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Introduction to Poland's Permanent Revolution

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The political history of Poland since World War II and the Communist takeover has been one in which crisis followed crisis. Even when there was more than a decade before the next crisis, “normalcy” was never fully “normal.” Instead, the institutions and their responses were structured by the previous crisis and constantly shaded by storm clouds for the next. In 1956, 1970, and 1980, Poles successfully “voted with their feet” and ousted their leaders. In 1968 and 1976, the crises were less systemic: specific groups revolted over specific policies. As a result, even though Władysław Gomułka in 1968 and Edward Gierek in 1976 retained their leadership for a while, the system was weakened and put on the defensive, so that it fell quickly when Poles returned to the streets in 1970 and 1980.

By 1989, when traditional Communist rule in Poland collapsed, the lessons and legacies of Poland’s past crises had made the turnover of power both unbelievable and unavoidable. There was no need for mass upheaval to bring down these Communist Party leaders: mere rumblings signaled to Poland’s leaders that they could not hang on any longer. Instead, they tried to preserve some of their power by offering to share the burden of Poland’s problems with the men and women they had jailed in 1980 and earlier. When the masses failed to go along with concessions and voted them out, this final set of Communist leaders accepted the inevitable and resigned. This, then, was the final surge in a rush of change that left no traditional Soviet-style communist regime in power by 1991. It was, for the Polish system, just the final crisis in a nearly forty-year series that had worn away Communist power.

At the same time, as the field broadened and the patterns of these various crises became clear, the crisis of 1968 was revealed as an exceptional case. It was not, as the others since 1956 had been, focused on a dance between the population and the elites, each side with its own original stimuli and rhythm. It was, on the one hand, a revolt of intellectuals and students and, on the other, a battle between groups of leaders over power. Workers deliberately avoided being publicly involved in what was essentially an intellectual-elite struggle for power. Later on, intellectuals were to consider one’s conduct in opposing the anti-Semitic purges of 1968 as a measure of one’s honor. A major moral issue for many, in the process of transformation 1968 was but a minor curve in the
road from 1956 to 1970 in the development of mass-elite relations. As a result, for the purposes of this book, 1968 is not given attention as a separate chapter. Instead, references are made to it when it played a role in later crises.¹

When we began this joint project under the aegis of the Joint Committee for Eastern Europe of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), it was early 1981. Our effort was a response to the "Solidarity surprise" and the need to find explanations for it. We were reacting to the inability of mainstream Western theories of communism to explain the realities of 1980–81 or of Poland's three earlier decades. We set out to analyze the crises of 1956, 1968, 1976, and 1980 in terms of mass and elite behavior; the interaction and relative impacts of political, economic, social, and international factors and actors; and the learning process from crisis to crisis. Given that this was a collaborative project, we could not move fast enough to avoid having to rethink what had been "new" theoretical approaches and to add the 1989 crisis—the final crisis for communist Poland. Our focus expanded from Juan Linz’s model of the reestablishment of authoritarianism to include the transition and democratization models that had developed in response to the spread of democracy back into Southern Europe and Latin America.

The transitions in Poland and the realities of the past forty years of Communist Party rule did not fit any of these models any more than communist theory could explain the early communist crises. For instance, the "transitions" and "democratization" literature, like Linz’s earlier model, looked primarily at explicit crises. In Poland, crises built on crises, even if censorship targeted them as "nonevents" and more than a decade separated them. Most of the models focused on internal actors, with the international scene being merely background. In the Polish case, though, the issues were never "simply" Polish. Soviet actions and limits, and in later years Western actors as well, did far more than set the stage; they led. Most theorists of democratization outside of Eastern Europe have focused primarily on elite pacts between the rulers and their enemies.²

None of the Polish crises were truly elite led. Only in 1989 did explicit "pacting" go on. The "masses"—both workers and intellectuals—were what forced rulers' action throughout Poland's history. Their responses were the signals for change. They became even more sophisticated as gains faded away with the apparent calming of crisis after crisis. Ultimately, the traditional theories of modernization contributed little to explain the change. Poland was a modern society, the country's economy industrialized in communism's early years. Communist rule, coupled with Polish history, had resolved most of Poland's developmental crises. Yet crisis followed crisis and "political democracy" was a long time in coming.3

In the end, the lack of a full theoretical fit has challenged us to examine to what extent the models and theories do or do not work, as well as how the Polish case actually evolved, instead of adapting one accepted approach or claiming a "new" explanation.4

Even before communism fell, looking at Poland crisis by crisis made it clear that communism was not what Westerners thought it was. Not only was it not a totalitarian system; it was also not even a viable system. Upheavals, even when they were neither mass actions nor successful, were never really brought under control and ended. No Communist leader felt strong enough to do away with his opponents. Nor was any leader capable of marshaling enough resources to make the system really work to either control or satisfy the population. Economics, domestic politics, foreign policy, and the processes of social change were so intertwined that Poland could only rock on for thirty years from one half-solved set of problems to the next, and back again. In the end, the Communist governments' opponents had learned more about getting and using power effectively than their rulers had. Actors who did not win one battle returned to fight again, with their tactics adjusted to avoid failure. Rulers who were supposed to have total power ultimately retreated from their challenges and recognized the hopelessness of the situation.

Poland's years of crisis also make it clear that, long before communism fell throughout Eastern Europe, the old methods of dissecting these systems into

3 The term "political democracy" has as many general meanings as it does users, but its general qualities are (1) electoral competition; (2) associated political rights; (3) accountability of elected leaders; and (4) universal inclusion. See Deborah Norden, Between Coups and Consolidation: Military Rebellion in Authoritarian Argentina (diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1992), p. 14.

separate studies of their political structures, economics, social change, and foreign relations did not work, and neither did theories of overall communist politics. All these elements and not any single event or failing led to the creation of Solidarity; its survival in the face of martial law; the regime's moves to compromise with it at the end of the eighties; and, ultimately, the defeat and resignation of Communist rulers in 1989. Then, as in 1956, 1968, 1970, and 1976, neither economic failings nor changes in Soviet policy alone explain why, on February 6, 1989, Wojciech Jaruzelski's government conceded to the relegalization of its archenemy, Solidarity, not just as a trade union but also as a partner in policy making. Nor could any single factor explain the ultimate "end of communism" on August 19 when rule was turned over to Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a non-Communist and a long-time member of the opposition. Finally, only this history of crises and failed attempts at their resolution can help us begin to understand the struggles with democratization that have beset Poland since the Communists stepped down.

Just as clearly, in each crisis, the reappearance of the events, actors, and symbols of previous crises (as well as continuing discussion about past crises) signals the extent to which the present has fed on the past. Crises do not begin and end distinctly in Poland. No single event can be understood out of its historical context. Decisions made in the heat of one crisis set the stage for the next. Lessons learned in one crisis are not soon forgotten. So political upheavals cannot be looked at as single events or, even, simply compared. They have to be looked at as parts of one cloth, an ongoing flow of events. This project has been an attempt to look at Poland as "a land of crises," to understand why no single crisis could be completely resolved and why one crisis followed another. In doing this, we have looked at the intermeshing of the various elements of Polish life and politics as well as the carryovers from crisis to crisis.

Poles' resistance did not make the communist experience irrelevant. Even when this project began in 1980, models and theories based on explaining change and mass action (and inaction) were needed as much or more than models and theories of control, manipulation, and elite-controlled decision making. The optional models we found, though, assumed some elements that Poland's social and economic system did not really have and ignored factors that could not be ignored in the Polish case—the significance of which was merely apparent in 1980 but became obvious in light of new information and Poland's difficulties with making democracy and capitalism work. Some of the "special" elements had long been dignified by observers of communism as adaptations to "Polish character." But now that communism has been dismantled elsewhere, the independent thinking that was "Polish" appears to have existed in more valid forms in other communist states and to have made a difference in the workings of communism and the troubled attempts to create democracy elsewhere as well.

Our initial models came from Juan Linz's pioneering study of the collapse of "democracy movements" back into authoritarianism in Southern Europe and
Latin America and the various discussions of the dilemmas of modernization. The fit was not quite right, it seemed then, because Poland and her peers in Eastern Europe ultimately were limited by the Soviet Union as much as they were by their own powers. Nor had Communist Poland ever been a “democratic system” in any formal sense. The model of breakdown and stabilization was there, but not the democratic base, at least formally. This was true even though there had always been popular input into the system and elite control was circumscribed by the presence of other actors and by the people’s divided loyalties.

The road map “breakdown and restabilization theory” assumed that breakdown occurred when legitimacy was lost or drastically weakened by the failure of the regime to demonstrate that it had or maintained enough efficacy to “maintain civil order, personal security, adjudication and arbitration of conflicts, and a minimum of predictability in the making and implementation of decisions” and its effectiveness to “implement the policies formulated, with the desired results.” Such failures were among the inevitable social and economic changes that occurred as societies modernized and citizens’ expectations increased beyond the ability of their political and economic systems to meet them. Too, these crises and the disaffection that triggered them were a reflection of the elites’ having set out an agenda for themselves that they could not possibly fulfill and of the fact that the elites did not have a real historical legacy to excuse their failures.

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6 Formally, Linz defines democracy as “legal freedom to formulate and advocate political alternatives with the concomitant rights to free association, free speech, and other basic freedoms of person; free and nonviolent competition among leaders with periodic validation of their claim to rule; inclusion of all effective political offices in the democratic process; and provision for the participation of all members of the political community, whatever their political preferences. . . . Practically, this means the freedom to create political parties and to conduct free and honest elections at regular intervals without excluding any effective political office from direct or indirect electoral accountability.” This was obviously never the case in Poland, but the further, more general definition that democracy is a “legal opportunity for the expression of all opinions and protection by the state against arbitrary and above all, violent interference with that right, rather than an unconditional opportunity for the expression of opinion . . . [not] the turnover of parties in power but the possibility of such a turnover” has existed *de facto* through the weakness of the Communist party and the ongoing defiance of the population. Linz, *Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, pp. 5–6.

7 Ibid., p. 20.

8 Ibid., p. 22.

The history of postwar Poland is one of a regime that lacked legitimacy from the outset because it was imposed by an unpopular outside force that had long been Poland’s enemy. It also has been one of an elite whose lack of efficacy and effectiveness has been continually in evidence. To that degree, breakdown theory and the theory put forth by Juan Linz to explain the rise of authoritarianism in Southern Europe and Latin America, that each system must resolve a set of crises to survive, do help to explain the Polish case. However, Communist Poland was always a less than democratic society.

System instability is explained in modernization theory by the failure of changing systems to handle the issues or crises associated with developing an identity with the state, a sense of legitimacy for the political system and its structures, and the ability to penetrate and manage the population, distribution channels and resources, and participation patterns. Not only is each of these issues problematical in itself, but, in new systems in the Third World (and potentially in the “new” communist systems of Eastern Europe), the crises have not presented themselves one by one but have come together, each one complicating the resolution of others. This inability to structure and handle crises one by one has led in Poland and elsewhere to ongoing system instability. What this theory has not then charted is the logic of elite responses.

In the Polish case, identity with the state was not a problem. Poles identified with Poland for centuries when Poland was independent and when it was not. Polish nationalism, after World War II, was further facilitated since border changes made it an ethnically united nation held together by the Catholic Church. At the same time, the communist system, try as it might, was never able to develop a real sense of the legitimacy of communist governance, nor could it effectively penetrate the society enough to monitor the population or even to “manage” it. It could not achieve distribution that satisfied demand or the kind of participation that “worked” to bring a population into line. Each of Poland’s upheavals was triggered by a piling up of these crises. Successive leaders tried time-worn methods and new concessions to overcome the protests, but to no avail. Each time, they quieted and then surfaced again and again.

The breakdown of democracy, in Juan Linz’s theory of democratic failure, comes when the system and its leaders fail to look as though they can handle various conflicts. The usual explanation for the collapse of a democratic government has been that the leaders lost control when they retreated in the face of what they perceived as strengthening opposition and weakening support. Simultaneously, there has tended to be a lack of consistent and effective responses to disorder and, finally, a move to repress opponents and to make use of corruption. These inactions usually became public enough to threaten the elite’s legitimacy further and to strengthen the opposition.

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10 Binder et al., Crises and Sequences.
11 Roman Szporluk, “Poland,” in Crises of Political Development in Europe and the United States, deals with these same crises in Poland’s precommunist history.
12 Linz, Breakdown of Democratic Regimes, ch. 4.
Two alternative elite responses to a weakening of their power are of particular relevance to the Polish case. On the one hand, top leaders could act to centralize their power and, on the other hand, they could act to try either to ignore or to co-opt the opposition in the hope that this would allow them to preserve their position. In all of this, negotiations, decisions, and transfers of power or co-optation have been done at the top levels. Except for the impetus provided by elites' fear of possible mass unrest or of an expanded opposition disloyal to the system, the actions that determined both system breakdown and reequilibration occurred at the elite levels and not at mass levels.

The Polish case varied markedly from the Linz model. Although elite-level negotiations and responses were central to the resolution of each of the Polish crises, the action in Poland was not always at the top. In each of its crises, it was mass action that shook the elite from its denial and lethargy and pushed it to "take action." So, to use the road map of Linz, we had to factor in the mass ingredient. Events took us from looking simply at why these systems broke down to looking at how democratization could be taking place. Thus we turned, at least for the latter crises, as scholars of Southern Europe and Latin America did earlier, to looking at the democratization process itself at least to deal with the crises of the 1980s.

Drawn from the study of the shift of government in, for example, Spain, Weimar Germany, and Latin America, from authoritarian statist regimes to democracy, standard democratization theory has focused primarily at the top. As did the earlier theories of breakdown, it focused on the nonmass actors and the kinds of options and timing they elected to use to structure the electoral and political process in the initial establishment of democracy. Critical to the establishment of democracy was, ironically, the willingness on both sides to agree both to allow conflict over policy to emerge and to control conflict while democracy was being established and a civil society developed or resurrected.13

At the same time, theorists like Phillippe Schmitter and Guillermo O'Donnell offer a definition of regime that works to explain societies like Poland not only in terms of formal structures but also in terms of "the ensemble of patterns, explicit or not, that determines the forms and channels of access to principal governmental positions, the characteristics of the actors who are admitted and excluded from such access, and the resources and strategies that they can use to gain access," as well as the rules (explicit or implicit) by which collective decisions are made.14 Beyond this, democratization theory, as it has begun to emerge, deals with both what Gramsci called "the war of movement" between the sides and what he called "the war of positions" in periods of consolidation, when groups hold on to the positions from which they left the crisis and seek "to obtain marginal advantages rather than to overwhelm or eliminate each other."15

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13 O'Donnell and Schmitter, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule.
15 Ibid., p. 9.
The final “fit” of this attempt to understand change in authoritarian, but certainly not communist-type, systems in Latin America and Southern Europe was the fact that regime consolidation did not require the immediate formalization of democratic structures. Rather, it “consists in transforming the accidental arrangements, prudential norms, and contingent solutions that have emerged . . . during the uncertain struggles of the transition into structures, i.e., into relationships that are reliably practiced and habitually accepted by those persons or collectivities defined as the participants/citizens/subjects of those structures.” 16

What do not fit are the context in which this move to democratization has occurred—communism—and the singularity of the events that precipitated it. Poland in the 1980s was far different from Southern Europe in the 1930s and even in the 1970s, which theories of breakdown and democratization were initially to explain. It is certainly different from Latin America. There were, simply, elements that were unique to Poland or, at least, hardly comparable to earlier democratization processes. What all of these contextual differences created was a situation in which democratization or even systemic reconsolidation could never be the result of elite compacts alone. In Poland, and ultimately in the rest of Eastern Europe, the broader society always had a defining role.

**Education**

The educational level throughout Polish society is and has been far higher than that in Latin America and even in Southern Europe during their transitions. This higher educational level is a product of the Communist commitment to mobilizing its citizens through education, including literacy campaigns and the expansion of educational access during the Stalinist period. It was a product of the desire of Communist elites to train and mobilize the population to serve the system’s interests. As a result, ideological education was a major part of curriculum for much of the postwar period. The lessons and promises were different from those in purely authoritarian systems: Poles were taught that the system was good because it provided for them and that it was a workers’ state. Obviously, the reality was different. But some elements of the message, especially the notion of egalitarianism, took root in Poles’ expectations and their rhetoric, whether they were Communists or opposition leaders. 17

The development of worldwide communication in the 1970s and 1980s increased Poles’ access to education and information. Simply put, however the statistics compare as to literacy and educational level, Poles have been far more exposed to the world than their peers in earlier instances of democratization. In spite of censorship, they got from Western media, from their own media, and

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16 Ibid., p. 12.
from their contacts with relatives and friends in the West a picture of economic and political life that raised their level of disaffection with what they had by making them feel "relatively deprived." With the exception of the initial period of martial law, from the 1960s on they also were allowed to leave Poland, as their peers in Latin America and Southern Europe also did, to work in more developed countries during the 1970s and 1980s. This meant that they returned with images and goods that further raised their disaffection and their sense that the system which promised them so much in fact deprived them.

Thus any real economic increases and drops in the standard of living were multiplied in their effect by Poles' "education" from their Communist elites and abroad. As a result, their demands far exceeded a mere return to conditions preceding an economic crisis that, in turn, had triggered a broader social and political crisis. The ability of the elites in the ruling establishment and the opposition then to negotiate over the heads of the *lumpen proletariat* was more limited than it was in other democratization processes. Polish workers, after all, had led movements for change not only in the 1980s but also in the 1950s and 1970s, leaving intellectuals to be either advisors or separate actors.

**State Economy**

While major industries often were owned in part or in full by the government or officials connected with it in Latin America and Southern Europe, never before had there been an economy as completely state controlled and owned as there was in Poland and the rest of the Soviet Bloc. Even though Poland's was a more "mixed economy" than existed elsewhere in the Soviet Bloc—with agriculture, from 1956 on, virtually all in private hands and small tradesmen and service workers being allowed to work independently—the system was basically state owned. Even this "private sector" was dependent on the state for supplies, markets, and regulations.

The very nature of the economic structures complicated even the Communists' efforts to solve problems by adding on parts of a market economy. The goal of communist economies was to build a heavy industrial base in which consumer-oriented industries were service-oriented and not central parts of the economy. As a result, virtually no enterprises lent themselves to an easy transformation to profit making and salable production, either in their material resources or in the training of their workers. The sheer bulk of that economy and the intricate, if dysfunctional, network of economic management and controls made reform (to say nothing of reformation) difficult at best at any time. In the 1980s, all of this made movement to a privatized economy a gargantuan task. Piecemeal, it had been a series of partial successes.

The fact that the state made it a point of honor to control all but marginal enterprises—and, in the case of Poland, agricultural land as well—affected the
very nature of political moves designed to trigger and resolve political crises. Political reform was always directly tied, in the popular mind, to economic gains. Demands for political reform grew directly out of economic dissatisfaction in all of the crisis periods but 1968. Even then, mass cultural and political symbols were used to give weight to the popular sense that the system was failing in economics.

The difficulty of resolving political crises under these circumstances was always that economic reforms were far slower and more complex than political reforms. Yet, demands for immediate economic betterment underlay most of Poland’s upheavals. Political reform is tied to economic gains; when political freedoms did come about, they lost their luster because shop shelves and people’s pocketbooks remained empty. The response of Poland’s rulers over thirty years was to try for economic quick fixes to provide the population with instant gratification rather than further straining their limited popularity by forcing the population to increase its productivity and reduce its living standards or asking it to wait for long-term structural reforms to work. So, in the 1960s, worker productivity was allowed to slide while the Gomulka elite attempted to calm the furies that had brought on the 1956 revolt. In turn, it allowed the economy to be increasingly dysfunctional rather than challenging workers. Then, in the 1970s, Poland dug itself into debt by borrowing too much too quickly in an attempt to make its economy productive and to stock its shelves, instead of risking popular disaffection and elite instability by trying to restructure the economy.

Politically, then, in forty years, the Poles learned that demands brought short-term gains but that no one could have faith in the system itself. Economically, the system simply worked itself into a long-term hole; workers had been trained that productivity would not be demanded of them, the burden of a national debt was being used to buy the workers off, and outmoded structures and plants were kept operating to avoid incurring excess costs or delay in getting Poles and their demands “off the street.”

### The Missing Entrepreneurial Class

Critical to all theories of democratization has been the entrepreneurial class, the middle class in traditional European terms of owners and managers whose productivity and savings are key to their earnings. It is this middle class that ultimately has served elsewhere as the base for stability and for democratization. It is theoretically the bridge between the “masses” and the elites as well as the group that most feels the need for rationalization of the polity and the economy.

For communist societies, the presence of an entrepreneurial class of owners was anathema. Although, in Poland, a small number of craftsmen were allowed to survive throughout the postwar period, the reality was that the very bases of entrepreneurship—investment and expansion—were barred by law.
Thus moves for restructuring and democratization always came not from this economically viable base but from other quarters. Workers demanded economic gains and political changes both to protect those gains and to ensure that they got what they had been promised by the regime all their lives.

The white collar class, or intelligentsia, was one in which the top focused on theories and criticism and the bottom on administering policy it most often considered "someone else's." At the top, either there were dissidents blocked from working in the system for their political beliefs or there were professionals and experts who advised and processed information but did not manage. At the bottom, there were government bureaucrats and functionaries, who could implement but not create policy. None of these experiential bases provided the base for rational reform that entrepreneurs had in earlier days. This meant that neither workers nor intelligentsia in Poland felt the need that entrepreneurs in other systems had to create a stable environment for making a financial commitment to the system. "Reasoned" and gradual democratization was not on their agenda nor were the skills it required.

There was a kind of entrepreneurial class. It was not often counted as one of those that sought change but, in retrospect, was a key force in all the changes in Poland. This was the very class that most observers assumed to be committed to the survival of the system at all costs: the state and party bureaucracy. In each successive crisis, most of these activists and workers did not support the system and used every opening to opt out of controls and tasks they resented.

For the some four million white-collar workers in the system, even for those in the nomenklatura system who owed their positions to the party's approval, the realities of the system's failures were often more apparent than for the rest of the citizenry. They had greater access to information about negative aspects of the system than did those outside the system. They also were the middlemen, expected by the citizens and other bureaucrats and managers with whom they dealt to solve problems and make things work. This gave them a negative image of the population and of the system itself.18

In the end, this class learned entrepreneurial skills from their personal involvement in corruption and in having to work the system to make things work. However profitable this may have been, though, these bureaucrats also knew how weak the system was and how unstable their positions were. So, while they looked from the outside to be the bulwarks of the system, they were a cancer within it, deforming it and the reforms that were attempted. Western scholars and their own critics did not see this. But in light of the movement from crisis to crisis, they were the first members of a civil society of educated and activated citizens. Although they did not take the risks of outright dissent, they often pushed the system from the inside to change. And they took advantage of changes and liberalization, not only to say what they had long thought silently but also to make gains for themselves.

In theory, this could have been a major source of the skills for capitalism. However, unlike the entrepreneurs of Southern Europe and Latin America, these men and women were symbols of old political ways that were generally despised. Their presence set off the battles in 1968 and 1989. Their involvement in reform doomed it in the public’s eyes and wore it down almost as soon as it was announced because they had a greater commitment to using entrepreneurship for their own personal and immediate interests than for building up the system.

The Ever-Present Opposition

Poles, unlike their counterparts elsewhere in Eastern Europe and unlike many in the authoritarian movements of Southern Europe and Latin America, have made a practice of resolving conflicts without doing away with either internal elite opponents or the declared opposition. Instead, most were co-opted or, at least, allowed to live on, merely harassed by the state. True, the list of those killed by the state police apparatus grows as old records are opened, but their numbers come nowhere near those in Latin America. Ironically, either when leaders elected to use force or their control slipped and the police acted on their own, violent repression was truly counterproductive. Martyrs were created and the regime put in serious risk as each “event” became public. It was, in fact, the murder of Solidarity priest Jerzy Popieluszko by the police that inspired reemergence of Solidarity, as it sensed that it still had a popular base.

As a result, from 1947 on, no crisis had final victors or final losers, as the constant repetition of actors in the chapters of this book shows. In a sense, an unacknowledged ad hoc democracy emerged, if we use democracy in its most simplistic meaning as merely a system where leaders have to be responsive to popular demands. Also, this proved a fragile basis for stability in Poland. It meant that the party, until it had run out of options and faced the real disillusionment of its population in the 1980s, never committed itself freely to repression and so could always find options to placate the population. Because internal party opposition was even more tolerated than dissent from outside the party, alternate, more trustworthy party leaders could always be “pulled out of the hat.” Men like Gomulka and Gierek were available, then, to symbolize reform by their reputations without having to really change the system. This also meant that crises never began afresh. Old actors rose to the scene with old agendas and reputations as well as animosities to build on. Their words and initial actions were not taken for what they said but in the context of their pasts.

This worked to allow the party to stabilize the situation until 1981. Then, the memories of failed promises and of martial law made ties with the party a “kiss of death” for many, even though much of Solidarity’s “braintrust” had
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come up through the party and led its revisionist wing. After martial law, individuals’ ties with Solidarity, even though it had lost, became a sign of trustworthiness. At best, this changed the equation of possible leadership pacts and strategies, although neither party leaders nor opposition figures were fully aware of the complete recalculation that more than thirty years of crisis management and mismanagement required. This complicated the denouement of communism, the Roundtable talks, and the election campaign of 1989 and made the results “surprising” to both sides.

The Second Hierarchy

One of the reasons Poland’s opposition was so indomitable was that there was always a “second hierarchy” with popular support, at least as a nationalist opposition. That second hierarchy was the Catholic Church, which, since the partitions, had taken on the role of defending Poland as a nation. Even in the Stalinist period, it was seen as such a formidable force that no Communist leaders wanted to take it on full force. As a result, Poles always had an “island of independence,” if not a lesson in freedom, in the Church.

The story of 1980 and 1989 is one in which the Church was a central symbol, negotiator, and sometimes even director of political events in Poland. Its role in the transformation, though, was critical far earlier. That role was not necessarily one and the same as the opposition’s. The Church’s priorities were clear: it wanted to gain more and more freedom and power for itself with every crisis. So, until 1976, it did not enter into real pacts with the opposition—many of whom were as atheist as their Communist brethren. Once the Church had both an international link and power base in the form of a Polish pope and a sense that its mission could be enhanced, it advocated for the protection of individual rights. The Church made some links with the opposition. With that came a much more rapid and far-reaching spread of dissent to the population with churches used as a base. Although the Church’s ultimate goals were essentially to protect its own priority of strengthening its power base and control over the population so that it could build churches, teach religion, and see to it that abortion and divorce were limited, its presence and its involvement with oppo-

19 For instance, Boleslaw Gieremek, Adam Michnik, and Jacek Kuron (leaders of Solidarity in 1980 and 1989–90) were all former party members, as were many others who rose to top positions in the first non-Communist regime and, earlier, in the Solidarity advisory bodies. One of the most cogent attacks on the system in the pre-Solidarity era was based on a coalition of party and nonparty intellectuals who formed “Experience and the Future of Poland” as a discussion group to look for ways out of the crisis. Their first papers were translated and published as Poland Today (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1980).

position activities clearly accelerated the collapse of the Communist leaders' power.

**External Powers**

Throughout the postwar period, the West played a role in Eastern Europe in terms of its relations with the Soviet Union. This limited Soviet pressure even as it often increased their rhetoric.

Outside influences have played a role in turning the countries of Latin America to democracy and have affected the calculations of authoritarian leaders and democratizing actors in Southern Europe. However, the extent of outside control over the events in Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe has been far greater and more deliberate than anywhere else. The Soviet-centered networking of ideological, political, and economic entities and policies made breaking out a very different phenomenon. The Cold War between West and East put a premium, for both sides, on the relationship between Soviet Russia and her Eastern European satellites. After all, the takeovers of Eastern Europe were the ultimate proof of Soviet power. Achieving change involved more actors than simply those within national boundaries. Popular awareness of what outside governments would allow and encourage was a much more important part of the equation for change in Eastern Europe than it was elsewhere. Moreover, to a large segment of Polish society—the individuals who depended on care packages to survive, the professionals and scholars who needed contacts to keep up with the West, dissident groups who got funding, equipment, and publicity from their supporters abroad in each crisis—the leaders and issues that could gain support both inside and outside of Poland's borders were of urgent interest.

The intertwining of East European states in the Soviet period as well as the repeated assertions of "fraternal solidarity" and commonality among the countries meant that their populations were accustomed to looking to each other for guidance on what was feasible. The events in Poland in 1956 and in 1968 were encouraged by the demonstration effect of events in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Solidarity was tolerated in 1980–81 not only because invading Poland while fighting in Afghanistan did not suit Soviet interests (in preserving the remnants of détente and in not fighting a two-front war). It was also minimally tolerated because Poland's economic problems served to demonstrate to the rest of the Soviet Bloc that political gains led to economic failure.

The decline of Communist control in Poland, after all, came after ten years of struggle. Meanwhile, Soviet opposition to reform changed to support for reform in the Soviet Union itself and into a desire to please the West to get its support. In the process, the West was allowed, particularly in Poland, to become an economic presence. Political successes in Poland in 1989 were coupled with growing economic difficulties elsewhere in the Soviet Bloc and Soviet leaders exerting pressure on hard-liners in Eastern Europe to liberalize to match the
Soviet way. This reduced other East Europeans’ reluctance to risk revolt. It also meant that, even if domestic hard-liners were united and the opposition was controlled, the resolution of the final crisis of Polish communism created bloc-wide pressure for change that ultimately brought down communism not only in Poland but throughout Eastern Europe.

Historical Memory

Poland’s experience with defying unwelcome rulers and defending its options dates from long before World War II. Its nationalism has survived two hundred years of being carved up by Prussia, Russia, and Austria. In effect, events from the past were so strong in the population’s consciousness that this memory essentially directed how Poles handled the experience of communism and the movement out of communism.

Censorship and the rewriting of history did little in the postwar period to do away with Poland’s national memory or even to use it to support the Communist status quo. In fact, Poles learned to be skeptics about their rulers from the rewriting of their history and their experiences of promises and hopes never realized. They also learned to retreat into private worlds, separate from the state, that they could control, even though the state controlled virtually every other aspect of their lives. This retreat and focus on history created, in effect, a series of relations and practices that virtually became a polity without structure and leadership over the years. Crises of the past were symbols and starting points for later crises. Old organizational forms of intellectual resistance to the Russian partition of Poland, like the underground press and the “Flying University” of lectures and classes given on forbidden topics by blacklisted lecturers, served as models for resistance in the 1970s. All of this meant that crises were not built from new ground but were legitimized by the reemergence of old heroes and old ways.

This history of failed revolts and distant leadership also gave time for new regimes to develop. As expectations of success dwindled with each reinstitutionalization of old power, what returned was the tradition of retreating from politics into circles of family and friends, where old traditions and national memories were maintained and where socially valuable work was done (so-called organic work) within a hated structure. This maintained the opposition’s strength even as it seemed to have failed to bring about change.

Because the people considered history to be relevant and desired to preserve their gains, reviving old symbols often sufficed to generate popular support. At the same time, historic institutions and past compromises limited each regime’s ability to impose itself. In 1956, decollectivization of Polish agriculture

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and the return of the Catholic Church to power were sufficient to mark Gomulka as a liberal, even as he reestablished the Communist rule. In later years, when agricultural failures plagued the Polish economy and the Church became an active force against Communist dominance, neither the Church nor Polish agriculture could be "retaken."

At the same time, the history of Polish crises in the Communist period is itself a part of national memory. Discussions of past crises were important in each new crisis. The lessons learned in the various crises and in the intervening years of apparent stability set the stage for the next crisis and the ones that were to follow. Even now, the era of the Communists is a point of departure and a standard of evaluation for the new era of freedom.

History and the flow of Polish politics from crisis to crisis thus created secure and trusted avenues for dealing with government control. The opposition never had to start afresh. History and Poland’s politics of crises also created boundaries to the system’s control that could not be surmounted.

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What follows is a study of Poland’s crises, what triggered them, how they occurred, and what allowed the system to survive until the next crisis. Although the focus is on “crises,” the real issue is what kind of system each one created and how each crisis led to an apparent stabilization that over and over broke down in a new crisis. The assumption is that no crisis was triggered by only one actor or factor nor did any crisis achieve a complete resolution. Our attempt has been to look at how the various actors and social and economic factors were knitted together in each crisis period. Although different combinations of actors and factors dominated in each period, it is clear that no political upheaval was without its economic, foreign, and social components. Crisis did not simply follow crisis but each one created the ground for the next crisis and set the boundaries for its resolution, until no simple or tried solution was either credible or viable by the end of the 1980s.

We begin not with the overarching event of establishing communism after World War II but with the first open responses to it and to the lifting of the worst controls in 1956. We end with the last crisis of communism in Poland: the period in 1989–90 when the Communist rulers came to negotiate with their former enemies and, finally, to recognize their loss in the very popular elections they had played the major role in designing, and to turn over power to Solidarity leader Lech Walesa and the government he helped to form.