

Poland's Solidarity Movement: A Triumph for Democracy

“Social justice cannot be attained by violence. Violence kills what it intends to create.”
-Pope John Paul II

During the 1970s, tensions were rising in communist controlled Poland. The Polish workforce was angered by decreasing wages and the increasing prices of necessary goods. A growing number of citizen-led, non-violent protests reflected the common frustration of the Polish people. Out of these conflicts the Independent Self Governing Trade Union “Solidarity,” or NSZZ "Solidarność" was founded. Solidarity grew into a larger movement that represented the Polish people and triumphantly created a democratic government. The Solidarity Movement successfully overturned the tragic oppression of Polish citizens by the authoritarian government. The effects of the Polish people's stand for democracy redefined Poland and Eastern Europe.

In February of 1945, as World War II was coming to an end, three leaders of the Allied powers, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, U.S President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, met at the Yalta Conference in Crimea, Russia. At Yalta, post-war Eastern Europe consumed a large part of the negotiations. In particular, Poland's post-war government was a topic of conflict due to its strategic position in Europe. Churchill and FDR both supported having a Polish government-in-exile in London, whereas Stalin advocated for a communist government in Lublin, Poland. The negotiators compromised that Poland and the countries bordering the Soviet Union were to be influenced by the neighboring Soviet Union's Communist rule, only if the Soviet government allowed democratic practices, such as representation of all political parties and free elections. Stalin did not honor the agreement and immediately established Communist governments behind the Iron Curtain instead. In Poland, other political parties were suppressed and the population was at unrest as they were forced into a government they had not chosen.

In the decades leading up to the 1970s, the Soviet Union took more power and tensions within Poland continued to rise. In 1970 non-violent protesters objecting to the increasing prices and decreasing availability of necessary goods were unexpectedly met with violence by the Polish Communist police. As a result of the outbreak of protests the acting communist leader was forced to resign, and Edward Gierek assumed Party leadership. Gierek came into office in 1971 with the belief that the Polish communist party should soften its ideological stance. Gierek used loans from the Soviets in Moscow in hopes of starting rapid industrial modernization to stabilize the economy and his government. Wages for workers soared and the cost of consumer goods went down. However after Gierek failed to manufacture exportable goods, the anticipated revenue needed to pay back the loans was not generated, and the Polish economy crashed. In response, Gierek raised the prices of common goods, but lowered the prices of luxury goods only affordable to higher class citizens and communist officials. Anger over the declining income rate and increasing food prices under Gierek grew. Protest

leaders used these ongoing tensions from Gierek's policies and misleading promises to rally a strong base in support of change for an honest government.

In 1979, newly appointed Pope John Paul II visited his homeland, Poland, which was over 95% Roman Catholic. Thousands of people gathered to hear the Pope, who spoke not only of religion, but also sent political messages hidden in his teachings. Because of the Pope's global coverage, communist-run Poland was put into the international spotlight. Now influenced by the Pope, the people of Poland had a newfound sense of courage and hope for democracy. Polish citizens were driven to unite with labor workers to secure democracy in Poland.

As 1980 approached, economic injustices under the communist government continued tragically oppressing the Polish population. In the port city of Gdansk and other towns on the Baltic Sea, shipyard workers were outraged. Wages continued to go down, while prices of necessary goods had become higher than ever. In December of 1979 an underground meeting was held by leaders of the angered workers at the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk. This was the first step towards forming the trade union, NSZZ: Solidarnosc. Shortly after, a well-liked worker and leader known for her rebellious attitude, Anna Walentynowicz was fired from her position at the shipyard. This rallied a large number of workers to non-violently strike for a better Poland. In August 1980, workers walked off the job. Former shipyard electrician, Lech Walesa, fired in 1976 for union organizing, climbed the fence into the shipyard full of strikers and spoke to the crowd, inspiring and rallying the workers. The strikes that began in Gdansk quickly spread throughout Poland. The Communist government soon saw they were faced with an entire nation that had come together in solidarity and agreed to negotiate. Compromises between the Polish-Communist government and protest leaders including Lech Walesa allowed the formation of the trade union, NSZZ: Solidarnosc, the first independent union behind the Iron Curtain. The Polish people's triumphant stand for a country that represented their democratic ideals would ultimately lead to the end of the tragic oppression of citizens in Poland.

In the 1980s a new head of defense, General Jaruzelski, took force against the rising opposition in Poland after threats of invasion from communist Russia, as had happened in other Eastern Bloc countries. On December 13, 1981, Jaruzelski made an address saying, "the crisis in Poland has reached its climax," and declared a state of emergency. Martial law was instituted and Solidarity was outlawed. The Polish communist government took over television and radio stations, closed borders and airports, suspended union activity, banned strikes, and banned public gatherings. Solidarity leaders were arrested, including Lech Walesa, and Solidarity became an underground movement. As Poland fell deeper into a state of crisis, Solidarity managed to stay alive with membership reaching almost 9 million. By contrast, membership in PZPR, the government-run communist workers union was lower than ever, and the communist youth group now made up less than 5% of students. Martial law failed to stop the spirit of Solidarity. As a result of this failure, in the summer of 1983, the Polish communist government ended Martial law. It took five more years of communist rule before Solidarity leaders were able to negotiate a free election. On June 4, 1989, the election results came in. Solidarity leaders swept the board. For the first time since World War II, Poland was not oppressed by communist rule. The fight for Solidarity had been won.

After the election of 1989, when communism was overthrown in Poland, the Iron Curtain began to fall. Only five months after Poland's first free election, the Berlin Wall was torn down, and the Soviet Union began to lose more power throughout Eastern Europe. Neighboring countries of Poland such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia had an increasing number of protests and strikes against communist rule. Many of these protesters found inspiration in Poland's success. Influenced by the Solidarity Movement, all of the countries behind the Iron Curtain, except for Romania, used nonviolent protest strategies to overthrow their communist governments. Within the next ten years the Soviet Union would cease to exist. Prior to the triumph of Solidarity, the Soviet Union was seen as an authoritarian force that could only be defeated with a large military. The people of Poland proved this wrong by non-violently creating a movement that stood up for their rights and beliefs, leaving a legacy of influence across Eastern Europe.

The triumphant 1980 protests starting in the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk, and the negotiations that would follow, overturned the tragic oppression of the people in Poland. The triumph of NSZZ: Solidarnosc, the first independent trade union behind the Iron Curtain, influenced movements throughout the Eastern Bloc to non-violently stand up for democracy. People around the world learned from the Solidarity Movement the power of uniting together as a population to stand up for change.