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ÉIRE – SOLIDARNOŚĆ: THE IRISH RESPONSE  
TO THE RISE OF SOLIDARITY, 1980–1981  
(PART II)

Abstract

This article examines the response in Ireland (north and south) to the rise, growth and suppression of Solidarność, from its creation in the aftermath of the Gdańsk shipyard strike of August 1980 to the imposition of martial law in the country in December 1981.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Irlandia, Polska, Solidarność.

**Key Words:** Ireland, Poland, Solidarność.

**Northern Ireland**

With so much going on in Northern Ireland in 1980–1981, it is no great surprise to find that events in Poland played second fiddle as far as public opinion was concerned to domestic developments. Yet it was precisely the sense that seminal events were occurring in both jurisdictions, and that there was at least the semblance of a viable comparison, that heightened awareness of points of contact, if not similarity, between them.

Provisional Sinn Féin was first into the field, with a speculative telegram of congratulations to Lech Wałęsa following the Gdańsk agreement.<sup>1</sup> One senses to

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<sup>1</sup> It read: 'Your victory advances not alone the rights of Polish workers but of workers everywhere. Control by the people of their places of work offers a great opportunity to progress further in establishing the complete freedom through democratic socialism of the rights and welfare of all peoples throughout the world.' "An Phoblacht/Republican News", 6 September 1980.

its surprise, it received a swift, warm, response from Wałęsa himself.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the following months there was the occasional reference to events in Poland in the columns of “An Phoblacht/Republican News”,<sup>3</sup> but little evidence of interest elsewhere in the north, the only exception being the nomination of Wałęsa for the Nobel peace prize by Mairead Corrigan of the Northern Ireland Peace People.<sup>4</sup> While his nomination on this occasion was unsuccessful it is at least possible that this initiative may have laid some of the groundwork for his eventual receipt of the award in 1983.<sup>5</sup>

The death on 5 May 1981 of Bobby Sands MP while on hunger strike was, of course, a landmark event in the recent history of Northern Ireland, and received a great deal of attention in Poland, as did the continuation of the hunger strikes thereafter.<sup>6</sup> In a move that made the front page of the “Irish Press” Wałęsa reciprocated the gesture of the previous Autumn, praising Sands as ‘a great man who sacrificed his life for his struggle.’ He continued: ‘I am very sorry that his strike ended tragically, but if one is going to achieve results, one has to fight ... If Mr Sands had calculated correctly as an activist when he chose to go on hunger strike, then he had certainly won a victory.’<sup>7</sup> Such a view, which ran contrary to

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<sup>2</sup> ‘On behalf of the independent Self-governing Trade Union in Gdańsk I thank you very cordially for your words of greeting and solidarity with us during the days of struggle. I hope we will maintain our present solidarity in the future.’ *Ibid.*, 4 October 1980. It appears that this response was a pro forma one that was issued in response to the thousands of communications received by the strikers after the Gdańsk agreement.

<sup>3</sup> Such as the reference to the visit to Dublin by Edmund Baluka, chair of the Szczecin strike committee in 1970 in October 1980. The paper particularly welcomed his statement of support for the blanket protest, and his call for them to be accorded the status of political prisoners. *Ibid.*, 8 November 1980. (For more details of Baluka’s visit see also below, in the section ‘Trade unions’). His time in Ireland was not without controversy, as his translator (provided by the Polish-Irish trade committee) refused to translate his remarks during a talk in UCD, as she disagreed with his views. “Irish Press”, 25 October 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Her letter to the Nobel committee included the following remarks: ‘In an age of unbelievable danger from nuclear weapons and massive unyielding power structures this wisely judged courageous campaign for freedom has not only been the most hopeful event of 1980 but could well prove to be one of the most significant turning points of European and world history in the second half of the twentieth century.’ “Irish Independent”, 19 January 1981.

<sup>5</sup> The travel writer, Dervla Murphy, pondered whether the international attention showered upon Solidarność at this time might have the same corrosive effect as it had had on the Peace People movement. “Irish Times”, 2 October 1981.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the ‘Letter from Warsaw’ by Judy Dempsey, “Irish Times”, 23 June 1981. The same paper noted that Margaret Thatcher’s conduct during the hunger strike crisis had made her ‘wildly unpopular’ in Poland, a state of affairs utilised by the chairman of Len Murray, the leader of the British TUC, during his address to Solidarność’s first national congress, 30 September 1981.

<sup>7</sup> “Irish Press”, 5 May 1981. Wałęsa’s comments are noted in at least two studies of the hunger strike crisis, P. O’Malley, *Biting at the grave*, Belfast 1990, p. 4, and C. Ryder, *Inside the Maze*, London 2001, p. 244. A correspondent of the “Connacht Sentinel” on 12 May, noting the Pope’s demand that Poland’s right to self-determination be respected, suggested that the same

Catholic teaching as generally understood, must be interpreted in the context of the numerous hunger strikes that had accompanied the radicalisation of opinion in Poland over the previous twelve months (and over which the *Solidarność* leadership had limited control).<sup>8</sup> It is unclear to what extent the situation in the Maze prison may have affected the strategy of the fasting imprisoned activists in Poland, who were seeking ‘political status’, but it is surely permissible to posit a connection.<sup>9</sup>

The regional press, as part of its general response to the military crack-down of December 1981, pushed the comparisons between Northern Ireland and Poland to the utmost. The “*Meath Chronicle*”, for example, suggested that ‘In view of the way the lawful aspirations and human rights of the minority in Northern Ireland have been suppressed by the majority the situation in Poland is not all that foreign to us.’ “*The Southern Star*” went much further in its analogy, equating the sufferings of the Poles under Soviet-imposed communism ‘the long suffering Northern Catholic minority [who] are under the heel of a group of tribal fascists called the Unionists.’ Whatever about the merits of such analogies the mere fact that they were drawn is itself testimony to the sense of an abiding common struggle between the two countries.

### Left wing politics

There is a danger in exploring the response of the left-wing elements of Irish politics to the rise of *Solidarność* of exaggerating the significance of same, given their general lack of public support. Even the strongest grouping – the Labour party – could muster only 9% of the national first preference vote and 15-6 Dáil seats in the three general elections in February 1981. When in office (between June 1981 and February 1982) the parliamentary party was consumed by domestic difficulties (including the perennial problem of party-infighting) and, understandably, it could not devote much attention to international affairs.

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principle should apply to Northern Ireland. In his view Sands’ victory in the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election of April 1981, was achieved in a ‘much more clear-cut fashion than the mandate of many of the groups and individuals who draw consolation from the supportive words of His Holiness in the case of his own native country.’

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the report in the “*Irish Independent*”, 8 June 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Wałęsa’s words were themselves reciprocated with a message of sympathy for *Solidarność* from Provisional Sinn Féin following the imposition of martial law. Notwithstanding such gestures, the political gulf between the two organisations can be inferred from its concluding paragraph: ‘We deplore any attempt by Western imperialism to exploit the agony and suffering of the Polish people. This historic nation has been a buffer zone between East and West for too long and an acknowledgement of Poland’s right to freedom and independence is vital for the advancement of socialism and the welfare of the Polish people.’ “*An Phoblacht/Republican News*”, 31 December 1981.

Consequently there is little to distinguish its particular stance on the issue from that of the Government as a whole, as discussed above – as there had been little to distinguish between its relative disregard of Polish affairs and that of Fine Gael, while both were in opposition prior to the election of June 1981. As the Irish member of the Socialist International, it was party to that organisation's stance on the Polish question – although that was by no means always easy to discern, especially after the events of 13 December 1981.<sup>10</sup> The only meaningful comment made by the party (as opposed to the government) regarding martial law came from Ruairi Quinn, in the aftermath of the declaration of martial law, who observed that the absence of Russian intervention was the only positive in the situation, and he urged that 'the Poles be left to deal with the problem themselves' – although, of course, given that such a neutral line inevitably favoured the stronger party in the confrontation, the Labour party thus perversely found itself by default siding with the Polish government in its suppression of *Solidarność*.

The twilight world of the hard left of Irish politics in the early 1980s was populated by minuscule numbers of passionate adherents, the dogmatic nature of whose analysis was only matched by their prodigious appetite for public engagement. Several groupings were particularly 'prominent' (in relative terms), or, at least, noteworthy, and on the Polish question they fell into two clearly-defined groups. The first, and most obvious, was the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI), which endorsed, almost without quibble, the Soviet line of the day, and whose publications, notably "Irish Socialist" and "Unity", are useful sources for the party's evolving stance on the *Solidarność* phenomenon. Initially this took the form of a cautious wariness, viewing labour unrest in Gdańsk as the result of the understandable antagonisms and frustrated expectations generated by admitted failings in recent economic policy, and the fact that private agriculture remained overwhelmingly in private hands. (The fact that the productivity of state-owned farms was greatly inferior even to this, notoriously inefficient, private sector was not adverted to).<sup>11</sup> Once the picture became clearer, a change in the editorial line took place, with both expected and unexpected consequences. As an example of the latter, in its efforts to discredit the role of the KOR, the "Irish Socialist" even took to endorsing the response of the "Irish Independent" to the Polish hierarchy's condemnation of the group in December 1980.<sup>12</sup> More predictably the party

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<sup>10</sup> The initial, unanimous support of the organisation for *Solidarność* gave way, after the imposition of martial law, to divisions along several lines, including those of ideology and geography (the Willy Brandt-led Social Democratic Party of West Germany, for example, was markedly cooler than sister parties elsewhere in Europe). For the initial position see the "Irish Times", 17 November 1980, and for the post-martial law split see the "Irish Independent", 30 December 1981.

<sup>11</sup> "Irish Socialist", no 212, September 1980, pp. 1, 2; no 213, October 1980, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, no 216, January 1980, p. 6.

began describing Solidarność activists as ‘reactionary extremists,’<sup>13</sup> and, in the aftermath of the declaration of martial law (which it welcomed as ‘the first step in the process of re-building socialism in Poland’), ‘a populist movement headed by a ragbag of religious, ultra-nationalist right-wing and Trotskyite elements.’<sup>14</sup> In short the party faithfully echoed the standard criticisms of Solidarność heard throughout the Soviet bloc, and, in so doing, proved itself utterly incapable of responding to the disparate – one might say insurmountable – theoretical and practical challenges posed to conventional communist thinking and praxis by the newly organised and energised workers of Poland.

The other hard left groups in Ireland fared little better in their response. Indeed, the fact that they were not obliged to follow any particular externally-imposed line served not to give their views greater credibility, but only deepened the analytical shoals in which they were destined to flounder.<sup>15</sup> In their obsession with combating what they saw as the threat to the socialist cause posed by the Roman Catholic church both domestically and internationally, such groups made two critical mistakes. They found it conceptually impossible to accept both that that same Church, led by a Polish Pope, had become one of the principal vehicles for the defence of human, and worker, rights in Poland; and also that Solidarność was *not* simply a vehicle for church teaching, or a stalking horse for episcopal influence, in that country. Noel Browne (a veteran left-wing political maverick, at this stage in the Socialist Labour party phase of his political peregrinations) exemplified the dilemma. Having first encouraged Irish workers to take heart from, and emulate their Polish counterparts, who had shown, in his words, ‘their contempt for, and independence of, their one-party regime, with its kept, quiescent Corporate State union bureaucracy’,<sup>16</sup> he arrived at the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, no 224, September 1981, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 228, January 1982, p. 6. See also “Unity”, vol. 20, no. 248, Saturday, 19 December 1981. See the letter of Michael O’Riordan, General Secretary of the party, to the “Irish Times”, 18 December 1981, which said that the Polish army had been forced to intervene as Solidarność planned a coup d’état. Rather confusingly he compared the situation in Poland at that time to ‘Franco’s war in 1936, to the Finnish war in 1939, and to events in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968’, and to Northern Ireland in 1974, ‘when true, tested and genuine trade unionists had no hesitation in breaking through the intimidatory paramilitary-backed picket line.’ The fact that the paramilitaries on this occasion were members of the Polish security forces seems to have escaped the author.

<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly the “Irish Independent” was particularly keen to emphasise the quandary in which the Irish left found itself over Poland. Desmond Rushe, in his last ‘Tatler’s paradise’ column of 29 December 1981 noted a lack of the ‘same sense of outrage at the savage repression in Poland’ as was expressed by left-wingers at similar situations elsewhere in the world.

<sup>16</sup> “Irish Times”, 27 September 1980. See the response from Noel Fanning of Glenageary, 7 October 1980, which concluded that the logic of Brown’s words was that Poland represented the ‘socialist country [that] comes nearest to the society which the Socialist Labour Party aims at,’ and that much of the credit for this state of affairs should be given to the Roman Catholic church in the country, and Pope John Paul II.

novel conclusion, after the imposition of martial law, that *Solidarność*, in conjunction with the Polish hierarchy ('that most reactionary sector of the reactionary Roman Catholic Church'), was seeking to re-establish the 'pre-war Poland of class-privileged landed aristocrats, where the mass of the Polish poor were paupers.'<sup>17</sup>

People's Democracy, at this time in its long dawn-out death throes, followed a different trajectory. Its initial reaction was to welcome *Solidarność* as 'a highly progressive phenomenon', which was not amenable to either conventional western or Soviet schematas.<sup>18</sup> Its defining feature was seen as its threat 'to the bureaucrats' monopoly of power' in Poland,<sup>19</sup> and the same line was repeated in the columns of the organisation's publication "Socialist Republic" throughout 1981.<sup>20</sup> At different times its members either stressed what they believed (hoped?) to be the growing independence of the movement from Church influence,<sup>21</sup> or simply ignored the role of the latter altogether.

Following the imposition of martial law, Sinn Féin The Workers' Party, too, stressed the malign role of the PUWP, especially following the declaration of martial law, and its 'fundamental structural, political and moral inability to respond in any meaningful sense as the "leading force" in Polish society' – which had obligated the army the step in.<sup>22</sup> The same analysis mocked the response of the 'devoutly pro-Moscow left' (that is, the CPI) to the rise of *Solidarność*, on the basis that its invoking of the imperialist bogey as an explanation for the changes witnessed in Poland 'presumes to set limits to the consciousness of the vast bulk of ordinary working members of society.' At the same time it displayed its own willingness to insult that same collective intelligence in suggesting that in acting as it had on December 13 1981 the military regime sincerely sought 'to maintain the momentum for greater democracy and accountability at all levels of Polish society.'<sup>23</sup>

A sustained (but singularly unpersuasive) critique of the Polish situation from a Trotskyite position came from the microscopic Irish Workers Group. Its analy-

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 29 December 1981. This frankly nonsensical letter received a measured (perhaps overly-polite) response, from a left-wing position, from Brian Girvin in the same paper on 7 January 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Joan Brady, National Secretary, "Irish Press", 26 August 1980

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Vincent Doherty, People's Democracy, *ibidem*, 19 November 1981.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the article 'Polish rulers prepare showdown', "Socialist Republic", vol. 4, no 9, November 1981, which suggested the threat posed by *Solidarność* to 'the bureaucrat's monopoly of power' was the key dynamic in the situation. John Thorne, the editor of "Militant Irish Monthly" peddled the same line at the time of the Gdańsk strikes, in a letter to the "Irish Times" 27 August 1980.

<sup>21</sup> The analysis proffered in "Socialist Republic", vol. 4, no 1, January 1981.

<sup>22</sup> "Workers Life", vol. 2, no 10, February 1982.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*. See also part one of this article, footnote 6, for the expressed preference of one member of the party for a military dictatorship over a religiously-influenced polity.

sis of the evolving struggle was torn between wish-fulfilment (that the Polish workers would ultimately behave in the manner prescribed by ideology – that is, under the guidance of ‘a revolutionary vanguard party armed with the Trotskyist programme of general strike and armed insurrection’) and disillusionment (as the journals’ contributors realised this was not going to happen). The following excerpt from its journal “Class Struggle”, written in late 1981, gives a flavour of the founding coterie’s analysis. The principal thesis was that the opportunity presented by the ‘massive anger’ of Solidarność’s rank and file was being ‘frittered away’ by the avoidance of ‘an indefinite general strike and armed insurrection against the Stalinist parasites and the Russian invasion this would inevitably provoke.’ It believed this decay was happening both inevitably, and deliberately, as a result of Solidarność’s federal, regional structure, and the malign influence of reformist or reactionary agents and forces such as Wałęsa and the KOR, the Catholic church, and/or Polish nationalism. Its prescribed alternative, however – which amounted simply to a regurgitation of Trotskyite panaceas, with little or no account taken of local conditions – betokened no meaningful engagement with the situation as it actually existed in Poland.<sup>24</sup>

### Trade unions<sup>25</sup>

The rank and file membership of the trade union movement in Ireland could not help but be struck by the sight of workers in Poland seeking, in the first instance, the very right to organise an independent trade union. For a variety of reasons, however, this sympathy was not always manifest in the upper echelons of the hierarchy of the movement. In a handful of cases, indeed, there was naked hostility manifested towards the Solidarność movement from some senior Irish trade unionists – almost all of whom, it should be noted, were drawn from the ranks of the hard left.<sup>26</sup> When compared, however, to the major splits within the British TUC on the issue, and bearing in mind the intense criticism of the frequent strikes undertaken by Irish unions at this time of economic recession, what is most striking about the response from the Irish labour movement is the

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<sup>24</sup> “Class Struggle”, nos 8 & 9, May–October 1981. A somewhat similar critique appeared in “An Camchéachta/The Starry Plough”, vehicle of the Irish Republican Socialist Party, in its February 1982 number.

<sup>25</sup> I wish to thank Peter Rigney of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions for supplying much of the information contained within this section.

<sup>26</sup> Such hostility was not unique to the Ireland, of course, and similar tendencies were manifest in the labour movements in other European countries. For a survey of the responses in various states in western states see Goddeeris, *Solidarity with Solidarity: western European trade unions and the Polish crisis 1980–82*.

note of sympathy manifested towards Poland at all times, and not just (as was the case with other sectors of Irish life) after the imposition of martial law.<sup>27</sup>

A telling straw in the Polish wind emerged even before the Gdańsk accords had been signed (before, indeed, serious negotiations on same had even begun), with the publication of an interview with Noel Harris, the Irish-born former National Secretary of the Irish branch of the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs and then head of the Economic and Social Department of the Communist-oriented World Federation of Trades Unions. In addition to giving a generally positive view of life behind the Iron Curtain (which, he argued, offered a quality of life superior to that of inner-city Dublin at that time), he defended the role and record of the official trade unions in Poland, and argued that their integration into the economic decision-making process there conveyed the misleading impression to the western media that they were not free or independent. Within the week several rank and file members of various trade unions responded, criticising the official unions in Poland, and arguing (none too convincingly as it turned out) that what the striking workers there sought was consistent with Lenin's ideas about elected representatives, and the right to strike, before concluding an impassioned plea that 'Trade unionists [in Ireland] should support their fellow workers in Poland.'<sup>28</sup> Mr Harris was interviewed in the press again, three months later, this time arguing that Irish unions, by dint of being parties to national wage agreements, were thereby as neutered in their ability to represent their members' interests as the official unions in Poland – a stance that one might most charitably describe as difficult to reconcile with his initial position.<sup>29</sup>

From the very earliest days the general thrust of mainstream trade unionism was overtly sympathetic to the emergence of Solidarność. To take but one example, even before the formal decision was taken to establish the union in Poland in the middle of September 1980, Galway Trades Council had contacted the Polish embassy to Ireland to demand the release of such members of KOR as were still detained.<sup>30</sup> Once the union had found its feet the most tangible manifestation of its links to Ireland came in the form of reciprocal exchange visits with Irish

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<sup>27</sup> For a hostile analysis of the response of the British unions to the emergence of Solidarność, and their continuing links with the official trade union movement in Poland, see the editorial 'Abuse of freedom' in the "Southern Star" 11 October 1980. The article also illustrates the schizophrenic attitude of some sections of the Irish media, with a friendly disposition towards Solidarność cheek by jowl with overt hostility to Irish unions. With editorial tongue set firmly in cheek, but with the most bitter of ironies bearing in mind subsequent developments in Poland, the leader writer pondered the merits of deploying the army to combat the menace of industrial unrest in Ireland.

<sup>28</sup> For the initial interview with Harris see the "Irish Times", 21 August 1980. For the response see the "Irish Times", 27 August 1980. The four signatories were, by the same token, hostile to a right-wing critique of developments in Poland.

<sup>29</sup> "Irish Press", 24 November 1980.

<sup>30</sup> "Connacht Tribune", 5 September 1980.



union personnel. The first, in October 1980, involved Edmund Baluka, the chair of the Szczecin strike committee in 1970, who was invited to speak at Liberty Hall in Dublin and University College Dublin – although, embarrassingly, his interpreter on the latter occasion (a member of the Polish-Irish Trade Committee resident in Dublin) refused to translate his remarks on the basis that she disagreed with his views.<sup>31</sup> In January of the following year came news of an official visit to Poland by a delegation from the ITGWU, headed by its secretary Michael Mullen, during which time, in trips to Warsaw and Gdańsk they met with and were immensely impressed by, amongst others Wałęsa and Zbigniew Bujak.<sup>32</sup> In the following July Janusz Onyszkiewicz, a member of *Solidarność*'s Praesidium, returned the favour when he addressed the annual conference of the Irish Congress of Trades Union in Cork. His speech, which received a standing ovation, emphasised *Solidarność*'s success in engineering the release of political prisoners in Poland and its commitment to the achievement of human, as well as union, rights.<sup>33</sup> It seems that the occasion persuaded *Solidarność* that it had as much to learn from Ireland as Ireland had to learn from it, for plans were put in place to send a larger (6 strong) delegation from Poland on a study trip to Ireland to see what it could learn from its union structures. The Irish point of contact for this venture was Matt Merrigan, National Secretary of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union, who in December 1981 issued a general appeal for funds to underwrite the cost of the trip as well as volunteers willing to accommodate the visitors. Inevitably the visit was cancelled following the declaration of martial law.<sup>34</sup>

The trade union movement in Ireland came out strongly against the imposition of martial law in Poland, both in its immediate aftermath, and for months afterwards. It was party to the statement made days after the crackdown by the European Trade Union Confederation, which called for the restoration of free trade unions in Poland and for additional supplies of food aid to the country, and to a similar, slightly more detailed, statement by ETUC on 30 January 1982, to

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<sup>31</sup> "Irish Press", 25 October 1980.

<sup>32</sup> For a recollection of the trip from the perspective of one member of the delegation see the letter from PC Mooney "Irish Times", 29 December 1981, who demanded that Irish workers raise their voices against the oppression of their Polish counterparts.

<sup>33</sup> "Irish Press", 10 July 1981.

<sup>34</sup> See the "Irish Press", 1 December 1981, for his call for assistance, and the same paper on 30 December for the cancellation of the trip. Merrigan had been in this area, as in many others, one of the most high profile of the union activists, having highlighted back in September 1980 what he saw as the hypocrisy of those who criticised Irish unions for engaging in the same type of industrial action that was being positively lauded when undertaken by Polish workers. "Hibernia", 11 September 1980. (For a critical response to Merrigan's use of language see the letter from M. McCullough, Terenure, Dublin to the "Irish Press", 15 September 1980.) He sustained his commitment to the end of the period in question, being one of the organisers of a demonstration against martial law outside the GPO in Dublin on 19 December 1981.

mark the Day of International Trade Union Support for Solidarność.<sup>35</sup> This support continued well into 1982 with the focal point a set-piece debate at ICTU's annual delegate conference in Belfast. Here several speakers spoke out in favour of composite motion 17 which, amongst other things, called for the abolition of martial law, the release of imprisoned trade union activists, the re-establishment of trade union rights, and on ICTU's Executive Council 'to consider practical ways by which affiliated trade unions can assist Solidarność.'<sup>36</sup> Two issues dominated the discussion: first, the moral obligation on all trade unionists to support Solidarność in its hour of greatest need (a position most forcefully put by Carol Coulter of the National Union of Journalists); and, second, a sense of unease lest that in condemning the crackdown in Poland Congress would find itself in bed with (in the words of a delegate from Ballymena) 'the Thatchers and the Regans in the West.' This unease was reflected in the wording both of this motion (which condemned 'the hypocrisy of those who loudly proclaim support for trade union rights in Poland while encouraging or condoning the repression of trade unionists in their own country and elsewhere'), and that of a second (passed without further discussion), which condemned 'in the strongest possible terms the imposition of martial law in Poland on the one hand and the US support for the repressive régime in El Salvador on the other.'<sup>37</sup>

This tendency on the part of the union movement in Ireland to conjoin its criticisms regarding repression in Poland with criticisms of western governments for their support of repressive régimes elsewhere did not go down well with some. In a manner consistent with its tradition of open hostility to organised labour, the "Irish Independent" group, in particular, sought to use Poland as a stick with which to beat the unions. In its first editorial on developments in the country following the signing of the Gdańsk agreement, for example, the paper observed that it was 'interesting to contrast the modest demands of the Polish workers with the excess power, even licence, of some western unions, and their demands for media attention'.<sup>38</sup> (One can only assume that the leader writer had skimmed over the reference within the Gdańsk agreement to the provision for free access to the media). The issue of South Africa repeatedly came up in such discussions. Thus, a letter from a UCD student that appeared some months later in the "Sunday Independent" took the Union of Students of Ireland, and the ICTU, to task by contrasting their public condemnations of apartheid while remaining, in the correspondent's view, purposefully quiescent on Poland. In

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<sup>35</sup> For the full texts of the two statements see Irish Congress of Trade Unions, *Twenty fourth annual report, 1982*, Dublin 1982, pp. 252–253.

<sup>36</sup> See the appendix for the motion in full.

<sup>37</sup> Irish Congress of Trade Unions, *Report of proceedings at annual delegate conference Belfast 1982*, Dublin 1982, pp. 203–209, *passim*.

<sup>38</sup> "Irish Independent", 4 October 1980. A similar sentiment was recorded in the "Southern Star" in its issue a week later.

the meantime, and on the same theme, the “Sunday Independent’s” columnist Des Hickey had on two occasions counterpointed the unions’ public criticism of the government based in Pretoria with its failure to be equally vocal on the behaviour of the authorities in Warsaw.<sup>39</sup>

### The Catholic church

Given the manifest support accorded by the Roman Catholic church in Poland to the strikers in Gdańsk, and elsewhere, it is no surprise that its course and outcome was closely followed by the Catholic community in Ireland.<sup>40</sup> The images of enormous numbers of strikers, young and old, devoutly kneeling at prayer while at mass, or attending outdoor confessions within the shipyard, was, of course, bound to appeal to Catholic sentiment,<sup>41</sup> and, arguably, it was this aspect of the emergence of Solidarność that stimulated the most interest in the country. Irish Catholicism had, of course, received a huge fillip with the visit of Pope John Paul II the year before, and the clear backing given by the enormously popular Polish Pope to this new movement, so self-consciously faithful to Catholic social doctrine, inevitably enhanced its standing in the eyes of the Irish faithful (and, of course, for the same reason raised the hackles of those hostile to the Church’s influence).

At all points over the course of the following sixteen months the role of the church in the evolving Polish situation was given particular attention in Ireland. Episodes which attracted particular attention were the appeal for calm issued by Cardinal Wyszyński, Primate of Poland, at the time of heightened fear of a Russian intervention in December 1980;<sup>42</sup> the death of Wyszyński and the attempted

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<sup>39</sup> “Sunday Independent”, 11 January 1981, 8 February 1981.

<sup>40</sup> For the similarities of the church in both countries, from a hostile viewpoint, see: C. Barker, *Festival of the oppressed*, London 1986, p. 60. See also above, footnote 5. For commentary on the Gdańsk strikes from one provincial paper see the Waterford-based “Munster Express”, 29 August 1980, which praised the ‘remarkable people’ of Poland, who, in the face of ‘murderous onslaughts ... maintained their religion and love of freedom.’ The implicit comparison with Ireland was striking.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, the front page coverage given to the strike in the “Irish Catholic”, 4 September 1980, with an accompanying photograph captioned ‘Polish strikers at prayer.’ The editorial in the same number, ‘What now in Poland?’, is interesting precisely because it did *not* refer to the Catholic dimension to the strike. It correctly predicted that the Communist authorities would seek to slow down the implementation of the Gdańsk and other agreements. The issue of trust was raised in another editorial on the 25<sup>th</sup> of the same month, which did, however, welcome, as agreed, the introduction of broadcasting of Sunday mass. On the same topic see the letter to the “Irish Independent” on 26 September 1980 from an Irish emigrant to Birmingham in England in which the same broadcast was seen as concrete evidence of the extent of the workers’ victory.

<sup>42</sup> “Anglo-Celt”, 5 September 1980.

assassination of Pope John Paul II, which happened within a fortnight of each other in May 1981;<sup>43</sup> and the publication of *Laborem Exercens*, the social encyclical penned by Pope John Paul II and published in September of the same year, which many commentators, in Ireland and abroad, interpreted as being strongly influenced by the struggles of *Solidarność* at that moment.<sup>44</sup>

The most obvious manifestation of the sympathy of Catholics in Ireland with the travails of Poland at this time came after the imposition of martial law. Over the following weeks prayers were said in many dioceses in the cause of peace and justice, with the Conference of Major Religious Superiors directing their 125,000-plus membership to devote at least one hour of prayer over the Christmas period to the cause of Poland.<sup>45</sup> Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, in his Christmas homily, paid tribute to the ‘valiant people of Poland who have always given the world an example in courage and fortitude for free expression,’<sup>46</sup> with the bishops of Kilmore and Kerry also publicly calling for prayerful support for the Polish people. The formidable fund-raising abilities of the Church were soon in evidence, with half a million punts raised in an impromptu collection, sanctioned by Archbishop Ryan, at Sunday mass in the Dublin diocese alone, and this was reinforced with donations from other dioceses at this time, as well as from other church organisations such as Aid to the Church in Need, and religious groups such as the Christian Community Centre (see below).<sup>47</sup>

In fine, in this as in other, neglected, ways, the international reach of the Roman Catholic church helped to give Irish Catholics a cosmopolitan perspective on a major development in European politics.

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<sup>43</sup> The “Irish Catholic”, in its editorial the week after Wyszynski’s death (4 June 1981), paid fulsome tribute to his long career at the head of the Polish church, and paid particular tribute to his sense both of prudence and courage. In its words, with which few could argue, Wyszynski ‘more than any other of his countrymen personified both the Catholic and the national conscience of his country’

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, the analysis by T.P. O’Mahony in the “Irish Press”, 16 September 1981 and Dr Finola Kennedy of UCD in the “Irish Times”, 22 October 1981. Also in the “Anglo-Celt” 18 September 1981.

<sup>45</sup> “Irish Independent”, 23 December 1981. Fr Paul Byrne, Secretary General of the Conference, was quoted: ‘Let us ask God through his Mother, the Madonna of Czestochowa, to relieve their suffering, to give them peace and the freedom to live as a people within dignity.’

<sup>46</sup> Likewise, his Church of Ireland counterpart, Archbishop Armstrong, referred to Poland as ‘tormented by a Godless opposition, hunger, and a denial of human rights.’ “Irish Times”, 25 December 1981.

<sup>47</sup> For the collection see “Irish Times”, 23 January 1982. For an appeal to assist Aid to the Church in Need see a letter from a Polish émigré in Ireland, “Irish Independent”, 15 December 1981.

### The Irish Polish Society<sup>48</sup>

The Irish Polish Society came into existence in the early months of 1979, as part of the preparations for the visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland later that year.<sup>49</sup> It was formed in the main from the small number of Poles in Ireland at that time (who numbered about 350, including Irish spouses, children etc.). A branch was briefly active in Cork, but given the concentration of the Polish community in the capital, not surprisingly its main focus was Dublin. During the period from the Gdańsk strike through to the imposition of martial law it had maintained itself in existence, albeit with a low profile, periodically organising cultural events with a Polish flavour and acting as a source of information for Irish media hungry for updates on the current state of affairs in the country.<sup>50</sup> Once the full scale of the food shortages in the nation became apparent in the Summer of 1981, it also began the task of helping to organise the despatch of food, clothing and medical supplies from Ireland.<sup>51</sup>

After the imposition of martial law, this humanitarian role became for a while the Society's dominant function, and one which it performed most successfully. The principal method of raising funds was the holding of a series of charity events in 1982, the proceeds of which went to the Polish Relief Fund established by the Society. Thus an all-priests show was held in the Olympia theatre in Dublin in early February, a 'variety' show (including Conor Cruise O'Brien as a guest turn) was organised in Blanchardstown and a Chopin recital by Micheál Ó Rourke in the National Concert Hall the following month, and a performance of the 'Pirates of the Penzance', also in the Olympia theatre, together with a sale of work by prominent Irish artists in St James' hospital, occurred in May. The Society's Relief Fund also benefitted from some of the royalties derived from the staging of a play in the Abbey theatre in September, by Fr Desmond Forristal, on the subject of the life of Fr Maximilian Kolbe.<sup>52</sup> Diverse other activities included a sponsored walk in the Dublin mountains, participation in the Dublin half-marathon, and the sale of domestically-produced items with the distinctive

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<sup>48</sup> I am grateful to the following members of the Irish Polish Society for their help in the preparation of this section of the paper: Dr Janina Lyons, Professor Maciej Smolenski, Martin Reynolds, Sebastian Widel, Hannah Dowling, Pat Quigley, and Kristof Kiedrowski

<sup>49</sup> A society by the same name, and with similar aspirations, had been founded in the 1930s, but had foundered with the outbreak of the Second World War. For details of the inaugural meeting, and its patrons, see "Irish Times", 10 May 1934.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, the appearance of Dr Janina Lyons, a prominent activist with the IPS, on the front page of the "Irish Press", 26 August 1981, and her view of the many problems facing the country on the inside pages.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, a letter from the then President of the Society, Maciej Smolenski, appealing for donations from Ireland, which appeared in the "Irish Independent", 3 December 1981.

<sup>52</sup> The sum involved amounted to IR£5,000, "Irish Independent", 4 April 1983. Fr Forristal also wrote a book on the same subject: *Kolbe: a saint in Auschwitz*, New Jersey 1983.

‘Solidarność’ logo, such as badges and car-stickers. The Society had a particularly close relationship with a number of Catholic priests, who facilitated its work in a variety of ways.

The food, clothing and medical supplies purchased with the funds from these various undertakings, and from donations from the public, were collected and stored in the Servite priory in Terenure. From there they were sent in containers to Szczecin, with charges on the cargo being waived by the Dublin port authorities. On arrival in Poland the relief was distributed throughout the country by the charitable commission of the Polish episcopacy, with Fr (later Monsignor) Ireneusz Antkowiak (who subsequently came to Ireland as a guest of the IPS) acting as the point of contact. At least one item of contraband material (a printing press for underground Solidarność activists) was included in the shipments, but this was detected and impounded by Polish authorities. Reports that came through around Easter 1982, to the effect that other sources of aid (from the Irish Red Cross, for example) were being diverted from their intended beneficiaries to the Polish security services, were found, on personal enquiry by a leading member of the Society, to be untrue, at least in the case of the IPS’s shipments. All told 20 containers were despatched by the Society from Ireland to Poland in the early 1980s – a most noteworthy achievement given the political, financial and logistical obstacles to be overcome.

The society was, of course, more than simply a vehicle for the despatch of aid to Poland, and it played a vital role in educating the Irish public about conditions in that country. This could lead it into difficult territory as, for example, when its President, Maciej Smolenski, a Professor in the Royal Irish Academy of Music, publicly criticised the Irish government, its political opponents, and the Irish Catholic church, for their failure (as he saw it) to condemn forthrightly the military take-over in Poland – a failing he attributed, in the government’s case, to its fear of a Russian response.<sup>53</sup> He was particularly critical of what he saw as the failure of Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, the Primate of Ireland, to adopt a more forceful position given the common Catholic heritage of both countries.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, he also condemned the statement issued by the Union of Students

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<sup>53</sup> See the report on his address to a special mass for Poland, held in the Pro-Cathedral in Dublin in the “Irish Press”, 28 December 1981. The full version of his speech on this occasion included the following words: ‘And what are the democratic governments in the West doing in the light of these dangerous and tragic events in Poland? Have they broken off diplomatic relations, withdrawn economic aid? Have they protested vigorously in a positive manner, or called off the Geneva peace Conference? Not at all! We Poles are saddened that the Irish authorities and the Catholic church – in this very religious country – cannot publicly condemn the present situation in Poland.’

<sup>54</sup> “Irish Times”, 24 December 1981. See also his letter of 31 December 1981 to the same newspaper (also published in the “Irish Independent” the previous day), wherein he asked plaintively: ‘How many more such blatant suppressions of basic human rights have to occur before politicians and public figures express “official” disapproval?’

in Ireland immediately after the imposition of martial law which, ingenuously, sought to lay some of the blame for the damage caused thereby at the door of the Catholic church in Poland, by pointing out that the armed resistance envisioned by Irish student armchair warriors would both produce a domestic bloodbath, and increase the likelihood of a Russian invasion.

Other consciousness-raising activities undertaken by the society included demonstrations outside the Russian embassy in Dublin (notably on New Year's Day 1982), the sponsoring of commemorative masses, participation in public debates,<sup>55</sup> the lobbying of local government representatives,<sup>56</sup> and briefings on conditions in Poland given to the Department of Foreign Affairs and elected politicians.<sup>57</sup> All told it was a remarkable record of achievement by a body of activists that never exceeded more than a few dozen at most.

### Other NGOs and the Irish public

In addition to the government, opposition political parties, trades unions, Catholic church and the Irish Polish Society, a small number of other organisations, either based in Ireland, or with Irish connections, had varying degrees of engagement with Poland and/or *Solidarność* during the period under review, of which two – the Christian Community Centre (CCC) in Dublin, and the Irish Red Cross – were the most significant for their efforts to send relief to the country.

The CCC was a small grouping, most readily identified in the public mind with its director, an energetic, pious Dublin solicitor TCG O'Mahony. As with many organisations its interest in Polish affairs was heightened by the imposition of martial law, although it had a proven track record on the matter having, for example, previously been involved in the organisation of annual mass to commemorate the victims of the Katyn massacre.<sup>58</sup> It proved itself to be a highly

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<sup>55</sup> Including, for example, the involvement of Professor Smolenski in a session of the UCD Debating Society in February 1982.

<sup>56</sup> Note, for example, the minute's silence in protest at the imposition of martial law at a meeting of Dublin corporation in early January 1982. Seán Lyons, an independent councillor on the corporation, was the husband of Dr Janina Lyons

<sup>57</sup> Oliver Flanagan, then a representative on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, was particularly vocal on behalf of the Society, and lobbied James Dooge, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, on the subject. "Irish Times", 30 December 1981. See the 'Government' section in part one of this article for a discussion on the issue of the possibility of accepting Polish refugees into the country, a subject which the IPS discussed in a meeting with Dooge in January 1982.

<sup>58</sup> "Irish Press", 28 September 1981. Prayers were offered at this mass in support of *Solidarność*, and O'Mahony spoke during it of the Christian inspiration Poland provided for Ireland and elsewhere. The "Irish Catholic", for its part, unique amongst the press in Ireland, referred to the gathering of two thousand Poles in Warsaw's Powązki cemetery to mark the fortieth anniversary of the atrocity. 16 April 1981.

effective vehicle for the raising of funds for the relief of distress in Poland, starting in August of 1980, and continuing throughout the martial law period.<sup>59</sup> The aid came in the form of both personal and corporate donations to the Centre, with a number of firms involved in the food, drink and retail sectors (such as Cadburys, Avonmore, and Superquinn) making contributions in kind. The first container (containing 14 tonnes, of food) was sent only two weeks after the appeal commenced, and a second (weighing another 16 tonnes) was despatched in September.<sup>60</sup> A third, due to sail on the very day martial law was imposed, was delayed both by the news from Poland and the Irish weather, but eventually sailed from Dublin to Szczecin a week later.

The Irish Red Cross became actively involved in the Polish situation at a late stage, following the events of 13 December 1981, but it responded in prompt fashion, launching an appeal for donations that yielded an immediate response.<sup>61</sup> Within a week of the call going out, a shipment of relief left Dublin bound for Poland, with food packs for 50,000 Old Age Pensioners, 20,000 children, and 60,000 babies.<sup>62</sup> Further shipments followed in 1982.

It should be noted that this humanitarian relief effort (and the much larger consignments of food sent by the EEC) was by no means universally popular, and there were those who suggested that the despatch of such aid perversely served either to reward the new Polish junta for their crackdown, or at least served to relieve the popular discontent with the regime, driven by food and other shortages, that had become acute by the Summer of 1981. Two examples will be cited. The first was a letter to the "Irish Times" from a John Lavin of Glencormac, county Wicklow, which appeared on 23 December 1981. In it he counselled against the despatch of aid because 'Every crumb of food, every aspirin sent to Poland would be used to consolidate the tyranny by representing the General [Jaruzelski] as a providential provider.' He furthermore queried the relative quietude (as he called it, the 'deafening silence') of liberal voices in Ireland in protest at what had occurred in Poland, suggesting that such silence was the result either of 'fear or approval'. Perhaps a more worrying note of caution was that sounded by Seán Flanagan, former Fianna Fáil Minister for Health and then MEP for Connacht-Ulster, who claimed in the "Irish Independent" on 22 December, that as a consequence of faulty supervision both that entire shipments of

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<sup>59</sup> O'Mahony's activities in this regard briefly landed him in legal trouble, when he appeared before Dublin District Court in November 1981 on a charge of collecting for charity without a licence the previous August, and obstructing O'Connell street in so doing. He was fined £2 on the main charge, and £10 for obstruction. "Irish Independent", 4 November 1981.

<sup>60</sup> "Irish Press", 17 August 1981, "Sunday Independent", 13 September 1981.

<sup>61</sup> For the initial appeal see the "Irish Times", 18 December 1981. For the thanks accorded to the generous response in Kerry see "The Kerryman", 25 December 1981. A second call was made immediately after Christmas, "Sunday Independent", 27 December 1981.

<sup>62</sup> "Irish Times", 24 December 1981.



EEC food aid to Poland had ‘actually disappeared,’ and that only ‘a very small percentage’ of the supplies that had got through had made its way to the needy in the country. The paper editorialised on the same day that as a result of such concerns, only ‘reliable international organisations’, such as the Catholic church or the Red Cross, should be used to channel supplies. It is impossible to know to what extent such words of caution may have discouraged some potential donors in Ireland; judging by the generosity of the public response, it seems the effect was minimal.

Some concluding words are needed regarding the work of other NGOs. Again, in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of martial law, a left-wing grouping briefly emerged, calling itself the Irish-Polish Solidarity committee, and consisting in the main of a small number of trade unionists, journalists, academics and political activists such as Michael Farrell, Declan Kiberd and Eamonn McCann.<sup>63</sup> With limited resources it could do little of its own accord, save for organising small protest marches and speaking engagements for exiled *Solidarność* leaders,<sup>64</sup> and lobbying, with varying degrees of success, Labour party and other left-wing TDs into expressions of support for the suppressed union.<sup>65</sup> Irish members of Amnesty International also had a walk-on part in the response to the Polish drama, with a suggestion that Seán MacBride intended to travel to the country to assess the extent to which human rights norms were being observed, and with Fr Breffni Walker invited to be one of the speakers at an Irish-Polish Solidarity campaign meeting.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, what of the Irish public and its attitude to Poland and to *Solidarność* at this time? It is, of course, impossible to state with any accuracy what the general state of opinion on the subject was, although the enthusiastic diverse responses detailed above serves as a fair proxy. Three straws in the wind may, however, give some indication as to the Irish public’s view on the matter. The first was a letter from an ordinary member of the public, who wrote directly to Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald in September 1981 asking that the latter appeal directly to the Irish nation for donations of money and non-perishable foodstuffs to be sent to Poland, on the basis that ‘most people who could, would respond generously’ to a call ‘to help the Polish people, ‘who seem to be almost starv-

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<sup>63</sup> See report of the inaugural meeting in TCD, “Irish Press”, 17 December 1981.

<sup>64</sup> See the notice of an event at Liberty Hall 24 March 1982 in the “Irish Times”, 20 March 1982, at which, amongst others, was scheduled to speak Wojciech Kowalewski, a member of *Solidarność*’s National Praesidium, who was out of the country when martial law was imposed.

<sup>65</sup> See the letter from Alex White, correspondence secretary for the group, to the “Irish Times”, 12 June 1982, carrying the names of TDs who had, and had not signed up to a statement of support for *Solidarność*. The Labour party TDs and Jim Kemmy expressed their support; the Workers Party TDs and Tony Gregory did not. See the ‘Left wing politics’ section above.

<sup>66</sup> For MacBride see “Irish Times”, 24 December 1981, and for Walker see the reference in footnote 41.

ing at the moment'.<sup>67</sup> The second was a barely noticeable expression of thanks, discreetly tucked away in the daily 'Acknowledgements' section of the "Irish Times" in September 1981. This came from a rank and file member of Killeshandra Co-operative Agricultural and Dairy Society, and was addressed to a highly diverse range of individuals and organisations from all across the country, which had responded to his personal call for food aid to Poland.<sup>68</sup> Such spontaneous generosity of time and money to a call from a private individual surely speaks of a widespread benevolence towards the intended recipients – as does the two following pieces of poetry, from two other private individuals, which appeared in the press at this time. In view of the tradition of lyrical nationalism common to the two countries, what the verses may lack in quality, they surely make up for in their evocation of a shared emotional-patriotic patrimony.

**'For Poland'**<sup>69</sup>

May the white flower of your courage  
Ever blossom and unfold  
In the soil where your unsung heroes  
Lie shrouded in Autumn gold.  
May God steer your ship to harbour  
Through the Night of oppression, far  
Into the sunrise of Freedom,  
May Peace light your way, like a star.

**'Poland's manhood'**<sup>70</sup>

While there is life, while there is love  
Beneath an everlasting sky  
While there's a God who rules above  
Then Poland's manhood must not die.  
While there is life, while there is grace  
Down through the years from days long gone  
Whatever dangers Poles may face  
Then Poland's manhood shall live on.

## Culture

It would be misleading to suggest that the emergence of *Solidarność*, and the travails of Poland during this time, elicited a universal response from Ireland's artistic community. Only one Irish visual artist produced a substantial work on the area, only two Irish plays looked to developments in that country for their subject matter, and no significant Irish author seems to have used Polish events as inspiration for their work.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> See correspondence contained on file 'Irish-Polish relations 1979–1981', DFA 2011-39-1747.

<sup>68</sup> The list included inter alia six other agricultural co-operatives, eight food companies and three transport companies.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from Maureen McGourty, Dublin 7, "Sunday Independent", 14 September 1981.

<sup>70</sup> P. Gallagher, *Waterford*, "Munster Express", 26 December 1980.

<sup>71</sup> In an article for the first number of the arts magazine "Circa" (November/December 1981), pp. 16–17, the poet and critic Tom Paulin suggested that the cultural as well as political ferment generated by *Solidarność* made Poland a welcome inspiration for Irish authors. The parallel was furthered by the fascination of Polish authors with modern Irish literature, which authors saw the British-Irish relationship as paralleling the Soviet-Polish one. In a manner at the same time both wistful and tongue in cheek, he suggested such respect and influence meant that Irish authors 'had a strange, translated, other existence as co-opted members of *Solidarność*.' Two more articles

There were, however, exceptions. The most obvious came from the small community of cinema enthusiasts in the country, who responded to several Polish-themed films at this time with genuine admiration. The particular object of their esteem was Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Iron*, which was awarded the Palme D'Or at the Cannes film festival in May 1981. The film received universal critical acclaim in Ireland, with the topicality of its subject matter as much a matter for comment as its artistic qualities.<sup>72</sup> Wajda's earlier film *Man of Marble*, to which *Man of Iron* was the sequel, was resurrected for a brief run at the Irish Film Institute in November 1981, and the director was the subject of an in-depth interview with Judy Dempsey in the "Irish Times" shortly before the festival.<sup>73</sup> Two other contemporary Polish-themed films also drew attention in Ireland at this time: *Robotnik 80*, the documentary of the Gdańsk negotiations, and a biopic of Pope John Paul II *From a far country*, which drew praise from the "Sunday Independent" for its 'quality of involvement' and for having turned 'social realism against the social realists.'<sup>74</sup>

The dynamic nature (and extensive public funding) of Polish theatre in the brief period when official and self-imposed censorship was relaxed drew admiring comments from Irish playwrights and theatre administrators and critics.<sup>75</sup> Only two Irish plays, however, appeared at this time – or, more accurately,

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appeared shortly after in the same magazine, reviewing in turn for an Irish audience the role of the artist in Polish society (January–February 1982, pp. 7–10), and the impact the imposition of martial law had had upon the arts in the country (March–April 1983, pp. 9–11).

<sup>72</sup> Some examples are the review in the "Irish Times" at the conclusion of the festival, 3 June 1981, "The Furrow", November 1981 (vol. 32, no 11), p. 748, and by Richard Kearney, then lecturer in Metaphysics in UCD, in a wider review of Wajda's work in "Studies", Spring 1982 (vol. 71, no 281), pp. 85–93. It was not a coincidence that the award of the 1981 Nobel prize for literature to Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz also produced a heightened appreciation of his work at this time in Ireland. For one example see Dennis O'Driscoll, *Ceslaw Milosz: The optimistic catastrophist*, "The Crane Bag", vol. 7, no 1 (1983), pp. 58–61.

<sup>73</sup> "Irish Times", 30 April 1981. During this interview Wajda placed stress on the necessity for, and the creative possibilities arising from, invention and allusion as a means of overcoming state censorship.

<sup>74</sup> "Sunday Independent", 11 October 1981. It should also be noted that the documentary *The Coronation*, an account of Pope John Paul II's first pilgrimage to Poland in 1979, and of the position of the Catholic church in Poland, was broadcast in a prime time slot on Ireland's main television channel RTÉ1 over the 1980 Christmas holiday period.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, the article on the engagement of Polish theatre with the contemporary political struggle in the country by Joe Dowling, artistic director of Dublin's Abbey theatre, in the "Irish Times", 13 November 1980; an interview with the Polish theatre producer Kazimierz Braun from Wrocław's Teatr Współczesny (the first Polish company to participate in the Dublin theatre festival) in the "Irish Independent", 19 August 1981; the brief summary of both the general post-war structures of Polish theatre, and the themes of some recent productions, by Susan Triesman in "Theatre Ireland", no. 2 (Jan–May 1983), pp. 93–94; and a highly favourable review of cultural policies in Poland and Yugoslavia by Laurence Cassidy of the Irish Arts Council in "The Crane Bag", Vol. 7, No. 1 (1983), pp. 167–169.

shortly afterwards – that directly drew on events in Poland for inspiration. The first was *Kolbe* by Fr Desmond Forristal, which has been referred to above. The second, and highly interesting, approach was that taken in *This is it*, a collaborative production penned by the loyalist activists Sam Duddy and Andy Tyrrie (former commander of the Ulster Defence Association), and community activist and Belfast playwright Michael Hall. The play is set at the time of the loyalist ‘Day of Action’ of 23 November 1981, and immediately after, and explores working class Protestant attitudes to a variety of contemporary political, religious and social issues, in Ireland and beyond. The third scene, set in a loyalist pub in late December 1981, opens with a discussion between the principal characters regarding recent events in Poland, and includes the following exchange, by degrees pointed and comical (best rendered with an authentically hard Belfast working class Protestant delivery):

MAGGIE: Do you think the Russians will move in?

ALAN: Dunno. If martial law can’t stop all those strikes and protests, I bet you they will.

DAVE: Those miners are holding out bravely. Sealed themselves in the mine - wouldn’t fancy that at all. Something like ten dead so far.

TOMMY: If the Russians come in with tanks there’ll be frigginn’ more than that dead - only nobody’ll ever hear of them.

MAGGIE: Wonder what the Pope’ll do if Poland’s invaded?

TOMMY: He’ll lock himself away in the Vatican, and shout from a safe distance.

MAGGIE: Well, what else could he do?

TOMMY: Maybe he could set fire to himself as a protest; do us all a favour.

MAGGIE: You’re just bloody..

ALAN: Just ignore him, Maggie. This General seems to be a tough nut. What do you call him?

DAVE: Yara. . . something. Bert? What’s yer man in charge of Poland called?

BERT: Ah. . . just can’t remember, lads.

TOMMY: You’d frigginn’ know his name if he owed you bloody money!

BERT: I can do without your cheek tonight.

ALAN: Strange. For a while I thought Solidarity was going to win out.

TOMMY: Sure nothin’ free survives under bloody Communism.

ALAN: For once I agree with you. Communism’s a terrible distortion of Socialism.

TOMMY: Same bloody thing!

ALAN: Oh no it’s not! In no way!

TOMMY: Course it is. All bloody Reds. Once they’re in power, that’s the end of your freedom.

DAVE: You mean you’d be stopped from kickin’ peoples’ heads in on a Saturday night? That’s just terrible! Couldn’t have that! What a place it would be!

TOMMY: I’m serious.

MAGGIE: CYNICALLY. That’s not possible.

TOMMY: IGNORING HER. Tell yah, there’d have been no bloody Civil Rights marches allowed in Russia. No I.R.A. funerals. Tanks would’ve gone in and - BANG! - all over. Hunger strikes would have made no impression on those boyos in the Kremlin.

DAVE: Is that how you think it should have been handled here?

TOMMY: Damn right, it is!

ALAN: You can't have it both ways?

TOMMY: Why not? We all must have freedom. But those who would try to destroy our freedom - like the I.R.A. - should be crushed!

ALAN: It's not that simple.

TOMMY: Friggin' is! It's all you bloody 'thinkers' and 'talkers' who make it seem complicated. You lot talk yourself into bloody complications. It's simple - if a fly lands on your neck you swat it! You don't say: 'Excuse me, would you mind buzzing off?'

MAGGIE: That's not the same.

TOMMY: Isn't it? It is to me.

ALAN: We gathered that.

BERT: Jaruzelski.

A BRIEF SILENCE FALLS. ALL AT THE TABLE, PUZZLED, LOOK OVER AT BERT.

BERT: Jaruzelski. General Jaruzelski.

While the play failed to register on the national scene, its mingling of comic, sectarian and political themes gives it a curiosity value if nothing else.

Mention should be made of the only noteworthy piece of visual culture inspired by Polish events at this time, an icon of Pope John Paul II produced by the renowned worker in kinetic stained glass, Desmond Kyne. The icon incorporates numerous motifs relating to the life and papal career of the Pontiff, and his nation's past, including the white eagle (Poland's national symbol – *with* crown), the swastika and hammer and sickle, the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, the *Parzenica* (a traditional Polish symbol of love) and – most pertinently for present purposes – the *Solidarność* logo, and the three anchor crosses of the Gdańsk memorial to those slain in the disturbances of 1970, set atop the waves of the sea.<sup>76</sup> The final effect is most striking, with photographic reproductions failing to do justice to the complex reflections of light that are the defining feature of this form of stained glass.

Finally, from the world of popular culture, mention needs to be made of what is by some distance the most widely-known example of *Solidarność*-inspired cultural output in Ireland, the U2 song 'New Year's Day', taken from the 1983 album 'War'. The song was penned as a protest against the imposition of martial law in Poland, and as an expression of support for *Solidarność*, and was subsequently used by the European Commission as the background music to a video summarising in visual form the changes produced by the fall of communism in the country.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Several copies of the icon were produced, one of which was presented by Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich to Pope John Paul II to mark the Young People of Ireland pilgrimage to Rome in September 1981, with another presented by Monsignor James Horan, parish priest of Knock, and progenitor of the basilica there, to the Marian Shrine at Jasna Gora. "Sunday Independent", 24 May 1981. For more details see <http://celticheirlooms.tripod.com/Icon%20of%20Pope%20John%20Paul%2011.htm> accessed 25-5-2011. See also the *Irish Catholic*, 4 June 1981.

<sup>77</sup> The video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvYtDeUaRuk>. See also N. Stokes, *U2: into the heart*, Cambridge 2005, p. 41.

## Conclusion

A constant theme running throughout this analysis is that public opinion in Ireland on the question of Solidarność crystallised after the imposition of martial law. To a certain extent this is unfortunate, for it confirmed in the eyes of the Irish people, as it did nearly everywhere outside the Communist world, the view of the union as passive, defenceless victim (akin to the clichéd view of Poland more generally) – whereas for the previous sixteen months it had, of course, been anything but.

The more important conclusion is that the emergence of Solidarność produced an extensive and heart-felt response within Ireland. While it is, of course, impossible to say conclusively whether this response was more impassioned or sincere in Ireland than elsewhere, the fact that it *was* impassioned and *was* sincere cannot be denied – and it equally cannot be denied that the fight for trade union, and other, rights in Poland elicited a more widespread response during this time than any other ‘external’ question in Ireland during the relevant months of 1980–1981. How does one account for this? As with so much else about Polish history, Norman Davies provides some clue as to the answer. He once wrote of ‘the fascinating discrepancy between the objective circumstances of modern Ireland and modern Poland, which are somewhat different, and the subjective psychology of the two nations, which is remarkably congenial ... the Irish are distinctly *Polskowaci*, the Poles distinctly *Irlandizujacy*.’ In other words, the historic experiences of the two nations are so similar as to have inculcated a comparable outlook on life in their two peoples. In the context of the current discussion, this meant that the struggles of Poland in the late twentieth century were as likely to elicit a sympathetic response from the Irish people as did its travails during the long nineteenth century. Long may the tradition survive!

## Appendix

### Irish Congress of Trade Unions

#### *Report of proceedings at annual delegate conference Belfast 1982, p. 203*

Composite motion 17, moved by Dermot Reid (Northern Ireland Civil Service Association).

*Conference endorses the Executive Council statement of 20 January 1982, denouncing the denial of human and trade union rights to millions of workers suffering under repressive regimes throughout the world and condemning the hypocrisy of those who loudly proclaim support for trade union rights in Poland awhile encouraging or condoning the repression of trade unionists in their own country and elsewhere.*

*Regarding the situation in Poland, Conference supports the following demands*

- (a) the abolition of martial law,*
- (b) the release of all trade union activists who have been detained,*
- (c) the re-establishment of full trade union rights,*
- (d) negotiations with Solidarność on the social and economic problems confronting the people of Poland,*
- (e) an end to the persecution of workers, including those in education, culture and the press, on the basis of their beliefs, and the reinstatement of those dismissed because of their support for Solidarność.*

*Conference further calls on the Executive Council to consider practical ways by which affiliated trade unions can assist Solidarność.*

*Gabriel Doherty*

IRLANDIA – SOLIDARNOŚĆ: IRLANDZKA REAKCJA NA POWSTANIE  
SOLIDARNOŚCI, 1980–1981  
(CZĘŚĆ II)

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje analizę reakcji Irlandii (północnej oraz południowej) na powstanie, rozwój oraz likwidację „Solidarności” od chwili strajku sierpniowego w stoczni gdańskiej po wprowadzenie stanu wojennego 13 grudnia 1981 roku. Autor rozpoczyna swój wywód od analizy reakcji mass mediów na wydarzenia w Polsce, aby przejść do zaprezentowania różnorodnych reakcji takich podmiotów polityczno-społecznych, jak: rząd, parlament, irlandzka lewica, irlandzkie związki zawodowe, Irlandia Północna, Kościół katolicki w Irlandii, irlandzka Polonia, środowiska artystyczne oraz opinia publiczna. Na podstawie bogatych materiałów źródłowych autor wykazuje, że reakcja Irlandczyków na powstanie „Solidarności” była zdecydowanie pozytywna, chociaż – rzecz jasna – zdarzały się głosy przeciwnie. Większość społeczeństwa nie miała szczególnych okazji, aby manifestować swoje poparcie i pozytywną opinię w konkretny sposób, tym niemniej przy nadarzających się okazjach reakcje były spontaniczne, szerokie i pozytywne. Zdecydowanie przeważała sympatia i solidarność z celami i środkami stosowanymi przez „Solidarność”, które utożsamiano z innymi walkami narodowymi Polaków.

