

Solidarity and the Fall of Communism in Poland

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When people hear about the fall of the USSR they usually think about the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. No doubt it is both a lot flashier, a group of people deciding to tear down a physical barrier, and better looking for the US with Reagan's famous demand to tear down the wall to the then general secretary to the Soviet Union. But Eastern Germany was actually the second country to break free of Soviet control. The first victory, in Poland, was in 1989, but East Germany fell 6 months later. The Solidarity movement was the inspiration for the movement in Eastern Germany along with all of the other satellite countries (countries that were run by the USSR but kept their names). The Solidarity movement should also be studied as a non-violent movement that managed to topple a government. Solidarity is one of the most fascinating revolutions in history and was essential to the disbanding of the USSR.

The Soviets claimed a third of Poland in 1939, after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, a deal the Soviets made with Germany after they both invaded Poland, the other two thirds were to go to Germany after the war was over, but they ended up being betrayed by Hitler so they joined the Allies and took all of Poland.¹ There was an agreement after World War II called the Yalta Conference that said Eastern Europe should be "friendly" to the Communists (basically allowing Eastern Europe to go to the Communists) which also backed up Russia's claim.² After the Soviets took hold of Polish land in 1945 they banned all anti-communist books and other materials, banned any independent unions, and started indoctrination in public schools. Large estates were abolished, businesses were owned (nationalized) by state, and farms were nationalized. Roman Catholic leaders were imprisoned, prices for consumer goods skyrocketed, and quality of working conditions plummeted because there was no competition to force them higher. They

¹ [The Jewish virtual library](#)

² [Office of the historian](#)

also set up huge networks of informants around the country that spied on everyday citizens.³

There were over 1,000,000 soldiers positioned around Poland and martial law declarations were extremely common.⁴ But Poland was always the most rebellious state in the Soviet Union, which came through multiple violent riots. They were also one of the only countries that were allowed to keep the physical structure of the churches although they were not supposed to be able to believe in any religion because 97% of Poland was Catholic, so the buildings were important to spreading rebellious messages to others along with informing people on important events.

The communists starved Poles of information. Everyone knew that T.V., radio, and newspapers could never be trusted because they were all owned by Soviets. The church became the way they communicated with the rest of the world. They used it as a way to talk about everything happening in their lives and the pieces of the world they could learn about. The communists owned all published books so the only way the Poles could get published information was through unpublished books called *Samizdats* that they passed to each other, which meant they could communicate information from around the world non verbally. The consumer goods situation was always getting worse. By 1956 working rights were abandoned and people in Poznan seized government buildings trying to see change in how they were treated, they lost and 74 were proclaimed dead and 300 wounded. There was another protest in 1970 over food prices skyrocketing so high people could barely afford sausage and bread. December 15th, 1970 was the first working rights agreement signed in Polish history, but it ended up being for nothing, 50 people were gunned down and countless more welders burned alive. In 1978 people tried to create trade unions, there was a Katowice and a Gdansk trade union, but both ended up in

³ World Almanac 1999

⁴ [Lech Walesa, The Shipyard](#)

mass arrests that got nowhere. All of these were just building up momentum for the storm about to strike.

In 1980, one of the workers of the Gdansk shipyards named Lech Walesa was released from prison. There were concerns over working conditions such as pay, hours, and favoritism for people loyal to the government, plus the fact that another member of the Gdansk shipyard named Anna Walentynowicz was banned from working at Gdansk for trying to improve working conditions. Since Lech Walesa was known for being a supporter of workers rights, he was one of the people arrested in 78, he was basically chosen to lead the strike. Walesa took on the role of the leader of the strike by saying he would be the last to leave the shipyard, and on August 14th, the strike began. The initial demands of the strike were for Anna Walentynowicz, Andrzej Kolodziej, and Lech Walesa, and a pay raise of 2,000 *zlotys* for each worker. The other demands were put in later, including the right to organize trade unions that were not controlled by the state or management. They also demanded access to the shipyard radio so the strikers could stay informed on the negotiations. The negotiations were between the leaders of the strike including Walesa and the management of the shipyard. The workers also managed to record the deals and connected them to other shipyards, and had others send out physical copies to other work sites. The management also ended up recording the negotiations and sent them to state television and radio services, so all of Poland knew about Solidarity.

The day after the official strike began, the public transport system was immobilized except for the electric train connecting the three major cities, phone lines were cut, and a blockade affected the tri-city area (Gdansk, Gdynia, and Sopot). The official news sources accused the strikers of making the lack of consumer goods even worse, and people who had no

experience in striking became parts of the strike committee. People who only saw the strike as a way to benefit themselves personally joined those allowed to debate what was happening, so in the end they only cared about the initial demands. They settled for 1,500 *zlotys* per person. On the third day, the pay raise was given out and the people were reinstated. So the strike was to be announced over and won by Walesa. And then this exchange, caught by an unnamed witness, happened.

"On seeing me with Zdzich near the door, Walesa gestured at us and said again, 'We've won!' I replied, 'My ass! You've lost. Just take a look at what's happening in the yard: cables cut and loudspeakers split with axes; they're writing 'Traitor' and 'Informant' on the walls, they're spitting at the very mention of your name. If you go out that door, they'll stone you.' Lech was at the end of his tether. 'Jesus, what have I done?'

Zdzich replied: 'What have you done? You've sold the lot of us that's what you've done. You've only looked after yourself. You're among those who'll be getting the 1,500 zlotys pay raise!'

'What should I do now?' Lech asked.

'Get a real strike going, to defend all the small factories that supported you.'

The people standing outside, by the second entrance to the shipyard, saw the electrically powered cart draw up with Lech standing on it. Walesa reminded them, as he said before, that he would be the last to leave the yard. 'If you want to go on with the strike, it will go on!' 'Who wants to go on with the strike?'

'We do!' 'Who doesn't want to go on with the strike?' Silence.

'So the strike goes on! I'll be the last to leave the yard.'"⁵ This was the moment the strike turned from a local issue to a national movement.

The strike was reinstated. The rest of the month was spent creating the 21 demands and creating more footing with Solidarity. On the 18th, a group called MKS(the Inter-enterprise Strike Committee) was created to express the needs of different types of workers in concrete terms. The government almost immediately threatened to shut down Solidarity with force and started looking for scapegoats because splitting up the different factions did not work. Gdansk leaders were arrested, and people who failed to stop the strike lost their jobs for no other reason.

There was a document written called the 21 demands. These demands were:

- The recognition of the free trade union independent of the party and employers,
- The guaranteed right to strike, the guaranteed right to freedom of expression
- The restoration of rights to people dismissed for defending workers rights
- The liberation of all political prisoners, access to the media to make the demands of the MKS public
- The payment of all strikers when they're on strike, a nation wide pay increase of 2,000 zlotys
- The establishment of salary scales for all positions
- To only export food that is in surplus, ration the meat market until it stabilizes
- Ban floating prices, appoint staff due to merit not party membership
- Lowering the retirement to pre-revolution age
- Payment of pensions to post-revolution levels

⁵ Lech Walesa: A way of hope

- Improve working conditions and health services
- Full medical services for all workers and their families
- The creation of adequate day care centers
- Three years of paid maternity leave
- The reduction of wait time for apartments,
- Increased travel allowances from 40 zlotys to 100 zlotys
- Saturday as a day off for everyone.⁶

The turning point for the deal came on the 22nd of August 1980, when Mieczysław Jagielski arrived to replace the discredited Gdańsk government official for the strike. When he met the delegates they realized the victory they won by having them negotiate with MKS. August 23, 1980 was the beginning of the meetings. And the day after there was a change in the party leadership. A Szczecin minister (Szczecin was a city in Poland) objected to holding mass over radio, but Kołodziejcki (another Gdansk representative) that it would benefit Gdansk and over-rid Szczecin, and the rest of the meetings went smoothly. The demands were met and signed on August 31st, and even though Gierek was forced to resign, this was a major turning point for Solidarity because it showed a deal could be made.

On December 12, 1981, martial law was declared. It began with an announcement by General Jaruzelski, the new prime minister after Gierek and a near emptying out of stores of basic necessities even though they now had warehouses overflowing with them. All dialogue between Solidarity and the Soviets was impossible because the radicals demanded crack downs on it, the Liberals lost the little ground they had, and the indecisive ones disappeared months

⁶ Lech Walesa, A way of hope

before martial law began. Troops surrounded the tri-city area that were meant to round up all petty criminals, including members of Solidarity. Telephone lines were cut and activists were arrested in the thousands including Walesa. Apparently most Polish and world leaders were completely blindsided by the actions going on in Poland. There were general strikes happening around the country, including a miners strike that led to a massacre. Walesa smuggled out notes to government officials and to other solidarity members, and was smuggled information by the same means. A group called the TKK also sprung up as a faction of Solidarity that did not follow its president that wanted to have a demonstration to mark the 64th anniversary of Poland's independence, but the army was sent in and it went nowhere. Walesa was released on November 10th 1982 and was put under constant surveillance by the Soviets. Walesa managed to split off in 1983 to talk to the leaders of the TKK about what to do next. Martial law was lifted in July the same year, but the 21 demands were never met.

This is the point most Polish rebellions gave up, but Lech Walesa and the leaders of Solidarity were too inspired by their past victories to give in. Walesa was surrounded by old party members, leaders of other anti-government groups (specifically the KOR), researchers and teachers from universities around Gdansk, and a group of journalists. They advised Walesa on how to go forward and see the success of Solidarity. The leader of the meetings after martial law was a woman named Bozena Rybicka, who made sure all of Walesa's interviews were taped and transcribed among other duties, which is partially how people know so much about this time. He was also in the center of the Western media's attention, which explains why he was able to stay in the public eye while not getting arrested or killed. The underground was extremely important at this time, because it reported everything Walesa said and did for Solidarity so it was public

knowledge and could spread the movement even further. On October 5th, 1983, it was announced that Lech Walesa won the Nobel Peace Prize. Walesa announced that he would donate the prize money to the agricultural development fund. He had his wife represent him in Oslo so he could not be locked out of the country, and used the speech he gave her to try to ask for genuine aid (not sanctions that hurt the people of Poland more than anything).

In 1984 the movement started to emphasize on self government for all citizens, re-evaluation of all the standards of Solidarity, self management at the workplace, and reforming the legal system. In the same year, the government announced 600 prisoners would be granted amnesty, including 11 Solidarity leaders that were not released after martial law was disbanded, although many of the 11 would refuse amnesty this year and in 1986. One of the original people on Welesas council, Borgdan Lin, was betrayed by another prominent Solidarity member a short time before this and was accused of “high treason”. And on October 19th, the religious face of Solidarity father Jerzy Popiełuszko was assassinated, assumably by someone paid by the Soviets. Yet in the “election”(there were no free elections until 1989) of 1984, somewhere between six million and ten milloin people refused to vote even though it was mandatory for every Pole to vote. And those who did not refuse amnesty were granted amnesty that summer. The death of Popielusko was also important because it created a martyr out of one of the most recognizable members of Solidarity. Unfortunately there is not that much that we know about the five years between 84 and the success of Solidarity in 89.

In 1989, the war was finally won with the round table talks. The first day of negotiations was February 6th. The talks were initially an attempt to settle unrest in the public. Solidarity leaders were there to get Solidarity legalized and get some opposition members into government.

On April 5th, the Solidarity heads won both demands. And on June 4th, the free elections were held, with Solidarity winning all the contested seats in the lower house of parliament, and 99 out of 100 seats in the senate.⁷ In April 1990 at Solidarity's Second National Congress, Walesa was elected chairman with 77.5% of the votes. In December 1990 in a general ballot he was elected President of the Republic of Poland. He served until he was defeated in the election of November 1995.⁸ Under this government the control of Communism was obviously ceased. The next major fall was that of Hungary on October 23, where round table talks that started on June 13th finally bore fruit with The Hungarian People's Republic officially renamed the Republic of Hungary, with an amended constitution proclaiming the virtues of democracy. The next collapse was in East Germany when on November 9, a month after protests started, the Berlin wall fell.⁹ The rest of the satellite states fell in a similar fashion one after the other until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1992.

It is clear that Solidarity was a major influence on the other revolutions that took down the Union, the Hungry round table talks were being arranged while the Polish ones were still in progress, and it's arguable that the Solidarity was essential to take down the Soviet Union. The argument can also be made that this is one of the most important events since World War II, it is a movement that started as a workers strike and ended with the liberation of a country. That also influenced and inspired the other movements across Eastern Europe. Lech Walesa was important as a lead figure and he and his team were essential to the victory of Solidarity. But the real moral of Solidarity was that if people stand together and can keep hope in apparently hopeless situations, they can make major changes in their Society.

⁷ [The Journal of International Institute](#)

⁸ [Nobel Prize.org](#)

⁹ [The Journal of International Institute](#)

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

"Lech Walesa: The ShipYard." Audio file. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_kVbLubBxM.

This interview helped me learn more about the leader of the Solidarity movement and how he inspired people to stand with him. It helps my research because it showed how it felt to be Polish and helped to show how they managed to get free of the soviets.

Walesa, Lech. *A Way of Hope*. Compiled by Henry Holt.

This book tells how Solidarity started and detailed other major events with first-hand witnesses. It was important to my research because it gave me more information that wouldn't have known how to find and helped with more mood-setting for Poland at that time. It seemed to complete the picture I'm trying for better than any objective source could.

Secondary Sources:

BBC. Last modified May 28, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17754512>.

This timeline sites major events in Poland's history including solidarity. This helped my research because it gave me a general summary of what happened and gave a bit of context on how Poland got to a place where it would be claimed by Russia. The timeline also helped with names and specific events to research later in my project.

"Lech Walesa Biographical." The Nobel prize.

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1983/walesa/biographical/>.

This web page talked more about the life of the leader of Solidarity Lech Walesa. This was helpful for my research because it helped me with the date that Walesa was announced as the president of Poland. It also told me how popular he was in Poland because of the fact he won by 77.5%.

"The 1989 Polish Round Table Revisited: Making History." The journal of the international institute.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jii/4750978.0006.301/--1989-polish-round-table-revisited-making-history?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

This web page talked about the 1989 round table talks and the people that got elected into congress. This was helpful for my paper because it gave me some important information about the round table talks which is when Solidarity was won. It also gave me the times for the other successes so I could confirm Poland was first and its importance in the long game.

"The World Almanac 1999"

This book talked about life in Poland under Communism. This was helpful for my paper because it helped me portray how necessary change was for Poland