

# Poland's Solidarity Movement (1980 – 1989)

---

**Maciej Bartkowski, Ph.D\***

**December 2009**

---

**Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance  
©2009 International Center on Nonviolent Conflict**

## **Disclaimer:**

Hundreds of past and present cases of nonviolent conflict exist. To make these cases more accessible, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC) is compiling summaries of them on an ongoing basis. Each summary aims to provide a clear perspective on the role that nonviolent civil resistance has played or is playing in a particular case.

The following is authored by someone who has expertise in this particular region of the world and/or expertise in the field of nonviolent conflict. The author speaks with his/her own voice, so the conflict summary below does not necessarily reflect the views of ICNC. If you would like to suggest a conflict that you feel should be summarized and included on ICNC's website, please contact us at [icnc@nonviolent-conflict.org](mailto:icnc@nonviolent-conflict.org) and let us know.

\*Dr. Maciej Bartkowski is the Senior Director of Education and Research at the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.

**Conflict Summary:**

Nonviolent struggle against the authoritarian communist government in Poland began soon after the communists stole parliamentary elections in 1946. However, it took over three decades of civil resistance—waged over time with varying tactics and degrees of intensity—for Polish society to begin organizing and consolidating itself in a broad coalition of social forces that climaxed in the establishment of the *Solidarność* (“Solidarity”) as an organization and a movement in August 1980. Solidarity, with its roots in trade unionism shook and delegitimized the communist regime by exposing its ideological but false claims of being a free “workers’ state”. This popular movement created independent political space where alternative institutions, activities, and discourses could develop and flourish. Solidarity always pursued its political objectives with a high degree of nonviolent discipline as well as self-imposed limitations. Both of these elements played a crucial role in a national compromise and peaceful transfer of power in 1989. This negotiated transition ushered Poland onto the path of a successful democratization that also carried important hallmarks of its civil resistance legacy.

**Political History:**

Until the second half of the 1970s, social groups that opposed the communist government were not united and their activities were not well coordinated. The lack of a broad coalition to unite various opposition forces played an important role in their failures. In 1956, workers went on the streets of Poznan, the fourth largest city in Poland, to demand economic and political changes and their demonstrations were brutally suppressed by communist authorities, with some hundred people killed. Many intellectuals, who still hoped to reform the system from within, did not support the workers in their more radical demands. In 1968, a similar fate awaited students and intellectuals who pressed for greater political freedoms. Workers were brought in to stage demonstrations against student “hooligans” and “troublemakers” and the communist rulers crushed the students and intellectuals with ease. In 1970, workers demonstrated on the streets of major coastal cities and demanded higher wages and economic reforms. Forty-five workers were killed and thousands were wounded during the unrest while intellectuals and students stayed at home and watched passively the unfolding tragedy. However, when a subsequent workers’ revolt in 1976 against price hikes resulted in hundreds of workers being arrested, the intellectuals joined the strikers. Intellectuals had already been galvanized by their mobilization against amendments to the Polish constitution in 1975 that reinforced the leading role of the communist party in society and committed Poland to eternal comradeship with the Soviet Union, which was seen as a vivid illustration of Poland’s loss of state sovereignty. In response to the massive arrests of workers in 1976, some intellectuals set up the Committee for the Defense of Polish Workers that raised money to pay for workers’ legal defense in the courts and aid for their families. A year later, the Movement for the Defense of Human and Civil Rights was established by a group of opposition members to hold the communist government accountable to its international commitments, which included recognition of human rights standards that it had

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC’s website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

voluntarily signed. In 1977, the killing of a 23 year-old anticommunist activist, most likely on the orders of the security services, galvanized the student body all over the country and led to the establishment of independent student organizations. A system of underground education was institutionalized in 1978 when the Association for Academic Courses was created. It offered covert teaching of alternative history, literature, philosophy, sociology, and economics in private apartments and church buildings. The underground opposition press flourished as well, and by the end of 1979 it boasted with more than 400 different publications and periodicals.

The year 1978 witnessed the election of the Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla as Pope John Paul II. He was the first non-Italian pope since the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Pope's 1979 visit to his native country brought millions to the open air masses in Warsaw, Krakow, and Czestochowa. During a pilgrimage that was broadcast on state TV and radio, the Pope spoke openly about human rights and the right to freedom of expression and conscience. For the first time in Polish communist history a massive social mobilization and participation had occurred without the visible presence of police or the state's security forces. For decades, Poles referred to their government as "they" without defining what "us" meant. But as Adam Michnik, one of Solidarity's leaders, observed, Poles could finally visualize "us." People realized that their strength was in numbers and this helped to break a collective barrier of fear. As a result, by the end of the 1970s, people's self-organization and a broad coalition of workers, intellectuals, students, members of the Catholic church and peasants became a potent force for change in Polish society. Their mass nonviolent mobilization was characterized by the establishment of a covert parallel polis alongside the existing authoritarian system in order to liberate society from the control of the ruling party without overtly challenging its dominance.

By the end of the 1970s, a deteriorating economic situation led to massive strikes in the summer of 1980 that involved all social groups and all regions in Poland. Starting from the Gdansk shipyard under the leadership of Lech Walesa, a factory electrician, and spreading quickly to other work places, the workers organized a free trade union named *Solidarność* ("Solidarity"). When the government bowed to Solidarity's demands and allowed legalization of Solidarity in September of 1980—the first legal free trade union in communist Central and Eastern Europe—the official membership of the movement grew within a couple of weeks to almost 10 million people; 80% of the state employees, including communist party members, joined the newly legalized trade union. Threatened by the scope and pace of the growing opposition and fearful of a possible Soviet military intervention (although to this day historians dispute whether such intervention was possible or likely) the leaders of the Polish military decided to impose martial law on December 13, 1981. Consequently, hundreds of Solidarity leaders were rounded up and detained and all legal opposition organizations closed down. However, the declaration of martial law failed to achieve the communist government's objectives. The opposition movement, although weakened, survived and reorganized itself underground. Its arrested leaders found themselves replaced by other activists who avoided detention and by a number of female

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC's website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

organizers, who in the absence of their arrested male colleagues took leadership positions in the underground press and other Solidarity structures. By 1984, all Solidarity leaders were released and martial law was lifted. The communist government was not strong enough to crush Solidarity but neither was Solidarity ready to take more coercive actions to reach for power. Consequently, between 1982 and 1988 Poland was in a political stalemate between the state and society while the economic situation deteriorated further. During these years the communist government was well aware that it had neither the internal power nor the outside legitimacy to implement any substantive economic reforms. By the end of 1988, with a rising number of strikes and protests, and general economic malaise among the Polish population, the communist government was ready to re-engage with Solidarity. It agreed to re-legalization of the trade union movement and open negotiations on a possible political transition. With its self-limiting philosophy of nonviolent struggle and the support of the Catholic Church, Solidarity was in a position to consider the offer of negotiations and accept a pacted transition, even though that meant a preservation of the economic and social status of the ruling elites.

As a result of the roundtable discussions between the opposition and the government, which lasted from February until April 1989, an agreement was reached to hold free elections to a pacted parliament in June 1989. The elections brought a decisive victory for Solidarity. In August 1989, the region's first noncommunist prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was appointed by the Polish parliament to head a new government with a broad popular mandate to implement wide ranging economic and social reforms to stabilize the country.

### **Strategic Actions:**

Solidarity members' actions cannot be analyzed independently from the phenomenon of the Solidarity movement itself. The power of Solidarity as a mass resistance movement derived from an intangible fabric of civic capital created by a thick web of human interactions and underground activities and institutions whose purpose was to free the society from the control of the government. This generated forces no less powerful or important for waging civil resistance and its eventual success than the impact of specific strategies and tactics.

Solidarity was not merely an opposition movement, it was, to paraphrase Vaclav Havel, a collective experience of living within the truth. Solidarity was an extraordinary mobilization of citizens from all walks of life united in protest against living in a communist lie. Solidarity was a massive societal polity organized independently outside the realm of the state that encompassed a number of historical, cultural, philosophical and human experiences. As such it was a socializing force that promoted behavioral attitudes based on mutual responsibility, solidarism, assistance, trust, loyalty; a teaching force that offered lessons in decentralized modes of self-organizing and participatory democratic governance; an empowering force that endorsed egalitarianism, individualism, and independence; and finally, a nonviolent force with its strict

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC's website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

nonviolent discipline and belief in the greater effectiveness of nonviolent actions over other means of a political contestation.

In the 1980s, Solidarity drew on a rich palette of nonviolent tactics that included, among others, protests; leaflets; flags; vigils; symbolic funerals; catholic masses; protest painting; parades; marches; slow-downs; strikes; hunger strikes; “Polish strikes” in the mine shafts; underground socio-cultural institutions: radio, music, films, satire, humor; over 400 underground magazines with millions of copies distributed, including literature on how to scheme, strike, and protest; alternative education and libraries; a dense network of alternative teaching in social science and humanities; commemorations of forbidden anniversaries; and internationalization of Solidarity struggle.

### **Ensuing Events:**

Twenty years later after the roundtable talks and first democratic elections in Central Europe, Poland is a full-fledged democracy with a relatively strong civil society (in comparison with other Central European states), competitive media and an increasingly consolidated parliamentary system based on a constitutionally strong executive and a popularly elected post of the president. The main socio-political cleavages in recent years have evolved around the role of religion and the Catholic church in public life, including state education; the effectiveness of transitional justice in dealing with collaborators of the former communist regime; and spectacular corruption scandals that besieged the Polish political scene in the last decade. Generally, however, Poland is seen as a success story in its democratic transformation. Various factors played a role in this successful democratic transformation. They include, among others, Poland’s integration with NATO (which reinforced the principle of democratic civilian-based control over armed forces) as well as negotiations with and eventual membership in the European Union (which helped to strengthen the rule of law, democratic institutions and civil society organizations).

The Polish population’s use of civil resistance to achieve a democratic transition has also affected how democracy has developed and consolidated over the past two decades. The legacy of a Polish civil resistance is particularly discernable in four major democratic changes:

1. After the roundtable discussions between the communist government and the opposition, Solidarity leaders had only two months (from mid-April to mid-June 1989) to prepare for the first open and free election in Poland since 1946. It was the self-organizing experience gained during the underground civil resistance, the well-developed underground press (already legal by that time), and the extensive network of volunteers that gave Solidarity an important advantage over the communists in that election.

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC’s website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

Solidarity ran a breathtaking campaign and eventually won all but one (taken by an independent candidate) contested seats in the pacted elections in June 1989.

2. The design and implementation of major decentralization reforms in the second half of 1989—which established 2,600 self-governing rural and urban communes with considerable governing powers, financial resources and legal status—had all the hallmarks of the Solidarity movement. Underlying these reforms was a philosophy of decentralized governance with autonomous local institutions and a non-political, civic organization in charge of training tens of thousands of local civil servants and political officials in governance and empowering local councils and administrations.
3. Poland’s civil resistance heritage was also reflected in the emergence of a “rebellious civil society” between 1989-1993 whose roots went back to the tradition of street protests and demonstrations like those used against the communist state in the 1980s. During the first years of transformation, Poland experienced the largest number of protests, and lost work days due to strikes among all the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. However, as Ekiert and Kubik emphasize in their book, contrary to common belief, the rebellious civil society strengthened Poland’s young democracy and served as a safety valve for expression of diverse interests by different social and economic groups at a time when political parties were weak and interest groups forming.
4. Poland’s foreign policy during the first years after 1989 was shaped by the worldviews of the Solidarity movement and avoided being hijacked by jingoistic sentiment. Good neighborly relations with Germany, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, oftentimes despite a difficult history and problems with Polish ethnic minorities in those countries, were established surprisingly quickly. This was a direct result of a philosophical and ethical reevaluation of international relations and Poland’s new place in a democratic Europe that occurred within the Polish opposition movement during the decades-long civil resistance struggle.

### **For Further Reading:**

- Adam Michnik, *Letters from Prison and Other Essays* (University of California Press, 1985).
- Adrian Karatnycky and Peter Ackerman, "How Freedom is Won," Research Study by Freedom House (2005).
- Aleksander Smolar, "Towards 'Self-limiting Revolution: Poland 1970-1989'" in Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC’s website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

- Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society. Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989-1993* (The University of Michigan Press, 2004).
- Lech Walesa, *The Road to Truth. Autobiography* (Swiat Ksiazka, 2008).
- Michael Bernhard, *The Origin of Democratization in Poland: Workers, Intellectuals, and Oppositional Politics, 1976-1984* (Columbia University Press, 1993).
- Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, “Poland: Power from Solidarity” in, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (Palgrave, 2000).
- Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity: A Political Sociology of Poland’s Working-Class Democratization* (Princeton University Press, 1991).
- Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague* (Random House, 1990).
- Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity, 1980–82* (Scribner, 1984).

To read other nonviolent conflict summaries, visit ICNC’s website:

<http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>