



December 12, 2011

The Rise and Fall of Solidarity

By MARK KRAMER

Thirty years ago Tuesday, the whole of Poland came under martial law. The sudden introduction of military rule after an 18-month-long crisis was a turning point in the history of both Poland and the Cold War.

The crisis stemmed from the formation of Solidarity, which started out as a free trade union but quickly became far more: a social movement, a symbol of hope and an embodiment of the struggle against communism and Soviet domination. Nothing analogous to Solidarity existed either before or after.

Solidarity had its roots in the worker unrest of December 1970 in Poland's northern cities, but the movement that emerged in the summer of 1980 was incomparably larger and drew from all segments of Polish society. Roughly 10 million people — nearly half of Poland's adult population — eventually joined.

The Polish Communist regime had tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent the formation of Solidarity. Faced with crippling strikes at major shipyards and factories in August 1980, the Polish authorities considered resorting to a full-scale crackdown. But after deliberating they ultimately decided against the use of force and — with great reluctance — to sign three landmark accords that formally recognized the establishment of Solidarity, which soon rivaled the Polish Communist Party in political power.

The founding of Solidarity is now the stuff of legend, but in the summer of 1980 the outcome of the workers' protests seemed uncertain at best. When mass strikes began in Gdansk in mid-August 1980, nearly all of the strike leaders feared that the protests would soon peter out or would not spread widely enough to compel the regime to negotiate. Many were worried that the authorities would instinctively rely on violent repression, as they had in December 1970. But the workers at the Gdansk shipyard pressed on, and the strikes spread rapidly to more than 750 sites around the country.

The feared crackdown did not come until a year and a half later, after extensive planning and preparations by the Polish security forces and army, under close Soviet supervision. The

move to crush Solidarity proved remarkably swift and effective, a textbook case of how an authoritarian regime can bring a rebellious society to heel.

The long and elaborate planning resulted in a crackdown that killed surprisingly few. Many thousands were arrested, a curfew was enacted, and communications and transportation were severely restricted.

Poles, long known for their defiance of communism, put up surprisingly little resistance. Part of the reason is that by December 1981, Solidarity's popularity was waning. The strikes and economic upheavals in 1981 had eroded Poles' living standards, causing many to hope that stability might be restored.

As the anniversary of martial law has approached, some observers have been inclined to look back on the formation of Solidarity in 1980 as the death knell of communism or at least the first nail in communism's coffin. That view is far too glib and teleological. Solidarity certainly highlighted the enormous public discontent with Communist rule — discontent that had surfaced many times before in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe — but the organization was crushed in December 1981.

Solidarity, despite its achievements, was unable to overthrow communism on its own. When Mikhail Gorbachev took office in Moscow in March 1985, Solidarity was still outlawed and barely functioning as an underground movement. It never returned to what it had once been in 1980-1981. Moreover, the role that Solidarity played in 1989 was feasible only because of the fundamental changes in Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev. Had there not been a drastic reorientation of Soviet policy, Solidarity might well have faded into oblivion.

None of this detracts from the invaluable contribution that Solidarity made. The organization brought together millions of people in a genuinely popular movement against the strictures of communism. Unlike in Poznan in June 1956, when tens of thousands of Poles waged fierce battles against Polish military and security forces for two days, Solidarity pursued its goals entirely peacefully and was able to survive for a year and a half.

Solidarity ultimately could not prevent martial law, but the union's mere existence underscored for everyone how bankrupt the Communist system was. And the introduction of military rule put an end to any lingering illusions in both East and West about the nature of communism.

The nearly 40 million Poles who woke up to martial law 30 years ago could scarcely have imagined that their country would be a member of both NATO and the European Union barely two decades later. Perhaps that augurs well for the brave protesters in Syria, Iran, and

China today who are being ruthlessly suppressed by autocratic regimes that do not hesitate to kill thousands of their own people.

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