East European Politics &
Societies
http://eep.sagepub.com/

Rebellious Poles: Political Crises and Popular Protest Under State Socialism, 1945-89

Grzegorz Ekiert

East European Politics and Societies 1997 11: 299
DOI: 10.1177/0888325497011002006

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://eep.sagepub.com/content/11/2/299.citation

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
American Council of Learned Societies

Additional services and information for *East European Politics & Societies* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://eep.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://eep.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Mar 1, 1997

What is This?

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

Rebellious Poles: Political Crises and Popular Protest Under State Socialism, 1945–89

Grzegorz Ekiert*

The study of popular protest and resistance under modern authoritarian regimes presents considerable empirical and methodological difficulties. The task becomes especially trying when such studies are conducted following the collapse of the regimes, the official condemnation of their political practices, and the efforts to reevaluate their history and the political responsibility of individuals, organizations, and social and professional groups. The process of settling scores with the past can easily lead to a misrepresentation of support for and opposition to the old regime and facilitate creation of new myths and falsehoods. Krystyna Kersten, a leading Polish historian, warned recently that "while for many years the official historiography and propaganda produced a distorted image of Polish society [. . .] today one can see a tendency to create a new legend of the Catholic nation that struggled against the Communists for forty-five years."[1] She emphasizes that everyday behavior under authoritarian rule displays a complex pattern in which various degrees of acceptance and adaptation are paralleled by dissent, passive resistance, and sometimes even active resistance. This paper will focus on the cycles of protest and opposition to communist rule in Poland and the forms they took. Without an accurate understanding of past strategies of resistance and instances of political mobilization, one

* This paper was written as a part of the research project "Strategies of Collective Protest in Democratizing Societies: A Comparative Analysis of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the former East Germany, 1989–1994," directed by Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik. The project and my own research were sponsored by the Program for the Study of Germany and Europe at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University, National Council for Soviet and East European Research, and American Council of Learned Societies. I would like to thank Valerie Bunce, Susan Eckstein, Jan Gross, Anna Grzymala-Busse, Michael Kennedy, Ireneusz Krzeminski, Andrzej Rychard, Anna Seleny, Richard Staar, Sidney Tarrow, anonymous EEPS reviewers, and especially Martha and Jan Kubik for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1. Krystyna Kersten, *Między wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem. Polska 1944–1956* (London: Aneks, 1993), iv.

© 1997 by the American Council of Learned Societies

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

from the SAGE Social Science Collections. All Rights Reserved.

can easily overlook or misjudge crucial facets of the current social, political, and economic changes that are taking place in the region. The historic patterns of collective protest have important consequences and manifestations in the current transition process and produce notable cross-regional differences in political developments among countries that must overcome the legacy of decades of communist rule.

State-socialist regimes faced critical challenges in maintaining political stability during their existence. Despite their highly repressive nature, waves of popular mobilization and various forms of collective action and protest occurred repeatedly. The threat of protest became an important element of every policy decision made by the ruling elites. In addition, all cases of collective action demonstrated the existence of considerable protest potential and the actual ability of social actors under state socialism to organize and launch large-scale protest actions that these regimes were not able to prevent, despite their enormous repressive capacity. Such actions reflected the institutional and political weakness of these regimes and effectively challenged the notorious image of a homogenic and atomized citizenry, incapable of exercising any effective political pressure and skillfully manipulated by the rulers, suggested by the concept of totalitarianism and other "one-actor" models. The persistence and impact of these protests also questioned the validity of "state-centered" explanatory models, according to which only state elites or hegemonic power in the region was accorded an active role in shaping political processes.[2]

Collective protest in East Central Europe displayed a number of peculiarities. First, the distinction between routine and unconventional forms of protest can hardly be applied to state-socialist regimes. Political terror during the Stalinist period effectively eradicated all routine forms of dissent and protest. In a highly politicized social environment, simple disagreement over minor economic or local issues was considered politically subversive and invited severe repression.[3] Second, under such conditions, cases of open defiance indicated a strong under-

2. For a critique of such approaches see, for example, Elemer Hankiss, "Demobilization, Self-Mobilization, and Quasi-Mobilization in Hungary 1948–1987," *East European Politics and Societies* 3:1 (1989): 105–52; and David Stark and Victor Nee, "Toward an Institutional Analysis of State Socialism," in Victor Nee and David Stark, eds., *Remaking the Economic Institutions of Socialism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 1–31.

3. Vaclav Havel emphasizes this point, arguing that "in societies under the posttotalitarian system, all political life in the traditional sense has been eliminated. People have no opportunity to express themselves politically in public, let alone to organize politically. The gap that results is filled by ideological ritual," *The Power of the Powerless* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1985), 49.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

current of everyday resistance and social discontent.[4] In fact, the scope of defiance and resistance was much greater than the instances of open protest actions would indicate. A systematic account of patterns and forms of everyday resistance under state socialism has yet to be written. There is, however, enough evidence to conclude that this collective resistance formed a crucial dimension of the relationship between the state and society under state socialism. Several obvious examples come to mind. There was conspicuous peasant resistance against collectivization, which delayed the state's takeover of land for many years and in Poland obstructed collectivization policies altogether. Churches and religious communities resisted the state's forced secularization and atheization policies. There was pervasive dissent among intellectuals, while cultural defiance among the youths and students was reflected in their fashion, music and art, as well as in the emergence of new social movements in the 1980s. Working-class resistance on the shop floor was a widespread phenomenon. And, finally, illegal and semilegal economic activities were common and undermined the institutional and ideological foundations of state socialism. If this defiance was so wide-ranging, however, the question arises why major protests were relatively few and why they occurred more frequently in Poland than in any other country of the region. To answer this question, an institutional approach is indispensable.

Contemporary research on collective protest convincingly demonstrates that political mobilization is shaped by the structure of political opportunities offered by the state.[5] Latent opposition and defiance give

4. As many studies of protest in various social and political systems convincingly demonstrate, under conditions of social and political oppression open acts of defiance are few, but, at the same time, intricate forms of everyday resistance develop. See, for example, James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Robert P. Weller and Scott E. Guggenheim, eds., *Power and Protest in the Countryside* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989); Forrest D. Colburn, ed., *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1989); Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Susan Eckstein, ed., *Power and Popular Protest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); and Jeffrey Kopstein, "Chipping Away at the State. Workers' Resistance and the Demise of East Germany," *World Politics* 48 (April 1996): 391–423.

5. For the seminal work analyzing the role of the political opportunity structure in facilitating collective protest, see Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1978). Various applications of the concept and its theoretical ramifications are analyzed by Doug McAdam, "Political Opportunities: Conceptual Origins, Current Problems, Future Directions," in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cam-bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23–40.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

rise to collective action when existing patterns of domination and oppression are altered and relaxed. Such conditions are usually the result of a cumulation of domestic, economic, and political difficulties, reinforced by geopolitical pressures. In turn, changes in the political opportunity structure invite a collective challenge to the existing political status quo. According to Sidney Tarrow, "political opportunities provide the major incentives for transforming mobilizational potential into action [. . .]; they signal the vulnerability of the state to collective action and thereby open up opportunity for others—affecting both alliances and conflict systems. The process leads to state responses which, in one way or another, produce a new structure of opportunity."[6] Tarrow identifies five conditions that contribute to the opening up of opportunities for collective action: the degree of openness of political institutions, the stability of political coalitions and alignments, elite divisions and/or their tolerance for protest, the presence of support groups and allies, and the policy-making capacity of the state.[7]

The concept of the political opportunity structure can be easily applied to the postwar history of East Central Europe, with one additional condition. The stability of geopolitical relations between the imperial center and its satellite states under conditions of political and/or economic dependency can significantly shape the internal structure of political opportunities within dependent states. This condition is crucial to understanding the political crisis in Soviet-dominated East Central Europe. During two periods—the late 1950s and the late 1980s—state-socialist regimes experienced profound instability, caused by an overlapping of domestic, economic, and political crises with the geopolitical pressures and uncertainty. These situations generated splits and struggles within the ruling elites and created openings in the political arena. As a result, in both periods the repressive capacity of the party-state was seriously weakened and various collective actors responded to the expanding structure of political opportunities by voicing grievances, demanding changes in state policies, and calling for a reform of political and economic institutions.[8]

6. Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 99.

7. Sydney Tarrow, "National Politics and Collective Action: Recent Theory and Research in Western Europe and the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 14 (1988): 429–30.

8. There was one more period of collective action and protest in the postwar history of state-socialist regimes. Between 1945 and 1948, during the imposition of communist rule, various groups and political forces opposed takeover of power by the Communists by a variety of

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

The clustering of collective protests within identifiable and limited time periods has been identified by students of contemporary protest movements. The concept of cycles of protest was developed by Tarrow to explain sequences of escalating collective action in Italy. He describes the cycle of protest as "a phase of heightened conflict and contention across the social system that includes: a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors; a quickened pace of innovation in the forms of contention; new or transformed collective action frames; a combination of organized and unorganized participation; and sequences of intensified interaction between challengers and authorities which can end in reform, repression and sometimes revolution."[9] Tarrow also points out that "cycles of protest are infrequent, are of unpredictable length and intensity, and appear to involve actors, groups, and modes of activities that differ both from those which are active during periods of quiescence and from each other. [. . .] they also do not characterize an entire social system in the same way; indeed, they leave large pockets of citizens uninvolved, produce conflicts between groups of mobilized citizens, and usually awaken a backlash against disorder."[10] Waves of protest and public activation in East Central Europe that occurred during the de-Stalinization period in the 1950s and during the disintegration of state socialism in the 1980s fit the above definition perfectly. These two periods provide an ideal example of cycles of protest that were not confined to the domestic politics of particular countries but displayed transnational dynamics as well. The course, resolution, and outcome of these protests differed from one country to another and produced the most enduring and significant variation in forms of state socialism.

Poland's post-Second World War history shows that its political experiences under communist rule were distinctive when compared with other parts of the region. The country experienced five major political crises (in 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, and 1980–81), involving massive mobilization of various social and professional groups. These events

means, including armed struggle. The consolidation of these regimes by 1948 and their growing repressiveness led to annihilation of the political opposition and a rapid decline in the scope and frequency of collective action.

9. Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement,* 153. For empirical application of the concept see his *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy 1965–1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

10. Sydney Tarrow, "Struggle, Politics and Reform: Collective Action, Social Movements, and Cycles of Protest," Western Societies Program, Occasional Paper No. 21, Center for International Studies, Cornell University (1991), 44.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

were characterized by a wide variety of collective protest that provoked coercive responses from the state. Moreover, Poland was the first Soviet bloc country in which the Communists peacefully surrendered their power in 1989. It seems that, among East Central European regimes, Poland represented an extreme example of both the institutional weakness of the party-state and the capacity of various groups within society to launch collective protest. It might be argued that in Poland mass protests became a relatively routine way of exerting political pressure, transmitting collective grievances, and defending collective interests.[11] Sources of Poland's exceptionalism should be located, above all, in the pattern and outcome of the de-Stalinization crisis that took place in the 1950s. Paradoxically, Poland's successful and relatively peaceful dismantling of Stalinist rule became a serious liability for the country's post-Stalinist ruling elite. The de-Stalinization process, culminating in the events of October 1956, engendered institutional, political, and cultural legacies that coalesced into a unique political opportunity structure. These specific institutional, political, and economic constraints set Poland apart from other East Central European regimes. By comparison, the Polish regime became institutionally more diverse, culturally more tolerant, and economically more constrained. As a result, it appeared more vulnerable to collective action from below and in the choice of its policies more constrained by the real or anticipated opposition of various social groups. The Polish elite frequently resorted to corporatist practices, buying the quiescence of strategic social and professional groups or regions and in the process imposing additional burdens on scarce resources and an inefficient economic system. In addition, Polish workers, students, and intellectuals became more defiant and willing to air their grievances and defend their interests through collective action than was the case in other former Soviet-bloc countries. Thus, since 1956 the trajectory of Poland's political and economic developments has been unique. This fact raises a number of important questions that are still unanswered in comparative analyses of

11. Jadwiga Staniszkis, analyzing Polish experiences under communist rule, suggests that regulation through crisis was a characteristic feature of the regime, which lacked independent political and economic mechanisms of self-regulation. See her book *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 249–78. This point has been developed further, emphasizing that the evolution of state-socialist regimes was in large measure crisis-driven—that is, shaped by the nature and consequences of major revolts they experienced. See Grzegorz Ekiert, *The State Against Society: Political Crises and Their Aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

East European politics. In order to understand Poland's exceptional political experiences under communist rule, it is necessary to focus more on the contingent historical events that produce path-dependent political developments and less on either the systemic logic and institutional constraints common to all state-socialist regimes or singular factors that are specific to Polish culture and society.[12]

Collective Protest and Resistance in Poland—The De-Stalinization Crisis

Scholars have explained the extraordinary frequency of popular protest and political instability in post-1945 Poland in two ways. Some interpretations pointed to a number of peculiar factors that characterized society and the party-state which set the country apart from other state-socialist regimes.[13] These factors reflected both Poland's past historical experiences and the peculiarities of the imposition and consolidation of the new regime. Scholars generally emphasized the following factors: the existence of the institutionally strong and politically independent Catholic church, the survival of private ownership of land and noncollectivized agriculture, a long history of strong anti-Soviet sentiments and uprisings against foreign domination, the strength and intransigence of the intelligentsia, the rebellious nature of the working class,[14] and the institutional weakness of the Polish party-state and its dismal economic performance. The second approach was based on systemic interpretations that emphasized the internal logic common to all state-socialist regimes. According to these interpretations, state-socialist institutional systems produced self-destructive tendencies and were

12. This argument is influenced by William Sewell, who in his paper on strategies of historical analysis argues that "contingent, unexpected, and inherently unpredictable events [. . .] can undo or alter the most apparently durable trends of history" ("Three Temporalities: Toward a Sociology of the Event," CSST Working Papers, No. 58, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1990, 17). Events can produce enduring and diverse legacies. They often generate profound changes in the institutional characteristics of regimes. In some cases, they can only transform the political practices of political regimes, leaving their formal institutional characteristics intact. Thus, it is possible that formally similar or even identical regimes can display profound differences in the political opportunity structure they offer to potential or real challengers.
13. See, for example, George Schopflin, "Poland and Eastern Europe," in Abraham Brumberg, ed., *Poland, Genesis of a Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1983), 123–34.
14. Krzysztof Pomian describes Poland as the only Soviet-bloc country where "authorities were afraid of the working class, not the other way around," in *Wymiary polskiego konfliktu 1956–1981* (London: Aneks, 1985), 10.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

highly crisis prone. By nature, such regimes were not only highly repressive but also generated economic inefficiency, policy inflexibility, and an underlying political instability. For a variety of unique historical reasons, Poland was seen as the clearest example of such logic.[15] The following section presents the argument that neither social and historical factors peculiar to Poland nor a self-destructive logic of state socialism alone can explain the specificity of Poland's political developments under communist rule. In order to explain Poland's distinctive developments, one must focus on the country's particular political experiences, the dynamics and outcomes of its political struggles and conflicts, and the cumulative political, institutional, and cultural consequences of these conflicts. I intend to show that, above all, the specific resolution of the de-Stalinization crisis in 1956 created an institutional and cultural foundation for Poland's subsequent turbulent political history. Peculiarities of Polish state socialism should be seen as resulting from a series of open confrontations between party-state elites and various forces within society that produced only temporary accommodations each time they occurred. From this perspective, Poland's postwar history presents itself as a long political learning process in which both sides of the confrontation developed new strategies of resistance and protest absorption, produced new institutional, political, and cultural resources, and traded concessions and defeats.[16]

RESISTANCE TO THE IMPOSITION OF A COMMUNIST REGIME

Imposition of a communist regime in Poland was accompanied by a period of open and intense resistance and political struggle. Organized forms of opposition and protest reached their peak in 1946 but quickly subsided in the face of the relentless and brutal repressive actions conducted by the Soviet forces, the communist-controlled security police, and the army. Following rigged elections in January 1947, the victorious Communists declared amnesty for members of the political and military underground. However, political repressions only intensified, lasting well into the 1950s. This cycle of protest displayed the most

15. Abraham Brumberg, for example, argues that "nowhere had the endemic communist failures to erect an economic system at once rational, productive, and at least moderately equitable been so disastrous as in Poland," See his "Introduction" to *Poland, Genesis of a Revolution,* x.
16. Nancy Bermeo emphasized the importance of political learning in regime transitions in her article "Democracy and the Lessons of Dictatorship," *Comparative Politics* 24:3 (1992): 273–91.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

varied repertoire of collective action in Poland's postwar history. According to Kersten, forms of opposition against the communist takeover during this period included (1) everyday resistance and symbolic defiance; (2) public demonstrations and strikes; (3) political struggle of legal opposition forces; (4) underground political organizations; and (5) armed resistance.[17] Our knowledge of the strength and influence of antiregime movements and organizations as well as the extent, forms, and intensity of protests is still relatively limited. Official communist data show that the number of illegal political and military organizations dropped from 1,057 in 1945 and 1,064 in 1946 to 721 in 1947 and 566 in 1948. The membership of these organizations was estimated at 80,296 in 1945, 61,264 in 1946, 46,084 in 1947, and 13,166 in 1948.[18] Between 1944 and 1948, the security police recorded 45,800 so-called terrorist acts against state authorities. During the same period, as a result of repressive actions against the opposition, 8,668 people were killed, some 150,000 were arrested, and 22,797 were sentenced by military tribunals.[19]

The cornerstone of legal opposition against the Communists was the Polish Peasant party (PSL), led by Stanislaw Mikolajczyk. Other political forces, such as the Labor party, independent socialists, or nationalists also attempted to organize legal political activities. Their efforts were quickly subverted by security forces. The leaders and activists of these parties were harassed and arrested. Communist agents infiltrated the leadership of such parties in order to destroy them from within. As a result, all legally existing noncommunist parties were destroyed or

17. Krystyna Kersten (pen name J. Bujnowski), "O oporze 1944–1948 czyli o poszukiwaniu propozycji," *Krytyka* 17 (1984): 163–64. See also Krystyna Kersten, "Społeczeństwo polskie wobec władzy ustanowionej przez komunistów, 1944–1947," in Miroslawa Marody and Antoni Sulek, eds., *Rzeczywistość polska i sposoby radzenia sobie z nia* (Warszawa: UW IS, 1987), 9–36; and Barbara Otwinowska and Jan Zaryn, eds., *Polacy wobec przemocy 1944–1956* (Warszawa: Editions Spotkania, 1996).

18. See Zenon Jakubowski, *Milicja Obywatelska, 1944–1948* (Warszawa: PWN, 1988), 157; and Zygmunt Wozniczka, *Zrzeszenie Wolność i Niezawisłość* (Warszawa: Novum-Semex, 1992), 16–18. See also Zygmunt Hemmerling and Marek Nadolski, eds., *Opozycja antykomunistyczna w Polsce 1944–1956. Wybór dokumentów* (Warszawa: Ośrodek Badan Społecznych, 1990) and Zdzislaw Szpakowski, "Zbrojne podziemie antykomunistyczne," in *Polacy wobec przemocy,* 34–78.

19. See Maria Turlejska, "Komuniści wobec społeczeństwa polskiego. Ciagłość i zmiana techniki wladzy," in *Rzeczywistość polska,* 42–43. See also Andrzej Paczkowski, ed., *Aparat bezpieczeństwa w latach 1944–1956. Taktyka, strategia, metody* (Warszawa: ISP PAN, 1994); Stanislaw Marat and Jacek Snopkiewicz, eds., *Ludzie bezpieki. Dokumentacja czasu bezprawia* (Warszawa: Alfa, 1990); and Maria Turlejska, *Te pokolenia żałobami czarne . . . Skazani na śmierc i ich sedziowie* (Warszawa: Niezalezna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1990).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

forcibly merged with the Communist party and its satellites. Mikolajczyk escaped from Poland after the communist-declared victory in the falsified elections of 1947 and the wave of repression against independent politicians that followed. Remnants of the PSL were merged into the communist-controlled United Peasant party, and the Polish Socialist party was merged with the Polish Workers party in 1948. The period of legal political opposition was over.[20]

Armed resistance and legal opposition activities were also paralleled by other forms of collective protest. In May 1946, mass antiregime demonstrations in several cities were brutally dispersed by the security police, followed by student strikes. During these events some protesters were killed, others wounded and arrested.[21] The country also experienced waves of workers' strikes, largely caused by economic problems (low wages, excessive production quotas, lack of food, repression against workers' representatives, and the like). According to partial data collected by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, during the last quarter of 1945 there were 42 strikes in 56 enterprises. In 1946 there were 136 strikes in several hundred factories.[22] It is clear that existing analyses of protest and resistance in Poland have focused on post-1956 events and have not paid sufficient attention to this early period of struggle. With the information currently available, one can argue plausibly that specific features of Polish Stalinism, such as its notable self-limitation in comparison to other East European regimes, should be linked to the widespread and intense resistance and protest activities that occurred during the formative stages of the communist regime. Despite the fact that by 1948 organized resistance and open protest had been eradicated by political repression and consolidation of that party-state's institutional structures, this period had important legacies that shaped the nature of Polish Stanlinism as well as the de-Stalinization crisis in 1956.

20. See Jan Zaryn, "Ostatnia 'legalna opozycja' polityczna w Polsce 1944–1947," in *Polacy wobec przemocy,* 80–120; Tadeusz Kostewicz, "Terror i represje," in *Polacy wobec przemocy,* 121–78; and Andrzej Paczkowski, *Stanisław Mikołajczyk, czyli klęska realisty* (Warszawa: Omnipress, 1991).

21. See Wojciech Mazowiecki, *Wydarzenia 3 maja 1946* (Paris: Libella, 1989); and Czeslaw Brzoza, *3 Maja 1946 w Krakowie* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 1996).

22. See Kazimierz Kloc, "Strajki w przemysle w pierwszych latach Polski Ludowej," *Studia nad Ruchami Spolecznymi* 2 (1989): 5–41; Helena Gnatowska, "Strajki w Polsce w latach 1945–1947 w swietle dokumentów PPR," *Z Pola Walki* 3 (1985): 103–12; Krystyna Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy. Polska 1943–1948* (Poznań: SAWW, 1990), 222–23; and Padraic Kenney, "Working-class Community and Resistance in Pre-Stalinist Poland: The Poznanski Textile Strike, Lodz, September 1947," *Social History* 18:1 (1993): 31–51.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

But the reemergence of collective protest in Poland after 1953 was a direct consequence of the political crisis that affected all Stalinist regimes in the mid-1950s.

THE OCTOBER 1956 TRANSITION

The period between 1953 and 1956 was crucial to events that later shook Poland in 1956. This was a time of great uncertainties stemming from the gradual dissolution of the political order constructed by Stalin and his little clones in East Central Europe. Stalin's death in March 1953 roused vague expectations and hopes for change. The dismal economic situation caused frequent outbursts of social unrest. The structure of political opportunities was gradually altered, with some groups, such as intellectuals and young party activists, benefiting more from the new situation than others. Reformist and more pragmatic factions inside the Communist parties were able, for the first time, to effectively challenge the Stalinist establishment. Internal debates and struggles that split the elites of state-socialist regimes during that time focused on three general issues:

> (1) the problem of political and economic relations between the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes that arose after dissolution of a main tool of Stalinist policies in the region, the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers parties (Cominform) in April 1956, as well as the formal normalization of relations between the U.S.S.R. and Yugoslavia in June 1956;
> (2) reassessment of domestic Stalinist policies, resulting in a complete reshuffling of political elites, reorganization of the political police, rehabilitation and readmission to the Party of former leaders accused of rightist deviations, posthumous rehabilitation of some victims of the Stalinist terror,[23] the removal and indictment of some security-force functionaries responsible for the most glaring abuses of power during the Stalinist years;
> (3) the reevaluation of Stalinist-forced industrialization policies that resulted in a debate over the ways to correct and rationalize the distorted economic system. At the center of these debates were collectivization

23. These rehabilitations were restricted to former party members and leaders who had been purged by Stalinists in internal fighting for power. Most of them, like Gomułka, Spychalski, and Kliszko in Poland, or Kadar, Szakasits, and Marosan in Hungary, played a crucial role in subsequent political events. In Poland, rehabilitation affected some 200 people, including the leaders of the Polish prewar Communist party killed by Stalin. Moreover, about 35,000 mostly political prisoners were released in the spring of 1956 and investigations of political offenses were terminated.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

policies, principles of investments and resource allocation, and the idea of a limited market. In general, this period of transition produced a highly chaotic political situation that was characterized by deep intra-elite cleavages and conflicts, a disastrous economic situation, continued Stalinist rhetoric in the media, abrupt shifts between old Stalinist and "new course" policies, and the increasing social discontent and pressures for change. Poland was in the forefront of these developments.

On 28 June 1956, a peaceful workers' demonstration in Poznań was transformed into a bloody revolt after security police fired into the crowd.[24] The situation in Poznan—Poland's fourth major industrial city—had been tense for quite some time before the demonstrations and strikes erupted. Already in 1954 and 1955, workers were bitterly complaining about acute housing and food shortages, excessive production quotas and taxes, as well as inadequate supplies of components and raw materials that prevented them from fulfilling production norms. The revolt began with a huge demonstration of workers from all of the city's factories in front of the town hall in response to rumors concerning the arrest of a workers' delegation from Poznań sent to Warsaw to present their complaints and demands. Within hours, after the security police had fired upon the crowd approaching police headquarters, thousands of demonstrators were battling the regime's security forces, destroying police stations, seizing arms, and releasing prisoners. The omnipresent slogans—"We want bread," "We want freedom," and "Down with false communism"—aptly reflected workers' grievances and feelings. The Polish regime immediately mobilized a massive armed forces of more than 10,000 troops and 360 tanks to quell the revolt and began repressive actions against workers who had participated in the demonstrations. During the revolt some 100 people were killed, 900 were wounded, and 750 were arrested. Among those who were arrested, 58 were later indicted and 27 were sentenced to prison terms.

24. More detailed descriptions of the Poznań events and interpretations of the revolt can be found in Konrad Syrop, *Spring in October: The Polish Revolution of 1956* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1957); Jakub Karpinski, *Count-Down* (New York: Karz-Cohl, 1982); and official documents concerning the revolt in Paul Zinner, ed., *National Communism and Popular Revolt in Eastern Europe* (New York: Praeger, 1956). Also, during the Solidarity period in Poland the conference of historians organized for the anniversary of the events carefully examined the whole episode. See Jarosław Maciejewski and Zofia Trojanowiczowa, *Poznański Czerwiec 1956* 2nd ed. (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1990). The Polish regime responded to this work with its own interpretation of events. See Antoni Czubinski, *Czerwiec 1956 w Poznaniu* (Warszawa: KAW, 1986). After 1989, several new analyses of the Poznan rebellion were published. See, for example, Maciej R. Bombicki, *Poznan '56* (Poznan: Lawica, 1992) and Edward J. Nalepa, *Pacyfikacja zbuntowanego miasta* (Warszawa: Bellona, 1992).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

Despite the brutality of this action, the general political situation deteriorated even further. During this time, practically the entire country was in a state of ferment. Public cultural life was blooming, certain journalists and newspapers were becoming less subservient to the party's instructions, debating clubs of the intelligentsia were formed throughout the country, and student cabarets, theaters, and jazz clubs were established. Peasants began dismantling collective farms, and workers demanded higher wages and benefits as well as industrial self-government. Growing tensions and pressures for reform came from many quarters of society, particularly the Communist party and its proxy organizations. The Party and mass organizations were split by internal conflicts; pressures for internal democratization and a change of leadership mounted. The transition process culminated in two plenary meetings of the Central Committee in July and October, which set the stage for a gradual and controlled turnover within the ruling elite. The October meeting, occurring within the context of Soviet pressure and great political activation in the country, made a symbolic break with the past and constituted the beginning of Poland's post-Stalinist regime.[25]

The political and institutional changes in Poland produced by the 1956 crisis were not only a reflection of intraparty struggles. They also indicated the fears of the communist elites, prompted by the growing popular discontent and mobilization of a society where links had begun to be established between intellectuals, students, radical party activists, and workers. The election of Władysław Gomułka as the new party leader was greeted by enthusiastic mass rallies and demonstrations across the country. At the same time, thousands of meetings in factories, universities, and state institutions produced an avalanche of resolutions and demands that were sent to the Party's Central Committee. Mass

25. For detailed accounts of party meetings and intraparty conflicts and struggles see Flora Lewis, *A Case History of Hope: The Story of Poland's Peaceful Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1958); and Jakub Karpinski, *Count-Down.* It should be emphasized that, surprisingly, the Polish crisis of 1956 was not studied and examined as comprehensively as other cases of crises were (see George Sakwa, "The Polish 'October': A Re-Appraisal Through Historiography," *Polish Review* 23:3 (1978): 62–78. Jadwiga Staniszkis offers an interesting interpretation of the crisis in his *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution,* 278–312. Only recently have Polish historians published systematic analyses of these events. See *Pazdziernik '56* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Spoldziel-cze, 1987); Zbyslaw Rykowski and Wiesław Władyka, *Polska Próba. Październik '56* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1989); Benon Dymek, ed., *Październik 1956. Szkice historyczne* (Warszawa: s.n., 1989); Wiesław Władyka, *Na czołówce: Prasa w Pazdzierniku 1956 roku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1989); Pawel Machcewicz, *Polski rok 1956* (Warszawa: Mowia Wieki, 1993); and Wiesław Władyka, *Październik 56* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1994).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

mobilization reached a climax on 24 October, when several hundred thousand Poles gathered in front of the Palace of Culture in Warsaw to listen to the speech of the newly elected party leader. The concluding passage of Gomułka's speech was an appeal for return to work and a show of support for political change by increased productive effort. "Today," he said, "we appeal to the working people of Warsaw and to the whole country: enough of demonstrations, enough of gatherings. It is time to return to our daily work, animated with faith and awareness that the party, united with the working class and the whole nation, will lead Poland on a new road to socialism." The period of social activation, however, was far from over. In November and December, there were street demonstrations in several cities. In 1957 and 1958, there were frequent industrial strikes. In October 1957, street demonstrations against the liquidation of the liberal weekly *Po prostu* were dispersed by the police.

The 1956 crisis brought great changes to Polish society and the composition and policies of the party-state's elites. In order to defuse political tension, significant economic concessions were offered. Military expenditures were reduced, investment increased in sectors that produced consumer goods, and the discrimination and harassment of the private sector eased. Real wages in Poland increased by an average of 20 percent as a result of the crisis. Improved living standards were followed by political concessions. The security apparatus was reorganized, and amnesty was granted to political prisoners. Entire groups that had been repressed under the Stalinist regime—including fighters of the noncommunist underground (Home Army), officers of the Polish prewar army, soldiers of the Polish armed forces in the West, and activists of the Polish Socialist and Polish Peasant parties—were rehabilitated. As a result of the October transition, the political leadership of the country was thoroughly changed and a relatively open political discussion was carried out inside the party. Polish economists designed far-reaching reform proposals to improve the effectiveness of the economic system. New organizations emerged, while existing institutions and organizations elected new leaders. More autonomy was granted to many traditional "transmission belts," such as trade unions or student and youth organizations, as well as the two communist-controlled political parties (the United Peasant party and the Democratic party). Spontaneously organized workers' councils in factories were legalized, and traditional forms of cooperatives were reestablished. Collectivization policies were

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

halted, and the majority of collective farms were dismantled (of the 9,975 collective farms that existed in June 1956, only 1,934 remained).

The institutional structure of the Polish party-state became more pluralistic than it was in any other state-socialist country. The new parliamentary elections were prepared for 1957, with a new electoral law allowing for a secret ballot and more candidates than the number of available seats. Also, a symbolic representation of independent Catholics in the Parliament was permitted. Censorship was drastically limited, and Polish culture and intellectual life experienced a period of remarkable revival. The media, discarding militant Stalinist language, experienced unprecedented programmatic changes.[26] In the education system, curricula were changed in all types of schools and a new legal framework for the functioning of universities, giving them a large measure of internal autonomy, was enacted. The Polish primate, Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, was released from prison and promised significant concessions. Shortly afterward, other imprisoned priests were released, expelled bishops and priests assumed their former duties, lay Catholic organizations were formed, Catholic papers and publications were allowed to be published, and religious instruction returned to public schools.

In response to strong anti-Soviet sentiments, relations with the U.S.S.R. were altered. Military advisors left Poland. Soviet marshal, Konstantin Rokossowski, was relieved of his duties as Poland's minister of defense. The Polish debt to the U.S.S.R. was canceled on the basis of unfair pricing practices, and new credits were granted by the Soviet state. An official agreement was signed concerning the "legal status of Soviet troops stationed temporarily on Polish territory," which stipulated that such presence "cannot infringe in any way on the sovereignty of the Polish state or allow any interference in Polish People's Republic internal affairs." Finally, an agreement was signed concerning the repatriation of Polish citizens who remained in Soviet territories after the war. By March 1959, about 224,000 Poles were allowed to return to Poland. Promises of the new regime included economic reforms, decentralization and workers' self-government, freedom of expression in art and science, liquidation of jamming of foreign broadcasts, and guaranties of a secure existence to individual peasants and small private en-

26. See Jerzy Eisler, "Polskie radio wobec wydarzeń w kraju w 1956 r.," *Krytyka* 40 (1993): 146–63; Wiesław Władyka, *Na czołówce: Prasa w Pazdzierniku 1956 roku;* and Robert Jarocki, *Tygodnik Powszechny: Czterdziesci pięć lat w opozycji* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1990).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

terprises. The new party's leadership and its policies were accepted with great enthusiasm by large segments of the population. This was the only moment in the postwar history of Poland that the regime could claim a substantial measure of genuine popular support.

The liquidation of these achievements and the retreat from promises began in the fall of 1957 and lasted for several years. Revisionist forces within the Party were quickly marginalized. The economic reforms were never implemented, and by the end of 1958 workers' self-government had been rendered meaningless. The media's newly acquired freedoms were promptly rescinded. Religious instruction was banned from public schools, and the relationship between the state and the church deteriorated. Polish society was not able to defend the concessions granted to it by the regime in an hour of weakness. As Jakub Karpinski points out, "after October 1956, the program of the intelligentsia was quite often limited to simple trust and hope. Gradually these feelings turned to disappointments."[27] It could be argued that, besides the weakness and fragmentation of reformist forces in Polish society, the tragedy of the Hungarian Revolution contributed heavily to this reversal of policies by the new regime in Warsaw. These two 1956 events were closely interwoven and for years represented an example of the hopes, perils, and limits of liberalization attempts in the region. In the long run, only the Polish Church seems to have been an undeniable beneficiary of the Polish October. However, intellectual elites also secured a limited degree of autonomy, and the peasants were saved from forced collectivization. In the 1956 crisis, as in all other cases of de-Stalinization, the principal political actors comprised anti-Stalinist forces within the Party, the intellectual elites, and the students. A very limited role was played by the Church and by Catholic circles, open anticommunist forces were absent, and neither workers nor peasants were able to organize and have visible impact on the political scene.[28] Thus, intellectuals and the intelligentsia were generally the winners of the transition to a post-Stalinist environment. They extracted the most tangible concessions from the party-state. Their living standards, freedoms, and opportunities were greater than those of other groups in Polish society.

Despite the reversal of the October policies and promises made in

27. Karpinski, *Count-Down,* 105.
28. See Krystyna Kersten, "Rok 1956—punkt zwrotny," *Krytyka* 40 (1993): 142–43.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

1957, since the beginning of the 1960s Poland had remained the most liberal and open country in the Soviet bloc. The institutional, political, and cultural consequences of the Polish October can hardly be overestimated, especially if we compare them with the outcomes of two other major de-Stalinization crises—Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968—as well as to the other state-socialist countries that survived de-Stalinization without an open political crisis. Krystyna Kersten argues that

> in 1956, the change in power relations between the state and society took place. After "October," the Communists relinquished their ideological domination step by step. They focused on controlling only these actions which were significant from a political point of view. They accepted some elements of pluralism in culture, expanded freedom to pursue research in sciences, accepted the existence of private agriculture [. . .] approved (despite some harassment and repressions) the existence of the Catholic church as an independent and powerful organization. Gradually, these forced concessions diminished the dependency of society, making it possible for different social groups to articulate their aspirations.[29]

Similarly, Jerzy Holzer points out that "Polish experiences in 1956 produced, on the one hand, the belief in the power of society (the regime can be forced to make concessions). On the other hand, they produced self-assurance among the power elite (masses can be relatively easily pacified if one can wait long enough for political energy to burn down)."[30]

In sum, as a result of the post-October transition, Poland became a country with semiautonomous public spaces, an independent Catholic church, a modicum of intellectual freedoms, a limited freedom of travel, an openness to the West in culture and sciences, and a degree of institutional independence within the universities, the media, and professional organizations. These "unpatrolled spaces" became laboratories of experience that nurtured political dissent and opposition. In 1956, the new repertoire of collective protest emerged, and the culture of resistance among educated classes was symbolically validated. Certain ele-

29. Kersten, "Rok 1956," 145. See also Włodzimierz Brus, "Trwałe konsekwencje 'Polskiego Października,' " in *1956 w dwadziescia lat później z mysla o przyszlosci* (London: Aneks, 1978), 53–62.

30. Jerzy Holzer, "Kryzysy i przezwyciężanie kryzysów w państwach komunistycznych," *Krytyka* 34–35 (1991): 40.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

ments of the noncommunist national tradition were resurrected and tolerated by the party-state. This situation differed radically from the outcomes of the 1956 de-Stalinization crisis in Hungary and in 1968 Czechoslovakia. In short, the political opportunity structure in Poland became significantly more open in comparison to other state-socialist regimes, despite the fact that organizational and institutional structures of the party-state were similar.

Perils of Frozen De-Stalinization: From March 1968 to Solidarity

In March 1968, a student revolt dramatically brought to the forefront Poland's internal problems—progressive economic stagnation, growing intra-elite conflict, a steady retreat from October 1956 hopes and promises, and an intensifying campaign against the intellectual elite.[31] The revolt was a desperate effort by groups of intellectuals and students to defend the remnants of the concessions achieved in 1956, and an attempt to force the regime to keep alive the legacies of 1956. It was also the political culmination of several years of growing disappointment and discontent, evidenced by the escalating conflict between the increasingly conservative Polish regime and the increasingly "revisionist" Polish intellectuals.

In February 1962, a debating society founded by Poland's leading intellectuals during 1956, the Club of a Crooked Circle, was banned. The following year, two influential cultural weeklies were liquidated, censorship was tightened, and certain liberal writers, artists, and scholars were sharply criticized by the party's authorities. In response, in March of 1964 a group of thirty-four writers and scholars sent a letter to Premier Jozef Cyrankiewicz criticizing restrictions on artistic freedom, cultural production, and censorship as well as demanding changes in the state's cultural and educational policies. The letter caused a considerable political stir. In March 1965, two young revisionist intellectuals—Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski—wrote an open letter to

31. A detailed description and interpretation of the events can be found in Karpinski, *Count-Down,* 105–38; Jack Bielasiak, "Social Confrontation to Contrived Crisis: March 1968 in Poland," *East European Quarterly* 22:1 (1988): 81–105; and, above all, Jerzy Eisler, *Marzec 1968* (Warszawa: PWN, 1991). See also Andrzej Flis, "Crisis and Political Ritual in Postwar Poland," *Problems of Communism* 37 (May-August 1988): 43–54, for an original interpretation. The official point of view of the Polish regime may be found in Bogdan Hillebrandt, *Marzec 1968* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Spółdzielcze, 1986).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

party members that contained a critical analysis of party-state policies. In both cases, the regime responded with repressive actions against the signatories of the letters. Their books and articles were banned, contracts were canceled, passports were confiscated, and official police investigations were initiated. Kuroń and Modzelewski were arrested and sentenced to prison terms; as was Melchior Wańkowicz, one of the signatories of the "Letter of 34." In 1965 state-church relations, which had become increasingly strained since 1958, deteriorated significantly following a letter sent by the Polish Episcopate to West German bishops. The letter was an official invitation to the latter to participate in the celebration of a thousand years of Polish Catholicism and contained the phrase "we forgive you and ask for your forgiveness." The government responded with an antichurch campaign built on the appeal to anti-German sentiments in Polish society. It also refused to allow Pope Paul VI to visit Poland, causing an international sensation. In 1966, during the tenth anniversary of the October 1956 transition, intellectuals who criticized regime policies during meetings organized to commemorate the events were expelled from the Party. Many others gave up their party membership in a gesture of solidarity. A mass petition was signed by 1,200 students and academics protesting both disciplinary proceedings instituted against students who participated in university-organized discussions and the suspension of Adam Michnik. At the same time, an anti-Semitic campaign was orchestrated by the conservative and nationalistic faction within the party elite following the Arab-Israeli War in 1967 and Soviet-bloc support for the Arab countries. The country's political situation was fraught with tensions, conflicts, and confrontations. Intellectuals' discontent, the primitive anti-Semitic campaign, and the regime's increasingly repressive policies had the greatest impact on the political atmosphere in the major academic centers around the country.

STUDENT REVOLT—MARCH 1968

During the 1967–68 academic year, political tensions at Warsaw University were high. The catalyst for open confrontation was the decision to close production of a patriotic nineteenth-century Polish play, "Forefathers' Eve" by Adam Mickiewicz, at the National Theater in Warsaw. The play's final performance on 30 January turned into a patriotic manifestation, after which a small student demonstration was

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

dispersed by the police. Two of the leaders of the demonstration, Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer, were expelled from the university. Some 3,145 people in Warsaw and 1,098 in Wroclaw signed a petition, addressed to the authorities, protesting the banning of the play. The Warsaw branch of the Union of Polish Writers criticized the regime's cultural policies at one of its meetings and demanded that production of "Forefathers' Eve" be allowed to continue unhampered. When a peaceful assembly of students at Warsaw University protesting the expulsion of Michnik and Szlajfer was attacked by the plainclothes security-police forces on March 1968, a full-scale confrontation erupted. During the next two days, students organized rallies and street demonstrations, and each time they turned into battles with the militarized police (ZOMO). In the space of a few days, the wave of student demonstrations spread to all major Polish academic centers. In several cities, students launched street demonstrations and fought with ZOMO. In other university towns there were rallies and meetings. During street confrontations students were brutally attacked with water cannon, tear gas, and truncheons. Faculty members were often beaten along with the students whenever the police invaded university buildings in pursuit of demonstrators. Students launched occupation strikes at Warsaw University and at the Warsaw Polytechnic. Students everywhere condemned police brutality and demanded the formation of an independent student organization, abolition of censorship, introduction of economic reforms, and observance of the constitution and political rights.

The regime responded to the rebellion of students and intellectuals with a fury. Hundreds of students were expelled from universities, sentenced and jailed, or drafted into military service. Intellectuals who sympathized with the students were viciously attacked in the press; universities were purged and their autonomy abolished. The authorities closed down the departments of economics, philosophy, sociology, and psychology at Warsaw University. A propaganda campaign in the mass media portrayed students and intellectuals as agents of Zionism, revisionism, German revanchism, and American imperialism. The anti-intelligentsia campaign was paralleled by an escalating anti-Semitic campaign. Hundreds of people lost their party membership and jobs because of their Jewish origin. As a result, following the March events some 20,000 people (mostly of Jewish origin) were forced to emigrate from Poland. The Party attempted to create mistrust and division be-

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

tween workers and the intelligentsia. Party organizations mobilized groups of workers to stage protest meetings against "troublemakers" and "ungrateful" students and intellectuals who lived at the expense of the working class while shamelessly slandering the workers' state. This ugly, crudely manipulated repressive campaign found its unfortunate consequences in December 1970, when workers of the Polish coastal region went on strike to protest drastic price increases and a new austerity program and the students and intellectuals did not join their struggle.

The events of 1968 signified the final defeat of the groups and forces that had secured the most tangible concessions in 1956; that is, the intellectuals and the reformist factions within the Party. Bielasiak argues that a major consequence of the 1968 upheaval was that

> the liberal and revisionist elements within the PZPR were virtually eliminated from significant positions. More important, the revisionists, disillusioned by the wholesale attack on the intellectual community, ceased to believe that one could reform the system from within. They saw the 1968 attacks as evidence that the party cared exclusively about power, and that no meaningful political change was possible. Initially, and for some time, they therefore, retreated into political passivity.[32]

The merciless destruction of the Czechoslovak reform movement by the Soviets in the summer of 1968 supplied additional proof for what many saw as the impossibility of reforms from within. While the March events, with their ugly anti-Semitic and antiintellectual campaigns, represented a setback for the Polish intelligentsia and Polish culture in general, they also left important legacies that become evident only at the end of the 1970s.

First of all, defeat of the revisionist opposition changed the ideological orientation of intellectuals. According to Kołakowski, "March 1968, despite all prosecutions and repressions, finally liberated Polish culture from ties with the communist system and its ideology. There was nothing left to 'revise' anymore, and nobody was ready to expect any improvement from one or another party faction."[33] Moreover, following a dramatic protest by independent Catholic deputies in Parliament against police actions in March, left-wing and revisionist opposition groups began to recognize independent Catholic circles as

32. Jack Bielasiak, "The Party: Permanent Crisis," in *Poland, Genesis of a Revolution,* 15.
33. Leszek Kolakowski, "The Intelligentsia," in *Poland: Genesis of a Revolution,* 62.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

their natural allies. It was Adam Michnik who emphasized this legacy of the 1968 events: "Bridging the artificial boundaries which separated a Pole-radical from a Pole-Catholic is, in my view, one of the most precious values of the March legacy."[34] Finally, the March events became a formative political experience for the young Polish intellectuals, who, for the first time, faced head-on the repressive reality of state socialism. Tens of thousands of students participated in street demonstrations and strikes, and were beaten up by the police. Thousands were expelled from universities and hundreds arrested. All experienced firsthand the "organized lie frame-up" used by the authorities and the media to discredit protest participants. As Jerzy Holzer argues,

> the entire generation of young intelligentsia—students and young intellectuals—inherited from the March events the awareness of their own weakness and the feeling of bitterness against the rest of society which refused to support them. But they also inherited the hatred against the regime which responded to a timid protest with violence and tear gas, with lies in the media, with expulsion from universities and jobs, with arrest and trials.[35]

It was this generation which returned to politics during the days of the Solidarity movement and rose to power after 1989. Therefore, Jerzy Eisler is absolutely right when he states that "formation of the '68 generation was the most important and enduring value of the March events."[36] However, before defeated intellectuals and students mounted a new challenge to the regime, another collective actor entered the Polish political scene.

WORKER REVOLTS IN 1970 AND 1976

After the government's announcement of substantial price increases in basic foodstuff on 12 December 1970, workers in the coastal cities of Gdańsk, Gdynia, Elbląg, and Szczecin held mass meetings, elected strike committees, drew up lists of demands, organized marches to the local party headquarters, and inevitably clashed with the police and the

34. Adam Michnik, "Dziedzictwo Marca," in *Marzec '68: Sesja w Uniwersytecie Warszawskim 1981 r.,* vol. 2 (Warszawa: Studencka Oficyna Wydawnicza SOWA, 1981), 34. See also his *The Church and the Left,* trans. David Ost (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
35. Jerzy Holzer, *Solidarność 1980–1981: Geneza i historia* (Paryż: Instytut Literacki, 1984), 19.
36. Eisler, *Marzec 1968,* 411.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

military forces.[37] These events constituted the largest and most violent working-class uprising in the history of state-socialist regimes. The first protests and confrontations with the police broke out in Gdańsk and Gdynia on 14 December. During street riots the party's headquarters, the trade union, and government buildings were burned down. Protesting workers were killed and wounded when the police opened fire. Strikes and violent street clashes continued the next day, and by 16 December violent protests had spread to other coastal cities. The following day, workers in Szczecin (the second major industrial center of the coast) joined the rebellion with strikes and violent street demonstrations. In the course of the next few days, there were strikes in hundreds of factories throughout the region, repeated demonstrations and street battles between thousands of workers armed with bottles of gasoline; the police and the military forces responded with armored vehicles, tanks, and helicopters. In many instances, the police and the military opened fire on unarmed crowds, killing and wounding protesters. According to official data, between 14 and 20 December, 45 people were killed, 1,165 were wounded, and 3,161 were arrested.[38]

As a result of street riots, nineteen public buildings were burned down—including the regional party headquarters in Gdańsk and Szczecin—and ten tanks, eighteen armed personnel carriers, and some sixty police cars were destroyed. At the same time, massive forces of police and soldiers were concentrated in coastal cities, curfews were imposed, and the region's communication with the rest of the country was cut off in an effort to prevent further escalation of strikes and demonstrations.[39] On 19 December, however, when the costal region was al-

37. For a more detailed analysis of December 1970 events in Poland see Karpinski, *Count-Down,* 157–66; Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 15–82; Zygmunt Korybutowicz, *Grudzień 1970* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1983); Andrzej Głowacki, *Kryzys polityczny 1970 roku* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Związków Zawodowych, 1990); and Jerzy Eisler and Stanisław Trepczynski, *Grudzień '70: Wewnatrz 'Bialego Domu'* (Warszawa: Colibri, 1991). Testimonies of participants in Szczecin events may be found in Małgorzata Szejnert and Tomasz Zalewski, *Szczecin: Grudzień-Sierpień-Grudzień* (London: Aneks, 1986) and *Grudzień 1970* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1986). For an interpretation that reflects the Polish Communist party's point of view, see Mieczysław F. Rakowski, *Przesilenie grudniowe* (Warszawa: PIW, 1981).

38. The actual number of casualties is still unknown but is estimated at several hundred. See Jerzy Eisler, Przedslowie, in *Wojsko Polskie w Grudniu 1970,* 5–27.

39. During these events, regular military forces were employed in some 100 actions in all regions of the country, involving 61,000 soldiers, 1,700 tanks, 1,750 personnel carriers, and units of the air force and navy (see Ryszard J. Kukliński, "Wojna z narodem widziana od środka," *Kultura* (April 1987): 14). In the Baltic coast cities, 27,000 soldiers, 550 tanks, and 750 personnel carriers took part in pacifying the workers' rebellion. See also Edward J. Nalepa,

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

ready effectively pacified, strikes spread to other parts of the country. That day, there were about 100 strikes throughout Poland, but they all remained localized and ended by 22 December. There were also small street demonstrations in several cities, which were dispersed promptly by the police. The brutality of police action, the military occupation of factories, and the arrests of strike committee members, as well as a dramatic change in the country's leadership, contributed to the rapid decline of protests and the recovery of political control in the region by the regime. In addition, during this crisis the Polish intelligentsia, students, and the Church, having been pacified in 1968, did not join the workers but instead remained remarkably silent. Because the workers had no influential allies, their protests were easily suppressed and the political tensions promptly and skillfully defused. While sporadic strikes occurred during the first months of 1971, by the end of March the workers had effectively been demobilized.

The December 1970 revolt was a turning point in the tradition of workers' protest. The events created a historical memory of heroic struggle against the regime and became a symbolic reference point for working-class resistance in much the same way that the 1956 and the 1968 events had become a reference point for dissenting intelligentsia. For an entire generation of workers, especially those living in coastal cities who had participated in strikes and demonstrations, the brutal and repressive nature of the regime was revealed. The revolt also signified the political awakening of the Polish working class. Workers' demands were not exclusively economic but covered an entire range of issues pertaining to Poland's political situation. Such demands were heavily influenced by concepts of social justice and equality, and focused on the functioning of public institutions, including trade unions and the media, economic reforms, the management and organization of production in enterprises, and broader social issues such as health care, housing conditions, and public transportation.[40] Moreover, the events produced a new repertoire of protest, a new collective frame of action, and an experience of collective action that would shape the patterns of

Wojsko Polskie w Grudniu 1970 (Warszawa: Bellona, 1990); Luba Fajfer, "The Polish Military and the Crisis of 1970," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 26:2 (1993): 205–25; and Jerzy Eisler and Stanisław Trepczynski, *Grudzień '70,* 19–20 and 137–66.

40. See Beata Chmiel and Elżbieta Kaczyńska, eds., *Postulaty 1970–71 i 1980* (Warszawa: Universytet Warszawski, 1988).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

workers' protest in the years to come. Roman Laba strongly emphasizes this point, arguing that the "main characteristics of Solidarity, its master frames, were created autonomously by Polish workers six years before the creation of KOR and ten years before the rise of Solidarity. The sit-down strike and the interfactory strike committee are the organizational breakthroughs. The programmatic frame or breakthrough is the demand for free trade unions, independent of the Party."[41]

The differences between the workers' demands and actions in 1970 and in 1980 should not, however, be disregarded. The 1980 demands were articulated in the clear language of political rights; this was absent in 1970. Ten years later, the strikers demanded not only credible and truthful information in the media but, above all, the abolition of censorship and constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression. Similarly, they demanded not only the democratization of existing trade unions but the right to form new, independent unions.[42]

This difference was not a reflection of the "linguistic incompetence" of the 1970 strikers; it indicated a fundamental change in the political imagination and the emergence of a new political discourse in 1980. Therefore, the argument that the Solidarity movement was the sole creation and expression of the long-lasting working-class struggle—one in which the role of intellectuals, human-rights organizations, and the church was not important—is fundamentally flawed.[43]

The workers' rebellion sealed the fate of Gomułka's regime and closed a distinct period in Polish postwar history. The party's divided leadership used the occasion to accomplish a long-overdue transition of power within the ruling elite. On 20 December, at the extraordinary

41. Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity,* 11.

42. In Szczecin in 1970, for example, workers demanded "regular and reliable information about the country's political and economic situation in national mass media." In 1980 in Gdańsk, they demanded "the enforcement of freedom of speech, print and publication as guaranteed in the Polish constitution." In Szczecin in 1971, workers demanded the "immediate and legitimate elections of trade union authorities, workers councils and [. . .] democratic election in the party and youth organization on the factory level." In 1980 in Gdańsk, workers demanded the "recognition of free trade unions independent from the Party and employers as codified in the World Labor Organization's convention No. 87 ratified by the Polish government." See Piotr Marciniak, "Horyzont programowy strajków 1980 r.," *Studia nad ruchami społecznymi* 2 (1989): 153–54.

43. For the debate of the origin of the Solidarity movement see Michael Bernhard, "Reinterpreting Solidarity," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 24:3 (1991): 313–30; and Jan Kubik, "Who Done It: Workers or Intellectuals? Controversy Over Solidarity's Origin and Social Composition," *Theory and Society* 23 (1994): 441–66.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

Seventh Plenary Party Meeting, Gomułka was demoted and his four closest associates were removed from the Politburo. The new party leader, Edward Gierek, promised a two-year freeze on food prices and unspecified economic reforms. In spite of these pledges, there was a resurgence of strikes and protests that continued for several weeks. But because there was no response in other parts of the country, they slowly subsided. Gierek's regime skillfully restored order by blaming all use of force on the departing leaders, by offering conciliatory gestures, and through economic concessions. The original Five-Year Plan for 1971–75 was redrafted and revised to satisfy more of the people's social and economic needs rather than to fulfill quantitative production targets. Also, a new agricultural policy was announced that abolished compulsory delivery quotas for private farmers. Real wages increased by 22 percent as an immediate result of the crisis.[44] On 15 February, the government, responding to lingering strikes and workers' demands, canceled all price increases and lowered food prices to the level that existed prior to 13 December 1970. The promises of the Gierek regime, however, quickly turned into disappointments.

Gierek based his new economic policies and political promises on a massive influx of Western loans and an opening of the global market to Polish goods. He made no serious attempts, however, to reform Poland's economic institutions and practices. In the middle of the 1970s, this opening of the economy in the absence of systemic reforms backfired. The economic crisis that began in 1974 became sharply visible in 1976. On 24 June 1976, the regime attempted to deal with the crisis by restructuring the price of food and consumer goods, and in doing so it effectively cut real wages. On 25 June, workers responded with mass revolts in two industrial cities in central Poland and short-lived strikes in many other locations. The strikes that took place in 130 factories across the country were generally peaceful. They lasted only one day; that evening the price increases were revoked by the country's prime minister. In two cities, however, events turned violent and had lasting repercussions. In Radom during the street demonstrations, party buildings were attacked and set on fire, and in Ursus workers blocked the main railroad tracks in the country and fought with the police.[45]

44. See Staniszkis, *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution,* 257.

45. Street demonstrations also took place in Plock but were much less violent than in the other two places. For a detailed analysis of June 1976 events see Michael Bernhard, "The Strikes of

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

As in 1970, the regime acted decisively. Street demonstrations were brutally dispersed by militarized police, and hundreds of workers were arrested, beaten, and dismissed from their jobs. In Radom 2 people were killed during the riots, 121 were wounded, and more than 2,000 were arrested. Also, 75 policemen were injured. Throughout the entire country several thousand people lost their jobs as a direct result of their participation in the protests, and 500 were indicted. The events ended with a series of trials in which 25 workers were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to ten years. The repressions were followed by a propaganda campaign and orchestrated political rallies against "troublemakers" and "vandals." This time, however, the intellectual elites, already mobilized to prevent changes in the Polish constitution, recognized that real strength lay only in cooperating with and supporting the workers. In September 1976, a group of intellectuals founded the Committee for Workers' Defense (KOR) and demanded amnesty for all workers who had been arrested and tried, as well as an end to repressions. They began publishing information on political prosecution in Poland and collected funds to assist the victims of state repression. Also, the Catholic church officially demanded an end to repression against the workers involved in protests.

In the aftermath of the June 1976 events, an alliance among workers, intellectuals, students, and the Church began to emerge. The formation of KOR stimulated the rapid development of independent groups, organizations, and initiatives across the country. Intellectuals, students, workers, and peasants formed their own organizations to monitor state repression and provide the victims with support and protection. In addition, strictly political organizations were funded by some opposition activists. Underground publications flourished, and clandestine publishing houses and distribution networks were established. Independent self-education groups were formed, and unofficial "underground" universities were organized. The newly formed opposition groups secured their existence and consolidated the independent democratic space; they brought together committed groups of leaders

---

June 1976 in Poland," *East European Politics and Societies* 1:3 (1987): 363–92; Michael Bernhard, *The Origins of Democratization in Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 46–75; Jan J. Lipski, *KOR* (London: Aneks, 1983), 30–40; and Karpinski, *Count-Down,* 191–97. For a selection of documents see Wieslaw M. Mizerski, *Radomski Czerwiec 1976* (Lublin: Norbertinum, 1991).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

and supporters who reevaluated past experiences and designed new strategies.[46] Meanwhile, the economic crisis engulfed all branches of the economy and resulted in the erosion of all official power structures. The growing moral and intellectual decay affected the entire institutional structure of the regime. The Marxist-Leninist project, which for years had supplied the party's elite with political imagination and self-justification, crumbled to pieces. Pope John Paul II's visit to Poland in 1979 amounted to an open symbolic confrontation with the regime, setting the stage for a new round of political struggle between the Polish party-state and society.[47]

FROM SOLIDARITY TO 1989

In the summer of 1980, when a huge wave of social unrest shook the country, the collective actors who entered the political stage this time were only nominally the same. For the first time in Poland's postwar history, the social and political conflict transcended both the ideological categories developed in intraparty struggles and the symbolic cleavage between revisionists and dogmatists. It went beyond all traditional limitations, divisions, political visions, strategies, and concepts.[48] Moreover, the political and social gap between workers and intellectuals was bridged as a result of the post-1976 developments and the resultant opposition activities. In August 1980 society, unified and

46. For a detailed analysis of independent groups and initiatives see Michael Bernhard, *The Origin of Democratization in Poland;* Peter Raina, *Independent Social Movements in Poland* (London: London School of Economics and Politics, 1981); Jan J. Lipski, *KOR: A History of the Workers' Defense Committee in Poland, 1976–1981,* trans. Olga Amsterdamska and Gene Moore (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Stefan Kawalec, *Demokratyczna Opozycja w Polsce* (New York: Wydawnictwo Głos, 1979); and Jerzy Holzer, *Solidarność 1980–1981* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1984). See also Brumberg, *Poland: Genesis of a Revolution;* Martin Myant, *Poland: A Crisis for Socialism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982); and Keith J. Lepak, *Prelude to Solidarity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
47. For a comprehensive analysis of this period, emphasizing the significance of papal visits to Poland for the emergence of the Solidarity movement, see Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).
48. The period of Solidarity in Poland already has an extensive bibliography. Competent analyses of events can be found in Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985); Alain Touraine et al., *Solidarity: Poland 1980–1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Staniszkis, *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution;* Holzer, *Solidarnosc, 1980–1981;* David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity;* Lawrence Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barriers: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Michael D. Kennedy, *Professionals, Power and Solidarity in Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

organized in an all-new national movement, was ready to sign a genuine contract with the party-state. The new workers' organization, Solidarity, led by its own grassroots leaders and supported by the church, the intellectuals, and the majority of the nation, gained strength from day to day. With some ten million members, Solidarity presented a mighty political force that was able to threaten not only the domestic order but the entire political stability of the region. In contrast to earlier protests, the demands of the union were distinctly political: freedom of association, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, social autonomy and self-government, and equality of rights and duties.

As Alex Pravda pointed out, "1980 brought an unprecedented expansion and politicization of workers' demands. Instead of pressing only for material security [. . .] strikers asked for institutional change [and were] in the forefront of the struggle for civil liberties."[49] The crisis in Poland was primarily a political crisis. It indicated the collapse of a definite concept of social and political order, a concept that found its manifestation in the system of power that had been established in Poland forty years earlier. The August Agreements that followed the nationwide strike action, announced the formation of the first free trade unions in the communist world and established a completely new model of state organization, combining an authoritarian state that securely controlled national politics and vibrant, democratic politics in places where the state's control was no longer effective.

The successful conclusion and the unexpected concessions forced upon the Polish party-state by the strikers set this political conflict apart from any events that had taken place in the past. The summer of 1980 produced the rapid mass mobilization and an unprecedented wave of strikes that involved all social strata and regions of the country. According to Piotr Marciniak, these strikes were characterized by:

> (1) the absence of preexisting organizational resources on the level of enterprises, such as independent employees' organizations, (2) a country-wide territorial scope and local universality, (3) long duration and a tendency toward the expansion and escalation of protests, (4) strong bonds of solidarity between strikers which bridged factory, industry, and social divisions, (5) the dignified character of protest actions and an ab-

49. Alex Pravda, "The Workers," in *Poland: Genesis of a Revolution,* 68. See also Ireneusz Krzemiński, *Czego chcieli, o czym myśleli ? Analiza postulatów robotników Wybrzeza z 1970 i 1980* (Warszawa: IS UW 1987); and Piotr Marciniak, "Horyzont programowy strajków 1980 r."

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

sence of violence, (6) a strong impact on significant segments of the establishment (local authorities, management, enterprise party, and union organizations), and (7) the rapid development of strong organizational structures and a common identity, which quickly lead to the formation of a nationwide movement.[50]

But perhaps even more important was the fact that the movement won significant political concessions and the time necessary to secure and consolidate the achievements of the successful countrywide collective action. Thus, by the end of the summer Polish society had new organizational structures that emerged during the strikes and a network of old embryonic opposition organizations that were formed at the end of the 1970s. For the first time, a state-socialist regime faced a highly organized, independent opposition movement with independent resources, experienced grassroots leaders, and the capacity to mobilize millions.

The institutionalization of Solidarity also provided the impetus for the independent organization of other social groups that were unable to join the union because they were not employees of state enterprises or public institutions. University students were the first group to start their own independent organization and to press for reforms in the education system.[51] Establishing independent farmers' unions proved to be more difficult. Polish farmers did not represent a cohesive social group due to four decades of exploitation, cultural and political mistreatment, and abuse by the state. Deep-seated grievances among farmers, however, soon resulted in a campaign of protests in the countryside that ranged from localized hunger strikes to spectacular demonstrations and occupation of public buildings.[52] Artisans, craftsmen, and small businessmen also organized their own independent union.

Even the existing state-controlled organizations—the professional associations and youth organizations, the two existing political parties

50. Piotr Marciniak, "Strajki polskie lat osiemdziesiątych—ciągłość i zmiana," in *Studia nad ruchami spolecznymi* 5 (1990): 7. See also Jadwiga Staniszkis, "The Evolution of Forms of Working-Class Protest in Poland: Sociological Reflection on the Gdańsk-Szczecin Case, August 1980," *Soviet Studies* 28:2 (1981): 204–31; and Jolanta Kulpinska, ed., "Raport PTS—Strajki 1980," in *Studia and ruchami społecznymi* 5 (1990).

51. See Andrzej Anusz, *Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów w latach 1980–1989* (Warszawa: Akces, 1991); Roman Kowalczyk, *Lodzki strajk studencki* (Warszawa: NOWA, 1992); and Barbara Wejnert, "The Student Movement in Poland, 1980–1981," *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 10 (1988): 173–81.

52. See Maria Halamska, "Peasant Movements in Poland, 1980–1981," *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 10 (1988): 147–60; "Farmers' 'Solidarity' 1981–1987," *Polish Agriculture* 8 (1988): 18–22; and Wojciech Blasiak, "Centra i peryferie ruchów chłopskich w Polsce 1980–1981," *Studia nad ruchami społecznymi* 2 (1989): 201–28.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

(the United Peasant party and the Democratic party), and the Communist party itself—were transformed by the explosion of popular participation following August 1980. They underwent a rapid process of internal democratization and a change in leadership. As a result, organizations that used to act as "transmission belts" between the party-state and society, and controlled the political arena, now acquired a significant degree of autonomy and often challenged the state's policies. Among independent organizations that existed prior to the summer of 1980, those affiliated with the Catholic church grew rapidly. The Catholic intelligentsia and many individual priests were deeply involved in the Solidarity movement, although the church hierarchy attempted to position itself as the mediator of conflicts between society and the state. Thus, the civic fever sparked by Solidarity spread to all groups, cities, and villages, and to all organizations and institutions of the Polish party-state. The self-governing spirit even affected the police and the military as their members attempted to organize independent trade unions.

In a country of 35.5 million, one-third of the population became members of independent professional, social, and political organizations. Moreover, the level of mass participation in various forms of collective action was phenomenal. By the end of the Solidarity period, one in five Poles had participated in a collective protest at least once. Predictably, only one in ten people living in the countryside participated in protest actions, while in cities the ratio was one in four. Twice as many men as women (more than 30 percent of which were younger than 25) participated in protest actions.[53] To sum up, Polish society experienced an unprecedented cultural and political revolution that altered all institutional structures, political attitudes, and modes of participation.[54] The emergence of a multidimensional, self-organized, strong, and independent democratic civil society that facilitated the

53. See Władysław Adamski, "Afiliacje zwiazkowe, stosunek do protestów i wartości obywatelskich jako przejaw konfliktu interesów," in *Polacy '88: Dynamika konfliktu i szanse reform,* Władysław Adamski et al., ed. (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1989), 175.

54. The evolution of political attitudes is the best-documented aspect of Poland's developments between 1980 and 1989, thanks to systematic empirical research conducted by a team of leading Polish sociologists. See Władysław Adamski et al., *Polacy '80: Wyniki badan ankietowych* (Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 1981); *Polacy '81: Postrzeganie kryzysu i konfliktu* (Warszawa: IFiS PAN, 1982); *Polacy '84: Dynamika społecznego konfliktu i konsensusu* (Warszawa: UW, 1986); and *Polacy '88.* A comprehensive list of publications based on these surveys was included in Władysław Adamski et al., *Polacy '90: Konflikty i zmiana* (Warszawa: IFiS and ISP PAN, 1991), 186–88.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

eruption of mass public participation became the most striking characteristic of the Solidarity period.

Solidarity evolved into more than an organized social force and a vehicle of political participation. It represented a distinct intellectual and symbolic formation that provided a multitude of groups and actors with a collective identity. During the period of its existence, Solidarity was able to develop a coherent collective identity that reflected and reinforced the insurmountable division between the "them" of the alien communist state and the "us" of society, as well as to establish a collective frame of action based on the notion of inalienable human and political rights. Solidarity's distinctive alternative political discourse merged concepts and ideas developed by the democratic opposition in the 1970s with those promoted by the social and ethical doctrine of the Catholic church. The movement also appropriated important segments of national and patriotic values and traditions. It found powerful symbolic expressions that appealed to the political imagination of diverse social groups within society. The collective identity of the movement was built around those symbols, values, and traditions, which set it apart from the official political language, values, and ideology.

Thus, Poland's political crisis did more than uproot a significant part of the state's theoretical and political foundations, and undermine its routinely employed legitimation claims. The crisis generated two opposing and well-defined political forces representing the state and society, and created two separate cultural and political idioms that appealed to different values and traditions and used different political calendars and symbols.[55] Solidarity emerged as a powerful defender of the Polish national tradition and values, and as a representative of a powerful vision of reform and political change based on the self-organization of a democratic society in the face of a totalitarian state. It pushed the party-state elites into a position of guarantor for foreign political domination and were considered indispensable only as long as the geopolitical balance of power in Europe remained unaltered.

55. For an analysis of the cultural dimension of the political crisis in Poland see Kubik, *The Power of Symbols Against the Symbols of Power.* See also Grzegorz Bakuniak and Krzysztof Nowak, "The Creation of a Collective Identity in a Social Movement, The Case of 'Solidarnosc' in Poland," *Theory and Society* 16 (1987): 401–29; Wojciech Modzelewski, "Symbolika Solidarnosci," *Studia nad ruchami społecznymi* 5 (1989): 229–79; Sergiusz Kowalski, *Krytyka solidarnościowego rozumu* (Warszawa: PEN, 1990); and Irena Grudzinska-Gross, "Culture as Opposition in Today's Poland," *Journal of International Affairs* 50:2 (1987): 367–90.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

The struggle that unfolded in Poland during the months that followed the August Agreements and culminated in the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981, however, also gave evidence of the regime's ability to survive and adjust to an unprecedented challenge from below. This was due in part to the pragmatism and flexibility of those in power, but it was also the result of Solidarity's own self-imposed limitations.[56] Andrzej Walicki emphasized this paradox when he pointed out that "if Poland were not part and parcel of the Soviet empire, one would ask only why a powerful, all-national movement demanded so little, and how it would be possible to combine a fully-fledged participatory democracy on the local level with communist-dominated government and, more important, with full communist control over the coercive powers." Furthermore, he asked how the Soviet Union could have accepted an arrangement where "communist power in Poland should be reduced to safeguarding the interest of the Warsaw Pact."[57]

On 13 December 1981, the imposition of martial law abruptly ended a precarious balance between political forces in Poland and reduced political uncertainties in the region. This was the most extensive internal military operation in the history of state-socialist regimes. Poland's borders were sealed, communication systems cut off, a national curfew imposed, extraordinary repressive legal regulations introduced, all organizations suspended, and tens of thousands of Solidarity activists were detained. Literally overnight, Poland changed from the most liberal to the most repressive regime in the Soviet bloc. In just a few years, however, it became clear that, as with other historical parallels, similarities between Polish demobilization policies and their counterparts in Hungary after 1956 and Czechoslovakia after 1968 were rather superficial. Despite its startling short-term success, the imposition of martial law did not break the political stalemate between the state and the society that emerged during the Solidarity period. While Solidarity's legal organizational structures were destroyed and its resources dis-

56. Institutional transformations and policies of the Polish regime are analyzed in more detail by the author's book *The Stae Against Society*. See also Bartłomiej Kaminski, *The Collapse of State Socialism: The Case of Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Jakub Karpinski, *Dziwna wojna* (Paryz: Instytut Literacki, 1990); and Jan Zielonka, "Poland: The Experiment with Communist Statism," in "The Crisis Problems in Poland," Research Project "Crises in the Soviet-Type Systems," Study 12a (Koln: Index, 1987), 59–82.

57. Andrzej Walicki, "The Main Components of the Situation in Poland," *Politics* 19:1 (1984): 5.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

persed, the movement soon emerged as a loose network of groups organized around territorial, institutional, professional, and personal bases united by common goals, values, and symbols.

These underground organizations formed the backbone of opposition and resistance against the postmartial-law regime. During this period, public-opinion polls consistently reflected that a significant segment of the population (approximately 25 percent) remained in strong opposition to the regime and that political divisions in the country persisted. As Krzysztof Jasiewicz concluded, "one of the most important results of the *Polacy '84* survey was the confirmation of the hypotheses that the political conflict which most sharply emerged in Poland in 1980–1981 was not resolved as a result of martial law and political events which followed its imposition. Quite to the contrary, it persisted although in less visible and spectacular forms."[58] The most visible forms of oppositional activities were street demonstrations and protests organized on the thirteenth of every month (the imposition of martial law) and other noncommunist national holidays. Street protests were most frequent and dramatic in 1982 and 1983, although they were usually confined to Solidarity strongholds in several big cities. The most important components of underground Solidarity's activities, however, were the formation of independent education as well as countrywide underground publishing and distribution networks.

While the extent and intensity of oppositional activities and public support for underground Solidarity declined through the 1980s, groups of hard-core activists carried on a broad range of clandestine activities in all regions of the country. Also, with the decline of political repressions, legally existing groups and organizations gradually extended the limits of permissible activities. By the end of the decade, Poland had again become the most politically liberal country of the Soviet bloc. Liberalization of the postmartial-law regime, together with the declining capacity of the Solidarity movement to coordinate the struggle of oppositional groups led to significant organizational and ideological fragmentation of the Polish opposition. Various political and social movements and parties filled up the entire spectrum of available political options. Thus, at the end of the decade the national level of con-

58. Krzysztof Jasiewicz, *Polacy '84 z półtorarocznej perspektywy: Raport wstępny z badania "Opinie Polaków—jesień '85"* (Warszawa: UW, 1986), 9.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

sensus and unity that had characterized the glory days of Solidarity gradually unraveled.

Although the imposition of martial law destroyed organized opposition and liberated the ruling elites from constant political pressures and threats, it did nothing to improve the party-state's capacity to deal with Poland's economic crisis. Also, with the passage of time, it became increasingly clear that the initial success in crushing the independent organizations was not followed by consistent demobilization strategies through which the Polish party-state elites could again emerge as the unchallenged political force in the country and so regain the political initiative. For a variety of reasons, the ruling elites refrained from massive political repression and searched for some sort of accommodation with representatives of the defeated opposition. This inconsistent demobilization process, during which both sides of the conflict frequently changed their strategies and failed to achieve convincing success, stretched over the entire decade, prolonging the political and economic difficulties that began in the 1970s.

In the spring of 1988, after several years of relative social peace, strikes and protests again erupted in factories and universities across the country. Students organized demonstrations on the anniversary of the March 1968 events and staged occupation strikes at several universities in May. Independent street demonstrations took place in several cities on 1 May. In April and May, the former Solidarity strongholds—Lenin Shipyard, Nowa Huta, and Stalowa Wola steelworks—and a number of other factories went on strike. During these strikes the restoration of the Solidarity union and the reinstitution of Solidarity activists who had been fired during and after martial law became major demands. These political demands were, however, eclipsed by a large number of specific demands concerning wages and benefits, as well as shop-floor issues particular to a given enterprise. As a result of these actions, former leaders and activists of the Solidarity movement again became present in the country's political life. These strikes, however, failed to stimulate mass political mobilization and revive the spirit of 1980. According to Piotr Marciniak, they resembled the "normal" strike waves that took place in many societies. These strikes were territorially limited and failed to achieve local universality. They were shorter and tended to decline rather than expand. Bridging the social boundaries became difficult. Strikes sharpened existing divisions and were not sup-

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

ported by any of the country's social elites. Finally, they did not produce new organizational structures and identities.[59]

Although the first wave of strikes brought no tangible political concessions, another wave that took place during the summer of 1988 was more successful. This time the strikes spread to the Silesian coal mines and Solidarity strongholds in the regions of Szczecin and Gdańsk. Party-state authorities realized that they were facing another potential political earthquake. Despite resistance from important segments of the ruling elite, party leaders finally agreed to meet with representatives of the opposition, giving them quasi-legal status. In the fall of 1988, the long preparations for the famous "roundtable" negotiations began, which gave the initial stimulus to historical changes in East Central Europe. Both the ruling elite and the Solidarity-based opposition had to reach an internal consensus for entering the talks. Official negotiations began in Warsaw on 6 February 1989. They were continued amid growing social tensions and multiplying protest actions. For example, in February 1989 there were 214 strikes in Poland, including 81 occupation strikes. In the first two weeks of March work stoppages took place in 223 enterprises and strikes in 341, affecting all regions and industries in the country.[60] During the same time, there were street demonstrations organized by students and ecological movements. Public-opinion polls revealed that 4.4 percent of adult Poles participated in strikes and demonstrations at least once in 1988, and 8.4 percent did so in 1989.[61] Among 314 protest events recorded by the Polish press in 1989, about 80 took place before the signing of the roundtable agreements.[62]

There is a widely shared belief in the existing literature that the sur-

59. Marciniak, "Strajki polskie lat osiemdziesiątych," 8–9. See also Paweł Smoleński and Wojciech Giełżynski, *Robotnicy '88* (London: Aneks, 1989) for detailed accounts of strikes at Lenin Shipyard and Nowa Huta steel mill; and Anna Blaszkiewicz, Zbigniew W. Rykowski and Jerzy Werenstein-Żuławski, "The Solidarnosc Spring?," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 27:2 (1994): 125–34.
60. See Document nr. 39, "Informacja o konfliktach spolecznych i akcjach protestacyjnych w zakladach pracy i srodowiskach zawodowych," in Stanislaw Perzkowski, ed., *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego i Sekretariatu KC. Ostatni rok władzy 1988–1989* (London: Aneks, 1994), 303–4. See also Document nr. 3, "Kalendarium akcji strajkowych w okresie 15–30 sierpnia 1988 r.," in *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego,* 15–31; and Marek Pernal and Jan Skórzyński, *Kalendarium. Solidarność 1980–1989* (Warszawa: Omnipress, 1990).
61. CBOS, "Życie codzienne Polaków w 1989 r." (Warszawa, grudzień 1989).
62. Data from the project "Strategies of Collective Protest in Democratizing Societies: Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the former East Germany, 1989–1994," directed by Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

render of power by communist regimes during 1989 represented, in essence, a pacted transition accomplished through peaceful negotiations between the reformists within the ruling elite and representatives of independent democratic groups; sustained mass mobilization supposedly did not occur and therefore had no significant impact on the transfer of power. While this may have been the case in some countries—Hungary, for example—such a view should definitely be revised when it comes to Poland. The roundtable negotiations and their final outcome were to a large extent the result of the wave of popular mobilization that began in the spring of 1988, peaked in the summer of 1988, and lasted well into 1989. In general, the 1989 transition was the direct result of a mass political movement that emerged in 1980, remained a considerable political force after the imposition of martial law, and renewed its protest activities in 1988. Thus, Polish political developments reflected a powerful challenge from below that lasted for more than decade, involved millions of people, and celebrated its final triumph in the events of 1989.

The roundtable agreements were signed on 5 April and provided for re-legalization of Solidarity, Farmers' Solidarity, and the Independent Student Union. The opposition also gained limited access to the official political process through semidemocratic elections that were scheduled for June 1989. The results of the roundtable negotiations set in motion a rapid process of liberalization, and the party-state elites very soon lost control over events. The parliamentary elections represented a clear moral and political victory for the restored Solidarity movement. By the fall of 1989, Poles had established the first noncommunist government in the region since the 1940s, and by January 1990 the Polish United Workers party had ceased to exist. New political elites that emerged from the Solidarity movement led the country toward liberal democracy and a market economy.

Collective Protest and Resistance in Poland: Conclusions

In this paper I have examined Poland's experiences under communist rule from a specific theoretical angle. I have focused on the role of political crises and collective protest in shaping a distinct type of state-socialist regime, one that was more tolerant, institutionally more pluralistic, and more prone to public engagement and political crises. I have argued that the high incidence of political conflict and collective

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

protest cannot be attributed exclusively to social, political, or historical factors specific to Poland or to general contradictions present in the communist organization of the economy and politics. Instead, I have suggested that the source of Polish exceptionalism can be found in the country's unique political dynamics and its crisis-driven political development.

The postwar history of Poland can be conceptualized as a series of confrontations between ruling elites and various actors within society that altered the political opportunity structure, making it ever more conducive to organized challenge from below. In this sequence of confrontations, the pattern and outcomes of the de-Stalinization crisis of 1956 played the most important role in shaping Poland's political trajectory. The transition to the post-Stalinist regime produced distinctive institutional, political, and cultural legacies that resulted in notable institutional and cultural pluralism, setting Poland apart from other state-socialist regimes in the region. It also made Poland's regime more vulnerable to various forms of popular mobilization and protest, and provided the political actors outside the party-state with important resources. As a result, different groups within Polish society periodically challenged the policies of the regime through mass political protest. These struggles were important generation-defining events, learning experiences that provided symbolic, intellectual, and social resources for future confrontations. Over time, various groups developed, cultivated and reworked their specific protest traditions, repertoires of contention, and collective action frames, enhancing the opposition potential of society. This potential was activated in subsequent political crises in which challenging groups, despite their ultimate failure, were able to shape the institutions and policies of the Polish regime and win tangible political and economic concessions. These different, group-specific traditions of protest coalesced in the political crisis and mass mobilization of 1980, producing a sharp polarization between the state and society and uniting various groups in Polish society into a powerful revolutionary movement. The rise and legal existence of the ten-million-strong independent trade-union movement, the self-organization of other social and political actors, and the appropriation of Polish national and democratic traditions by new political actors made the situation in Poland qualitatively different throughout the 1980s. As a result, Poland's political development and conditions departed even further from those in other Soviet-bloc

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

countries. Despite Solidarity's defeat in December of 1981, and the imposition of a highly repressive regime, the party-state elites were never able to recover political initiative and introduce effective economic and political reforms. By the end of the decade, the paralyzing political stalemate, the resurgence of opposition activities, and mass protest had forced the regime to enter a controlled political transition. In 1989, the ten-year political struggle culminated in the downfall of the communist regime and the rapid democratization of the Polish political system. Thus, the process of deconstruction of the state-socialist regime in Poland began in earnest during the 1980–81 crisis, but its beginnings go back to the 1956 de-Stalinization crisis.

The post-1989 experiences of Poland's newly founded democracy reflect the legacies of popular struggles. Following the 1989 transfer of power, collective protest in Poland was intense. Protest actions ranged from single isolated strikes to nationwide protest campaigns involving hundreds of schools, hospitals, and enterprises as well as thousands of workers and public-sector employees. They included one-hour-long warning strikes as well as protracted and desperate strike campaigns that lasted for months. The repertoire of protest was indeed diverse. It consisted of both violent and nonviolent street demonstrations, a variety of occupation strikes, dramatic hunger strikes, huge rallies, boycotts, occupation of public buildings, blockades of roads and public spaces, rent strikes, and various forms of symbolic protest. Protest activities spread to all regions of the country and involved all social groups and categories, with workers, public-sector employees, peasants, and youths as the most active participants. Comparative research indicates that Poland had the highest incidence of protest among the East Central European postcommunist countries.[63] The high level of collective protest is not an exclusive result of costly economic and social policies introduced by the postcommunist governments. Other countries have been implementing similar measures to facilitate the transition to a market economy with much less opposition from groups and organizations within society. To a large extent, the situation in Poland reflects past collective struggles. As I have argued in this paper, well before the fall of communism, various groups in Polish society developed consid-

63. For the preliminary results of a four-country study on protest activities, see Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, "Contentious Politics in New Democracies: Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Former East Germany," Program on Eastern and Central Europe Working Paper Series, Center for European Studies, Harvard University, no. 41, 1997.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013

erable resources and the expertise necessary to mount successful collective action. For this reason, reexamination of political developments under state socialism is indispensable to understanding critical elements of the ongoing political collective action. For this reason, a reexamination of political developments under state socialism is indispensable to understanding critical elements of the ongoing political transition in the region and the diverging experiences of the postcommunist countries.

Downloaded from eep.sagepub.com at Harvard Libraries on August 9, 2013