

# BOOKS

**THE POLISH AUGUST:  
THE SELF-LIMITING REVOLUTION**  
by Neal Ascherson  
(Viking; 320 pp.; \$14.95)

Robert Sharlet

Modern Poland is founded on a set of fault lines that have become increasingly evident since Stalin's death in 1953:

- A ruling *Communist party* that never fully succeeded in penetrating and hence controlling Polish society.

- A *Party leadership* divided at the top between neo-Stalinist conservatives and reforming "revisionists," along with a moderate centrist faction that usually plays the two rival factions off each other because it is too weak to lead effectively.

- A powerful and well-led *Catholic Church* with deep social roots in the population. The Church provides a rival belief system to the Polish Communist party's cradle-to-grave Marxist-Leninist ideology. Her competitive position in Polish politics was greatly enhanced by the election of Karol Cardinal Wojtyla of Krakow as Pope John Paul II in 1978 followed by his triumphal papal visit to Poland in June, 1979, an event that had destabilizing side effects for the government's authority.

- A restive *intelligentsia*, which since the late '60s has undergone a sea change and, by the latter half of the '70s, provided the impetus for the most extensive, and perhaps the most politically sophisticated, human rights movement in the European Communist states. The demand for free trade unions, independent of the Party-state, was just one of the positions advocated by Polish human rights activists, whose ranks included an electrician from Gdansk named Lech Walesa.

- A largely *private peasantry* that is staunchly pro-Church in its spiritual allegiance and whose agricultural production is for the most part beyond the direct control of Party-state.

- Finally, a politically conscious and volatile *industrial working class*—Marx's proletariat, in whose name the Communist party traditionally governs—

which, after several previous confrontations with the Party-state had become by the summer of 1980 a rumbling volcano.

Poland's latest labor crisis, the fourth in the past twenty-five years, is stimulating a veritable "cottage industry" of books. This one, published last year in England, was among the first to appear. Ascherson offers an "eyewitness" account of Solidarity's "self-limiting revolution" from August, 1980, through July, 1981. The American edition updates events through the end of 1981, including the first stages of the "state of war" of December 13.

Ascherson gives adequate coverage to earlier outbreaks of working-class unrest in the book's opening chapters, although I feel that he underestimates the contribution of the first crisis, the period from the Poznan workers' revolt of 1956 to Gomulka's coming to power. His treatment of the Gdansk crisis of 1970 clarifies the question of army involvement in its suppression; and I fully concur that the "most spectacular consequence of the June, 1976 [labor] crisis was a rapid emergence of unofficial opposition groups," the most important of which was KOR, or the Workers' Defense Committee.

A closer reading of these antecedent crises, all of which ended badly for the protesting workers, would have offered little hope of a happy outcome for Solidarity as well. In the original British edition Ascherson was guardedly optimistic about the union's longevity, in contrast to his tone in the brief epilogue for the American edition. Certainly this reviewer would have desired that optimism to be well founded, but all indicators (short of outright Soviet invasion) have suggested a recurrence of the boom-to-bust pattern that is all too familiar from previous cycles of labor unrest.

The latest working-class eruption tends to follow the standard four-part scenario:

1. All four labor disturbances were triggered by an economic catalyst—an adverse change in wages and/or prices. (Apropos, meat prices were raised on July 1, 1980.)

2. On three of the four occasions, the

outbreak of protest strikes was followed by the fall of the incumbent Communist party leader, who traditionally was made a scapegoat to deflect blame from the Party. In the current crisis, two Party leaders—Gierek and Kania—have fallen.

3. In all four instances, the government reacted to the labor unrest with a combination of short-term police repression to restore order and middle-run economic concessions to pacify the aroused working class as a whole. (Given the vast scale of the peaceful protest in the summer of 1980, the government had little choice but to skew the repression/concession ratio in favor of the latter, culminating in acceptance of the "21 demands.")

4. Finally, in all four working-class eruptions, the protest scenario ended with the Party-state eventually coopting, subverting, or "taking back" concessions made in the heat of crisis, a process most recently underway in Poland since December 13, 1981.

The imposition of martial law to conclude the unrest of 1980/81 is, of course, the most extreme "ending" in all the postwar cycles of protest and repression. It now seems that the possibility of invoking a "state of war" had been present in the shadows as one—the ultimate and most dramatic—of several conclusions considered by the Party for bringing to a close the 1980/81 crisis. Along the way, the Party employed bureaucratic obstruction to block implementation of the Gdansk Accords, hoping, no doubt, that Solidarity would soon lose its momentum and wane as a social force. Kania's removal as Party leader in the fall of 1981 signaled the failure of the strategy of obstruction. His successor, Jaruzelski, then turned to cooptation in an attempt to saddle Solidarity with responsibility for Poland's economic problems while withholding from it the authority to effect change. As Ascherson makes clear in his epilogue, this strategy, which may have been merely a diversion, quickly failed, causing General Jaruzelski to carry out several well-executed provocations in November and early December of 1981, which, in turn, served as pretexts for martial law.

Jaruzelski's military coup against Solidarity and Polish society, the result of months of secret planning, was without precedent in contemporary Communist systems. Carried out with uncommon efficiency in a country con-

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