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# Bricks and Bombs versus Bullets and Batons: Protest and Regime Violence as Generational Experience in Communist Poland

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This article discusses the relation between state violence and public disorder under authoritarian rule in Poland. Focusing on the major crises and protests of the communist era, it examines regime violence through a double perspective – on the one hand, the way the regime resorted to physical violence to uphold its survival and, on the other hand, as a generational experience of those who suffered from it. Despite the state's use of physical violence until 1989 becoming more rationalised, modernised and efficient, it also turned less effective over time. This evolution contributed to a decreasing risk factor for protesters vis-à-vis the state. Since the bulk of those who participated in protests and riots were young people, the focus lies on the youthful dimension of public disorder and in particular the activity and experience of then students and young workers.

The epic Polish protest song, the *Ballad of Janek Wiśniewski* [*Ballada o Janku Wiśniewskim*], retells an episode of violent confrontation with the communist regime in dramatic fashion. The song is an ode to the sacrifice of an unknown young worker who was killed along with dozens of others during the December 1970 revolt, when mass protests broke out in response to the regime introducing price hikes on basic food stuffs. It was only one of several violent episodes on the streets of Polish cities during communist rule. This article discusses the relation between state violence and public disorder in Poland in the late socialist period. It focuses in particular on the crises of 1968, 1970, 1976, 1980–1 and the years leading up to the demise of the communist regime. State violence is approached through a double perspective – on the one hand, the manner in which the regime resorted to physical violence and, on the other hand, as a generational experience of the ‘victims’, that is, those on the receiving end of this violence – metaphorically corresponding to the respective ‘sides of the barricades’. Firstly, the angle of the various institutions at the communist regime's disposal to execute state violence is analysed. I set out the essential qualitative changes that took place during the process of destalinisation, roughly between 1954 and 1957, which define the framework and determine the capabilities of the state and the regime in this area during the period of late socialism from 1968 to 1989. I look closely at the ‘division of labour’ between the agencies that during this period would act as the ‘perpetrators’ of state violence. In focus is particularly the infamous specialised paramilitary riot police, the *Zmotyrowane Odwoły Milicji Obywatelskiej* (Motorised Division of the Citizens' Militia), in short ZOMO, and its operational evolution over time.

Subsequently, the ‘other side’ of the barricade is presented from the point of view of the ‘victims’, i.e. those who experienced (and sometimes provoked) state violence, meaning those against whom the above institutions were dispatched. The main crisis moments from 1968 to 1989 are analysed with an emphasis on the role of the respective younger generation embodied by students and young workers during the protests that spilled onto the streets. This is not to say that it was only youths who were the

main protagonists of these protests and confronted by the regime's repressive apparatus, but they constituted a new cohort among the protesters whose experience of violence could be described as 'fresh' or 'new'. Afterwards, I turn to the most important dynamics of the protest movements and discuss the similarities and differences in protesters' repertoires. Lastly, this article will explore the different 'generational' experiences and perceptions of state violence during the various protest movements from 1968 to 1989.

### Communist State Violence and Its Generational Resonance

Before proceeding to discuss the evolution of the institutional division of labour in communist Poland's response to mass protests and public disorder and its generational perspective, a few conceptual delineations and theoretical clarifications are in order. Firstly, for the purposes of this article the concept of state violence should be delineated since postwar Poland, Stalinist Poland and late socialist Poland were societies that had gone through a variegated experience of profound levels of violence. During the Second World War, Poland was subjected to an escalation of violence through the military confrontation with two 'totalitarian powers', Hitler's Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. In a period of under six years, parts of the prewar Polish state had seen three separate occupation regimes with mass civilian casualties. The Polish lands became one of the main theatres of the Holocaust while the Polish state itself was dismembered and only re-emerged with limited sovereignty and severely altered borders. This was accompanied by massive and often violent population displacements at the end of the war.<sup>1</sup>

Communist Poland was thus born after the war under a specific 'regime of violence'.<sup>2</sup> There exists a variety of conceptual-theoretical work that classifies the types of violence involved.<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this article, it is important to underline that the focus lies on part of the socialist's state capacity for intentional structural violence with the aim of repressing protest and public disorder.<sup>4</sup> While the security apparatus has been the subject of extensive research over the past decades, similar research on the communist police, the *Milicja Obywatelska* (MO – Citizens' Militia) and in particular its later specialised riot police the *Zmotoryzowane Odwoły Milicji Obywatelskiej* (ZOMO – Motorised Reserves of the Citizen's Militia) is still wanting.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in popular memory it is exactly the latter who feature as the main symbol of repression of street protests during communist rule. Therefore, this article will focus primarily (though not exclusively) on the history of the ZOMO and its political role as a pillar of the late socialist Polish regime.

Secondly, the conceptual use of generation needs to be clarified to avoid confusion in the ambitions of this article. The term 'generation' is understood here as representing a group of age-cohorts who share the same decisive experience within a specific time frame. The conceptual framework for this generational analysis borrows from the theoretical approach initially put forward by Karl Mannheim.<sup>6</sup> The key notion of this generational approach as applied in this article is that young people experience historical events differently than their elders and as a result develop their political views

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the violence in Poland and the broader region in this period see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Fleming, 'The Regime of Violence in Socialist and Postsocialist Poland', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102, 2 (2012), 482–98.

<sup>3</sup> Hanna Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970); Michael Bernhard and Daniel O'Neill, 'The Uses of Violence', *Perspectives on Politics*, 18, 3 (2020), 701–5; Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6, 3 (1969), 167–91; Johan Galtung, 'Cultural Violence', *Journal of Peace Research*, 27, 3 (1990), 291–305; Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Fleming, 'The Regime of Violence in Socialist and Postsocialist Poland', 489.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Mawby, 'The Changing Face of Policing in Central and Eastern Europe', *International Journal of Police Science and Management*, 2, 3 (1999), 199–216.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Pilcher, 'Mannheim's Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 45, 3 (1994), 481–95; for a detailed discussion of the social theory on generations see Helmut Fogt, *Politische Generationen: Empirische Bedeutung und Theoretisches Modell* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982); for a discussion of its

in a distinct way. Collective binding customs, social usages, beliefs and ideas that individuals acquire while coming of age at a certain time in history lead to a generation-specific mentality. Furthermore, a generation's identity is often determined by a decisive event, a 'generational event', that was critical during its members' socialisation, such as a massive political crisis or protest movement. The more generational events, the more potential political generations can arise.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, a generational approach to the perception of state violence during protests by focusing on the respective experiences of the younger generation, i.e. the youngest cohorts of protesters (while acknowledging the multi-generational characteristics of mass protests), can allow for an evolutionary analysis and differentiated portrayal of the application of said violence.

### The Sovietisation of the Repression Apparatus

To contextualise the dynamics of state-instigated violence and repression in Poland under late socialism, some of the developments and changes that took place during the process of destalinisation should be taken into account. Therefore, it is necessary to refer to the implemented institutional changes that were part of Poland's transformation into a Soviet-styled satellite state. When communist rule was established in Poland following the Second World War, the state's repressive apparatus was modelled on that of the Soviet Union and to a certain extent even directly controlled by the latter. Initially, the presence of the Red Army and the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (*Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*; NKVD) on Polish territory ensured that the communist-led post-war government was able to carry out the reforms required to usher in a process of Sovietisation and the proclamation of a 'people's republic'. The first post-war years were characterised not only by the dramatic realities of a war-ravaged society but also by a terror campaign and an ongoing civil war in which the fledgling regime eliminated its opponents.<sup>8</sup>

Starting in 1948, the Stalinist repressive system was further perfected. As a result, outright terror became less obvious as the most ardent opponents of the new regime had already been eliminated and sufficient compliance was exacted from the population at large. Stalinist policy was not only geared towards total communist dominance in the public sphere but was, moreover, bent on controlling citizens' private lives. Whether or not the societal reality during the Polish Stalinist period actually conformed to the analytical depiction espoused by proponents of the totalitarian paradigm, it is a fact that the repressive apparatus created by the post-war communist regime constituted one of its core defining elements.<sup>9</sup> However, the structure and functioning of this apparatus changed significantly after 1956.

At the outset of communist rule in Poland, the security apparatus *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa* (Office of Security) was set up according to the Soviet model. The secret police and the official police force, the MO, as well as other internal security formations such as the voluntary militia reserves, were subordinated to the Ministry of Public Security (*Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego*; MBP). The latter, in turn, was subordinated to the Soviet NKVD on Polish soil in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The Polish army had its own intelligence structure which was similarly subservient to the Red Army and later put under the authority of the Polish Minister of Defence, Marshal Konstanty Rokossowski, who was in effect a Soviet citizen of Polish origin. Despite no major public protest or disorder taking place in the early 1950s, the defection to the West of a high-ranking security apparatus officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Józef Świątło, and his revelations on Radio Free Europe, prompted the

implications for historians see Alan Spitzer, 'The Historical Problem of Generations', *The American Historical Review*, 78, 5 (1973), 1353–85.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Heberle, *Social Movements: An Introduction to Political Sociology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), 122–4; Karl Mannheim, 'Das Problem der Generationen', *Kölner Vierteljahrsheft für Soziologie*, 7 (1928), 164–8; Julián Mariás, *Generations: A Historical Method* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1970), 114–15.

<sup>8</sup> On the first post-war years, see Krystyna Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland, 1943–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Dariusz Jarosz, *Polacy a Stalinizm 1948–1956* (Warszawa: Instytut Historii PAN, 2000), 227–37.

regime to undertake a reorganisation of the security apparatus institution in 1954. This coincided with the beginning of destalinisation and culminated two years later in the abolition of the MBP and the creation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (*Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych*; MSW) overseeing a downscaled secret police, the Security Service (*Służba Bezpieczeństwa*; SB).<sup>10</sup>

In 1956, Poland saw widespread public disorder. In June of that year, a worker revolt in the city of Poznań turned into an armed rebellion. The security forces were unable to deal with the situation and the regime sent in the army, resulting in a bloody quelling of the uprising leaving dozens killed. The following months witnessed a deepening crisis of the regime leading to a change in party leadership with the return of Władysław Gomułka in October and the ousting of the Stalinist guard. Direct Soviet control was overturned when Rokossowski was removed from his post as Minister of Defence and returned to the Soviet Union together with the Soviet security advisors who had been residing in the country.<sup>11</sup> However, in the face of ensuing public protest, the regime reassessed its repressive capacity and ability to maintain public order. Having downscaled the security apparatus, the Poznań revolt painfully exposed the risk of violent escalation by relying on the army to deal with civil unrest. For this reason, towards the end of the year a specialised paramilitary force, the ZOMO, was set up to take on future public protests.<sup>12</sup> Henceforth a certain division of labour in coping with public unrest and challenges to the regime's authority could be observed. Simultaneously, the regime moved from relying on a repressive structure that acted pre-emptively to repressive action that was applied reactively.<sup>13</sup>

### The Impact of Destalinisation

After 1956, the SB was used by the regime with reserve compared to its more powerful predecessor during the Stalinist period. This was a direct outcome of the destalinisation process but also partly a result of Gomułka's distrust of the institution – he had, after all, been its prisoner during the Stalinist years. Though its role was significantly curbed, the SB was still active in countering challenges to the regime. During instances of public protest and disorder its operatives would infiltrate the protesters and try to manipulate the dynamics of demonstrations by acting as provocateurs or, conversely, engage in surveillance and observe participants of protest movements in order to facilitate their arrests or later exploit them as informers.<sup>14</sup>

Following the dramatic quashing of the Poznań uprising, the army was again deployed against civilians on two later occasions – during the December 1970 crisis and the imposition of martial law in December 1981. In both cases the military's role was significant. Though the brunt of the confrontation was carried out by the MO and the ZOMO, most of the fatalities – forty-five in total – were the result of the conduct of the army, which had opened fire at the protesters. The death toll was nevertheless less severe than during the Poznań uprising in 1956.<sup>15</sup> In 1981, the army resources deployed in the military coup d'état by far surpassed those of 1970. However, in order to limit casualties and prevent a repeat of 1956 and 1970, the operation was meticulously planned and the army briefed not to

<sup>10</sup> Antoni Dudek and Andrzej Paczkowski, 'Poland', in Krzysztof Persak and Łukasz Kamiński, eds., *A Handbook of the Communist Security Apparatus in East Central Europe 1944–1989* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2005), 221–7. On Światło and his revelations, see Zbigniew Błażyński, *Mówi Józef Światło: Za kulisami bezpieki i partii 1940–1955* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo LTW, 2003); Andrzej Paczkowski, *Trzy twarze Józefa Światły: Przyczynek do historii komunizmu w Polsce* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Prószyński i S-ka, 2009); Przemysław Słowiński, *Wielkie afery: Mroczny PRL* (Warszawa: Fronda, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> On the crisis year of 1956, see Paweł Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Antoni Dudek and Tomasz Marszałkowski, *Walki uliczne w PRL 1956–1989* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Geo, 1999), 59–60.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Sharman, *Repression and Resistance in Communist Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003), 118.

<sup>14</sup> Dudek and Paczkowski, 'Poland', 237–75.

<sup>15</sup> In 1970, the protests were pacified using 27,000 soldiers, 550 tanks, 750 armoured vehicles, 108 airplanes and helicopters, and forty naval units. At that time, it was the largest use of military force against the civilian population. Jerzy Eisler, *'Polskie Miesiące' czyli kryzys(y) w PRL* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2008), 42–3.

engage with protesters directly. That role fell to 30,000 functionaries of the MSW – the SB, the MO and especially the ZOMO.<sup>16</sup>

Following destalinisation the main institution tasked with dealing with public protest and disorder was indeed the ZOMO. Founded as a specialised paramilitary police force under the general MO command following the developments of the crisis year of 1956, it was staffed by veteran MO functionaries, decommissioned soldiers, and former members of the Stalinist security apparatus.<sup>17</sup> The force was organised along military lines and its divisions were stationed permanently in the country's major cities. The remit of the ZOMO units included, among other tasks, the apprehension of highly dangerous criminals and logistical and relief operations following natural disasters, but primarily the units were dispatched to deal with public disorder. Initially, the troops were equipped only with batons and helmets. In 1957, water cannons were purchased from East Germany, where ZOMO officers also received training by the *Volkspolizei* (People's Police) whose expertise in this field was classed at the time as the best within the Soviet bloc, having been developed in the wake of the June 1953 uprising.

The same year ZOMO units were dispatched to subdue protests around the country, the most notorious being the riots in Warsaw triggered by the closing down of the student journal *Po Prostu*. The protests were suppressed, and the following years saw the gradual specialisation and professionalisation of ZOMO methods and equipment. In the early 1960s, ZOMO units were kitted out with tear gas grenade launchers that were subsequently used against protesters throughout the decade. Following the brutal but chaotic response to the March 1968 student protest movements, ZOMO units were further modernised and supplied with shields to complement the batons and helmets while their overall training was intensified. However, the ZOMO failed to contain the December 1970 revolt and the army was called in again. As a result, the ZOMO's overall capacity was expanded in the 1970s, its personnel base increased – from the originally envisioned 6,600 troops it grew to a force of around 13,000 in the 1980s – and its tactics modernised. During the decade, the ZOMO similarly profited from Poland's opening up to the West as its units and equipment were upgraded through the purchase of Western material, thus further enhancing its overall functionality. Though the 1970s were arguably the most peaceful decade in the history of communist Poland – the June 1976 crisis being the exception that proved the rule – during this period the ZOMO became the best trained and organised riot police in the Soviet bloc. The force effectively served as an example for the other socialist countries.

With the imposition of martial law ZOMO units functioned as the shock troops to break the population's resistance, with the army, as a rule, in an assisting role despite its wide deployment. In some cases, this led to fatalities, as when a special ZOMO platoon carrying firearms was sent in to break a miners' strike in Silesia. However, over the whole period of martial law the number of fatal casualties was relatively low compared to the earlier crises in 1956 and 1970. Nevertheless, during the period of martial law the ZOMO became notorious for its brutality and its colloquial nickname, 'the beating heart of the Party', evidently reflected the population's loathing of the regime and its riot police. Even after martial law, from 1983 onwards, violent intervention by the ZOMO and the beating of protesters was common. During that decade, ZOMO units were further modernised and their equipment – in particular the troops' protective gear – better adapted to the frequent street battles that took place at the time. Despite financial problems in the 1980s that saw the ZOMO rely on 'fraternal aid' from other socialist countries to supply its units, in the recurring crises from 1968 onwards it was the ZOMO that ultimately represented the embodiment of the regime on the streets until the latter's demise in 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Following the imposition of martial law in December 1981, 70,000 soldiers, 1,750 tanks, 1,400 armoured vehicles, and hundreds of planes and helicopters were deployed. Eisler, 'Polskie Miesiące', 57–60.

<sup>17</sup> The paragraphs below on the history of the ZOMO are based on Dudek and Marszałkowski, *Walki uliczne w PRL*; Antoni Dudek, 'Bijące serce partii', *Wprost*, Warszawa, 29 Jul. 2001; 'ZOMO – "bijące serce" partii', *Dziennik*, Warszawa, 13 Apr. 2009.

### A Generational Perspective Concerning the Opposition

While the ZOMO was the regime's elite force that held the lines during the recurring crises from 1968 to 1989, it is important to emphasise who the ZOMO actually confronted at the barricades mounted in Poland during late socialism. The problem is all the more significant since the master narrative in the scholarship on resistance and opposition to communism in Poland during this period has been influenced by a romanticised perception leading to the reproduction of certain stereotypes despite the emergence of evidence to the contrary. It primarily concerns the foundation of Solidarity (*Solidarność*), which is reflected in the mostly linear depiction of the rise of opposition to communist rule in Poland leading to the demise of the regime in 1989. This romanticised narrative that has permeated popular memory and influenced scholarly works is most dramatically portrayed in Andrej Wajda's 1981 film *Człowiek z żelaza* (The Man of Iron).<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, it epitomises a distortion concerning the participants in public protest and disorder from 1968 to 1989. On the one hand, it extrapolates divisions between working-class and student milieus before 1980, while on the other hand it overemphasises continuity in opposition activism and repertoires after 1981.

What the crises from 1968 to 1989 had in common was that the bulk of the protesters on the streets and fighting the ZOMO were youths, be it students or young workers. The 1968 protest movement is regarded as a student rebellion, because it was students who started it and who became the target of the regime's propaganda and smear campaign. It was also students who afterwards were subjected to trials leading to prison sentences. However, the figures relating to the total number of detained protesters provide a somewhat different perception.<sup>19</sup> Among those arrested during the protests – 2,732 people nationwide – the largest single group were young workers. In addition, according to figures from the MSW, high school pupils also represented a significant percentage of those apprehended. In fact, university and college students constituted only one-fifth of the overall number of individuals incarcerated and prosecuted for participating in the protest movement. Such data suggests that a young age rather than a specific milieu was the common denominator of the protesters.<sup>20</sup>

Concerning the December 1970 crisis, it is often taken for granted that the revolt was carried out by the working class since the focal points of confrontation took place in coastal cities with maritime industries with students seemingly absent from the protests, not supporting their peers despite their similar age. According to the romanticised narrative, students presumably stayed away deliberately out of vengeance for the supposed lack of worker support two years earlier.<sup>21</sup> Yet, testimony has surfaced indicating that students in the coastal cities definitely did take part in the revolt, while MSW data shows students among those arrested during the protests. Simultaneously, in a non-industrial academic centre such as Kraków, students actually staged protest demonstrations in solidarity with the workers at the coast. Moreover, many students who took part in these demonstrations had also been active in the 1968 protest movement, as had many of the young workers. The 1970 revolt was again a rebellion of a younger generation – the same as in 1968 – whose members, be

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Kemp-Welch, *Poland under Communism: A Cold War History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 156.

<sup>19</sup> On the 1968 crisis, see Jerzy Eisler, *Polski rok 1968* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> *Ustalenia operacyjno-śledcze dot. wydarzeń marcowych*, Aug. 1969, Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (AIPN), 0365/105.t1, 195–211; 'Nr 1 – Informacja Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych dotycząca osób zatrzymanych, ukaranych i wcielonych do służby wojskowej. Warszawa, 26 Marca 1968', in Grzegorz Sołtysiak and Józef Stępień, eds., *Marzec '68. Między tragedią a podłością* (Warszawa: PROFI, 1998), 323–4; 'Nr 4 – Prokuratura Generalna, departament nadzoru nad postępowaniem przygotowawczym, Informacja o wynikach ściganiach karnego osób, które dopuściły się naruszenia prawa w związku z ekscesami w marcu 1968r., Warszawa, 16 października 1968', in Sołtysiak and Stępień, eds., *Marzec '68*, 332–40; Andrzej Friszke, 'Ruch protestu w marcu 1968 (w świetle raportów MSW dla kierownictwa PZPR)', *Więź*, 3 (1994), 88–9; Marcin Zaremba, 'Biedni Polacy '68. społeczeństwo polskie wobec wydarzeń marcowych w świetle raportów KW i MSW dla kierownictwa PZPR', *Więź*, 3 (1998), 161–72.

<sup>21</sup> On the December 1970 crisis, see Jerzy Eisler, *Grudzień 1970: Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sensacje XX Wieku, 2000).

it workers or students, had more in common with each other than with the elder generations due to a similar socialisation process.<sup>22</sup> In June 1976, the crisis was very short-lived and much more localised compared to the March 1968 and December 1970 revolts, but the regime had been aware of the potential volatility of the then younger generation prior to the crisis and had taken preventive measures. Nevertheless, among those arrested in the city of Radom the overall majority were youths, including some students.<sup>23</sup>

The younger generation was even more prominent during the 1980–1 crisis. A fact often overlooked is that Solidarity was carried to a large extent by what in fact constituted a youth movement, as 44.5 per cent of the adherents were under twenty-nine years of age. Moreover, the emergence of Solidarity depleted the official youth organisation of a more than significant percentage of its membership. If the student milieu had not been subjected to a different legal framework than working-class youth, they probably would have joined Solidarity proper instead of setting up an independent student organisation. Furthermore, Solidarity as a movement polarised the ‘us against them’ perception of a divided society to the extreme.<sup>24</sup> Not only did this dichotomy denote society at large versus the regime, but it also pointed to an inter-generational conflict of the young generation against the communist establishment. The explicit adherence of the independent student movement to the ideals of Solidarity should be seen as constituting an expression of generational solidarity and, again, the result of a similar socialisation.

After the imposition of martial law, the regime – embodied by the military junta – rapidly destroyed the movement that was Solidarity. Though those of its activists who had not been apprehended continued their activity underground, it must be noted that other oppositional movements and organisations that operated from within the underground such as the Confederation for an Independent Poland (*Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej*; KPN) or Fighting Solidarity (*Solidarność Walcząca*) – a radical group within the Solidarity underground that used the symbolism of the wartime resistance – attracted young people due to their more radical stance. During the ensuing years of martial law the recurring street demonstrations lost some of their momentum, but they were still largely carried by the younger generation.<sup>25</sup>

The mid-1980s saw renewed public opposition against the regime instigated by a series of new social movements that were founded from 1983 onwards and again mainly formed of the then younger generation, a fact which was duly noted by the security apparatus.<sup>26</sup> These movements such as the Movement for an Alternative Society (*Ruch Społeczeństwa Alternatywnego*; RSA), the Freedom and

<sup>22</sup> *Informacja. Warszawa, dnia 17 grudnia 1970 r. Aktualna sytuacja w województwach – poza Gdańskiem – godz. 18:00, 17 Dec. 1970, Archiwum Dokumentacji Historycznej Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej (ADHPRL), Materiały Nieuporządkowane, 3–4; Meldunek o aktualnych wydarzeniach w kraju – godz. 18:00–21:00, 17 Dec. 1970, AIPN, 1585/985, 24; Ocena wydarzeń grudniowych w regionie krakowskim, Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie (APKr), PZPR KW 539, 281a–343; Eisler, ‘Polskie Miesiące’, 122–6; Tom Junes, *Student Politics in Communist Poland: Generations of Consent and Dissent* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), xxvii; Tadeusz Stanisław Piotrowski, ‘Studenti gdańscy w grudniu 1970’, *Zeszyty Historyczne*, 99 (1992), 54–8; Lech Wałęsa, *Droga nadziei* (Kraków: Znak, 1989), 49–50.*

<sup>23</sup> ‘Nr 4 – Informacja dyrektora Departamentu III MSW Gen. Adama Krzysztoporskiego dotycząca nastrojów społecznych związanych z regulacją Cen, Warszawa, 21 maja 1976r.’, in Jerzy Eisler, ed., *Czerwiec 1976 w materiałach archiwalnych* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2001), 82; On the June 1976 crisis, see Paweł Sasanka, *Czerwiec 1976: Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Władysław Adamski, ‘Przynależność związkowa i miejsce w strukturze a interesy grupowe’, in Władysław Adamski, ed., *Polacy ‘81. Postrzeganie kryzysu i konfliktu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFIS PAN, 1996), 160–1; Marcin Kula, ed., *Solidarność w ruchu 1980–1981* (Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza NOWA, 2000), 56–57; Wolf Oschlies, *Jugend in Osteuropa. Band 2: Polens Jugend – Kinder der Solidarnosc?* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1982), 104–6; Charles Wankel, *Anti-Communist Student Organizations and the Polish Renewal* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 153.

<sup>25</sup> Andrzej Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours: Poland and the Poles from Occupation to Freedom* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 464. On the participation of youth in street demonstrations during the martial law period, see Paweł Piotrowski, ‘Udział młodzieży w demonstracjach ulicznych we Wrocławiu w okresie stanu wojennego’, in Monika Kała and Łukasz Kamiński, eds., *Młodzież w oporze społecznym 1945–1989* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2002), 130–137.

<sup>26</sup> *Sytuacja w Środowisku Młodzieżowym – Zagrożenia, Prognozy, Wnioski*, Jun. 1988, AIPN, 0296/206/5, 1–58.

Peace Movement (*Ruch Wolność i Pokój*; WiP), the Orange Alternative (*Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*), the Federation of Fighting Youth (*Federacja Młodzieży Walczącej*; FMW) and the revived Independent Students' Association (*Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów*; NZS) also introduced new forms of public action, but their main achievement was that they broke down the barrier of fear among the population since the imposition of martial law.<sup>27</sup> The public activity of these movements and their youthful adherents paved the way for the solidarity actions with striking workers in 1988. Although the striking workers called for the legalisation of Solidarity, they were not fully supported by the oppositional elite of the former trade union. The strikes had broken out spontaneously and were initiated by young workers of the same generation as the youth and student activists of the above social movements.<sup>28</sup>

Testimony to the importance of the younger generation in the strikes of 1988 was that fact that the PZPR's Politburo convened in an extraordinary, expanded mode following the first wave of strikes to discuss the situation of the country's youth. Acknowledging that it was one of the core problems they were facing, the party and government's top officials offered a bleak assessment over the whole line.<sup>29</sup> When the strike wave flared up again later that year, once more led by a younger cohort of workers too young to have experienced the 1980–1 Solidarity period, the regime moved to initiate talks with the 'elder' veteran opposition and former Solidarity leadership. These initial talks in turn led to the round-table talks and, ultimately, the demise of the regime. In the process, though, the radicalised youth had become sidelined. As a result, during the final months of communist rule in Poland the disgruntled younger generation organised rowdy protests on a running basis without achieving much.<sup>30</sup>

### Youth and the Changing Dynamics of Protest

With the benefit of hindsight it is hardly surprising that it was youths who were at the forefront of the street protests and confrontations with the ZOMO during the various crises in the late socialist period in Poland. First of all, generally it is a youthful inclination to take part in protest movements. Young people are usually physically fitter to 'do battle' with the riot police but, more importantly, they have less to lose, which was definitely a factor when it came to the working class as well as students. In other words, the risk is lower. Secondly, in the particular case of communist Poland there was additionally a significant generational divide. Older age-cohorts had memories of earlier repression under Stalinism. The young had no such inhibitions. Moreover, the youths who took to the streets in the mid- and late 1980s had not experienced the Solidarity period at the beginning of the decade first-hand and therefore had not been directly affected by the shock of the imposition of martial law in 1981. One publicist at the time described this generation of young people as the 'generation beyond defeat' (*pokolenie obok klęski*), meaning that these young activists had not felt the wrath of the regime after 1981 and therefore were more courageous than their older contemporaries.<sup>31</sup>

The generational element also implies a difference in outlook on life. Young people coming of age in the 1970s had undergone a different socialisation process than those who had come of age a decade earlier. The regime's promises of rising prosperity in the 1970s naturally raised expectations, which

<sup>27</sup> Dudek and Marszałkowski, *Walki uliczne*, 365–69. On the social movements of the era, see Waldemar Fydrych and Bronisław Misztal, *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa. Rewolucja krasnoludków* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, 2008); Junes, *Student Politics in Communist Poland*; Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution. Central Europe 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Anna Smółka-Gnauck, *Między wolnością a pokojem* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2012); Marek Wierzbicki, *Ostatni Bunt: Młodzież opozycja polityczna u schyłku PRL (1980-1990): Fakty, konteksty, interpretacje* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 151–3; on student and worker solidarity during the 1988 strikes as well as the strikers' youthfulness, see Paweł Smoleński and Wojciech Gielżyński, *Robotnicy '88* (London: Aneks, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> *Stenogram z posiedzenia Biura Politycznego KC PZPR w dniu 1988. 05. 31.*, 31 May 1988, ADHPRL, Materiały Nieuporządkowane, 1–167.

<sup>30</sup> Dudek and Marszałkowski, *Walki uliczne*, 386–95.

<sup>31</sup> Janusz Legon, 'Pokolenie obok klęski', *Grizzly*, 4 (1988): 7–8.



came back with a vengeance once the economy faltered again at the end of the decade. This partially explains the wide participation of younger cohorts in the Solidarity movement in 1980–1. Thus, the fact that the grassroots movements of the 1980s were carried by youths who came of age during the decade is explained by the circumstance that they not only had not experienced the 1980–1 crisis first-hand, but they also did not foster any illusions about the communist system as it could not offer them a promise for a better future.<sup>32</sup>

Since the protest movements and revolts that took place under late socialism were to a large extent formed of youths from consecutive age-cohorts, it is also interesting to point to certain similarities, differences and evolutions in the dynamics and the repertoires of the protest movements. They were to an extent related to the dominant milieu from which the protesters originated. In 1968, the initial protest action that students had planned was a peaceful rally on the University of Warsaw's premises. There, worker party activists [*aktyw*] and volunteer workers' militia attacked the students, provoking skirmishes between students and regular riot police in the streets around the university centre. Some scholars have noted that the use of worker party activists before the ZOMO was an exceptional tactic on the part of the regime, though there were certain precedents – for example, a similar strategy was actually used to break up a student rally in the city of Łódź in May 1946.<sup>33</sup> The day of the initial rally on 8 March 1968 was coincidentally Women's Day and it was seemingly female students who were particularly beaten.<sup>34</sup> This was again exceptional as the regime was usually wary of using violence against women.<sup>35</sup>

During the following weeks of student protest violent clashes between students and ZOMO units took place on the streets of several academic centres. In some cases students took refuge in churches or on university and college premises – which enjoyed extraterritoriality and thus fell beyond the direct jurisdiction of the MO – but riot police attacked them anyway by storming the buildings or gassing them out. Students would either run away or defend themselves with what means they could. Sometimes barricades were constructed. However, riot police, volunteer militia and worker party activists – not counting the SB functionaries among the student crowds, who in some cases received the same beating as the protesters – attacked the students in a rather chaotic way. Occasionally, students exploited this to their advantage, as during an incident at the Warsaw Polytechnic where students fought off ZOMO attacks in the buildings and even managed to take some militiamen hostage, after which violence had to make way for negotiations to release them.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, students resorted to strike actions in order to protect themselves from the violent attacks of the ZOMO. During the three-week-long protest movement students in various cities adapted their tactics to those of the regime.

In December 1970 and June 1976 workers used different strategies and the street protests themselves were more violent. On the one hand, the regime deliberately sought violent confrontation in 1970, while in 1976 it responded in a less overtly violent manner but violently nonetheless as with the use of so-called 'fitness trails' (*ścieżki zdrowia*) in which the detainees had to run a gauntlet between lines of riot police while being beaten with batons. On the other hand, youth who reside in an industrial environment tend to have a different temperament and physical disposition to their peers in academia. Workers from one factory or plant would take to the streets to mobilise

<sup>32</sup> Such data is apparent from regular sociological survey studies; see for example Henryk Banaszak and Leszek Rowicki, eds., *W przededniu wielkiej zmiany: Młodzież Warszawy 1987–1988* (Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski Wydz. Pedagogiczny Inst. Socjologii, 1991); Stefan Nowak, ed., *Studenci Warszawy: Studium długofalowych przemian postaw i wartości: Praca zbiorowa*, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Dudek and Marszałkowski, *Walki uliczne w PRL*, 147–48; Junes, *Student Politics in Communist Poland*, 112. On the 1946 protests, see Wojciech Mazowiecki, *Pierwsze starcie: Wydarzenia 3 maja 1946* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> Piotr Osęka, *Marzec '68* (Kraków: Znak, 2008), 175–80.

<sup>35</sup> This point is underlined by Padraic Kenney, 'The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland', *The American Historical Review*, 104, 2 (1999), 399–425.

<sup>36</sup> See Eisler, *Polski rok 1968*, 268–70.

other workers and students, and march to the ‘seats of power’ to give their protest more voice and force. This led both in 1970 and 1976 to local party headquarters being attacked and burned by the protesters. While the 1976 protests were more limited in scale, the 1970 revolt produced some important practices in the form of the sit-in occupational strike and the setting up of inter-factory strike committees, which offset the regime’s capabilities to use violence.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly enough, it is often overlooked that these were exactly the forms of action and organisation of protest used in the student milieu in 1968 as well – not only the student strikes testify to this, but also the fact that students organised themselves in intra-institutional committees of delegates.

### The Protests of the 1980s

The repertoires of protest and resistance reappeared in the 1980–1 crisis with lessons of past failures apparently learnt.<sup>38</sup> The initial protests were characterised by non-violence taking on the shape of occupational strikes and eschewing street protest.<sup>39</sup> However, in the later stages of the crisis segments of the grassroots movement radicalised and street protests started appearing, mainly by women during the so-called hunger marches and students demonstrating to pressure the regime into releasing political prisoners. Towards the end of the year, when parts of Solidarity were increasingly radicalising, the regime struck in full force at striking students of the College of Fire-fighter Officers (*Wyższa Oficerska Szkoła Pożarnicza*), which was later seen as a rehearsal for the imposition of martial law. The regime had been cautious in its recourse to violence during the crisis and the operation to impose martial law was meticulously planned over the space of one year to achieve both maximum impact and effectiveness and to limit resistance.

Actually, during the preceding decade the regime had already restrained its use of violence in order to gain goodwill from the West upon which it depended for extensive loans, in particular after Poland’s endorsement of the Helsinki process in which it made commitments to respect human and civil rights. It had to adjust its methods, to which protesters adapted accordingly as the crisis of 1980–1 demonstrated. While in 1968 and 1970 the level of violence was unexpected, the 1976 crisis showed that the regime would not eschew violent methods of subduing protest. In the wake of the 1976 crisis, an organised opposition began emerging that established links between intellectual and worker milieus. The activity of the first of these civil society groups, the Workers’ Defence Committee, known by its Polish acronym KOR (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*), also became pivotal in keeping the regime’s violence against protesters in check.<sup>40</sup>

Despite different age-cohorts taking the front stage during the various crises from 1968 to 1980, with each new protest the memory of previous protests influenced the repertoire and dynamics of resistance. This was obviously also facilitated by the frequency and relative closeness in time of the crises and the fact that older workers or graduate students and young faculty passed on their experiences to the younger protesters. In cases where protest was linked to more pre-meditated and organised oppositional activity, intergenerational exchanges between activists – among others, during common discussion sessions or seminars – further enabled protest action to evolve. The above factors

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of the practices during the revolts of 1970, see Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity: A Political Sociology of Poland’s Working-Class Democratization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> On *Solidarność* and the 1980–1 crisis, see Andrzej Friszke, *Rewolucja Solidarności 1980–1981* (Znak: Kraków, 2014); Wojciech Polak, Przemysław Ruchlewski and Jakub Kufel, eds., *Czas przełomu: Solidarność 1980–1981* (Gdańsk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2010); Anna Machcewicz, *Bunt: Stajki w Trójmieście: Sierpień 1980* (Gdańsk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2016); Tomasz Kozłowski, *Anatomia rewolucji: Narodziny ruchu społecznego “Solidarność” w 1980 roku* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2017); Jack Bloom, *Seeing Through the Eyes of the Polish Revolution: Solidarity and the Struggle Against Communism in Poland* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> On the issue of non-violence, see Aleksander Smolar, ‘Towards “Self-limiting Revolution”: Poland, 1970–1980’, in Timothy Garton Ash and Adam Roberts, eds., *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 127–43.

<sup>40</sup> On KOR’s activity see Michael Bernhard, *The Origins of Democratization in Poland: Workers, Intellectuals, and Oppositional Politics, 1976–1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Jan Józef Lipski, *KOR: A History of the Workers’ Defense Committee in Poland, 1976–1981* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

mitigated the process in which every generation or group of age-cohorts has its own learning process, thereby repeating similar mistakes of previous generations.<sup>41</sup>

The imposition of martial law and the crackdown that followed destroyed the ten-million-strong mass movement that was Solidarity, forcing the remainder of the committed activists underground.<sup>42</sup> While some of the underground structures still managed to mobilise for mass protests to take place, a general stance of wariness towards public protests began to set in among the population. However, radicalised youths proved an exception to the rule and were still prone to take to the streets. They provided the impetus for new social movements such as Fighting Solidarity (*Solidarność Walcząca*) or the RSA to arise and confront the regime in public demonstrations of defiance, despite the restrictions of martial law. Other movements like WiP confronted the regime publicly as well, but mainly to galvanise public opinion by exposing the regime's repressive reactions to their actions.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, by the middle of the decade the regime deemed the opposition linked to Solidarity to no longer constitute a major threat and initiated a certain liberalisation in terms of the degree of repression as a means of gaining support from the population.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, by that time the opposition had diminished significantly as consecutive leading activists had been apprehended, while societal fatigue with the underground struggle led others to cease their activity. Moreover, the amnesties that the regime had declared posed a problem for released opposition activists since they could not just reconnect with the remaining underground for risk of further exposure. Ironically, while the relaxation of repression encouraged public aboveground activity, the veteran underground opposition activists were too cautious in the eyes of the radicalised younger generation.

Such circumstances encouraged oppositional activity in the public sphere among a new generation of youth. Various forms of public activity – spearheaded by such movements as the RSA or WiP – became attractive for these youths. This young generation would take to the streets. The 'smokescreen' (*zadyma*) – denoting the clashes between groups of politicised youth and the ZOMO – turned rioting as a form of political manifestation into a near cult-like concept symbolising the actions of this generation. This was facilitated by the lower risk of repression experienced by them. It should be noted, however, that in fact the number of arrests and beatings did not necessarily decrease, although the situation was significantly less severe than in the years of martial law – since arrests rarely led to prosecution, let alone a prison sentence – to the extent that it became more of an annoying harassment.<sup>45</sup> Needless to say this instilled a daredevil spirit among the 'smoke-screeners' (*zadymiarze*), the young politicised and energetic rabble-rousers who confronted the phalanxes of ZOMO and their water cannons with cobblestones and improvised petrol bombs.

Other social movements attracting rebellious youths like the Orange Alternative (*Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*) championed forms of public protest that deliberately neutralised the regime's use of violence. The Orange Alternative organised theatrical public demonstrations – or happenings – to revive society in light of the apathy caused by martial law and the ensuing normalisation period. It effectively offered an option of taking to the streets and having fun. It is possible to see these happenings as sharing characteristics with other non-violent performative activities that straddled the cultural and political sphere, such as alternative theatre. In this sense the happenings fit within a 'performative' tradition that had taken root in communist Poland decades earlier.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Junes, *Student Politics in Communist Poland*, 167–68.

<sup>42</sup> Sharman, *Repression and Resistance*, 114. It must nevertheless be stated that *Solidarność's* survival underground has a complex history which also owed a lot to the unsung activism of women; see Shana Penn, *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Jacek Czapotowicz, an oppositional student activist from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, conducted and recorded by the author.

<sup>44</sup> Kemp-Welch, *Poland under Communism*, 336–7; Mieczysław Rakowski, *Jak to się stało* (Warszawa: Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza "BGW", 1991), 93.

<sup>45</sup> Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution*, 23–30; Interview with Marcin Meller, an oppositional student activist in the late 1980s, conducted and recorded by the author.

<sup>46</sup> Elżbieta Matynia, '1989 and the Politics of Democratic Performativity', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 22, 3 (2009): 263–72.

The first happenings were organised in 1985, but they really took off from 1987 onwards. They either centred on mocking the absurdities of existing official holidays and commemorations or presented new events to be celebrated. The common characteristic of the happenings was that they were peaceful and satirical, in effect disarming the repressive power of the regime and coaxing people to cross the barrier of fear and take to the streets. The practice of having fun in public in large numbers forced the regime to choose between either letting the non-violent ‘happeners’ be or sending in the ZOMO to disperse them. But the sight of riot police beating dwarves or smurfs – participants of the happenings dressed up for the occasion – to subdue, for example, a ‘revolution of the dwarves’, just added to the absurdity of the situation.

The happenings exposed the regime in a way that made it hard to be taken seriously anymore. Thus, commodity-supply disruptions and chronic shortages – the seemingly endless lines in front of empty stores being commonplace – were counteracted by happenings with themes like ‘the big eat out’ or ‘who’s afraid of toilet paper?’. The regime’s repressive policies reverted to the surreal when happeners were arrested for presenting flowers to militiamen on ‘the militia’s day’ or for exposing real undercover SB agents in a crowd of mock undercover agents who would publicly proceed to check participants’ identification papers. This type of action was assessed by the regime as a new form of political struggle which could revive the opposition and was seen as particularly attractive to the younger generation.<sup>47</sup> The prospect of unleashing youthful energy during a ‘smokescreen’ or ‘mocking the Commies’ during a happening had an effective mobilising potential among Poland’s youth. Other social movements supported by the younger generation, such as the FMW or the NZS, also emulated the above modes of protest action. The ZOMO, for all its training, experience and equipment, became completely ineffective against such actions. By the late 1980s, the regime saw this rebellious generation of youth as a permanent problem, one that it was seemingly powerless against.<sup>48</sup>

### The Evolution in the Use of Violence

Having perfected repressive institutions like the ZOMO, they paradoxically became increasingly ineffective in the latter years of communist rule. After 1956, the regime attempted to maximise the cost of collective action, but as it had shed its most blatant totalitarian characteristics as a result of the destalinisation process, it also ceded to concentrate pre-emptively on the cost of mobilisation, allowing for protest and public disorder to re-emerge time and again.<sup>49</sup> Ever more so, martial law became a Pyrrhic victory. It destroyed the opposition that had adhered to a certain tradition of public protest, one which the regime knew how to manage. But following martial law, a new generation of radicalised youths came of age, engaging the regime in the public domain in ways that its repressive apparatus was unable to cope with effectively. In the end the only options that were left on the table were either an escalation of violence or an exit strategy. In the wake of the strike waves of 1988, the regime’s elite chose the latter.<sup>50</sup>

Given that it was different age-cohorts of youth that were on the frontline of the protests and the repertoire of protest actions evolved and adapted vis-à-vis the regime’s use of violence, it is important to look at the differentiated generational experiences of those who challenged the regime on the streets. The post-1956 change in the regime’s repressive strategy was noticed by many protagonists at the time.

<sup>47</sup> *Kto się boi papieru toaletowego*, 1987, Ośrodek Karta Archiwum Opozycji (OKAO), AO IV/34-2, 1; *Rewolucja krasnali*, 1987, OKAO, AO IV/34-2, 1; ‘Nr 5. 1988 wrzesień 20, Warszawa – Opracowanie Kpt. Marka Zielińskiego dotyczące młodzieżowych ruchów alternatywnych w Polsce lat osiemdziesiątych’, in Paweł Ceranka and Sławomir Stepień, eds., *Jesteście naszą wielką szansą: Młodzież na rozstajach komunizmu 1944–1989* (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2009), 460–1; Fydrych and Misztal, *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*, 36–182.

<sup>48</sup> *Sytuacja w Środowisku Młodzieżowym – Zagrożenia, Prognozy, Wnioski*, Jun. 1988, AIPN, 0296/206/5, 1–58.

<sup>49</sup> Sharman, *Repression and Resistance*, 118.

<sup>50</sup> Tom Junes, ‘The Demise of Communism in Poland: A Staged Evolution or Failed Revolution?’, in Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *The 1989 Revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe: From Communism to Pluralism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 104–5.

Karol Modzelewski, commenting on the experience of his prison sentence after the 1968 protests, underlined the difference in the regime's methods since Stalinist times:

A miraculous aura hung about that place since the early fifties. Our block, built back then on the initiative of the director of the Investigative Department of the Ministry of Public Security, was linked by an underground corridor to a parallel building where in Stalin's times the state security interrogated and tortured its prisoners. There they extracted false confessions and constructed false accusations. The place used to be called the 'palace of miracles'. The methods had changed, the miracle workers now acted slower and subtler, without physical violence.<sup>51</sup>

The degree of violence on the streets was another matter. During the 1968 protests, students in Warsaw considered the possibility that the militia might shoot at them, which did not happen, proving that fear unfounded. In contrast, the regime exceeded the imagination of protesters in December 1970, who then could not contemplate that the army would shoot at them.<sup>52</sup> Both revolts were characterised by shock at the regime-instigated violence. In March 1968, it was shock at the violation of university autonomy and extra-territoriality when riot police entered university premises and brutally beat students.<sup>53</sup> In December 1970, worker strikes and demonstrations escalated into the setting on fire of local party headquarters in coastal cities. The regime reacted with brute force and ultimately sent in the army, which resulted in dozens of fatalities. The single most dramatic event took place on 17 December ('Black Thursday') in the seaport city of Gdynia when, due to contradictory orders, army units opened fire upon hundreds of workers, who were heading to work following the party's call to do so. The massacre left at least eighteen people dead.<sup>54</sup>

In 1976, the limited scale of the June crisis perhaps did not leave a lasting imprint – the most cited case of violence was the physical abuse that those arrested had been subjected to (i.e. the 'fitness trails') – although tales of the repression were made public through the publications of the emerging organised opposition. In fact, the subsequent rationing of sugar and introduction of ration cards most likely had a greater impact on the consciousness of the then generation of youth. The unexplained death in 1977 of Stanisław Pyjas, a student who collaborated with the post-1976 opposition and was believed to have been murdered by the security apparatus, sparked enough outrage to give rise to a fledgling student opposition movement in several academic centres, in part exactly because it was an exceptional case of violence.<sup>55</sup>

There have been many accounts of the Solidarity period that make clear the disbelief in the possibility of a general crackdown by the regime. Therefore, the experience of shock that the imposition of martial law brought was even greater. The army's coup d'état had been meticulously planned and the initial resistance was less than expected. Within a few days after the initial shock had worn off strikes broke out around the country, triggering the military junta to execute 'pacification' operations. These operations involved both the army and the ZOMO, in which the former would enforce the perimeters around the respective shipyards, factories or mines (strikes broke out in 199 of the 7,000 enterprises), while the latter would enter preferably at night and round up the strikers. In some cases, live ammunition was used and inevitably resulted in fatalities, the most dramatic case taking place in the Wujek mine in Silesia where 3,000 miners had gone on strike and were bent on mounting stiff resistance. In the end, the lives of nine were lost during the pacification of the strike.<sup>56</sup> In the following

<sup>51</sup> Karol Modzelewski, *Zajeżdżymy kobylę historii: Wyznania poobijanego jeźdźca* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Iskry, 2013), 156–7. An abridged version of Modzelewski's memoirs was recently published in English: *Riding History to Death: Confessions of a Battered Rider* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

<sup>52</sup> Jakub Karpiński, 'Krótkie śpięcie (marzec 1968)', in Jakub Karpiński, ed., *Wykres gorączki: Polska pod rządami komunistycznymi* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2001), 195.

<sup>53</sup> Junes, *Student Politics in Communist Poland*, 105–7.

<sup>54</sup> Eisler, 'Polskie Miesiące', 38–41.

<sup>55</sup> Junes, *Student Politics in Communist Poland*, 168–72.

<sup>56</sup> Eisler, 'Polskie Miesiące', 57–60.

months, public resistance and protests fizzled out with the remaining Solidarity activists reverting to underground conspiratorial activity.

Notwithstanding, the years following the imposition of martial law rather invigorated the radicalised youths who were prone to rebel. It was symptomatic that in 1982 at a concert of the popular rock band *Perfect* in Warsaw, when the band played their hit song '*Chcemy być sobą*' (We want to be ourselves), the youthful audience joined in, enthusiastically changing the lyrics to '*Chcemy bić ZOMO*' (We want to beat the ZOMO).<sup>57</sup> The generation of youth that came of age in the 1980s had no illusions concerning the regime. Its members, moreover, were bereft of any real future perspectives due to the overall social and economic malaise. They had little to lose when confronting the regime's shock troops, the ZOMO, on the streets with cobblestones and petrol bombs according to the ritual of the 'smokescreen'. As one oppositional student activist of the late 1980s pointed out when reminiscing about his and his peers' experience of that era:

People of my age – with some exceptions can't say that the regime succeeded in manhandling them. Besides, at the end of the 1980s, communism's teeth were so eroded that being active in various oppositional organisations did not pose much of a risk – there was an atmosphere of impending decline.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, the decade had started with a formal increase in the state's capacity to mobilise its resources to carry out violence. While the regular army troops returned to their barracks in 1982, the security apparatus saw its ranks swell again, even to levels exceeding the Stalinist period. Opposition activists were still regularly harassed, beaten up by 'unknown perpetrators' and in some cases even killed, yet the violence was relatively limited as it remained within the legal restrictions of martial law.<sup>59</sup> When the Solidarity activist and priest Jerzy Popiełuszko was murdered, the regime showcased a trial of the supposed SB perpetrators, something that would have been unthinkable in the Stalinist (and even later) periods.<sup>60</sup> The confrontations between rebellious politicised youth and the ZOMO were a far cry from the pre-1956 arbitrary Stalinist terror, and while becoming commonplace during the decade, with a ratio of around 13,000 ZOMO functionaries for a population of thirty-eight million, communist Poland had become a state in which violence was contained. It even managed to work out a more or less legal (and perhaps even legitimate) framework for the use of violence.

## Conclusion

It is important to underline that from 1968 to 1989 the regime's use of physical violence became more rationalised, modernised and efficient. While it holds true that a certain division of labour existed between riot police, the security apparatus and the army in executing state violence, in 1968 the militia and the ZOMO charged at student protesters in a seemingly chaotic fashion and had only truncheons to disperse groups. In the ensuing years, modern riot gear was introduced while more organised and well-rehearsed tactics were applied to counter public disorder. The level of brutality and erratic use of violence was decreasing overall, although there were some occurrences of brutal violence in the 1970s and 1980s, some of which resulted in fatalities (mainly among protesting workers). In the late 1980s, oppositional youth activists were still frequently beaten and arrested, but the potential consequences they suffered were far less severe than in previous years. This evolution contributed to a decreasing

<sup>57</sup> Maciej Lizut, *Punk Rock Later* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2003), 58.

<sup>58</sup> Beata Tadla, *Pokolenie '89 czyli dzieci PRL-u w wolnej Polsce* (Warszawa: G+J, 2009), 208.

<sup>59</sup> Paczkowski, *The Spring Will Be Ours*, 469.

<sup>60</sup> On the Popiełuszko case, see Kevin Ruane, *To Kill a Priest: The Murder of Father Popiełuszko and the Fall of Communism* (London: Gibson Books, 2004).

risk factor related to state violence. Thus, despite becoming more efficient, the state's use of physical violence became less effective over time.

The bulk of those on the receiving end of mass violence on Poland's streets and squares were young people – mainly students and young workers – as they were the most likely to participate in protests and riots. As such, the main frontline protagonists in consecutive crises in the history of communist Poland were members of different generations who had been socialised under different circumstances. These youths therefore had different first-hand experiences of repression and state-instigated physical violence. Such different experiences led to different assessments. The youths of the 1980s had no immediate traumatic recollection of martial law, and during the final years of communism hot-headed youngsters sought violent confrontation with the regime in a 'smokescreen' while their less volatile peers found ways to neutralise violence by organising happenings. This was a significant evolution. The decreasing risk factor in effect turned public disorder and state violence into a cult-like ritual for the younger generation by the late 1980s. In the period from 1968 to 1989, differing generational experiences of state violence, combined with the reduction in the regime's use of physical violence, encouraged public disorder as the overall level of risk vis-à-vis state violence decreased over time.