Postwar Poland was shaken repeatedly by protest actions and uprisings against the Soviet-backed communist regime: in 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, and again, most successfully, from 1980 to 1981. The democratic opposition of the 1970s was monitored with keen interest in Sweden. The Swedish media reported frequently on the Workers’ Defense Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotniczej, KOR, or Kombinat, Social Self Defense Committee) and articles by well-known KOR activists like Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń were published in newspapers and journals of varying political stripe. The strikes of August 1980, which led to the formation of a new social movement, the Independent and Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity” (Niezależny Związek Zawodowy „Solidarność” NSZZ Solidarność), headquartered in Gdańsk, were met with tremendous sympathy throughout the Western world.

Over the 16 months that the burgeoning organization Solidarity — the name we will use here — was able to act entirely above ground, until General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law on December 13, 1981, Solidarity was the object of frenetic diplomatic activity and extensive international aid efforts. Sweden manifested agreement and support despite political and ideological reservations.

The dramatic events in Poland during 1980 and 1981 now stand out as the beginning of the end of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, but that perspective was far from the minds of contemporary onlookers. They remembered the outcomes of earlier reform movements, especially the bloody disintegration of the Prague Spring in 1968. The reformist policies of Alexander Dubček had been stymied by tanks from the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev had declared that when a threat to the cause of socialism arose in a socialist country, it was not only a problem for the country concerned, but for all socialist countries.

The events in Poland of 1980–1981 unfolded in the shadow of the policy the world came to call the Brezhnev Doctrine.

There was no doubt among Swedish diplomats and union leaders, who are the focus of this article, that they would support the independent trade union movement that had suddenly appeared on the Polish stage and which soon totaled 10 million members (in a country of 38 million). Still, they could not ignore the risk of renewed military intervention that would have disastrous consequences for Poland and security in Europe. A balance had to be struck between support for a movement with which one strongly sympathized (and which demanded nothing more than what it had been guaranteed by several international treaties) and acceptance of political and military realities. The actors involved were also obliged to uphold official Swedish policy, which was aimed at reducing tensions between the blocs in Europe and building bridges between East and West.

In the following, we paint a picture of the views of diplomats and union leaders on, first, how Solidarity should act to prevent leading itself and the world over the brink of ruin and, second, how they should themselves act in order to responsibly support the democratization of Poland.

WHAT SHOULD SOLIDARITY DO?

The Diplomatic Stance

Swedish diplomats in Warsaw who reported on the developments, with Ambassador Knut Thyberg in the vanguard, recognized early on the historical dimensions of the events. The Gdańsk Accord signed in late August opened the door to independent unions and sparked somewhat euphoric hopes for “humanization of the communist system” and a “more humane society”.

Still, the embassy was convinced that the changes had to happen within the framework of a socialist system and preservation of Poland’s membership in the Warsaw Pact. There was no doubt among Swedish diplomats and union leaders, who are the focus of this article, that they would support the independent trade union movement that had suddenly appeared on the Polish stage and which soon totaled 10 million members (in a country of 38 million). Still, they could not ignore the risk of renewed military intervention that would have disastrous consequences for Poland and security in Europe. A balance had to be struck between support for a movement with which one strongly sympathized (and which demanded nothing more than what it had been guaranteed by several international treaties) and acceptance of political and military realities. The actors involved were also obliged to uphold official Swedish policy, which was aimed at reducing tensions between the blocs in Europe and building bridges between East and West.

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Solidarity demanded management by the workers, the right to appoint directors. Rearly did unions in the west have this.

In a letter of November 7, 1980, to ICFU and LO, Wałęsa mentioned the reasons for choosing LD: “We think that the most suitable development in which such an agreement would be Sweden, since it is the Western country that is closest to us, because of its neutrality, freedom of visa tourism movement, already established numerous contacts with Swedish trade unions and already working ways of organizing [sic] of goods, organized by Polish Living in Sweden. Sweden had been the first country to help us [. . .] and it won’t be forgotten,” Wałęsa declared in a conversation with Swedish trade unionists on December 9, 1981. He repeated the statement in a telegram to LO’s national conference in Stockholm on February 12, 1982.

Swedish cooperation with Solidarity was above all an expression of international workers’ solidarity. It was fighting for the fundamental right of unions to self-governance. But it was also a response to Sweden’s own concerns over the consequences of developments in its neighboring country. That this contribution has resulted in few historical accounts can partly be explained by the efforts to remain as inconspicuous as possible. The upmost concern on the Swedish side was to provide as much help as possible, while avoiding international complications. LO did not want its support for Solidarity to be seen as aimed at the Communist Party in Poland (which it actually was) or as part of a cold war against Soviet states in Eastern Europe. The organization could not appear to be “the errand boy of the USA,” an accusation Polish media had aimed at LO.

For this reason, the Swedish position initially consisted of the position of the ICFU and the LO’s own stance. To neutralization by the Polish government and the Soviet Union was that Sweden was supporting anti-Communist activity in Poland and to protect their own support actions. The Swedish government wanted to maintain direct relations with Solidarity and insisted on keeping in the background the ICFU, the International Trade Secretariat (the international organization of the national unions), and Polish trade unions in Sweden. They were cooperating with the ICFU and the AFL-CIO and accepting “American money.” For the same political reasons, LO was willing to support what they regarded to be Solidarity’s political ambitions.

For that matter, Solidarity’s leadership shared the opinion that LO should have nothing to do with “American money,” but were less concerned about the Soviet invasion in Poland. Signals that Solidarity sent to Sweden in 1980 and 1981, in particular via union channels, were often predicated on the notion that Poland would be forced to believe any intervention would happen.

One consequence was that LO, in order to avoid accusations of political involvement, refused to cooperate with KOR and representatives of KOR in Sweden. Rune Mollén, LO’s National Secretary, was very clear at a meeting of the LO’s executive committee on January 12, 1980: “[W]e should avoid any contact with KOR, which is a political organization, because it may give rise to misunderstandings. Contacts should be organized differently between the union organizations.”

This view also emerges clearly in a letter Mollén sent on January 6, 1981, to the chairpersons of LO’s member unions. Solidarity was to be supported, Sweden required “great caution” and restraint with respect to the release of information, since the Polish government was sensitive. Mollén wrote that the organization was planning to acquire equipment for information programs, since this was the greatest need. He cited Wałęsa’s letter to ICFU and LO: “Solidarity wants “asistance mainly from Sweden due to our neutral position and our connections with Poland in general.” He thus emphasized GPs’s central role. Even if the local organizations were now going to get involved, LO consid- ered it “inappropriate to engage in broad-based, public fundraising in view of the political complications that might arise.” The best approach was for local organizations and unions to allocate funds to the Fund for Solidarity (i-fonden), established by the labor movement in 1969 to promote the development of trade unions and democracy in Eastern Europe. Even if direct negotiations with representatives of Solidarity (such as Deputy Chairman of the Interfac- king Founding Committee in Gdańsk, Bogdan Korf) in Stockholm, LO made it clear that they wanted no Polish intermediaries in Sweden.

The position was reiterated in letters from the LO leadership to its own organizations and the ICFU. With increas-
side interference in Poland’s affairs, which could give
We do? transformation into a political power?” The journal de-
situation […] How could […] Solidarity have escaped

Jósef Czyrek in New York in September 1980. He ex-
problem in a conversation with his Polish colleague

as the “transmission belt” between the State and the
stance was fictitious, especially in Poland, where the
cooperation with the Social Democratic Party. But the
political, in particular through the close union/political
knowledge of anyone in Sweden or Poland. The fiction
is union cooperation we want to develop, not political;

LO’s understanding of Solidarity’s political role was
with solidarity, the peaceful evolution into capitalism commenced. Virtually everyone was unprepared. even the Brezhnev doctrine was a paper tiger. For frightening adult children.

concern to the Ministry, but outwardly it chose to keep
Poland. It is unlikely any other matter was of greater
events extensively, and reports were steadily flowing in
Swedish foreign minister made his strongest statements
Swedish foreign minister made his strongest statements
that if the Polish regime did not intervene against its en-
lems could be resolved. The rest of the world ought to

Mattsson started by assembling equipment that had
among the Polish regional organizations and partly to
in accordance with Solidarity’s wishes — partly to avoid

how justified

How should we do?

the events described happened
that Brezhnev and his Politburo be-

severity. The matter, also, involved a trade union that was working for democ-
the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

affairs. It had poisoned the atmosphere of the interna-
tional relationship and engendered disappointment

loosely, the Russians finally got what they wanted when

with five printing presses in each. A third was on the

it all began

the Society’s founding beliefs about strike-prone and contentious

political, in particular through the close union/political
independence of anyone in Sweden or Poland. The fiction
is union cooperation we want to develop, not political;

WHY JUSTIFIED?

new Warsaw pact countries met on decem-
ation of any other country.

three-party center-right coalition led by

Jaruzelski instituted martial law at midnight on Decem-
he was permitted. solidarity was formed on

the Soviet leadership view the applica-
tion of its own doctrine? Were they prepared to once

sorcery” of the Brezhnev Doctrine. It was only at this time

For frightening adult children.

lenient in Poland and that this was the position adopted “from

the three-party center-right coalition led by

Wojciech Jaruzelski, who was already

First secretary of the Polish Com-
munist Party: the Poles

minded the Riksdag that the 1975 Final Act of Helsinki

Eckerberg in Stockholm had declared that

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the Soviet leadership view the applica-
tion of its own doctrine? Were they prepared to once

How justified was the caution?

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able to resist the pressure from Moscow? The
possible for the Soviet Union to intervene with troops?

weeks after Eckerberg in Stockholm had declared that

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the &quot;right&quot; of the Soviet Union to intervene with troops but not financial aid. The country

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2. Cryptogram, Warsaw to Stockholm, 801089 (147), under Thyberg, HPEp, file 135, UD.

3. Cryptogram, Warsaw to Stockholm, 801004 (164), HPEp, file 135, UD.

4. Memorandum 801015: Poland discussion of November 11 (contribution by Thyberg, HPEp, file 136, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Cf. also letter from Thyberg to Minister of Foreign Affairs 801030 (139), p. 6, HPEp, file 137, UD.

5. Memorandum 801031, Pol I, HPEp, file 137, UD.

6. Cryptogram, Warsaw to Stockholm, 801029 (246), HPEp, file 137, UD.

7. Cryptogram, Warsaw to Stockholm, 801040 (302), HPEp, file 150, UD.

8. Memorandum, Canadian ambassador with head of political section when the population of Sweden was 8.3 million. See also Cryptogram, Warsaw to Stockholm, 801026 (316), file 139, HPEp, UD.


11. Eliasson, Ståd för Solidaritet, p. 18. See also Cryptogram, Warsaw to Stockholm, 801021, (316), file 139, HPEp, UD.


14. Cf. Andrew D. MacIntosh, *Cold War International History Project* http://www.wilsoncenter.org (Virtual Archive 2.0, 1980–81 Polish Crisis), *A Factory is Born* [The OECD and Solidarity], *The Swedish Trade Union Confederation’s contact with Solidarity in Poland], LO F09A:3. See also Cryptogram from ICFU and ICFU members forwarded by LO Sweden to Solidarity in the Form of Printing Equipment, etc., *ication March 8, 1982*, LO F09A:7. See also Cryptogram, Swedish delegation to the UN, New York to Stockholm, 801025, file 136, HPEp, UD.


16. Andrzej Paczkowski, Malcolm Byrne, Gregory F. Domber & Howard E. McClelland, *The federations of the LO had at this time two million members when the population of Sweden was 8.3 million. According to Rune Molin in the International Committee, March 1, 1989, §5, Poland, LO A068, ARAB.

17. Deliberations within the Polish regime have been described by, among others, Wojciech Jaruzelski in *In Mein Leben für Polen: Erinnerungen, München 1993, and Hinter den Türen der Macht: Der Anfang vom Ende einer Herrschaft, Leipzig 1995; and by then deputy Prime Minister Mieczysław F. Rakowski in *Esbegun i Polen: Der Anfang vom Ende des Oktobrk, Hamburg 1995, esp. pp. 27-59.*


Abbreviations

UD Archive of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Central organisation for Swedish Government's Offices and Library) ARAB Labor Movement Archives and Library