

# Solidarity

In 1980 a remarkable new development took place in Eastern Europe. Since the communist take-over in the 1940s Moscow had not allowed any real political opposition to communism in the countries of Eastern Europe. In Poland, in 1980, this changed. A powerful non-communist organisation called Solidarity challenged the government.

## What part did Solidarity play in the decline of Soviet power?

### The challenge of Poland

With a population of 35 million, Poland was, after the Soviet Union, the largest country in Eastern Europe and there were several reasons why the Soviets had problems controlling Poland:

- 1 Much of Poland had been ruled by Russia since the eighteenth century. Most Poles were proud of their nation and disliked Soviet communism.
- 2 The Second World War increased the Poles' hatred for Soviet Russia. Stalin had carved up their country with Hitler in 1939. In 1940 Stalin massacred thousands of Polish Army officers and buried them at Katyn. In 1944 the Soviet Red Army deliberately allowed the Warsaw Rising to fail, with huge loss of Polish life.
- 3 Most Poles were Catholics. The Catholic Church, which was too well-organised to be broken by the communists, encouraged Polish nationalism. In 1978 a leading Polish churchman became Pope John Paul II.
- 4 Ordinary Polish people had more power than in other communist countries. Polish farmers successfully held on to their own farms. Among Polish factory workers there was a strong tradition of using strikes against the government. In 1956 and 1970 strikes had forced the communist government to change both its leaders and its policies.

*Lech Walesa, the Solidarity leader, speaking at Gdansk, 1980.*



### The birth of Solidarity

Polish living standards were poor in the 1970s. The communist government had large international debt. In July 1980 new price rises led to widespread unrest and strikes. Strikers were particularly active at the Lenin shipyards in the town of Gdansk (formerly Danzig). The workers at Gdansk were led by a remarkable man, an electrician called Lech Walesa. He was a brilliant speaker. In August the striking workers set up a new trade union called Solidarity. Unlike all other trade unions in communist states, Solidarity was not controlled by communists. Soon it had 9 million members and was demanding not only better conditions for workers, but also more political and religious freedom. Unrest spread throughout Poland. The communist leader, Gierek, was replaced in September as the communist party tried to find a way out of the crisis. In November, judges in the Polish Supreme Court sided with Solidarity and declared that the union was legal.

### SOURCE A

Once Solidarity was formed and became a national force, the Polish communist leaders were in an impossible position:

- > If they tried to destroy Solidarity they would be despised by the great majority of the Polish people.
- > If they accepted the existence of a non-communist opposition force they risked provoking an armed invasion by the USSR.

### Send in the tanks?

In December 1980 and March 1981 the Soviet leaders considered sending troops into Poland to impose Soviet power, just as they had done in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. They decided against immediate armed intervention but urged the Polish communists to destroy Solidarity before it got out of control. A new Polish Prime Minister was appointed called Wojciech Jaruzelski. He was a communist and an army general. The Soviet leaders made it clear to him that he must control Solidarity or expect a Soviet invasion.

### SOURCE B



*General Jaruzelski. The communist leader knew that if he did not control Solidarity, Soviet tanks could invade Poland.*

### SOURCE C

*Speaking in 1995, Jaruzelski described the pressures that were put on him in 1981.*

At first the Soviets gave us an ultimatum: either bring the situation under control or we will cut off supplies of oil, gas and other raw materials. I was summoned three times to the Soviet Union. On the last occasion, in September 1981, I was shown army manoeuvres all along the Polish border. The Soviet army leader, Marshal Ustinov, informed me that what was happening in Poland was intolerable. We had to convince our allies that we would not undermine the Warsaw Pact or allow the state to be de-stabilised. The introduction of martial law allowed us to avoid military intervention.



## Martial law

Jaruzelski tried to negotiate with Solidarity but the talks were not successful. In December 1981 he took the advice from Moscow and declared a state of martial law in Poland. This meant that the army had emergency powers. The leaders of Solidarity and thousands of its supporters were arrested and held without trial. Meetings and demonstrations were forbidden. Many supporters of Solidarity lost their jobs. In October 1982 the government tried to replace Solidarity with new communist unions.

Jaruzelski's attempt to destroy Solidarity did not work. Walesa was imprisoned but this made him seem even more of a hero. The movement survived underground. No one took the new unions seriously. Communist party members left the party in huge numbers. Almost a year after the declaration of martial law, in November 1982, Walesa was released from prison.

## SOURCE E

*A British newspaper later summed up the impact of martial law on Walesa while in prison:*

Walesa waited, his message to the government the same, 'You will have to talk to us again. Without the public consent, which only Solidarity can deliver, your economic reforms can never succeed.' The claim was the simple truth.

He emerged from prison to a surprising discovery – Poland was not a political wasteland. In addition to the Solidarity underground network there were new groupings producing an extraordinary range of newspapers, journals and books. Far from being snuffed out, the opposition to Communist rule had been broadened and strengthened.

*The Observer*, 'Tearing down the Curtain', 1990

## SOURCE D



In 1983 Walesa was awarded a Nobel Prize for his work for Solidarity. In the same year the Pope visited Poland and was greeted with great enthusiasm. He was another symbol of hope for Polish opponents of communism. In 1984, Polish people were outraged to learn that Father Jerzy Popielusko, a priest who supported the union, had been beaten to death by secret police. The continuing support for Solidarity was shown when a quarter of a million people attended his funeral.

*Huge enthusiastic crowds turned out to greet Pope John Paul II during his visit to Poland in 1983.*

## The impact of Gorbachev

In 1985 the political mood in Poland began to change because of the rise to power of Gorbachev in the USSR. By calling for greater freedom in the Soviet Union Gorbachev undermined old-style communism in Eastern Europe. The threat of Russian tanks also began to disappear.

Jaruzelski introduced reforms similar to those being tried in the USSR under Gorbachev. Jaruzelski held a referendum in November 1987 asking for backing for his economic reforms. He failed to win enough votes which was a great blow to his authority. In 1988 Walesa and the still illegal Solidarity organised a nationwide series of strikes against price rises. Walesa called for talks with the government and finally Jaruzelski agreed. As a result of these talks Solidarity was once again legalised and elections were organised for June 1989.

## Solidarity triumphs in elections

For the first time since the 1940s free elections were being held in Eastern Europe but the freedom was limited. They were organised so that 65 per cent of seats in the main chamber of the Polish Parliament were reserved for communists. Nevertheless, the elections were a disaster for the communists. So few people voted for them that they looked ridiculous. Almost all leading communists failed to get elected. The Polish people voted massively for Solidarity. In the Polish Senate, the second chamber of the Polish parliament, there were no restrictions and Solidarity won 99 out of 100 seats. Weeks of chaos followed as the discredited communists tried and failed to form a government. Eventually, Jaruzelski agreed that Solidarity could help to form a government. In August, Tadeuz Mazowiecki, a leading member of Solidarity, became the Prime Minister of a coalition government that included both communist and Solidarity ministers. In less than a year Solidarity had gone from being illegal to being the leading part of the government. The remaining communist ministers soon resigned and the Solidarity take-over was complete.

## SOURCE F

*Bronislaw Geremek was a leading Solidarity activist. He reacted emotionally when in August 1989 Solidarity helped to form a government:*

For the first time in 45 years, a Polish government is to be formed, on Polish soil, by non-Communist forces. The monopoly of the Party which ruled Poland against the will of the people has been broken.

## >> Activity

- 1 Explain in your own words why the Soviet Union had always found it difficult to control Poland.
- 2 Why were the leaders of the Soviet Union worried when Solidarity was set up in 1980–81?
- 3 How successful was the introduction of martial law?
- 4 How did Solidarity take power in 1989?

## SOURCE G



*A Solidarity demonstration in 1989. In that year Solidarity triumphed in elections.*