EDITOR'S NOTE. After the imposition of martial law, on December 13, 1981, the leadership of Solidarity—about ten thousand people—were arrested, and Adam Michnik was among them. He was held in prison for two and a half years, whereupon he was released in an amnesty—only to be rearrested six months later and sentenced to three additional years of prison. All but the last Letter, which was written during the current prison term, in this section of the book were written during the first two and a half years of investigative arrest—December 13, 1981–July 21, 1984.

// Why You Are Not Signing . . . : A Letter from Białołęka Internment Camp 1982

My dear friend,

General Jaruzelski has announced that those internees who desist from activities “contrary to the law” will be released. And so freedom is within the reach of one’s hand. A few strokes of the pen on the loyalty declaration will suffice . . .

Friends and relatives are asking, “So what’s stopping you from making these few inconsequential gestures?”

It is very easy, indeed, to exchange the barred window, with its clear outline of a barbed wire fence behind, it for “freedom.” The steel gates of Białołęka will open up before you, and instead of the prison yards you will see the streets of your hometown, filled with strolling army patrols and rolling tanks. You will see people being asked for identification cards, cars being stopped to have their trunks inspected, the security agent, with his keen eye, fishing out of the crowds individuals suspected of “violating the state of war legislation.” You will hear World War II terms that until now you knew only from history books: “roundup,” “Volkstiste”—words cleansed of the dignifying patina of time and pulsing with new menace. You will hear about new arrests, about people sought by the police or in hiding, about Draconian sentences.

And if you are capable of making self-interested decisions, then
the first reason for not signing is: it isn’t worth it. Here, no one can put you in “provisional detention”; here, you need not fear anything. It is paradoxical, I know, but if one morning you are awakened by banging on the door you are not going to be afraid of the uniformed guests; it is only your good-humored jailer handing out the morning coffee. Here, you do not panic at the sight of the cynic with his darting eyes—a stool pigeon is not a threat. Białoleka is a moral luxury and an oasis of dignity. It is also a conspicuous symbol of your dissent and your importance. Since you are an intern, the authorities take you seriously.

They will sometimes try to scare you. A friend of mine, a factory worker from Warsaw, was promised fifteen years in jail; another was threatened with trial for espionage; a third was interrogated in Russian; a fourth was marched out of his cell and told that he would be going to the depths of Russia (when he was really being taken for an X-ray). But all this is bearable. I actually believe that it is easier to cope with than the morally and politically complicated situation on the other side of the wire fence. (“Perhaps it is easier to be in prison than to go free,” a good friend wrote to me. “Outside, the waters have rushed forth and turned to foam, and an opaque scum is floating on the top.”)

The primate of Poland has condemned the practice of coercing people to sign the loyalty declarations. The pope has openly called this violation of human conscience a crime. One cannot but agree with this definition. All condemnation must be directed at those who extort these written declarations—those who employ this cruel means of degrading human dignity. A young woman, the wife of a Solidarity activist, was imprisoned after being dragged away from her sick infant who, she was told, would be placed in an orphanage. She signed the declaration. A friend of mine was taken away from his mother, who lives alone and is dying of cancer, and was told that “not a soul will even make a cup of tea for your little mother.” He signed the declaration. There is no point in listing any more cases of the cruelty of some people, the helplessness of others—the tragic dilemmas and the dastardly blackmail. Everyone is familiar with the various reactions of people who are subjected to these pressures. The primate of Poland left open the question of whether to sign, especially for teachers. In his opinion, for them to maintain their dignity and to be able to continue to teach are both important. The choice is always up to the individual—to the voice of his or her conscience and reason: no one can condemn anyone else’s choice. Ostracism would play into the hands of the people in power, since this is precisely what they want—to break society’s resistance and the solidarity of the people by creating divisions. To tolerate and understand, however, is not to decide that the act of signing the declaration is in itself morally indifferent. It is not. Every loyalty declaration is an evil; and a declaration that has been forced out of you is an evil which you were compelled to commit, although it may, at times, be a lesser evil. So this act sometimes deserves understanding, always compassion, but never praise. There are at least a few reasons for this. First of all, dignity does not allow it.

Impotence in the face of armed evil is probably the worst of human humiliations. When six hulks pin you to the ground, you are helpless. But you do not want to give up your natural right to dignity: you are not going to reach any agreements with the ruffians, you are not going to make any commitments. When they take you from your house, beat you with all their might, burn your eyes with tear gas, break open your front door with a crowbar and wreck your furniture right in front of your family, when in the middle of the night they drive you to the police station in handcuffs and order you to sign statements, then your ordinary instinct for self-preservation and your basic sense of human dignity will make you say NO.

Because even if these people were doing it all in the name of the best and noblest cause they would be destroying that cause with their misdeeds.

At this point you still know little. Only when, a few hours later, they drive you in the direction of Białoleka (you will look around with curiosity, for previously you knew this road only as far as good old Mokotów prison) will you hear on the prison van’s radio, as your teeth chatter from the cold (these circumstances will later be called “humane conditions”), that war has been declared on your nation. It was declared by people who on behalf of this nation govern, proclaim, sign international agreements—the same people who publicly held out a conciliatory hand while secretly issuing orders to hunt us in the night.
And then you really know for sure that you will not make a gift of your loyalty déclaration to these people, for they are incapable of any loyalty whatsoever.

And you still don’t know what this war means; you still don’t know by what methods factories and steelworks, shipyards and mines will be assaulted; you still don’t know about the “bloody Wednesday” in the Wujek mine; but you do know one thing already: to sign this declaration would be to negate yourself, to wipe out the meaning of your life; to betray the people who have faith in you; to betray your friends who are dispersed in different prisons—who have been sentenced and interned; to betray the friends who are being sought by the police and who are in hiding; to betray all those who will stand up for you—with a flier in Cracow or Gdańsk, a rally in Paris or New York. The face of Zbyszek who is in hiding, of Edek who has been sentenced, of Sewek hurrying down a Parisian boulevard have not yet begun to flash before your eyes. Nothing is fixed yet, the door is still open before you, you still have a choice. But you know already—your instincts are telling you—that to forsake your dignity is not a price worth paying to have the prison gates opened for you. And so here is the second reason: the demands of common sense.

Reaching agreements of any kind with people who treat the very concept of “agreements” completely arbitrarily, who regularly go back on their promises, and for whom lies are their daily bread, is contrary to common sense. After all, you have never known anyone who has had any dealings with the agents of the security services and has not felt cheated. To these people, with their lifeless but shifting eyes, with their minds that are dull but skilled in torture, with their defiled souls that yearn for social approval, you are only raw material to work with. They have their own particular psychology: they believe that anyone can be talked into anything (in other words, everyone can be either bought or intimidated). To them it is only a matter of the price to pay or the pain to inflict. Although they act according to routine, your every stumble, your every fall gives meaning to their lives. Your capitulation is no mere professional achievement for them—it is their raison d’être.

And so you find yourself engaged in a philosophical debate with them about the meaning of your life, about the meaninglessness of their lives, about giving meaning to every human existence. You are engaged in the argument of Giordano Bruno with the Inquisitor, of the December with the tsarist police superintendent, of Walerian Łukasiński with the tsarist angel of annihilation, of Carl von Ossietzky with the blond Gestapo officer, of Osip Mandelstam with a member of the Bolshevik party dressed in a uniform with the blue piping of the NKVD. You are engaged in the never-ending argument about which Henryk Elżberg once said that the value of your participation cannot be gauged in terms of your chances of victory but rather by the value of your idea. In other words, you score a victory not when you win power but when you remain faithful to yourself.

Your common sense also tells you that by signing the loyalty declaration you are placing a whip in the hands of the policemen. They will wave it around and threaten you in order to force you to sign the next declaration, your agreement to collaborate with them. With this, your loyalty declaration will transform itself into your pact with the devil. This is why you should not give these police inquisitors even the tip of your finger: because they will instantly grab your whole arm. Surely you must know someone whose life has been shattered by one moment of moral inattention or weakness of spirit, someone who has been pursued by phone calls, whose home and office are regularly invaded by the police, who is blackmailed every time he or she goes abroad. Such people pay for one moment of unwisdom with years of degradation and fear. If you don’t want to be afraid, if you want to respect yourself, your inner voice tells you, don’t enter into any agreements with the policemen.

You harbor no hatred toward the policemen, only pity. You know the high incidence of mental illness among them; you know that every one of them is ashamed in front of his children. You know that the sentence of national oblivion will be passed on them (who can remember

1. On December 16, 1981, while breaking the strike in the Wujek mine (Silesia), the armored police units (ZOMO) killed nine miners. It was the most violent episode of the military coup d’état.

any more the executioners and informers of bygone days?), that they
can win the fame only of Herodotus—like commissar Kajdan in Stefan
Zeromski’s Before the Spring or colonel Różański from the Polish
Stalinist Security Service. And this is the third reason—the argument
of memory.

The history of your nation is fixed in your memory. You know
that in its history a loyalty declaration signed in jail has always been a
disgrace, loyalty to oneself and to the national tradition a virtue. You
can remember those who were tortured and jailed for long years but
who signed no declarations. And you know that you, too, will not sign
them, because you are unable and unwilling to renounce the memory
of the others, especially since there are certain people who keep on
popping up in your memories: those who lost the battle for dignity in
prison. With your mind’s eye you can see Andrzej M., the excellent
literary critic, your friend, who while in jail wrote a brilliant essay
denouncing people—proof of his moral death; Heniek Sz., an ambitious
and intelligent man, who let himself be maneuvered into the role of
chief informer on his friends; Zygmunt D., a charming companion and
intelligent young man who gave in once and then spent years denouncing
his friends. So you remember with dread and terror this human
debris, these people who have been battered by the police machine, and
you will see that your own future, too, is an open question. The choice
is yours, but your memory ceaselessly repeats in your ear: you, too,
can be like them. No one is born an informer; you forge your fate daily,
at the price of your life. At this point you still haven’t heard about the
loyalty declarations; the infamous interviews, the shameful pronounce-
ments read on the radio. You still don’t know how Marian K. from
Nowa Huta, an intelligent and courageous Solidarity activist, was
cheated when in his declaration he wanted to render unto Caesar the
things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s, but
ended up giving everything to the police, because he had not imagined
that there exist situations when ambiguity turns into explicitness and
half-truths become full-fledged lies. You still haven’t heard the inter-
view with Stanisław Z., a worker and an activist in Nowa Huta, an
artful dodger whom people always distrusted and who is now living up
to their suspicions by echoing the government’s propaganda. You still
haven’t read the declaration made by Marek B., the [Solidarity] National
Commission’s spokesman, who was a physicist from Gdańsk and Lech’s
protégé, slandering Solidarity’s people. Nor the declaration made by
Zygmunt L. of Szczecin, Marian J.’s adviser, who dictated to Marian
all that drivel about “the Jews who are in power” and about “setting up
gallows for the party leaders,” and who today is condemning “extremists.” In other words, you still don’t know that this time, as always,
persons will be lied to, cheated (think of Zdzisław R. from Poznań, to
whom you talked at the unveiling of the Poznań monument), cowed yet
again. You don’t know that this time, too, the rats will be the first to
run from the sinking ship. But you do know already that all this is
nothing new, that you will not feel like explaining to these policemen
who are waving your release in front of your nose, in this crowded
police station, that it is they who are the slaves and that no release will
free them from their slavery. You don’t feel like explaining that these
people who are crowded into these smoke-filled corridors, and who
have only just been torn out of their homes—these worker activists,
professors and writers, students and artists, friends and strangers—that
they are the very life and substance of liberty and that this is why war
has been declared on them. You don’t feel like explaining to the
policeman who whacked your face with sadistic delight (he was given
permission to do it, at last—he had to spend sixteen months restraining
himself) the meaning of Vassili Rozanov’s essay, which argues that
European culture’s most fundamental debate is the antagonism between
the man who holds the knot and the man who is being flogged with
it. And you don’t feel like explaining to him that your encounter is the
latest incarnation of this antagonism. You will not talk to him at all.
You will smile ironically, you will choose not to sign anything (not
even your warrant), you will express your regrets, and—you will leave
the room.

They will drive you to Białoleka in the company of people who
are the pride of every Polish home. You will ride together with a famous
philosopher and an eminent historian, a theater director and a professor
of economics, a Solidarity leader from Ursus and one from Warsaw
University, students, and workers. In Białoleka itself they will not beat
you. On the contrary! You are to serve as proof of their liberalism and

3. The Russian philosopher (1856–1919).
humanism; for very soon they will be showing you off to the International Red Cross delegation and to Sejm* deputies, and even to the primate of Poland. So they will be quite courteous, quite helpful, quite gentle. But every now and then they will make you take a walk between two lines of men in helmets, armed with truncheons and shields, in order to frighten you and to remind you of their power. The only thing that these masquerades will remind you of is that this regime is like the vicious dog that loves to bite even though his teeth have fallen out. Pavel Korchagin’s ethos has disappeared; nowadays when someone shouts at a policeman, a flash of fear appears in his pupils. You can detect this fear and uncertainty under his helmet, through his uniform, behind his shield (a Japanese import). And you will realize right away that a policeman’s fear means that there is still hope for you. Hope is important. Perhaps more important than anything else.

After all, this is precisely what the battle is being fought over: the policemen want to force out of us a declaration that we are giving up hope. They know that the person who pledges his loyalty to this system of coercion and lies is forsaking hope for a Poland in which lies and coercion will be rejected. These declarations are supposed to make us into lowly and servile people, who will not rise up to fight for freedom and dignity. So by refusing to talk with the policeman, by refusing to collaborate, by rejecting the status of informer, and by choosing to be a political prisoner you are defending hope. Not just hope within yourself and for yourself but also in others and for others. You are casting your declaration of hope out of your prison cell into the world, like a sealed bottle into the ocean. If even one single person finds it, you will have scored a victory.

I know what you are thinking: he is reciting platitudes and banalities, demanding heroism; he is hopelessly romantic. But this is not quite true.

I agree with the first point. Banal truths, if they are to remain banal, must be remembered, especially at times when banal behavior requires some courage, whereas relativism—which incidentally does serve a purpose in intellectual activity—can lead people to dilute moral standards and question what should be morally self-evident. But I do not believe that allegiance to these truths is the same as having romantic values.

You know that you are no hero and that you never wanted to be one. You have never wanted to die for your nation, or for freedom, or for anything else, for that matter: the fates of Winkelried and Ordon [legendary heroes who died for their countries, which were overwhelmed by superior enemies] have never tempted you. You have always wanted to be alive, to live like a normal person, to have respect for yourself and for your friends. You have always enjoyed the moral comfort that allows you to take pleasure in your inner freedom, in beautiful women, and in wine. This war surprised you in the company of a pretty woman, not while you were plotting an assault on the Central Committee headquarters.

Nevertheless, they did declare this war on you and over thirty million other people, and so you are forced to recognize that amid the street roundups, the ignoble court sentences, the despicable radio programs, and the distribution of leaflets by underground Solidarity you will not regain the normalcy that was based on respect for yourself. Now you must choose between moral and material stability, because you know that today’s “normalcy” will have the bitter taste of self-defeat. And you will not, for the sake of life’s enjoyments, give in to the tempting offers of freedom made by the policeman, who seeks to delude you with promises of happiness but really brings suffering and inner hell instead.

No, this is not heroism. It is mere common sense. Bertold Brecht said, “Woe be to nations that must have their heroes.” How can one disagree with this? Heroism presupposes exceptionality. Today, Poles need normalcy and ordinariness if they are to resist the rule of the military and the police.

Let me make myself clear: this is not a program of romantic intransigence but rather a strategy for social resistance. It serves no purpose today to bring back the classic conflict in Polish political

4. The Diet, Polish parliament.
5. Pavel Korchagin, hero of Nikolai Ostrovsky’s novel How the Steel was Tempered (1934) is a symbol of the total devotion to the communist cause.
thought between romantic insurrectionism and realistic organicism, as does Daniel P. in the weekly Polityka." Let’s take a closer look at his arguments.

P. sees the validity of both sides of the dispute, but he argues for the point of view of the organicists, who have decided to remain on the editorial staff of Polityka, and to risk being asked by their children “What did you do when instead of arguments came the soldiers?”—who chose a responsible attitude instead of voluntary withdrawal from public life—so-called internal exile. “There is no point in chasing after lost innocence,” P. writes. There is no point in changing from a realist’s costume to a fundamentalist’s. Spurs and bedroom slippers do not go together,” he writes of the Polityka editors who rebelled.

In his opinion, “It would not be in the public interest if newspapers stopped being published in Poland, or if their variety were further limited. We must act so as to make the army go back to the barracks... Who else will do it if we take comfortable little jobs as spokesmen for Polish-American private commercial enterprises or as editors of apolitical publications?” Daniel P. uses all the arguments that you know so well—from, for example, the discussions that arose after Piotr Wierzbicki’s “A Treatise on Maggots” was published. P. does not preach in Newspeak, he doesn’t talk nonsense; he uses serious arguments and clearly formulates the pressing dilemmas of present-day Poles.

His reasoning must be debated on two levels—the concrete and the universal. If both the insurrectionists and the organicists are necessary, then we need people who are organicists in form and insurrectionists in substance. We need people who do not lie publicly, whom we can trust, who reject compromise with the system of government that has been imposed on this nation—yet who do not ask for rash actions, call for terrorism, or organize urban or rural guerrillas. In other words, the classic dilemma can be described as grass-roots activity versus collaboration, not just as grass-roots activity versus insurrection.

Compromise is necessary for a healthy public life, provided that it is real compromise, both in substance and in the public eye. When a compromise is seen by the public as renunciation of conviction or as flagrant treason, it is no longer a compromise. It becomes a falsehood or a misunderstanding. To side with WRONa today is to take a stand against the nation—we both know this all too well. The loyalty declaration that the policemen are demanding from you and the somewhat different one that Daniel P.’s colleagues in his editorial office have been asked to sign are not a compromise; they are acts of collaboration, and have been conceived exclusively as such. Whoever attempts to save the August “renewal” (I don’t like this term, which is used by the party; I prefer the expression “a formula for democracy”) with this act is irrevocably bringing about its destruction. So much for the general question. Now for concrete examples. Daniel P. seems to believe that Polityka will become—as it did some years ago—an oasis of half-truths in the sea of lies, a paper with a touch of decency. I am of a different opinion. I believe that this idea’s time has passed—not on December 13, 1981, and not even on September 1, 1980, with the signing of the Gdańska accords—but in the middle of the Giełde decade, when Polityka was transformed from a relatively liberal and restrained critic of the system into its agile apologist. In June 1976, at the time of the Radom and Ursus workers’ strikes, Polityka became a typical product of the decadence of the Giełde team and the spokesman for Giełde’s disintegrating strategy. In the Solidarity era, it was no longer a credible paper—not for the authorities and not for the people. It was not even an interesting paper, merely an anachronistic one. The political rise of its editor-in-chief coincided with the political death of Polityka. Today it is only a caricature of itself. The entire history of Polityka is the story of a mirage which a sizable part of the Polish intelligentsia came to believe—an

6. The journalist Daniel Passent is deputy-editor of the weekly Polityka. Created in 1956, Polityka served the party’s liberal wing. Its founder and first editor-in-chief Mieczysław Rakowski, deputy-prime minister of the Januszewski government, was one of the main architects of the December 13, 1981, coup.

7. See this volume, page 169.

8. WRON is an acronym of the Military Council for the National Salvation, a temporary military government that ruled Poland during the State of War (December 13, 1981–July 22, 1983). WRON is just one letter short of “wroa,” i.e., “crow.” Much of the antigovernment propaganda was based on that coincidence.
illusion that the system could be reformed from above if the intellectuals joined in the palace intrigues, if they knowledgeably walked in the corridors of the Central Committee, and if they spent enough time in ministers' waiting rooms. This idea has been killed, and nothing will resuscitate it. Social conflict—and, through it, potential social compromise—can take place only on the factory floor and in the university lecture hall and not in a session of the Sejm or the Central Committee's plenum. However intertwined and complex the history of the relations between the communist rulers and Polish society has been, with this last "war" the party has deprived itself of its mandate to govern, and no one can do anything to change this—not even by pulling the traditional four-cornered military cap by force over the police helmet.

If we are to have any influence on Poland's future, then it must be forged by an organized society exerting incessant pressure on the authorities. To rely on the good will of the WRONa bosses is like waiting for manna to fall from the sky. Yet it is reasonable to rely on their weakness: it is reasonable to believe that those in power can be forced to compromise. This belief is justified by the fact that there is an obvious ideological and programmatic vacuum within the party. The apparatus stands for power and privilege, not for ideas or values. The most obvious manifestation of this is the regime's habitual reliance on the argument of force as a substitute for the force of arguments. Let us travesty Hegel: Minerva's C.R.O.W. flies out at dusk.

You know how profound the feeling of loneliness can be. You think that you are powerless against the police-army machine that was mobilized on that December night. You still don't know what will happen. You still don't know that people will begin to recover from the shock, that underground papers will appear, that Zbyszek B. will lead his Solidarity region from the underground, that in Wrocław they will fail to capture Władek F.; that Gdańsk, Świdnik, and Poznań will again shake up all Poland; that illegal union structures will be formed. You still don't know that the generals' vehicle is sinking in sand, its wheels spinning in place, that the avalanche of repression and calumnies is missing its aim.

But you do know, as you stand alone, handcuffed, with your eyes

filled with tear gas, in front of policemen who are shaking their guns at you—you can see it clearly in the dark and starless night, thanks to your favorite poet—that the course of the avalanche depends on the stones over which it rolls. [Czesław Miłosz]

And you want to be the stone that will reverse the course of events.

March 25, 1982
EDITOR'S NOTE. The essays in this part were written between 1976 and 1979, when Michnik and others were formulating the plan and vocabulary that led to the radical changes of the years 1980 to 1981.

A New Evolutionism
1976

The historic events that we call the Polish October [1956] were a source of hope that the communist system could evolve. This hope was grounded in two visions, two concepts of evolution. I will label them “revisionist” and “neopositivist.”

The revisionist concept was based on a specific intraparty perspective. It was never formulated into a political program. It assumed that the system of power could be humanized and democratized and that the official Marxist doctrine was capable of assimilating contemporary arts and social sciences. The revisionists wanted to act within the framework of the Communist party and Marxist doctrine. They wanted to transform “from within” the doctrine and the party in the direction of democratic reform and common sense. In the long term, the actions of the revisionists seek to allow enlightened people with progressive ideas to take over the party. Władysław Bierkowski, one of the most typical representatives of this group, defined these ideas as enlightened socialist despotism.

Stanisław Stomma, a leading exponent of the second type of evolutionist vision, called his orientation “neopositivist.” In that vision, the strategy chosen by Roman Dmowski,† at the turn of the century,

1. Roman Dmowski (1864–1939) was the spiritual father and political leader of the National Democratic party (SN-Endecja) and an antagonist of Józef Piłsudski.
was to be applied to today’s historical and political conditions. Stomma
considered himself a Catholic and recognized Catholicism as a perma-
nent component of Polish public life. As head of the Catholic Znak
group, he wanted to repeat the maneuver of the leader and ideologue
of the national democratic camp and, like Dmowski when he joined the
tsarist Duma in 1906, Stomma and his colleagues entered the Sejm of
the Polish People’s Republic in January 1957. The group of Catholic
activists around Stomma, who based his thinking on analysis of the
geopolitical situation, aimed at creating a political movement that, at
the right moment, could lead the Polish nation. For Dmowski, that
moment came with the outbreak of World War I; for Stomma, it could
possibly come with the decomposition of the Soviet bloc.

From 1956 to 1959, Stomma’s ideas had the partial support of the
episcopate, owing to the concessions granted the Catholic Church by
Władysław Gomułka’s ruling group. Stomma’s evolutionist concept
differed fundamentally from the revisionist idea. First of all, neoposi-
tivism took for granted Poland’s loyalty to the USSR while at the same
time rejecting Marxist doctrine and socialist ideology. Revisionists, by
contrast, tended toward anti-Soviet rather than anti-Marxist sentiments,
as was the case in Hungary. To use a metaphoric comparison, if one
considers the state organization of the Soviet Union as the Church and
the Marxist ideological doctrine as the Bible, then revisionism was
faithful to the Bible while developing its own interpretations, whereas
neopositivism adhered to the Church but with the hope that the Church
would sooner or later disappear.

The two concepts shared the conviction that change would come
from above. Both the revisionists and neopositivists counted on positive
evolution in the party, to be caused by the rational policies of wise
leaders, not by incessant public pressure. They both counted on the
rational thinking of the communist prince, not on independent institu-
tions that would gain control of the power apparatus. Most probably
without making these assumptions, neither the neopositivists nor the
revisionists would have been able to conduct their public activities,
although, as it turned out, adoption of these assumptions inevitably led
to political and intellectual defeat. Both the Church’s revisionist critics
and the neopositivist opponents of the Bible’s principles were defeated.

The revisionist orientation definitely had some positive characteris-
tics alongside its negative ones. We should remember both the intellec-
tual fruits of the revisionism of that era and the political activity of
important groups of the intelligentsia who were inspired by revisionism.

The former are obvious: it is enough to recall the outstanding books
written by Leszek Kołakowski, Oskar Lange, Edward Lipiński, Maria
Hirszowicz, Włodzimierz Brus, Krzysztof Pomian, Bronisław Baczko,
and Witold Kula. Revisionism, in its broadest conception, was mani-
festated on the literary front in the works of Kazimierz Brandyś, Adam
Wazyk, Wiktor Woroszylski, and Jacek Bocheński. All these books,
whatever their scientific or artistic value, popularized the ideas of truth
and humanism, which were under attack in the official propaganda. The
publication of each of these books rapidly turned into a political event.

In addition to positively influencing Polish learning and culture,
revisionism inspired political activity among the citizens. By opposing
passivity and internal exile, revisionism laid the basis for independent
participation in public life. Faith in one’s ability to exert influence on
the fate of society is an absolute prerequisite for political activity. In
the case of the revisionists, this faith depended on a belief that the party
could be reformed. We can see clearly today that their faith was based
on delusions; still, civic activity and open demonstrations of opposition
were its real and positive results in the years from 1956 to 1968. The
majority of oppositionist initiatives during that period originated in
these circles, not among steadfast and consistent anticommunists. It is
important to remember this fact in weighing the responsibility for the
Stalinist beliefs of Poland’s leftist intelligentsia. It was the revisionist
ex-Stalinists who originated and disseminated dissenting points of view
among the intelligentsia—points of view which would later help to
revive civil life in Poland in the midst of its difficult reality.

And yet revisionism had been tainted at its very source by the
belief that the strivings and goals of the “liberal” wing in the party
apparatus were identical to the demands of the revisionist intelligentsia.
I think that the revisionists’ greatest sin lay not in their defeat in the
intraparty struggle for power (where they could not win) but in the
character of that defeat. It was the defeat of individuals being eliminated
from positions of power and influence, not a setback for a broadly based
leftist and democratic political platform. The revisionists never created
such a platform.
Revisionism was terminated by the events of March 1968. In that month the umbilical cord connecting the revisionist intelligentsia to the party was severed. After March 1968 the idea that a progressive and democratic wing existed in the party’s leadership was never to regain wide currency. One of the few people who continued to cherish this political hope was Władysław Bieńkowski, although his formulations were generally considered as protective coloring and not genuine reasoning. In fact, by popularizing his work, Bieńkowski created a completely new style of political activity. Previously, “staying inside the party”—that is, appealing for support only to party members—was an unwritten law of revisionism. Bieńkowski gave new substance to the old formulas; revisionism, conceived by him as a belief in the existence of a wise party leadership, was transformed into merciless and unceasing criticism of current leaders and their stupidity. On the one hand, he propagated ideas clearly hostile to the authorities and a program that was explicitly oppositional; but on the other hand, his program was addressed to the authorities and not to the public. Those of Bieńkowski’s readers who were not party members could not learn from his writings how to live, how to act, and what to do to further democratic change.

Also in 1968, the year revisionism died, the demonstrating students chanted: “All Poland is waiting for its Dubček.” For a while, the leader of Czech and Slovak communists became the symbol of hope. To this very day, the myth of Dubček and the Prague Spring has played an important role in Poland, and the meaning of this myth is far from simple. It serves to justify both radiant optimism and the darkest pessimism; it provides a defense for attitudes of conformism as well as for gestures of heroism. Why?

In October 1956 the threat of Soviet intervention in Poland made a national hero out of Władysław Gomułka—a man who would walk off the political stage covered with infamy and contempt fourteen years later. His example reveals the basic ambiguity in the whole myth of the heroic party leader. There are reasons to believe that even if there had been no armed intervention the extreme polarization and open conflict between the progressive wing of the party and the extraparty opposition KAN (club of the Non-party Engagés movement) were bound to surface in Czechoslovakia. It is difficult to predict the future, but I would venture that more than one “Dubčekite” would quickly have been transformed into a tamer of the turbulent opposition.

The myth of the “good” party leader is necessarily ambiguous. Many of those who joined the PUWP defended their decision in the following manner: “This way I will be able to serve the cause of Polish democracy, because in this way alone I will be able to lend effective support to the Polish Dubček when he appears.” So far, this service to the cause of democracy has amounted to service to the totalitarian powers. Those who did not join the PUWP and who declared themselves to be totally anticomunist also use the example of Czechoslovakia to justify their decision to shun all oppositional behavior. These people call oppositionists “political troublemakers,” and view the fate of Czechoslovakia and Dubček as proof that “there is no way anything is going to change here.”

For me, the lesson of Czechoslovakia is that change is possible and that it has its limits. Czechoslovakia is an example of the fragility of totalitarian stability, and also of the desperation and ruthlessness of an empire under threat. The lesson of Czechoslovakia is that evolution has its limits and that it is possible.

The experiences of the neopositivists should also be closely examined. There is no doubt that their actions had the positive effect of helping to create an independent public opinion and of popularizing a way of thinking that differed completely from the obligatory official style of party propaganda.

As I have already mentioned, a starting point for the ideas of the Znak movement in 1956 was geopolitical realism and a rejection of the Poles’ supposed predisposition to revolt—a lesson learned from the tragedy of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. In return for backing Władysław Gomułka’s new party leadership, the Znak movement received significant concessions from the authorities. Several Clubs of the Catholic Intelligentsia were formed, and Tygodnik Powszechny, the Znak [Sign] monthly, and the Znak publishing house were reactivated. The Znak movement gained the right to express its own opinions and to formulate
its own model of national culture. One cannot overestimate the importance of the assimilation of contemporary Christian thought by Polish intellectuals. It would be equally difficult to overestimate the role of books written by Stefan Kiesiewski, Hanna Malewska, Jerzy Turowicz, Jerzy Zawieyski, Stanisław Stomma, Antoni Gołębiew, or Jacek Woźniakowski. Because of the works by these authors, a broad base for a culture independent of official norms and molds came into existence in Poland. Thanks to speeches made in the Sejm by Stefan Kiesiewski, Jerzy Zawieyski, and Stanisław Stomma, young Poles were given an opportunity to become familiar with an ersatz political pluralism. By its very definition, the small group of Znak deputies was destined to fulfill the role of a realistic, pragmatic, and Catholic “opposition to Your Royal-socialist Majesty.”

The Więź group of the Polish Catholic left occupied a different niche, combining revisionist hopes with the political strategy of Znak’s neopositivists. The innovative ideas of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Anna Morawska, and other essayists published in Więź brought its editors into conflict with the episcopate; but these ideas also made possible an ideological dialogue with the lay intelligentsia. As paradoxical as this may sound, it was the Więź group which enabled the leftist intelligentsia to revise traditional stereotypes of Christianity and the Church.

The support lent to Gomułka by Znak and Więź was limited to a specific political objective—to expand the domain of civil liberties. An important component of this goal was normalization of relations between Church and State—for example, by freeing of the [then imprisoned] Primate of Poland, by relinquishing administrative harassment, by legalizing religious instruction, and so on. In these circumstances, the Znak movement confined its activities to loyal, albeit restrained and dignified, support of the authorities’ policies. Much like the revisionists, the Catholic politicians believed in having concessions and rights “granted” from above rather than in organizing pressure from below. They sought harmony, not conflict; they cared for order, seeking agreement with the party, and sought to avoid imputations of oppositional attitudes.

Even though the leaders of Znak never committed the fundamental mistake of the revisionists—instead, they always stressed their ideological and political separateness—the history of their movement inspires critical thoughts about the line of action chosen by the Catholic neopositivists.

A policy of conciliation makes sense only if both sides take it seriously. In relation to communist power, whose political vocabulary lacks the word conciliation, such a policy has meaning only if it is conducted from a position of strength. Otherwise, conciliation turns into capitulation, and the policy of conciliation into a march toward political self-annihilation. This is how the Znak group of deputies evolved.

Agreement to a succession of personnel changes in the Znak group of deputies dictated by the authorities led to an increasing conformity of the movement’s political line with the official line. Abandonment of its principles led the Znak deputies to lose their authority in the eyes of the people, who, even though they themselves were powerless, respected courage and consistency. The deputies followed a path that proceeded from compromise to loss of credibility. I am using strong language, yet it is difficult to find other words to describe the votes of the Znak deputies (except for those of Stanisław Stomma) in favor of the government amendments to the Constitution of the PPR [1976]—for amendments that were opposed by independent public opinion in Poland. This was the last stage and the final product of their abandonment of principle in exchange for immediate but illusory gains. It is one of the many paradoxes of Polish history that Stanisław Stomma, a politician whose eyes were fixed on the example of Alexander the Great and his policy of realpolitik, ended his political career in the Polish People’s Republic with a romantic gesture worthy of Rejtan.

The ideas of the revisionists and the neopositivists contained two basic answers to the political dilemmas of the years 1957 to 1964—a period of social normalization and political thaw, increasing prosperity among the people, and relative expansion of civil liberties. Both groups reflected to a great degree the atmosphere of political peace and socio-psychological stability.

4. The protests against the changes in the Constitution were the beginning of the self-organization of the opposition in Poland.

5. Tadeusz Rejtan (1746–1780), a deputy from Nowogródek to the 1773 Diet, tore his clothes and threw himself on the floor begging other envoys to reject the partition of Poland.
The fragility of both revisionism and neopositivism surfaced when social conflict became more acute, in the late sixties and seventies. The student and intellectual movement in March, 1968, the workers' explosion in June, 1976—both spontaneous public manifestations led to the downfall of the revisionists and neopositivists. The uselessness of both abstract formulas adopted from the history of philosophy and the tactical programs that resulted from these formulas was bared in the clash with real social processes. The conflicts between the public and the authorities showed the illusory character of the hopes held by both the revisionists and the neopositivists, and placed them in a situation in which they had to make a dramatic choice. When there is open conflict, one must clearly state a position and declare whose side one is on—that of those being beaten up or that of those doing the beating. Where the conflict is open, consistent revisionism as well as consistent neopositivism both inevitably lead to unity with the powers-that-be and assumption of their point of view. To offer solidarity with striking workers, with students holding a mass meeting, or with protesting intellectuals is to challenge the intraparty strategy of the revisionist and neopositivist policies of compromise. Social solidarity undermines the fundamental component of both strategies: acceptance of the government as the point of reference.

The dilemma of nineteenth-century leftist movements—"revolution or reform"—is not the dilemma of the Polish opposition. To believe in overthrowing the dictatorship of the party by revolution and to consciously organize actions in pursuit of this goal is both unrealistic and dangerous. As the political structure of the USSR remains unchanged, it is unrealistic to count on subverting the party in Poland. It is dangerous to plan conspiratorial activities. Given the absence of an authentic political culture or any standards of democratic collective life, the existence of an underground would only worsen these illnesses and change little. Revolutionary theories and conspiratorial practices can only serve the police, making mass hysteria and police provocation more likely.

In my opinion, an unceasing struggle for reform and evolution that seeks an expansion of civil liberties and human rights is the only course East European dissidents can take. The Polish example demonstrates that real concessions can be won by applying steady public pressure on the government. To draw a parallel with events at the other end of our continent, one could say that the ideas of the Polish democratic opposition resemble the Spanish rather than the Portuguese model. This is based on gradual and piecemeal change, not violent upheaval and forceful destruction of the existing system.

The Soviet military and political presence in Poland is the factor that determines the limits of possible evolution, and this is unlikely to change for some time. The desire to resist has been paralyzed by the specter of Soviet military intervention and Soviet tanks in the streets of Warsaw. The memory of Budapest and Prague has led many people to believe that the Soviet leaders will not allow any changes whatsoever. But on closer examination, the matter seems much more complicated.

Let us recall: Władysław Gomułka owed his enormous popularity in 1956 to his skillful definition of the "Soviet question." Every competent party leader can win obedience and allegiance by cleverly juggling fear and the public's desire for security. Mieczysław Moczar tried to strike the right note, and Franciszek Szelachcic appealed to these popular sentiments with a phrase that made the rounds in Warsaw: "Polish-Soviet friendship should be like good tea: strong, hot, but not too sweet." These two politicians [and security service officials] started their march to power by seeking greater popularity, and though they did not succeed, the Soviet question remains a showy stage for political exploitation.

When one analyzes the complexity of Polish-Soviet relations, it must be noted first of all that the interests of the Soviet political leadership, the Polish political leadership, and the Polish democratic opposition are basically concurrent. For all three parties, a Soviet military intervention in Poland would be a political disaster. For the Polish leadership, such an intervention would signify dethronement or the reduction of its position of leader of a nation of thirty-four million, with limited sovereignty, to that of policeman acting on behalf of the Soviet imperium. The Soviet leaders, however, certainly remember the international repercussions of their interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, as well as the resolve of the Polish workers in December 1970 and June 1976. If we include also the traditional anti-Russian sentiments of the Poles, and their propensity to fight out of sheer desperation (as demonstrated, for instance, in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944), then we
can conclude that a decision by Soviet leaders to intervene militarily in Poland would be equivalent to opting for war with Poland. It would be a war that Poland would lose on the battlefield but that the Soviet Union would lose politically. A victorious Soviet war with Poland would mean a national massacre for the Poles, but for the Soviets it would be a political catastrophe. This is why I believe the Soviet leaders, as well as the leadership of the PUWP, will go far to avoid such a conflict. This reluctance delineates the area of permissible political maneuver; this alignment of interests defines the sphere of possible compromise.

I am not contending that Soviet intervention in Poland is impossible. On the contrary, I believe that it may be unavoidable if the Moscow and Warsaw authorities on the one hand, and the Polish public on the other, lose their common sense and a sense of reality and moderation. The opposition must learn that in Poland change can only come—at least in its first stages—within the framework of the “Brezhnev doctrine.”

The revisionists and neopositivists also believed that evolutionary change should be planned within the parameters of the “Brezhnev doctrine.” I believe that what sets today’s opposition apart from the proponents of those ideas is the belief that a program for evolution ought to be addressed to an independent public, not to totalitarian power. Such a program should give directives to the people on how to behave, not to the powers on how to reform themselves. Nothing instructs the authorities better than pressure from below.

“New evolutionism” is based on faith in the power of the working class, which, with a steady and unyielding stand, has on several occasions forced the government to make spectacular concessions. It is difficult to foresee developments in the working class, but there is no question that the power elite fears this social group most. Pressure from the working classes is a necessary condition for the evolution of public life toward a democracy.

This evolution is not easy to chart; it requires that fear be constantly overcome and that a new political consciousness be developed. Factors that retard this process include the absence of authentic workers’ institutions and of models and traditions for political resistance. The day the first independent organization for workers’ self-defense was founded, when the strike committees in the shipyards of Szczecin and Gdańsk were formed, a new stage in worker consciousness began. It is hard to tell when and how other, more permanent institutions representing the interests of workers will be created and what form they will have. Will they be workers’ committees following the Spanish model, or independent labor unions, or mutual aid societies? But when such institutions emerge, the vision of a new evolutionism will become more than just a creation of a mind in search of hope.

The role of the Catholic Church is a crucial element in Poland’s situation. The majority of the Polish people feel close to the Church, and many Catholic priests have strong political influence. The evolution of the Polish episcopate’s program of action should be carefully analyzed. This evolution can be observed easily in official Church documents. The Church hierarchy’s consistently and specifically anticommunist position, in which all social and political changes that have taken place since 1945 were rejected, has been evolving into a more broadly antitotalitarian stance. Jeremiads against “godless ones” have given way to documents quoting the principles of the Declaration of Human Rights; in pastoral letters, Polish bishops have been defending the right to truth and standing up for human freedom and dignity. Most important, they have been defending the civil liberties of the working people, and particularly their right to strike and to form independent labor unions.

The Catholic Church, which consistently resists pressure from the government and defends Christian principles as well as the principles of the Declaration of Human Rights, has necessarily become a place where attitudes of nonconformity and dignity among the people can mingle. It is therefore a key source of encouragement for those who seek to broaden civil liberties.

The new evolutionism aims at gradual and slow change. But this does not mean that the movement for change will always be peaceful—that it will not require sacrifices and casualties. In the past, this movement partially consisted of mass actions by workers and students—and this may continue into the future. Such actions are usually followed by disputes in the power elite. Therefore, we should ask whether forces within the party and its leadership exist which are capable of adopting
a program of reform, and whether revisionism might reappear within the party. Can the democratic opposition find an ally in one of the party coteries?

Revisionism is a movement of intraparty renewal which came into being in the fifties and is now an outdated phenomenon. It is difficult to imagine a movement that would use Marxist-Leninist doctrine, or even any of its elements, to enforce reforms in Poland today, since this doctrine is a dead creature, an empty gesture, an official ritual. It no longer stimulates discussion or fires up emotions. It is incapable of causing internal tension and division.

I believe nevertheless that change within the party is inevitable. Among the hundreds of thousands of party members who have no interest whatsoever in dialectical materialism, there are many for whom membership in the PUWP is simply a necessary precondition for participation in public life. Among them are many believers in realpolitik, pragmatism and economic reform. Their political beliefs and decisions are shaped by the pressure of public opinion and by forces within the national economy. Pragmatism causes these people to let narrow ideological criteria be overridden by the need for the development of education, stronger scientific-technical cooperation with capitalist countries, and increased competition. This obviously does not mean that these individuals are striving for democracy. A party “pragmatist” has no reason to aim for democratic change—for pluralism and authentic self-government. But he does have reason to understand the effectiveness of compromising with forces favoring plurality instead of brutally suppressing them. For he knows very well that repression solves nothing and instead prepares the ground for the next explosion of social discontent, the consequences of which are impossible to foresee.

The party pragmatist will therefore do his best to avoid such situations. This is why he can be a partner of the democratic opposition, with whom it will be possible to reach a political compromise. But he will never be a political ally. I think that this distinction is important. If the people of the democratic opposition fail to distinguish the various trends that exist within the power apparatus, I believe they may ignore reality, become fanatical maximalists, and go astray into political adventurism. Identifying their own goals with those of the pragmatic wing of the party, however, could lead them to repeat the mistakes of the revisionists, to form false alliances and lose their ideological identity. The people of the democratic opposition should not place excessive hope in “reasonable” party leaders, or give in to arguments that “one should not make things more difficult for the current party leadership because the next one may be worse.” The democratic opposition must formulate its own political goals and only then, with those goals in hand, reach political compromises. Take, for example, a situation in which the workers revolt and the government declares that it wants to “consult with the working class” instead of organizing a bloody massacre. The people of the democratic opposition should treat this reaction neither as a sufficient concession (“but they are not shooting”) nor as a meaningless fiction. On the contrary, the democratic opposition must be constantly and incessantly visible in public life, must create political facts by organizing mass actions, must formulate alternative programs. Everything else is an illusion.

The intelligentsia’s duty is to formulate alternative programs and defend the basic principles. More precisely, I refer to those small groups of intellectuals who believe in continuing the traditions of the “insubordinate” intelligentsia of the early 1900s—the traditions of writers such as Stanisław Brzozyński, Stanisław Wyspiański, Stefan Żeromski, and Zofia Nałkowska. I feel solidarity with those traditions and those people, although I am the last person to overestimate the importance of their actions. But those voices, albeit weak and sporadic, are nonetheless authentic: they form an independent public opinion, with nonconformist attitudes and oppositional thought. This course is being followed by people from various traditions and social strata: former revisionists (including the author of this article), former neopositivists, and those who became ideologically aware after the events of 1968.

The direction the ideological thinking of the young generation will take—as well as the drift of political change in Poland and in other countries of Eastern Europe—will depend on the convergence of these groups with the activities of the working class. When a free press and independent organizations do not exist, the moral and political responsibility of these groups is much greater than at any other time. The people of the opposition should renounce material profit and official esteem in order to fulfill this exceptional responsibility, so that we can expect the truth from them.
Some Remarks on the Opposition and the General Situation in Poland 1979

(Written jointly with Jan Józef Lipski)

EDITOR’S NOTE. This article, signed by two KOR members—Michnik and Jan Józef Lipski—was a reply to an article published in the underground three months earlier by another KOR member, Jacek Kuron. Kuron considered the prevention of a social explosion the most urgent task of the opposition and advocated the creation of a nonoppositional “movement of demands.” That movement would channel social discontent into practical pressure on the authorities in matters of economy and social organization. The underlying question was that the possibility and desirability of collaboration between the opposition movement and the authorities. Both articles marked an important point in the political discussion leading to the creation of Solidarity.

Because of both its content and its author, Jacek Kuron’s article “The Situation in Poland and the Opposition’s Program,” which appeared this year in issue no. 3 of Biuletyn Informacyjny, constitutes an important event in independent publishing. Kuron tackles fundamental problems that require an honest and subtle analysis. Our remarks will merely be a sort of glossary for discussion, an attempt to define several points which we consider important.

Kuron ties his reflections to the possibility of a sudden explosion of public anger. We fully share his concern about the potential consequences of such an explosion. But we believe that the issue of how a democratic opposition should function in our society is broader and that it is partly unrelated to the possibility of an imminent outbreak. An explosion may result when normal channels for social pressure on the