

Poland, Five Years After Martial Law

A 'Second' Society Flourishes

By Susan Osnos

The idea of an alternative society has proved very attractive to Poles in the five years since martial law was imposed, and there is hardly an adult in Poland unaware of the existence of the underground. Many of those involved have said their participation in this parallel society has given them a feeling of freedom unavailable to citizens of most Communist countries.

When the regime sought to crush the Solidarity movement by imposing martial law on Dec. 13, 1981, the response of Polish society must have come as a surprise. The people found ingenious ways to assert their defiance of martial law, in keeping with the nonviolence that had been a cornerstone of the Solidarity movement.

A spontaneous network of independent institutions developed, encompassing just about every aspect of cultural and political life, and they continue today in a flourishing parallel society. Many aspects of the nation's official life — publishing, the press, education, research, health information, insurance, theater, art, film, radio, and audio and video tapes — now have their counterpart versions, created by independent underground activity.

During the first weeks after the military crackdown, all channels of communication — the media, telephones, Telexes, travel and public gatherings (including schools and universities) — were almost completely paralyzed.

The Poles responded by building an independent network of communication and information. Pamphlets appeared in Warsaw calling for the self-organization of society and urging that support systems be set up for victims of repression and that mechanisms be established for gathering and disseminating information.

Spectacular actions such as strikes and demonstrations were discouraged in favor of general, everyday resistance in a variety of forms, including rejection of officially sponsored activities.

As Solidarity's Wiktor Kulerski wrote from hiding: "This movement should create a situation in which the authorities will control empty stores, but not the market; the employment of workers, but not their livelihood; the official media, but not the circulation of information; printing plants, but not the publishing movement; the mail and telephones, but not communications, and the school system, but not education."

That vision has become an undeniable reality in the last five years. Those who participate are, of course, well aware of the dangers involved. Organizers, authors, printers, lecturers, distributors, students and others risk reprisals ranging from being fired, or being expelled from school, to imprisonment or even assault by "unknown perpetrators."

The impact of this parallel society on the Polish leadership has been striking. Because so many Poles are receiving information from alternate sources, the regime has been forced to tell more of the truth than in the past. For example, voter turnout in the 1985 parliamentary elections was

reported at 85 percent, the lowest figure ever "reported" by a Communist government (99 percent "turnouts" are not unusual in Eastern Europe).

It was at least partly in response to pressure from the alternative society that the regime released all political prisoners last September. There are plans to publish banned writers — George Orwell, among others — prob-

ably because it is known that their works already are widely circulating.

Five years after the imposition of martial law, Poland's leaders find themselves facing a united, independent society — a situation unprecedented in Eastern Europe.

In the words of Jacek Kuron, leader of the disbanded Committee to Defend Workers (known by its Polish initials

KOR): "We have an organized society under a Communist, totalitarian regime; this has never happened before in any country other than Poland. And the fact that we are organized means that the elite has become a mass phenomenon.... I know that tanks can come and raze us to the ground. But our victory cannot be reversed as long as this... elite... exists." □

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Susan Osnos is press director of the Helsinki Watch Committee, a human rights organization, which has just released a report on Poland's "alternative society."