



REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION IN POLAND 1980–1989

**Solidarity, Martial Law, and
the End of Communism in Europe**

ANDRZEJ PACZKOWSKI
TRANSLATED BY Christina Manetti

REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION
IN POLAND, 1980–1989

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Andrzej Paczkowski
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UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER PRESS

This translation was funded by the Foundation for Polish Science.

A shorter version of this book was published in Polish as
Wojna polsko-jaruzelska: stan wojenny w Polsce 13 XII 1981–22 VII 1983
(Warsaw, Prószyński i S-ka, 2006 and 2007). Copyright © by Andrzej Paczkowski, 2006, 2007.

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First published 2015

University of Rochester Press
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
www.urpress.com
and Boydell & Brewer Limited
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DE, UK
www.boydellandbrewer.com

Copublished by the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences,
ul. Polna 18/20, 00-625 Warsaw, Poland.



ISBN-13: 978-1-58046-536-6

ISSN: 1528-4808

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Paczkowski, Andrzej, 1938–

Title: Revolution and counterrevolution in Poland, 1980–1989 : Solidarity, martial law, and the end of communism in Europe / Andrzej Paczkowski ; translated by Christina Manetti.

Other titles: *Wojna polsko-jaruzelska*. English

Description: Rochester, NY : University of Rochester Press, 2015. | Series: Rochester studies in East and Central Europe, ISSN 1528-4808 ; v. 14 | "A shorter version of this book was published in Polish as *Wojna polsko-jaruzelska : stan wojenny w Polsce, 13 XII 1981-22 VII 1983* (Warsaw : Prószyński i S-ka, 2006 and 2007)"—Title page verso. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015029788 | ISBN 9781580465366 (hardcover : acid-free paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Poland—Politics and government—1980–1989. Revolutions—Poland—History—20th century. | NSZZ "Solidarność" (Labor organization)—History. | Government, Resistance to—Poland—History—20th century. | Anti-communist movements—Poland—History—20th century. | Martial law—Poland—History—20th century. | Social change—Poland—History—20th century. | Democracy—Poland—History—20th century.

Classification: LCC DK4442 .P33313 2015 | DDC 943.805/6—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015029788>

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America.

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PREFACE

On March 2, 1950, the National Security Council organized a debate on the United States' strategy in the face of the Soviet threat. One of the participants was Professor James Bryant Conant, a chemist who had been president of Harvard University since 1933. He belonged to an elite group of scientists involved with the United States' most important military undertakings during the Second World War (including the Manhattan Project). He was also close to the world of politics: he had been the chair of the National Defense Research Committee since 1941, and was High Commissioner for Germany during the years 1953–55, and then ambassador to that country until 1957. During that debate, Professor Conant said that if it did not come to war, then “the competition between our dynamic free society and their [Soviet] static slave society should be all in our favor.”¹ He also predicted that the Soviet Union might Balkanize itself by 1980.

The state Moloch created by Lenin and Stalin really did collapse, both formally and definitively, as a result of “Balkanization” in December 1991. It had split into national states, just like the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Professor Conant's prediction was off by just ten years. Nevertheless, the year he mentioned, 1980, was not a normal year for the Soviets, nor for the entire system of their satellite states, created by Stalin in East Central Europe during the years 1944–47. In 1980, the United States led a boycott of the Moscow Olympics in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the end, however, this was not particularly galling, since the Kremlin could retaliate by boycotting the Los Angeles Olympics four years later. The outcome of the US presidential election was incomparably more important than America's posturing over the Olympics. The Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, won, having announced a tough stance toward the Kremlin. After some presidents' perceived dovishness, now a hawk was in the White House. Just as important as Reagan's victory were events in Poland, the largest Soviet satellite in Europe. Since July 1, a wave of strikes had swept through the country, culminating in a general strike. This was just a couple of weeks before the Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, announced the start of the Olympic Games at the opening ceremonies, and a few months before the American elections. This unprecedented

series of events, which occurred without excesses, rioting, or casualties, culminated on August 30–31 with the signing of agreements between the communist leadership, headed by Edward Gierek, and the two largest strike committees (in Gdańsk and Szczecin). Among other things, these agreements stipulated that the government would grant permission for the creation of a trade union independent of the state and the communist party, which had a monopoly on power. The trade union called itself “Solidarity.”

The star Polish athlete at the Moscow Olympics, Władysław Kozakiewicz, won a gold medal in the pole vault—despite the fact that the Soviet audience had tried to distract him by whistling and screaming during his run up to the jump. After winning, Kozakiewicz made a rather impolite gesture to the audience: he bent his arm at the elbow and clenched a fist, telling spectators, basically, “Up yours!” “Kozakiewicz’s gesture,” as it was later called in Poland, was not meant to express scorn for the audience. It was simply an expression of satisfaction, as David must have felt when he vanquished Goliath. All things considered, Solidarity itself was a bit like that gesture—one that millions of Poles, mostly workers, were showing to the ruling communist party. Because its official name was the Polish United Workers’ Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR), some maliciously said that it was not Polish (because it was dependent on Moscow) or united (because there were cliques vying within it) or working class (because most of its members were bureaucrats).

The crux of the matter, of course, is not in gestures, names, or symbols, no matter how significant they might have been. The creation of Solidarity was a powerful breach in a system whose foundation was one-party rule and the support of a Soviet superpower. Solidarity’s impact was particularly great because it was an autonomous organization that had, within a matter of weeks, managed to attract about nine million members from various ages, professions, and beliefs—from the intellectual elite to agricultural workers who could barely read and write. Although the worst years of the Stalinist terror had already passed, when the communist system was being formed, the country still found itself in the grasp of an ideologically driven dictatorship with a totalitarian pedigree and ambitions to control everything and everyone—deciding everything from the number of apartment buildings that should be built to the price of a box of matches.

Solidarity started the process of dismantling communism and saw it through to the end: in 1989, the system that had been enigmatically called “real socialism” collapsed, and other nations in that part of Europe followed the Poles’ lead. Without the processes that had begun during the summer of 1980, the predictions of that Harvard professor most probably could not have been fulfilled.

The phenomenon of Solidarity aroused great interest around the world. In the Soviet Union and other communist states, there was concern that the Polish events would be “contagious” and have a destabilizing effect. In the West, there

was an opposite reaction: what was happening in Poland and what Solidarity represented was seen as an attempt by working people (both physical and intellectual laborers) to acquire subjectivity, as a fight for the dignity of subordinates vis-à-vis their superiors, as the opportunity for a profound, positive change in the communist system, and for its democratization. At the same time, Solidarity was seen as a factor that was weakening the entire Soviet camp, which could tip the scales in favor of the Free World, hastening its victory in the Cold War. To some extent, the West reacted emotionally to Solidarity—Westerners were captivated, for example, by the exotic scenes of the strike at the Gdańsk Shipyard, which received extensive media coverage. It was, after all, an occupation strike, which in itself was a rarity, since workers do not usually report to work during labor strikes. Intellectuals played a direct role in the strike as advisors, which was unusual in the West. People admired the fact that the strike leadership was absolutely democratic. The Strike Committee meetings, almost permanently in session, and talks with the government delegation were broadcast over speakers throughout the shipyard. People were fascinated with the thirty-seven-year-old electrician Lech Wałęsa, who emerged overnight as a charismatic leader. For outside observers, it was a bit of a shock to see the extent to which religious elements permeated the strike: Mass celebrated at the shipyard, thousands of kneeling workers, hundreds of people taking Communion, crosses, portraits of the Pope and pictures of the Virgin Mary on fences and gates. What also struck observers was the contrast between this imagery and the name of the place where all this was happening—the Lenin Shipyard. Ironically, there was even a plaster bust of Lenin in the hall where the Strike Committee was meeting.

While Polish government propaganda and that of other communist countries was condemning Solidarity as a counter-revolutionary movement, most public opinion outside the communist world saw it in a different light. Books on the subject had titles such as *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* or *Poland: Genesis of a Revolution*.² Solidarity was regarded as a revolution that would bring about a profound change in Poland's political system. At the time, its effect on the balance of power in Europe was of secondary significance. The international aspect of the movement became clear only after a nearly decade-long chain of events came to an end in 1989. This movement was sparked by a strike in defense of two people who had been fired for their activities in the underground opposition, and was a protest against the degradation of living conditions and the lack of civil freedoms in Poland. Two phases during this series of events have attracted the most interest among both specialists and the general public alike: the first, from 1980 to 1981, covered the strikes that led to the formation of Solidarity, and its sixteen months of legal existence; the second, from 1988 to 1989, encompassed negotiations with the government and the fall of the communist system in Poland. Academic publishers in the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany, as well as in

Poland, published dozens (and perhaps hundreds) of books on the subject and thousands of articles by sociologists, economists, political scientists, anthropologists, social psychologists, and specialists in international relations. The first wave of these publications appeared during the years 1982–85, and dealt with the origins of the Polish revolutionary movement. The second wave came after 1989, and primarily addressed the causes of the communist system's collapse. Thus, authors did not usually limit themselves to the situation in Poland, but rather dealt with the phenomenon's broader geographical aspects. After Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union in 1985 and introduced *perestroika*, developments in Poland and other East Central European communist countries were usually analyzed from the perspective of change in the Soviet Union. As the archives gradually began to open after 1989, historians began writing about the "Polish revolution" and even today it is primarily historical research that is conducted.

In writing this book, my intention was not to describe and analyze the entire Polish "revolutionary era," from the first strikes in July 1980 to the moment a Solidarity activist, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, became prime minister in late summer of 1989. Instead, the main subject of my research was just a small portion of that decade, one that lasted just over a year and a half—but which was of fundamental importance for describing and understanding the era as a whole. This was the period of martial law, which was imposed on December 13, 1981, and was lifted on July 22, 1983. An unexpected, brutal, and overwhelming attack was launched on the night of December 12–13, 1981. It was carried out by tens of thousands of soldiers, and over one hundred thousand armed functionaries of the security apparatus and militia.³ This action put a stop to the Polish revolution and changed its character, to a certain extent. That attack and the reprisals that followed reduced the millions-strong workers' movement that had emerged spontaneously over the preceding months to a much smaller, but very determined, clandestine organization. Its political agenda took priority and overshadowed its earlier moral, communal, and utopian concerns. As an underground movement, Solidarity gradually lost its illusions about the possibility of transforming a centralized and state-controlled economy into one based on self-government and communal ownership. This change of perspective opened the way to acceptance of the free market and private ownership, which also proved to be the "road to Europe." Martial law derailed the rush to individual and national freedom that was already under way. It did not, however, manage to eliminate the tens of thousands of people who were Solidarity's main motivating force—they continued fighting, this time underground. Their hopes for a new, better Poland may have been suspended, but they had not been completely destroyed.

This book, however, is not devoted to Solidarity's ideological transformation. Rather, I would like to describe the mechanisms of martial law, and the reaction when General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared it early on the morning of

December 13, 1981. I am interested both in the decisions made on the highest levels of government and also in how they were implemented “in the field,” as well as how Solidarity members responded when tanks appeared in the streets and thousands of the group’s most active members were arrested. I am trying to answer the question of what martial law actually was, since its imposition was unprecedented in Polish history. Under martial law, the Military Council of National Salvation (Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego) was created—a new, completely extra-constitutional governmental organ under the direction of the prime minister and leader of the ruling party. It was commonly known by its acronym, WRON. Heading it was Jaruzelski, the same person who was also prime minister and the party’s first secretary. Can the creation of WRON, then, be called a military coup, or was it just part of a huge propaganda campaign? Whom and what was martial law supposed to protect? I will also attempt to describe in more detail main figures of the drama, General Wojciech Jaruzelski and Lech Wałęsa, as well as their closest associates.

The international context of martial law is of lesser concern to me here, since the dynamics of the events in Poland itself were of primary importance at the time. Nevertheless, some readers may not be familiar with the situation in Poland during the last years of the “short twentieth century,” to use Eric Hobsbawm’s description (as he called the years 1914–91 in his book *The Age of Extremes*). For them, I present in a concise manner both the events leading up to that grim day of December 13, 1981 (chapters 1–3), and those during the last years of communist rule (chapters 19–20). For anyone who wishes to learn more about the broader historical context of the period covered in this book, I can immodestly recommend my own monograph.⁴ Of course, since its appearance, research has shed much more light on the period of martial law, which I take into consideration extensively here.

In writing this book, I have concentrated my research on the relatively large body of material available in Polish. These sources are largely comprised of documentary works, as far as martial law is concerned, and for the most part focus on one city, region, factory, or event. I utilized previously published biographical works, numerous memoirs, and diaries (including some by individuals in the top echelons of power), as well as hundreds of accounts that have been collected as part of oral history projects. In addition, of course, I also used materials from the official press and those published illegally. Hundreds of documents from various sources have already been published, or are available on the Internet. It is my hope that I have managed to find most of them. One source of inspiration (but also information) has been the conferences in which many of the important and sometimes even leading figures of those events have taken part. An especially important one titled “Poland 1980–1982: Internal Crisis, International Dimensions”⁵ took place in Jachranka near Warsaw in 1997. Participants included Marshal

Viktor Kulikov, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, General William Odom, Professor Zbigniew Brzeziński, and Professor Richard Pipes. I also used many works published abroad, primarily from the United States, Great Britain, and France,⁶ especially those dealing with Western policy toward Poland.⁷ Of these, the monograph of Gregory Domber is—for the moment—the most important.⁸ To my knowledge, however, no foreign monographs about martial law based on Polish archival sources exist, and studies of the decade that followed are also very rare.⁹ Western scholars have concentrated on specific aspects of the larger period, particularly the years 1980–81,¹⁰ as have the Poles, but martial law itself has been the focus only sporadically. In fact, only George Sanford's very interesting study considers the same time period as this work. Since Sanford was writing in the 1980s, however, he did not have access to confidential and secret documents, whether Polish, Soviet, or American.¹¹

I carried out my own archival research systematically for over a decade. During the years 1992–96, I served as an expert for a parliamentary commission that was researching the legality of the imposition of martial law.¹² I worked primarily in Polish archives, which hold thousands of volumes containing documents from the communist party (mainly in the Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of Modern Records] in Warsaw), military (mainly in the Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe [Central Military Archives] in Rembertów), and security apparatus (at the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej [Institute of National Remembrance] in Warsaw). I worked in the Russian archives less often, because gaining access to documents from my particular period of interest was difficult. Some of the Soviet documents have already been published, however. As far as American documents are concerned, I have only studied those that have been published in print or on the Internet. Research in the archives was laborious, since I literally had to dig through tens of thousands of pages and look at hundreds of microfilms. I am not complaining, however—this happens to be the type of work I enjoy.



Without the events that occurred in the Soviet Union as a result of Gorbachev-era reforms, both economic (*perestroika*) and political (*glasnost*), the communist system in Poland probably would not have fallen when it did, nor in the way in which it did. Perhaps we would have seen a long-term “rotting” of the system, or a violent upheaval of rebellious masses. Or, perhaps, we would have seen the opposite: without the birth of Solidarity (which revealed to the world the profound dysfunctionality of communism as a state system), and without martial law (which was an unsuccessful attempt to conceal the system's shortcomings once again and to quash social opposition), the Soviet leaders, even unconventional ones like Mikhail Gorbachev, would not have been forced to undertake changes

that were in essence much more profound than the usual political facelifts, like the one initiated by Nikita Khrushchev. It was not enough to talk about “errors and distortions,” or to postulate about the “moral and political unity of the people.” The creation of Solidarity and its dogged fight in the dramatically unfavorable conditions of martial law forced them to respond to this challenge in a way that was more serious than mere verbal declarations. Lech Wałęsa’s union was thus a contributing factor to the end of the Cold War, as well as East Central Europe’s entry into the democratic realm—a good reason to learn more about this episode in Poland’s relatively recent past.



I would like to thank the following institutions for supporting the publication of this book: the Foundation for Polish Science (Fundacja na rzecz Nauki Polskiej), which funded the cost of the translation; and my own Institute of Political Science in Warsaw for its goodwill, even beyond the official call of duty. I would especially like to thank Basia Kalabinski, for her thorough reading of the text, thoughtful comments, and diligent preparation of the index; and Christina Manetti, the translator, who coped admirably with my style, even though it can sometimes be rather Baroque, and eased my life by independently solving problems she encountered along the way. I also thank the anonymous reviewers, whose comments allowed me to correct some of the text’s shortcomings, although I was not fully able to implement all of their propositions. I also would like to thank Sonia Kane and the staff of the University of Rochester Press, as well as those at Boydell & Brewer, for their solid and quick work, as well as for their forbearance with my less-than-perfect grasp of English. Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to Tim Snyder for his interest in my book proposal, and for helping this project get off to the right start.

ABBREVIATIONS

AIPN	Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (Institute of National Remembrance)
AK	Armia Krajowa (Home Army)
AWS	Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność (Solidarity Electoral Action)
CBOS	Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (Public Opinion Research Center)
GDR	German Democratic Republic
KKP	Krajowa Komisja Porozumiewawcza (National Coordinating Commission of Solidarity)
KOK	Komitet Obrony Kraju (Committee of National Defense)
KOR	Komitet Obrony Robotników (Workers' Defense Committee)
KOS	Koła Obrony Solidarności (Solidarity Defense Circles)
KPN	Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej (Confederation of Independent Poland)
MKO	Międzyregionalna Komisja Obrony Solidarności (Inter-Regional Defense Committee of Solidarity)
MKS	Międzyzakładowy Komitet Strajkowy (Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee)
MKZ	międzyzakładowe komitety założycielskie (inter-enterprise founding committees)
MO	Milicja Obywatelska (Citizens' Militia)
MON	Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej (Ministry of National Defense)
MRKS	Międzyzakładowy Robotniczy Komitet Solidarności (Inter-Enterprise Workers' Committee of Solidarity)
MSW	Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych (Ministry of Internal Affairs)

NSZZ	Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy “Solidarność” (Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity”)
OBOP	Ośrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej (Center for Public Opinion Research)
OKO	Ogólnopolski Komitet Oporu NSZZ “Solidarność” (National NSZZ Solidarity Resistance Committee [pseudonym “Mieszko”])
ORMO	Ochotnicza Rezerwa Milicji Obywatelskiej (Volunteer Reserves of the Citizens’ Militia)
PRL	Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa (Polish People’s Republic)
PRON	Patriotyczny Ruch Odrodzenia Narodowego (Patriotic Movement of National Rebirth)
PZPR	Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (Polish United Workers’ Party)
RFE	Radio Free Europe
RFI	Radio France Internationale
RMP	Ruch Młodej Polski (Young Poland Movement)
ROMO	Rezerwowe Oddziały Milicji Obywatelskiej (Reserve Detachments of Citizens’ Militia)
SB	Służba Bezpieczeństwa
SDP	Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich (Polish Journalists’ Association)
SPD	Social-Democratic Party (West Germany)
TKK	Tymczasowa Komisja Koordynacyjna (Temporary Coordinating Commission)
WRON	Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego (Military Council of National Salvation)
WZZ	Wolne Związki Zawodowe (Free Trade Unions)
ZASP	Związek Artystów Scen Polskich (Union of Polish Stage Artists)
ZLP	Związek Literatów Polskich (Polish Writers’ Union)
ZOMO	Zmotoryzowane Oddziały Milicji Obywatelskiej (Motorized Detachments of the Citizens’ Militia)

PART I

THE BEGINNING

CHAPTER ONE

POLAND—"THE WEAKEST LINK"

In June 1977, a group of analysts from various US government agencies¹ produced a memorandum more than twenty pages long entitled "Prospects for Eastern Europe." For our purposes, the following statements in the memorandum were of paramount importance: "unrest is likely to grow in Eastern Europe over the next three years. . . . Poland will be the most volatile, and a blow-up there, which might bring down Gierek and even conceivably compel the Soviets to restore order, cannot be ruled out."² The authors of the memorandum suggested that "if order should break down, both Warsaw and Moscow will want to see it restored by Polish forces, [and] only if these fail will the Soviets intervene."³ Regardless of what one thinks of the competence of the American intelligence community at that time, one must admit that this prediction, formulated with extreme restraint, has to a large extent been vindicated—a rare event, since intelligence services err just as often as meteorologists do.

The conviction that Poland, of the eight⁴ East Central European communist states, was most likely to experience violent protests was also held among members of the region's nascent democratic opposition, and even within Poland's own ruling elite. Members of both groups were aware of a growing social discontent that stemmed from the worsening economic situation. The kinds of violent protests seen in Poland took place in other communist states either not at all or on a much smaller scale. Unrest in Poland was usually sparked by economic grievances and came to resemble political rebellions against the ruling cliques. While other countries also experienced these kinds of revolts—for example, Czechoslovakia and East Germany in 1953, and even the Soviet Union itself during the Novocherkassk riots in 1962—these were just isolated events. In Poland, meanwhile, strikes and demonstrations took place in June 1956 in Poznań, in August 1957 in Łódź, in December 1970 on the coast (the largest were in Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Szczecin), and in June 1976 in several other cities, including Radom. In two cases (in 1956 and 1970), strikes were violently broken up by means of military force, including armed units, resulting in the deaths of dozens of protesters. In Poznań alone, approximately seventy people died. The mass protests in March 1968 by students and young people that occurred in virtually all the larger cities were also exceptional and unique to Poland.⁵ These protests were purely political in nature, as were the youth street demonstrations in October 1957 after authorities closed the popular weekly *Po Prostu*.⁶ In the 1960s, clashes occurred several times in

response to the government's anti-Church (or anti-religious) measures, and some of them—such as those in Nowa Huta near Kraków in 1960—lasted several days.

One can therefore say that a certain segment of Polish society, particularly workers and students, was “overly excitable,” and would quickly and frequently opt for dramatic forms of protest. To a large extent, this was a result of how the communist system functioned. Since no freedoms of speech or association existed, there were no institutional channels for negotiation. For the government, the main instrument for managing a crisis was force (the police and army), along with intense and brutal propaganda campaigns conducted in state-controlled media. Although the system was identical in the other communist states, only in Poland were there such frequent disturbances and strikes. The Polish tradition of resistance and insurrection was deeply rooted in Polish national culture, linked to nineteenth-century Romanticism and the memory of the uprisings against Russian rule in 1794, 1830, and 1863. Even under communism, children learned about these events in schools. Moreover, not everyone accepted the legitimacy of this regime, installed after the Second World War under the aegis and control of the Soviet Union. For a great many Poles, the Soviet Union was an enemy. The memory of the Polish-Soviet War of 1920 was still fresh, as well as that of the Soviet invasion in September 1939 (along with the German one), and the massacre of Polish officers in Katyn. The Poles also recalled how the Red Army's offensive was halted in August 1944, when the anti-German Warsaw Uprising broke out, leaving the Polish capital to its fate at the hands of the Wehrmacht. Moreover, the Soviet Union was considered the heir of Tsarist Russia, against which the Poles had waged futile insurrections that were bloodily suppressed.

The protests of 1956–76 were spontaneous and generally short-lived. As a result, there was not enough time to create stable centers of leadership, or for a charismatic leader to emerge. Nevertheless, some of these revolts were effective. In December 1970, strikes led to changes at the highest levels of the Polish government. (Władysław Gomułka left in disgrace after fourteen years in power and was replaced by Edward Gierek.) They also prompted the government to rescind its price hike, as would be the case later in June 1976 as well. Strikes and street demonstrations were two defining characteristics of the Polish political scene.⁷

The fact that the Catholic Church remained independent of state control and enjoyed great authority in Poland also distinguished Poland from other countries in the Soviet bloc. After the Second World War, Poland became a country that was in effect monoethnic, with a single religion (Roman Catholicism), which hampered the communists' war on religion to a significant extent. The Soviet model combated religion everywhere that communists took power, from Korea to East Germany. In the case of Poland, the war with the Church, which peaked during the years 1953–55, ended in a defeat for the atheistic and anticlerical state. After the political situation stabilized in 1956, even the communist leaders who, like

Władysław Gomułka, were deeply convinced of the need to marginalize and subjugate the Church, would appeal to the Catholic hierarchy for support, requesting that it not encourage the faithful to revolt. This tactic afforded Polish leaders more room to maneuver, while their counterparts in other communist countries could not appeal to any church because all churches, having been deprived of their autonomy, had much less authority. At the same time, however, this made Polish leadership dependent on the Church. From 1948 to 1981, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński was the head of the Polish Church, a position known as the primate. Wyszyński was outstanding as both politician and priest. He opposed taking overly aggressive steps against the government, but was at the same time an untiring advocate of a Catholicism that was very much centered on the cult of Mary, marked by large-scale, open-air religious services in urban spaces. The enormity of these services is perhaps best illustrated by the clash between the Church's celebration of a millennium of Polish Christianity and the state's own secular festivities for the millennium of Polish statehood, both celebrated in 1966.

While the Catholic Church did not have immediate political ambitions, it did provide a cultural and philosophical alternative to official Marxist ideology. It boasted an efficient and extensive organization, which in 1977 numbered approximately 15,000 clergymen and 4,500 monks, as well as over 27,000 nuns, 5,000 seminarians, and almost 4,000 theology students. There was an elite, intellectually vibrant lay movement organized through the Clubs of the Catholic Intelligentsia (*Kluby Inteligencji Katolickiej*), which published several periodicals, including the popular weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Since 1957, this group of lay Catholics also had representatives in parliament. There were pro-government Catholic organizations, too, whose loyalty toward the communist state was not always certain. The Church had a solid base in its ministry to the university community, which had many thousands of members, and also in its youth groups, called "Oasis." The Church's real strength, however, was of course the huge numbers of believers who came from all social classes and age groups. Even most party members considered themselves Catholic.

No one except Juliusz Słowacki, a mid-nineteenth century Polish Romantic poet, foresaw what would happen on October 16, 1978: the conclave of cardinals elected the Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła, as pope. He became John Paul II. Edward Gierek, first secretary at the time, is said to have cried "O rany boskie!" (the equivalent of "for God's sake!") upon hearing the news.⁸ While official records do not confirm this exclamation, even as an anecdote it does convey both the embarrassment and linguistic register of Poland's believers in Karl Marx, who tried to put a good face on the situation. In a telegram sent the next day to the Vatican, the Party leadership stressed that the election of Karol Wojtyła was a triumph "for the Polish people . . . who are building . . . the greatness and success of their socialist fatherland."⁹ The implicit suggestion was that the new

pope actually owed his new position to the fact that he was from socialist Poland. Although it may sound ridiculous, the matter did appear very serious. The Soviet minister of foreign affairs, Andrei Gromyko, went to the Vatican in January 1979. Recounting his visit to Gierek, he told him that the pope was “an ideological and political enemy” who “could cause many problems.”¹⁰

And that is exactly what happened, as shown by the pope’s visit to Poland on June 2–9, 1979, often described as his “Pilgrimage to the Fatherland.” Millions of Poles turned out to see the pope, and an opinion poll reported that 87 percent of those surveyed declared they were “very interested” in the visit.¹¹ The Church’s solid organization of the event was impressive, and it was reassuring to see what huge crowds were gathering for an event not sponsored by the communist regime. People remembered the ideas in the pope’s homilies—truth, the dignity of man and his labor, the rights of the individual and collective—things that were never mentioned in Poland’s official language. People also remembered the pope’s exhortation: “Do not be afraid!” There can be no doubt that the new Polish pope and his tour of Poland seriously delegitimized the regime.

Something else that was specifically Polish was the country’s particular form of democratic opposition, which emerged in 1976–77. This phenomenon was not exclusively Polish, however, because dissident groups had already existed in the Soviet Union since the mid-1960s. The Polish democratic opposition was comprised of groups representing a variety of ideological orientations, from post-Marxists and social democrats to Christian democrats and nationalists. Some of the most dynamic were those who had participated in the student revolt of 1968, known as the “March generation.” The opposition developed over a number of years, and one of the most important experiences for those involved were the collective protest letters that were signed in late 1975 and early 1976 against proposed changes to the constitution. In mid-1976, the Polish opposition started to distinguish itself from those in other communist countries, not only because of its dynamics but also because it had managed to reach beyond strictly intellectual circles, something that opposition movements elsewhere had largely failed to do. The opposition’s reaction to the reprisals against those who participated in the strikes and unrest in June 1976 was a critical moment.¹² It spurred Polish dissidents to organize themselves with the aim of offering assistance—financial and legal—to the victims of those reprisals and their families, and it finally allowed them to breach the confines of the “intelligentsia ghetto.” That September, the Workers’ Defense Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR) was founded.¹³ Later, other organizations came into being, such as the Student Solidarity Committee (Studencki Komitet Solidarności), the Movement for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights (Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela), the Young Poland Movement (Ruch Młodej Polski, RMP), and the Confederation of Independent Poland (Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej, KPN). In its program, KPN stated

that Poland's full sovereignty should be restored, and even called itself a political party. KOR's activities were the most varied; this group was also the main source of information about events in Poland for the foreign media and the West. Jacek Kuroń was KOR's best known member, not just because he was extremely active, but also because he was exceptionally creative. During the years 1964–71 he served two three-year sentences as a political prisoner.

There were no more than 2,000–3,000 people involved in the opposition, in all the organizations throughout Poland. It was nevertheless very lively and determined, and several dozen of its members could even be called "professional oppositionists." The opposition organized aid for those who had suffered as the result of government reprisals, and planned celebrations for traditional Polish holidays (commemorating the Constitution of 1791 on May 3 and Poland's independence on November 11) that were not recognized by the communist state. Sometimes several thousand people would take part in these events. Oppositionists also collected signatures for various protest letters, held hunger strikes, and organized lectures for students on subjects that had been officially banned. Above all, however, they initiated a "second circulation" of illegally published books and periodicals that were critical of the government's current activities and informed readers about the reprisals. They also presented historical facts that had been either covered up or falsified—something known as filling in the "white patches." There were discussions about possible changes to the government system and methods of exerting pressure on the governing powers in the party and state. In addition to news sheets, there were also several literary and political periodicals. These actions all took place on a scale unknown in other countries: in 1978, the political police (Służba Bezpieczeństwa, SB) confiscated approximately 300,000 pages of various printed materials, and by July of 1980 they had collected close to 600,000.¹⁴ During the years 1976–80, the SB uncovered 35 secret "high-class" duplicating centers, and confiscated over 3,000 reams of duplicating paper and over 110 kilograms of printing ink. More than the SB's growing efficacy, this data illustrates how much underground publishing had grown.

In terms of later developments, the opposition's good contacts in the Church, which were sometimes even very close, were crucial. Priests sometimes helped create opposition organizations (one of KOR's founders was the priest Jan Zieja), and most of the anniversary commemorations began with a Mass. Hunger strikes were organized in churches, and many members of the Clubs of the Catholic Intelligentsia and the ministries to the university community participated in the opposition's activities. Many opposition activists met with Church hierarchs. Cardinal Wojtyła, Archbishop of Kraków and the future pope, was one of the bishops most favorably disposed to the opposition, but Primate Wyszyński also helped. It was not only groups from the political center or right who had contacts in the Church, however. A rapprochement was taking place between the

Church and the leftist, anti-totalitarian, anti-communist intelligentsia. The book *Rodowody niepokornych* (Pedigrees of the Defiant, 1971), written by Bohdan Cywiński, a Catholic intellectual, is an example of the efforts being made in this area. One of the leading leftist oppositionists, Adam Michnik, also wrote a book in this vein—*Kościół, lewica, dialog* (1977, published in English as *The Church and the Left*). Although most of the clergy did not participate in this dialogue, it was nevertheless apparent that the Church served as a protective shield for opponents of the regime.

Perhaps more important than gaining the Church's favor was to break down the barrier that divided the intellectuals and university students from the workers. A year after it was founded, KOR began publishing a biweekly, *Robotnik* (The Worker), whose title alluded to a tradition going back to the nineteenth century, when the Polish Socialist Party published an illegal periodical with that same title in the Russian partition. The publication's first editor was Józef Piłsudski, who had been one of the founders of independent Poland in 1918. In April 1978, the group associated with KOR and RMP formed the illegal Free Trade Unions (Wolne Związki Zawodowe, WZZ) in Gdańsk and began to engage systematically with the workers. WZZ activists distributed periodicals and other underground publications and trained people in the defense of ad hoc interests; for example, they educated workers about labor safety regulations and workers' rights. They also sometimes sponsored lectures on Polish history or economics. WZZ members took part in commemorative and other events organized by the opposition, and also staged their own in honor of the anniversary of the December 1970 massacre.

During an event in 1979, a still unknown electrician named Lech Wałęsa, who was involved in WZZ, addressed a crowd of about two thousand people in front of the Gdańsk Shipyard, where the massacre's first victims had fallen. He predicted that a memorial commemorating the victims would be erected on that spot within a year—which is exactly what happened. Similar groups, but smaller and less active, were based on *Robotnik's* network of correspondents. In 1979, *Robotnik* published a document titled "Charter of Workers' Rights," which mentioned the right to strike and the need to create trade unions independent of the government. The document was signed by over a hundred people from twenty-six cities. Fifty thousand copies of the "Charter" were printed and then distributed in dozens of factories. The opposition in other communist countries had never succeeded in carrying out anything like this on a similar scale. In 1978–79, the first farmers' associations were created; they followed the WZZ model, publishing illegal periodicals such as *Placówka* (The Outpost). To some extent, the rivalry between KOR and other opposition groups played a role in raising the political consciousness of both workers and farmers.

The growth of the democratic opposition was spurred by political and economic developments in the international arena. The period of détente in the

1970s reached its height in August 1975, when thirty-five states, including the United States and the USSR, signed the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Helsinki. While this document sanctioned the existing borders, which was vital for Poland and the entire Soviet bloc, it contained a "trap," as one of the leading experts on Central Europe, François Fejtő, has called it.¹⁵ One of its sections, known as the "third basket," dealt with human rights, including the freedoms of association, movement, and speech. This portion of the agreement gave the West the opportunity to air its views and to protest human rights violations, something for which the communist dictatorships of the Soviet bloc were notorious. After Jimmy Carter took office in January 1977, Washington made the defense of human rights a foreign policy priority, based on the Helsinki Accords.¹⁶ The United States' European allies had to take this into account. Opposition activists in communist countries could now invoke the accords that their own governments had signed and demand that they be respected. To a certain extent, this limited the ability of those in power to launch reprisals.

The Polish ruling elite was especially susceptible to this kind of pressure, since the economic policies of Gierek's government (intended to modernize Poland's production potential and raise the standard of living) had been dependent, since 1971, on credits that Western banks and governments had gladly granted. Soon, however, these policies broke down when the loan repayments began to consume an ever-greater portion of the revenue from exports, making it necessary to secure further loans, which were granted with increasingly unfavorable terms. In 1975, Poland's debt totaled \$8 billion, while approximately one-third of the country's export revenues were used to service its debt. In 1980, the debt rose to almost \$25 billion, and the payments were more than Poland's total exports to the West.¹⁷ As a result, the Polish economy became dependent on its creditors. It should not be surprising that, for Gierek, it was important for Poland to enjoy a reputation as a stable and liberal country. As a result, he believed that drastic measures should be avoided when combating the opposition, and above all that there should be no public trials ending in severe sentences. "Our country," said one of the high-ranking SB functionaries at a meeting with party activists, "is treated like one that . . . has no political prisoners . . . and this is paying off for us."¹⁸ While it is true that there were plenty of people (particularly in the security apparatus) who advocated more radical methods, the political decision-makers nevertheless stood in their way. Of course, opposition activists were quite frequently subjected to various types of harassment—for example, 48-hour detentions, temporary arrests, searches, confiscations, and being fired from their jobs or banned from foreign travel, even to "fraternal" countries. Sometimes they were beaten—even fatally. Nevertheless, in comparison to what was happening to dissidents in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, their situation was easier. As Bogusław

Stachura, the deputy minister of internal affairs, noted, "We treat them very 'tenderly.'"¹⁹ Not only was the opposition in Poland more numerous and active than in other communist states, but it also had greater freedom to act.

The Kremlin's leaders often criticized their Polish comrades for having allowed the only large sector of private agriculture in the Soviet bloc to remain (it included 70 percent of the total land under cultivation). They also criticized Polish officials for their relatively tolerant attitude toward intellectuals, who had been expressing their opposition to the government with some frequency since 1957.²⁰ Vladimir Lenin once said that Tsarist Russia was the "weakest link in the chain of imperialistic states." By this logic, it can be argued that Poland, with its many idiosyncrasies, was the weakest link in the chain of communist states.²¹

CHAPTER TWO

THE SOLIDARITY REVOLUTION

Act One, 1980–81

Under pressure from turbulent protests, the Polish communist regime withdrew the price hike on foodstuffs that it had planned for June 25, 1976, resulting in a long period of destabilization for the system. Freezing prices for another year deepened the market imbalance since production could not keep pace with the population's income, and there were limits to Poland's ability to earmark loans for the import of consumer goods. Chaos began creeping into the centrally planned industrial sector. The government cut back on investments arbitrarily, and it proved increasingly difficult to maintain cooperation between producers. The energy balance was fragile and inflationary pressures emerged, while the lines outside shops grew longer and the black market spread. The catastrophic winter of 1978–79 that paralyzed the country for a couple of months played a role, too—over half of Poles said that the magnitude of the calamity was due to “organizational paralysis.”¹ In other words, the government was responsible. By early 1980, only 29 percent of those surveyed believed that the condition of the economy was “good,” in comparison to almost 60 percent four years earlier.² These negative feelings were exacerbated by disappointment, since the first years of the Gierek era had generally been assessed very favorably, primarily because the standard of living had been improving rapidly. Gierek himself was perceived as the opposite of Gomułka: he was tall, broad-shouldered, elegantly dressed, and traveled the country. He was direct in his contact with people, whom he did not shun. Gierek was no stranger to life abroad (before 1946 he had lived for more than a decade in France and Belgium), and he liked to have official, top-level meetings with Western politicians. These traits now began to irritate people, making Gierek seem artificial and pompous.

By granting concessions under the pressure of public opinion, the ruling clique showed itself to be weak, and this kind of “loss of face” is more difficult for those in power to handle in a dictatorial state than in a democracy. Moreover, the course of events in June 1976 confirmed workers' belief that strikes could prove an effective instrument in the fight to resolve their most pressing issues. The opposition was organizing itself, and its members were pointing out the errors, waste, and abuses in Gierek's ruling circle, about which rumors were flying. Western radio

stations broadcasting in Polish, especially Radio Free Europe (RFE), played an important role in publicizing these kinds of issues.³ In the autumn of 1978, the Polish pope emerged as a new national authority, far above those holding the reins of state power. Nevertheless, this does not mean that anti-government behavior appeared on a large scale. In the parliamentary elections of March 1980, society's voting behavior did not deviate from long-standing norms: over 98 percent of those eligible to vote took part, and approximately 99 percent of the votes went to the single list of candidates dictated by the communist party.⁴ Discontent and criticism remained "dormant," manifested more often as complaints and joke-telling at home, among friends, or in the ubiquitous lines, than through participation in public events organized by the opposition. Just below the surface, however, the processes needed for this discontent to be transformed into publicly expressed dissent were simmering.

Gierek's team decided to "thaw" meat prices after the elections seemed to confirm that they had the situation under control. The new prices (at least dozens of percentage points higher) were introduced on July 1, 1980. The reaction was swift. That same morning, several factories around the country stopped production, with workers at spontaneous public meetings demanding salary increases or a return to previous prices. In the evening, a meeting of those responsible for the economy took place at the party's Central Committee. It was decided that wherever there was a strike, the workers' demands for pay hikes should be at least partially met. The first test—at the Ursus tractor factory near Warsaw—was successful: one of the government ministers came to the negotiations, and workers returned to work in exchange for the promised pay raise.⁵

This is how the first phase of this "summer of strikes" began; it was to last over six weeks. Until mid-August, strikes of varying sizes took place in over two hundred enterprises in approximately fifty locations. The course of events was generally similar to that at Ursus, although government ministers rarely came to see the striking workers. News about the protests spread quite quickly. Even though most factories did not go on strike, this did not necessarily mean that they had no discontented workers—it was simply that no one had taken the initiative to organize them. There were cases in which several factories in one place decided to strike at the same time. On July 16–19, a widespread strike took place in Lublin, with workers from approximately eighty enterprises taking part. An entire railway junction was blocked, which happened to be the one serving trains transporting supplies for Soviet troops stationed in Germany. A single government minister was no longer enough to stop this protest, however; a government delegation headed by a deputy prime minister was dispatched to resolve the matter.

In addition to demands related to pay hikes, there were others related to working conditions and the management's arrogant treatment of employees. There were also demands related to more than just one enterprise, such as the call to

equalize the child benefits paid to civilians and those in the military or police force. There were calls for lowering the retirement age, abolishing Saturday as a workday, and holding democratic elections in existing trade unions. No mainstays of the system were questioned, however, whether economic (central planning) or political (monopoly of the communist party). The opposition immediately began to revive: on July 2, KOR issued a short statement in support of workers' demands for raises, and on July 11, another, more extensive document was published that contained a number of demands beyond those voiced during the strikes. For example, they demanded a "radical change of the entire economic system," a legal guarantee of the "private ownership of land," a legal right to create independent trade unions, the right to strike, abolishment of preventative censorship, a guarantee of freedom of the press, a halt to reprisals against the opposition, and the release of political prisoners.⁶ Because people from the opposition rarely had access to the factories on strike, the main sources of information were the Polish language broadcasts by foreign radio stations and word of mouth (including by telephone). Even with the many temporary work stoppages and expressions of discontent, there were no excesses, which caused the party leadership to decrease its vigilance. During a meeting that took place on July 24, Gierek said that "here and there various kinds of pimples [*sic*] might pop up," but that "those minor conflicts would burn out."⁷ Soon after, he left for a three-week holiday on the Black Sea at Leonid Brezhnev's invitation.

Although Gierek erred in his prognosis, the fact he left the country was not necessarily a mistake, since his presence probably would not have influenced events anyway. From the government's perspective, things took a turn for the worse. On August 14, Stanisław Kania, heading the Politburo in Gierek's absence, announced that a strike had begun at the Gdańsk Shipyard (where "people from KOR had the upper hand") and that some fellow named Wałęsa, who was "linked to Kuroń's group," was heading the strike.⁸ It was true: for the first time, people from the opposition chose where and when the strike would take place, and prepared their list of demands. They were not revolutionary: pay increases, reinstatement of those who had been dismissed from their jobs at the shipyard for their involvement in the illegal WZZ, an improvement in the supply of basic goods, and the erection of a monument commemorating the victims of the December 1970 massacre. When the directors accepted these demands, however, it was announced that the strike would continue anyway because other enterprises had joined it. On August 16, the Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee (Międzyzakładowy Komitet Strajkowy, MKS) was created, led by Wałęsa. Within days, it came to represent over one hundred enterprises. Several WZZ activists were also involved. MKS announced a list of twenty-one demands, of which the first was most important: the introduction of a legal right to create independent trade unions. In addition to economic and social demands, some were also related to civic freedoms that had already been

included in KOR's declaration. A second, political phase of the strike movement had begun, in which demands related to civic freedoms overshadowed those for emergency pay.

On August 18, the shipyard workers from Szczecin followed Gdańsk's lead: they founded an MKS, too, which presented its own list of thirty-six demands, similar to those in Gdańsk. Given the memory of the December 1970 massacre, it was probably not a coincidence that strikes became most politicized in those two cities, and that the creation of independent trade unions topped their lists of demands. During this time, as many as a dozen or more strikes were taking place every day elsewhere in Poland. These followed the "July model," and were generally limited to just one enterprise, without any formal organization by strike committees. New elements began to appear, thanks to Radio Free Europe and the BBC's coverage, and to an ever-larger number of flyers that were being distributed in large industrial centers, urging people to strike and informing them about what was happening on the coast. For example, on August 20, in Świdnica, in Lower Silesia, a strike began with the slogan "Solidarity with the Gdańsk MKS." Farmers' opposition groups conveyed their support for the workers on strike in Gdańsk. A group of opposition intellectuals from Warsaw went to the shipyard, where MKS appointed them as advisors. More than a dozen KOR and RMP activists were there as well, who edited a daily bulletin titled *Solidarność* (Solidarity). An important aspect of the Gdańsk strike was the presence of symbols and religious artifacts—portraits of John Paul II and pictures of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. In a sense, these images served as protective shields as they decorated the shipyard gates. Open-air Masses were held at the shipyard, and were also attended by the workers' families, friends, and passersby, who all stood at the gate. This all reinforced the impression that the strikes were being transformed into a national and community social movement with deep religious and moral underpinnings.

One reason the protests spread was that the government sent groups of negotiators to Szczecin and Gdańsk, headed by deputy prime ministers Kazimierz Barcikowski and Mieczysław Jagielski, who had managed to end the strike in Lublin. Because people saw the presence of these men as a sign that the government intended to continue its tactic of making concessions, which it had employed up to this point, people's fear that force would be used diminished. This fear was not entirely unfounded, however, since plenty of support for crushing the strikes existed in the highest echelons of power. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych, MSW) created a team called "Operation Summer-80" (*Operacja "Lato-80"*) that was preparing to carry out a blockade of the shipyard, militarize the ports, kidnap members of the Gdańsk MKS officers with a commando detachment, and arrest opposition leaders.⁹ Most of the Politburo members, however, including the most important—Gierek, Kania, and Jaruzelski, who was also minister of defense—believed that, because of the

scope of the protests, an improvised attack on the striking enterprises would be impossible, and that there was no time for longer preparations. They were not even influenced by pressure from Moscow: Brezhnev urged Gierek to take decisive action in personal letters, and the Soviet ambassador expressed a similar sentiment in his statements. Thus, the Polish leadership limited itself to propaganda suggesting that the strike would have negative consequences for the economy, alluding to the threat of a Soviet intervention. Party leaders appeared on television; Gierek alone was on television twice in the course of just one week. They also made certain personnel changes (including the dismissal of Prime Minister Edward Babiuch) that were designed to cast blame for the crisis. Gierek personally persuaded Primate Wyszyński to urge people to end the strikes during a sermon planned for a Church holiday on August 26.

By that point, however, it was probably already too late: since Monday, August 25, the strikes had been spreading like wildfire, with increasing numbers of new MKS branches being established, which meant that there were at least a dozen factories on strike in each of a number of other industrial centers. In most cases workers expressed solidarity with their counterparts who were striking on the coast, and the same twenty-one demands were often declared. On August 28, the coal mines went on strike. Not only were these mines a source of precious hard currency and the Polish economy's pride and joy, but they also represented the main political support for Gierek, who had himself been a miner for many years. According to a Ministry of Internal Affairs communiqué, on August 29 at 10 a.m., strikes were under way at 653 enterprises, with over 640,000 people participating.¹⁰ The country was on the brink of a general strike.

That day, at a Politburo meeting, Gierek admitted that it was "necessary to choose the lesser evil, and then try to get ourselves out of this."¹¹ That "lesser evil" was to accept the first demand—i.e., to agree to the creation of independent trade unions. The party leadership realized the danger ("we might lose the chance to exercise power . . . we will have our hands tied") but also felt a sense of helplessness ("strength is something we lack,"¹² said Kania). Moscow silently accepted this solution. As a result, the government commission and the MKS in Szczecin signed an agreement on August 30, and the next day in Gdańsk.¹³ The members of the opposition who had been arrested were released. The good judgment shown by both sides was impressive: the workers did not go out into the streets, and those in power did not attempt to use force, probably because both sides remembered the tragic lesson of December 1970.

In some parts of Poland, primarily in Upper Silesia, the strikes lasted until September 5, but they, too, ended with the signing of more agreements, which, among other things, confirmed the agreements in Szczecin and Gdańsk. Without waiting for legal solutions, the strike committees began to transform into "inter-enterprise founding committees" (*międzyzakładowe komitety założycielskie*,

MKZ). New leaders emerged, like Zbigniew Bujak in Warsaw, Andrzej Słowik in Łódź, Władysław Frasyniuk in Wrocław, Mieczysław Gil in Nowa Huta, and Jan Rulewski in Bydgoszcz. They were usually young workers, engineers, or low-level bureaucrats, and were people who were the most vocal and organizationally talented. For the most part, they had nothing to do with opposition groups, and until the strikes they generally had been no different from their colleagues. People from all over the country went on pilgrimages to Gdańsk for consultations and to express solidarity with the shipyard workers. The city began to be treated as if it were the “real” Polish capital. Nevertheless, a certain amount of chaos persisted because of the vagueness surrounding just how the new trade unions would be organized. The chaos lasted until September 17, when representatives of almost forty MKZ met in Gdańsk.

After long debates, participants decided to create a single organization that they called the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity” (Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy “Solidarność,” NSZZ). The National Coordinating Commission (Krajowa Komisja Porozumiewawcza, KKP) was also established, comprised of representatives from each region. They agreed that a statute would be drawn up, and appointed as union chairman Lech Wałęsa, that charismatic leader of the Gdańsk Shipyard strike. No one was surprised by the tautology in the union’s name, since the difference between “independent” and “self-governing” was not obvious. The idea of “solidarity,” however, turned out to be the right choice in terms of propaganda, while it also conveyed well the general feeling of striving toward a sense of community. It also emphasized the subjectivity of a society treated as a whole, independent of the government (and the state)—and even as its antithesis.

The union’s structure was organized geographically, not by professions or sectors, as is usually the case in trade union movements. In effect, almost all the opposition groups merged with Solidarity. Many of their activists became advisors for KKP or regional committees, and also worked for the union organizations that were taking shape. While it is true that only a few people were actually part of the union leadership, both on the national and regional levels, advisors like Jacek Kuroń, Adam Michnik, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Henryk Wujec, Andrzej Stelmachowski, Jan Olszewski, and Andrzej Czuma played very important roles. In Gdańsk, of course, it was WZZ activists who were most prominent at Wałęsa’s side. These included Anna Walentynowicz, Bogdan Borusewicz, and Andrzej Gwiazda.

Solidarity cells began springing up all over the country, not only in the fields of production or transport, but also in government offices, trade institutions, schools, universities and academic institutions, theaters and editorial offices, and even in courts and ministries. In a short time, approximately nine million people had signed up for the union—men and women, young and old, with a

wide range of views, people who belonged to all social and professional groups and came from all walks of life, from professors at renowned universities to barely literate agricultural workers. About a million members of the communist party joined Solidarity, too, against which its leadership did not immediately protest. The communists even quietly counted on their membership in the group becoming one of the means by which they could gain control of this new, strange, and dangerous entity that was taking shape. Joining Solidarity was not the same as registering oneself in a trade union, which was quasi-mandatory under communism. It was a completely new experience because it meant becoming a member of a huge social movement, which took the form (perhaps only a guise) of a trade union only because of events during the “summer of strikes,” and the fact that the system’s authoritarian character meant this was the only viable option acceptable to those in power.

Society did not become less active after the strikes ended. On the contrary, just organizing the Solidarity cells and appointing their interim authorities meant that thousands of meetings took place, at which people who had been silent until now, or who had mindlessly applauded official speakers, finally spoke up. The vast space of public debate opened up, without any limitations, and with complete freedom in terms of who should speak, and about what. Those attending the meetings often became truly obsessed with transparency, for example, with regard to regulations governing the meetings and the selection of candidates for office in the union. People suspected manipulation and clandestine communist party or SB activity everywhere. At the same time, they strove to reach some general consensus in these debates, because “solidarity” was considered to be a synonym for “unity” and “equality.” This explosion was not limited to the creation of Solidarity, but meant an almost universal impulse to create new organizations or to free existing ones from party control—something the party and state authorities found disturbing. Two competing farmers’ organizations were launched in the first week of September alone—Peasants’ Solidarity and Rural Solidarity. After many months of negotiations and squabbling, they united to form the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union of Individual Farmers Solidarity (NSZZ Rolników Indywidualnych “Solidarność,” NSZZ RI). In the spring of 1981, the new organization numbered over half a million members. From early September, postsecondary students also began to organize themselves, and representatives of approximately sixty newly created postsecondary organizations convened in Warsaw after the new academic year began on October 1. They decided to create the Independent Students’ Union (Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów), appointed its board, and agreed on its statute. Six months later it had about eighty thousand members, representing approximately 25 percent of all postsecondary students. In December 1980, the Individual Craftsmen’s Solidarity (NSZZ Indywidualnego Rzemiosła “Solidarność”) was founded. Despite its only marginal importance (having only

four thousand members), its existence clearly demonstrated the desire of many groups to have their own truly “independent and self-governing” organizations. In that same period, the Solidarity union for disabled people and pensioners was also launched (NSZZ “Solidarność” Inwalidów, Rencistów i Emerytów), as well as one for taxi drivers (NSZZ “Solidarność” Kierowców Transportu Prywatnego). In mid-September, a committee was established that would act as an umbrella organization for artistic and academic associations (the Artistic and Academic Associations’ Consultative Committee, Komitet Porozumiewawczy Stowarzyszeń Twórczych i Naukowych), working closely with Solidarity. It became the spokesman for professional organizations such as the Polish Sociological Association, Polish Philosophical Association, and Polish Filmmakers’ Union. The intellectual organizations that were part of the “ideological front”—very important to the party—were experiencing their own kind of revolt. These included the Polish Journalists’ Association (Stowarzyszenie Dziennikarzy Polskich, SDP) and the Polish Writers’ Union (Związek Literatów Polskich, ZLP). In the autumn of 1980, people associated with the opposition, or close to it, assumed leadership of these organizations and transformed both of them into close allies of Solidarity.

Social ferment spread like wildfire and engulfed virtually everyone: scouts and high school students, activists and members of the communist party. Party members began pushing for a special congress to be convened, and democratic elections at all levels. Women’s and youth organizations that had been party appendages were swept up in it, too, as were activists in the pro-government trade unions, which were searching intensely for a new incarnation, to avoid being devoured by Solidarity. After years of having quietly accepted the system, Poles “let loose”: almost everyone was talking, making speeches, writing, and arguing, and virtually any topic was game. Solidarity was, of course, the biggest breach in the communists’ monopolistic system, but hundreds of smaller gaps and cracks appeared, too. Underground publishing expanded tremendously, since many of the new, various Solidarity organizations began producing their own news sheets, brochures, and books.¹⁴ These publications were transmitting information that was not subject to government censorship, including texts on previously taboo subjects in contemporary Polish history, as well as analyses of the economic situation.

Although the democratic opposition’s intellectual output was considerable, it nevertheless had no plan ready for governing the country. In its early phase, the opposition presented itself as an egalitarian movement whose aim was to seek redress, “limited to the workers’ defense . . . [and] safeguarding that agreements signed by the government are realized,” as well as “demanding that the authorities respect the freedoms of speech and association.”¹⁵ It was simply acting as a trade union that was “making demands,” while the addressee of those demands was supposed to insure they were met. Because people were joining the union en masse, however, with people from all across society getting involved, Solidarity

was somehow gradually forced to shift its emphasis from only voicing grievances to proposing more or less specific changes. The attitude of the “addressee”—the communist leadership—also contributed to this development: it had adopted its own brand of passive resistance, such as dragging its feet in realizing the points outlined in the agreements.

Solidarity’s program was first sketched out in February 1981.¹⁶ Although it did state that “we do not intend to replace the government in [carrying out its] tasks,” blame was being put on the government—or to be more precise, the communist system. “The disappearance of democratic institutions is at the root of this crisis,” the authors wrote, “and the deep division between society and the government that is associated with this.” Moreover, they stated that economic reforms would not suffice “unless a thorough reform of the system by which power is exercised is not carried out simultaneously.” Liberating enterprises from government control and eliminating central planning were recognized as fundamental to any economic reform. In the political sphere, the main issue was modification of the electoral law for parliament and local government so that it would guarantee the ability “to submit [the names of] candidates by organizations and civic groups.” This text, which became the subject of a long discussion, thus did not directly attack two fundamental canons of the system: the role of the communist party as the main organizer of political life, and Poland’s position as a Soviet satellite. This moderate approach has been described as “self-limiting,” and the entire situation has been called a “self-limiting revolution.”¹⁷ Although this sounds like an oxymoron (a revolution is, after all, the opposite of limiting oneself), it did convey the current state of affairs quite well: there existed both a fear of going too far, which could end with a Soviet intervention, as well as a lack of a universally comprehensible language capable of expressing these new political projects.

With time, Solidarity’s transformation from a supervisor into a catalyst of change became increasingly apparent. It was a reaction to repeated conflicts with the government, and was above all due to the communist party’s unwillingness to undertake reforms. For example, union representatives were the main authors of the amendment to the censorship law, as well as legislation on enterprises and employees’ self-government, both of which were passed by the parliament. In May 1981, in another bill, the idea of a “social enterprise” was introduced, founded on the idea that the crew of the factory would be in charge of it. Another one was on the establishment of a Chamber of Local Government as a second house of parliament. A little later, a bill on local government itself was prepared for presentation to parliament.¹⁸

The union’s platform, passed on October 7, 1981, at the First National Solidarity Congress, was titled “The Self-Governing Republic” (*Rzeczpospolita Samorządna*),¹⁹ and encompassed not only economic and political reforms, but also changes in education (including the question of truthful history teaching in

school), amendments to the criminal code, autonomy for universities, the need to liberate the justice system from party control, the freedom to conduct scholarly research, access to radio and television for social organizations, and autonomy for local self-government. The union platform stated plainly that “the idea of freedom and uncurtailed independence is dear to us,” and that “national identity must be fully respected.”²⁰ The program also stated that only through free elections would parliament regain a “generally recognized representative character.”²¹ They declared that an awareness that bloodshed was possible “requires us to realize our ideals gradually” and “to observe the balance of power that arose in Europe after the Second World War.”²² The revolution was thus still “self-limiting,” a gradual one based on “an honest and loyal dialogue with the government.”²³ The entire “self-governing Republic” was a utopia of sorts—a variation of the “third way” between ideocratic authoritarianism as implemented by the communist party (ruling with a monopoly of power and all-embracing etatism) and the democratic world (based on the free market and private ownership). Regardless, however, of whether this kind of project could actually be carried out, it was nevertheless a clear alternative to the communist system.

In official documents, Solidarity invariably declared it was ready to negotiate and conclude a “new social contract.” Some of Solidarity’s members, however, especially activists at various levels and the group’s advisors, who were intellectuals, were convinced that the union was fulfilling a mission, that it was morally in the right, “represent[ing] the embryo of new life within a state that has totalitarian ambitions.”²⁴ They believed it not only represented the captive Polish society to the government, but also in fact *was* society, representing “good,” while the government embodied “evil.” Through various projects, Solidarity was assuming the burden of rebuilding Poland. The trade union wanted to push forward the communist party, which had proved incapable of doing so itself.

CHAPTER THREE

“DEFEND SOCIALISM AS IF IT WERE POLAND’S INDEPENDENCE”

In choosing the “lesser evil,” those in power had created an exceedingly difficult situation for themselves. Clearly, a new, independent organization would be a “foreign body” whose existence would be irreconcilable with the system’s fundamental principles. Above all, it would challenge the omnipotence of the communist party, which, in Poland’s case, had already been forced to accept the autonomy of the Catholic Church. The government’s strategy regarding Solidarity and the other organizations that were forming under the union’s protective umbrella did not leave much room to maneuver. If the system was not going to disintegrate, the union needed to be absorbed by the existing structures and subjugate itself to the “leading power,” as the communist party declared in the state constitution. Various tactics could be employed to achieve this: the movement’s development could be hampered, its collapse could be brought about from within, or it could be discredited. A frontal attack could also be launched by using force, and above all by isolating (read: arresting) the most active members of the union and opposition. These measures—weaken and attack—were essentially complementary, since achieving the first aim would make it easier to employ the second. Taken together, they offered a chance to make Solidarity “fit” into the system in terms of its form and personnel. Or, they would make it possible to eliminate Solidarity entirely. Since the government abandoned the use of force in July and August, however, they could not resort to it now, after they had just signed the agreements, which the overwhelming majority of both Poles and foreign observers had applauded enthusiastically.

The communist party leadership also had internal issues it needed to address. To this end, Edward Gierek was removed as first secretary on September 5, a continuation of personnel changes that had begun two weeks earlier. Gierek’s successor, Stanisław Kania, was an experienced, albeit colorless, *apparatchik*, who for many years had been responsible for party control over the security apparatus and policy toward the opposition. Soon, further changes were made in the party and government apparatus which were intended to show that the party was removing those responsible for the economic disaster. These changes did not result in complete unanimity within the ruling clique, however. As often happens in crisis situations, a division arose between the “moderates” and

the “hardliners.” The moderates (including such individuals as Stanisław Kania, Kazimierz Barcikowski, and Wojciech Jaruzelski) advocated gradually weakening Solidarity and bleeding it of its members. The hardliners, by contrast, believed Solidarity should simply be liquidated as swiftly as possible. In the party apparatus, army, and Ministry of Internal Affairs, these hardliners (called the “party concrete,” *beton partyjny*) were especially numerous. They were also strongly represented in the party’s highest echelons, and included, for example, new members of Politburo Stefan Olszowski, Andrzej Żabiński, Tadeusz Grabski, and Stanisław Kociołek, and minister of internal affairs Mirosław Milewski. Although advocates of reform had certainly also appeared in the party, supporting change that would allow a permanent place in the system for Solidarity, they did not find support in the highest circles of power.

At first, Moscow’s stance was similar to that of the moderates. The Kremlin’s instructions for the Polish leadership issued on September 3 mentioned the necessity of “preparing a counterattack” and “a return to the lost positions in the working class.” The Kremlin recommended, however, that Polish leaders “show flexibility” in their activities, and only use “balanced administrative measures if they are needed,” while they were to focus on propaganda and “increased militancy in party organizations” in the factories.¹ The only innovative recommendation suggested was that “those in leadership positions [in the army]” should be attracted “to work in the party and economic sector.” Such propositions implied that the Soviets saw regaining complete control over the situation more as a process, rather than as a sudden one-off operation.

Kania’s team had internal divisions, and used tactics that were intended to impede the expansion of Solidarity, by delaying decisions, for example. These activities were undertaken not only at the local level, but also at municipal, regional, and even national levels. On the local level, for example, factory directors refused to provide union cells with any office space or telephones. The authorities’ intentions became glaringly obvious when it came to Solidarity’s registration. The group submitted its registration application (along with its statute) to the Voivodship Court in Warsaw on September 24. Time passed, but the court did not act on the matter, although the application had seemed to be a mere formality. In response, Solidarity carried out a one-hour warning strike throughout the country on October 3. After a month, the court finally approved Solidarity’s registration. It changed the union’s statue, however, eliminating from it the right to strike, and adding a mention of the “leading role of the party” found in the constitution. Solidarity appealed to the Supreme Court and announced that if the decision regarding these amendments was not changed, it would call for a general strike. After feverish negotiations, with this threat looming over it, the Supreme Court repealed the amendments. On November 10, the union was registered, with the agreed-upon wording. Thus, arranging this one matter took almost two and a half months, counting from the

end of the strike at the Gdańsk Shipyard. The government resisted the legalization of other organizations much more aggressively. The Independent Students' Union was registered only in February 1981, five months after submitting its application and after a strike lasting many weeks. The Independent Self-Governing Trade Union of Individual Farmers Solidarity (NSZZ IR) was registered in May 1981, after the occupation of several public buildings and some extremely dangerous disturbances (about which more will be said later in this chapter). Tradesmen had to wait until June 1981 for the registration of their Solidarity branch.

These delay tactics became a mainstay of the government's strategies, in all kinds of situations, of varying degrees of importance. Solidarity even had to resort to strikes—or threats of strikes—to force the implementation of some of the points in the Gdańsk Agreement. These points included the introduction of Saturdays as a day free from work, and the publication of an official union newspaper (the first issue of *Tygodnik Solidarność* (Solidarity Weekly) appeared only in early April 1981). The situation was similar on the regional level, where there were numerous conflicts with the local administration. One such conflict occurred over granting hospitals the use of buildings originally slated for party or militia use. Also controversial was the removal of officials tainted by corruption. Negotiations regarding amendments to the laws on censorship and local government, for example, dragged on for months. There was a constant battle, complete with protest marches, over demands to improve food supplies or guarantee deliveries of rationed items (such as meat, butter, and baby formula). Eventually, these demands were successfully forced through. Not only was this kind of sluggishness part of the government's tactics, it was above all a sign that the party elites were not prepared—politically or intellectually—for change and reforms. As Solidarity strove to expand into areas that would be "independent and self-governing," it was guided by a precisely defined, and perhaps utopian, vision of general political changes. The communist party, by contrast, concentrated primarily on maintaining its monopoly of power and the political status quo.

The government's resistance to change prompted unionists to escalate their protests. Strikes were their preferred tool, and often broke out on the local level for mundane reasons. Despite Wałęsa's undeniable charisma and the union leadership's authority, many of these actions took place against their will, despite repeated appeals for calm. "Solidarity society," or at least a large segment of its elite (particularly regional activists and those from the factory committees), felt deeply frustrated, particularly during the autumn of 1981, and the union's national leadership had trouble controlling them. The party and its subordinate state services were unsuccessful in crushing Solidarity by eliciting centrifugal activities, eliminating union radicals, and arranging a split, since the unifying forces—a common enemy and hope that fundamental changes would be carried out in Poland—were stronger than their differences.

Nevertheless, in the second half of 1981, the tactic of delaying reforms and the government's negative reaction to the union's projects, combined with worsening everyday problems, plainly had an impact on Poles' attitudes. According to research carried out in late November and early December 1981, the percentage of people who supported Solidarity dropped in one year from 89 percent to 71 percent. The number of people who believed that the government alone was responsible for the economic and political crisis fell from 61 percent to 39 percent, while those who blamed both sides (the government and Solidarity) for the conflict grew from 27 percent to 40 percent.² Even some union members were already having doubts about their own organization: about 8 percent of those surveyed declared that they did not support Solidarity.³ While having over 70 percent support is more than satisfactory, in this case, the downward trend was critical. Society was already tired of the day-to-day difficulties and prolonged emotional seesaw.

Obvious to everyone were the government's tactics of avoiding reforms and postponing decisions. Nevertheless, the ruling camp was also involved in other, less visible activities, such as those of the security apparatus and its informers, who attempted, mostly unsuccessfully, to insure that decisions made by various Solidarity branches would be in line with the government's interests. Most important, however, were the government's preparations to attack the union. Even during the summer strikes, the Polish Politburo members considered imposing martial law, since the country's constitution did not sanction the declaration of a state of emergency in response to unrest or natural disasters. The idea was dropped, however, and the "lesser evil" was chosen instead. The matter was taken up again in connection with the conflict over Solidarity's registration and the union's right to announce a general strike. On October 22, 1980, the Politburo appointed a group to prepare the principles by which the state would function during such a strike. That same day, a meeting took place in the General Staff, resulting in an order to prepare the document "Propositions on the Matter of the Procedures by Which Martial Law Would Be Imposed for the Security of the State and a Definition of the Effects of Implementing Martial Law."⁴

It was not just current events in Poland that prompted these decisions, although they had brought pressure on the regime to act; they were also made because Poland's western and southern neighbors (East Germany and Czechoslovakia) had begun to show signs that they were concerned about the situation in Poland, too. As early as September 30, Erich Honecker, the East German communist leader, asked his comrades in Moscow to create a "consultative mechanism" regarding Polish matters.⁵ In analyses for internal use, German Democratic Republic (GDR) politicians referred directly to the situation in Czechoslovakia in 1968, where the "consultative mechanism" ended with an armed intervention. Admittedly, reactions at the Kremlin were at first significantly less emotional than those in