

ZUZOWSKI, ROBERT. *Political Dissent and Opposition in Poland. The Workers' Defense Committee "KOR"*. Praeger, Westport [etc.] 1992. ix, 293 pp. Ill. £58.95.

Despite its relatively short lifespan (September 1976–September 1981), *Komitet Obrony Robotników* (KOR), the Workers' Defense Committee, had a profound influence on Polish domestic politics and on the founding of the Solidarność movement. It also acted as a model for the establishing of other civil rights movements, such as Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia, served as a catalyst in the general tendency of liberalization in Eastern Europe and supplied the requisite intellectual atmosphere for the upheavals there in 1989. A numerically small group of Polish intellectuals may therefore claim the merit for setting the course for political, economic and social renewal in the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

The origins of KOR can be traced back to the harsh sentences handed out in June 1976 to workers in Radom and Ursus after they had gone on strike to protest against price rises. After several individual protests, for example the "Letter to the Persecuted Workers" by the novelist Jerzy Andrejewski or the "Letter of 101", Antoni Macierewicz and Jacek Kuroń founded a "Workers Defense Committee" on 23 September in the knowledge that "this is collective suicide". They also knew that Piotr Jaroszewicz, Prime Minister at the time, ridiculed the new body ("We can only laugh at them"). Yet KOR became the first dissenting organization in the history of Communist Poland to operate in the open. It was to gain for itself the pioneering role in the struggle for independent trade unions and, as ultimate goals, for parliamentary democracy at the end of Soviet domination. KOR's activities are relatively well documented because official censorship could never suppress "Samizdat" publications, which were subsequently reprinted by Polish emigré publishing houses abroad.

Western newspapers and magazines often gave leading KOR-figures like Adam Michnisk, Jacek Kuroń and the literary historian Jan Józef Lipski the opportunity to present their views. Lipski managed to have the first comprehensive and detailed monography on KOR published in London in 1983. In the countless articles and essays which dealt with the origins, goals and banning of Solidarność (from P. Raina, D. McShane, N. Ascherson, T. G. Ash, etc.) KOR's role therein was given its due place.

Zuzowski, a lecturer in the department of international relations at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, has worked several essays published by him in learned journals (*The Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, *East European Quarterly* and the *Polish Review*) into the book and extended the material for a taut monography. At the outset he outlines the aims of his study and adumbrates the violence, spontaneity and secrecy surrounding dissident activity after the Polish "Spring in October" of 1956. In doing so, he offers a thorough explanation of the Polish dissidents' perception of appropriate means and outlines extensively the oppressive policy of the state. In March 1968 Poles learned the bitter lesson that a liberal student protest movement without a mass basis or support from the workers could be easily hammered into the ground by the Government. This realization led to a new concept pursued vigorously by KOR and which manifested itself in what was euphemistically called the "December troubles"

in the coastal cities in 1970: that dissent and opposition ought to be decentralized, the struggle for political reforms be conducted by peaceful methods and that gradual, incremental changes could be achieved only over a relatively long period. Not the antagonism of communism-capitalism, but totalitarianism versus pluralism should be at the centre of ideological dispute.

Originally run by only fourteen members, all of whom were university graduates and highly regarded in their communities because of their successful careers, the KOR group grew to thirty-eight and were ideologically, religiously and politically a heterogeneous group of people. Underrating the committee's immediate and future impact on Polish politics and afraid that the persecution of dissidents might adversely affect further economic co-operation with the West, the authorities abstained, in the first phase, from imprisonment or major harassment. The first mass arrests occurred in 1977 after protests concerning the death, under mysterious circumstances, of a KOR-sympathizer. When the last of those workers sentenced in 1976 were amnestied and released in July 1977 some KOR members felt their organization had fulfilled its original aims, resigned and formed the "Defence of Human and Citizens' Rights Movement" (ROPCiO). The remaining majority, now under the slightly attenuated name of "Social Self-Defence Committee KOR" (KSS-KOR), vowed to continue the struggle against political, religious and racial repression and for the reintroduction of the rule of law. Up to August 1980 sympathizers and members of KOR had distributed c. 300 books and brochures and a mass of leaflets, of which roughly one-third were issued by their underground publishing house NOWA. With the printing of KRYTYKA there appeared the first samizdat paper in Poland entirely devoted to political issues. The Flying University, later named the Society of Academic Courses (TKN), conducted lectures and seminars, mainly in the social sciences and humanities, until 1979. Courses devoted to Poland's recent history and politics attracted the largest audiences. On the basis of his impressive knowledge of samizdat publications and countless interviews with KOR activists Zuzowski is able to describe the development of KOR in a convincing manner. It should be noted, however, that Zuzowski depends almost exclusively on literature in Polish and English and does not consider, among other articles, the important proclamations of Adam Michnik which appeared in the German and French press. Despite his sympathy for the Workers' Defense Committee, and especially for its leading figures, the author displays a sufficient amount of academic sovereignty so that his admiration is not uncritical. This honest approach is clearly evident in the central chapters (5 & 6) of the book, in which the committee's relations with the Roman Catholic Church and other dissident organizations are scrutinized. Without the political groundwork done by the Church up to 1976 or the support of the clergy the establishment of KOR and its activities stretching over the five years cannot be comprehended in full. Not all KOR activists welcomed the increasing involvement of the episcopate in the day-to-day controversies at a time when the socio-economic situation was deteriorating rapidly, especially after the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope (October 1978) and his subsequent triumphal visit to Poland (June 1979). Some KOR people, J. Kuroń for example, called themselves "Christians without God" and were prepared to respect the Catholic ethic. Micknfs's book, *Church-Left Dialogue* (1977), evoked tough discussions, not least of all because he maintained the common ideological denominator of the

leftist intelligentsia and Christians only lay in “the encounter in anti-totalitarian resistance”, but he, too, was prepared to accept the Catholic Church mainly as an ally in the struggle for freedom, tolerance, justice, human dignity and truth. The mutual concern for the situation the country was in, the endeavour to prevent a critical deterioration in the strained relationship between the disillusioned society and communist monopoly power and to find an evolutionary solution – that was the common basis. Despite occasional and public disagreement the ground structure for co-operation based on trust was established between the Church and KOR, whereby the latter tried to exercise a moderating influence on more militant and nationalistically-minded alliances.

The origins, growth and the success of the first free trade union movement under communist rule can only be grasped within the framework created by KOR's initial activities. For example, the first unofficial paper *Robotnik*, aimed specifically at Polish workers, appeared in September 1977 with the assistance of KOR. In August 1979 it published the “Workers’ Rights Charter” which facilitated the setting up of a permanent base for collaboration between the intelligentsia and the workers. How KOR and the free trade union movement influenced one another in a variety of ways has been described in detail several times. Zuzowski succeeds, however, in presenting new aspects of this co-operation which was evident in the organization, internal structure and strategy of *Solidarność*. Especially revealing is his analysis of the reasons for the decline of KOR-influenced activities after August 1980, although individual KOR members played a prominent role in the trade union movement in the exciting months that followed. Professor Eduard Lipinski announced the dissolution of KOR at the trade union congress in September 1981. During the period of martial law and while the Polish United Workers’ Party was inexorably falling apart, KOR's original principles and the input of the organization's leading members provided the intellectual background for concepts about the long overdue “new departure”. In the period December 1981 to May 1986 alone, 1,600 illegal dissent organizations were smashed by the police and 1,200 duplicating machines confiscated. None the less, roughly 1,350 different samizdat publications were issued, among them *Tygodnik Mazowsze*, compiled with the assistance of former KOR members and sometimes reaching a record circulation of 40,000.

Zuzowski does not devote the same detailed attention to KOR in the years following its dissolution; yet he is at pains to trace its influence on important decision-making processes up until the “Round Table” talks of Spring 1989, thereby providing convincing responses to the question, why were there organizations like KOR in Poland? His cautious resumé, namely that KOR above all others contributed to transforming the Polish pattern of dissent, although its ideas were certainly not original, deserves our approval, for KOR simply adopted ideas and observations originated by others in the past and skilfully applied them. Other factors of importance such as the Catholic Church, the combined impact of other dissident groups and, above all, *Solidarność* played their part in bringing about the change of systems in Poland. But “it was KOR – and KOR alone – that introduced a new method of more effective dissident activity to Poland, the method of trial and error subject to public criticism” (p. 261).

Zuzowski's investigation is a thorough, well-structured, soberly written and very readable review of the whole KOR complex. He does not treat the

organization in isolation, but places it among other forces which struggled against the communist monopoly and sought to create a pluralist society, a parliamentary democracy and a market-oriented economic system. Because his grasp of the material is so obviously sovereign, his conclusions are logical and convincing. The – implicit – credo of this book can be formulated as follows: a small group of intellectuals of high moral standing and conscious of a sense of responsibility can sometimes really succeed in an open and peaceful struggle with the powers that be and bring about a profound change in politics, economic affairs and society as a whole.

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