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The Underground Press in Solidarity's Poland

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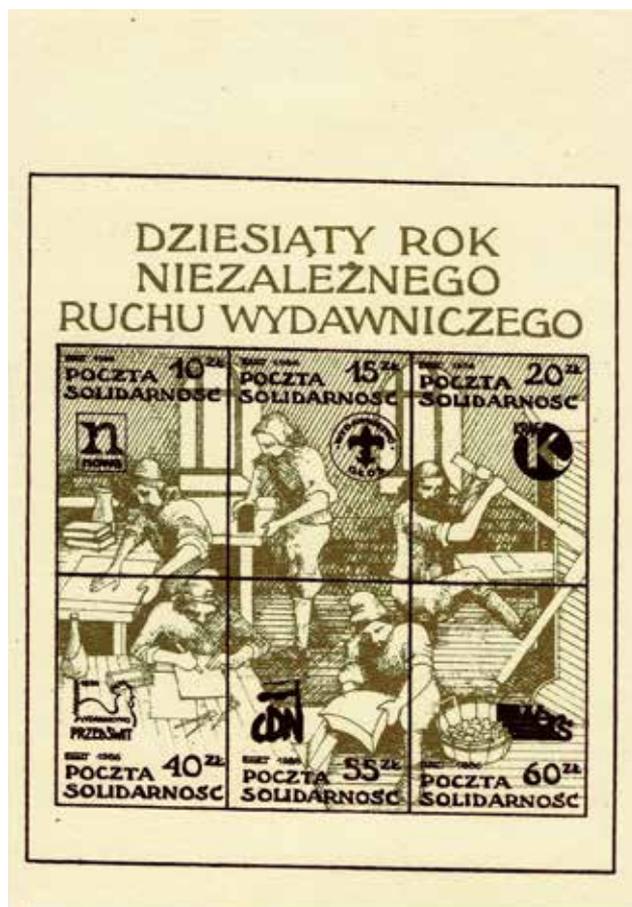
Of the great social movements that have left their imprint on modern history, few rival Poland's Solidarity Trade Union Federation in staying power, fortitude, and connection to ordinary people. The obstacles Solidarity faced were daunting. On three previous occasions, citizens in Eastern Europe had sought to overthrow Soviet domination: East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Each time the forces of democracy were crushed by the Red Army.

By the time Solidarity emerged, communism had held sway in Poland for more than 40 years. Poles had clashed with political authorities before, but Communist leadership had reasserted its control through a combination of threats, reprisals, and rewards. Few observers gave Solidarity a chance in the late 1980s, believing that the Soviet Union was committed to its empire and that it would put down any rebellions on its borders. In the diplomatic universe, most U.S. State Department officials believed that the Polish people would actually opt for communist candidates, and thus for security, in the crucial 1989 elections.

Solidarity, however, prevailed, against all odds and despite many free world leaders who were doubtful as to the desirability of freedom in Poland. Why? *cont. on pg 28*

1. This six-value souvenir sheet commemorates the tenth anniversary of the Independent Publishers Movement; it features an overall scene of a print shop that is divided into six imperforate unofficial stamps with values from 10 złoty to 60 złoty. Each unofficial stamp is headed "Poczta Solidarnosc" ["Solidarity Post Office"], and each has a different logo associated with the underground printing movement:

- "n NOWA" ["New"]—George Orwell's 1984 was the first book published by the underground publishing house NOWA, or "Niezalezna Oficyna Wydawnicza."
- Glos Wydawnictwo ["Voice Publishing House"]
- KRAG K" ["Circle Publishers"]
- "Przed-Swit" Publishers ["Before-Sunrise" Publishers, with a rooster]
- CDN ["To Be Continued"] Publishers, with a white and red Polish flag
- ANEKS ["Annex"] Publishers



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Part of the answer lies in the fact that during the 1980s, something akin to a free press existed in Poland. It was actually an underground press that was parallel to the controlled and censored official media. Solidarity created an independent, uncensored press, which included serious political journals, regional newspapers, mimeographed bulletins, and, yes, postage stamps!

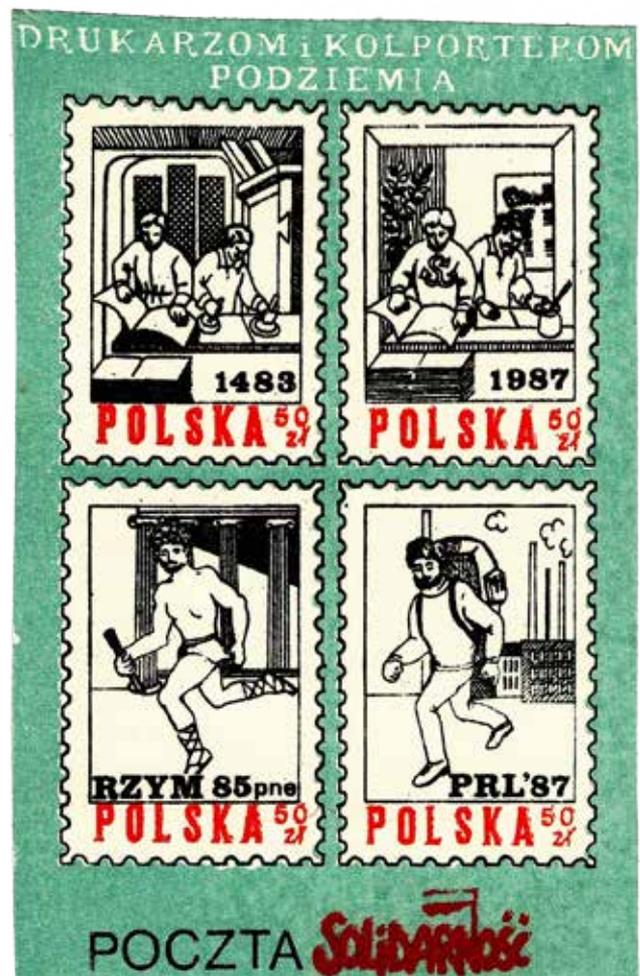
A later conference sponsored by the Institute of National Remembrance—an organization that studies crimes against Poland by both fascists and communists, as well as Polish resistance to totalitarianism—presented a striking reminder of just how crucial the Solidarity press was to the ultimate triumph of democracy.

As an underground operation, the Solidarity press was illegal. The authorities confiscated any printing equipment they discovered and imprisoned journalists and printers. Solidarity relied on the generosity of its supporters in democratic countries to provide it with printing presses. The United States was critical here: the Reagan administration, the new National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the labor movement all worked to ensure that Solidarity had the means to communicate with the Polish people.

In late 1981, immediately after martial law was imposed in Poland, activists began producing a series of unofficial stamps under the name of the outlawed Solidarity Union. Some stamps were produced by prisoners, who carved shoe leather into printing templates that were smuggled to the outside. Most of the stamps represented events in the history of Poland and placed Solidarity within that history. These stories could not be found in the official histories produced by the Communist Party in Poland, which had claimed the exclusive right to compose history.

The stamps, however, did not simply represent history; they also opposed the Communist government by giving authority to Solidarity based upon a claim to the possession of truth, the objectively “true” history of Poland. In this way, the stamps also fit into a larger Solidarity discourse on truthful speech and representation, a discourse that was implicated, for Solidarity, in the production of an independent civil society.

The images used on underground postage constructed a history that involved the resistance movement in Poland and made it clear that Solidarity was the authentic successor to the leadership of Poland. Solidarity accorded itself authority



2. This souvenir sheet, with the heading in Polish, “Printers and Distributors Underground,” was issued in 1987 by the Underground Post of Solidarity Trade Unions; it is dedicated to the printers and “hawkers” (distributors) of underground publications. From upper left to right, the stamps depict:

- Printing in 1483 in Cracow
- Printing by Solidarity in 1987
- A hawker in Rome, ca. 85 B.C.E.
- A Solidarity hawker in the PRL (Polish People’s Republic) in 1987

by using the images and emblems of Polish nationalism and the trade union movement. One goal of the Solidarity movement was to establish a public sphere of communication free from government and Communist Party interference. It accomplished this not only through the circulation of subversive images—in this case, illicit printing presses—but also by controlling the terms of circulation by minting postage.

Solidarity produced a few stamps in 1980, but most of its unofficial stamps appeared between December 1981 and 1989, a time during which the movement was illegal. Although the stamps were not official, and were not used on mail, they mimicked the forms of official postage. In addition to their featured images, some of them bore monetary denominations, the coun-

try (and sometimes the region) of origin, and the term “Poczta Solidarnosc,” or “Solidarity Post Office.”

The artists who produced images for the stamps are generally unknown. Production was not centrally coordinated, and there was considerable duplication of images and themes. Stamps were often produced and sold for collection in sets, each of which consisted of several stamps using similar scenes. Stamps were used to generate funds for the movement!

Stamp making was difficult, as paper and printing materials were strictly controlled by the government, and production and distribution of such materials carried the risk of arrest. Even so, many people contributed, through small illegal acts of complicity, to the work of the underground press. Possession of illegal material such as underground stamps or books also carried the risk of reprisal, and participation in underground unions could lead to dismissal from work.

The Solidarity stamp makers were quite prolific, producing at least 3,000(!) different stamps. One can identify seven basic themes on the stamps, including historical events, individual persons, religious subjects (including the Pope), geographical and environmental subjects, and ideogrammatic stamps, the last of which features the Solidarity logo and scenes of the production of underground material, with printing presses, papermakers, and book binders.

The Solidarity press was determined to address its



4. One of five imperforate stamps issued by the “Poczta Niezależna,” or Independent Post, and dedicated to five years of activity of WERS, the Independent Book Publishers. The same stamp was issued in five colors, blue, green, brown, orange, and red, and shows a 16th-century print shop, with a pressman pulling the bar of a wooden hand press and a compositor (at right) setting type.

message to the entire population, and not simply to a narrow group of urban intellectuals. After Solidarity was declared illegal, the clandestine press served as a surrogate union, reporting on cases of management corruption and keeping readers abreast of the situation of imprisoned union leaders. It published books by authors like George Orwell and Hannah Arendt that were suppressed under Communism. It even published journals aimed at the apparatus of repression, with one periodical, *Dignity*, for the police, and another, *Redoubt*, for the military.

The goal of Solidarity leadership was to convey the message of nonviolent rebellion against a foreign-imposed dictatorship to every group in Poland, including members of the ruling United Workers’ Party. No audience was considered too small, insignificant, or hostile to ignore. For the Polish people, the Solidarity period was a time of trial, marked by political upheaval, martial law, and years of scarcity and want. Poland’s Communist leadership avoided mass brutality, believing that people would eventually tire of strikes and poverty, and then surrender to the inevitability of party dominance. The failure of this strategy was largely due to Solidarity’s having gained dominance over the political discourse through its underground press.

Solidarity succeeded because its leaders were committed to communicating with the majority. Those who today claim the mantle of democracy in authoritarian settings are not likely to prevail—even with the smartest technologies—unless, like Solidarity, they develop a language and instrument, including stamps, to convey their message far and wide to the millions they have thus far failed to reach.



3. This 50-zloty souvenir sheet depicts a 16th century print shop, with two printers working a wooden hand press and compositors in the background standing in front of type cases. It was issued in 1985 by the Solidarity Post of Cracow for the Underground Post of Solidarity Trade Unions and dedicated to the Underground Printers. The round hand cancel at lower right shows the coat of arms of Poland, which, if in color, would be a white, crowned eagle with a golden beak and talons on a red background.