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.

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 un-
derground activity was taking place in Poland at the time. Later
with the August 1980 events much more open activity became pos-
able. 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 popu-
ularity among left-wing members of Solidarnosc and students. Al-
together 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 con-
tacts with anarchists in the West. Significantly, it is now known as
well that other contacts were being developed with Western anarch-
ists as a result of the Roger Noel case. Noel, a Belgian anarchist
who was convicted for smuggling a radio transmitter to the Soli-
darnosc 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 pro-
gram.

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 op-
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 lib-
ertarian 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.