THE SELF-LIMITING REVOLUTION
THE POLISH AUGUST:
by Neal Ascherson
(Viking; 320 pp.; $14.95)

Robert Sharlet

Modern Poland is founded on a set of fault lines that have become increasingly evident since Stalin's death in 1953:

• A ruling Communist party that never fully succeeded in penetrating and hence controlling Polish society.

• A Party leadership divided at the top between neo-Stalinist conservatives and reforming "revisionists," along with a moderate centrist faction that usually plays the two rival factions off each other because it is too weak to lead effectively.

• A powerful and well-led Catholic Church with deep social roots in the population. The Church provides a rival belief system to the Polish Communist party's cradle-to-grave Marxist-Leninist ideology. Her competitive position in Polish politics was greatly enhanced by the election of Karol Cardinal Wojtyla of Krakow as Pope John Paul II in 1978 followed by his triumphal papal visit to Poland in June, 1979, an event that had destabilizing side effects for the government's authority.

• A restless intelligentsia, which since the late '60s has undergone a sea change and, by the latter half of the '70s, provided the impetus for the most extensive, and perhaps the most politically sophisticated, human rights movement in the European Communist states. The demand for free trade unions, independent of the Party-state, was just one of the positions advocated by Polish human rights activists, whose ranks included an electrician from Gdansk named Lech Walesa.

• A largely private peasantry that is staunchly pro-Church in its spiritual allegiance and whose agricultural production is for the most part beyond the direct control of Party-state.

• Finally, a politically conscious and volatile industrial working class—Marx's proletariat, in whose name the Communist party traditionally governs—which, after several previous confrontations with the Party-state had become by the summer of 1980 a rumbling volcano.

Poland's latest labor crisis, the fourth in the past twenty-five years, is stimulating a veritable "collage industry" of books. This one, published last year in England, was among the first to appear. Ascherson offers an "eyewitness" account of Solidarity's "self-limiting revolution" from August, 1980, through July, 1981. The American edition updates events through the end of 1981, including the first stages of the "state of war" of December 13.

Ascherson gives adequate coverage to earlier outbreaks of working-class unrest in the book's opening chapters, although I feel that he underestimates the contribution of the first crisis, the period from the Poznan workers' revolt of 1956 to Gomulka's coming to power. His treatment of the Gdansk crisis of 1970 clarifies the question of army involvement in its suppression, and I fully concur that the "most spectacular consequence of the June, 1978 labor crisis was a rapid emergence of unofficial opposition groups," the most important of which was KOR, or the Workers' Defense Committee.

A closer reading of these antecedent crises, all of which ended badly for the protesting workers, would have offered little hope of a happy outcome for Solidarity as well. In the original British edition Ascherson was guardedly optimistic about the union's longevity, in contrast to his tone in the brief epilogue for the American edition. Certainly this reviewer would have desired that optimism to be well founded, but all indicators (short of outright Soviet invasion) have suggested a recurrence of the boom-to-bust pattern that is all too familiar from previous cycles of labor unrest.

The latest working-class eruption tends to follow the standard four-part scenario:

1. All four labor disturbances were triggered by an economic catalyst—an adverse change in wages and/or prices (Apropos, meat prices were raised on July 1, 1980.)

2. On three of the four occasions, the outbreak of protest strikes was followed by the fall of the incumbent Communist party leader, who traditionally was made a scapegoat to deflect blame from the Party. In the current crisis, two Party leaders—Gierek and Kania—have fallen.

3. In all four instances, the government reacted to the labor unrest with a combination of short-term police repression to restore order and middle-run economic concessions to pacify the aroused working class as a whole. Given the vast scale of the peaceful protest in the summer of 1980, the government had little choice but to skew the repression/concession ratio in favor of the latter, culminating in acceptance of the "21 demands").

4. Finally, in all four working-class eruptions, the protest scenario ended with the Party-state eventually coopting, subverting, or "taking back" concessions made in the heat of crisis, a process most recently underway in Poland since December 13, 1981.

The imposition of martial law to conclude the unrest of 1980/81 is, of course, the most extreme "ending" in all the postwar cycles of protest and repression. It now seems that the possibility of invoking a "state of war" had been present in the shadows as one—the ultimate and most dramatic—of several conclusions considered by the Party for bringing to a close the 1980/81 crisis. Along the way, the Party employed bureaucratic obstruction to block implementation of the Gdansk Accords, hoping, no doubt, that Solidarity would soon lose its momentum and wane as a social force. Kania's removal as Party leader in the fall of 1981 signaled the failure of the strategy of obstruction. His successor, Jaruzelski, then turned to cooption in an attempt to saddle Solidarity with responsibility for Poland's economic problems while withholding from it the authority to effect change. As Ascherson makes clear in his epilogue, this strategy, which may have been merely a diversion, quickly failed, causing General Jaruzelski to carry out several well-executed provocations in November and early December of 1981, which, in turn, served as pretexts for martial law.

Jaruzelski's military coup against Solidarity and Polish society, the result of months of secret planning, was without precedent in contemporary Communist systems. Carried out with uncommon efficiency in a country con-
stantly on the verge of economic and political chaos since 1980, Polish martial law has followed the familiar “Third World” pattern when generals seize power: the immediate suspension of political groups and detention of their leaders, the banning of politics in general and the atomization of the population to obviate organized resistance, and the selective use of judicial action against the bold few who protest, thereby intimidating other potential resisters.

In its first half year of existence, the Polish military government has been generally successful in its limited “normalization” program: but Solidarity, although decapitated and driven underground, still continues to show vitality in the form of a clandestine press and radio, some symbolic, passive resistance, and occasional large-scale protest demonstrations. The Jaruzelski regime, however, appears to have sufficient coercive forces and the willingness to deploy them. Moving beyond the initial phase of normalization, Jaruzelski and his advisors will soon have to select their future course from among the options available to Communist states: the Hungarian way of Kadarist conciliation or the Czech route of socio-political immobilism under Gustav Husak since 1968. A possible third way—the model of interwar Polish military dictatorship under Marshal Pilsudski—cannot be ruled out.

As for the Sisyphean struggle for human rights in Poland, I share Neal Ascherson’s confidence that it will go on as it always has after setbacks in the past. In this spirit, his Polish August serves as an excellent guide to the past—and the future—in Poland.

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**CHINA’S INTELLECTUALS: ADVISE AND DISSENT**

by Merle Goldman

(Harvard University Press: 276 pp.; $22.00)

**THE GATE OF HEAVENLY PEACE:**

**THE CHINESE AND THEIR REVOLUTION, 1895-1980**

by Jonathan D. Spence

(Viking Press; xiii+465 pp.; $19.95/Penguin paperback $8.95 (fall))

Howard Goldblatt

Like the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China has been plagued by, or blessed with, an almost continuous series of dissident movements since its inception. But unlike its neighbor to the north, the goals, methods, and fate of most dissidents in China have not succeeded in capturing the attention of the rest of the world. In part this is due to the exotic image most Westerners still have of China and in part to the unique nature of China’s dissident movements, but mostly to Party control of internal and external communications and its often ruthless suppression of “counterrevolutionary” activities. The names Wei Jingshen, Bai Hua, and Liu Qing are recognizable to only a handful of people outside China, even though these men and many more like them are dissenters whose cases have been hotly debated throughout the People’s Republic.

Merle Goldman, professor of history at Boston University and the author of the authoritative study Literary Dissent in Communist China, has made the phenomenon of dissent among Chinese intellectuals both accessible and decipherable to Western readers in this her newest work. It is a book that should be read by anyone who desires a greater understanding of the “Sleeping Dragon.”

Tempting though it is to turn immediately to Goldman’s account and analysis of the Cultural Revolution, a period often equated with Hitler’s Holocaust, the earlier chapters on dissident movements prior to the 1960s are essential: Not only are those movements part of an evolutionary process that must be seen in its entirety to be appreciated fully, but this is where the author analyzes in detail the historical roots of Chinese dissent.

One of the unusual aspects of Chinese intellectual dissent is the speed and regularity with which participants change roles: Persecutors become the persecuted as political winds shift and power struggles rage in the leadership ranks. If readers feel that they are encountering many of the same names over and over again, it is no illusion. Then, too, in the People’s Republic, as in dynastic China before it, leading cultural and scientific figures often hold important positions in the government, thus obscuring the lines between patrons and clients. It is a nation where the fiercest battles often are fought over contemporary analogues to historical themes, conflicts, and literary works that tax the interpretative powers of the intellectuals and are a complete mystery to the general population. If there is one central figure in this history of political and intellectual struggle, it is of course Mao Zedong, whose various roles in each controversy are neatly analyzed and documented, resulting in a vastly modified view of the omniscience of China’s “Great Helmsman.”

No author of a work dealing with such a sensitive and emotional subject can be expected to submerge her sympathies completely; however, the fact that Goldman is clearly sympathetic to China’s dissenters in no way lessens the objectivity of her approach or the quality of her scholarship. Her sympathy, in fact, lends poignancy and added relevance to the issues that have caused thirty years of ideological conflict.

Goldman argues, finally, that the decisions of China’s leadership following the death of Mao and the fall from power of his wife, Jiang Qing, and the rest of the “Gang of Four” have taken China to a point where it may be possible no longer to impose a “monolithic view of reality” and also that dissent may have achieved such momentum that it is virtually unstoppable. Her argument seems amply warranted and carefully substantiated. Thus China’s most recent round of large-scale bureaucratic purges must be seen as more than just a high-level power struggle in continuing reaction to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. It is certainly that; but it is to some degree also a victory for the forces of dissent, whose demands for modernization, liberalization, and a just legal system have earned for them the appellation “China’s conscience.”

The title of Jonathan Spence’s latest book certainly has its ironic side, for seldom has any nation witnessed as little peace—heavenly or terrestrial—as China during the twentieth century. It has been a painful process this revolution, but thanks to the unique talents of Spence, who teaches at Yale, and to the authors of the vast quantities of