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East German and Polish Opposition during the Last Decade of the Cold War

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Abstract

The transition from communism to democracy in Eastern and Central Europe would not have been possible without the activities of several dissident movements. We will compare two presumably opposite anti-communist dissident circles: the Polish and the East-German oppositions.

Indeed, before the collapse of communism in the Eastern block, the oppositional movements in these countries showed many differences. The opposition in East Germany developed slowly and differed profoundly from the Polish one. But after 1989 these two movements made similar mistakes and, ultimately, their fates converged. This paper analyzes their situation and their contacts before 1989, as well their successes and mistakes following the transition. Such problematic as the increasing disappointment of the population in both countries, declining enthusiasm for the economic and social changes taking place, and, in the Polish case, the rising power of the Catholic Church and the complicated situation of women will be discussed, as well as the causes of the missed chance for a real social transformation in Eastern and Central Europe.

Still, we should not forget that thanks to the activity of these movements a nonviolent transformation was possible. The truth is that the dissident movements after 1989 succeeded politically but failed socially. The members of "Solidarnosc" and the civic movements in former East Germany were not prepared to deal with all social and political changes after the fall of communism.

Keywords

Polish and East-German Dissidents, "Solidarność", Communism, Cold War, Transformation of 1989, Catholic Church, Women's Right.

The collapse of Communism in Eastern and Central Europe, German unification and, generally speaking, the end of the Cold War, are among the best documented and most systematically researched events in recent history. By the mid 1990s, historians, political scientists and sociologists had gained easy access to the archives, opening up the possibility to gather pertinent evidence and pursue numerous research programs to understand the processes that have made possible the peaceful ending of the East-West conflict.

Nevertheless, a comparative analysis of the relations between East German and Polish opposition circles was for a long time neglected. Recently, the interest in this type of research has been growing.¹

The choice of East Germany and Poland for this study is not arbitrary. During the communist era these two countries were described as complete opposites. On one hand “the model child of Moscow”- East Germany, on the other “the funniest barrack from the bloc,” as Poland was called at this time. The opposition movements of these countries were, of course, also different. Nevertheless, despite these differences, they made similar mistakes and finally their fates converged. So what have we learned or not learned from the opposition movements in these countries? What were their successes and failures?

First of all, I will briefly compare the two countries and the situation of the opposition movements before German reunification in 1990. In the second part, I will present my analysis about the situation of the former democratic opposition and society in Germany and in Poland after the 1989. In the third part I shall attempt to draw conclusions and catalogue the losses and gains of the dissidents’ activities in these countries.

Similarities and Differences. The Clandestine Years

In the 80s, both East Germany and Poland were communist countries and both had been dependent on the USSR since Yalta; however, they had taken separate paths. What drove their divergent evolution? Why was Poland regularly shaken by upheaval and East Germany relatively stable? Why was East Germany more infused with Communist ideology than Poland?

The Eastern German dissidence developed slowly and differed profoundly from the Polish one. In fact, East German dissidents hardly made contact with the Polish democratic opposition but fixed their attention on West German organizations instead. Polish dissidents from KOR², on their part, often emphasized their admiration for the Russian opposition and had numerous contacts with the Czechoslovaks from Charta 77 as well. In some cases,

¹ A very interesting book by Marion Brandt (2002): *Für eure und unsere Freiheit? Der Polnische Oktober und die Solidarnosc-Revolution in der Wahrnehmung von Schriftstellern aus der DDR*. Berlin:Weidler, and the work of Tytus Jaskułowski (2007): *Pokojowa rewolucja w Niemieckiej Republice Demokratycznej w latach 1989- 1990*, ATUT, and of this same author (2007): *Wladza i opozycja w NRD 1949-1988 Proba zarysu* ATUT

² KOR- in Polish *Komitet Obrony Robotników* - Workers’ Defense Committee, founded in 1976; thereafter, repressed by the communist authorities. The KOR organized financial and legal support for imprisoned workers and their families – it was one of the first links between intelligentsia and the workers in Poland. The KOR and its members took the first steps in preparing society for Solidarity. Some of its founding members are: J. Kuroń, A. Michnik, J.J. Lipski, A. Macierewicz, J. Andrzejewski, J. Zieja.

these relations even became official; for instance such oppositional organizations as “Polish-Hungarian Solidarity” and “Polish- Czechoslovak Solidarity” which already existed in the 80s. The oppositional circles from these countries exchanged publications, undercover press and ideas. Some of them became friends. Such contacts were very limited between Polish and German dissidents.

One factor, which contributed to the lack of connection between these two dissident groups was the general approach of the intellectuals from each country toward communism. While in Poland intellectuals such as Czesław Miłosz, Jacek Kuroń, Karol Modzelewski, and Leszek Kołakowski (initially idealist-communists), had for the most part switched camps by the 60s, their German counterparts continued to consecrate communism as the best way to stop National Socialism and prevent its redemption for much longer. It was the most convincing alternative to the Nazi past. Leading intellectuals such as Bertold Brecht and Christa Wolf maintained their loyalty to the Party for a rather long time. The slogan “*Lieber rot als tot*” (Better red than dead) was well-known in East Germany. In East Germany words such as Communism, Marxism and Leninism still had a meaning and many believers. Gesine Schwan, president of the European University “Viadrina”, a specialist on German-Polish relations, remembers that “*in 1967, when I had my first conversations with Leszek Kołakowski to collect ideas for my dissertation, he told me that in Poland, nobody believed anymore in all that stuff: Marxism, communism. This was very different in East Germany, which had believers in communism and Marxism.*”³ Consequently, the fundamentals of opposition were different in both countries.

Another important factor was the fact that, after the revolts of 1956, 1968, 1976 and 1980 the Polish Communist Party had completely lost its authority and most people did not fear it, whereas in East Germany the fear of authority was still present until the end of the 80s.

Even though some of the critical Marxist intelligentsia, like Wolf Biermann (expelled from East Germany in 1976) or Robert Havemann, tried to fight for more democracy, the regime was very vigilant and afraid of “contamination,” and so, following Biermann's expulsion, the communist party disciplined more than 100 nonconformist intellectuals. The SED persisted in its repressive policy against dissidents, even after an exodus of artists in disapproval of Biermann's expulsion. This procedure led to a mass departure of important writers, which lasted until 1981.⁴ The regime in Poland was a little bit less vigilant, so the dissident movements were capable of developing more rapidly.

In addition, another difference one should not forget is the very well developed STASI network in East Germany. The policy of Honecker's regime toward dissidence was very strict, even stricter than the Polish one. In Poland, the dissidents followed the example of the Russian oppositionists who began making their actions overt, saying, for example, that a petition or a call without names and addresses was not worth anything. As everyone acted in this way, openly, like the KOR, they succeeded in developing a kind of civil society. As a common proverb held at the time, “they” cannot arrest the entire nation. In East-Germany the people were too afraid to take a part in such official actions.

³ Gesine Schwan *Bridging The Oder: Reflections On Poland, Germany, And The Transformation Of Europe Part One*, Lecture Delivered at the German Unification Symposium, October 3, 2006 GHI Bulletin No. 40 (Spring 2007), p.41

⁴ The situation in both analysed countries was a little bit like an old Polish joke from the era: Two dogs meet at the border between Poland and East Germany: Why are you going to the GDR ? asked the Polish dog to the German one– to eat a lot, and you, why are you going to Poland ? Because I want to bark a little bit.

Besides, the dissidents in Poland enjoyed a non-negligible support from society. Poland had a long tradition of an “undercover society” working against an occupant government, which dated back to the Three Partitions (1772, 1793 and the final, which erased Poland from the map of Europe 1795). Furthermore, the Second World War and years of communism produced a certain “second society” parallel to the official one. The Poles knew how to use a clandestine print machine, how to distribute *samizdat* papers and how to organize “flying universities”⁵. The Germans, a protestant, Hegelian nation had always had a more state-oriented mentality.

But what was the fundamental difference between Poland and Germany before 1989? The abovementioned political scientist, Gesine Schwan, provided a very simple answer: *Germany was divided, Poland was not*.⁶ Indeed, this important detail was also visible in the type of repression in each country. In contrast to Poland, the East Germans had an “older brother” in West Germany. The oppositional groups in East Germany suffered much from this existence: the most politically active people always disappeared after some time, expelled toward the West or “bought” by West Germany’s government: as was the author of *Die Alternative*, Rudolf Bahro (imprisoned and deported in 1977, co-founder in 1980 of “*die Grünen*”). There was a strong, permanent pressure to be expelled, more or less voluntarily, at any given time. All this made the construction of an oppositional movement very difficult. The Polish oppositionists, like Michnik, Kuroń, Modzalewski and many others, on the other hand, were imprisoned several times. This got the Polish dissidence the “chance” and time to clarify and develop their ideas.

Moreover, the idea of a rebel against the “official state” was always romanticized within Polish society.⁷ This is why the nonconformists could count on a neighbor that would warn them “Mister Adam, they asked for you”. The East German dissidents could not count on this small but significant support.

The Church and the Dissidents before 1989

While speaking about dissident movements in Central Europe we cannot neglect the special role played by the Church, Catholic in the Polish case, Protestant in the East German one. This role was so important that on October 9th 1989, the West German President Richard von Weizsäcker, when asked how he would explain the unprecedented upheaval in East Germany, replied, “*Gorbachev and the churches*”.⁸

The Catholic Church has always played an important role in Polish society. For centuries, the Polish Catholic Church has been loyal to the Polish people over any administration imposed from the outside (Prussian, Austrian and Russian administrations

⁵ From the Polish “*Latający uniwersyteci*”. Underground education systems started during the Russian occupation of Poland in the late XVIII century and reborn during World War II under nazi occupation. It was revamped again during the Communist era with the activity of *Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych* - Society of Educational Courses. The main purpose of these courses during the Communist period was the learning of modern history, censored by the communist party (massacre of Katyń, Warsaw Uprising, Prague Spring etc.) Personalities like Bronisław Geremek, Adam Michnik, Jacek Kuroń and many others gave lectures for these “Flying Courses”.

⁶ Gesine Schwan, *Bridging The Oder: Reflections On Poland, Germany, And The Transformation Of Europe Part One*, Lecture Delivered At The German Unification Symposium, October 3, 2006 GHI Bulletin No. 40 (Spring 2007) p.39

⁷ One could just look at the book selection in Polish schools: a model of a romantic, very often tragic, rebel is always present in several books, such as: *Konrad Wallenrod*, *Grażyna*, *Kamienie na szaniec*, etc.

⁸ Nielsen, Niels C. 1991. *Revolutions in Eastern Europe: The Religious Roots*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, p.27

during the Partitions and later under Communist occupation). The Catholic Church has traditionally been viewed in Poland as protector of all that is Polish including its language, history, culture and traditions. After the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope, the Catholic Church and the Pope became crucial to the changes not only in Poland but also in all the communist block. The Polish church pledged its allegiance not to the communist state nor to the national leaders but to the Vatican. This constituted a part of its independence.

The East German Church in the past had been more obedient to secular authorities: first under the regional authorities and afterward under the Nazi regime, of which it was very dependent. After the Second World War, the Protestant churches in East Germany established themselves as an oppositional force in society and became independent of the state for the first time in German church history.⁹

Moreover, the East German Constitution of 1949 gave the Churches many rights and provisions, including the right to take a stance on critical issues¹⁰. Furthermore, Protestant Churches were recognized by the state and were the most influential and largest organization to exist apart from the party.¹¹

Another similarity between these two organizations lies, like Ruth Ediger perfectly remarks, in their "relations with the exterior". In the Polish case, this relation was with the worldwide Catholic Church and with the Vatican. In East Germany, the Church was linked to the Protestants in West Germany. "*These outside ties gave the Churches an advantage in that they could receive monies, material, and moral support from an outside, extra-governmental source when the national government was cracking down*" emphasized Ediger.¹² The difficult economic situation of the country meant that the East German government could not afford losing this lucrative relationship.

In both cases the church was a place that John Burgess describes as an exceptional "free space" for activists, compared to the conformity imposed by the communist system that they experienced elsewhere. "*The church offered a sense of freedom and acceptance, that they did not find elsewhere in society*".¹³

But although in the East German case the Church had had a significant political identity for years, it became a key agent behind the mass mobilization against communism only in the final years before its collapse. In Poland, it played a significant role in the struggle against the communists from the beginning.

A Mental Barrier?

In fact, the question is why the relations between East Germany and Poland were colder than those between Poland and other countries behind the iron curtain. This was in part provoked by the reinforced border control between these two countries (East German authorities closed the border with Poland after strikes in August 1980). In addition, the outlook of the Germans (from both East and West) on Poland in the early 80s was generally

⁹ Ediger, Ruth M., "History of an institution as a factor for predicting church institutional behaviour: the cases of the Catholic Church in Poland, the Orthodox Church in Romania, and the Protestant churches in East Germany.", in *East European Quarterly*, September 2005

¹⁰ Ediger, Ruth M., 2005 and Goeckel, Robert F., *The Lutheran Church and the East German State: Political Conflict and Change Under Ulbricht and Honecker*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1990

¹¹ Ediger, Ruth M., "History of an institution as a factor for predicting church institutional behaviour: the cases of the Catholic Church in Poland, the Orthodox Church in Romania, and the Protestant churches in East Germany.", in *East European Quarterly*, September 2005 and Stackhouse, Max L. 1981. "*The Religious Situation in the German Democratic Republic.*" *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 1:1:1-8, 1981

¹² Ediger, Ruth M., 2005

¹³ John P. Burgess, *East German Church and the End of Communism*, Oxford University Press 1997, p.24

focused on maintaining the *status quo* and keeping the peace, like that of Günter Gaus, politician, journalist and former West German representative in East Germany: "*Western Europe needs a stable Eastern Europe- and vice versa.*"¹⁴

Moreover, there existed also a mental barrier. Negative stereotypes played an important role in mutual perception. Marion Brand, a German researcher, analyzed the reactions of East German intellectuals to the Polish events of the 80s and made the contestation that the negative perception of Poles, and of course the German propaganda, played an important role in the relations between these two countries.

Her theory is that not only the German population, but also the German authorities from SED had a very negative view of Poland, with some rare exceptions. Stereotypes such as "Polish economy" (polnische Wirtschaft), "Polish liberty" (polnische Freiheit), "Polish nationalism" or Polish anti-Semitism and anticommunism were present and often repeated in East German media¹⁵. Consequently, it was difficult to expect an enthusiastic reaction from the East German society to the Polish events. This was perhaps another limiting factor to the contact between these countries' democratic oppositions.

On the other hand, during the manifestations in the Fall of 1989 in East Germany most Poles were scared that the collapse of communism in East Germany and German reunification would be problematic for the legitimacy of the Polish borders. These fears, however, weren't present among the Polish opposition, who understood that the German *Vereinigung* would possibly help Polish integration into Western Europe.

First Contacts

Given these differences, it becomes easier to understand the apparent lack of connection between the two movements. However, were these pro-democracy movements connected at least to some extent? Did they learn from each other?

Indeed, we find that some German activists tried to get in contact with their Polish colleagues, such as, for example, the organization *Aktion Sühnezeichen*, which had by the mid 60s made contact with a circle of Polish intellectual Catholics from *Znak* and KIK. Through these relations between *Aktion Sühnezeichen* and Polish dissidents and intellectuals, young Germans were exposed to a more liberal and oppositional thinking than found in Eastern Germany.

Ludwig Mehlhorn, a German dissident, was in Poland for the first time in 1970 with *Aktion Sühnezeichen* and wrote that these contacts "*had a huge impact on the formation of opinions for many hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of young people in East Germany*" and that "*it was a school for political and social responsibility.*"¹⁶

In the mid seventies some intellectuals from Eastern Germany began to change their mind about the situation: they started to see a slight chance to create political opposition. Several factors contributed to this change. Jens Reich¹⁷, a former dissident and co-founder

¹⁴ Gluza, Zbigniew, *Polish - German Decade (1980-1990)*, Publication of Karta (39/2003) Page Range: 096-111 "*Europa Zachodnia potrzebuje do życia stabilnej Europy Wschodniej - i odwrotnie.*"

¹⁵ Brand, Marion (2005): *Für eure und unsere Freiheit? Der Polnische Oktober und die Solidarnosc-Revolution in der Wahrnehmung von Schriftstellern aus der DDR*. Berlin:Weidler

¹⁶ Mehlhorn, Ludwig : *Die wichtigsten Themen Waren Tabu*. P. 34 in: Dialog. Deutsch Polnisches Magazin 9 (1995).

¹⁷ Jens Reich, a doctor and biologist, was one of the founding members of *Neues Forum*, the most important citizens movement during the autumn of 1989 in the ex-GDR. For many years involved in the initiatives of the democratic opposition, pacifist, ecologist, he represented *Neues Forum* at the round table negotiation. Afterward, he was elected representative of *Bündnis 90*. After the reunification, *Bündnis 90* joined *Grünen* and Jens Reich was their candidate to the presidency of the Republic.

of *Neues Forum*, named some of them: “*My prolonged stays in the USSR made me understand what decades of the form of development which we undergo had given. There, I met dissidents. With Afghanistan, we all were convinced that the system led right to catastrophe. The second factor was Poland, which taught us that a quiet opposition does not count.*”¹⁸

The Polish opposition, which culminated in the 1980s in the “Solidarność” movement, meant for many in the GDR a hope for their own situation. A change from below seemed suddenly to be possible. Opposition was no longer to be found only on the individual front; now in Poland a social movement had developed which the government could not overlook so easily. This had considerable effects on the education of new oppositional groups in the GDR, which committed themselves to similar principles and saw their ideals closely connected to human rights. Poland became the model for those who wished to have a critical debate over communism.

But when martial law was imposed on December 1981 these hopes were destroyed and apathy gained terrain. A Dresden citizen expressed these feelings in qualm to a random Polish visitor in January 1983: “*You bungled the affair and missed the opportunity, you killed in us the hope of destroying communism. Nobody else will do that, except for the Poles. For us, Germans, cheap food, good beer and West German television, are enough to forget about the communist slavery. These three things are curing our frustrations. If it depends only on us, the revolt will probably never come.*”¹⁹

For some oppositionists, such as Gerd Poppe “*‘Solidarność’ [was] the completely crucial point in history, and not Gorbachev*”.²⁰ For others, such as Hans-Jürgen Fischbeck it was obvious “*that the transformation in the GDR is only then possible if something changes in the Soviet Union*”.²¹

Despite these differing opinions, probably the biggest influence on the transformation in East Germany was the policy of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* in the Soviet Union. The Polish events had, for sure, an influence on the changes in the GDR, but the regime was so rigid that without the transformation started by Gorbachev and his announcement that he was breaking with the Brezhnev-Doctrine²² the old Honecker administration would have possibly remained for a couple more years.

After 1989 – Successes and Failures

The first big success of the opposition was of course the non violent transition from a communist system to a democratic one in the Eastern block.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break up of the Soviet empire the oppositional movements in Central and Eastern Europe continued to play a role. Their victory over the

¹⁸ An interview with Jens Reich, “*De l’opposition en ex-RDA aux engagements de la société civile d’aujourd’hui*”. In: *Mouvement* N° 14 March-April, 2001.

¹⁹ Gluza, Zbigniew, *Polish - German Decade (1980–1990)*, Karta (39/2003) Page Range: 096–111

²⁰ Gerd Poppe “*die ‚Solidarność‘ [war] der ganz entscheidende Wendpunkt in der Geschichte und nicht Gorbatschow*”(Enquete-Kommission, 1995, VII/1, P.288) and Lindner, Bernd, *Die demokratische Revolution in der DDR 1989/90*. Bonn, 1999, P. 16

²¹ Hans Jürgen Fischbeck “*in der DDR erst dann Änderungen möglich sind, wenn sich in der Sowjetunion etwas ändert*”. (Enquete-Kommission, 1995, VII/1, P.288) and Lindner, Bernd, *Die demokratische Revolution in der DDR 1989/90*, Bonn, 1999, P. 16

²² The Brezhnev-doctrine was a part of Soviet foreign policy, announced in September 1968, to justify the invasion of Prague. This policy meant limited sovereignty for countries from the Warsaw Pact and the possibility of a military intervention “*when forces that are hostile to socialism try to turn the development of some socialist country towards capitalism (...)*”

communist system in 1989 didn't mean the end of their existence. The dissidents in both countries now began to play an official role in political life.

It is quite interesting and important to ask what went right and what went wrong during this post-communist existence given that these movements continue to be a model for other dissident groups – such as, for instance, the Ukrainian Orange revolution.

As we briefly saw in the first part of this article, during the undercover period the dissident movements in both countries were different. During the “official” existence their ways were different as well, at least in the first phase.

While in Poland the active members of the anti-communist opposition, such as Wałęsa, Kuroń, Mazowiecki, Michnik, Geremek or Tusk and the Kaczyński brothers, played or are still playing a role in political or intellectual life, in the German case the dissidents were marginalized and disappeared quite quickly. The politicians from East Germany who play a role in today's politics do not generally belong to oppositional circles.²³

Where Did the Enthusiasm Go?

The small role of the former dissidents in political and cultural life in “new” Germany is partially due to the fact that East Germany was simply “incorporated” into West Germany. The majority of the East German population didn't want any more experiments and wanted reunification.²⁴

As John C. Torpey explains, the dilemma of East German dissidents was that, “*the GDR's anti-Stalinist opposition was [...] trapped between the inherited critique of capitalism, itself powerfully rooted in antifascism, and its achievements of 'bourgeois' civil rights; between its desire to overcome the dangerous division of Europe and its lack of enthusiasm about Western institutions.*”²⁵

The oppositionists were no longer needed and the western political elites did not agree with some experiments and innovative solutions implemented during the *Vereinigung*. “*This was the original sin of the reunification*”²⁶ - claimed Wolfgang Templin - a former East German dissident and publicist. The West provided the money but refused to accept any political ideas from the Eastern block. The result of this process was a rapid development of the East German infrastructure, but it also provoked a feeling of lack of sovereignty, lowering the self-esteem of many citizens of the ex-GDR. Moreover, it also provoked a sentiment of lack of responsibility for their country and field of activity - many of them moved (and are still moving) to West Germany (a phenomenon known as *schrumpfende Städte* - Lean Cities - in the ex-GDR). East Germans are the only ones among the former Soviet bloc people that did not inherit their own country— they got incorporated.

²³ Angela Merkel, for instance, started her political carrier after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the former chef of SPD Matthias Platzeck was active in the ecological movement.

²⁴ Jens Reich remembered that: “*People didn't want any more social experiments, no more reforms, no more “third way”. Only the western model, and right now. This brutal transition was a surprise for us [the dissidents]. The reason of our marginalization is therefore simple: the population has withdrawn their support.*” Interview with Jens Reich in *Itinéraires* n°14 2001/2 “*De l'opposition en ex-RDA aux engagements de la société civile d'aujourd'hui*”.

²⁵ Torpey, John, C., *Intellectuals, Socialism, and Dissent The East German Opposition and Its Legacy*, Contradictions of Modernity volume 4, 1995 University of Minnesota Press, Series editor: Craig Calhoun, New York University, p.159

²⁶ Templin, Wolfgang, *NRD i RFN. Aneksja zamiast zjednoczenia*, in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 04.10.2006

“Today in the east, people who were never socialists or communists in the old times defend socialism,” explains Christopher Dieckmann, a former dissident and Protestant minister from eastern Germany. “It’s just because they want to be East Germans. They want to keep something for themselves”.²⁷

This sentiment of “removed responsibility” for their country still plays a role in East Germany. The East German society stopped becoming, or never became, a “civil society”.²⁸ Michael Stürmer, a commentator for the newspaper *Die Welt*, remarks that in comparison to West Germany : “Everything is more pronounced in East Germany. The resentment is more pronounced, the poverty is more pronounced, and so is the feeling of being cut off.”

Recent research has revealed that the *idea* of democracy is accepted to a high degree in both East and West Germany, but approval for the *existing* democracy has declined: in West Germany it is about 60–65 percent, and in East Germany it has dropped to about 30 percent.²⁹

In the Polish case the situation is similar, at least concerning the progressive decline of enthusiasm. Initially, the greatest workers’ movement (almost 10 millions workers) enjoyed enormous popularity. But after the Round Table negotiations and the involvement of “Solidarność” in politics (for which the movement was unprepared) the image of “Solidarność” within Polish society strongly deteriorated. According to a study by “Rzeczpospolita” made in 2005, the Poles who disapprove of the changes started by “Solidarność” outnumber those who approve of them.³⁰ Clearly, something went wrong; a critical examination of the mistakes made since 1989 is thus necessary.

Economically, Poland’s situation was more complicated than Germany’s since there was no older brother. Nevertheless, very quickly, by the mid 90s, the Polish economy—more than half of which had been privatized—was making important steps, including significant reductions in the annual inflation rate and the budget deficit (Balcerowicz Plan). The annual growth rate of Poland's gross national product was the highest in Europe. But this progress was uneven geographically- the sectors of heavy industry such as coal-mining and agriculture experienced slumps. The gap between the rich and the poor grew, adding to the bitterness and frustration, and reflected in a political life that was less stable than expected.

As a result, paradoxically after so many years of struggle for free elections and a democratic system, the people lost their faith in democracy, the numbers of people participating in elections drastically declined. Only recently, during the October 2007 elections, has participation increased, reaching its highest point since 1989 - 53.79%. But still, there is a big difference in participation between inhabitants of big and small cities, the participation of the latter in civil society still being weak.

This is also due to the type of agreement between the Polish democratic opposition and the authorities in 1989. The former dissidents broke the first rule of “Solidarność”- the

²⁷ Bernstein, Richard, *Threats and Responses: A Heritage of Protest; The Germans Who Toppled Communism*, in New York Times, February 22, 2003

²⁸ Stürmer, Michael, in: Bernstein, Richard, *Threats and Responses: A Heritage of Protest; The Germans Who Toppled Communism*, in New York Times, February 22, 2003

²⁹ Numbers cited after Schwan, Gesine, *Bridging The Oder: Reflections On Poland, Germany, And The Transformation Of Europe Part One*, Lecture Delivered At The German Unification Symposium, October 3, 2006 GHI Bulletin No. 40 (Spring 2007) p.43

³⁰ *Rzeczpospolita*, (Polish National daily newspaper) August 16, 2005

transparency and accessibility of negotiation. Whereas during the Gdańsk strikes everybody heard and could participate in discussion, in 1989 this rule was broken. The first, and most important part of negotiation between the opposition and the members of the regime in Magdalenka³¹ happened behind close doors. This secretive way of negotiation, which broke the beautiful principles of self-management, self-administration, democracy and transparency, left a bitter taste in society, followed, like in the East German case, by a “hand wash” of responsibility for one’s country and society. The newborn “civil society and participative democracy” never really had the chance to grow up.

The rapid changes after 1989 provoked a situation in which many of those who started the peaceful revolution are today in difficult economic situations, while ex-regime employees are well paid by the government.

An additional problem was the waste of human potential. In East Germany, after the reunification, the administration was still run by old regime officials. The argument was that only these people had enough experience, but in Wolfgang Templin’s opinion, the new government knew that these people would not contest any orders.³²

This problematic is without a doubt very difficult and controversial in all post-communist countries. It is practically impossible to change and “clean” completely an entire administration following a change of political system.

Still, these dissidents and activists, people who risked everything, should not be marginalized and left behind as were the Polish shipyard workers. (For instance of some 16,000 men and women who were employed in the Gdańsk Shipyard in 1980, only about 3,000 are employed today.)

Ironically, often those who were at the origin of a revolution are forgotten and unappreciated by posterity, by the very people who benefit from their struggle.

When speaking about 1989 and democratic opposition in Central Europe we often hear about a “missed opportunity” for a so-called “third way”. This “lost chance” took different forms in both analyzed countries: in the Polish case the communist system was very quickly replaced by “wild capitalism” and failed to leave space for a “third way”. In Germany, as declared again Wolfgang Templin “*they built too many highways and left people behind. The social transformation wasn’t assured. (...) We received fish and not a fishing rod.*”³³

The question is whether it is possible to find a third way and, if so, how? Some people regret that there was no “new Marshall plan” for Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, but as we can see in the case of East Germany, money alone is not enough to pave the “third way”.

Some Polish Particularities: Rising Power of the Catholic Church ?

A founding principle of Western democracies is the separation of church and state. The Polish democratic opposition after 1989 betrayed this principle.

After the transition, the Polish society wanted to express its gratitude to the Church for its support during the communist era. The role of the church in official and political life thus grew significantly in a very short time: the Church became present in the media, in

³¹ Secret talks between the democratic opposition and the Communist regime in Magdalenka, near Warsaw, started on 16 September 1988. These meetings paved the way for the Round Table discussions.

³² Wolfgang Templin, *NRD i RFN. Aneksja zamiast zjednoczenia*, in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 04.10.2006

³³ Wolfgang Templin, *NRD i RFN. Aneksja zamiast zjednoczenia*, in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 04.10.2006

schools (religion lessons) and even in official buildings (crosses on the walls). The biggest change in comparison with the old regime was the rise of Church presence in the media—with the extreme case of some private journals and radio-stations such as *Radio Maryja*.³⁴

A study presented by Tadeusz Szawiel³⁵ shows that the majority of Poles consider that the institution of the Church has too much influence (65%),³⁶ that it has too much power (50%), and that the Catholic Church should not be involved in politics (66%).³⁷ Furthermore, most Poles don't accept the fact that the Church takes a stand concerning the bills in the diet or *Sejm* (52%). On the other hand, almost 90% accept the presence of the catholic religion in the public sphere (crosses in public buildings, religion in schools, etc.).³⁸

As these figures reveal, there is a paradox in church activity after 1989. On one hand, the Catholic Church is present in many spheres of public life (65% of the priests said that the presence of the Church in public life has improved), on the other hand its ability to influence public opinion has declined – (in the opinion of 49% of the priests.)³⁹

Unfortunately, the new Polish government after 1989 has not paid attention to the separation of these two spheres of life: politics and religion. Instead of a division of the functions of Church and State (the French model of *laïcité*), the Church has gotten too much involved in politics.

Women's Role after 1989

Another area, which was neglected in Poland by the former dissidents after the transformation in 1989, is the presence of women in society. An interesting observation by Padraic Kenney, a historian from Indiana University and specialist on Poland, could be a key to understanding this problematic. The historian's reflection is that in Polish society, mostly ethnically homogenous, the biggest division concerns the gender.⁴⁰

In Polish oppositional circles women played an important role. In August 1980, women like Henryka Krzywonos, Alina Pieńkowska and Anna Walentynowicz stopped the breaking-up of the August strike and forced the shipyard workers to continue the “solidarity” strike with other factories. After the delegalization of “Solidarność” many women were arrested and suffered repression. But many of them stayed active in their oppositional activity, while the men were mostly imprisoned. The *Tygodnik Mazowsze*, a clandestine journal, was edited mostly by women.

Anna Bikont, a journalist and one of the co-founders of *Tygodnik Mazowsze*, in an interview with Ewa Kondratowicz said: “*I never had the feeling of being ‘abused’ by the men, who were preying on my hard women’s work. Indeed, this happened in ‘Solidarność’ in 80-81, it was clear from our analysis: women had been doing a hard job, and after, the elected leader was always a man. However, it’s not like the men isolated the women; also women voted for a male leader. They accepted this order, they weren’t subverts. And in this*

³⁴ *Radio Maryja*- is a very controversial, nationalist, conservative, religious radio and media group led by Father Director Tadeusz Rydzyk. Even the Vatican has expressed some concern about its activity.

³⁵ A professor of sociology at the Warsaw University.

³⁶ Szawiel, Tadeusz, *Kościół polski - spojrzenie z zewnątrz*, lecture delivered at the Renovabis congress in Freising (Germany) in September 1998.

³⁷ Szawiel, Tadeusz, September 1998

³⁸ Szawiel, Tadeusz, September 1998

³⁹ Tadeusz Szawiel, September 1998

⁴⁰ Kenney, Padraic, *The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland*, 1999.

case “Solidarność” wasn’t a subverter of customs. It is a pity, that especially in this case nothing changed.”⁴¹

But after 1989, when “Solidarność” became officialy a political power, women stopped playing a role in this organisation. Of course, it is possible to ask if they really wanted to play a role in the first place. However, assuming that at least some of them did, which is likely the case, one must ask *why* it did not happen Shana Penn⁴², an American writer, provided some statistics concerning the participation of women at the Round Table negotiations: among 60 opositionists participating in discussions with the governement there was only one woman.

These numbers reflect that, despite their active role before 1989, women were pushed out after the transformation. This situation is also typical of the rest of the ex-communist bloc – women weren’t able to fight succesfully for their civic and political rights.

But the culmination point of this “forgetting” about women’s role in the opposition and of their marginalization from civic life, was the antiabortion law voted in Poland in 1993⁴³ (under enourmos pressure from the Catholic Church).

When we ask why, despite this enormous enthousiasm and such high expectations, things didn’t work exactly as we wanted, perhaps one of the responses, as Maria Janion suggests, is precisely the relative absence of women in current public life. As she explained: “A democracy which doesn’t treat women as citizens with full rights is damaged and it deprives itself of a potential of power, which guaranties its quality and existence.”⁴⁴

Where is the “New Bastille”?

Another key factor during a revolution is a symbol. In the Polish case in 1989 such a symbol was lacking. The Germans had the very spectacular fall of the Berlin Wall, but the Polish transition occurred without “taking the Bastille,” without having a symbolic event that would have the same psychological impact as December 13, the day that Jaruzelski announced Martial Law. The two-and-a-half months of negotiations at the round table couldn’t replace, for most Poles, a spectacular event, a single day, which would symbolize the end of communism. The lack of such a cathartic event made it thus more difficult for the Polish people to accept the changes and move on. This was, to some degree, a shortcoming endemic to the Polish revolution. This slow and peaceful revolution would have been even more exemplary had it been able to benefit from the power of a symbol. Even a peaceful revolution needs a clear symbol.

⁴¹ Kondratowicz, Ewa, *Szminka na sztandarze. Kobiety Solidarności 1980-1989*, wyd. Sic!, Warszawa, 2001; p. 188 Anna Bikont: “W żadnym momencie nie miałam poczucia, że jestem “dołowana” przez mężczyzn, którzy żerują na mojej ciężkiej kobiecej pracy. Owszem, to miało miejsce w “Solidarności” w latach 80-81, to jasno wynikało z naszych badań: kobiety wykonywały bardzo dużą robotę, a potem, gdy wybierano kogoś na przewodniczącego, zostawał nim mężczyzna. Nie było jednak tak, że tylko mężczyźni sekowali kobiety, bo przecież kobiety też wybierały mężczyzn, uznawały ten porządek, nie były burzycielkami. I w tym sensie “Solidarność” nie była burzycielem obyczajów. Szkoda, że w 80 i 81 roku akurat w tej sprawie nic się nie zmieniło”.

⁴² Penn, Shana, *Solidarity’s Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*, 2005

⁴³ In German case, after the Vereinigung a new law was passed by the Bundestag in 1992, which permitted first-trimester abortions on demand.

⁴⁴ Janion, Maria: ”Demokracja, która nie traktuje kobiet jako pełnoprawnych obywateli jest ułomna i sama pozbawia się potencjału siły, gwarantującej jej jakość i trwanie.” Preface to Schana Penn’s book “*Podziemie kobiet*” for the Polish edition.

Different Histories, Similar Fates?

Certainly, between Poland and East Germany there is a big difference but if we look more closely at other post communist countries, their fates become more similar. We can observe the same phenomenon everywhere: the oppositional movements lost their support and were transformed into a pallet of traditional political parties: conservatives, social democrats, Greens, etc. The parties took control and the civic movements disappeared. In the Czech Republic, for example, Vaclav Havel became a symbolic figure despite no longer having any political influence, except very sporadically. In Poland as well, during the 2000 presidential elections Lech Wałęsa received only 1% of the vote. The changes in Eastern Germany were simply more brutal and faster.

Despite all differences—historical, ideological and political—between the opposition movements in Eastern Germany and in Poland, after 1989 they are almost in comparable positions. Their social status and role is not very strong. (Except for some politicians in Poland, who politically and ideologically do not have much in common anymore with “Solidarność”).

Finally, we didn't learn enough to avoid repeating the same mistakes. The same errors and false moves are being played out again in new “color revolutions”. A good understanding of the problems that the dissidents met during the “birth phase” and in the first moments of their “official” existence could help us to avoid a lot of problems, such as in the case of the Orange Revolution. Unfortunately, after four years, this enormous popular revolution has encountered some problems similar to the Polish ones: war “on the top”, corruption, new political elites not prepared to deal with a new reality, and so forth. In addition, the silent participation of Russia, who doesn't want to completely lose its longtime satellite, is not helping to improve the situation. And again, the Western World has missed the chance to help in the construction of a “third way”- generally speaking, except for Poland and the Baltic countries, the western help has been too weak.

A final component is the education and preparation of the population for a revolution. The society has to be prepared for changes from the bottom, not from the top, and it has to be able to deal with changes after the revolution. This part is the most difficult and is easier said than done.

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