Introduction:

Why Poland? Why Workers? Why 1980?

The Poles rebel against a mild oppressor, because they can; against a harsh one, because they must.

Saying from the 1860s crisis (from Greek): a serious breakdown in the process of economic growth in capitalism. Crisis is a phenomenon solely connected with the capitalist economies and does not occur in other socio-economic systems...

From the official Encyclopedia Powszechna, Warsaw

When I first came to Poland I kept hearing a very strange word. 'Yowta', my new acquaintances sighed, 'yowta!', and conversation ebbed into melancholy silence. Did 'yowta' mean fate. I wondered, was it an expression like 'that's life?'

'Yalla' (Polish pronunciation 'yowta') is where the story of Solidarity begins. 'Yalla' for the Poles means that, after their army had been the first to resist Hitler, after Britain had gone to war to defend of Poland's independence and Polish servicemen had fought courageously in defence of Britain, after some six million of their compatriots (one in every five citizens of the pre-war Polish Republic) had died in the war—after all this, their country was delivered up by their western allies, Britain and America, into the famously tender care of 'Uncle Joe' Stalin.

While it can be argued that Churchill and Roosevelt had no alternative, since when the Big Three met at Yalta in the Crimea in February 1945 the Red Army already occupied the territory of the former Polish Republic, and while in the final communiqué of that meeting Stalin solemnly promised 'the holding of free and unfettered elections as soon as possible on the basis of universal suffrage and secret ballot',¹ such a deliverance was an equivocal blessing, for anyone. But to understand why it was in Poland that the first workers' revolution against a 'Workers State' erupted in
August 1980, you must understand why the prospect of Soviet 'liberation' was so particularly appalling to the great majority of Poles in 1945.

To understand this you must return to the beginning of Poland's recorded history with the baptism of King Mieszko I in the Latin rite in the year 966. Poland thus became the easternmost bulwark of Latin Christendom. The kingdom grew and prospered until, uniting with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, its vast territories extended over most of what is now the western Soviet Union. Polish armies occupied Moscow. In the sixteenth century this Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth developed a unique political system. Supreme power lay with parliamentary gatherings of the nobility, who sought perfect liberty for themselves, and perfect equality among themselves. Such was their respect for the rights of the individual noble, that in time the extraordinary institution of Liberum Veto gave every single member of parliament (Sejm) the right to veto any Bill. One vote again sufficed. It was unanimity or nothing! Such was their mistrust of central authority that they converted the monarchy into an elective office. The kings whom they elected in tumultuous mass assemblies on a great meadow outside Warsaw were often reduced to despair or even flight. 'Poland stands by unruly' ('Nierządem Polska stać') the unruly nobles proclaimed as their motto, refusing to vote their monarchs the necessary funds for a professional army. On an island like Britain, or on the other side of the Atlantic, this Noble Democracy might just have lasted. But Poland lay on the open plains between two hungry autocracies, Russia and Prussia.

Despite last-minute efforts to reform and strengthen the kingdom, culminating in the famous liberal Constitution of 3 May 1791, Poland was simply carved up by her neighbours, Russia, Prussia and Austria, in the 'Partitions' of 1772, 1793 and 1795. Poland disappeared from the map of Europe as an independent state for the next one hundred and twenty-three years. But it refused to disappear as a nation.

Though in the 'Golden Century' of Noble Democracy Poland had been known as the 'paradise of heretics', a haven of religious tolerance and diversity, the Poles' fervent patriotism was now expressed through an ever closer identification of the nation with the Roman Catholic Church, against the creeds of their oppressors.

German Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy. Again and again, in 1794, and 1830-1, and 1863-4, and 1905, they expressed their longing for freedom through heroic insurrections, which were crushed with habitual brutality by Tsarist Russia. While the masses prayed to 'Mary, Queen of Poland', a great part of the 'intelligentsia' (what would have been called in nineteenth-century England the 'educated classes', but a more coherent social group, with a special aristocratic ethos and sense of patriotic duty) kept alive the values of 'Polishness' and nursed the myths of the glorious Polish past. In exile, Romantic poets like Adam Mickiewicz developed a Messianic allegory in which Poland, the 'Christ among nations', suffered, was crucified, but would rise again for Europe's redemption. The Church, the insurrectionary tradition, the cultural work of the intelligentsia and romantic Messianism forged what can best be described as the Polish national conscience.

This whistle-stop tour through ten centuries of history must serve to establish three points which are as important as they are basic: the Poles are an old European people with an unquenchable thirst for freedom; freedom in Polish means, in the first place, national independence; the Polish national identity is historically defined in opposition to Russia.

In the nineteenth century this opposition might be described as the clash of Polish democracy with Russian despotism. Polish individualism with Russian collectivism, Polish Catholicism with Russian Orthodoxy. The revolutionary replacement of one kind of Russian orthodoxy with another in 1917 might have been expected to appease the conflict. But the relationship between the new Polish and Russian states which emerged from the ashes of the First World War began with another war: the Polish-Soviet war of 1920. It ended in another world war, after Stalin had joined Hitler in the fourth and most terrible Partition of Poland, under the terms of the Secret Protocol to the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.

The Poles remember 17 September 1939, when Soviet troops invaded eastern Poland, just as vividly as 1 September. More than one million Poles (roughly one-tenth of the population of Soviet-Ukraine) were murdered, and the annexation of eastern Poland was complete. The Poles remember two World Wars which have left them with indelible scars. After World War I they inherited a bankrupt state with no authority over its own territory and population. After World War II, they were dismembered once again by the U.S.S.R. and its allies. Between the two was the Occupation of Poland from 1939 to 1945. The two Poles remember World War II as a war in which they were at the centre.

Since 1945 Poland has been free again. But the Poles remember, and the memory is too painful to forget. "For a grand tour the reader should turn to Norman Davies's magnificent God's Playground. A History of Poland" (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981).
occupied Poland) were deported eastward by the Soviet authorities—fewer than half of them returned, carrying children who would not forget Siberia. One such child was Andrzej Gwiazda, later to become a leader of Solidarity. His tender feelings towards the Soviet Union may be imagined. It is now established beyond any reasonable doubt that thousands of Polish officers were murdered on Stalin’s orders at Katyn in 1940. The Warsaw Uprising, launched by the underground Home Army (AK) in 1944 as a last desperate attempt to keep control of Poland’s liberation in non-communist Polish hands, was crushed with unsurpassed brutality by the Germans, while the Red Army held back just a few miles away on the left bank of the Vistula, and Stalin for weeks refused to allow American aircraft carrying supplies to refuel on Soviet airfields.

And so to ‘Yalta’.

In 1945 the majority of Poles, like the majority in other European countries after the cataclysm of total war, did not wish simply to return to the pre-war status quo. Unlike many young Poles today, for whom ‘like before the war’ is the highest possible praise, many of them had bitter memories of the Second Republic, with its rural poverty and ill-treatment of the Jewish and Ukrainian minorities. The peasantry, who still comprised roughly half the working population, cried out for a fairer distribution of land, and all the parties of the pre-war Left were committed to giving it to them. In a free election in a free Poland there would almost certainly have been a strong vote for the Peasant Party and for the reformist programme of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), as there was in Britain for the Labour Party.

But there was no society in eastern Europe less prepared voluntarily to accept Soviet socialism, imposed by Russian bayonets. Soviet socialism did not start from scratch in Poland; it started with a huge political and moral debit. Stalin himself said that introducing communism to Poland was like putting a saddle on a cow; the Poles thought it was like putting a yoke on a stallion. This fundamental, historic opposition and incompatibility is the most basic cause of the Polish revolt against ‘Yalta’ and Soviet socialism in 1980. For thirty-five years Poland’s communist rulers tried either to break the stallion to the yoke or to mould the saddle to the cow. It was always probable that they would fail.

... the liquidations and deportations ... and all the rest of the game of setting up a totalitarian regime ... if we do not get things right now [he went on] it will soon be seen by the world that you and I by putting our signatures to the Crimea settlement have underwritten a fraudulent prospectus.\(^2\)

In the ‘election’ finally held in January 1947 a million voters were summarily disenfranchised, thousands of Peasant Party members and 142 candidates were simply arrested, the vote count was rigged.\(^3\)

I have no space to spell out the full catalogue of force and fraud by which Soviet domination was imposed on Poland, or the suffering of the civil war which accompanied it. It is sometimes suggested that the Sovietisation of Poland only began in earnest with the American declaration of Cold War in late 1946. The reverse is nearer to the truth: the Cold War was, in part, a western response to the Sovietisation of Poland which began when the first NKVD man set foot on Polish soil.\(^4\) It is, however, true that Poland’s first post-war communist leader, Władysław Gomułka, recognised the tactical need to mould the saddle to the cow—that is, to take a slower Polish road to Soviet socialism—if the new regime was ever to win some genuine legitimacy in this stubborn and hostile nation. He did not, for example, envisage the immediate forced collectivisation of agriculture. Only after he was replaced by a Stalinist stooge, Bolesław Bierut, was this tactical restraint abandoned. Then the collectivisation of agriculture was announced,
Timothy Carston Ash

the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) was dunned into a most unequal merger with the communist Polish Workers' Party to form the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR—hereafter simply 'the Party'), and, in the period of full-blooded Stalinism, from c. 1949 to 1954, they tried to break the stallion to the yoke.

At the end of this period the Leninist-Stalinist political system had been installed in Poland which, in essentials, was still in place in 1980. The nature of this system has been well characterised by the former East German dissident Ru Jolff Bahro as a 'politbureaucratic dictatorship'.\(^5\) Supreme power is normally concentrated (barring direct intervention by the Soviet Union) in the Party's Politburo, a body with ten to twenty members, chaired by the Party leader (formally, Party First Secretary). Historically, as in the Soviet Union, the personality of the Party leader has marked the 'era' in a fashion typical of a dictatorship. The Politburo's decisions are transmitted to society through two linked pyramids of political bureaucracy, the Party and the state administration, the latter being in practice subordinate.\(^5\)

The security of the regime depends at all times on the potential coercive power of the security and armed forces (with the ultimate threat of the Red Army, two divisions of which are permanently stationed on Polish soil). The relative importance of Party, security services and military in preserving communist rule in Poland varies with circumstances: when the Party lacks even grudging popular acceptance the direct coercive power of the security and armed forces becomes correspondingly more important. Though theoretically integrated into the Party-state, the security and military apparatuses have their own direct links with the Soviet Union, often at the highest levels, and play a significant role in the internal factional struggles of the Party.\(^7\) Historically, they have not been mere 'executors' of the current Party leader's 'line'. The basic structure of the politbureaucratic dictatorship is thus simple, totalitarian and monolithic; but its day-to-day politics are fraught with internal tensions and contradictions, which become most acute in periods of political crisis like 1980–2.

The Party controls not only the appointment of its own full-time officials, known collectively as the apparet, but also all the most important appointments in almost every walk of life: central and local government officials, managers in industry and commerce, publishers, newspaper editors, senior army officers, judges, trade union leaders, university rectors, headmasters, leaders of youth and women's organisations, bankers, fire brigade commanders... For this purpose, the Party's Central, regional and local committees maintain lists of positions, and of people judged fit to fill them. The Soviet term for these lists, nomenklatura, has come to be applied by extension to the class of people holding such positions. In 1972 the nomenklatura was expanded to include the Party's central control, so that by 1980 there were probably some 200,000 to 300,000 nomenklatura jobs.

The nomenklatura can accurately be described as a client ruling class. Its members enjoy power, status and privileges (in varying degrees) by virtue simply of belonging to it. They may not individually own the means of production, but they do collectively control them. In the 1970s they were popularly known as 'the owners of People's Poland'. By contrast with other class systems, economic and political power are concentrated permanently in the same hands. Neither is this a purely functional elite. The children of the nomenklatura enjoy automatic advantages, so long as they remain loyal to the system. In the 1970s these advantages were comparable with hereditary privilege in the West: if you were the son of a senior apparatchik you had a much higher standard of living, better education and career chances than your contemporary, the son of a worker.\(^9\) If one includes families, perhaps 1½ million people depend directly on the continuance of Party monopolies for their jobs, powers or privileges.

In Poland, the ruling class has a characteristic face. Recruited from workers' and peasants' sons, for ideological reasons and because they were most likely to be loyal to the new system, these young men trooped hopefully into power. If the initial revolutionary élan, the 'new frontier' spirit, soon evaporated in a swamp of inefficiency and lies, the poor peasant's son (remembering the misery of a rural childhood in pre-war Poland) had none the less taken an undreamed-of step up the social ladder and acquired a vested interest in the system. Further advancement, moreover, depended on a consistent 'negative selection' since the qualities of unquestioning obedience and loyalty to the Party were rewarded, while individual initiative, innovation and spontaneity were generally discouraged. In the 1950s and 1960s the faces which stared
out of the solemn black-and-white portrait photos in Trybuna Ludu (The People's Tribune, the Polish Przedsza) might still be those of bony, puritan old communists like Gomulka, or the ascetic features of Jewish intellectuals; in the 1970s they were supplanted by the broad, slab features and fatty jowls of the peasant sons. At fifty the ruling class had the face it deserved.

This regime can accurately be described as 'totalitarian' in the sense that it aspires to total control over every aspect of its citizens' lives, to break every social bond outside its aegis, to destroy 'civil society'. Wherever two or three are gathered together, there the Party-state desires to be. Ideally, this control will extend even to the subject nation's collective memory, to history, for 'he who controls the past controls the future'. Yet every national case in eastern Europe was different, and nowhere did the reality fall farther short of the totalitarian ideal than in Poland.

Here the sprawling political bureaucracy never became a really swift, effective executor of central orders; on the contrary, it developed a matchless expertise in obstructing or twisting changes ordered from above. The Polish Party was never purged by a Stalinist terror as brutal as in Hungary or Czechoslovakia. 'Some sort of filter mitigates extremes in Poland',9 Czeslaw Milosz (the exiled Polish poet awarded the Nobel Prize in 1980 comments—but the filter was surely strengthened in this case by the communists' awareness that they were an embattled minority attempting to rule a hostile people, and simply could not afford to deplete their own ranks. Outside the ranks of the Party, Stalinism was both too severe and too mild. It was too severe for the Party to win the voluntary cooperation of several groups whose cooperation it might have won by less conciliatory methods: thousands of former members of the Home Army (AK), their education and skills of great potential value, were harassed, sacked, imprisoned and judicially murdered.10 It was too mild to break the back of 'civil society', as was done, for example, in Hungary in three years of terror after the Russian invasion in 1956.

Even in the worst years of Stalinism, Polish communism was distinguished by half-measures, partially executed. Specifically, the Polish communists failed to collectivise private agriculture and to subjugate the Church. (Perhaps they would have needed another Russian invasion to do so.) Little more than 9 per cent of agricultural land was collectivised by 1956, and during the 'Polish October' of that year four-fifths of the collective farms were spontaneously dissolved by their members.11 The Primate, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, returned to Warsaw from three years' 'interment' in a remote monastery. The Church rose still more in popular esteem for being yet again persecuted by an alien power.

The fact that Wyszyński's Church succeeded in keeping the allegiance of most of the peasant families who flocked to find work in the new socialist industrial centres is of capital importance for an understanding of Solidarity. This stubborn allegiance of the young working class, at once pious and patriotic, was unique in eastern Europe. So was the manner in which the Church and non-communist intellectuals kept alive the Poles' autonomous collective memory—the national conscience—against the Party's determined efforts to destroy it.

In 1956 the Poles had succeeded in preserving two vital bastions of pluralism, the Church and private agriculture, and an exceptional degree of independence in intellectual and cultural life. Here there were still the social bases for self-determination.12 In 1950 a simple terminology was widely adopted by Solidarity members to describe the essential conflict in Poland since 1945: it was, they said, a struggle between 'the society' (społeczeństwo) and 'the power' (władza). Yet the mass adoption of this terminology by workers in 1980 is itself a crucial historical development. It would be wrong for the historian to join them in projecting the constellation of 1980—the confrontation between a self-aware, united 'society' and a weak, divided 'power', the utter alienation of the working class from the Party-state which ruled in its name—back into the year 1945 or 1956.

Workers in a 'Workers' State'

True, 1956 was the first date which Solidarity chapels embroidered on their banners, because it was the first year in which Polish workers stood up for their rights against the communist regime, at the cost of their lives. On 28 June 1956 workers of the Stalin engineering works in Poznań (better known, before and since, as the Cegielnki works) came out on the streets to protest at their worsening economic position. Makeshift placards held aloft by the swelling crowd demanded 'Bread and Freedom'. Polish Internal
Security forces put down the rising in two days of street fighting, during which at least fifty-three people were killed and hundreds injured. Poznań gave birth to a potent myth linking two ideas of freedom, the workers' freedom from want and the nation's freedom from foreign domination: a myth all the more potent because any reference to the Poznań events was soon censored out of the official media. Officially, the events became non-events, the dead unpersons.

However, in 1956 the workers' protest was still mainly channelled through the soi-disant workers' Party. In this, Poland in 1956 was like Czechoslovakia in 1968 rather than Poland in 1980. The nearest thing 1956 had to a Lech Walesa, a young Warsaw car-worker called Leszek Goździk, was actually secretary of the Party group in his factory. The man who re-emerged as Party leader in the dramatic days of the 'Polish October', Władysław Gomułka, was the first and last Polish communist to be, briefly, a national hero. He was a national hero in October 1956 above all because people thought he was defying the Russians. In Warsaw, the workers waited in their factories, preparing to defend this new and supposedly reformist Polish communist leadership, against the Red Army if necessary.  

It would be wearisome to detail the slow process of disillusionment which followed this heady dawn. Suffice it to say that Khrushchev's acceptance of Gomułka proved to be not the beginning of a new period of democratisation in and through the Party, of rational economic reform, cultural liberalisation and increased respect for human and civil rights, but rather the beginning of the end of that happy ferment of 'renewal' which effervesced across Poland in the autumn of 1956.

For the workers, two elements of this gradual reestablishment of the politbureaucratic dictatorship were especially painful. First, the 'workers' councils' which had emerged spontaneously in many factories in 1956 were 'merged' by a law of 1958 into theoretically independent 'Conferences of Workers' Self-Government' (KSR). In practice this put them back under Party control. Instead of being genuinely independent bodies expressing the grievances of the workers they became (to use Lenin's metaphor for trade unions in the communist system) just another 'transmission belt' for conveying the Party's wishes (e.g. increased production) to the workers.

Secondly, for political reasons the pioneering proposals made by many Polish economists for reforming the bureaucratized command economy were largely ignored. (Whereas they were largely implemented in Hungary—Polish economists have long been prophets without power in their own country.) Over the next fourteen years, repeated attempts at decentralisation and the introduction of some market mechanisms were repeatedly frustrated by a combination of bureaucrat inertia, vested interests, limited imagination in the Gomułka leadership and perhaps also a desire to show that at least in economies Poland could stick to a Soviet model. Having failed to destroy the private sector in agriculture, the regime consistently neglected it, thus eating away at the roots of economic growth. Meanwhile, the characteristic concentration on a few heavy industrial branches meant that the workers rarely saw the products of their labour in the form of consumer goods. The annual increase in real wages in the 1960s was, according to the distinguished Polish economist Wlodzimierz Brus, 'not even statistically significant'.  

By the end of the decade industrial safety and social facilities for the workers had been badly neglected, while a newly married couple had to wait on average seven years before being assigned a flat of their own.

One of the few remaining popular benefits of this irrational, lopsided political economy was the regime's guarantee of low staple food prices, some of which had been frozen for a decade. Though shortages of meat and dairy products were acute by 1970 (mainly due to the cumulative neglect of private agriculture) when the working-class housewife did obtain her joint in the state-owned butcher's (as opposed to on the burgeoning black market) it was very cheap. But the economic distortions caused by this price freeze became so acute that the Gomułka leadership decided they would have to increase staple food prices, by up to 36 per cent. They chose to do this, without warning, on 13 December 1970, just a fortnight before Christmas—which shows how far they had lost touch with the mood of the people.  

The result was an earthquake of working-class protest which toppled Gomułka and shook the regime. In Gdańsk thousands of shipyard workers marched on the Party's regional headquarters, demanding that the price rises be withdrawn. Within a few days the government was faced with strikes and protests across much of the
country. Several big Warsaw factories were occupied. This time the bloodshed came in the Baltic ports, where armed police and professional Polish soldiers once again shot and killed Polish workers. Gomulka had ordered them to crush what he now called ‘counter-revolution’, though even the Soviet Politburo did not endorse this interpretation.

December 1970 is the single most important date in the prehistory of Solidarity. In December 1970 the giant which the socialist regime had itself created, the new working class, first flexed its muscles, seized the men who claimed to rule in its interest by the scruff of their necks, and shook them. At least three vital lines of causality run from here to August 1980.

The first could be seen most clearly in an industrial enterprise of which the world would hear more. The Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk was already one of Poland’s shop-window socialist enterprises—the kind of place they took visiting heads of state to see. The workforce, more than 15,000 strong, was a mixture of raw young peasant sons and older men, many ‘resettled’ from the pre-war eastern provinces which had been incorporated into the Soviet Union as a result of Yalta. December 1970 fused them for the first time into a cohesive community with a common purpose. The shooting of their comrades in front of the shipyards gates on Wednesday 16 December transgressed that especially sacred unwritten commandment of the Polish religion of freedom, ‘Tol shall not kill Pole’. The more the authorities attempted to suppress the memory of the December dead in subsequent years, the more fiercely the people of the coast remembered. Forced underground, the myth of the martyrs grew in the fertile subsoil of the national conscience. To the shipyards workers, with their strange mixture of patriotic peasant piety and workers’ self-respect bred by socialism, the Poles murdered by Poles, workers murdered by a ‘Workers’ State’, became the symbol for all their accumulated grievances. To one shipyards worker in particular, a private farmer’s son and member of the strike committee in 1970, the duty to honour the martyrs’ memory became a driving force, almost an obsession. His name was Lech Walesa. In his subsequent career, myth and history, subjective and objective causes, became inextricable. 16

Secondly, the workers deliberately organised themselves outside the aegis of the Party, and formulated proto-political demands. This was particularly notable in the tough north-eastern port of Szczecin where the shiplyards workers successfully adopted the pre-war technique of the occupation-strike. In January 1971, protests having resumed after the Christmas break, more than thirty Szczecin factories set up a network of strike committees which effectively controlled the everyday life of the city. Their demands included not only the withdrawal of the price rises, but also the recognition of the strike committees as authentic, permanent representatives of the work force (like the ‘workers’ councils’ of 1956), and, in the longer term, new, free, independent trades unions—prefiguring August 1980.

In 1971, however, the outcome was rather different. On the evening of 24 January the new Party leader, Edward Gierek, unexpectedly appeared at the gates of the occupied Warski Shipyards in Szczecin. There followed an unprecedented nine-hour-long confrontation in which Gierek adopted a tone of frankness and humility (“When it was proposed that I take over the leadership of the Party, at first I thought I would refuse... I am only a worker like you...”)17 Somehow it worked. After defusing him in complaints about the official trades unions, the lies of the official media and the inefficiency of the ruling class, the workers finally shouted, in words which were to become first famous and later infamous: ‘Pomoczymy! Pomoczymy!’ (“We will help you!”) and went back to work. The next day saw a similar marathon confrontation in the Lenin Shipyards and another personal triumph for Gierek. Unlike in 1956, the workers’ protest had not initially been channelled through the Party, but many of the strike leaders were Party members and the strikers finally agreed to give the Party another chance.

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the whole of Gierek’s political strategy in the next decade was dictated by the workers’ revolt in 1970–1, and the extent to which Solidarity was shaped by the workers’ bitter recollection of its outcome. In his speeches Lech Walesa would often recall how he himself had shouted ‘Pomoczymy!’... ‘And what did Gierek do with our help?’ he would ask.

Gierek’s ‘Great Leap’

What Gierek did is already the subject of excellent learned articles, satires and sermons on human folly. 18 Briefly, he seems to have
started from the correct premise that communist ideology would not furnish the means of political legitimation for the Polish Party in the 1970s. In fact he knew the workers did not believe the ideological guff of propaganda any more than he did. They wanted peace today, not the promise of paradise tomorrow. He tried to play the national card, for example by rebuilding the royal castle in Warsaw, but such gestures had a very limited effect. In any contest for patriotic legitimacy the Party was bound to lose hands down against the Church, indeed against almost anyone except Moscow. He tried to woo the Church and intelligentsia into more active ‘patriotic’ co-operation by offering greater tolerance in intellectual, cultural and religious life.

But his trump cards were economic. Basically he proposed to win the support of the majority of the population by bringing them a steadily rising material standard of living, visible in the shops as consumer goods, on top of the traditional socialist advantages of full employment, social security and stable prices. As political boss of industrial Silesia he had become expert at the game of distributing goods and privileges so as to satisfy different factions in the party, and, more important, to ‘divide and rule’ between different sectors of society. The miners, for example, had been especially well paid and well supplied with meat to keep them passive. These Tammany Hall politics Gierek now intended to apply on a national scale. The great leap forward, the Polish Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle), would start with a spurt of industrial development using technology and plant imported from the West and initially paid for by the West. Exports from these new plants to the West would then earn the hard currency to pay back the loans.

Gierek’s broad strategy was neither unique nor wholly absurd.* Both János Kádár in Hungary and Erich Honecker in East Germany developed models of ‘consumer socialism’. Both used western loans to finance the necessary imports, and the per capita hard currency debt of both Hungary and East Germany was larger than Poland’s as late as 1979. Both ran into difficulties in the worsening world economic climate of the late 1970s. Honecker initiated a tactical rapprochement with the (Protestant) Church; Kádár set an example of tactical intellectual tolerance. Both tried to play the national card.

What was unique about Gierek’s ‘great leap forward’ was its scale, the breathtaking incompetence with which it was executed, and the society with which he had to deal. The Five-Year Plan for 1973–5, finally adopted in June 1972, concentrated heavily on a few industries—steel, shipbuilding, petro-chemicals—for which the export prospects were poor even before the oil crisis. Although few communist regimes have been less ideological, the over-ambitious Plan goals, the obsession with heavy industry and the incredible, vainglorious ‘Propaganda of Success’ bear the unmistakable marks of the experience which many of the new Politburo had shared in the Stalinist Union of Polish Youth (ZMP). Gierek’s monument is the gigantic, unfinished ‘Huta Katowice’ steelworks, a huge economic white elephant for which the only rationale is political: it lies in the heart of his former Silesian fief, providing jobs for the boys, a specially-built broad-gauge railway runs from its gates straight to the Soviet Union.

The implementation of the Plan, moreover, was so uncontrolled that gross investment in fixed assets rose by a staggering 69.5 per cent instead of the planned 38.5 per cent: real wages by 36 per cent instead of 17 per cent (official figures). The Gierek team persuaded themselves that rapidly rising real wages would correspondingly increase productivity, as well as performing the vital political service of keeping the workers quiet. In practice their strategy raised expectations rather than productivity. At the same time there were no major structural reforms, which might have ensured that western imports were used effectively. Greater autonomy was rightly given to the managers of larger companies, now reorganised into groups known by their Polish initials as WOGs. The short-term effect of this half-hearted reform was, however, to further overheat the economy, as rival managers used their new freedom to invest more borrowed money, pay out more wages, and, more often than not, to enrich themselves on the side.

*Several western writers have followed the Polish sociologist Jadwiga Staniskis in labelling the Polish political system under Gierek ‘corporatist’. This label does not seem to me useful (1) because the differences between this and any western ‘corporatist’ system are greater than the similarities, and (2) because the similarities to the political system before 1970 are greater than the differences. A change in strategy by the new Party leadership, which left the basic structure of the politburo-bureaucratic dictatorship unchanged, hardly justifies a new label for the whole system.
Any coherent plan for the rapid modernisation of Poland would have begun with the modernisation of private agriculture, which, despite all its handicaps, was consistently more efficient than the socialised sector. Increased food supplies from the private sector to the state-run shops could have helped to secure the regime's minimal legitimacy with the urban working class, while agricultural exports could have paid for some of the imported western technology. As one Polish writer pithily observes, '...Ham and beef are wanted by all, but Polish machine tools and cars will not be bought by anyone who is quite sane.'

At the beginning of the Gierek era a little of this economic common sense does seem to have penetrated to the top, but it was soon defeated by the unholy alliance of bureaucracy and ideology. To the ideology of Soviet socialism private agriculture was, of course, anathema. The bureaucrats therefore had cast-iron arguments with which to defend their vested interests. There was a formidable industrial lobby inside the Party, and none for private agriculture. In fact, the late 1970s saw a further, rapid 'socialisation' of agriculture: the proportion of arable land privately farmed fell from 86 per cent in 1970 to 75 per cent in 1980, with a corresponding, predictable decline in production. At the same time, both domestically-produced and, increasingly, imported meat was pumped into the shops to feed the consumer boom. According to official figures the average per caput consumption of meat rocketed from 53 kg in 1970 to 70 kg in 1975. As a direct result of these policies, Poland, which had been a major food exporter in the 1950s, ran up a staggering $4.5 billion deficit in food and agricultural trade with the West in the period 1970-80. The system of fixed, heavily subsidised staple-food prices reached new heights of surrealism when bread became cheaper than animal fodder. Private farmers, rational enough, began feeding their animals bread...

Though most of the economic foibles of the Gierek 'great leap' were a direct result of the failures of the system and the leadership, the price freeze was caused by social pressure. In this regard, the Polish workers had won themselves a virtual power of veto in 1970-1. After Szczecin and Gdańsk had gone back to work the textile workers of Łódź—Poland's Manchester—came out on strike. This time it was the new Prime Minister, Jaroszewicz, who asked 'Will you help us?', and the furious crowd of badly paid, undernourished women answered: 'No!' Next day the 13 December price rises were finally withdrawn. So in 1976 basic food prices were still mostly pegged to the 1967 level, while the regime continued to shower money on to the workers.

In June 1976, without prior warning or consultation with the workers, the government once again tried to remedy this yawning imbalance between demand and supply by introducing food price rises of, on average, 60 per cent (69 per cent on meat). Workers across the country went on strike; the Baltic shipyards were once again occupied, the strikers set about electing a committee, drawing up lists of demands... From the Ursus tractor factory near Warsaw several thousand workers marched to the transcontinental railway lines and stopped the Paris-Moscow express. In Radom, south-west of Warsaw, workers reverted to the more primitive forms of protest which had been seen in Poznań exactly twenty years before. A large crowd marched to the Party headquarters and, receiving no satisfaction, set fire to it. That evening a visibly shaken Prime Minister Jaroszewicz announced the withdrawal of the price rises 'for further consideration': there had, he said, been useful 'consultations' with the workers. Meanwhile, police and security thugs moved in to take a savage revenge on the workers of Radom and Ursus, forcing them to run the gauntlet through two lines of trenchan-wide police, who called this, with delicate irony, the 'path of health'. Harsh sentences were handed down by civil courts; thousands of workers were sacked. But it was the regime which had capitulated.

A Great Convergence

In their last four years, from summer 1976 to summer 1980, Gierek and his crew were like the pilots of an airliner which has gone into a nosedive. Starting with the so-called 'economic manoeuvre' of late 1976, they tried every trick they knew, but the machine would not respond to the controls. The dive became steeper and steeper; the engines burned out; the pointer on the hard currency debt dial whizzed up into the red, from the $10 billion mark in 1976 to around $17 billion in 1979. In this uncomfortable position a remarkable thing happened in the body of the aircraft. Hesitantly at first, hindered by the stewardess, then with growing confidence, the
passengers began to get together, to organise themselves, to sign petitions to the crew and demand a change of course ...

The single most important initiative grew directly out of the Radom and Ursus trials. Learning that many of the accused workers had no resources with which to defend themselves a diverse group of intellectuals clubbed together to help. In September 1976 they founded the Workers' Defence Committee, which would become known throughout the world by its Polish initials KOR. Other intellectual initiatives had preceded KOR: most importantly a wave of protests against proposed changes to the Constitution in 1975 formally enshrining the leading role of the Party in the state and Poland's 'unshakeable fraternal bonds' with the Soviet Union. Many others were to follow KOR,24 but its foundation was a turning-point. In its original form it was the first bridge thrown over the fatal gulf between workers and intellectuals, which had been so painfully apparent in December 1970, when most intellectuals remained silent during the workers' protest (many still smarting under the memory of the workers' indifference during the students' protest in March 1968, its brutal suppression and the subsequent official anti-Semitic—anti-Zionist—campaign and cultural pogrom). Without this bridge Solidarity would have developed, if at all, very differently.

In its original composition, KOR threw bridges over some deep divides within the critical intelligentsia: it included former communists and members of the pre-war Polish Socialist Party (PPS), for example, the venerable economist Edward Lipiński; former protégés of the Stalinist regime, like the novelist Jerzy Andrzejewski, and former prisoners of Stalin, like Antoni Paidak, a veteran of Piłsudski's First World War 'Legions' and students whose first battles had been fought with the communist police in March 1968.25

KOR was an icebreaker. In its wake, more and more intellectuals dared to participate in some kind of opposition activity. Within three years, Poland developed a whole opposition counter-culture without parallel in the Soviet bloc. There were two excellent uncensored literary magazines and upwards of ten uncensored journals of opinion. The largest of the underground publishers, Nowa, produced some hundred works, including a Polish translation of Orwell's Animal Farm and a pocket-sized handbook giving instructions for dealing with the secret police. A 'New Wave' of young poets from the Polish 'class of '68' punctured the mendacious bubbles of official propaganda with sharp, electrifying political poems. People paid high prices for these forbidden fruits; they devoured them in a night and then passed them on to their friends, so the circle of readers was far larger than the few thousand copies which were somehow run off on the hidden duplicators. A growing number of scholars took part in the 'Flying University' (TKN), founded in January 1978, which held unofficial seminars in private flats on all those areas of Polish history and life which were officially taboo.

I cannot do justice in a few sentences to the richness and excitement of this unique opposition counter-culture,26 and I must confine myself to those parts of it which are directly relevant to the pre-history of Solidarity. Yet one is bound to ask why all this opposition activity was tolerated by the Gierek regime. There can be little doubt about the technical feasibility of repression. At a meeting in 1978 a colonel of the security service was asked why the police did not destroy the underground publishers. 'We know all the addresses, we could destroy everything in one night,' he sighed, 'but the high-ups won't allow us to' (my italics).27 The 'high-ups', notably Gierek himself, seem to have thought that this flowering of intellectual opposition would not amount to a serious political threat, while tolerance might win them a broader measure of co-operation from the intelligentsia. Perhaps this reflected their low regard for ideas in general. But two other factors contributed to this major miscalculation.

The first was détente. Although the Polish opposition did not on the whole support détente, in the late 1970s détente supported the Polish opposition. In early 1977 the most active younger members of KOR were arrested, and materials collected for a trial. Then, in July 1977, they were all quite unexpectedly arrested. Thereafter KOR activists would be abused, harassed, sacked from their jobs, many times detained for questioning and held for the forty-eight hours allowed by law before charges had to be preferred—but they would not be held for a longer period until August 1980 (and even then the fiction of successive forty-eight hour detentions was carefully preserved). By 1977 Gierek was already in desperate financial straits, while the 'Helsinki process' was in full swing and the
Carter administration made the most explicit 'linkage' between the economic and human rights components of détente. That year both Chancellor Schmidt and President Carter visited Warsaw. At a press conference Carter loudly praised the Polish record on human rights and religious tolerance, in the next breath announcing a further $200 million of US credits.29 'Linkage' could hardly be more explicit than that. If the KOR activists had still been imprisoned, it is doubtful if the credits would have flowed so freely.*

The second factor is the Church. It was by no means self-evident that the Polish Catholic Church would spring to the defence of intellectuals who still described themselves as democratic socialists (although there was no ideological uniformity in KOR, and one founder-member was a priest). Before the Second World War the socialist and Catholic milieux in Poland had been bitterly antagonistic: they were 'Two Worlds'. The story of how this gulf came to be bridged in the three decades after 1945 is a complex and fascinating one, which can be only crudely summarised here.29 It was a convergence from both sides. Within the Church, a brilliant group of philosophers and writers concentrated around the Kraków weekly Tygodnik Powszechny (including Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II), the Warsaw monthly Współczesność ('Link', its editor, Józef Mazowiecki, subsequently one of Lech Wałęsa's closest advisers) and the Clubs of the Catholic Intelligentsia (KIK) gradually formulated a new Catholic social philosophy, fitted generally to the demands of the twentieth century. This merged with the political strategy which the Church hierarchy under Wyszyński developed specifically to combat the demands of a totalitarian regime.

By 1968, Poland's two Cardinals, Karol Wojtyła in Kraków and the Primate, Stefan Wyszyński, in Warsaw, were already spelling out the list of God-given human and civil rights which the state must respect: the right to a life of dignity, the right to freedom, the right to participate in public life, and so on. This marked a significant change even from the Polish Millennium celebrations of two years before (the thousandth anniversary of the baptism of Mieszko I), when the Church had talked more about its own historic rights than about the universal rights of the individual and society. When Giełek set out to woo the Church, it responded with increased demands, which included not only, for example, permission to build more churches and seminaries, but, centrally, more respect for the human rights of all Poles, believers and non-believers. In a sermon delivered in September 1969 the Primate declared: 'It is the clergy's duty to defend the workers' interests against hasty and ill-considered government measures... it was painful that workers should have to struggle for their rights against a workers' government.'30

Such language from the pulpit had a direct influence on workers. It also furnished a common vocabulary for socialist intellectuals. The rapprochement with the Church from the Left took place at several levels. For Leszek Kolakowski it was a stage in a profound philosophical quest which led him from militant atheism in the Stalinist period to the provisional conclusion that the best substitute for Christianity is probably Christianity. For the young historian Adam Michnik it followed rather from the historical discovery that the Church had been the single most important defender of human and civil rights against totalitarian encroachments in Poland since 'Yalta' (a message spelled out in his influential book The Church, the Left, Dialogue, published in Paris in 1977). For KOR's most dynamic political activist, Jacek Kuron, it was initially more a calculation of political tactics.

The operative facts are that the non-communist Polish Left now abandoned the outdated stereotype of the bigoted, nationalist, 'reactionary', anti-Semitic Church (which lived on as a terrible phantom in the mind of the western Left); that Catholic and non-Catholic intellectuals found more and more common ground in the defence of common values, common sense and basic rights against the late Giełek regime; and that the Church of Wyszyński and Wojtyła cast its protective mantle around increasingly outspoken opposition.*

*One anecdote gives the flavour of the time. When an unofficial lecture organised by Kraków students on 'Orwell's 1984 and Poland today' was broken up by police, the organiser went in some distress to his parish priest. A few days later there was a meeting in church, with an address, subject... 'Orwell's 1984 and Poland today'. This meeting was not disrupted. Among his many firsts, Pope John Paul II, then Archbishop of Kraków, must be the first divine to have ordered 1984 to be read in churches.
This opposition cannot be described by the western or pre-war Polish categories of ‘Left’ and ‘Right’. Although elements of pre-war traditions (Socialist, Peasant, ‘National Democratic’) resurfaced, these differences were blurred by changed circumstances and deliberately suppressed in the common struggle against the communist authorities. None the less, three tendencies can be identified, whose differences would be important for the history of Solidarity.

The first might be described as ‘fundamentalist national opposition’ and tended to concentrate on the traditional ideal of national independence in conscious defiance of the existing political reality (‘Yalta’, with no prospect of military liberation while the Soviet Union remained a nuclear superpower). From this time-honoured starting-point of romantic idealism the clandestine Polish League for Independence (PPN) produced a number of lucid studies, looking forward, for example, to Poland’s place in a peacefully reunited Europe alongside a reunited Germany. Working openly, the Movement for the Defence of Human and Civil Rights (ROPCIO) linked these long-term goals to the short-term demand for respect of the Helsinki Agreements. Finally, the small Confederation for an Independent Poland (KPN), founded symbolically on 1 September 1979, came closest in words to the unconditional, insurrectionary defiance of the nineteenth century. Their professed aim was a Polish Third Republic freed from Soviet domination and ‘the dictatorship of the Polish United Workers’ Party’.  

At the other end of the spectrum there was what has been called the ‘loyal opposition’, which accepted both Poland’s position within the Soviet bloc and the basic principles of the communist system. Representative of this tendency was the ‘Experience and the Future’ (DfP) group, which produced two devastating analyses of Poland’s social and economic collapse by 1980. DfP contained many Party and non-Party members of the Warsaw ‘Establishment’. Its proposed remedies were mostly structural reforms and policy changes, arrived at by negotiation and compromise within the Party, initiated by the Party, and controlled from above. It thus carried on the Marxist ‘revisionist’ hopes of 1956—the hopes that the system could be internally ‘revised’ to make it democratic and efficient—and indeed the leading figures of the ‘loyal opposition’ came from the ‘class of ’56’.

For the third tendency, by contrast, Marxist ‘revisionism’ had died its final death under the batons of the Warsaw police in March 1968, and under the tracks of the Soviet tanks in Prague in August. It was an illusion to think that a ruling communist party could ever generate and sustain a real democratisation of the system from above—in fact, as Kolakowski wrote from involuntary exile, ‘democratic communism’ was like ‘fried snowballs’. At the same time they recognised that Poland could not achieve ‘freedom’—i.e. full sovereign national independence—in the foreseeable future. Of course no one could be certain where the limits of Soviet tolerance would be at any particular time; but the example of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 seemed to preclude any attempt at independent control of defence, foreign and security policy, a radical transformation of the Party, or a frontal challenge to its ‘leading role’.

The ‘class of ’68’ none the less thought they discerned a new way forward within these invisible limits. While ‘bureaucratic despotism’ socialism would not be transformed from above, Kolakowski argued in a seminal essay “On Hope and Hopelessness”22 its internal contradictions made it susceptible to pressure from below. To exert this pressure the Poles should organise themselves outside the structures of the Party-state. These ‘self-organised’ social groups and movements would then gradually expand the areas of negative liberty and self-determination open to the citizen. In the end the structures of the Party-state might become little more than stage sets, the facades of a Potemkin village for the eyes of the new Tsars in Moscow, while behind them Polish society would be reformed in an increasingly open, democratic and pluralist way. The economic success and political stability of this relatively autonomous ‘civil society’ would reassure Soviet leaders, whose control of Poland’s foreign and defence policy would not be challenged. This strategy was elaborated in a series of essays by KOR members like Jack Kuron and Adam Michnik, who christened it ‘the New Evolutionism’. Significantly, in September 1977 KOR rebaptised itself ‘Committee for Social Self-Defence—“KOR”’/KSS—KOR’, thus expressing the larger aspiration.

*For brevity, and in accordance with popular usage, I shall refer to it throughout simply as KOR.
terminology which now became current, they sought the gradual emancipation of ‘the society’ from ‘the power’.

There is a direct connection between this third opposition strategy and the birth of Solidarity. KOR’s slogan ‘Don’t burn down Party committees, found your own!’ could hang as a motto over all the workers’ protests of 1980. Although KOR encouraged sundry civic initiatives in all walks of life, the most important were without doubt the private farmers’ Self-Defence Committees and the workers’ Committees for Free Trades Unions. In September 1977 a group of KOR collaborators founded an unofficial paper, Robotnik (The Worker), which was aimed specifically at a working-class readership. On its smudged, small-printed sheets the lessons of past workers’ protests (1956, 1970) were drawn in language workers could understand. The first unofficial free union cell was formed on the initiative of Robotnik, by a former Radom worker called Leopold Gierak (no relation) in November 1977. The Charter was signed by sixty-five activists—workers, technicians, engineers, intellectuals. All, on the principle of openness adopted by much of the opposition, gave their full addresses, and the minority who were fortunate enough to have telephones gave their telephone numbers as well. An appendix cited the relevant clauses of the International Labour Organisation’s Convention and the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both ratified by the Polish government, to prove the legality of their demands.

It is naturally difficult to separate the workers’ own autonomous political learning process from the direct influence of KOR. But certainly these tiny free union cells, Robotnik’s translation of KOR’s general strategy into specific tactics (how to organise an occupation strike, what to demand) and the nationwide opposition network played a major role in helping discontented workers to generalise their grievances, formulate remedies, and co-ordinate their activities. In this sense one could argue that before August 1980 KOR worked very much as Lenin recommended (in What is to be Done?) the conspiratorial communist party should work, raising the political consciousness of the proletariat in key industrial centres. With two crucial differences: KOR’s goal was revolution not revolution; and KOR’s whole ethos was based on the refusal of the lie. Unlike the ‘loyal opposition’ they would not use any part of the ‘doublespeak’ which is as vital as guns to the survival of a communist regime. In this respect following Sakharov and Solzhentitsyn they proposed to speak and write as if they lived in a free country.

By 1979, then, there was already the embryo of that tacit alliance of workers, intelligentsia and Church, unprecedented in Polish history, unique in the Soviet bloc, unseen in the West, which was to grow into Solidarity. The quality of this convergence is beautifully

*The original Robotnik had been founded by Józef Piłsudski before the First World War.
illustrated by the life-story which one young worker told me, sitting in a Warsaw café one rainy afternoon in the autumn of 1980. Born in 1954, at the end of the Stalinist period, he was the thirteenth son of a peasant farmer and the first member of his family born in hospital. When he was three, his father had sold their small private farm and moved to the growing industrial town of Ursus, near Warsaw. At seventeen he left technical school, getting a job in the tractor factory and attending evening classes. With his muscular physique and clean-cut, rugged features he looked like one of those Socialist Heroes of Labour who used to leer out of the placards on the factory walls, the Stakhanovites who had laid a record number of bricks in one shift or performed some other superhuman feat of socialist productivity. With his background he should have been a pillar of the ‘Workers’ State’.

But he wasn’t. For a start, he was a Catholic. Then he was appalled by the brutality and injustice of police reprisals in Ursus after the June 1976 protests, by working conditions in the factory, by the inequality of wage distribution, by the corruption and inefficiency of the management (nomenklatura, of course). In his own workshop the noise level was 95 decibels (he told me): a girlfriend at the Warsaw ‘Róża Luksemburg’ factory was invalided out due to mercury poisoning—aged twenty-nine. What was to be done? Well, in his housing estate, as all over Poland, the local padre comes round at Christmas time to sprinkle holy water and chalk the initials of the three kings—Kasper, Melchior, Baltazar—and the date of the new year on the doorposts of the faithful. From the tenor of this padre’s sermons it appeared he might be in contact with the opposition. So as the priest sprinkled holy water and chalked ‘KMB-1977’ the young parishioner confessed that he was interested in KOR, and asked if the reverend father could show him something from the unofficial press. At once, the reverend father produced a sheaf of samizdat papers, among them Robotnik—and so began a political education which continued through direct contacts with opposition activists from Warsaw.

Three years later this young worker was, at age twenty-six, the chairman of the whole Warsaw region of Solidarity. His name was Zbigniew Bujak.

Bujak’s story, with its wonderful complicity of ancient and modern, KMB and KOR, the three kings and the social self-delusion committee, the Church and the opposition, is a parable of post-war Poland. Where else could it have happened?

Of course Bujak was exceptional. In 1979 the number of workers actively engaged in organised opposition could still be measured in hundreds. But the potential support in his generation and class was enormous. Poland was by now an exceptionally youthful country: nearly one-third of the industrial working class was under twenty-five.° From the uncensored works of the opposition (notably DÍP’s devastating ‘Report on the State of the Republic’), from the researches of Polish sociologists, and, above all, from what they themselves said in the forums provided by Solidarity, we can construct a group portrait of this generation.°°

At home, they had imbibed the memories and myths of national resistance (the ‘national conscience’) with their mothers’ milk: but unlike their parents they had no personal experience of terror, Hitlerite or Stalinist. They had never lived in fear. Unlike their parents, they could not expect dramatic social advancement. The first generation of peasant sons sat tight in their offices. The young generation, although better educated than those in authority over them, could mostly reckon with a lifetime on the same factory floor. Their material expectations had, however, been dramatically raised by Gierek’s great leap. In their early teens they had experienced a dizzy increase in their standard of living; after the puritan stagnation of the late Gomulka years, the shops had been suddenly filled with food, jeans, transistor radios and cassette-players from the West; new buildings had shot up around them; they had been told they might reasonably expect to move into a new flat in a few years—and even, if they were very lucky, to acquire a car. Moreover, they had been able—for the first time ever—to take a holiday in the West. The little Polski Fiat, piled high with provisions and children, became a familiar sight in Vienna and West Berlin. They had seen with their own eyes the noxious evil of the capitalist West—and they rather liked it.

Now these raised expectations were being disappointed. Everywhere they looked they saw standards falling. As the economy broke down, the shortages became ever more frequent and infuriating: this week there was no shaving-cream, next week the shelves were spilling over with shaving-cream but there were no
razor-blades; this week there was meat but no cooking-oil, next week cooking-oil but no meat. The queues lengthened. As in Gomulka’s last years, working conditions in the factories and mines actually deteriorated: according to official statistics there were more deaths per thousand workers in 1979 than in 1970. People might laugh at a shortage of shaving-cream, but a shortage of leather gloves for shipyard workers handling icy metal was no laughing matter. Medical care deteriorated as the hard currency allocation for imported drugs was slashed. Alcoholism became a national disease. By 1980 one million Poles were classified as alcoholics: 40 per cent of all alcohol consumed was reportedly drunk at the place of work.

Moreover, it was characteristic of the Giełdek boom that the gains were unevenly distributed. Relatively speaking, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. According to the DnIP report, by 1979 there was a wage differential of 1:20. Increasingly, the dollar became a second currency (partly used on the black market, partly in official shops where a whole range of otherwise unavailable goods could be bought for hard currency), and this produced a new divide between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’: those who had access to dollars and those who didn’t. Meanwhile, many members of the communist ruling class appropriated state funds to build themselves luxurious villas: corruption on an unprecedented scale spread from the top down. (Arguably it was a principle of Giełdek’s handling of the apparatus and nomenklatura.) While the socialist model steel-town of Nowa Huta (near Kraków) still had just one hospital with a maximum of 1,000 beds for a population of more than 200,000, well-appointed new sanatoriums were built for the ruling class.

All these symptoms of growing inequality offended deeply against the egalitarianism which this generation of workers and students had imbibed with their socialist education at school. The propaganda which continued vaingloriously to proclaim ‘you’ve never had it so good’, when any fool could see they had had it better, was simply an insult to their intelligence. What is more, there was absolutely no secular institution through which they felt they could express their discontent. All the unreal ‘representative’ structures of the state, all those intermediate organisations through which a totalitarian regime attempts to control, mobilise and (if it is wise) consult its citizens—the Party, the youth movement, the official trades unions—these were subjects of indifference or contempt. Their attachment and fierce loyalty went first to the family, second, to a close circle of friends, and, third, to what Walesa would describe as ‘the family which is called Poland’—the nation.

This was the generation which would flock to the Solidarity standards and give the mass movement its youthful dynamism. Solidarity filled that yawning gap between the family and the nation; Solidarity was the first secular organisation which had ever spoken for them; it was their movement, their generation’s bid for political participation.

And a ‘Miracle’

In October 1978 there occurred a shocking external intervention in the internal affairs of People’s Poland. Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, Archbishop of Kraków, was elected Pope. The nation celebrated this ‘miracle’, spontaneously, in churches and on the streets. The regime was dismayed, though Giełdek’s Politburo put a brave face on things, and welcomed the elevation of a ‘son of the Polish nation’. In June 1979, after some diplomatic wrangling, the Pope returned to his native land for the most fantastic pilgrimage in the history of contemporary Europe. As he progressed across the country, addressing hundreds of thousands in Warsaw’s Victory Square, in Gniezno, the cradle of Polish Catholicism, before the shrine of the Black Madonna at Częstochowa, inside Auschwitz, and then, dramatically, a vast congregation on the meadows of his beloved Kraków, he expounded his personal vision under the blazing sun.38

In a beautiful, sonorous Polish, so unlike the calcified official language of communist Poland, he spoke of the ‘fruitful synthesis’ between love of country and love of Christ. At Auschwitz he gave his compatriots a further lesson in the meaning of patriotism, recalling, with reverence, the wartime sacrifice of the Jews and Russians, two peoples whom few Poles had learned to love. He spoke of the ‘inalienable rights of man, the inalienable rights of dignity’. He spoke of the special mission of the Slav Pope to reassert the spiritual unity of Christian Europe, east and west, across all political frontiers. Invoking the romantic Messianism of Adam Mickiewicz, he spoke of the special lesson which Christian Poland had to teach the world, and the special responsibility which this laid on the present generation of Poles. ‘The future of Poland’, he
declared from the pulpit of his old cathedral, ‘will depend on how many people are mature enough to be nonconformists.’

This language, this vision, came like a revelation to countless young Poles. In Victory Square the crown interrupted his sermon with a rhythmic chant, ‘We want God, we want God in the family circle, we want God in schools, we want God in government orders, we want God, we want God...’

‘People are preaching with me,’ the Pope said: and indeed his preaching built magnificently on the ground plan of the young generation’s common but unarticulated values. ‘Yes,’ they said, as they wandered homeward through the flower-strewn streets, ‘now I see—that is what I believe.’

As important as this triumphant articulation of shared values was the popular experience of—there is no better word for it—solidarity. The police disappeared from the streets; perfect order was kept by volunteer ushers wearing the papal insignia. Despite the great heat and crush the vast crowds never once became violent. The drunks disappeared too: a voluntary ban on alcohol was generally observed. On the Blonia, which is to Kraków what Port Meadow is to Oxford, nearly two million people stood together, applauded together, sung their old hymns together, listened silently together. That intense unity of thought and feeling which previously had been confined to small circles of friends—the intimate solidarity of private life in eastern Europe—was now multiplied by millions. For nine days the state virtually ceased to exist, except as a censor doctoring the television coverage. Everyone saw that Poland is not a communist country—just a communist state.

John Paul II left thousands of human beings with a new self-respect and renewed faith, a nation with a rekindled pride, and a society with a new consciousness of its own essential unity. From this time forward the Manichean dichotomy between ‘society’ and ‘power’ became more than an intellectual construct. KOR’s use of the word ‘society’ had been more prescriptive than descriptive; it combined the Enlightenment postulate of a ‘natural identity of interests’ within ‘civil society’ and the Romantic postulate of the natural unity of the nation, to indicate what should be rather than what was. In reality the ‘objective’ economic interests of different groups within Polish society were, of course, different and often conflicting. In the past, conflicts within Polish society had been exploited by the Russians to fragment the Polish insurrections (for example, by setting peasants against landlords in 1861–68). They had been exploited, quite skilfully, by Edward Gieriek in his strategy of economic ‘divide and rule’. But in a situation where the whole economy was breaking down this ceased to be possible. The Pope’s visit probably marks the point at which the subjective reality of social/national unity overtook the ‘objective’ reality of social division. To take our terms from Aquinas rather than Marx: In that nine-day-long outpouring of love and joy the unity of Polish society was transformed from the Potential to the Actual.

There is no doubt the communist ‘power’ was heading for a crisis anyway; the nosedive was going to end in a crash, another attempt to increase food prices was almost certainly going to produce another explosion of working-class protest. But the form the explosion took in 1970—the quiet dignity of the workers, their peaceful self-restraint, the rhetoric of moral regeneration, the ban on alcohol, the breath of spontaneous social support—this follows from the mass experience of that fantastic pilgrimage in June 1979. It is hard to conceive of Solidarity without the Polish Pope.

In December 1979 the Committee of Free Trades Unions on the Coast arranged an unofficial ceremony before the gates of the Lenin Shipyards to mark the anniversary of the 1970 shootings, as they had done the previous year. (They were helped by student activists from the opposition Young Poland Movement, RMP, thus symbolically healing the rift between students and workers which had been so apparent in Gdańsk in 1968 and 1970.) Although most of the Free Trades Union activists were placed under preventive arrest, and despite a massive police presence, more than 5,000 people gathered at the appointed time. After the national anthem and the laying of wreaths, a student spoke on behalf of the arrested unionists:

The history of the Polish People’s Republic does not consist only of Party conferences and 5-year Plans... We have to remember the Stalin terror, the June events in Poznan, the students’ March, December on the coast, June in Radom and Ursus. That is the history of our nation... Today, having learned from our experiences, we know how to struggle with calm, obstinacy and solidarity.”
In Poland, history—the real, people's history of People's Poland is remembered by months. Such is the cumulative arithmetic of the collective memory that one can almost express the causes of Solidarity as an equation of months: 'August' (1980) + 'June' (1956) + 'March' (1968) + 'December' (1970) + 'June' (1976).

After a minute’s silence, a short, square-shouldered man with drooping moustaches erupted on the scene. Lech Wałęsa had secretly made his way to the gate, evading arrest. Introducing himself as a strike leader from 1970, but also as one who had cried 'Pomoc! Pomoc!' to Edward Gierek, he said that not one of the strikers' demands had been fulfilled, least of all the demand for a monument to the December martyrs. In vain had they put their trust in the Party. Now they knew that 'Only an organised and independent society can make itself heard. Therefore I appeal to you to organise yourselves in independent groups for self-defence. Help each other. Get in touch with the existing groups.' If this was the central strategy of KOR, his last admonition was pure Wałęsa. Everyone should come back next year, same place, same time, he said, and each carrying a stone. If the authorities refused to build a monument, they would build it themselves!42

Meanwhile the Party was preparing for its Congress, due in February 1980, and inside the Party, too, a chorus of criticism rose from below. Workers in factory Party cells roundly denounced the privileges of the Party elite, the continued deterioration of supplies and the absurd 'Propaganda of Success'. Like the 'loyal opposition', local Party organisations now clamoured for the Party to take the initiative of reform. But Gierek responded in characteristic fashion. On the one hand he wooed the Congress with a show of 'frankness' about the economic difficulties, and with vague promises of more 'socialist democracy' and a return to 'Leninist norms'. On the other, he offered a scapegoat in Piotr Jaroszewicz, the highly unpopular Prime Minister; it was the government, not the Politburo, which was responsible for the economic 'mistakes', he implausibly suggested. With this cosmetic change he saved his own position for a few months longer, but many local Party activists and revisionists were profoundly disappointed. Some of them, too, now began to wonder if the way out of the crisis really led through the Party.

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Like other revolutions, the Polish revolution of 1980–81 was not caused simply by growing economic 'immiseration' and exploitation. The Gierek era is a perfect illustration of Toqueville's famous observation that revolutions tend to happen not when things have been getting worse but when things have been getting better. The Gierek regime raised the material expectations of the population, and especially of the younger generation, to a level which it could only disappoint. The curve of rising expectations, sharply disappointed, is a classic precondition for revolution. Its half-hearted tolerance of the opposition encouraged the growing conviction that people could change things by organising themselves outside and against the totalitarian Party-state. This opposition saw a remarkable convergence of widely differing intellectual traditions and interest groups, of workers, intellectuals and the Church, in the defence of common, basic rights—a convergence which was the conscious labour of outstanding individuals. Helped by the intellectual opposition, small groups of workers learned, from their own experience of protest in 1956, 1970 and 1976, to become (in Lenin's word) the 'vanguard' of the revolution. Tradition, G. K. Chesterton once remarked, is the democracy of the dead, and perhaps only in Ireland is this democracy as vital as in Poland. It is impossible to place an exact value on the transformation of consciousness wrought by the Polish Pope.

The economic crisis was thus a necessary, but by no means a sufficient, cause of the revolution. The decisive causes are to be found in the realm of consciousness rather than of being. By 1980 this unique society, at once sick and self-confident, frustrated but united, faced a weak and divided power elite which no longer had the means to win voluntary popular support yet had not the will to command obedience by physical coercion. Although the individual components are novel—the alignment of the Church, the agitation of workers against a 'Workers' State'—the basic shift of political self-confidence and will from the rulers to a section of the ruled is familiar from the pre-history of earlier revolutions.

The precipitant cause of the revolution is, however, to be found in the realm of political economy. 1979 had seen the first actual (officially admitted) decline in National Income in the history of People's Poland. As western creditors at last became chary, the new
Prime Minister, Edward Babiuch, announced a hair-raising plan to eliminate Poland's trade deficit ($1.3-1.5 billion) by the end of the year. This would involve an estimated 25 per cent increase in exports, while supplies to the domestic market would have to be cut by 25 per cent in the last quarter of 1980.63 Some increase in food prices was now unavoidable. Having learnt a little from the blunders of 1970 and 1976, the Politburo decided to introduce the price rises in a covert way, by transferring better cuts of meat to the so-called 'commercial butchers', where prices were already much higher; and to break the news quietly at the beginning of July, when people should be absorbed in preparing for their summer holidays.

This sleight-of-hand did not save them. Workers in the Ursus tractor factory and the great 'Huta Warszawa' steelworks immediately laid down their tools, and only resumed work after management had conceded wage increases of more than 10 per cent. It soon became clear that the authorities had prepared a strategy of swift concession to all purely economic, local demands, supplemented if need be by container-loads of meat rushed to troubled areas. On 11 July managers of major plants were apparently flown to Warsaw and given corresponding instructions. The workers, divided, might yet be defeated.

In the event, the effect of this strategy was the reverse of that intended: it actually fanned the flames of industrial unrest across the country, since workers elsewhere quickly learned of their comrades' victories, and concluded that a strike was a sure-fire way for them, too, to win a compensatory wage increase. What confounded the government was the speed with which information about the strikes spread around the country, despite the complete silence of all the government-controlled mass media (the Party daily, Trybuna Ludu, first mentioned 'work stoppages' on 4 August). It is hardly an exaggeration to say that most of this information came from one telephone in one small Warsaw flat, where Jacek Kurpiel, assisted by a student of English from the Kraków Student Solidarity group, kept a round-the-clock strike watch. From here, and from a score of other telephones, the latest news was assembled and passed on to KOR contacts all over Poland, to western correspondents, and to western radio stations (Radio Free Europe in Munich, the BBC in London) which broadcast it back to the country.

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in Polish, within hours. Millions of workers were thus informed. The disproportion between the resources of the opposition information-gatherers and the resources of the state was staggering. If Gierek had decided at the beginning of July to detain a few tens of activists, to cut a few hundred telephone lines, and to control the international exchanges, the history of that summer might have been very different.

Instead, the strategy of appeasement was pursued despite an ominous escalation of the strikers' demands. In mid-July the 10,000 strong work force of the FSC truck factory in Lublin, south-east of Warsaw, proclaimed a peaceful occupation-strike, not merely for higher wages, but for a list of thirty-five points which included the abolition of 'commercial butchers', the reduction of police and army privileges (e.g. higher family allowances and pensions) and a free press. No sooner had they been bought off with money, meat and promises, than the Lublin railwaymen came out, blocking the vital railway lines to the Soviet Union, along which, it was widely believed, Polish foodstuffs had rolled to fill the Moscow shops in time for the Olympics. The Lublin Party paper referred darkly to 'anxiety among our friends' (a code-word, of course, for Poland's Soviet bloc allies). The railwaymen's demands included work-free Saturdays and trades unions 'that would not take orders from above'. This time the strike was settled only after a Deputy Prime Minister, Mieczysław Jagielski, had come in person to make peace with money.64

While strikes continued to break out like bushfires, in Warsaw, in Łódź, in Wroclaw—one hundred and fifty in all by 8 August—Edward Gierek, in a last, characteristic gesture of supreme indifference, flew off for a three-week holiday in the Crimea, still apparently confident that his lieutenants could silence the workers by a judicious use of his own potent mixture: money, meat and promises. But on Thursday 14 August the nationwide protest was joined by a voice which he could not ignore. It spoke, as it had to his predecessor, from Gdańsk.