

"We are witnessing one of the monumental turning points in history"

Renewal in Poland

BY JOHN P. C. MATTHEWS

As events continue to unfold in Poland, Western experts still fail to realize that what they are witnessing is not simply a "revolt of the workers" joined later by intellectuals, farmers, and students. Rather, it is a full-scale social and spiritual revolution, what the Poles prefer to call *odnowa*, renewal. It had been fomenting for four extraordinary years before it burst through the crust at Gdansk, and it has roots deep in Polish history. What the general public—and possibly some Kremlin leaders—still fail to grasp is that Solidarity is not just a labor union but a mass movement involving the overwhelming majority of the Polish people, including 39 per cent of the Communist party.

Thus speculation as to whether and when the Soviets will invade is beside the point. They are too late anyway. Even an invasion last August would probably have come too late; for, unlike Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Hungary in 1956, Poland's is not so much a political revolution as a moral one—one that cannot be snuffed out, crushed by tanks, or even slowly coerced into reversing itself.

The repercussions within the Communist world of this "renewal" are destined to be far greater than those of the "Prague Spring," the Sino-Soviet split, the Stalin-Tito split, or even the Hungarian Revolution. For the renewal movement strikes at the heart of what has characterized the practice of communism since Lenin's day: its degradation of the individual. And the trend it has begun may prove irreversible. We are witnessing one of the monumental turning points in history.

Why just now, and why in Poland? Poland's situation is unique. What has been taking place there is not about to be repeated in East Germany, in Czechoslovakia, or the Ukraine—not even in Hungary or Rumania—though many of the same conditions prevail in all these countries. Poland is different because its history is different. While not the only Catholic country in Eastern Europe, it may well be the most Catholic country in the world. Statistics tell the story: Prewar Poland had about 14,000 Catholic priests, of which 2,647 were executed or died in concentration camps during the war. Today, despite thirty-five years of harassment by the Communist authorities, priests num-

ber over 20,000. An estimated 33 of Poland's 35 million people are Roman Catholic; half attend Sunday mass.

How did the Polish Church get this way? The answer is simple: persecution. Not only persecution of the Church, but of Poland as a nation. Poland and the Church in Poland have a thousand-year history. For most of the last three hundred years there has been no independent Polish state. Three times in this period Poland was wiped off the face of Europe, most recently in 1939, by the Nazis and the Soviets. Each time, the Church has helped to keep alive the spirit of Poland—its literature, history, and culture—so that today Church and nation are practically inseparable. Poles have tended to regard any attack on the Church by the government as an attack on their sacred nation; believing Christian and nonbeliever alike flock to its defense.

The Church in Poland is also quite different from the Catholic Church in Western Europe and the United States. "In the last 30 years," writes the British scholar Peter Hebblethwaite, "the Churches of the West have often indulged in breast-beating; they feel guilty because they 'lost' the workers in the 19th century. ...The Polish Church...did not lose the workers and, on the contrary, feels closely united with them."

Always in the shadow of this strong, independent entity, the Polish Communist party was never able to act quite as ruthlessly as its sister parties in Eastern Europe, nor did it have the Moscow-trained cadre to carry it out. But it is not just a strong Church and a weak Party that sets the Poles apart from their neighbors; it is their fierce nationalism. Traditional Polish-Russian relations account for the healthy respect the Soviets accord Polish anti-Russianism. Many Poles see little difference in their relations with the USSR today from those of Poland under the czars. And while there is not a word about either event in Polish history books, most Poles know about and resent the Katyn Forest murders and the fact that the Soviet Army, having called upon the Poles to rise up in August, 1944, simply watched from across the Vistula as the Nazis crushed the sixty-four-day uprising and destroyed Warsaw house by house. There has never been much doubt in Polish or Soviet minds that, were the Soviets to invade, the Poles would fight.

ANTECEDENTS

Poland's history of worker outbursts against the Communist regime also sets it apart from its neighbors.

John P. C. Matthews travels frequently to Poland and Eastern Europe. He is Associate Director of the International Research and Exchanges Board.

While the East Germans had a full-scale workers' uprising in June, 1953, the Czechs their "socialism with a human face" in 1968, and the Hungarians their revolution in 1956, the Poles have had no less than four major upheavals involving workers: Poznan in June, 1956, which brought in Gomulka that October; the Baltic seaboard in December, 1970, which brought in Gierek; Radom and Ursus in June, 1976; and finally the Baltic seaports again in August, 1980, which brought in the present Party leader, Kania.

In the first three, workers rioted, attacked Party headquarters, and were killed or jailed. Last August not a shot was fired or an arrest made. Why was 1980 so different from the previous upheavals?

The obvious answers are: (1) The workers abjured violence and did not take to the streets, where they might have been prey to police action; (2) they remained inside the shipyards and factories; (3) they organized speedily (so speedily, in fact, that one suspects they were already organized); (4) they maintained a remarkable internal discipline and sobriety; (5) they articulated specific demands that were within the power of the authorities to grant, and stuck to them; (6) they communicated these demands to their fellow workers throughout Poland and to the outside world; and (7) they insisted on the government coming to them and on holding "open" negotiations.

To account for the change in tactics we have to focus on what took place in Poland between the riots of June, 1976, and last August. And to appreciate the significance of those events we have to recall the general conditions in People's Poland from the time of Gierek's accession to power in December, 1970.

Rigid thinking, rigid planning, and a rigidly overcentralized economy had led to Gomulka's downfall. People had great hopes for Gierek — had he not modernized Silesia and brought prosperity to that part of Poland? Gierek set out at once to do for Poland what he thought he had done for Silesia. To that end he borrowed heavily from the West, importing technology and whole plants from Western Europe. When sold, the modern products produced by cheaper Polish labor would pay off the Western loans and leave Poland with modern, efficient factories. By 1974 the effects of this infusion of Western capital were in evidence all over Poland. If there was no boom, at least material life was getting better, for many. Then came the OPEC oil price hikes and recession in the West; potential Western markets dried up and Polish goods, with their emphasis on quantity rather than quality, could not compete. By 1976 inflation was rampant and the economy stagnant.

Heavy-handed censorship raised further difficulties. Even main-line Polish economists did not know the extent of the Western loans. So little factual information appeared in the newspapers and so great were the distortions that Poles came to assume that most of what appeared in print was lies. Doubtless the main reason for such heavy censorship was the Party's own assessment of its relatively weak position: Only by keeping the lid on information and controlling access to it could it manipulate events and keep people confused and divided. The New Class, about which the Yugoslav Djilas wrote in 1956, settled in with a vengeance in

Gierek's Poland. Special Party stores and dollar stores abounded. Social stratification grew more rigid.

THE WORKERS' DEFENSE COMMITTEE

In the winter of 1975-76 the Party planned to introduce amendments to the old Stalinist constitution of 1952. They would be debated and voted upon in the Sejm, Poland's parliament, but only, of course, after the outcome had been decided by the Party. Two amendments—one recognizing that the Communist party would occupy by law and in perpetuity the "leading role" in Polish society, the second tying Poland so closely to the Soviet Union that it might as well be another Soviet republic—so offended Poles, inside the Party and out of it, that fierce disputes broke out behind closed doors. Intellectuals in and outside the Sejm banded together against the amendments and fifty-nine wrote a public letter of protest against these changes, at the same time calling for observance of basic rights guaranteed by the constitution. They included their names and addresses. The Party got its amendments, if somewhat watered down, but it inadvertently drew attention to those democratic provisions in the constitution that had long lain dormant.

People expected reprisals against the fifty-nine. When none came, those who had signed their names and addresses took heart. And when the workers rioted the following June over the sudden hike in meat prices and were jailed and tortured by the secret police, eleven signatories were ready to put their names on the line again. But this time they did more than write a letter; they founded an organization called the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR). It not only began publicizing news of the workers' arrest and torture, but raised funds to hire lawyers for their defense and to support the families of the arrested men.

The government began immediately to denounce and harass KOR. But, as one patriot put it: "Despite the efforts of official sources to present KOR as an isolated band of renegades and traitors, these people have set new standards of public behavior." KOR acted in the open. Wrote Tadeusz Szafar, a contributor to *Survey* (Fall, 1979), "The new democratic movement rejects any kind of adventurism....Hence their unqualified rejection of conspiratorial activities and their observance of existing laws, demanding at the same time that the authorities observe their own laws."

Just as caution and prudence marked the Church's reaction to last summer's strikes, so its initial reaction to the riots of June, 1976, was one of discreet silence. But in September of that year a pastoral letter, read from every Catholic pulpit in the country—although it made no mention of the riots or of KOR and its campaign—declared that giving money to help oppressed workers and their families was a good and Christian thing to do. Suddenly KOR's defense fund began to fill.

It was not until May of '77 that the Church spoke out directly. In Cracow, after the murder of a student volunteer for KOR apparently by the secret police and a candlelight march by thousands of students, Cardinal Wojtyla, the present pope, criticized the government. In Warsaw, Cardinal Wyszynski spoke even more sharply. In a widely publicized sermon he declared:

The Polish people are being told a lie. But they understand the importance of knowing the truth in spite of all the distortions and falsifications....It is the Church that has the right to tell the individuals who wield the power the truth, the bitter truth. The Church does not fight against them, but against their errors and sins, against injustice and damage being done by them.

Over the next several years Wyszynski and the Polish bishops continued to speak out not only publicly in sermons and pastoral letters, but in meetings with the Gierek leadership and in private letters.

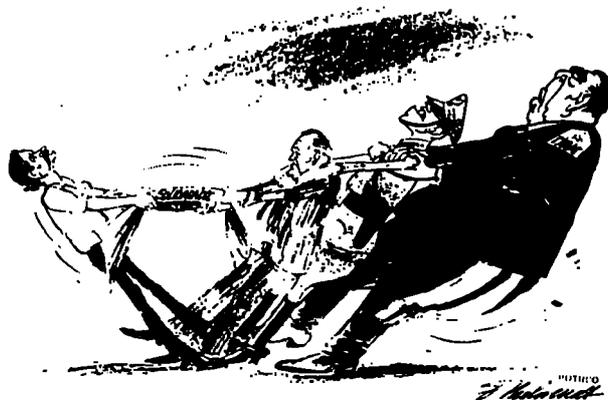
With the establishment of KOR and its *Information Bulletin* in September, 1976, there had come a flowering of samizdat publications. As a result, writers who had been exercising self-censorship no longer felt the need to do so. If the official censor insisted on cuts, the writer simply took his work to NOWA, the unofficial publishing house. Not only literature, but new periodicals containing the matter of politics, economics, and sociology began to appear. KOR also helped to establish *Robotnik*, a workers' journal, in 1977. When the strikes began last summer, *Robotnik's* circulation had already grown to 40,000, its readership estimated at 200,000.

By the summer of 1977 all the arrested workers had been freed. KOR now had a choice: go out of business or expand its charter. It chose the latter path and changed its name to the Committee for Social Defense (KSS) but retained the KOR acronym for identity's sake; it is known today as KSS-KOR.

The regime, fearful of what might happen if it attempted mass arrests or a roundup of the escalating unofficial periodicals, began a campaign of intimidation—threats, blackmail, occasional beatings, and frequent false arrests and unexplained detentions—against the leaders of these groups. These individuals courageously stood their ground, refusing to go underground and insisting that the law be upheld in every instance. After each release they went about their cause with renewed vigor. By 1978 one member of this growing opposition was able to write: "As people are faced with new models of conduct, fear and feelings of impotence and helplessness recede."

While the opposition grew, many intellectuals remained convinced that only reform from within had any chance of rescuing the country. Banding together in a group that called itself "Experience and the Future," over a hundred responsible citizens, many of whom had held high government and Party positions, took a poll of prominent but anonymous citizens from which they extracted key elements for a two hundred-page "Report on the State of the Republic." This document was designed to shock the leadership out of its complacency. It was sent to Gierek and circulated among top Party echelons. Its authors sincerely expected it would open the way to full-scale debate; instead, it was swallowed up in silence. In the spring of 1979 the report was leaked to the opposition, which promptly printed and circulated it in samizdat.

The winter of 1978-79 had been a severe one for Europe but an unmitigated disaster for Poland. Services and transport broke down. For nearly a week the city of Warsaw and the government ceased to function. Hospi-



tals ran out of coal, which—though never mentioned in the official media—took its toll in the lives of old people and infants.

Into this scene of decay, ferment, and open opposition strode Pope John Paul II. His remarkable election in October, 1978, had startled the world, but those of Polish descent were electrified. For the community of believers and the opposition in Poland his election caused a quantum leap in hope for the future.

One of John Paul's first official acts was to "accept" the outstanding invitation that he, acting for the Polish Church when he was still cardinal in Cracow, had issued to Pope Paul VI to visit Poland in 1980. The regime was still basking in the popularity of his election and the popular approval of its own patriotic reaction to it and was caught off guard. An outright refusal was too risky; soon public pressure for the visit was too much to withstand. The government began a secret, protracted, and acrimonious series of negotiations with the Polish Church and the Vatican in order to minimize the risks his visit might entail.

On the eve of the visit a special issue of the samizdat monthly *Glos* carried some speculation about what the pope's visit might mean for Poland. "I do not believe the moral attitude of society will suddenly change," wrote the Catholic intellectual Bohdan Cywinski, "but I believe that such a change will be initiated. The papal visit will be a time of sowing; the moral harvest will come later."

And what a sowing it was! For eight gloriously sunny days in early June, Pope John Paul II, already beloved by the Poles who knew him, traveled among, preached to, said mass for, sang and joked with millions of Poles. Throughout that visit, as a Polish friend wrote to me afterwards, "the Poles behaved magnificently; they were as if illuminated from within....There was none of the mass hysteria of Mexico or even Italy; they were simply lovely in their joy and happiness." It was fear that the mobs might turn unruly which had so petrified the government, forcing it to extract elaborate pledges from the Church about crowd control. The government need not have troubled itself. Tens of thousands of marshals with armbands appeared suddenly and took over; fleets of buses picked up and delivered whole towns of the faithful. Everything was well organized. The government appeared to melt away.

The pope's message was a deceptively simple one:

The Gospel is the good news about God's love of Man and the love reveals to us the greatness and dignity of each individual. Have faith in the enormous and real adventure of life in God here and now and in the future full of life in Him. Believe in your vocation.

But the visit was equally important for what the Polish people learned about themselves. During the pope's stay all of Poland had been a place of warmth, cooperation, decency, and discipline. How great was the power of a great mass of people acting with one mind and spirit, and how utterly impotent was the government. Without this knowledge acquired through the physical experience of those days, the strikes at Gdansk, the rapid establishment of the ten million-strong Solidarity, and the "renewal" that has since swept Poland could not have come about.

THE NEW APPOINTMENT

From June, 1979, to August, 1980, the Gierk regime did its best to convince itself, the outside world, and the Polish people that nothing much had occurred during the pope's visit. As events have shown, the government succeeded in convincing only the first two. Since last August events in Poland have been thoroughly and accurately reported in the American press. But these reports tell little of Solidarity outside of Warsaw and Gdansk. Local chapters are beehives of activity; communications with Warsaw, Gdansk, and the local populace are astonishingly good. People bring their problems to Solidarity and, while they may not get instant solutions or justice, they do get instant attention and action.

Faced with an unbroken series of defeats and a steady retreat since August, the government has been doing its best to recapture its "leading role" by labeling everything "socialist" renewal. The Polish Communist party (technically Polish United Workers party) has had the impossible task of trying to play a leading role in a country whose population firmly believes it responsible for everything that has gone wrong. Thus, after many months of surrendering to worker demands, the Party, through its newspaper, *Trybuna Ludu*, solemnly declared in December that the current process of renewal in public life was rooted in and had been prepared by the Party. The Party, in fact, has disintegrated to such an extent that its only real function is to act as a buffer between the Polish people and the Soviet Communist party, trying to convince the Soviets that they are still in control and that intervention is unnecessary.

However arrived at, the February 9 appointment of General Wojciech Jaruzelski to head the Polish government has turned out to be a brilliant move, both as an assurance to the Soviets that things will not get out of hand and as insurance for the Polish people against Soviet invasion. A professional military man and a Pole before a Party member, Jaruzelski is as unlikely to acquiesce in a Soviet-led invasion as he is to order Polish soldiers to fire on Polish workers.

As to the Party membership, the rank and file not already among the 39 per cent who have joined Solidarity are sufficiently disaffected as to be beyond the

leadership's control. This leaves the middle echelons—the bureaucrats, managers, and police. It is they who pose the greatest danger, for they stand to lose everything if the renewal process goes on. Not only have they been fighting a dogged rear-guard action against Solidarity since August, they are behind every provocation; if they can foment enough civil strife, the Soviets will have the excuse of intervening.

Assuming the Soviets cannot prevent the renewal process from going the course in Poland, what will be the consequences of their failure? They appear to run two enormous risks. First, so long as they remain diametrically opposed to Solidarity, the risk of provoking a frontal confrontation, bloodshed, and even escalating warfare will continue. Second, no matter how thoroughly the Soviets may succeed in sealing off Poland from the rest of the bloc, the risk that sooner or later the ideas of egalitarianism, justice, and democracy will seep out to other parts of the empire cannot be avoided. Such are the horns of the Soviet dilemma. Any attempt to eliminate 10 million workers would be suicidal. Yet any attempt to coexist with the Polish "renewal" means having to reach an accommodation with it. A "Yugoslav solution," expulsion from the bloc, is not geographically possible. A new, watershed situation has thus arisen; we are witnessing the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire as we have known it.

INTERNATIONAL REPERCUSSIONS

What does this mean for us? First, we have to recognize the danger of the situation for all of Europe and the U.S., for there is no certainty that NATO can stay aloof from a major conflagration in Poland, particularly were it to spread to other countries. But now we can recognize the Soviet empire for what it is. "Renewal" in Poland proves again that the empire is *not* monolithic, irreversibly growing strong while our world shrinks. It is an ossified, decaying structure with the yeast of human nature swelling through its cracks. The terrible irony is that in our present stance we seem unable to take advantage of this blend of change and paralysis.

Once having assessed the situation correctly, we must recognize that it is not strictly a Soviet or Polish-Soviet affair from which we can remain aloof. We are already heavily involved through out bank loans, and the Poles and Soviets are pleading for more, not less, economic involvement from the West. And it is, after all, in our interest to see that the changes taking place in Poland continue and that the Soviets do not perceive us as taking any military advantage of their disarray. The best way to do this is not to rattle NATO's sabres but to begin bold, peaceful, concerted economic initiatives—something like a new Marshall Plan that would include East and West, as well as nonbloc European nations, as contributors to the economic revitalization of the area.

It will take firmness, patience, imagination, and consummate diplomatic skill on the part of Western bankers and economic managers to take over peacefully the ground the Soviets and their Polish cohorts, by virtue of the impasse they have created, will have to give up. But it is hardly too much to ask of them when one considers the alternatives. **WV**