The Collapse in Poland

Rudy Perkins

1982

> "Winter is yours, Spring is ours!"
>
> —Solidarity

Painted across a thousand walls in Poland, this promise reminds us that the democratic upsurge there is far from buried. A certain phase of the movement has ended. When the movement reappears its form will be different, advanced by the lessons of a year and a half in the open air, and by the lessons of December's defeat.

What led to the collapse in Poland? With 10 million industrial workers, three million farmers, and a half million tradesmen in Solidarity—that is, 80–90% of the workforce—how was a coup possible? With several months distance from December 13th, the pattern of events is a little clearer, and information on the resistance a little more available. Further discussion about the collapse is possible now, and as necessary as the debate surrounding Solidarity's gains.

The Counter-Offensive

The Polish Communist Party government was initially split and immobilized in the face of the Solidarity movement. "Hardliners"—e.g. CP members gathered around ranking central committee member Stefan Olszowski, the "Warsaw 80 Club," the anti-Semitic "Grunwald Patriotic Union" and its journal *Reality*, etc.—could not command a clear majority in the party in 1980. The party itself was fissured by "rank and file" democratic efforts such as the so-called "horizontal structures" which attempted to connect party locals together at the base, communicating outside the party hierarchy. This effort at "renewal" of the party was active in Torun, Lodz, Szczecin, Gdansk and elsewhere.

Tadeus Fiszbach, Gdansk party leader that fateful August of 1980, was sympathetic to the workers, liked by many shipyard strikers, and counseled for negotiations to settle the strikes. In fact, just as radical Solidarity members criticized the compromising attitude of Lech Walesa and other union leaders, the same conciliationism "weakened" the CP. This "liberalism" helped open the door for a year and a half of Solidarity's democratic experimentation.

By the Spring of 1981, however, the party hardliners were beginning to mobilize a counter-offensive that would reach full steam by August 1981 and culminate in the December coup. To highlight key events of this period of counterattack by the government:

- Feb. 1981: General Jaruzelski, then Minister of Defense is also appointed to head the government as Prime Minister. He proposes a three month strike moratorium and Solidarity's national leadership agrees.
- 19 March 1981: In Bydgoszcz police use clubs to break up a Solidarity meeting, severely beating several of the local union leaders, the first time such force is used against the Union. Solidarity calls for a national general strike for March 31 in protest. On March 29, the Party central committee censures committee member

Olszowski and other hardliners implicated in the Bydgoszcz provocation. Olszowski is kept on the CC however. After this censure, Walesa, without sufficiently consulting other Solidarity leaders (much less the rank and file), calls off the general strike. Also, in March, Warsaw Pact maneuvers in Poland (code named "Union '81") concentrate on perfecting the Pact's communication channels, channels independent of Polish Army communications. It was these channels which were used to coordinate Polish forces during the coup. (More on this below.)

- 6 August 1981: The government cuts off negotiations with Solidarity (on "self-management," food supply, etc.), but claims in the media that the union cut off the talks.
- 15 August 1981: "The Free Unionist," Solidarity newspaper at the Huta Katowice steelworks, is suppressed after printing an anti-Russian cartoon. One of its publishers is arrested and the union's local office is ransacked by the police.
- 5 September 1981: Solidarity begins its first national congress at which it calls for "free elections to parliament and regional assemblies." A national referendum on self-management is also discussed. (In August the Solidarity leadership proposed a return to the 6-day work week if the 6th day could be self-managed.) At the second half of the Congress, held at the end of September, Walesa is challenged for the union leadership by the more radical Solidarity leaders Jasio Rulewski, Andrzej Gwiazda, and Marian Jurczyk. By a narrow majority Walesa retains the union presidency, getting 55% of the vote.
- 8 September 1981: In the strongest language ever the Russians demand "radical and determined measures" against the "anti-Soviet campaign" in Poland. The Polish CP in turn violently denounces the "adventurists" in certain segments of Solidarity. Then, in a new tack, hardliner Olszowski calls for a "national front" of the government, the leadership of Solidarity, and "all the patriotic forces."
- 17 October 1981: Kania is deposed as First Secretary of the Party. General Jaruzelski, already Prime Minister and Defense Minister, is given the First Secretary position as well. He sends the army out among the people, ostensibly to help resolve local disputes. At the Party's 4th Plenum that month party members are given an ultimatum: Quit the Party or quit Solidarity. (By Oct. 1981, one third of the Communist Party belonged to Solidarity.)
- 28 October 1981: Solidarity holds a one hour general strike, protesting the failure of the government to reopen negotiations on economic reforms.
- 4 November 1981: Walesa, Jaruzelski and Catholic primate Glemp hold a "summit meeting" on Poland's crisis. By mid-November mail outside the country is being selectively interrupted. At the end of the month Jacek Kuron, long-time social democratic dissident, is arrested for allegedly planning a "political organization hostile to the socialist state." A tract seized at his house discussed the possibility of a "self-managed republic" in Poland. lzvestia charges that "counter-revolution is aspiring to power in Poland." At the beginning of December, Solidarity's National Commission, meeting at Radom, votes to hold a general strike if emergency powers are enacted by the government. (Walesa abstains on this vote.)
- 8 December 1981: Jaruzelski holds a meeting with the first secretaries of the 49 party districts

At this meeting the Party's national leadership is sharply criticized by the local leaders for not supporting and protecting them against Solidarity's "threats." Jaruzelski turns down a request for the issuance of arms to the local party apparatus, assuring them that every necessary step would be taken to protect party leaders.

- 9 December 1981: Warsaw Pact commander Marshall Victor Koulikov (Russian) arrives in Warsaw.
- 12 December 1981: Solidarity's 107-member National Commission meets in Gdansk. Solidarity militant Jasio Rulewski proposes a national referendum, a vote of confidence (or lack of) on the current methods of power used by Poland's central and regional governments. Armored cars are moving into position even as he speaks.

The Coup

In September Solidarity had expected martial law or some other intervention. In the factories, over the public address systems, methods for resistance were openly discussed. The government did not move then, possibly because resistance was being consciously prepared. After this period of tension, Solidarity's guard was relaxed a bit. The December move apparently caught many Poles by surprise.

Besides this element of surprise there were a number of advantages in the December timing for the authorities. In January '82 the new self-management laws were to go into effect, allowing worker participation in the selection of managers. These laws directly weakened the "nomenklatura" system (power of appointment of the party) and would have further eroded the authority of the party.

Regional and municipal free elections were also to be held at the beginning of 1982. The question of national political power, beyond economic and factory issues, raised in August and September, was now pushing to the front of Solidarity's agenda. All this had to be stopped before it got started.

In addition, winter is a harder time for spontaneous resistance to mobilize itself, especially when food and heating fuel shortages are arranged by the government.

The weekend timing of the coup, when workers were home, not in their plants, minimized the number of factory occupations—a tactical key to Solidarity's strength—and isolated people from their workplace comrades. The power of the Polish movement grew as it organized across regions and throughout society, not limiting itself to factory or even industrial organization. Still, the fighting units of Solidarity remained the workplaces, and these units were disrupted by the coup's Sunday move. By cutting phone lines, intercity travel, and imposing a curfew, the authorities further limited the communication and coordination necessary for an effective resistance.

Only the police and the most reliable sections of the military were used to directly attack the workers. When the question arose in August of '80, Jaruzelski had judged the army to be unreliable. It seems likely that Warsaw Pact communications channels were used to coordinate the coup, and not Polish army communications, in order to keep sections of the Polish army in the dark.

On Monday, 14 December, Polish soldiers and armored cars were stationed around the Gdansk shipyards. Soon the troops were talking with the people there, who offered them soup and tea, and placed flowers in the gun barrels of the armored cars. "Solidarity" was painted on several of the armored vehicles. By Monday night, the government had to send in more reliable militia units (paramilitary) to replace the soldiers.

The Polish army is largely composed of draftees (154,000 of the 210,000 soldiers are draftees). Almost half of these draftees were drafted since the founding of Solidarity, and through prior direct membership, or through family ties, are influenced by Solidarity. In fact, the 1980 conscripts were held over because the army did not want to draft any new men in 1981 as they would have been too "contaminated" by Solidarity. (This move alone suggests that the army "had" to act in '81 or early '82—because the contamination would only continue and you cannot stop drafting year after year.)

Due to this contamination, troop rebellions and fraternization occurred repeatedly, and not just in Gdansk. Solidarity reported that in Bydgoszcz there was an armed clash between army units and the ZOMO (motorized riot police).

The government relied on the ZOMO and the militia—both professional, not conscripted, repressive forces—to break into occupied factories, and in direct clashes with the workers. Such reliable units were apparently rotated through the country, suppressing one locality and industry at a time.

Clashes were continuous and frequently very violent during the first week and a half of resistance. Events at the Wujek and Piast mines in Silesia showed the extent of the confrontations.

On the 15th of December the Wujek miners sent a delegation to the Staszic mine to find out what kinds of weapons and tactics worked best against the ZOMO. They gathered pneumatic hammer points (sharp and heavy), and welded large screws on the end of long metal rods—weapons known to work against the shielded, helmeted cops.

On the 16th tanks surrounded the mine. The crowd which gathered, chanting "Gestapo! Gestapo!", was dispersed with water cannon. But when the ZOMO broke into the mine, dozens of them were taken by surprise and were severely beaten by the miners. Three ZOMO were taken hostage, and threatened with hanging if the ZOMO entered again. Guns were seized by the miners, but then were thrown away. The first wave of attack was repulsed.

In the next attacks the ZOMO began firing on the miners. The miners responded with molotov cocktails. The miners were finally forced out of the mine, but not until seven had been killed, along with four ZOMO, and 79 people wounded.

The Piast miners, 2,000 strong, and armed with large quantities of dynamite, were able to hold out down in the mine shafts for almost two weeks. Finally, starved out by the militia, the miners surrendered on the 29th of December. Similar occupations, often armed with explosives, had taken place at over a dozen other Silesian mines.

As fierce as this mine by mine, factory by factory resistance was, it could not stand up long against the Polish security forces. Uncoordinated, unarmed, undermined politically, and isolated internationally, the Polish insurgents were doomed to defeat.

Disarming the Movement

There is a tendency by those interested in revolution to shy away from military questions and the question of the military. This avoidance is a natural inclination, since genuinely democratic organization is almost impossible to maintain during civil war or prolonged guerrilla campaigns. By circumstances and maneuver Solidarity won a period of grace in which the mass strike was an adequate weapon. General strikes and factory occupations create the ideal conditions for far-reaching participatory democracy and the continued growth of militance and insurgent thinking. But sooner or later either the power of the state must dissolve, or the state must suppress the insurgent democracy.

At this decisive moment the revolution must have won over sufficient numbers of soldiers to make suppression impossible, or else it must have ready a coordinated and effective defense against the military. In December of 1981, Solidarity, unfortunately, had neither.

Solidarity had made some attempts to penetrate the military and police, but without success. An attempt was made by employees at one of the military hospitals to organize a Solidarity cell. Everyone was fired. When workers at the military publishing house tried to organize, again, everyone was fired. At the police school, when some low-key union demands were raised, everyone was fired. The state knew that the armed forces were a key element of power.

Solidarity's failure to subvert the army was not its own fault. But its lack of a ready and coordinated defense has to be blamed, at least partially, on the moderate sections of the union leadership whose strategy of tripartite coalition disarmed the Polish movement politically. To even consider a defense plan, one must recognize that an enemy exists and that a conflict is inevitable. By aborting strike calls, by pulling in the reins on local militancy, and by considering a "front of national unity" (of Solidarity, Church and Party), Walesa and other moderates weakened the combativeness of the movement, and strengthened trust in the government.

As mentioned above, after the Bydgoszcz beatings Walesa called off the planned general strike. A few words of censure by the CP central committee was apparently enough show of good faith to satisfy Solidarity's president. But many "radicals" in the union's National Commission, as well as many, many more in the rank-and-file judged this to be a grave strategic error. After a temporary loss of face, Party hardliners were able to regain momentum—facing a union more and more ready to back off.

Throughout the summer and fall Walesa helped suppress the numerous strikes that were begun. Strikes were seen by him as disrupting the possibility of negotiating a sharing of power with the government, the government that was already preparing Solidarity's suppression. (Jaruzelski's appointment as head of state, and the Warsaw Pact "Union '81" exercises were pre-Bydgoszcz and should have served as a clear indication as to what lay ahead.)

In August of 1981, for example, when the typesetters of the Olsztyn party newspaper, the Olsztyn Tribune, occupied the printing plant to prevent the production of the slander-filled journal, Walesa sent Jacek Kuron to convince the typographers to end their strike. There were many other incidents where Walesa or other national union leaders intervened to stop strikes.

Perhaps most disarming was the embrace by Walesa, et al of the possibility of a "national front." The idea of a "national front"(of Union, Church and State), first proposed in early 1981, was revived in the fall by the extreme Party hardliner Olszowski. Olszowski's endorsement alone should have given pause. Unwilling or unable to hear Jacek Kuron's early warning—"The regime has received a fatal blow: either it must die or it must destroy Solidarity. There is no other solution."—the Solidarity moderates desperately hoped for an agreement which would partition power between Solidarity and the Party.

Walesa carried this hope right up to the end, as his speech at Solidarity's National Commission meeting the night of Dec. 12th, the eve of the coup, makes clear: "...And now we have come to devilishly serious matters, political matters...We have come to a time that I myself had only foreseen for the spring, that I still have wanted to avoid... I have not wanted us to come to political solutions [i.e., the question of national political power] now...I have [since] come to the conviction that there are no other solutions, that political solutions must be undertaken sooner than I had thought." His realization that the movement would have to fight for political control of the country came too late.

The failure to adequately deal with the military question, the tendency toward conciliation, the hope for gradual reform, the failure to clearly point out the class enemy and organize against it, all contributed substantially to the collapse in Poland.

Geopolitics and "The Self-Limiting Revolution"

> "The rulers of the USSR will not risk an armed intervention in Poland as long as Poles refrain from overthrowing a government which is obedient to the USSR. Consequently, let's abstain from that, for the moment. The agenda for today is a society democratically organized in professional associations or cooperatives, economically and locally self-managed. Its very necessary for us, for a time, to coexist with our totalitarian state and party apparatus."
>
> —Jacek Kuron

This straightforward evaluation of Poland's geopolitical location was the rationale for what Kuron, and many Poles, conceived of as a "self-limiting revolution." Though the Poles clearly worried less about Russian intervention than *Newsweek* did, it was because they assumed Russian and Polish Communist Party hegemony as a limiting factor from the start.

Consequently, the CP's political leadership of the country, and Poland's involuntary inclusion in the Russian sphere of influence, were not tackled head on at the beginning. The Poles seemed to hope for, as the French journal Liberation put it, a sort of constitutional monarchy with the Party retiring to the role of Queen mother. The shell of this titular Party leadership would then continue to serve as a shield against Russian intervention, and the Poles could do what they wanted.

Couldn't the Poles have organized an open revolution against their imperialist masters as has been done elsewhere? Factors which have aided other anti-imperialist struggles did not apply in Poland in 1981: distance from the imperial power (as with Yugoslavia), weakening of the imperial state by war (as happened after World Wars I and II), a colonial population armed by the imperial power to fight a rival imperial power (as in China and Southeast Asia during WW II), the shifting of spheres of influence (e.g., American support of anti-British movements as the U.S. moved into the Mid-East in the '40s and '50s), internal upheaval in the imperial power (e.g., in the U.S. during the Vietnam war), the spread of insurgence in neighboring nations, etc.

Most of these factors the Poles had no way to change. They could attempt to spread insurgence in bordering countries, and in imperial Russia, and, in fact, they made initial efforts to do so. At its first Congress, Solidarity made an appeal to workers in the Eastern Bloc, announcing its strong support for those "who have chosen the difficult path of the fight for free unions." It asked workers of the socialist countries not to believe the lies being heaped on Solidarity. Solidarity also called for delegations from unions in other socialist countries to come to Gdansk, but only the Yugoslavs accepted the offer.

Left essentially isolated internationally, the Poles were caught between a rock and a hard place. But was the self-limiting revolution their only alternative? Tactically, yes. Strategically, no. As Kuron noted: "It is necessary, for a time, to coexist with the Party." (my emphasis) The problem with all reform tactics is that the moderates of the movement begin to pervert short-term tactical compromises into long-term strategic goals. So what began as a clear-headed evaluation of forces in the early decision not to mount an immediate, violent, frontal attack on the Party was gradually transformed by Walesa and Co. into a plan to merge the movement and the Party into a "national front."

In any movement, the spirit of combativeness and radical opposition must be nurtured, even if the time is not yet ripe for open conflict. Failing that, when conflict occurs, the movement is caught unprepared.

From Opposition to Self-Management

By the end of the '50s the Polish ruling class had coopted "self-management." After the armed workers uprising in Poznan in 1956, the Communist government instituted "workers' councils" so that the workers would have a partial voice in the management of industry. The workers could not complain against themselves, the Party reasoned.

The most radical Poles understood this half-way "self-management" to be just a sophisticated repressive measure and so wanted nothing to do with managing the country or its economy in 1980. Instead, they preferred a strategy of opposition, striking to correct governmental wrong-doing. Such a strategy would allow Solidarity to make sharp criticisms of government policy, acting as an independent control commission, whose enforcement powers were guaranteed through the use of strikes.

The moderates in Solidarity, on the other hand, wanted a partnership with the government, to help it make the right policy decisions in the first place. In the initial phase of the '80/'81 upsurge, moderates and radicals alike assumed that the communist government would remain in place, to be either pressured or joined. Consequently, the fundamental problems caused by Communist Party rule, and the overall political-economic and social structure tied to that rule, could not be solved by either the partnership or the opposition approach.

At its best, the opposition strategy was able to achieve only limited successes. It could get some food released to the population, or force a reduction in press censorship, or win the release of political prisoners. To this extent it was able to alleviate, but not end the crisis facing Polish society. But even these limited successes depended on the willingness of the powers-that-be to be pressured into reforms, and on their ability to effectively undertake reforms.

In Poland (as has happened elsewhere—Russia 1917, Chile 1970–73…) the ruling class, once it began losing power, deliberately allowed the country to plunge further into economic chaos. At that point, opposition is no longer of any use, the movement must itself take on responsibility for the management and direction of the country.

As long as the authorities have tight control of the economy and society, as long as no "power vacuum" exists, then "self-management" will actually be a partner in state management, a partial, reformist measure at best. Under such conditions radicalism and militance will gravitate to an opposition approach, not to any form of management. But once a power vacuum begins to emerge, once the authorities let go of the country and let it fall further into crisis, the radical position has to shift to (self-) management of the country.

Only at this point, there can be no partnership-the organs of self-management cannot tolerate the existence of the old state/managerial apparatus. "The workers councils are the only power, or they are nothing."

The Polish movement was at such a revolutionary juncture. Many of those who had insisted on a general strike of opposition protest after Bydgoszcz in March were, in nine months time, calling for an end to the Communist Party government. By the Dec. 12th Solidarity National Commission meeting, even Walesa realized that the Polish movement was going to have to face "devilishly serious matters, political matters."

To resolve the crisis the movement would have to assume political direction of the country. The political direction of the country-i.e., decisions on coal production, on foreign relations, on money or its abolition, on free access to the media, on the direction or disbanding of the army, on the production or allocation of food, housing, goods, etc.-all had a direct bearing on whether daily life could be transformed. To continue such a transformation the movement would have to seize this political power from the government, would have to transfer the ability to make these decisions to the organs of self-management and direct democracy throughout Poland.

The Polish Communist party knew that the debate on the seizure of power was surfacing, and that such a revolutionary juncture was fast approaching. The Party moderates had not disarmed the Party to the extent that Solidarity's moderates had disarmed Solidarity. For the Party, quicker political consolidation, combined with unshaken control of the military, was sufficient to overcome an insurgent movement of millions.

Lessons of the Collapse

The lessons of the collapse are important to those willing to learn from it. This movement was pushed to the brink of the seizure of power, then faltered. The "self-limiting" phase was useful for a short period of movement expansion and consolidation, and bought time during which external factors weakening Russian imperialism might have occurred. But this phase needed to be accompanied by preparation for inevitable conflict over political control of the country, requiring continuing combativeness and a refusal of all partnership with the country's rulers. A movement of opposition, of criticism of the government had to build for the time when it instead forced the government aside and resolved the country's problems itself.

At such a critical juncture, the majority of the army had to have been neutralized or even swung over to the side of the movement. The reactionary units of the military should not have been allowed to establish separate and secret lines of communication and organization. Workers' and grass-roots organization needed to have had ready plans for defense, communication and coordination.

Such questions concerning the "seizure of power" may seem remote and speculative for those of us in the U.S. in 1982. They probably seemed remote and speculative in Gdansk in 1979.

Rudy Perkins
Boston, April 1982

Related in this issue

See "A Reply on Poland" by E.B. Maple, FE #309, June 19, 1982.

Rudy Perkins
The Collapse in Poland
1982

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/309-june-19-1982/the-collapse-in-poland
Fifth Estate #309, June 19, 1982

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net