rapid transformation of the economy. There was, finally, also a Christian Democratic Solidarity that promoted traditional Catholic values. Thirty years after its dramatic birth, Solidarity continues to inspire both the ruling Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*), as well as its oppositional rival, the Law and Justice Party. Both the current (2010) Polish President and Prime Minister proudly recall their involvement in the Solidarity movement.

Remarkably, the impact of Solidarity extended beyond Europe. In 1986, the anti-Marcos *Laban* movement in the Philippines followed the Solidarity model of negotiated peaceful change. In 1994, following a mass mobilisation by the African National Congress (ANC) and a round table, South Africa’s leaders ended Apartheid and paved the way for democratisation. The mobilisations in Central Asia, especially the ‘tulip’ *KelKel* in Kyrgyzstan, also emulated the Solidarity model, including the negotiated changes of regimes. The ‘cedar revolution’ in Lebanon, the ‘orange revolution’ in Ukraine, the ‘rose revolution’ in Georgia,

17 Ash (1990:28).

and the more recent attempts at a 'saffron revolution' in Burma and a 'velvet revolution' in Iran, all show remarkable similarities with the original Solidarity template. Obviously, this does not mean that all contemporary national and liberal-democratic movements are copies of Solidarity. Each of them has its unique features, emphases and preoccupations, reflecting the distinctive political environments and historical legacies. But at the same time, they follow the familiar Solidarity 'template' that, as noted by Ash,¹⁸ is dramatically different from the 'vanguard' party-directed, ideological cum utopian and violent model of the 'old' French, Russian and Chinese revolutions. This commonality is no doubt due to both conscious emulation—all successful strategies become popular models—and unintentional repetitions of action that fit well the new global socio-political circumstances.

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