

The revolution that changed nothing and everything

(Editor's note: In commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Polish Solidarity movement, we asked Thaddeus Radzilowski of the Piast Institute to comment on what that movement meant and how it affected the course of modern history.)

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A quarter of a century has now passed since Solidarity was created out of the strike of the Polish shipyard workers in Gdansk. A generation later with the Soviet power that the embattled Polish strikers challenged now only a dim memory, historians have begun to assess the place of Solidarity in the history of the twentieth century.

The heyday of the movement was a brief one. It flamed brilliantly in August 1980 and was crushed by military power in December 1981 leaving the Communist Party still in power behind the bayonets of its soldiers. It was a revolution which at the time seemed to change nothing. From the perspective of 25 years later, we know it was the revolution which changed everything.

During Solidarity's heady days of freedom in early 1981 students at Poznan University strung a huge banner

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between their dormitories which proclaimed: "Workers of the World! I apologize. Karl Marx." The banner caught the spirit of a worker's revolution that had risen up against a state that ruled in Marx's name.

As no other phenomenon of our time, Solidarity shattered the myths of the Cold War. It was not only a revolution that rejected Karl Marx, but it was also ambivalent about the individualism and materialism of capitalist societies. It drew heavily on Catholic Personalism and its sense of the dignity of the person and of the prophetic nature of work. If it was anything, it was a moral revolution. It carried a principled commitment to non-violence.

The story of the long Polish struggle for freedom in modern times is paralleled by a deep reflection on how violence, even in a just cause, can be corrupting. Poles learned that lesson of history well. Adam Michnik in his "Letters From Prison" summarizes this lesson

clearly when he writes that, "history shows us that people who storm bastilles often create their own new ones."

Despite the West's focus on its leaders such as Lech Walesa, the real roots of Solidarity were the basic human solidarities of family, neighborhood, parish, village and workplace. Czeslaw Milosz, the great Polish poet, caught the importance of those elements when, in his Nobel address delivered in 1981, he tells us that many consider "these parochial attachments as ridiculous." But in times of need and utter peril "these bonds reveal their life giving properties" to create the basis of community and resistance. This, he says, "was the case of my native land."

Many in the West and East, enmeshed in 19th century dogmas and unable to free themselves from the residual myth of the Russian Revolution, were utterly confounded by Solidarity. It was the hoped for worker's revolution, but it was embarrassingly Catholic. "How can a

worker's revolution be religious?" the Spanish film director Luis Bunel asked of Walesa. "This is a contradiction in itself."

Most importantly, Solidarity exposed the contradictions and failures of the Leninist model of revolution and the supposed worker's state born out of it. It showed the model to be hopelessly elitist. Solidarity also revealed the terrible continuities of repression between the policies of Tsarist and Soviet policies in Poland.

Solidarity revealed that the Soviet colossus had feet of clay and that it was composed of "people's democracies" which the people did not support. The Emperor indeed had no clothes. Without Solidarity it would be difficult to imagine scenarios in which Soviet power would be brought down so decisively by 1990.

Solidarity also gave the world a new way of revolution. The Jacobin-Leninist model which dominated western thinking for the two centuries after the French Revolution has, since 1981, been eclipsed by the principled

non-violent moral revolution created by Solidarity. In the two decades following the suppression of Solidarity's hopes in December 1981, we have seen not only the ultimate success of the Polish Revolution a few years later, but also similar popular victories against tyranny around the world from the People Power Revolution in the Philippines and Yeltsin's Stand at the Russian White House to the Ukrainian Orange Revolution. The British historian Timothy Garton Ash has rightly called Solidarity the "default model of revolution" of modern times.

Solidarity – Solidarność – remains an enduring Polish gift to the ongoing struggle of the world's people for freedom and human dignity. It has given a new dimension to the motto of Poland's freedom fighters and soldiers of earlier times who believed that where there was a fight for any people's freedom there was Poland – "For your future and ours."