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## OPPOSITIONAL STUDENT POLITICS IN POLAND AND SOUTH AFRICA: YOUTH REBELLION AS A FACTOR IN THE DEMISE OF COMMUNISM AND APARTHEID

### Abstract

This article discusses youth rebellion in the form of oppositional student politics as factor in the demise of communism in Poland and apartheid in South Africa from a comparative perspective. It underlines the role of the younger generation in these events by building upon the structural commonalities between the two regimes and the causes of their demise. Through the concept of the 'classical student movement' it analyses the similarities and differences in the activities of opposition student movements in Poland and South Africa during the Cold War era.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Polska, Afryka Południowa, komunizm, apartheid, ruch studencki, aktywność polityczna studentów, Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów

**Key words:** Poland, South Africa, communism, apartheid, student movements, student politics, Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów

Two decades after the demise of communism the narrative concerning the cause of the 'revolutions' of 1989 has focused on factors such as changes in Soviet foreign policy, a faltering economy, a delegitimised ideology, a loss of belief among the ruling elites, and grassroots opposition. However, what has more often than not been overlooked is the role of young people in these events. This article will therefore focus on youth rebellion in the form of oppositional student politics as a factor that led to regime change at the end of the Cold War. Moreover, in order to transcend the specific context of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, this article will present a comparative study between Poland and South Africa which represent two symbolic examples of regime change at the end of the Cold War era. These cases have been presented by scholars like Samuel Huntington as part of the same wave of democratic change in the late twentieth

century.<sup>1</sup> In fact, notwithstanding their respective differences, both examples of regime change have proven to show far-going structural commonalities.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, scholars from Poland and South Africa have engaged in mutually studying the transitions to democracy from a comparative point of view thus further giving validity to comparisons of the trajectories of both countries.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, by venturing into a comparative case study, this article's purpose is twofold. Firstly, it will highlight a generational angle to the transitions in Poland and South Africa. Secondly, while treating youth rebellion as a structural commonality in order to transcend the ideological contexts of the respective regimes, it will compare two examples of student movements and youth protest within the context of regime change. As such, this article will focus on the question whether youth rebellion and in particular oppositional student politics constituted an important factor in the respective transitions.

### **The classical student movement as a motive force of oppositional student politics**

Student politics, as it is understood here, concerns both struggles in the strictly educational as well as the broader national sphere.<sup>4</sup> As the focus will be on oppositional activity, these struggles are primarily defined by their conflictual character vis-à-vis the respective regimes. While there exists an abundant amount of literature on student politics and student movements in various geographical and historical settings, its conceptualisation often lacks clarity and consistency. This article will be concerned with the phenomenon of the 'classical student movement' which existed and appeared in Poland and South Africa until the respective transitions to democracy. The concept of the classical student movement is both opposed to the 'new student movements' that arose in the 1960s in Western societies, and the activity of students which is perceived to embody student politics in present-day democratic societies – including post-communist Poland and post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See S. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> See A. Guelke, T. Junes, 'Copycat Tactics' in *Processes of Regime Change: The Demise of Communism in Poland and Apartheid in South Africa*, "Critique & Humanism", no. 39 (2012): 171–192.

<sup>3</sup> See U. van Beek, ed., *South Africa and Poland in Transition: A Comparative Perspective* Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 1995; E. Wnuk-Lipiński, ed., *Values and Radical Social Change: Comparing Polish and South-African Experience*, Warsaw: Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> S.M. Badat, *Black Student Politics, Higher Education and Apartheid: From SASO to SANSCO, 1968–1990*, Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1999, pp. 19–21.

<sup>5</sup> L. Vos, *Nationalism and Student Movements: Conceptual Framework and a Flemish Case-Study*, [in:] *University and Nation: The University and the Making of the Nation in Northern Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, eds. M. Norrback, K. Ranki, Helsinki: SHS, 1996, pp. 78–79.

The classical student movement refers to a social movement which was based on collective action under student leadership aimed at influencing societal developments that operated within the framework of a broader social movement as its vanguard, or in a supportive role and recruiting ground for said broader movement. In an authoritarian context, a classical student movement manifested itself not only in an overtly political form, but could appear to be concerned with nominally apolitical activity towards the student as such to further its political aims. Such a student movement emerged from within an existing organisational structure or, conversely, spawned a new organisational structure which depending on the circumstances operated legally or illegally and thus clandestinely.<sup>6</sup> As this kind of student movement was focused on mobilising towards the achievement of a specific goal, it could overcome more traditional divisions within the student body along lines of political affiliation and degrees of political participation.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, student movements were determined and characterised by a generational aspect due to successive age-cohorts of students leaving and entering the student body. As student generations could succeed each other quite rapidly, this allowed for the development of distinct generation styles owing to their members' specific socialisation experiences while coming of age. Thus, student politics and, even more so, student movements were prone to certain transformation fuelled by changing student generations.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the emergence and existence of a student movement of the classical type throughout modern history was dependent upon certain preconditions. Firstly, students as a social group were to hold a specific social position in society that entailed no less than what some sociologists described as a 'total role' which stood in opposition and was mutually exclusive to other roles.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, the intellectual status of students that was inherent to their academic experience enabled and encouraged a disposition to criticise their environment, in turn fuelling the potential for rebellion.<sup>10</sup> Finally, both their social

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<sup>6</sup> P.G. Altbach, *Students and Politics*, [in:] *Student Politics*, ed. S.M. Lipset, New York: Basic Books inc., 1967, pp. 82–87; L. Vos, *Student Movements and Political Activism*, [in:] *A History of the University in Europe: 4: Universities since 1945*, ed. W. Rüegg, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 283.

<sup>7</sup> W.L. Hamilton, *Venezuela*, [in:] *Students and Politics in Developing Nations*, ed. D.K. Emmerson, London: Pall Mall Press, 1968, pp. 352–353.

<sup>8</sup> K. Mannheim, *Das Problem der Generationen*, „Kölner Vierteljahrsheft für Soziologie“ 7 (1928), pp. 309–329; for a detailed discussion of the social theory on generations see H. Fogt, *Politische Generationen: Empirische Bedeutung und Theoretisches Modell*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982; for a discussion of its implications for historians see A.B. Spitzer, *The Historical Problem of Generations*, „The American Historical Review“ 78, no. 5 (1973), pp. 1353–1385.

<sup>9</sup> K. Allerbeck, L. Rosenmayr, *Einführung in die Jugendsoziologie*, Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1976, p.162.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Fendrich, R.W. Turner, *The Transition from Student to Adult Politics*, „Social Forces“ 67, no. 4 (1989), p. 1050; A. Marsh, *Protest and Political Consciousness*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977, pp. 199–214.

and intellectual status combined with their youthful inclination could provide students with a missionary calling towards society, thereby drawing on specific historical experiences and traditions – the memory of which can be described as a cumulative ‘narrative of consciousness’.<sup>11</sup> This article will discuss the activity of the respective student movements carried by generations of youth coming of age around the mid-1980s in Poland and South Africa as a factor leading to the demise of communism and apartheid. However, as the role of the student milieu needs to be seen against the backdrop of the respective national historical context, it is necessary to reflect upon the preceding evolution of oppositional student politics under communism and apartheid.

### **Oppositional student politics under communism**

Since student politics is dependent not only on the overall political situation, but even more so on the higher education context some brief remarks on the latter are necessary. As the communists in Poland needed skilled cadres and a future elite to achieve their goals after the War, higher education policy was therefore of the utmost importance to the regime’s long term success. From 1944 to 1989 the communists never relinquished formal control over higher education in government. Moreover, during the first post-war years and the Stalinist period they undertook to ‘Sovietise’ higher education. The cornerstone of this ‘Sovietisation’ was an attempt to dismantle the traditional university structure into vocational colleges. This, however, was not fully achieved though academic autonomy –hitherto an important characteristic of the Polish higher education system– was severely curbed.<sup>12</sup> Until 1989, further changes to the higher education law were enacted that vacillated between relaxing and tightening control on the academic milieu. Above all, the student community was to be brought in line with the regime’s political aims. In order to facilitate this the communist regime created among others official student organisations that were to act as ‘transmission belts’ for the Party’s policies. In Poland, the Soviet model of the *Komsomol* was never implemented and throughout the communist regime’s existence a plethora of official student and youth organisations passed the revue.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> S.K. Morrissey, *Heralds of Revolution. Russian Students and the Mythologies of Radicalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 7–8; L. Vos, *Student Movements and Political Activism*, p. 277.

<sup>12</sup> J. Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000, pp. 45–46.

<sup>13</sup> See J. Walczak, *Ruch Studencki w Polsce 1944–1984*, Warszawa: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1990.

In part, this was caused by persisting and recurring resistance from within the student milieu. During the first two decades of the communist era, students manifested themselves at times as political actors opposing the regime.<sup>14</sup> Then, in 1968, the first student generation to have been born and raised under communist rule massively rose in protest against the regime. The lead-up to the March 1968 protests had been the activity of a small group of leftist students, the protests themselves were carried by a far greater group turning the events into an experience for a whole generation. The protests shook the regime, but failed to destabilise it and in effect resulted in a repressive counter-reaction that would linger on for nearly another decade. Nevertheless, for the generation that took an active part in the events, the protests would have long-lasting effects. Firstly, they resulted in a loss of faith in socialism among the younger generation, Poland's first to have been raised under it. Secondly, the events precipitated the formation of a consolidated and organised opposition during the 1970s in which student activists from 1968 would play a prominent role.<sup>15</sup>

Following the repression in the aftermath of the 1968 protest, the student milieu stayed largely aloof from politics. Nevertheless, small hearths of opposition persisted while students –contrary to popularised belief– also showed their solidarity with striking workers in 1970.<sup>16</sup> By the mid-1970s students were again becoming politicised enough to visibly act as a group in defiance of the regime. First, some informal networks of students became involved in petition campaigns to protest among others the regime's plan to amend the Constitution.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, following the suspected murder of a student oppositional activist, students started to organise themselves formally setting up the *Studenckie Komitety Solidarności* (SKS – Student Solidarity Committees) from 1977 onwards. The SKS cooperated with the then organised opposition that had emerged in the wake of the oppressed worker riots of 1976.<sup>18</sup> A year later, another group of opposition-minded students set up the *Ruch Młodej Polski* (RMP – Young Poland Movement) as a more ideologically-oriented right-wing student and youth

<sup>14</sup> A. Friszke, *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945–1980*, London: Aneks, 1994, pp. 67–244; Ł. Kamiński, *Polacy wobec nowej rzeczywistości 1944–1948. Formy pozainstytucjonalnego żywiołowego oporu społecznego*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2000, pp. 150–198.

<sup>15</sup> T. Junes, *Confronting the 'New Class' in Communist Poland: Leftist Critique, Student Activism and the Origins of the 1968 Student Protest Movement*, "Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory" 36, no. 2 (2008), pp. 270–272; for a detailed account see also J. Eisler, *Polski Rok 1968*, Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2006, A. Friszke, *Anatomia Buntu. Kuroń, Modzelewski i komandosi*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> T. Junes, *Generations of Change. Student Movements and Student Politics in Communist Poland*, PhD Dissertation: KULeuven, 2011, pp. 175–190.

<sup>17</sup> J. Czaputowicz, A. Lępkowski, *Niezależny ruch studencki w latach 1972–1976*, "Więź" no. 2 (1991), pp. 125–130.

<sup>18</sup> H. Głębocki, *Studencki Komitet Solidarności w Krakowie 1977–1980. Zarys działalności*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PiT, 1994, pp. 50–219; J. Szarek, *Czarne Juwenalia. Opowieść o Studenckim Komitecie Solidarności*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2007, pp. 63–87.

organisation.<sup>19</sup> Although limited in scope, this organised oppositional activity prepared the ground for a more large-scale mobilisation and oppositional organisation in the student milieu, which would take place after the worker strikes in the summer of 1980 and the foundation of *Solidarność*.

In 1980–1981 student politics changed drastically, both in scope as well as in nature. The sixteen-month-long *Solidarność* period was a generational event. The student milieu became widely politicised and put forward demands for academic autonomy and organisational pluralism. This period saw the foundation of independent student organisations of which the *Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów* (NZS – Independent Students’ Association) was the most significant.<sup>20</sup> Students also began setting up self-government councils at numerous institutions of higher education while pursuing higher education reform.<sup>21</sup> However, the creation of the NZS –mirroring the workers and independent farmers setting up their own independent and self-governing trade unions– was to be the most important feat of the 1980–1981 period. The NZS was legalised following a nationwide student strike in February 1981.<sup>22</sup> Following its registration, the NZS held a first national congress at which its statute was proclaimed and the organisation’s area of activity established and formalised as an apolitical independent student union.<sup>23</sup> However, the NZS was perceived as a hostile political organisation since terms like ‘apolitical’ or ‘independent’ were qualified by the communist regime as synonymous to anti-communist.

Despite its formal apolitical stance, the NZS initiated a campaign to free political prisoners.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the organisation actively pursued curriculum reform and entered into negotiations regarding a new higher education law. The student movement that carried the NZS thus remained with its activity more or less within the boundaries of trying to ‘fix the distortions of the socialist system’. The NZS was also a prime example of a classical student movement. It aligned itself with *Solidarność* and identified with the union’s programme, though the student milieu was prone to radicalisation. The latter trait came to the fore in late

<sup>19</sup> P. Zaremba, *Młodopolacy. Historia Ruchu Młodej Polski*, Gdańsk: Arche, 2000, pp. 62–88; T. Sikorski, *O kształt polityki polskiej. Oblicze ideowo-polityczne i działalność Ruchu Młodej Polski (1979–1989)*, Toruń–Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2011, pp. 105–161.

<sup>20</sup> J. Czaputowicz, *Walka o legalizację Niezależnego Zrzeszenia Studentów*, [in:] „*Jesteście naszą wielką szansą*”. *Młodzież na rozstajach komunizmu 1944–1989*, eds. P. Ceranka, S. Stępień, Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2009, pp. 252–269.

<sup>21</sup> M. Kunicki-Goldfinger, *Początki Samorządu Studenckiego na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim*, [in:] *Samorząd Studencki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego w latach 1980–1989 (dokumenty, relacje i inne materiały)*, ed. M. Kunicki-Goldfinger, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2010, pp. 19–31.

<sup>22</sup> See R. Kowalczyk, *Łódzki strajk studencki*, Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza “Nowa”, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> J. Czaputowicz, A. Łepkowski, *Walka o legalizację...*, pp. 284–285.

<sup>24</sup> S. Podorzecki, *Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów (1980–1988)*, “Kontakt” no. 5 (1988), p. 40.

1981, when a contested election of a provincial college rector resulted in another nationwide student strike which in the end was only ended by the imposition of martial law.<sup>25</sup>

Martial law put an end to student politics as it had come into being during the *Solidarność* period. However, the effects of the military crackdown vis-à-vis the student milieu were somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the NZS was one of the first organisations to be banned with one of the highest percentages of activists detained. On the other hand, despite the regime crackdown a new liberal higher education law was passed. This law entailed both provisions for academic reform as well as the creation of student self-government councils at higher education institutions. Thus seeing the demands for academic reform realised despite martial law and the banning of the organisation, the NZS had in fact to a large degree achieved its aims and in effect scored a major victory.<sup>26</sup>

In the wake of martial law a period of ‘normalisation’ ensued that would set the climate for the rest of the decade. This period was characterised by societal demoralisation caused by the double impact of repression and economic crisis. Student youth recoiled from political activity opting rather to retreat to their private lives. Nonetheless, some student opposition persisted both underground and in the student self-government councils which had been allowed to resume their activity after the imposition of martial law.<sup>27</sup> However, as the years progressed, student oppositional activity gradually seemed to wither away – a trend that also rang true for the opposition as a whole – as the generation of students who had become active in the *Solidarność* period of 1980–1981 left the universities and colleges.

### **Oppositional student politics under apartheid**

In South Africa, the situation of the student milieu was somewhat complex due to the nature of the apartheid system. Education of the Black majority had already suffered from segregation before the Second World War, but this discrimination was refined and expanded under apartheid. During the era of so-called ‘high apartheid’, the system of Bantu education was institutionalised and an abyss came to exist between the higher education amenities for Blacks, Coloureds and Indians as opposed to those for the White minority. Bantu education was supposed to imbue the Black populace with the ideology of

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<sup>25</sup> Ch. Wankel, *Anti-Communist Student Organizations and the Polish Renewal*, London: Macmillan, 1992, pp. 107–128.

<sup>26</sup> T. Kozłowski, *Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów 1980–1989*, [in:] *NSZZ Solidarność 1980–1989*, tom 7: *Wokół „Solidarności”*, ed. Ł. Kamiński, G. Waligóra, Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2010, pp. 239–266.

<sup>27</sup> M. Wierzbicki, *Młodzież w PRL*, Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2009, pp. 84–87.

apartheid and basically provide for no more than the schooling of the exploited Black labour force. The system came to experience a crisis due to both economic and demographic pressures leading to some attempts at reform from the 1970s onwards.<sup>28</sup> However, the racially segregated blueprint of the higher education system remained in place, though the number of Black students began to increase dramatically from the late 1970s, both in absolute terms as well as from the perspective of Black student enrolments at White universities.<sup>29</sup>

Oppositional student politics as such existed in South Africa initially on a low level. The student body was divided not only between Whites and non-Whites, but among Whites themselves as Afrikaner students had their own organisational structures such as the *Afrikaanse Studentebond* (Afrikaner Student Union).<sup>30</sup> However, the *National Union of South African Students* (NUSAS), a predominantly White student organisation – although incorporating a small number of Black students as well – came to oppose the regime on a liberal political platform during the 1960s.<sup>31</sup> NUSAS protested against the further enactment of apartheid laws in the sphere of higher education. It effectively became the most ardent voice of opposition against the regime during the decade as Black student organisations such as the *African Students Association* and the *African Students Union of South Africa* disappeared and the liberation movements they were affiliated to, respectively the *African National Congress* (ANC) and the *Pan African Congress* (PAC) were banned and its members subjected to state repression. However, though NUSAS acted on behalf of Black student grievances, its failure to effectively achieve any success as a multiracial organisation against the regime led some Black students to radicalise towards the end of the decade.<sup>32</sup>

In 1969, Black students, not seeing NUSAS as capable of defending their particular interests, broke away and formed their own organisation, the *South African Students Organisation* (SASO). The foundation of SASO signaled the beginning of the Black Consciousness movement. This movement filled the void in South African oppositional politics since the banning of the liberation movements and had an important consciousness-raising effect on the Black, Indian and Coloured groups of the population.<sup>33</sup> The regime cracked down on

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<sup>28</sup> C.J. Bundy, *South Africa*, [in:] *Student Political Activism: An International Reference Handbook*, ed. P.G. Altbach, New York: Greenwood, 1989, pp. 23–26.

<sup>29</sup> S.M. Badat, *Black Student Politics...*, pp. 196–199.

<sup>30</sup> H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 547.

<sup>31</sup> M. Legassick, J. Shingler, *South Africa*, [in:] *Students and Politics in Developing Nations*, ed. D.K. Emmerson, London: Pall Mall Press, 1968, pp. 128–132.

<sup>32</sup> M. Legassick, Ch. Saunders, *Aboveground Activity in the 1960s*, [in:] *The Road to Democracy in South Africa. Volume 1 (1960–1970)*, ed. Th. Papenfus, Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004, pp. 679–686.

<sup>33</sup> D. Hirschmann, *The Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa*, “Journal of Modern African Studies” 28, no. 1 (1990): pp. 3–9.



SASO in the early 1970s arresting, persecuting and imprisoning a number of its leaders. The organisation was officially banned in 1977 and its most prominent leader, Steve Biko, died in police custody after being tortured.<sup>34</sup> However, the younger Black generation had become so aroused by the activities of SASO and other Black Consciousness organisations set up in its wake in the early 1970s that its activity be seen as having paved the way for the Soweto Uprising of 1976. The uprising was a student protest campaign against the use of Afrikaans in Black secondary schools, though the underlying aim was a struggle for equality between Black and White education. The regime reacted violently which resulted in more than 500 deaths.<sup>35</sup>

Following the emergence and then ascendancy of SASO in the student opposition, NUSAS was left somewhat ideologically disoriented during the 1970s. It would move decisively towards the Congress movement in the aftermath of the Soweto Uprising.<sup>36</sup> In the wake of the repression that followed the uprising, many a youth activist went into exile where they would join the ranks of the ANC and provide for fresh momentum in the armed struggle. Furthermore, a successor student organisation to the banned SASO, the *Azanian Students Organisation* (AZASO), was founded in 1979. However, AZASO gradually broke with the Black Consciousness movement and shifted ideologically towards the Congress movement during the early 1980s.<sup>37</sup> The culmination of this shift of orientation in oppositional student politics centred around the creation of a broad political movement of popular front politics with the foundation of the *United Democratic Front* (UDF) in response to the regime's constitutional reforms to implement a Tricameral parliament in 1983. Since the late 1970s the regime had been introducing reforms to the system with a double purpose. On the one hand these reforms were designed to present some show of goodwill to the outside world, but on the other hand they were in fact designed to strengthen the power of Whites by luring the disenfranchised Coloured and Asian minorities into the system at the expense of the Blacks. Both NUSAS and AZASO would become active as affiliates of the UDF. In fact, the UDF was to a large extent carried by youth and student activists whom it provided with a broader framework for activity.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> M.V. Mzamane, B. Maaba, N. Biko, *The Black Consciousness Movement*, [in:] *The Road to Democracy in South Africa. Volume 2 (1970–1980)*, ed. B. Theron, Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2006, pp. 141–150.

<sup>35</sup> T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, London: Longman, 1983, pp. 322–330.

<sup>36</sup> M. Legassick, *NUSAS in the 1970s*, [in:] *The Road to Democracy in South Africa. Volume 2 (1970–1980)*, ed. B. Theron, Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2006, pp. 875–882.

<sup>37</sup> C.J. Bundy, *South Africa...*, pp. 28–30.

<sup>38</sup> J. Seekings, *The UDF. A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983–1991*, Cape Town: David Philip, 2000, pp. 29–59.

### **Youth revolt, student opposition and the demise of communism and apartheid**

In light of the above, it is fair to state that oppositional student politics played an important role in the political struggle in Poland as well as in South Africa until the mid-1980s. The latter half of the decade saw events unfold that within the span of a few years led to demise of both communism in Poland and apartheid in South Africa. What both cases had in common was that regime change ultimately came about through elections following a negotiated settlement between regime and opposition elites. However, the run-up to these negotiations had constituted a period of intensified grassroots opposition against the backdrop of a changing geopolitical context and a protracted economic crisis. Moreover, in both cases the mid-1980s would mark the beginning of a generational revolt against the respective regimes. In both cases, rebellious youth challenged the status quo and saw a reinvigorated activity of oppositional student movements.

In Poland, three events took place by the middle of the decade that would encourage the oppositional student movement to re-emerge in strength. Herein, the academic year of 1985–1986 can be seen to represent a caesura. The first of the events was the general amnesty that was declared by the regime. This entailed a release of the remaining detainees from the martial law period and a certain liberalisation as far as repression was concerned. The second event was the modification of the liberal higher education law enacted in the wake of martial law. The new law again curbed academic autonomy and severely limited student self-government. The third and final important event was the appearance of a new student generation enrolling at the universities and colleges.

This student generation possessed some specific characteristics due to its socialisation and the climate in which it was coming of age. These youths had witnessed the events of 1980–1981 close enough to have been influenced by the spirit of the *Solidarność* period. However, since they had not directly participated in the events because of their then age, they stood more aloof from them than their elder contemporaries and were in turn not affected by the demoralisation and fear that had gripped the population because of martial law. Moreover, the period in which they were reaching adulthood carried a smaller risk of repression. Most importantly, this generation was prone to rebellion, a characteristic also reflected in the youth counter-culture and rock music of the era. The grim perspectives that the reality of life under normalisation presented for their future, led to a stance of outright anti-communist contestation. These youths can be rightly described as the ‘children of *Solidarność*’ and their appearance on the political stage would signal a new wave of oppositional student politics.<sup>39</sup> The student movement would become influenced by movements on the periphery of the milieu such as the

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<sup>39</sup> S.P. Ramet, *Social Currents in Eastern Europe. The Sources and Meaning of the Great Transformation*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 212–254; M. Rymśza, *Niezależne*

*Ruch Wolność i Pokój* (Freedom and Peace Movement) and the *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa* (Orange Alternative). The oppositional activity of radical university and college students was encouraged by similar activity in high schools by such movements as the *Federacja Młodzieży Walczącej* (Federation of Fighting Youth).<sup>40</sup>

This particular blend of generational characteristics against the backdrop of the above described social and political climate would lead to the revival of the NZS. Firstly, there was an increase in underground activity primarily manifested by an increase in the distribution of underground (student) publications. Furthermore, the NZS managed to hold a second congress that although completely conspiratorial constituted a continuity with the NZS from 1980–1981. It also signified growing momentum and a generational ‘changing of the guard’ in the student movement. Above all, this generation would engage in new types of actions that were characterised by their concreteness. It is important to note that during these actions the NZS was not only active in its own name, but deliberately made reference to the still banned *Solidarność*.

The oppositional student movement reached its zenith by 1988. That year would turn out to be a crucial one. It was preceded by the invigorating and mobilising effect that John Paul II’s third visit to Poland had brought about in 1987. At the mass meetings with the Polish Pope the students saw and realised their strength in numbers. At the start of the following academic year the student movement continued to gain momentum and by early 1988 the time was deemed right to re-emerge, that is to engage in public activity as opposed to the hitherto underground conspiratorial actions. This took place symbolically in March 1988 on the twentieth anniversary of the 1968 student protests.<sup>41</sup> When two months later, in May, the students’ working-class peers went on strike in protest against the regime’s planned economic reforms, the students initiated a solidarity strike. The May 1988 strike wave would witness the re-emergence of *Solidarność* though the strikes were a manifestation of generational solidarity between the students and a younger generation of workers who had no firsthand recollection of the *Solidarność* period at the beginning of the decade.<sup>42</sup>

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*Zrzeszenie Studentów w latach 1986–1989 jako ruch społeczny*, MA thesis, Uniwersytet Warszawski, 1990, pp. 30–34.

<sup>40</sup> P. Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 57–164; see also W. Fydrych, B. Misztal, *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa. Rewolucja Krasnoludków*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, 2008; A. Smółka-Gnauck, *Między wolnością a pokojem. Zarys historii Ruchu „Wolność i Pokój”*, Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> M. Rymśza, *Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów...*, pp. 65–94.

<sup>42</sup> Ł. Kamiński, *Młodzież w ruchach opozycyjnych 1980–1989*, [in:] *Młode pokolenie Polski*, ed. B. Rogowska, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2000, p. 36; D. Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics. Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, pp. 182–183; P. Smoleński, W. Giełżyński, *Robotnicy '88*, Londyn: Aneks, 1989, pp. 80–85.

Although the regime managed to contain and put an end to the strikes in May, a new wave of strikes broke out in the summer. Since this happened during the holiday period, students were free to go and support the workers directly in their struggle. Confronted with another wave of strikes carried by this belligerent young generation, the regime cautiously opened negotiations with representatives of the ‘elder’ opposition to seek a way out of the persisting crisis. At this time the NZS held a third congress which primary result was a decision to try and embed the movement more firmly in the student milieu by addressing specific student grievances. However, by the end of the year it was becoming clear that this strategy was a failure. General issues were pre-eminent and dominated the political struggle, but by that time the main arena of the struggle had moved from the streets, campuses and factories to the negotiating table. The NZS’ main action in late 1988 was a boycott of the hated obligatory military education at the universities. The movement had thus started to lose some of its dynamic, a problem that was exacerbated by the fact that the NZS remained an illegal organisation and could not develop any formal on-campus activity.<sup>43</sup>

The decline of the student movement became very apparent once the ‘Round Table’ process reached its final phase. Firstly, students were underrepresented in the delegation of the opposition that was to negotiate with the regime, the *Komitet Obywatelski* (Citizen’s Committee). At the Round Table itself the NZS was only present at three ‘subtables’ and thus had a minimal impact on the proceedings. As a consequence its demands were not met despite promises of support from opposition leaders –most notably Lech Wałęsa– and the movement reacted with volatile student demonstrations, in turn triggering an anti-student media campaign.<sup>44</sup> The NZS then held a fourth special congress of which the ambivalent outcome was a non-endorsement of the Round Table while simultaneously calling for students to support the opposition in the upcoming elections. Moreover, in contrast to *Solidarność*, the NZS was not legalised in the wake of the Round Table and in a frustrated bid to have its demands met, the students initiated another nationwide strike. However, this strike did not wield any results and risked bleeding to death. Finally, on the eve of the June elections the NZS national leadership –having antagonised not only the regime but many among the opposition as well– called an end to the strike.<sup>45</sup> The subsequent opposition victory in the semi-free elections signalled the demise of communism in Poland. Within months of the election, the country saw a non-communist government take office and embark on a series of radical reforms aiming to transform the country into a liberal democracy and a market economy.

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<sup>43</sup> M. Rymsza, *Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów...*, pp. 114–159; P. Waingertner, *Dekada buntu czyli o NZS-ie lat osiemdziesiątych*, „Zeszyty Historyczne” no. 133 (2000), pp. 13–14.

<sup>44</sup> A. Dudek, T. Marszałkowski, *Walki uliczne w PRL 1956–1989*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Geo, 1999, pp. 386–389; P. Waingertner, *Dekada buntu...*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>45</sup> T. Kozłowski, *Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów 1980–1989*, pp. 276–295.

Similarly, in South Africa the apartheid regime faced a challenge by a generation of rebellious youth in the mid-1980s. While this generation was particularly self-conscious in its revolt, its members also stressed generational solidarity in the struggle against apartheid.<sup>46</sup> The direct catalyst that led to the outbreak of generational revolt was the activity of the UDF. When the elections for the envisioned new Tricameral parliament were to take place violence erupted in the Black townships, which was in essence a generational revolt. The township uprising of 1984–1986 would coerce the apartheid regime to realise that the balance of power in the country was shifting despite its capacity to contain the violence. It was not the fear of violence spilling over from the townships to the suburban white areas that had prompted the regime to assess this evolution. The capability for the police and military to contain popular unrest had been an objective from the outset in the planning of these townships. It was the foundation and activity of the UDF with its practices of popular democracy that led the regime to change its strategy i.e. to negotiate while still in a dominant position. In this manner, the UDF became a vital element in the struggle against apartheid as it made the country ungovernable creating the conditions for a sustained insurrection. But it was the young people of the townships who stood on the frontline of the struggle and were the driving force behind the uprising of 1984–1986. Armed mostly with nothing more than sticks and stones this young generation faced the strongest army in Africa but was nonetheless incited and imbued with a spirit of invincibility and imminent victory. Though the uprising was contained and oppressed with the regime declaring consecutive states of emergency, the vehement opposition of the younger rebellious generation had hit its mark.<sup>47</sup>

Simultaneously, as stated above, both NUSAS and AZASO – the latter changed its name in the mid-1980s to the *South African National Students Congress* (SANSCO) to emphasise its identification with the Congress movement – had committed to the struggle for democratisation and national liberation within the framework of the UDF. Following consecutive states of emergency the apartheid regime banned the UDF, but the movement rapidly re-emerged temporarily under a new name, the *Mass Democratic Movement* (MDM).<sup>48</sup> Throughout this period the generation of young township partisans and students stood together with the rest of the oppressed in the struggle against apartheid with the students mirroring the practice of popular democracy in the educational sphere. Students engaged in protests demonstrations, sit-ins, and boycotts targeting a range of educational issues among which a national campaign for an education charter guaranteeing

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<sup>46</sup> C. Bundy, *Street Sociology and Pavement Politics: Aspects of Youth and Student Resistance in Cape Town, 1985*, “Journal of Southern African Studies” 13, no. 3 (1987), pp. 318–220.

<sup>47</sup> D. McKean, *The UDF and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*, “TransAfrica Forum” 4, no. 1 (1986), p. 32; M. Neocosmos, *From People’s Politics to State Politics: Aspects of National Liberation in South Africa, 1984–1994*, “Politeia” 15, no. 3 (1996), pp. 80–84.

<sup>48</sup> J. Seekings, *The UDF...*, pp. 229–259.

non-racial, free education for all people in South Africa was one of the most significant. In the political sphere students engaged in coordinated campaigns with the UDF such as the defiance campaign in 1989 that aimed at civil disobedience of apartheid laws. Students regularly held commemorations of historical events such as the Soweto Uprising, which had an important consciousness-raising effect. They organised campaigns to release political prisoners of whom the most prominent was Nelson Mandela. They mustered support for the exiled and banned liberation movements and agitated on international issues among others by opposing the appearance of speakers at universities who were perceived to support the apartheid regime. More directly, students protested against the restrictions, repression, and regime violence they and other activists beyond the student milieu were subjected to.<sup>49</sup>

Whereas both NUSAS and SASNCO embraced non-racialism in principle, in practice both organisations were still focused in their activity along racial lines. NUSAS was still a student organisation based primarily upon a white constituency, while SANSCO catered to Black students among whom it achieved a hegemonic position. But the student movement transformed the educational sphere into an arena of the national struggle. SANSCO's programme acknowledged working-class leadership in the overall struggle and thus mainly played a supportive role. It mobilised students towards demands of representation and decision-making at the institutions of higher education. Moreover, it served as a catalyst for political resistance and provided the opposition movement with politically and organisationally skilled activists. Finally, SANSCO played a major role in swaying the Black segment of the student body towards the Congress movement and thus contributed to the momentum that launched the ANC back to the frontline of the South African political scene.<sup>50</sup> In 1991, after the apartheid regime had unbanned the liberation movements in early 1990, and initiated negotiations with the opposition, the UDF disbanded itself.<sup>51</sup> These developments affected both NUSAS and SANSCO and ended the role they had hitherto played. The negotiations between the regime and opposition ultimately led to the first full-franchise elections in 1994. They symbolised the end of apartheid, an event to which oppositional student activists had contributed.

### **Comparing the Polish and South African oppositional student movements**

Despite the formally different ideological framework of the regimes, the Polish and South African oppositional student movements operated against the backdrop of fairly similar circumstances. Both the NZS on the one hand and NUSAS

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<sup>49</sup> S.M. Badat, *Black Student Politics...*, pp. 278–306.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 368–370.

<sup>51</sup> J. Seekings, *The UDF...*, pp. 280–284.

and SANSCO on the other hand are examples of classical student movements. Both movements were based upon collective action by students under student leadership and affiliated with a broader social movement, *Solidarność* and the UDF respectively. The movements were active in the educational sphere, but had broader societal aims – the struggle against the communist and apartheid regimes. Moreover, in the final years before the demise of the regimes, the oppositional student movements were carried by specific generations that were imbued with a spirit of rebellion. Finally, as both societies underwent political and social change in the 1990s, both movements shared a similar fate as democratisation undermined the rationale and the preconditions for the movements to continue to exist in their then form. This is illustrated by the evolution of the oppositional student movement in both countries since the demise of communism and apartheid.

In Poland, the opposition victory in the semi-free elections signalled the demise of communism, but no victory for the NZS. In fact, it is even possible to state that the demise of communism coincided with the demise of the NZS as a movement. There are several reasons to underline such a statement. Firstly, the NZS became redundant as a political movement, on the one hand because it lost its symbolic position, its enemy, and its demands, while on the other hand the organisation's failure to adapt to changing circumstances pushed it into a peripheral low-key position. Secondly, there was internal tension within the movement caused by ideological conflicts and the dichotomy of combining underground and public activity. Thirdly, there was the students' political inexperience and radicalism. They had outplayed themselves and their role was reduced to that of mere rioters (*zadymiarze*) to become sidelined by both the 'elder' opposition and the regime. Finally, the individualism and personal ambitions of many among this young rebellious generation caused the movement to disintegrate once other political career options had presented themselves. Nevertheless, the events of 1989 did not constitute the end of the NZS as such since the organisation formally exists to this day. However, it no longer resembles the movement that emerged in the 1980s.

In South Africa, political change also precipitated change in the student movement and the nature of student politics. Following the unbanning of the ANC, the commencement of the negotiation process, and the dissolution of the UDF, NUSAS and SANSCO activists perceived that their hitherto specific roles had come to an end. However, they simultaneously saw the need for further activism in the educational sphere to put their non-racialist credo into practice. This led to a merger of NUSAS and SASCO into a new organisation, the *South African Students Congress* (SASCO) affiliated with the Congress movement in 1991. Since then SASCO has remained an active player in South African student politics.<sup>52</sup> Both student organisations in Poland and South Africa, the NZS and

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<sup>52</sup> S.M. Badat, *Black Student Politics...*, pp. 370–371.

SASCO, still proclaim political programmes that relate to their past activity and pride themselves to constitute the biggest student organisations in their countries. Of the two, SASCO claims a revolutionary mission to transform society, though both organisations are focused on the higher education sphere.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, both in Poland and South Africa the democratic process following the demise of communism and apartheid respectively made that national political struggles were to be fought elsewhere. The student organisations now operated through the legal institutional framework at the universities and colleges. This transformation of the political and social context therefore signalled the end of a particular form of student politics and in fact the end of the classical student movement as a phenomenon in both countries. This evolution has been compounded by the transformation of the social role of students – no longer a total role – and the effects of generational change in the student body – the activists that carried the struggle against communism and apartheid have long left the student milieu and their successors are confronted with a radically different reality. Additionally, students have become more prone to apply individualist strategies towards their lives, which has eroded the group cohesion of the milieu in turn affecting the potential for political mobilisation. Above all, the apolitical sphere which in an authoritarian context was politicised – arguably more under communism than apartheid – has become truly apolitical in the changed socio-political reality of the past two decades. In this sense, both cases show striking similarities.

The main difference lies in the movements' legacies and perception of the past – the narrative of consciousness in which both the NZS and SASCO stress their legendary origins. The South African experience was in the end more positive than the Polish one where the student movement became suddenly marginalised and frustrated, even before the actual demise of the communist regime. In South Africa, the student movement managed to adapt more effectively to the changing circumstances, which is explained by the fact that its activity had been based upon a more solid political programme that was embedded within a broad social movement, the UDF. In Poland, the student movement of the late 1980s took upon itself the role of a vanguard and was mostly reliant upon concrete action rather than a well worked-out political programme. Moreover, in the latter case the broader movement itself disappeared as *Solidarność* rapidly disintegrated during the transition. In South Africa, the ANC and its partners remained united and retained a dominant political position. Thus, in contrast to the NZS, SASCO as an organisation can still claim to uphold a societal mission with some credibility.

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<sup>53</sup> Compare the present programmes of the NZS and SASCO <http://www.nzs.org.pl>; <http://www.sasco.org.za>



## Conclusion

For all the differences between communism in Poland and apartheid in South Africa, comparison of the respective regimes and the factors of their demise produced some striking similarities that can be perceived to constitute structural commonalities of which youth revolt and oppositional student activism are an example. The purpose of the comparative approach in this article was twofold. The first aim was to demonstrate a generational angle to the events that led to the demise of the respective regimes. As has been discussed above, the background to the oppositional student activity in Poland and South Africa in the latter half of the 1980s was a generational revolt. This generational revolt became symbolised in Poland by the united actions of young workers and students during the strikes of 1988 that re-introduced *Solidarność* on the political stage and forced the regime to negotiate. In South Africa, it was the rebellion of youth in the townships combined with the activity of students and workers within the framework of the UDF and the MDM that propelled the ANC back to a formidable position in the struggle and, as in Poland, compelled the regime to initiate negotiations with the opposition. From this perspective, the rebellion of youth constituted in both cases a motive force leading to the elite negotiations.

The second aim was to compare the two cases of oppositional student activity within the context of regime change. Both the NZS in Poland on the one hand, and NUSAS and SANSCO in South Africa on the other hand were examples of classical student movements. The main difference between the two cases was that in Poland the oppositional student movement acted as a vanguard for the broader *Solidarność* movement, while in South Africa the students were from the outset embedded within the framework of the UDF and thus acted in a more coordinated supportive role. Ironically, their contribution to the process that led to regime change also precipitated their ultimate redundancy in the final stages of that process as the elites of the respective broader movements took over and the momentum switched from grassroots activism to high politics.

This leads to the question of whether youth rebellion and oppositional student politics constituted an important factor in the respective transitions. The role of the rebellious younger generations in Poland and South Africa and their contribution to the process that led to the demise of communism and apartheid should be acknowledged. Primarily, because the rebellion of the younger generation injected renewed energy into the opposition's efforts and showed the respective regimes that as long as a new generation would stand up in defiance that regime's future was at stake. This then in turn influenced the respective regime's elites to move towards dialogue with the opposition. However, the young generation became marginalised in the further process, and as a result its contribution has been minimalised and somewhat forgotten in later accounts of the demise of communism in Poland and apartheid in South Africa.

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł porównuje rolę działalności opozycyjnej studentów w wydarzeniach, które doprowadziły do upadku komunizmu w Polsce oraz apartheidu w Afryce Południowej. Autor na początku przedstawia rolę opozycyjnej działalności studenckiej oraz ich protesty w szerszym kontekście historycznym prowadzącym do wydarzeń z lat osiemdziesiątych XX wieku. Następnie działalność polityczna studentów i ich opór analizowane są jako jeden z czynników prowadzących do upadku obu reżimów. W szczególności analizowana jest działalność NZS-u w drugiej połowie lat osiemdziesiątych w porównaniu z działalnością studentów w Afryce Południowej w tym samym czasie. Autor stara się pokazać wpływ aktywności studenckiej na oba systemy, wykraczając poza li tylko kwestie polityczne i doktrynalne.