

SOLIDARITY'S SECRET:
The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland
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A scholarly account of the work of hitherto-unacknowledged women in the labor and civil rights movement that eventually unseated Communism in Poland.

"Solidarity produced perhaps as many heroines as it did heroes," maintains Penn (Women's Leadership Institute/Mills), though for various reasons few students of the movement have gotten around to documenting the specifics.

Just so, when the secret police of the Jaruzelski regime arrested the male leadership of Solidarity in 1982, they were quite mystified to discover that the movement's newspaper went right on publishing. "Blinded by sexism," Penn writes, "the secret police hunted diligently for the men they assumed to be behind the newspaper--Solidarity men in hiding whose names had appeared in bylines."

Instead, seven women directed the newspaper and the thousands of activists who published and distributed it, and they did a superb job of spreading the values and agenda of the movement throughout the country. Most of the seven, Penn notes, had a long history of activism themselves; many had been involved in the antigovernment student protests of 1968 and had moved to the printing press just at about the time Solidarity emerged as an opposition force in the late 1970s.

Civil society in Poland, Penn observes, was largely built through the medium of the underground press, which found much to comment on--not least the disparity between the officially ordained equality of the sexes and the realities of economic life, for Polish women actually worked far more hours and were paid far less for their labor. (One of the seven, Helena Luczywo, is now one of the wealthiest women in Poland, having put her time and energy into "building publishing skills that produced incredible profits under the new market economy.")

So, with all these women's efforts, why was Lech Walesa's the single face of Solidarity? Because, Penn was told, if the "weaker sex" were shown to be strong in the movement, some activists might have suspected that the whole thing was a government front.

Welcome homage to the founding mothers of the new Poland.