

# Broadening the Cultural History of the Cold War

## The Emergence of the Polish Workers' Defense Committee and the Rise of Human Rights

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Over the past twenty years, the historiography of the Cold War has witnessed a revived interest in the significance of ideational factors such as culture and ideology for Cold War international relations.<sup>1</sup> Whereas post-revisionism in the 1970s and 1980s still focused primarily on how international politics was affected by the distribution of power in the international system, historians in recent years have emphasized that “ideas were an essential component of the cold war world, which cannot be reduced to any assumed ‘realist’ structure—be it conceived in purely economic or power based terms—without losing an essential dimension of the narrative.”<sup>2</sup>

This incipient cultural history of the Cold War has focused mainly on the period from 1945 until the early 1960s. David C. Engerman has even argued that the ideological dimension of international politics lost its significance after 1962.<sup>3</sup> Although it is true that the ideological dimension of the Cold War was toned down during *détente*, the relaxation of tensions also converted a

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1. This article is based on the broader anthropological or sociological understanding of culture as entailing systems of ideas and values, by means of which historical actors interpret their reality, as well as the structures of meanings through which the former are expressed and defined. Understood in this broader sense, ideology is a subspecies of culture. See Clifford Geertz, “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 194–233. For a useful survey of cultural theory more generally, see William H. Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture,” in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 76–96.

2. Leopoldo Nuti and Vladislav M. Zubok, “Ideology,” in Saki Ruth Dockrill and Geraint Hughes, eds., *Palgrave Advances in Cold War History* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 103; and Mark Kramer, “Ideology and the Cold War,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (October 1999), pp. 338–376.

3. David C. Engerman, “Ideology and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917–1962,” in Melvyn P. Leffler

specific set of ideas into potent factors in international politics: The human rights provisions enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act provided East European opposition groups with a means of exerting pressure on their governments that was largely normative. To students of international relations, the Helsinki Final Act shows how ideas and values can have powerful effects in international politics.<sup>4</sup>

The significance of ideas is readily apparent in the history of the Polish Workers' Defense Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, or KOR), which is the focus of this article. Although KOR was an important precursor of the social movement that emerged around the Solidarity trade union, it started out as a comparatively small group of intellectuals. Nevertheless, two of its members—Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń—managed to attract the attention of Western media to the violation of human rights in Poland thus exerting significant pressure on the Polish United Workers Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, or PZPR).

If the history of KOR broadly confirms the thesis of a “Helsinki effect,” it also challenges us to analyze in greater depth precisely how ideas had an impact on international and domestic politics. The literature on the Helsinki effect focuses on economic linkages but takes for granted that Polish human rights demands would find broad Western support. Some of KOR’s most vocal supporters, however, came from the Western New Left. Recent studies by Robert Horvath and Samuel Moyn have shown that not until the 1970s did the Western left begin to adopt a human rights language. When the projects of a full-fledged transformation of capitalist societies “suddenly came to seem like dark tragedies rather than bright hopes,” individual human rights appeared like a “purer,” minimalist alternative to comprehensive blueprints of a future society.<sup>5</sup> In the immediate postwar years, hopes for revolutionary change had often been projected on the Communist world. Even after few leftists harbored any doubts about the Soviet Union, the left was still forced to position itself vis-à-vis capitalism’s most significant rival. This situation created a group of Western advocates of the Workers’ Defense Committee. The

and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, 3 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Vol. 1, pp. 41–43.

4. Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

5. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 8; and Robert Horvath, “‘The Solzhenitsyn Effect’: East European Dissidents and the Demise of the Revolutionary Privilege,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (November 2007), pp. 879–907.

Helsinki effect must therefore be seen within a more general transformation of Cold War culture. Broadening the cultural history of the Cold War to include the 1970s and 1980s has the additional merit of helping to explain why human rights ideas emerged as potent international norms.

A journal article cannot provide a comprehensive account of the emergence of an organized opposition in Poland or even a full account of just KOR. Thus, I focus here on the activity of KOR from June 1976 to September 1977. I deal primarily with the activities of two of Poland's most prominent opposition figures, Kuroń and Michnik, not because other figures were less important but because these two were most active in raising international awareness of the Polish opposition. I do not deal with the Catholic Church because the alliance of intellectuals, workers, and Catholic clergy had not yet emerged in 1976–1977.<sup>6</sup>

The remainder of the article is divided into four sections. First, I briefly sketch the international human rights advocacy of the Workers' Defense Committee and discuss how it both confirms and challenges the idea of a Helsinki effect. I then devote two sections to showing how and why KOR's attempts to raise international awareness were particularly successful among Communism's former supporters and why this support was crucial. The concluding section is devoted to briefly discussing methodological questions related to the cultural history of the Cold War more broadly understood.

## The Workers' Defense Committee, Détente, and Human Rights

The year 1976 marked a turning point in Polish history. On 24 June 1976, a decision of the Polish authorities to increase food prices sparked violent worker protests in the cities of Radom and Płock, as well as in Ursus, a suburb of Warsaw. The PZPR responded with repression, arresting and firing workers.<sup>7</sup> Although labor unrest was hardly a novelty in Communist Poland, the events of 1976 were different in that the workers were supported by members of the intelligentsia. On 23 September 1976, a group of Polish intellectuals published an "Appeal to Society and the Authorities of the PRL [Polish People's Republic]" in which they denounced the repression and informed the public about the formation of a Workers' Defense Commit-

6. Michnik published his influential *Kościół—lewica—dialog*, which anticipated this alliance, in 1977. See Adam Michnik, *The Church and the Left*, trans. and ed. by David Ost (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

7. Paweł Sasanka, *Czerwiec 1976: Geneza—przebieg—konsekwencje* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2006).

tee.<sup>8</sup> In subsequent months, KOR helped the suppressed workers by providing legal advice, collecting money, and organizing political protest.<sup>9</sup>

From the start, two of KOR's main figures, Kuroń and Michnik, tried to raise international awareness of the situation in Poland. Prior to the June events, Kuroń had established himself as a source that Western correspondents consulted for independent information. In 1976, Kuroń used these contacts to inform Western media about his interpretation of the June events and about the formation of the Workers' Defense Committee.<sup>10</sup> Michnik was in Paris at the time. Granting him a passport had been an obvious attempt by the PZPR to get rid of a notorious troublemaker, but it turned out to be a self-inflicted blow for the party. Supported by prominent Polish emigrants such as Włodzimierz Brus and Leszek Kołakowski, Michnik publicized the formation of the Workers' Defense Committee by meeting leading West European intellectual and political figures, publishing essays in Western newspapers, giving interviews and making statements on television, and holding press conferences in London, Paris, Cologne, and Rome.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, KOR managed to initiate an impressive international media campaign. Interviews with Michnik and Kuroń and essays written by them were published in leading West European and U.S. newspapers.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on the information provided by Kuroń and others, Western journalists made the

8. For an English translation of the appeal, see Jan Józef Lipski, *KOR: A History of the Workers' Defense Committee in Poland, 1976–1981* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 467–469.

9. For a comprehensive recent account, see Andrzej Friszke, *Czas KOR-u: Jacek Kuroń a geneza Solidarności* (Kraków: Znak/ISP PAN, 2011). For accounts of the KOR's history in English, see Michael H. Bernhard, *The Origins of Democratization in Poland: Workers, Intellectuals, and Oppositional Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Lipski, *KOR*; and Robert Zuzowski, *Political Dissent and Opposition in Poland: The Worker's Defense Committee "KOR"* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992). Primary sources have been published by Zygmunt Hemmerling and Marek Nadolski, eds., *Opozycja demokratyczna w Polsce 1976–1980: Wybór dokumentów* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1994); Andrzej Jastrzębski, ed., *Dokumenty Komitetu Obrony Robotników i Komitetu Samoobrony Społecznej "KOR"* (Warsaw: Wydawn. Naukowe PWN, 1994); Łukasz Kamiński and Grzegorz Waligóra, eds., *Kryptonim "Gracze": Służba Bezpieczeństwa wobec Komitetu Obrony Robotników i Komitetu Samoobrony Społecznej "KOR"* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2010); and Robert Sulek, "'Gracze'—Komitet Obrony Robotników w propagandzie PRL, stereotypach oraz dokumentach Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych," *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2003), pp. 79–112.

10. Jacek Kuroń, *Gwiazdny czas* (London: Wydawn. Aneks, 1991), pp. 16–17.

11. For summaries of the conferences in London, Paris, and Cologne, see *Kultura* (Paris), Vol. 31, No. 1/2 (January–February 1977), pp. 163–165; *Kultura* (Paris), Vol. 31, No. 4 (April 1977), p. 146; and *Kultura* (Paris), Vol. 31, No. 5 (May 1977), pp. 159–160. For the London press conference, see also Leszek Kołakowski, Włodzimierz Brus, and Adam Michnik, "The Polish Resistance," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 23, No. 21/22 (20 January 1977), p. 61. For a summary of the Italian conference, see "Informacja PAP z dnia 1 marca 1977 r.," in Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), Archiwum Komitetu Centralnego Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej (Arch. KC PZPR), Wydział Prasy, Radia i Telewizji, File XXXIII-135.

12. See, for example, their interviews and essays in *Le monde* (Paris), 16 December 1976, p. 12; *Le monde* (Paris), 29 January 1977, p. 2; *Le monde* (Paris), 1 March 1977, p. 2; *Le monde* (Paris),

Workers' Defense Committee an increasingly salient issue in their coverage of Poland.<sup>13</sup> *Der Spiegel*, published in Hamburg, ran a three-part series on the June events that was basically a German translation of KOR documents. The work of Michnik and Kuroń was supported by a network of Polish émigrés in the West, among which Kuroń singled out the brothers Aleksander Smolar and Eugeniusz Smolar, as well as by Western scholars dealing with Polish and East European affairs.<sup>14</sup>

The Polish government's reaction to KOR and the formation of two other opposition groups varied in the months after September 1976.<sup>15</sup> The PZPR Politburo initially tolerated KOR and even met some of its demands by freeing most of the repressed workers. As the opposition movement gained momentum, however, the party went on the offensive. In May 1977, after Michnik had returned to Poland, he and other leading members of KOR, including Kuroń, were arrested on charges of having established contact with "Western propaganda centers" such as Radio Free Europe.<sup>16</sup> Just two months later, however, Poland's authorities changed their policy again. On 19 July, the PZPR Politburo approved an amnesty freeing the members of KOR and the remaining protesters of June 1976.

The Workers' Defense Committee, therefore, was not only the Soviet bloc's largest opposition group up to that point but also its most successful, having achieved its goal of freeing the workers who had been arrested in June 1976. Subsequently, KOR, which was rechristened the Committee for Social Defense "KOR" (*Komitet Samoobrony Społecznej "KOR"*, or KSS-KOR), widened the scope of its activities despite continued harassment. Thus, the group was an important precursor to the creation of Solidarity.

In a comprehensive study of KOR, Andrzej Friszke, the distinguished

11 May 1977; *Le nouvel observateur* (Paris), 6–12 June 1977, p. 48; *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 17 January 1977, p. 78; *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 14 March 1977, pp. 134–135; *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 23 May 1977, pp. 111–113; *Die Welt* (Hamburg) 3–6 May 1977; *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), 13 May 1977, p. 11; and *The New York Times*, 8 June 1977, p. 21. See also the Polish translation of an untitled interview with Adam Michnik in *Information* (Copenhagen), 20 April 1977, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Wydział Zagraniczny, File LXXVI-551.

13. See the prominent coverage of KOR in *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 15, 22, 29 November 1976; *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 27 September 1976, pp. 135–137; *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 23 May 1977, pp. 110–111; *The Times* (London), 26 November 1976, p. 10; *The Times* (London), 29 April 1977, p. 17; *The Times* (London), 20 May 1977, p. 15; *The Economist*, 1 January 1977, pp. 9–10; *The Washington Post*, 21 December 1976, p. A19; *The Washington Post*, 3 June 1977, p. A19; and *Chicago Tribune*, 6 February 1977, p. A1. For summaries of Italian and Belgian press coverage, see the press summaries of the Polish Press Agency from 27 October 1976, 8 November 1976, and 2 December 1976, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Wydział Prasy, Radia i Telewizji, File XXXIII-134.

14. Kuroń, *Gwiazdny czas*, p. 17.

15. The two other groups were the Movement for Human and Civic Rights and the Confederation for an Independent Poland.

16. Andrzej Friszke, *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945–1980* (London: Wydawn. Aneks, 1994), pp. 389–398.

historian of the Polish opposition, discusses several possible reasons for the PZPR Politburo's adoption of the amnesty. First, the regime feared a worsening of relations between the Catholic Church and the state. Moreover, many in the PZRP were not sure that legal trials were an effective way of battling the burgeoning opposition movement. Rather than deterring other intellectuals from political activities, the pending trials became a common grievance that united disparate opposition groups. Important though these factors may have been, the decisive reason for the amnesty, in Friszke's view, was Warsaw's concern that relations with the West would suffer if the KOR activists were put on trial.<sup>17</sup>

The history of KOR therefore shows how profoundly East-West relations had been transformed by détente. The country's openness to Western influences made it possible for Michnik and Kuroń to appeal to Western opinion. Relations with the West provided the dissidents with leverage at home. Daniel C. Thomas interprets the rise of groups like KOR and Charta 77 as a "Helsinki effect." The Communist governments of Eastern Europe, this argument goes, had agreed to include human rights provisions in the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) because they wanted to gain acceptance for the international status quo in Europe and to obtain Western credits and technology. By exposing the human rights record of their governments compared to CSCE obligations, East European dissidents and opposition groups showed how the Communist parties violated norms they had explicitly endorsed in the Final Act. Because repression of the opposition would have threatened to endanger economic cooperation with the West, the rulers of the Soviet Union and its satellites, according to this argument, tolerated the existence of the human rights groups.<sup>18</sup>

Although the case of KOR partly confirms this thesis, a closer look at those who supported KOR renders some aspects of Thomas's account problematic. One important factor was that the emergence of a Polish opposition coincided with the election of Jimmy Carter, who as president of the United States gave human rights a prominent place in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> In June 1977, after the KOR members were arrested, the U.S. congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe held hearings about Poland, and the Polish writer Gustaw Herling-Grudziński testified on behalf of Michnik.<sup>20</sup>

17. Friszke, *Czas KOR-u*, pp. 237–238.

18. Thomas, *Helsinki Effect*.

19. David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2004), pp. 113–144.

20. Adam Michnik, "Helsinki and Warsaw," *The New York Times*, 8 June 1977, p. 21.

Warsaw, however, did not face a unified Western front. Most importantly, Carter's emphasis on human rights in East-West relations was deeply at odds with Bonn's *Ostpolitik* and contributed to tensions between the U.S. president and West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.<sup>21</sup> Judging from the records of the PZPR's Central Committee and from selected records of the SPD archives, there is little evidence to suggest that human rights played a significant role in the informal or official Polish-West German meetings between June 1976 and July 1977.<sup>22</sup>

One of détente's main architects, Willy Brandt, was also critical of an aggressive human rights policy. In an article published in May 1977, he wrote that he welcomed the liberalization tendencies in the East connected with the Helsinki Final Act, and he expressed his admiration for groups like Charta 77. But he also warned of exaggerated hopes for what détente could achieve, and he cast doubt on the suggestion that an international court for human rights had been established in Helsinki.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, Brandt did have some concern about the fate of East European human rights activists. During a trip to Poland in June 1977 he discreetly intervened on behalf of Michnik with Polish authorities.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, he refused to exert pressure on Communist rulers by publicly endorsing the human rights cause of Eastern dissidents. Michnik later angrily recalled that when he came to West Germany in 1977 Brandt declined to meet with him.<sup>25</sup> Brandt did meet the exiled philosopher Leszek Kołakowski in spring 1977.<sup>26</sup> Afterward, however, the SPD's vice-chairman

21. On the human rights question as a source of tension in German-American relations, see Klaus Wiegrefe, *Das Zerwürfnis: Helmut Schmidt, Jimmy Carter und die Krise der deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2005), pp. 123–154. For the former chancellor's own perspective, see Helmut Schmidt, *Menschen und Mächte*, Vol. 2, *Die Deutschen und ihre Nachbarn* (Berlin: Siedler, 1990), pp. 222–229.

22. Ryszard Frelek, "Informacja nt. wizyty w Polsce delegacji frakcji SPD w Bundestagu," 17 January 1977, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Sekretariat KC, File XI/507; Edward Babiuch, "Informacja o wizycie delegacji Klubu Poselskiego PZPR w Bonn na zaproszenie frakcji parlamentarnej SPD," 2 June 1977, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Sekretariat KC, File XI/507; and Edward Babiuch, "Informacja o pobycie w Polsce przewodniczącego SPD Willy Brandta," 1 July 1977, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Sekretariat Edwarda Gierka, File XIA/778. For the SPD's documentation of Brandt's 1977 visit, see Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (AdSD), SPD-Archiv, SPD-Parteivorstand/Internationale Abteilung, File 11594. See also Hans-Eberhard Dingels, "Reise des Parteivorsitzenden nach Polen (27.6.–1.7.1977)," 18 August 1977, p. 60, in AdSD, Willy-Brandt-Archiv (WBA), A11.8, File 29; and "Deutsch-polnische Konsultationen am 22. und 23. Juni 1977 in Bonn," n.d., pp. 2–12, in AdSD, WBA, A10, File 30.

23. Willy Brandt, "Wider die alten Kreuzritter: Über Bedingungen und Chancen einer künftigen Entspannungspolitik zwischen Ost und West," *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), 26 August 1977, p. 3; and Willy Brandt, *Menschenrechte: Misshandelt und missbraucht* (Reinbek, Germany: Rowohlt, 1987).

24. Willy Brandt, *Erinnerungen: Mit den "Notizen zum Fall G"* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1994), p. 474.

25. Adam Michnik, *Letters from Freedom: Post-Cold War Realities and Perspectives*, ed. by Irena Grudzińska-Gross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 55.

26. Mieczysław F. Rakowski, *Dzienniki polityczne, 1976–1978* (Warsaw: Iskry, 2002), p. 199.

explained to the Polish ambassador that Brandt had merely agreed to meet a man called Stroynowski at the insistence of the SPD's Carlo Schmid and that Kołakowski had simply been accompanying Stroynowski. The official also reported that Brandt had declined to provide financial support for Polish émigrés and that no similar meetings would take place in the future.<sup>27</sup>

Making economic cooperation with the East conditional on human rights improvements, finally, would have contradicted the strategic thinking behind *Ostpolitik*. Engaging the East in various forms of exchange, such as economic cooperation, was supposed to expose Communist societies to Western influences. Economic exchange, in other words, was a means of inducing gradual and evolutionary changes and could therefore not be made conditional on these changes. *Ostpolitik*, then, had the aim of liberalizing the Soviet bloc; the human rights advocacy associated with the so-called Helsinki Effect, however, was not part of that strategy.<sup>28</sup> During a trip to Poland in November 1977, Schmidt even seems to have communicated his critical view of Carter's foreign policy to the Poles. A Polish protocol of confidential talks describes Schmidt as having said that Carter had understood the "political mistakes connected with the dissidents and the defense of human rights."<sup>29</sup>

An analysis prepared by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in advance of the Belgrade CSCE review conference identified not only the Federal Republic but also France—thus, two of Poland's most important Western trade partners—as the "least confrontational" European states.<sup>30</sup> The image arising from the archives of the PZPR, moreover, is not one of a Polish government exposed to Western pressures. To the contrary, Polish as well as German records suggest that the Poles brought up the issue of Western media coverage of the June events. During Polish–West European meetings at several levels of government held in 1976 and 1977, the Poles almost always complained about what they saw as an "anti-Polish campaign" in Western media. West European politicians usually responded in a defensive manner, saying that because of press freedoms they could not do much about it. They would then explain to their Polish interlocutors that they themselves were often the subject of critical media scrutiny.

The study of Cold War human rights activism gets even more complex

27. Cable No 1379/II from Polish Embassy in Cologne, 2 May 1977, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Sekretariat Edwarda Gierka, File XIA/557, p. 19.

28. Gottfried Niedhart, "Revisionistische Elemente und die Initiierung friedlichen Wandels in der neuen Ostpolitik 1967–1974," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2002), pp. 233–266.

29. "Informacja o wizycie Kanclerza Federalnego RFN—H. Schmidta w Polsce, w dniach 21–25 listopada 1977 r.," 2 December 1977, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Sekretariat KC, File XI/507, Fol. 126.

30. Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, "Perspektywy spotkania Belgrad 77 i kierunku aktywności polskiej," n.d., pp. 19–28, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Sekretariat Edwarda Gierka, File XIA/558.

once we ask how KOR managed to create publicity for its cause. Why would people in the West listen to someone like Michnik or Kuroń and declare their solidarity with them? Michnik later remembered that he had adopted a new approach to raising international awareness of Communist repression:

I spoke with members of the left which was a novelty. Normally, when someone wanted to engage in anti-Communist action, they negotiated with the anti-Communist right, but I said, "I am a man of the left and I am going to speak with people of the left. And I'll demand that they take a stand."<sup>31</sup>

Especially among the French and Italian left, Michnik met positive, at times even enthusiastic reactions. Left-wing periodicals such as *Il manifesto*, *Libération*, and *Le nouvel observateur* published his essays and appeals.<sup>32</sup> This response differed markedly from the situation of East European emigrants of the late 1940s and 1950s who had been likened to the counterrevolutionary French émigrés of the late eighteenth century.<sup>33</sup>

Scholars such as Samuel Moyn, Robert Horvath, and Tony Judt, moreover, have shown that in the mid-1970s the left had only begun to adopt a language of rights in its political discourse. According to Judt, "as a way of thinking about politics, 'rights talk' had been altogether unfashionable in Europe for many years." Until around the mid-1970s, "talk of 'rights' had long been out of favor among left-leaning European intellectuals, who echoed Marx's famous dismissal of 'the so-called rights of man' as egoistic and 'bourgeois.'"<sup>34</sup> Thus, Michnik's efforts seem to have tapped into significant changes in transnational intellectual discourses and political culture that were contexts for the Helsinki Effect, not its results.

To account for these complexities, we must travel further down the path suggested by Daniel Thomas. Even though he highlights the impact of identities and ideas on foreign policy, he focuses almost exclusively on the norms explicitly agreed upon in the Helsinki Final Act. However, a major tenet of Thomas's analytical perspective, the constructivist school of international relations theory, is that international politics always occur within a cultural context, which helps to shape how actors behave. This idea derives from the observation of the systemic and stable nature of international relations. The fact that states do not need to negotiate the rules of their interaction every time they encounter each other suggests that they *share* ideas about what states are

31. Michnik, *Letters from Freedom*, p. 54.

32. See, for instance, the members of the "Comité de solidarité avec des travailleurs polonais" in *Le monde* (Paris), 7 November 1976, p. 3.

33. Horvath, "The Solzhenitsyn Effect," p. 891.

34. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 564–565; Moyn, *The Last Utopia*; and Horvath, "The Solzhenitsyn Effect."

and how they can and ought to interact. The identities of social actors like states, however, are not simply given or derived from an objective environment but “are inherently social definitions of the actor grounded in the theories which actors collectively hold about themselves and one another and which constitute the structure of the social world.”<sup>35</sup> International politics is therefore embedded in systems of shared knowledge. The culture of international politics delimits the parameters under which actors are considered legitimate players in international society.<sup>36</sup>

As historians of international relations have noted, the culture of the Cold War was peculiar because, despite the important differences between the two systems, both sides were part of what S. N. Eisenstadt has called “the cultural and political program of modernity.”<sup>37</sup> “With the demise of fascist anti-Enlightenment thinking, both liberal democracy and communism pretended to the true mantle of scientific rationality. Both professed to embody modernity and appropriated the word ‘democracy’, but applied it to fundamentally different meanings.”<sup>38</sup> As a battle of ideas, the Cold War was fought over the meaning of modernity.

Both sides, therefore, had shared values and ideas well before some of them were explicitly codified in the Helsinki Final Act. This common cultural context and its dynamics turned the Western left into a particularly receptive audience for appeals by East European intellectuals who, often in the name of democratic socialism, demanded solidarity in their struggle for human rights. The support of these specific people, in turn, may have been particularly problematic for the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

## The Workers’ Defense Committee and the Western Left

To understand the transnational cultural dynamics, on which KOR’s human rights campaign could draw, it is important to recognize that the identity of

35. Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (April 1992), p. 398.

36. The magnum opus of constructivism is Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Its basic ideas can be derived from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

37. S. N. Eisenstadt, “The Civilizational Dimension of Modernity: Modernity as a Distinct Civilization,” *International Sociology*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 2001), pp. 320–340.

38. Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, “East Is East and West Is West? Towards a Comparative Socio-Cultural History of the Cold War,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (October 2003), p. 8; and Engerman, “Ideology and the Origins of the Cold War.”

the Soviet Union and its allies did not come down to their opposition to human rights. On the contrary, the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe thought of themselves as agents of an elaborate ideological project organized around a set of ideas and values—social justice chief among them—that were as much part of international political culture as were political and civil rights.<sup>39</sup>

The meaning of modernity, moreover, was contested not only between East and West, but also within the West. After 1945, following the interwar crisis of liberal democracy, many believed that the horrors of fascism were a result of Western modernity's "internal contradictions." Searching for an alternative, the USSR became an important point of reference because the Soviet project, which based its political identity on a revolutionary break with the Western political and economic system, embodied a socialist "counter-modernity." Moreover, having industrialized "backward" Russia, defeated Fascism, and sent the first human being into space, this Soviet countermodernity seemed to many to be the way of the future. In the bipolar context of the early Cold War, the Soviet Union came to embody the hopes of many in the West who sought an alternative modernity—despite the USSR's repressive character and the atrocities the Soviet regime had committed. Therefore, many Western—particularly French and Italian—intellectuals either joined the Communist movement or became "fellow travelers."<sup>40</sup>

The events of 1956 in Hungary were a watershed with regard to Western perceptions of the Soviet Union. But as late as 1961, Jean-Paul Sartre, who had condemned the invasion of Hungary, still believed that, "whatever its crimes, the U.S.S.R. has over the bourgeois democracies this redoubtable privilege: the revolutionary objective."<sup>41</sup> Not until the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia was the Soviet Union finally discredited as the standard-bearer of a socialist countermodernity. But even at that time a certain ambiguity remained in the relationship between the Soviet project and those in Western Europe who sought to transform the Western model. On one hand, this resulted from the bipolar structure of the international system, as Eric Hobsbawm argued:

But if there was no significant movement to overthrow capitalism worldwide, revolutionaries still hoped that its contradictions and those of its international

39. Rosemary Foot, "The Cold War and Human Rights," in Leffler and Westad, eds., *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 3, pp. 445–465.

40. Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 329–336, 361–362, 429–431; Horvath, "The Solzhenitsyn Effect," pp. 882–895; and Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

41. Horvath, "The Solzhenitsyn Effect," p. 891.

system made it vulnerable—perhaps one day fatally vulnerable—and that Marxists, or at any rate socialists, would provide the alternative to it. If communist power did not look like expanding much . . . , the world was still divided into the “two camps,” and any country or movement which broke with capitalism and imperialism tended to gravitate or to be notionally absorbed into the socialist sphere.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, both Western leftists and Soviet Communists drew on a common philosophical heritage: Marxism. Writes Tony Judt,

When it came to changing the world there was still only one grand theory purporting to relate an interpretation of the world to an all-embracing project of change; only one Master Narrative offering to make sense of everything while leaving open a place for human initiative: the political project of Marxism itself.<sup>43</sup>

In the late 1960s and early 1970s individual in the West who still cherished the idea of a revolutionary transformation along Marxist lines could no longer deny or ignore the deformations this revolutionary project had brought about in Eastern Europe. These changes created an environment that was particularly conducive to the efforts of Kuroń and Michnik to mobilize Western support for their demands.

This is particularly true for the Communist parties of France and Italy. Since 1956, to varying degrees, both parties (especially the Italians) had adopted an independent position vis-à-vis Moscow. In 1968, both took the unprecedented step of openly criticizing the invasion of Czechoslovakia. The pinnacle of this development was the short-lived Eurocommunist project in which the Italian and French Communist parties (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, or PCI, and *Parti Communiste Français*, or PCF), as well as their Spanish comrades, committed themselves to respecting political pluralism, human rights, and democratic procedures in their efforts to build a socialist society.<sup>44</sup>

These changes, no matter how unprecedented, had their limits. Neither the PCF nor the PCI considered severing ties with Moscow, and their criticism, even of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, remained “contextualized.” Although they acknowledged the negative East European realities, they never criticized Soviet-style socialism as such and even maintained that it was supe-

42. Eric Hobsbawm, “Goodbye to All That,” *Marxism Today*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (October 1990), p. 19.

43. Judt, *Postwar*, p. 403.

44. For a major recent study of the PCI and PCF during the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Maud Bracke, *Which Socialism? Whose Détente? West European Communism and the Czechoslovak Crisis, 1968* (New York: Central European University Press, 2007). See also Silvio Pons, “The Rise and Fall of Eurocommunism,” in Leffler and Westad, eds., *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 3, pp. 45–65; and Pavel Kolar, “The Spectre Is Back: New Perspectives on the Rise and Decline of European Communism,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2010), pp. 197–209.

rior to the Western model.<sup>45</sup> As both parties moved nearer toward assuming government responsibilities, they came under pressure both from their domestic societies as well as from their countries' Western allies to prove their democratic credentials. At the same time, a New Left emerged that was sharply critical of the orthodoxy and authoritarianism of Soviet Communism and perceived the Marxist project in an undogmatic and somewhat romantic fashion.<sup>46</sup>

Kuroń was well aware of this situation and managed to use it for the cause of the Polish opposition. On 18 July 1976, he wrote an open letter to Enrico Berlinguer, chairman of the PCI. With the Workers' Defense Committee not yet formed, Kuroń presented only himself. Berlinguer, in contrast, was a prominent figure in West European politics. Because of the publicity East European dissidents were receiving at this time, leading Italian newspapers published the letter. Moreover, skillfully exploiting the link between the international situation and the PCI's domestic policies, Kuroń managed to establish a connection between his situation and Berlinguer's ideological commitments.<sup>47</sup>

In the letter, Kuroń addressed Berlinguer as "a leader of a workers' party, as a man, who announces the program of a socialism respecting human rights, and as a communist." Then, he described the PZPR's decision to raise food prices—the reason for the labor protests—as a deeply undemocratic decision symptomatic of a political system in which a small ruling elite had deprived the workers and society as a whole of any means to express its will or defend its interests. Throughout the letter Kuroń emphasized the lack of legal protections of workers' and human rights in Poland. In this situation, the Polish intellectual concluded, the societies in which political opinion could be freely expressed had an obligation to speak out for the rights of Poland's workers. Kuroń therefore asked Berlinguer to use his international influence to intervene on behalf of the June 1976 protesters.

The reason Kuroń addressed his letter to Berlinguer, of all European politicians, lies with the Italian's ideological commitments as a leading proponent of the Eurocommunist project. By addressing Berlinguer as a politician who stood for a type of socialism that respected human rights and by contrasting this goal with the lawless and undemocratic situation in a socialist country, Kuroń managed to exert significant normative pressure on the PCI

45. Bracke, *Which Socialism? Whose Détente?* pp. 276–278, 284–285, 294–309, 340–341.

46. Judt, *Postwar*, pp. 401–407.

47. Jacek Kuroń to Enrico Berlinguer, 18 July 1976, in Archiwum Opozycji (AO), Kolekcja Jacka Kuronia, AO III/12k.2/1. See also Andrzej Friszke, "Z ziemi polskiej do włoskiej. List Kuronia do Berlinguera i jego konsekwencje," in his *Przystosowanie i opór* (Warsaw: Więź, 2007), pp. 276–283.

leader. This pressure seemed even greater because the June events concerned Berlinguer's primary constituency: workers. Michnik expressed this connection more bluntly. In an interview with *La Repubblica* he argued that if the PCI failed to speak up for the rights of Polish workers then Italian workers would have no reason to believe that, once in power, the Communists would safeguard Italian labor's rights.<sup>48</sup>

Kuroń's strategy worked. The Italian Communists sent their Polish comrades a letter in which they criticized the repressions and asked the PZPR leaders to show restraint and mercy for the June protesters. In the letter, the PCI Secretariat addresses Poland's rulers as "comrades" and as adherents to a common political project, noting that Italian Communists hoped the Poles would show restraint precisely because Italian workers were looking to the socialist world for models of how to solve social conflicts. The Italians did not, however, criticize the legal proceedings against the workers.<sup>49</sup> The content of the letter was published on the front page of the PCI's daily newspaper *l'Unità* and was widely reported on in the Italian press.<sup>50</sup> Crucially, Communist-dominated trade unions joined the protests. The Italian delegation to the Polish trade union congress of 1976, held shortly after the June events, criticized the measures taken against the Polish workers.<sup>51</sup> In communiqués published in the Communist press in July and again in November 1976, the trade union of Italian metal workers repeatedly criticized the measures taken against the workers and declared that it had established contacts with the KOR.<sup>52</sup> In May 1977, the Communist-dominated *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*, or CGIL) wrote a letter to the chairman of Poland's Council of the State to protest against the repression of KOR.<sup>53</sup>

The New Left seemed even more open to KOR's appeals. Upon leaving Western Europe in May 1977, Michnik published an article in *Il manifesto*, the periodical of a group of PCI dissenters who had been expelled from the

48. "Informacja PAP z dnia 17.XI.1976," in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Wydział Prasy, Radia i Telewizji, File XXXIII-134.

49. Report from Gerardo Chiaromonte (director of the PCI) to the Central Committee of the PZPR, 20 July 1976, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, File LXXVI-548.

50. "Lettera aperta d'un 'dissidente' polacco a Berlinguer," *l'Unità* (Rome), 20 July 1976, p. 14; and "Pronunciate in Polonia altre sette condanne," *l'Unità* (Rome), 21 July 1976, p. 1. For the press coverage of the PCI's response, see PAP, "Włoska prasa komunistyczna i lewicowa o Polsce," 23 September 1976, p. 22, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Wydział Prasy, Radia i Telewizji, File XXXIII-134.

51. Emilio Gabaglio, "Włoskie syndykaty a 'Solidarność,'" *Więź*, Vol. 36, No. 5 (May 1993), pp. 198–199.

52. Polish translation published in *Kultura* (Paris), Vol. 12 (December 1976), p. 153.

53. Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro to Henryk Jabłoński, telegram, 27 May 1977, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Sekretariat Edwarda Gierka, File XIA-1046.

party for their criticism of the Italian Communists' continued alignment with Moscow.<sup>54</sup> In an editorial preceding Michnik's article, the publication urged the PCI to intervene on behalf of the Workers' Defense Committee. Arguing that KOR's members were standing on the front lines of class struggle, the journal's editors asked whether their Italian comrades would abandon a Polish opposition whose sole crime was to fight for the right of Polish workers to strike.<sup>55</sup>

On one hand, then, the divisions in the Italian left allowed Michnik to step up the pressure on the PCI to support the cause of the Polish opposition. On the other hand, a deeper bond seems to have existed between many members of KOR and the Western New Left. This is most obvious in an appeal from thirteen Polish intellectuals, including Michnik and three other founding members of the Workers' Defense Committee, first published in *Libération* on 28 July 1976. Following the June events, they appealed to leading intellectual figures of the Western left and to all those "who feel solidarity with the struggle of the workers of the world for the liberation of labor." They went on to describe the "political struggle of the Polish people" for human rights as "a struggle for democratic socialism, a socialism defined by Karl Marx as 'the very opposite of the situation where man is humiliated, an abandoned slave held in contempt.'"<sup>56</sup>

To be sure, Marx is not cited in any other document related to KOR, and the "democratic socialism" Polish opposition figures like Michnik referred to was not Marxist in any meaningful sense. Describing the KOR's ethos, Jan Józef Lipksi mentions, among others, broadly understood Christian ethics as an inspiration, but not Marxism.<sup>57</sup> Most importantly, the oppression that the committee fought was defined primarily in political rather than economic terms. Michnik, and with him probably the vast majority of Polish opposition figures, rejected capitalism, but he considered totalitarianism to be by far the greatest human nightmare.<sup>58</sup> By the mid-1970s, then, Kuroń had long since completed his detour "to Communism and back," and Michnik had ceased to be "a Marxist dissident and turned into an anti-totalitarian opposi-

54. Bracke, *Which Socialism? Whose Détente?* pp. 291–294.

55. Adam Michnik, "Wracam do Polski," Polish translation of a text originally published in *Il manifesto*, 18 May 1977, in AO, File AO III/17k.6/2.

56. Quoted from Adam Michnik et al., "Appeal from Poland," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 23, No. 15 (30 September 1976); and Stanisław Barańczak et al., "Varsovie: L'appel des treize," *Le nouvel observateur* (Paris), 2–6 August 1976, pp. 32–33.

57. Lipksi, *KOR*, pp. 75–76.

58. Michnik, *The Church and the Left*, p. 192; Jan Skórzyński, "Solidarność i socjalizm," *Tygodnik Powszechny* (Kraków), 26 April 2009; and Jan Skórzyński, *Od Solidarności do wolności* (Warsaw: Trio, 2005), pp. 150–153.

tionist.”<sup>59</sup> However, both intellectuals had once placed their hopes in the Marxist project, and both still considered themselves to belong to the left.

This self-identification as “left-wing” and “socialist” allowed Michnik to integrate Western and Eastern intellectuals into a transnational democratic project and thus to tie the fate of the Western left to the fate of Polish democracy. When the PZPR stepped up its efforts to suppress the burgeoning opposition, Michnik declared in *Der Spiegel* and *Le nouvel observateur* that not only Poland but “all of Europe” was at a crossroads: “Either the future holds a social order based on democratic norms or its name will be totalitarianism.” Struggling for democracy, he went on, the Polish opposition was fighting for the most fundamental values of European humanism, which was why its struggle was relevant for the Western left:

If the celebrated program of a “socialism in liberty” is not to deteriorate into its own caricature, if West European Socialism is truly to be a community of free human beings, than the totalitarian social systems of Eastern Europe may turn out to be the greatest threat to this program.<sup>60</sup>

Already in his open letter to Berlinguer, Kuroń had warned that new social turmoil in Poland would mean not only a “tragedy for the Polish nation” but also a “political defeat for the entire European left.”

Such appeals had the deepest impact in France where the “Solzhenitsyn shock” of 1974 had thrust the French left into a state of profound transformation. Some leading French leftists began reexamining their former sympathies for the Soviet project. Two media-savvy young intellectuals—the so-called nouveaux philosophes, Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann—even denounced Marxism outright, declaring it a form of totalitarianism. These developments set the stage for an almost enthusiastic reception of the Polish opposition, and later of the Solidarity movement, by French intellectuals. As an anti-totalitarian humanism and a general skepticism of grand ideological schemes took root in Paris, something of an “elective affinity” flourished between Polish oppositionists and French intellectuals.<sup>61</sup> In June 1977 the editors-in-chief of France’s most important journals of the non-Communist left

59. “Do i od komunizmu” [To Communism and back] is the subtitle of the first part of Kuroń’s autobiography. For the Michnik quotation, see Skórzyński, *Od Solidarności do wolności*, p. 92.

60. Adam Michnik, “Ich werde schreien,” *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 23 May 1977, pp. 111–113; Adam Michnik, “Je crierai,” *Le nouvel observateur* (Paris), 6 June 1977, p. 48; and Adam Michnik, “Vive la Pologne!” *Le monde* (Paris), 16 December 1976, p. 12.

61. For changes in French intellectual life during the 1970s, see Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004); Horvath, “The Solzhenitsyn Effect;” Judt, *Postwar*, pp. 559–566; Jan-Werner Müller, “The Cold War and the Intellectual History of the Late Twentieth Century,” in Leffler and Westad, eds., *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 3, pp. 5–8.

called on French leftists to rally behind KOR. Appealing to all parties and trade unions that had signed the common electoral program of the Socialist Party and the PCF, they argued that it would be unforgivable to watch in silence as the Polish opposition was put on trial in Warsaw. Given the common struggle for workers' rights and democracy, not just the members of the committee were on trial in Warsaw: "It is our trial that is being prepared in Poland," the authors concluded. "And it is yours."<sup>62</sup>

The support that KOR mobilized in the West was the result not only of the explicit inclusion of human rights in the Helsinki Final Act, but also of the international political culture that had evolved around competing interpretations of modernity, values and ideas—a culture that had always been shared across the Iron Curtain. What had changed by the 1970s was that the values associated with the Soviet version of modernity were increasingly seen as inferior to the values it violated; that is, political and civic rights. The case of KOR was especially powerful because people defining themselves as democratic socialists showed how the violation of political rights was particularly damaging for workers, the very social class in whose name the Communists claimed to rule. This way, the transnational framework of Cold War culture, and the dynamics inherent in it, had established links between the otherwise unconnected causes of the emergent Polish opposition and the Western left.

### **The PZPR and the “Foreign Policy” of the Workers Defense Committee**

The cultural dynamics of Cold War international culture created two groups of people in Western Europe who were particularly susceptible to claims by East European intellectuals: Western Communists and the New Left. Likewise because of the structure of Cold War culture, the support of Western leftists may have proved to be particularly important.

In the 1970s under Edward Gierek, Poland's official propaganda generally took on a less aggressive tone, deemphasizing class struggle. But despite the pragmatism and liberalism of the Gierek era, ideology remained important. The 1970s consumer socialism was in fact part of a broader ideological project that was supposed to lead Poland out of its “backwardness” and turn it into a modern, “second Poland”—complete with a typically gigantic industrial endeavor in the form of the Katowice Steelworks. For all its focus on consumption and patriotism, the official discourse of the 1970s constantly in-

62. Jean Daniel et al., “A toutes les centrales syndicales, aux partis signataires du ‘programme commun,’” *Le nouvel observateur* (Paris), 13–19 June 1977, p. 50.

voked the image of a dynamically developing country on the road to a brighter, socialist future.<sup>63</sup>

This ideological project was a revolutionary break with the Western model. As an experiment in socialism, Stephen Kotkin notes, the USSR was supposed to be “a superior alternative to capitalism, for the entire world. If socialism was not superior to capitalism, it could not be justified.”<sup>64</sup> Even “peaceful coexistence” did not mean an end to ideological competition with the West but merely that such competition was supposed to be waged peacefully, within the confines of autonomous national developments.<sup>65</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, Poland’s international position played an important role in the ideological efforts of the 1970s. In 1971, the newly elected PZPR First Secretary, Gierek, noted that social apathy among young Poles resulted from the experience of how their country had fallen back as compared to other societies.<sup>66</sup> Such comparisons were possible because even prior to détente Poland was never completely isolated from Western influences. Contacts with the large community of Polish emigrants in the West, Polish émigré journals smuggled into Poland, and, most importantly, Radio Free Europe kept Poles informed about how their country was perceived abroad.<sup>67</sup> In this context, détente seems to have been perceived by Polish Communists not only as a form of establishing economic cooperation with the West but also as a way to enhance this self-image. The PZPR’s more active role in relations with the West brought the party recognition both from its Western Communist allies and from its ideological adversaries. The major goal of the PZPR’s propaganda for 1976 and 1977 was therefore defined as enhancing Poland’s image as a dynamically modernizing country, with highly developed productive forces, just and human social conditions, a rich culture, and a prime research infrastructure.<sup>68</sup>

The fact that détente also had adverse effects for the party’s self-image does not seem to have caught the Polish leaders by surprise. Well before West-

63. Marcin Zaremba, “Propaganda sukcesu: Dekada Gierka,” in Piotr Semków, ed., *Propaganda PRL: Wybrane problemy* (Gdańsk: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2004), pp. 22–32; and Jan Kubik, *The Power of Symbols against the Symbols of Power: The Rise of Solidarity and the Fall of State Socialism in Poland* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), pp. 51–53, 59–74.

64. Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 19.

65. For a contemporary view, see Istvan Kende, “Peaceful Co-Existence: Its Interpretation and Misinterpretation,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 1968), pp. 352–364.

66. Zaremba, “Propaganda sukcesu,” p. 24.

67. On RFE, see Jolanta Hajdasz, *Szczekaczka czyli Rozgłoszenia Polskiego Radia Wolna Europa* (Poznań: Media Rodzina, 2006); and Paweł Machcewicz, “Monachijska menażeria”: *Walka z radiem Wolna Europa* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych, 2007).

68. “Informacja na temat działalności propagandowej na zagranicę,” 29 September 1976, p. 109, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, File XXXIII-44.

ern media covered the rise of Poland's opposition, the PZPR's departments of propaganda and international relations seem to have understood the potential threat posed by the Helsinki Final Act. Documents defining the outlines of propaganda work for 1976 and 1977 were based on the premise that détente would intensify the international ideological struggle because the Western world would now focus on socialism's human rights record.<sup>69</sup> In a way that is significant for Cold War culture, the PZPR did not react to these allegations by rejecting the idea of human rights but by arguing that they were safeguarded more "fully" in socialist societies.

This highlights another problem of Daniel Thomas's account of the Helsinki effect. Like other authors, he takes for granted a specific meaning of "human rights." Throughout the Cold War, however, East and West were competing over the dominant interpretation of what human rights were. The Soviet Union and its allies were not passive observers of these debates but actively contributed to them through, for instance, their membership in the UN Human Rights Commission.<sup>70</sup> In 1969, for instance, the commission passed a resolution noting "the significant practical and theoretical contribution of Lenin, prominent humanist, to the development and realization of economic, social and cultural rights' and the 'historical influence of his humanistic ideas and activity' in this field."<sup>71</sup>

Against this background, a document for the PZPR's Central Committee outlining possible responses to the post-Helsinki human rights campaign claimed that, for the socialist states, there is "absolutely no reason to evade a serious discussion concerning human rights." After all, the paper's author claimed, by establishing the "most just of all social orders," the October Revolution's aim had been to make sure that, for the first time in history, individual rights were guaranteed not only in words but also in deeds. The Western model knew merely an "abstract" guarantee of human rights, whereas socialist countries not only guaranteed political rights in their constitutions but had implemented key provisions such as the right to work and the right to humane working conditions, the right to social security, the right to education, and the right to participate in high culture that actually enabled people to live a life in human dignity.<sup>72</sup> In order to counter human rights-related charges,

69. "Wnioski dla pracy ideowo-wychowawczej w związku z nowym etapem odprężnienia po zakończeniu KBWE," attachment No. 7 to protocol No. 1 of the KC PZPR Secretariat meeting, 16 January 1976, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Sekretariat KC PZPR, File XI/318.

70. Foot, "The Cold War and Human Rights."

71. Cited in Horvath, "The Solzhenitsyn Effect," p. 894.

72. Krzysztof Kruszewski, "Informacja w sprawie dywersyjnej kampanii 'obrony praw człowieka i obywatela,'" in Łukasz Kamiński and Paweł Piotrowski, eds., *Opozycja demokratyczna w Polsce w świetle akt KC PZPR (1976–1980): Wybór dokumentów* (Wrocław, Poland: Gajt, 2002), pp. 53–56.

documents outlining the PZPR Politburo's ideological aims for the second half of 1977 foresaw courses for party members on "Human rights and their implementation in socialism and capitalism" and a theoretical party conference on "Human and civic rights in capitalism as well as equality and justice in socialism."<sup>73</sup>

This was the context within which the Polish opposition presented a specific challenge. The arguments meant to counter Western charges were rendered hollow when Western media focused their attention not so much on an isolated group of intellectuals defending "abstract" human rights but on a committee defending the rights of *workers* against the Polish United Workers' Party. This effect was significantly amplified when KOR was supported by the Western left, and especially Western Communists, whose existence proved the West's "deficiency" in terms of granting social rights.

This left-wing support made it almost impossible to discredit the opposition as a mere agent of Western "reactionary forces." In protesting against the crackdown of May 1977, the Italian metal workers wondered what the charge of complicity with "foreign organizations" meant. After all, they, too, were a Western organization with connections to KOR. They further declared their solidarity with Polish workers, arguing that in doing so they were honoring the same class principles that informed the struggle of workers for democracy in Italy and in other parts of the world.<sup>74</sup>

The context of this debate also explains why Kuroń is probably correct to assume that his letter to Berlinguer contributed to liberating most of the workers arrested after June 1976.<sup>75</sup> The support of Berlinguer and of the Italian Communists for KOR lent credibility to the charge that the PZPR was failing in the very field in which it claimed to be implementing a superior form of safeguarding human rights. The Italians' protest note to the PZPR initiated a flurry of activity within the Polish Politburo.<sup>76</sup> A response underwent three drafts whose evolution shows the PZPR's intention to counter the claim that the June events were in any way legitimate workers' protests. The initial version still called the protests "criminal acts" that had occurred "against the background of workers' demonstrations." The main thrust of this draft was to dispel allegations that the legal proceedings against the workers

73. "Informacja na temat działalności propagandowej na zagranicę."

74. See the text of the Italian metalworkers' statement in *Kultura* (Paris), Vol. 31, No. 7/8 (July–August 1977), pp. 269–270.

75. Kuroń, *Gwiezdny czas*, p. 9. See also Andrzej Friszke and Andrzej Paczkowski, eds., *Niepokorni: Rozmowy o Komitecie Obrony Robotników* (Kraków: Znak, 2008), pp. 44, 137.

76. For the activity that followed receipt of the Italian note, see the documents in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, File LXXVI-548.

lacked due process. Moreover the draft emphasized that the decision to raise food prices had been preceded by lengthy and democratic consultations.

The final letter, which also seems to have served as a template for a paper handed out to Western visitors to the trade union congress held in Poland shortly after the June events, mentions only “criminal acts . . . of antisocial elements.”<sup>77</sup> The letter characterized the price increases as having resulted not from an economic crisis but, to the contrary, from the country’s dynamic economic development. The letter claimed that the price increases had been adopted only after long consultations with the working class. The letter conceded that “antisocial elements” had tried to exploit the price increases by committing criminal acts, but it stressed that their misdeeds should not be allowed to tarnish Poland’s democratic process and highly successful project of modernization.<sup>78</sup>

The letters underscore how eager the PZPR was to reconcile with the international Communist movement. Having sharply criticized the Italians in the initial draft, the final version expresses understanding for the Italian comrades, who are portrayed as being under anti-Communist pressures. The letter notes that the Poles were counting on the PCI to oppose anti-Communism and underlines the obligation the Poles felt to common democratic principles. This attempt at reconciliation found symbolic expression in an exchange between Gierek and Berlinguer following the PCI’s protest. A copy of the letter to the PCI can be found in Gierek’s records, but the first secretary did not himself sign it. Instead, he contacted Berlinguer to request that the Italians return to Poland some flags from a Polish unit of the International Brigades that had fought during the Spanish Civil War. In addition, Gierek invited a PCI delegation to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the formation of the International Brigades. In his efforts to reconcile the international community of the Communist left, Gierek could not have invented an issue better than this, rich with the symbolism and mythology of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>79</sup>

Western economic pressures—while central to the story—are nonetheless only one part of why the KOR managed to force Poland’s authorities to accept its existence. The PZPR may have perceived the repercussions of crushing the Polish opposition as a threat not only to its economic cooperation with the West but also to its ideological self-image. In the context of an international ideational struggle, ideology was not merely a tool Poland’s rulers relied on to

77. “Aktualny rozwój budownictwa socjalistycznego w Polsce,” n.d., in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, File XI/419.

78. Report from Ryszard Frelek to the PCI Directorate, 12 August 1976, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, File LXXVI-5-48.

79. Gierek to Berlinguer, 21 October 1976, in AAN, Arch. KC PZPR, Wydział zagraniczny, File LXXVI-5-48. This file also contains related correspondence with the Polish embassy in Rome.

infiltrate and manipulate the opposition. Ideology was a double-edged sword that Polish intellectuals managed to turn against the authorities.

## Conclusions

There was more to Cold War human rights activism than just the formal human rights provisions in the Helsinki Final Act. After encountering East European dissidents, Western leftists increasingly incorporated human rights language into their discourse and political thought. Given how closely Communism's identity was related to its struggle with the West, the criticism voiced by Western leftists was particularly damaging. Within the dynamics of a cultural framework inherited from earlier stages of postwar history, transnational human rights advocacy became effective.

The historiography of the late Cold War can benefit by adopting the cultural historical perspective that, so far, has been applied almost exclusively to the 1950s. Simultaneously, the cultural history of the Cold War would benefit from refinement of its analytical categories.

First, Cold War cultural history has been criticized for the fact that Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union—and, more broadly, Communism—are strangely absent from the literature. Much of what figures under the heading “cultural Cold War” is not at all about the conflict between East and West and instead is either about domestic American conflicts or about U.S. attempts to establish cultural hegemony in Western Europe.<sup>80</sup> The problem with this “unilateral Cold War” is not only that it truncates international history, leaving Eastern Europe “*terra incognita*,” but also that it suggests one actually *can* analyze either of the two “camps” in isolation from the other.<sup>81</sup> It thereby revives a flawed view of the Cold War world as consisting of two self-contained systems hermetically sealed off from one another by the Iron Curtain.

To be sure, prior to détente, severe limits were placed on East-West interactions. But it is doubtful that the world's division into East and West was ever so complete as to justify an analysis of either side in isolation from the other. Patrick Major and Raina Mitter, at least, presume that even in the 1950s and 1960s “there was perhaps more interaction between East and West than the finality of the Iron Curtain would suggest.”<sup>82</sup> The study of Commu-

80. Even one of the few studies actually concerned with a Central European country focuses on Western influences. See Mark Pittaway, “The Education of Dissent: The Reception of the Voice of Free Hungary, 1951–56,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (October 2003), pp. 97–116.

81. David Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Major and Mitter, “East Is East,” pp. 5–6.

82. Major and Mitter, “East Is East,” p. 12.

nism suffers particularly from this lack of an interactive approach to early Cold War culture. The 1950s was the period of the Cold War in which Western sympathies for the Soviet project ran deepest. A great deal has been written about the rise of anti-Communist intellectuals, but the pro-Communist or even pro-Stalinist sympathies prevalent, for instance, among French *hommes des lettres* until the late 1960s have not been analyzed within the context of the intellectual Cold War. What thus disappears is the striking fact that Soviet Communism, despite its repressiveness and the atrocities perpetrated by the Soviet regime, once caught the imagination of some of Europe's brightest intellectuals.

Second, Cold War cultural history is often not only not about the Cold War but also not concerned with culture as a factor that has an independent significance: David Caute, for instance, criticizes an "investigative approach" to Cold War culture that is almost exclusively concerned with exposing the covert influence of state agencies on cultural activity instead of analyzing the cultural activity itself.<sup>83</sup> All too often, culture and intellectuals are treated not as factors or agents of international relations but as instruments or victims of manipulation. "Culture," to use the positivist terminology of political science, is a dependent variable, and states and their interests provide the independent variables.<sup>84</sup>

On one hand, following Jeffrey Isaac or Hugh Wilford, paying more attention to culture could help us understand that there was more to Cold War liberalism than its attempted manipulation by the CIA.<sup>85</sup> Assessing the appeal of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, adds further layers of complexity to the transnational and cross-bloc interactions from which the culture of the Cold War emerged. In this field lurks another of the perils of Cold War cultural history that Caute identifies—namely, the belief that "the entire Soviet experience and its Western believers more or less boils down to Hiss, the Rosenbergs, the Cambridge Five, the KGB, the Venona tapes and archival exposure."<sup>86</sup> The discussion here of the surprising coalition of Polish opposition intellectuals with former "fellow travelers" adds nuance to this picture.

83. Caute, *The Dancer Defects*, pp. 616–617. See also Jeffrey C. Isaac, "Rethinking the Cultural Cold War," *Dissent*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 2002), p. 31.

84. For other examples, see Volker Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999); Giles Scott-Smith and Hans Krabbendam, eds., *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe, 1945–1960* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); and Hugh Wilford, *The CIA, the British Left and the Cold War: Calling the Tune?* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

85. Isaac, "Rethinking the Cultural Cold War"; and Hugh Wilford, "Playing the CIA's Tune? The New Leader and the Cultural Cold War," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2003), pp. 15–34.

86. David Caute, Foreword to Scott-Smith and Krabbendam, eds., *The Cultural Cold War*, p. vii.

Culture and ideas were important factors throughout the Cold War. By broadening our focus to include both Eastern Europe and the later stages of international history, we receive a more interactive understanding of Cold War culture as a system of meaning that connected different parts of the world as much as it divided them. Moreover, culture and ideas were not only propaganda tools of the powerful. Instead, Cold War culture provided Polish opposition groups with a resource to mobilize international support for their local political project.

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