



Review of the publication: Marek Wierzbicki, *Ostatni bunt. Młodzieżowa opozycja u schyłku PRL, 1980–1990*, Lublin: IPN 2013, ISBN 978-83-7629-429-2

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Ostatni bunt [The Last Rebellion] is Marek Wierzbicki's most recent book dealing with Polish youth under communist rule. It tackles the specific problem of youth opposition to communism during the regime's final decade of existence. The book represents a first attempt at an in-depth historical discussion and analysis of the subject, which thus far has been mostly absent in the narrative. The importance of the topic is due to the fact that—as the author emphasises—in this period at least four hundred youth organisations, groups, and movements at schools and universities were politically active beyond the control of the regime. There would never again be such a degree of politicisation and activity among Poland's youth after the demise of communism.

Wierzbicki presents a study of this phenomenon on a national scale (based upon 15 cities), employing an impressive variety of primary and secondary sources. He manages to discuss a plethora of organisations and movements from the era, introducing the reader not only to the larger and more prolific oppositional youth movements that acted publicly such as the Ruch Młodej Polski [Young Poland Movement], the Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów [Independent Students' Association], the Ruch Społeczeństwa Alternatywnego [Movement for an Alternative Society], the Ruch Wolność i Pokój [Freedom and Peace Movement], the Federacja Młodzieży Walczącej [Federation of Fighting Youth], or the Pomarańczowa Alternatywa [Orange Alternative], but also the smaller groups and even conspiratorial initiatives that sprang up during times of heightened repression. The activity of these movements is especially highlighted in the first part of the book that presents a chronology of youth oppositional activity throughout the decade.

The book treats the period from 1980 to 1990 as a historical epoch during which the communist regime underwent its protracted death struggle starting with the emergence of Solidarność [Solidarity] and ending with the dissolution of the main symbol of the communist regime, the Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza [Polish United Worker's Party]. Wierzbicki puts forward three distinct periods in which to frame the political activity of Poland's youth of the era: the legal Solidarność period from 1980 to 1981, the martial law period from 1981 to 1983, and the waning of the Polish People's Republic from 1984 to 1990.

As such, the book aims to answer a series of crucial questions regarding the 'youthful opposition' of the 1980s, which the author frames as the manifestation of a major rebellion. Thus, it traces the reasons for the emergence of political opposition in youth groups, and then subsequently discusses the aims and scope of the various organisations, movements, and groupuscules in a first general chronological discussion. In the second part, it further explains and contextualises youth opposition by grounding it in the specific circumstances of the era, which was comprised of not only political and economic limitations, but were also the result of the influences of home and family tradition, the Church, and popular youth culture (often coming over from the West). A significant aspect of this 'youthful rebellion' was that it was not always in line with the betterknown 'elder' organised opposition. In fact, towards the end of the decade some of the young opponents of the communist regime would come into direct conflict with the older generation of dissidents and opposition activists.

It is exactly in this evolution that the story of youth opposition to communism in the 1980s becomes compelling. As Wierzbicki demonstrates in the third part of the book, the younger generation produced new themes around which to mobilise and introduced new tactics to oppose the regime. The author also refers to the youthful opposition as a 'network society', and although it represented a minority, an elite among Poland's youth became quite a formidable force on the ground. It is also striking that the young activists had a near allergic stance towards hierarchy—which is in part explained by their aversion to the communist system—and preferred to

organise in loose and decentralised structures. More so, in contrast to the 'self-limiting revolution' of Solidarność and the elder opposition, the young rebels did not eschew violence. Romantic insurrectionary sentiments and youthful energy not only led to regular confrontations with the infamous riot police, the ZOMO, but even led in some instances to planning partisan-like actions of sabotage and armed resistance. Ultimately, the biggest curiosity is found in the ideology and worldview of the young rebels. While they were united by a wholehearted anti-communist stance, their ideological views as such could be quite disparate. Nevertheless, there was a dominant strand of patriotic, conservative, nationalist, and Catholic tendencies, but this easily merged with elements of youth counter-culture that in a different societal and political context would have been unimaginable.

Wierzbicki's account and analysis of the youthful rebels comes to a close in 1990 with the demise of the communist regime in Poland. However, the author hints at the repercussions and consequences of these rebels' coming of age experiences while opposing the communist regime, and in some cases coming into conflict with the then elder opposition. It is with this question that the book ends, and the reader may ponder if indeed some of the political protagonists in present-day Poland whose political roots lay in the youthful 'last rebellion' of the 1980s may not have harboured feelings of nostalgia, resentment, or unfinished business during the years of systemic transformation. It is clear that the story of the last decade of communism in Poland and those who opposed it has not yet fully been told. In this light, *Ostatni bunt* is a welcome addition to the scholarship on Communist Poland and can serve as a roadmap for further research on the topic while providing insightful background to understanding contemporary Polish politics and history.

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