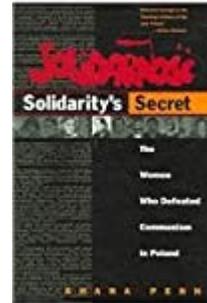




**Shana Penn.** *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. 400 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11385-9; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-03196-2.



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## A Solidarity Still Unexamined

Reading Shana Penn's *Solidarity's Secret* reminded me of a minor skirmish that broke out among scholars of Polish politics in the early post-communist years. In that debate, two books staked out a challenge to the presumed conventional wisdom about the birth of Solidarity. Arguing against the idea that intellectuals had played a central role in the birth of Solidarity, Roman Laba and Lawrence Goodwyn sought to place workers—in particular shipyard workers who had built the Free Trade Unions in the late 1970s, and who articulated non-economic demands in 1980—at the center of the drama. They argued that workers had in fact been twice overshadowed: first by late-comer intellectuals who elbowed workers aside in their negotiations with similarly educated communist officials, and then by Western academics who identified too strongly with their Polish peers and reinforced that narrative.

Laba positioned his book, from the very first page, against the “Elite Thesis,” and even suggested that those who advocated it found themselves in agreement with Poland’s communist leaders.[1] Goodwyn, too, hinted at a kind of unintentional symbiosis between regime and

scholars, remarking on how the “Leninist system crushed the world of the scholar.” As a result, he argued, studies of Poland in the West “reflected an accumulation of glimpses of the very apex of society,” both of the Party elite and dissident elites, too. He castigated his predecessors for their inability to link their interest in (dissident) ideas to the actions (the strikes and the worker self-government) that had captured the world’s attention.[2]

Laba and Goodwyn had a point, of course. Intellectuals, such as professional scholars, do tend to write about other intellectuals; the study of Poland was certainly not free of the kind of Kremlinology that plagued Soviet Studies in the post-Stalin era. Moreover, social history came late to Poland; in fact, even today it is marginal in Poland itself. Laba’s book in particular remains one of the most important studies of Polish workers. Yet their condemnation of what they imagined to be an opposing viewpoint undercut their impact. A detailed review by Michael Bernhard showed that Laba had overstated his data, and could not effectively separate worker contributions to the central demands of Solidarity from the contributions of intellectuals. Goodwyn, mean-

while, had staked his claim to originality on attention to detail, yet Bernhard argued persuasively that Goodwyn had in fact ignored a massive amount of detail, in the underground literature of the Workers' Defense Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników, or KOR), and its successors.[3] Other reviewers—it is fair to say that no books on Poland have ever received such exhaustive scrutiny—echoed these criticisms.[4] Goodwyn's book, which relied entirely on interviews and translated documents, particularly bothered reviewers, each of whom found different howlers that exposed a basic lack of knowledge of Poland.

In all these reviews, the argument about workers vs. intellectuals sometimes became quite arcane: was Andrzej Gwiazda, or Adam Michnik, or KOR as a whole, properly classified as “worker” or “intellectual”? The reviewers were, however, making an important and subtle point: that the nature of Polish society under communism was such that social categories broke down, rendering charges of elitism simply inaccurate. A Polish intellectual like Michnik might end up working on a factory assembly line, for example; others—thanks usually to the efforts of the communist regime itself—had come out of the working class, while many erstwhile workers (one thinks of Zbigniew Bujak) sought with some success to become intellectuals.

Behind this argument was a larger point about history itself. Scholars of Poland knew that Solidarity was a great and complicated event, like all revolutionary moments, and could not possibly be explained by one cause. Goodwyn and Laba sought to overturn what they saw as a monocausal explanation, and replace it with one that they had apparently discovered, and which the keepers of the rival flame sought to keep hidden. They failed to see that the standard explanation was not nearly so monocausal, because it could not be. Their corrective was sorely needed, but it was not revolutionary.

There is of course a fundamental difference between Shana Penn's work and Laba and Goodwyn's: the divide within Solidarity that Penn posits, between men and women, could not be crossed as could the worker-intellectual divide; she could hardly make similar mistakes of categorizing her subjects. In her knowledge of Poland, Penn falls somewhere between Laba and Goodwyn: she lacks Laba's almost native knowledge of Poland but has devoted herself to the story of Solidarity rather longer than did Goodwyn. While both come to Polish history as outsiders, without the linguistic skills necessary for deep archival research, Penn's work shows

greater ease with the particularities of Polish politics than does Goodwyn's.[5]

Like both Laba and Goodwyn, Penn was drawn to the story of Solidarity by the implications it has for questions of social justice, democracy, and activism in general. In fact, they are part of a whole generation of social scientists (one thinks of Bernhard, as well as David Ost, Michael Kennedy, and Timothy Garton Ash) who entered the field of Polish studies because of Solidarity. Solidarity—and it always bears repeating that it is the largest oppositional movement in history—turns out to mean very different things to different people. We can see this almost every day in the acrimonious political battles in Poland today, of course, but it is also evident in American academic discourse.

*Solidarity's Secret*, to my mind, has all the positive attributes of the books by Laba and Goodwyn, and the same general limitations.[6] Penn went to Poland after 1989, in search of women's experiences in communism and in opposition. During the course of extensive interviews with women who had been active in Solidarity, she began to notice oblique references to women's roles in the underground. Persistence helped her to overcome many interviewees' suspicion of her agenda, and to bridge the gap between American feminism and anti-communist opposition. In the end, she produced a collective biography of seven women (a number of others play supporting roles in this narrative) and their efforts to save Solidarity in the years after martial law was declared in December 1981. As the book's subtitle has it, they “defeated communism in Poland.”

In the literature, and even more in popular memory, there is an assumption that Solidarity in 1981 leads us to Solidarity in 1989. Anyone who spent time in Poland in the mid-1980s (as Penn did not, and all the more impressive is her work for this) knows that this simply is not so: the fire of martial law reforged Solidarity, melting down some components while giving rise to new ones, and forcing the core to reinvent itself to survive. As Penn shows, the group of women who created *Tygodnik mazowsze*, Solidarity's flagship underground paper, while also coordinating the safehouses and distribution networks upon which the (male) leadership relied, deserves much of the credit for this transformation. Solidarity did not effect the fall of communism through direct confrontation, though strikes (in 1980 and in 1988) and demonstrations were essential to that struggle. In large part, it did so through survival, as banal as that sounds: unlike the movements of the Prague Spring and

the Hungarian Revolution, Solidarity could weather the sticks and carrots of normalization.[7] It did so through flexibility and communication. The women of *Tygodnik mazowsze* really contributed something new, as they created, wrote, edited, and distributed what must have been the largest underground newspaper operation ever. (Again, those superlatives—but can any other clandestine movement boast press runs of up 10,000-50,000 *every week*? One wonders why schools of journalism do not study this business model.)

There are two truly wonderful things about this book. The first is that—as so often happens when research focuses on women in larger social movements—one learns an enormous amount about the *praxis* of opposition. This, in a way, is what Laba and Goodwyn were searching for, too: the experience of Solidarity behind the manifestos and essays. But Penn takes us much farther. We learn where meetings took place, what they looked like, how they were arranged, and how they were conducted. We learn how the newspaper was assembled, and about paper and ink. We learn about the half-life of safehouses, and about life in them. Ironically, the insiders who write social movement history often leave this stuff out; that has been true for most veterans of Solidarity, and Penn satisfies our curiosity.[8]

Second, Penn's feminist perspective attunes her to the ways in which actors mask their work. She devotes a chapter to the ways in which women's roles and women's bodies—pregnancy, motherhood, domesticity, etc.—offered camouflage for the women of *Tygodnik mazowsze*. For example, she points out that the underground activity of the martial law period was of necessity located in homes. This put women in charge, as they would be more likely to know where a printing press could be hidden in the root cellar, or how to put up a fugitive Solidarity leader. Family relationships and domestic obligations, on the other hand, could also hinder women's activism; men could disappear for years into the underground, but most women had to balance politics and life. But as Penn shows, motherhood yielded the necessity of invention: the women of *Tygodnik mazowsze* were forced to find practical, not theoretical, solutions to the immediate problems of the martial-law struggle. And thus their triumph.

*Solidarity's Secret* is an engaging and essential collective biography of women who were absolutely central to the story of Solidarity's triumph in 1989. No one else has tackled this story, from a feminist perspective or any other. (Indeed, this book also reminds one of just how lit-

tle research has been done on the mechanics and markets of underground publishing.) Why, then, does it summon to mind the Laba-Goodwyn debate of 1991?

The answer comes with the book's subtitle: "The Women who Defeated Communism in Poland." Penn has advanced the same claim that Laba and Goodwyn did: as in their work, the conventional story is presumed not only to be flawed, but censored. Intellectuals pushed workers' contributions to the margins, and men have done the same with women's contributions. Penn's rhetoric within the book tends to be rather more careful than that of her predecessors; she writes of "including" the women's story. For the most part, she allows the interviewees, in particular Barbara Labuda, to portray men as helpless, almost incompetent figures rescued by the women.

A reading of *Solidarity's Secret* prompts this reader to a surprising reflection: with the thirtieth anniversary of the birth of Solidarity less than three years away, we still have nothing approaching a comprehensive history of Solidarity. We do not even have a flawed version—and our Polish colleagues have not produced one, either. There are excellent works of political science and sociology (most of which, it must be said, are ignored by Penn, who thus overestimates the gaps in our knowledge), and many journalistic narratives that still have the power to bring the reader back to those luminous months of experimentation. Still as of yet, no historian has tried in a research monograph to portray the birth, life, and after-life of this immensely important actor in European history.[9]

To be clear: I am not suggesting that Shana Penn should have written this history. I think rather that the lack of a history leaves her tilting at windmills. *Solidarity's Secret* is a fine book that finds itself out in the open, constructing an iconoclastic position almost by default. For by a comprehensive history of Solidarity, I mean a history that would recognize that such a revolutionary moment as that of 1980, and especially one that helped set in motion a further revolution nine years later, could not possibly be traced back to a narrow set of factors.

Historians of the French or Russian revolutions have generally accepted the need to encompass a variety of complementary explanations. The events of 1980-1989 in Eastern Europe are of similar complexity. They were not brought about by tradition-steeped workers, or ex-Marxist intellectuals, or disillusioned/cynical Party leaders, or women editors, or the Pope, or Ronald Reagan, or the oil crisis, or the microprocessor, or a failed nuclear

plant in Ukraine, or Kremlin strategists, or even (I must admit) Orange Alternative. These and other actors are part of a story as complex as that of other great revolutions. Poland's transformation in the 1980s needs to be seen in the same way.

Instead, the paradigms that Penn challenges exist largely in political discourse, and in legend. There is no question that we—not only scholars, but all those who care about Polish history, including the citizens of Poland itself—need to be reminded that Solidarity is something larger than Lech Wałęsa, Pope John Paul II, or Adam Michnik. *Solidarity's Secret* thus has an important role to play, even if, inadvertently, it recapitulates the continued search for monocausality that marks contemporary Polish discourse.

One significant area in which the book does fall short of its promise deserves mention. This is hardly a book on the women of Solidarity. Penn's reach was defined by the women she met, and limited by her unfamiliarity with the literature and with Poland in general. She claims that half of Solidarity was female, yet never takes us to the factories, hospitals, and other workplaces where those union members worked. And if it was women's networks she sought, one misses any mention of the Women's Network that emerged among internees at Goldap in 1982; women in that network supported fellow internees as they encountered difficulties reintegrating into life after internment, and also as a distribution network for underground literature. As far as I am aware, that network has never been described in print; it, too, must be incorporated in the history of Solidarity and the fall of communism. One can hope that before too long, we will have histories of Solidarity; they will be all the richer for Shana Penn's research.

#### Notes

[1]. Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity: A Political Sociology of Poland's Working-Class Democratization* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3-4.

[2]. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Breaking the Barrier: The Rise of Solidarity in Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xvi, xviii.

[3]. Michael Bernhard, "Reinterpreting Solidarity," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 24, no. 3 (1991): 313-330.

[4]. Jan Kubik, "Who Done It: Workers, Intellectuals, or Someone Else? Controversy over Solidarity's Ori-

gins and Social Composition," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 3 (1994): 441-466; and Andrzej Tymowski, "Workers vs. Intellectuals in Solidarnosc," *Telos* 90 (Winter 1991): 157-174. Reviews by Dawid Warszawski (Konstanty Gebert) in the *Boston Globe* (May 5, 1991), and by Timothy Garton Ash in the *New York Review of Books* ("Poland After Solidarity," June 13, 1991, 46-58), respectively, generated vituperative replies from Laba (to Warszawski) and Goodwyn (to both reviewers); see *Boston Globe*, July 28, 1991, and *New York Review of Books*, October 24, 1991.

[5]. That there is plenty of room for non-Polish speakers to contribute to our knowledge of Poland was shown a decade ago by Tina Rosenberg, whose *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts after Communism* (New York: Vintage, 1996) is still essential reading.

[6]. I should note here that my work on gender and on Solidarity is frequently mentioned by Penn, in the text and in footnotes. However, I do not perceive any sharp polemic with my work, and this review is not intended as a response to Penn's quite generous comments on the limitations of my research.

[7]. See Grzegorz Ekiert, *The State against Society: Political Crises and their Aftermath in East Central Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe, 1989* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), chapter 1.

[8]. Another book that explored these questions was Maciej Lopinski, Marcin Moskit, and Mariusz Wilk, *Konspira. Rzecz o podziemnej Solidarnosci* (Gdansk: Oficyna "Kształt", 1989). The condescending treatment of women's movement work in that book, though, left much for Penn to do.

[9]. The closest thing may be Timothy Garton Ash's *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, recently reissued by Yale with a postscript. Garton Ash, however, does not cover the martial law period, and has not updated his 1983 text. In Polish, similarly, the standard work remains one first published that same year: Jerzy Holzer, *Solidarnosc 1980-1981: Geneza i historia* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1984 [Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Kra?g, 1983]). Though the work of an eminent historian, this book's reach extends no farther than does Garton Ash's. The same can be said for Holzer's follow-up volume, with Krzysztof Leski: *Solidarnosc w podziemiu* (Lodz: Wydawnictwo Lodzkie, 1990). It seems that the politicization of history in post-communist Poland has made consideration of Solidarity a task for some later generation.

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