

REVIEWS

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HISTORY OF THE UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL IN A TURBULENT TIMES

Andrzej Friszke, *Czas KOR-u. Jacek Kuroń a geneza “Solidarności”* [The Times of the Workers’ Defence Committee. Jacek Kuroń and the Origins of “Solidarity”], Wydawnictwo Znak, Instytut

Studiów Politycznych PAN, Kraków 2011, 612 p., 38 photographs.

The issue of the political opposition in Poland during the communist period is broadly represented in Polish historiography. However the studies that had been conducted before the archives of the Polish United Workers Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza — PZPR) and the Security Service (Służba Bezpieczeństwa — SB) were open and made available for the historians are fragmentary and lack certainty in many areas. Although since early 2000’s more and more documents have been revealed, so the perspective and the conclusions that have been made can be considered as more significant. The exemplification of this process is Andrzej Friszke’s new book — “Czas KOR-u — Jacek Kuroń a geneza «Solidarności»”.

Andrzej Friszke is recognized Polish historian, professor of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the author of many fundamental books on the history of communism in Poland. His best known works include “Opozycja polityczna w PRL

1945–1980” (London 1994), “Życie polityczne Emigracji” (Warsaw 1999), “Oaza na Kopernika. Klub Inteligencji Katolickiej 1956–1989” (Warsaw 1997), “Przystosowanie i opór. Studia z dziejów PRL” (Warsaw 2007) and the monumental “Anatomia buntu. Kuroń, Modzelewski i «komandosi»” (Cracow 2010). He is also a member of the Council of the Institute of National Remembrance.

Before Friszke’s new work, the topic of the history of the Workers’ Defence Committee was discussed in historiography in several books, but only few of them were focused mainly on the history of the Committee. Among the most important are Peter Raina’s “Independent Social Movements in Poland” (London 1981), Paweł Sasanka’s “Czerwiec 1976” (Warsaw 2006) that very precisely depicted the background in which KOR was established, “Kryptonim Gracze” (Warsaw 2010) — a selection of documents related to the invigilation of KOR by the SB (Security Service), “Dokumenty Komitetu Obrony Robotników i Komitetu Samoobrony Społecznej KOR” (London 1994) — a collection of the documents made by KOR. Finally, there is the noteworthy “Workers’ Defence Committee” (Londyn 1983, Warszawa 2006), a quasi monograph written in the 1980s by Jan Józef Lipski, a member of the Committee.

The book is divided into 8 chapters, including introduction and conclusion. The first one discusses how the opposition social circles functioned before KOR was created (Międzyepoka, p. 19–97). The second one deals with the first period of KOR’s existence (Komitet Obrony Robotników, p. 97–243). The third describes KOR after its transformation into KSS “KOR” (Samoorganizacja i samoobrona, p. 243–327). The fourth touches upon the topic of strengthening the opposition social circle of Jacek Kuroń (Budowanie niezależności, p. 327–435). The fifth concentrates on period just before the great strikes of the Polish August occurred (Przedwiośnie rewolucji, p. 435–511). The final chapter describes the events that directly led to the rise of “Solidarity”. The contents of the book are summarized in the conclusions (p. 579–599).

Friszke describes the history of the Workers’ Defence Committee in the context of activity of Jacek Kuroń — one of the main figures of KOR, charismatic oppositional leader and later on, an influential advisor of “Solidarity”. This method of historical narration offers more perspectives on the examined topic and prevents from “dehumanization” of history, which is a serious threat to everyone who analyses the history of institutions or social movements. In the introduction the author underlines the importance of contestation of the political reality in Poland in the 1970s. It was a very rare social attitude towards the government at that time, when most Polish citizens tried to adapt themselves to the system created by the communists (p. 9–15). Oppositionists were considered by the majority of the Polish

citizens as unpractical people who cannot manage themselves. As Friszke points out, that was the social and psychological background of the era.

Andrzej Friszke tackles his topic chronologically. In the first chapter he depicts how the oppositionists functioned at the time before KOR was established. He stresses the importance of illegal connections between oppositionists in Poland and their friends in Western World in the context of smuggling literature which was banned in People's Republic of Poland or financial support. A fact mentioned for the first time in the historiography is the usage of Masonic connections in order to establish safe route between oppositionists in the PRL (Jan Józef Lipski, Jan Olszewski) and their friends in the West (p. 73–74). He also pays attention to the protests of Polish intelligentsia against the amendments to the constitution of the PRL in 1975/76 and notices that it was a main factor that consolidated oppositionists who before had been atomized (p. 83–95). In the second chapter, Friszke concentrates on the development of KOR and how the visions of its purposes evolved during the first period of its existence. The author meticulously shows the negotiations between so called “lay leftists” (*lewica laicka*) and the “independence group” (*niepodległościowcy*) that eventually led to the collapse of fragile consensus and engendered intensifying aversion towards one another (p. 167–199). Nevertheless, the significance of KOR was increasing and Kuroń's position in the Committee was growing. The third and the fourth chapters are dedicated to the further development of KOR that transformed into the Committee of Social Self-Defence “KOR” (*Komitet Samoobrony Społecznej “KOR”*) in September 1977. They show how the Committee functioned in the late 1970s and what ideas it presented with respect to the political reality in Poland. Friszke stresses that the ultimate aim of KOR and “KSS” KOR was Polish independence, but it was not publicly advertised because of political tactics. KOR focused on a small steps strategy that was meant to weaken the foundations of the communist regime and its legitimization (p. 337–342). In chapters five and six Friszke depicts how KOR was prepared for the revolution of the Polish August 1980 and shows support of its leaders, especially Jacek Kuroń, for the strikes that eventually led to the creation of “Solidarity”. Friszke reveals that Kuroń analysed economic and social problems of Poland very deeply and predicted the revolution that shook the communist regime in Poland (p. 439–483). His thoughts seemed to be so eccentric that no one believed him and the strikes which occurred during August 1980 were a complete surprise to the leaders of the opposition, except Jacek Kuroń.

Friszke's book is a crucial work on the history of the Polish opposition movement of the 1970s and also a great inquiry into the biography of Jacek Kuroń. It is based on a whole spectrum of primary sources and its contents will be considered

as fundamental for many years. The only weak point of the book is very hermetic language which reduces the circle of potential readers. On the other hand “Czas KOR-u” contains 38 photos of great quality that will attract not only historians. Undoubtedly no one who becomes acquainted with the book will be disappointed.