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Poland: Return of the Anarchists

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Last September the Sigma Group of anarchists in Warsaw issued a 'Proclamation to the Libertarian Movement in the West.' This statement in effect proclaimed the existence of a functioning anarchist movement in Poland today thereby marking the most promising manifestation of revolutionary libertarian politics in Soviet-East Europe since the Second World War.

Consciously anarchist groupings have appeared elsewhere in the region; notably in Bulgaria and the USSR. In the former case the libertarian presence is a continuation of the Bulgarian anarcho-syndicalist tradition rooted in the working class. The arrest of several anarcho-syndicalist militants for strike activity back in 1974 was the most prominent indication of this. In the USSR, anarchism has sporadically gained a marginal following among disaffected students and intellectuals, particularly in Leningrad. These left oppositionists blended anarchism with Marxism and engaged in activity akin to that of the Western New Left.

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But the new Polish anarchist movement is considerably different. It has arisen and grown within the context of an enormous popular movement which challenged the very existence of the Soviet system. In the case of the Sigma group, most of its members were students and their initial attraction to anarchism was intellectual insofar as they learned of it through the availability in libraries of writings by Bakunin, Kropotkin, Proudhon and the pioneer Polish anarchist Edward Ambrowski.

According to its proclamation the Sigma group was born in early 1980. This was before Solidarnosc existed, although widespread underground activity was taking place in Poland at the time. Later with the August 1980 events much more open activity became possible. As a result, by year's end the group had launched its own review with a print run of 6,000 copies. These were distributed in Wroclaw and Krakow as well as Warsaw.

The appeal of the review was considerable. Sigma notes that the Soviet ambassador in Warsaw protested very strictly against its further appearance and that the review gained considerable popularity among left-wing members of Solidarnosc and students. Altogether six issues appeared prior to the military coup. Besides this the group also issued a five booklet series on anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism which was widely distributed across Poland through a network of private contacts.

The period of Solidarnosc's legal existence also enabled the group to gain greater familiarity with anarchism by way of contacts with anarchists in the West. Significantly, it is now known as well that other contacts were being developed with Western anarchists as a result of the Roger Noel case. Noel, a Belgian anarchist who was convicted for smuggling a radio transmitter to the Solidarnosc underground, had been meeting with anarcho-syndicalists in Warsaw.

The activity of other anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist groups in Poland is a point stressed by the Sigma Group in its proclamation. Among the indications of activity by other groups it notes is the appearance of another anarchist review in the Silesian industrial centre of Wroclaw. Still, a precise estimate of the overall strength of the movement isn't made given a lack of information.

In fact, the Sigma Group did not even know there was another active anarchist group in Warsaw until just after the declaration of martial law. They found out by way of a leaflet passed out on the campus of Warsaw University which was urging resistance to the military junta. Other libertarian groups have apparently even concealed their activity during the period from August 1980 till the coup. Due to problems such as these the movement was incapable of engaging in co-ordinated activity or formulating a common program.

When the military coup happened, Sigma's activities were set back dramatically. A number of the group's members were arrested for a short time and their ability to publish disrupted. For a while, only writing on walls and leaflet distribution by hand was possible.

By Spring the political situation in Poland was changing as the union movement managed to mobilize major manifestations of opposition particularly in the streets. Things improved for the Sigma Group too. In co-operation with other libertarians in Warsaw it started a new underground review called 'Equality'. Sigma further notes that in this time period, efforts were underway to launch an anarcho-syndicalist paper called 'Subversion' and that other Left Opposition publications had published some articles offering a libertarian standpoint.

By September, the time of their proclamation, the group was making plans to resurrect their original review and booklet series. To this end they made an appeal to libertarians in the West for political and economic support. It is crucial that it is given to them.