AT HOME: THE MAN WHO LED POLAND'S REVOLUTION
In Poland the Communist nations face the first major defection from their ranks. The Poles draw inspiration in this modern struggle from deep in their past. The Roman Catholic Church and the desire for national independence in this almost medieval landscape are old and powerful forces.

Poland’s Catholicism dates back to the 10th century. It was never challenged by the Reformation. Eighty per cent. of Poles are practising Catholics, a figure that is perhaps not exceeded even in Latin America.

The influence of figures like Stefan, Cardinal Wyszyński, the Primate, was reinforced by the election of a Polish Pope, Anna Władysławowa, the 53-year-old crane driver whose seeking led to the August strikes in the Polish shipyards, and the consequent growth of the Free Union movement.

She says that: “After he became Pope, every Pole held his head high. We were no longer just a nation of drunkards and scroungers.” Rebellion and anti-Russian feeling are also Polish traditions. Marx noted that the country was the “thermometer of the intensity and vitality of all revolutions since 1794.”

Poland has periodically been occupied by her neighbours. Catherine the Great swallowed part of the country in the First Partition of Poland in 1772. If the Russians were unhappy before, they have been hated since. Two later Partition put more than half the country under Russian rule. There were bloody anti-Tsarist revolts up to 1914.

The new Polish independence that emerged after the First War was speedily killed off in the Second. Nazi Germany invaded from the West in 1939, and Soviet Russia moved in to take Eastern Poland. The Poles have subsequently massacred 15,000 Polish Army officers at Katyn Forest in 1940. Though the Poles have tried to blame the Germans, no Pole believes the Nazis were responsible for this particular atrocity.

By 1947 Poland was firmly under a Communist government, and was a Russian satellite. The Poles never resigned themselves to either. They persistently refused to subject land collectivisation. As a result, 700...
per cent. of the land is privately owned, divided into small family-owned farms. It is a medieval, peasant landscape in a modern Communist state.

Communism has made equally little impact in the cities. A recent poll shows that three per cent. of the country would vote Communist, given a free choice. The politicians found that 34 per cent. would vote Christian Democrat, 27 per cent. Socialist, 19 per cent. Liberal, and Farmers’ Party, four per cent.

The Poles are more circumspect in their dealings with the Russians. If you live next to a bear, you do not go out of your way to upset it or arrest it. That is not the same thing as killing it. The thousands of candles lit to commemorate the dead at Katyn show the quieter way in which the Poles express their feelings.

No system could be expected to work in the face of such anti-intellectualism. Poland is no exception; the system has failed. The country owes $20 billion in hard currency abroad. There are shortages of virtually all essentials. Corruption and bribery are rampant. Communist Party officials either jump the queue for luxuries, or take a cut-off selling them to non-Party members.

The fact of revolt has been burning for many years. In 1970 at least 55 shipyard workers were shot dead during rioting in Gdansk. Although wages were increased, and Party boss Władysław Gomułka was sacked, the tensions were not lessened. There were further riots in July 1976 against increases in food prices.

The movement that grew in Gdansk last August had strong roots. Its leader, Lech Walesa, dates his determination to achieve union freedom from the 1970 shootings.

Walesa himself said a year ago: “I’m sure that we’ll get free trade unions in this country one day – but not in my lifetime.” Yet, by late November, the free trade union Solidarity had at least 10 million members in a country of 35 million. Perhaps it had grown. “I don’t really know how many people we have,” said Walesa. “Almost everybody, I suppose.” Solidarity made sweeping political gains, including the individual’s right to strike and to join a free, independent and non-political trade union.

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A mass meeting of peasants joins the free trade union, Solidarity (shown). They are in a village 356 miles from the Russian border in the south-east of Poland. The song of liberation they are singing was written in 1938, during another period of Russian domination by the Nazis. A Solidarity speaker, sporting a fashionable Waleska blazer and tie, has little difficulty in getting recruits. Since its start in the Gdansk shipyards in August, 10 million of the 35 million Poles have joined. Like the country itself, Solidarity is mainly Catholic; the crucifixes, iridescent together with the Russian rockets, still break the sky. Bishops have noted that middle-aged Government security men are hedging their bets on the future by being baptized. Solidarity is clear about its likes: freedom, independence and Alexander. It is much more interested in its critics, left, candles are placed in memory of the 25,000 Polish officers shot by the Russians in the Katyn Forest in 1940. But the Solidarity leaders seldom mention the Russians by name, only inference. An opinion poll shows that the Poles have little more affection for Communism than for the Russians. Only three per cent, said they would vote Communist in a free election. But the leaders do not attack Communist dogma. Caution is their hallmark.
Horses on the Cracow-Warsaw motorway (above). The Palace of Culture (right) was presented to Warsaw by Stalin. Far right: old aristocrats eager in a Cracow cafe.

"Sometimes I have to calm the radicals. Other times, I encourage the fearful."

He has avoided politics, and stuck on the firmer ground in Poland, Catholicism. "I am a union man and not a Socialist. My religion helps now: it has helped me all my life. A man without religion is a dangerous man and without religion I would be a dangerous man."

Speeches have been practical, dealing with food shortages, wages, hospital schemes, pensions. Thus Marian Jurkiewicz, a union leader from Szeremain, said of the Communists: "We are not enemies. We only want the women to forget the word 'Soviet'."

Wales has been the natural leader. He kept the impetus going after the first strikes in Gdańsk, which merely sought to have Åke Wandersson reinstated, and a 17%-premium pay increase. Important help has come from KOR, a group of dissidents led by Jacob Korn.

But, as the Russians and the Polish Communist Party were well aware, Solidarity’s main strength has been the massive support of the Polish people. It is fear of the Polish people’s thirst for independence that makes Soviet troops to quadrate it.

Brian Meyer
The strikes started when Anna Walentynowicz (left) was sacked from her job as a crane operator in Gdansk for union activity. The protests swelled into the movement that toppled Party boss Edward Gierk. Government propagandists present as exercising discipline (right) are viewed with amusement.

The near-collapse of the economy fuelled feeling against the regime. This queue (above) is for chocolate in Cracow. Notes queue for meat, bread, vegetables, newspapers. A joke says the authorities ordered meat shops to be three miles apart, so queues would not get mixed up. Jacki Kunet (right) is a key figure. He leads the Self-Defence Committee, KOR, which protects individual rights, publishes clandestine journals. His arrest for setting up a 'criminal organisation' led to strikes, a new concept for which a word had to be coined (Solidarity). He was released...