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## THE EAST VERSUS THE SOUTH

### BELGIAN SOLIDARITY MOVEMENTS WITH POLAND AND NICARAGUA DURING THE EARLY 1980s

For some years now, the western European reaction towards the emergence and struggle of the Polish trade union *Solidarność* in the 1980s has received a striking amount of scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> Among the common conclusions emerging from this growing body of literature is the vision that the mobilization of western Europe in support of the persecuted Polish trade union was remarkable for its size, breadth and duration. Indeed, historians have not eschewed superlatives when it comes to describing this solidarity, praising it with adjectives like ‘tremendous’ and ‘exceptional’.<sup>2</sup>

In their efforts to answer the question as to which country was number one in supporting *Solidarność* and to underline the importance of the support given from their respective countries, some authors have been virtually bidding against each other. They have exhausted themselves with arguments about the volume of aid and the amounts of money given to *Solidarność*, the breadth and vigour of the mobilization, and the eventual impact it had on the victory of the independent trade union organization in its struggle against the Polish authorities for recognition and democracy. Obviously, scholars always have the tendency to celebrate the relevance of the issues and topics they are profiling. Apart from this, when substantiating their claims about the exceptional breadth and size of the western

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<sup>1</sup> In October 2010, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) organized a grand-scale conference entitled ‘Świat wobec Solidarności: The World towards Solidarity Movement 1980-1989’ in Wrocław, gathering scores of historians from across the world who were working on the topic. A recent reference work is Idesbald Goddeeris, ed., *Solidarity with Solidarity: Western European Trade Unions and the Polish Crisis, 1980-1982* (Lexington: Lanham, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Bégin, ‘Kontakte zwischen Gewerkschaften in Ost und West: Die Auswirkungen von *Solidarność* in Deutschland und Frankreich. Ein Vergleich’, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 45 (2005), 293-324, 300, 303; Andrzej Chwalba and Frank Georgi, ‘France: Exceptional Solidarity?’, in Idesbald Goddeeris, ed., *Solidarity with Solidarity*, 191-218.

European reaction towards Solidarność, historians have usually turned to making comparisons with the reactions towards other issues and dissident movements beyond the 'iron curtain', reactions which were in fact more limited, if not virtually absent.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, with its proportions in terms of size and duration and its volume in aid, the mobilization in support of Solidarność dwarfs the short and feeble one that came in reaction to the crushing of the Prague spring in 1968, or the virtually non-existent one for Poland in 1956. Even the strong but short solidarity with the Hungarians in 1956 pales by comparison to the attention and mobilization developed for Solidarność for many years during the 1980s.

Yet, the nature and character of the solidarity movements in support of Solidarność have to date scarcely been put in the broader perspective of transnational solidarity movements that identified with issues in the other part of the cold war world, namely, the Third World. However it may be, in common use, it is with the north-south rather than with the west-east direction that the term of 'solidarity movements' has conventionally been associated.<sup>4</sup> It should be remembered that the 1980s were also a period in which solidarity movements with the Third World mushroomed for a final time prior to much of their work being taken over by more professionalized NGOs in the 1990s. Among the most prominent of these solidarity movements were those for Nicaragua and Central America, where a US intervention by the Reagan Administration loomed over the region in reaction both to the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979 and the support of the Sandinistas for insurgencies in other Central American countries, notably El Salvador and Guatemala.<sup>5</sup> While the western European supporters of Solidarność feared a Soviet intervention against Polish dissidence, scores of committees of activists rose up at the same time opposing (under the slogan 'Central America, No Second Vietnam') both American intervention in Central America and the mostly hostile foreign policy stance of its western allies towards the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Christiaens, Idesbald Goddeeris and Wouter Goedertier, 'Inspirées par le Sud? Les mobilisations transnationales Est-Ouest pendant la guerre froide', *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'Histoire*, 109 (janvier-mars 2011), 155-168.

<sup>4</sup> Reinhart Kössler and Henning Melber, 'The West German Solidarity Movement with the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa', in Ulf Engel and Robert Kappel, eds., *Germany's Africa Policy Revisited: Interests, Images and Incrementalism* (Münster, Hamburg and London: LIT Verlag, 2002), 103-126.

<sup>5</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge e. a: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 339.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Graham, 'British Policy towards Latin America', in Victor Bulmer-Thomas, ed., *Britain and Latin America: A Changing Relationship*, (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 52-67, at 64.

In this article, then, we want to set the mobilizations for Solidarność and for Sandinista Nicaragua next to each other. Did these two transnational solidarity movements have more in common than merely developing simultaneously during the ‘second cold war’ of the 1980s and their respective claims to the title of ‘solidarity movement’? Or, do the differences between them mean that they were lived out in completely separate worlds from one another? Indeed, on the face of it, the differences are obvious when viewed from the respective sides of both the donors and the recipients of the solidarity. Whereas the solidarity in support of Solidarność came mainly from ‘old social movements’ and notably trade unions, the activists for Nicaragua have been attributed mostly to the new social movements that had emerged since the 1960s and were characterized by the grassroots dimensions of the new left.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Solidarność was supported by conservatives and neo-liberals such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, those very same cold warriors were hostile to the Sandinistas (with members of the Reagan administration even clandestinely supporting their enemies). The domestic situation also differed for Poland and Nicaragua. Indeed, whereas Solidarność struggled as a dissident trade union movement for recognition and democracy, the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) held power over Nicaragua from the revolution in 1979 until it lost the elections in 1990.

In sum, the causes of Solidarność and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua were not only remote from each other – separated by geography, ideology and the virtual boundaries between the three worlds of the cold war constellation – but were also juxtaposed by other factors. Nonetheless, it does make sense to compare them, since both of them triggered solidarity movements abroad and it is precisely these movements into which we want to inquire. We will argue in this article (through comparisons) that the solidarity movements in support of Solidarność and Nicaragua shared in common the ways in which they were donors or suppliers of solidarity, dependent on and shaped by the opportunities and input coming from the recipient or requiring countries. In hinting at the causes for the trajectories of the mobilization for Solidarność and Nicaragua, this article will bring in the role of Polish and Nicaraguan *acteurs*, something which has to date been mostly neglected in the national readings of solidarity movements. Indeed, whereas accounts have to-date been resolutely centred on the role of the donors of solidarity, we will show how these donors were conditioned in their ideology, actions, outlook and strategies by the lines set out by the recipients of this solidarity. We will do so by starting from the case of the Belgian solidarity towards Solidarność and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua,

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, eds., *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956–1977* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

but will also try to develop a model which might be usefully extended to other western European countries. We will also regularly expand our view to other solidarity movements, such as those for Cuba, Vietnam and Chile. Informed by the cross-fertilization of research by both authors on the solidarity movements with Solidarność and for Nicaragua and other Third World countries, this contribution will shed a new transnational light on these solidarity movements, which becomes an invitation for further research.<sup>8</sup>

### 1. Solidarność in Belgian Society

When strikes broke out at the Lenin shipyard in Gdańsk in mid-August 1980 and led to a dynamic escalation of a protest movement, Poland suddenly became front page news. In the next years, the struggle of the newly founded independent Polish trade union Solidarność for democracy and trade union rights would remain a fixture in the foreign news pages in Belgian newspapers and media. Lech Wałęsa, with his iconic moustache, and the dark spectacled General Jaruzelski proclaiming martial law on television on 13 December 1981 were images well-known to the Belgian public, and are till to-date associated in Belgian public memory with the struggle of Solidarność. However, that such awareness and name recognition by themselves did not spur concrete support became very clear in the months following the foundation of Solidarność. Belgian society might well have been sympathetic towards the Polish workers and their quest for more democracy under the leadership of Wałęsa, but it initially remained very silent when it came to turning this sympathy into action. The development of the Polish workers' movement and the foundation of Solidarność in September 1980 could be followed in the media and press. Yet, for several months virtually no action of public support beyond words and declarations was undertaken, neither by trade unions, NGOs or other established organi-

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance: Idesbald Goddeeris, 'The Transnational Scope of Western Labour's Solidarity with Solidarność', *Labour History Review*, 75, 1 (2010), 60-75; Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych "Solidarności": Biuro Koordynacyjne NSZZ "Solidarność", 1982-1989', *Pamięć i sprawiedliwość*, 2 (2006), 315-347 and 1 (2007), 309-334. Kim Christiaens, 'States Going Transnational: Transnational State Civilian Networks and Socialist Cuba and Sandinista Nicaragua Solidarity Movements in Belgium (1960s-1980s)', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis/Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 89, 3/4 (2011), 1277-1306; Kim Christiaens, 'Een verdedigingslinie van de revolutie: Nicaraguacomités in België en politieke solidariteit in een transnationaal netwerk (1977-1990)', *Brood en Rozen: Tijdschrift voor de Geschiedenis van Sociale Bewegingen*, 14, 4 (2009), 28-49.

zations, nor by grassroots initiatives. The Belgian government, too, continued its normalization policy with the Polish government.<sup>9</sup>

In view of the lack of reaction from Belgian society and notably from the trade unions, the latter being expected by the nature of the issue to give prominence to the developments in Poland, Belgian media even started explicitly wondering why the society remained so passive in the days following the outbreak of protest in August 1980.<sup>10</sup> It was only on 26 August 1980 that the Belgian Christian and socialist trade unions eventually publicly declared their sympathy with the Polish workers. In the following weeks, via articles in their trade union press, bulletins and related newspapers, they continued to give publicity to the developments in Poland such as the Gdańsk Agreements and the foundation of *Solidarność* in September 1980.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, they could draw on a stream of information provided by their respective international trade union confederations, the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which had been among the first to declare their support for the Polish workers in August 1980.<sup>12</sup>

Despite their wordy declarations of support, however, Belgian trade unions undertook no further public action. Several explanations were given at the time and now in retrospect have been invoked to account for this initial absence of public support actions. Notably, there is the argument that, considering the international character of the issue, the national trade unions committed the Polish issue to the headquarters of the WCL and ICFTU, their traditional guides in international issues, and that a cautious approach was necessary in order not to jeopardize the chances of Polish workers' success. To be sure, some truth does lie in this explanation, yet this was not the only reason. An often overlooked yet just as obvious fundamental reason was the initial absence of contact between the Belgian trade unions and the workers in Poland. These were not only necessary for turning support into concrete action, but were also required for what was an even more fundamental precondition, namely, a mutual acquaintanceship between *Solidarność* and its supporters abroad. Indeed, beyond the information provided by the press and their international confederations on

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<sup>9</sup> Sprawozdanie za rok 1980, s. 7, 1980, 1 Belgia, Bg 23, D IV 43/84 and Notatka, December 1980, 1981, 1 Belgia, Bg 23, Archives of the Polish Foreign Ministry, Warsaw (hereafter: MSZ).

<sup>10</sup> *Le Soir*, 21 Aug. 1980.

<sup>11</sup> Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Belgium: The Christian Emphasis', in Idesbald Goddeeris, ed., *Solidarity with Solidarity*, 244.

<sup>12</sup> Kim Christiaens, 'The ICFTU and the WCL: The International Coordination of Solidarity', in Idesbald Goddeeris ed., *Solidarity with Solidarity*, 101-127.

Solidarność, Belgian trade unions had little knowledge about the newly founded Polish trade union, the course it wanted to go, its specific needs for support, and the ways in which it could be materially helped.

The importance of direct contact and relations with Solidarność became clear some months later when the first public support actions for Solidarność followed in the wake of the establishment of a working relationship between Solidarność and some Belgian trade union sectors. Indeed, piggybacking on the networks of the international trade union confederations ICFTU and WCL, Solidarność started reaching out to the headquarters of the Belgian trade unions and engaged in a targeted lobbying of supporters, notably via the sending of delegations to Belgium and invitations to meetings with the trade union's leadership in Poland. In November 1980, a Solidarność delegation, consisting of Józef Przybylski and Zygmunt Zawalski, visited the Belgian Christian trade union ACV/CSC (*Confédération des syndicats chrétiens/Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond*), which was to be the first in a series of visits by Solidarność delegations to the Belgian Christian and socialist trade unions and their international confederations.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, delegations of the Belgian Christian and socialist trade unions travelled in the course of 1981 to Poland at the invitation of Solidarność, attending for instance the first Solidarność congress in September.

The initiative for building and tightening connections came less from the Belgian trade unions than from Solidarność itself, which became increasingly aware of the value of external contacts.<sup>14</sup> Having established a constituency at home during the first few months of its existence, the Polish trade union soon realized that international contacts were crucial to its domestic chances for success. They could give further legitimization and material assistance. Simultaneously, Solidarność was cautious, fearing that it would open itself to accusations of being a political movement rather than a trade union. Nor did it want to be accused of being an instrument of foreign intervention by searching too openly for alliances with any foreign groups (a charge being aired in the state propaganda). Therefore, Solidarność preferred to access trade unions, building on the tradition of international labour solidarity.

Solidarność not only reached out to the trade unions of big western European countries, it also showed interest in presenting its cause to the Belgian trade unions which at the time played a crucial role in the management of the international trade union confederations, and furthermore were

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<sup>13</sup> Goddeeris, 'Belgium', 245.

<sup>14</sup> John Earle, 'Solidarity Seeking to Develop Relations with Western Unions', *The Times*, 17 Jan. 1981.

endowed with important financial resources.<sup>15</sup> Yet, obviously, even if contact and connections were important as preconditions, the love had to be mutual. Indeed, the degree to which the Christian and socialist trade unions answered *Solidarność*'s efforts at rapprochement differed. The Belgian Christian trade union and its network of related organizations belonging to the Christian 'pillar' was the most receptive sector of Belgian society to *Solidarność*'s request for support, and it became the most important *acteur* when it came to organizing support actions. Several factors were involved. For one thing, there was the strong involvement of the Belgian trade union ACV/CSC in the rather small World Confederation of Labour (WCL), whose secretary-general, Jan Kułakowski (a Belgian of Polish origin), served as an intermediary between *Solidarność* and Belgian trade unionists, and served *Solidarność* delegates well in getting an entrée to the Belgian Christian workers' movement.<sup>16</sup>

For another thing, *Solidarność* had a Catholic identity and struggled for trade union rights and democracy in the 'Second World'. This profile was quite welcomed by the Christian trade unions and fit their ideological agenda, whose room for manoeuvring on international issues (notably in the Third World, such as for Vietnam, Chile and Nicaragua), had been very limited due to the policy of its international confederation. Because the membership of the WCL consisted mainly of trade unions in the Third World, which were mostly marginal to the domestic scene of their countries, the international Christian trade union confederation had, for example, been forced to take a low profile in the mobilization for Chile during the 1970s, often leading to internal tension and frustration among its rank and file. Now, the policy of the WCL seemed to be in line with the course of the trade union's rank and file.

Indeed, over and above the strategic and ideological motivations in the offices of the WCL and ACV/CSC leadership, the impetus for action on Poland came from below, from some regional sections and groups inside the Christian pillar, with most of them being able to rely on their own connections with Poland. Whereas the leadership of the Christian trade union focused on political and moral support for the newly founded Polish trade union, local sections started the collection of humanitarian aid, often making use of the networks of Polish immigrants or networks of the Catho-

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<sup>15</sup> Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Western Trade Unions and *Solidarność*: A Comparison from a Polish Perspective', *The Polish Review*, 52, 3 (2007), 205-229.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Pasture, 'Jan Kułakowski: From Exile to International Trade Union Leader and Diplomat', in Michel Dumoulin and Idesbald Goddeeris, eds., *Integration or Representation? Polish Exiles in Belgium and the European Construction* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylandt, 2005), 111.



lic church.<sup>17</sup> Important in this context was the ACV/CSC Polish Section, uniting the Polish workers affiliated to the Christian trade union, which stimulated the leadership of the ACV/CSC in the development of further contact with Solidarność.<sup>18</sup>

Solidarność found a rather ambivalent reception among the quarters of the Belgian socialist trade union ABVV/FGTB (*Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond / Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique*). The latter supported Solidarność via financial donations as part of its commitments to the ICFTU, which had set up a solidarity fund for Poland. Moreover, ABVV/FGTB president Georges Debunne (just like his colleagues of the ACV/CSC) attended the first Solidarność congress in September 1981. Yet, support actions beyond those staged at the initiative of the ICFTU were non-existent. This contrasted with the socialist trade union's participation in various NGOs and grassroots initiatives oriented towards Third World issues, especially after the mobilization against the coup in Chile in September 1973. The ABVV/FGTB was, for instance, involved in the foundation of the National Chile Committee in Belgium, materially supporting local solidarity groups and Chilean refugees. All this had happened with a synergy between the directives of the ICFTU – which stimulated its affiliates to take part in campaigns on Chile – and initiatives from below by its rank and file who were active in local Chile committees. The ABVV/FGTB leadership's ability to mobilize public action on behalf of Solidarność, however, was severely limited because support from its rank and file was largely lacking. For many Belgian trade union militants, who demonstrated in droves against the Chilean dictator Pinochet, and who worked for causes in Chile, Nicaragua, and other Latin American countries, or were active in peace movements, support for Poland – in addition to Solidarność's Catholic overtones – had a smell of the anti-communism and cold war politics pursued by the ICFTU and its American affiliate AFL-CIO.

Throughout the 1980s, it would be commonplace among these Third World solidarity groups to complain about the extensive attention to Poland, and then to place the east-west policy of the leadership of Belgian trade unions and governments against the background of north-south relations, and vice versa. It was with much frustration that an activist for Chile wrote in the early 1980s: 'In mainstream media, you can read everything about Wałęsa and Solidarność, but you find scant information about Chile

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<sup>17</sup> The local trade union section in the regional town of Mechelen, for example, collected aid which it sent to a Polish priest with whom they were in contact for some time after his visit to Belgium. *Het Volk*, 22-23 and 26 Aug. 1981.

<sup>18</sup> Idesbald Goddeeris, *Polonia belgijska w pierwszych latach po II wojnie światowej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, 2005), 91-92, 135-140.



and Nicaragua. It is therefore our task to inform Belgian citizens about Chile and Nicaragua, rather than heating up east-west tension and working with the logic of the cold war.<sup>19</sup> Although it can be said that these activists linking east-west and north-south so intimately were more than they imagined actually part of the cold war logic they wanted to escape, it is important to keep this thinking in mind, as it is key to understanding why many Third World groups were so adverse to becoming involved in actions for Poland. This would remain a constant during the 1980s, even if support in Belgian society intensified after martial law.

The proclamation of martial law in December 1981 by General Jaruzelski drew universal opprobrium and provoked in Belgian society a groundswell of protest against the Polish authorities. The Belgian Christian and socialist trade unions jointly condemned the coup, just as they had done in the wake of the Chilean coup of 1973. In the days following the proclamation of martial law, they organized a national strike (to last five minutes), protested with telegrams and petitions to the Polish embassy in Brussels, and staged demonstrations with their regional sections in various cities across the country, drawing some hundreds or thousands of participants.<sup>20</sup> Along with the Belgian trade unions, political groups ranging from the extreme left to Belgium's conservative government coalition were united in their condemnation of the military coup in Poland.

Humanitarian relief operations for Poland soon became the main way for giving a form to solidarity with Poland, as they seemed for activists far more effective than organizing demonstrations and other protest actions. In several cities and even small-sized towns, local informal and temporary committees were set up with a view toward collecting food, clothes and drugs. Collected aid was transported by a ship that departed from Antwerp under the coordination of the Belgian Red Cross, as well as via several trucks filled with tons of aid. At the Catholic university of Leuven, the academic staff collected 750,000 BEF (almost \$19,000), purchased aid and sent this in a truck to the Catholic university of Lublin, while the Free University of Brussels collected food and drugs to be sent to the academic hospital of Gdańsk.<sup>21</sup> Whereas these relief operations were successful when measured by the volume of collected aid and the media attention they gained, they were also marked by a lack of coordination. When Belgian

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<sup>19</sup> Letter from Erna Foubert to local Chile committees, sine dato (probably 1981-1982), Archives Chile Committee, Amsab-ISG, Antwerp.

<sup>20</sup> *Le Journal Indépendance Le Peuple*, 19-20 Dec. 1981; Belgijskie reakcje na stan wojenny w Polsce, s. 5, 1982, 1 Belgia, Bg 22, D IV 8/86, MSZ; *Het Volk*, 17 Dec. 1981.

<sup>21</sup> *La Dernière Heure*, 29 Dec. 1981; *Le Journal Indépendance Le Peuple*, 30 Dec. 1981.

groups wanted to do ‘something’ for Poland, they tried to do it their own way, making use of channels they could find in their own environment. For instance, the local committees for the collection of aid set up in the weeks after the coup were driven by Belgians with Polish origins or families, who offered channels for passing aid to Poland. Similarly, the Catholic university of Leuven sent its aid to the Catholic university of Lublin, since it had had for many years close relations with this university.<sup>22</sup> While the indignation caused by the proclamation of martial law seems to have spurred activities on behalf of Poland, truly effective trade union support had been rendered much more difficult. With the outlawing of *Solidarność*, the traditional routes for the Belgian Christian trade union ACV/CSC to support its Polish counterpart had largely disappeared. The Belgian Christian trade union and its leadership, consequently, played a more supporting rather than a leading role in the relief activities undertaken in Belgian society in the weeks following the coup. This was because they had to rely on connections their local groups and sections had with Poland for channeling collected aid. Despite the fragmentation, however, the collected aid in the circles of associations, local trade union sections, and workers’ organizations belonging to the Christian pillar was impressive: in a time span of only 6 months, more than 30 million BEF (more than \$650,000) was collected by June 1982 to be used for food, clothes and other relief.<sup>23</sup>

It was only following input from Polish *acteurs* that the Christian trade union ACV/CSC could develop a more coordinated role in supporting *Solidarność*. In July 1982, Polish trade union activists (who had been stranded in the west by martial law) established *Solidarność*’s Coordinating Office Abroad in Brussels in order to coordinate a more centralized support campaign which would meet the needs of the Polish trade union now continuing its activity underground.<sup>24</sup> Led by Jerzy Milewski and close to the international headquarters of the ICFTU and WCL, the Coordinating Office was a vital link between *Solidarność*’s leadership inside Poland and the international trade union movement. It had an important role in passing information, setting the agenda and pointing to courses available for action by the international confederations and their affiliated members. As part of their commitments to their respective international confederations, the Belgian Christian and socialist trade unions financed the Brussels office of

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<sup>22</sup> Louis Vos, ‘Leuven, Louvain and Poland’, in Michel Dumoulin and Idesbald Goddeeris, eds., *Integration or Representation? Polish Exiles in Belgium and the European Construction* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 2005), 13-29, 25.

<sup>23</sup> *De Volksmacht*, 10 and 11 Sept. 1982.

<sup>24</sup> Idesbald Goddeeris, ‘Lobbying Allies? The NSZZ *Solidarność* Coordinating Office Abroad, 1982-1989’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 13, 3 (2011), 83-125.

the Coordinating Office Abroad. In turn, the Coordinating Office Abroad provided a conduit for structural, organizational and technical aid to the disbanded trade union. Making use of the new opportunities, in November 1982 the Christian trade union launched a campaign to spread information about the situation in Poland accompanied by the sale of solidarity candles.<sup>25</sup> Although alternative channels continued to function, actions for Poland proceeded in the next years increasingly via the Polish connections of the ACV/CSC, which founded in 1985 a National ACV/CSC Commission Poland-Solidarność after the secret visit of two of its representative to Poland.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, this closer look at Belgian solidarity with Solidarność reveals the crucial role of Polish militants. Trade unionists from Poland, paying a visit to western Europe, were key to the setting up of the solidarity campaign. Older networks revived, for instance between Catholic universities or Polish immigrants' descendants and their relatives and contacts in the Polish People's Republic. Solidarność itself had a decisive voice in determining the contents of the aid, whether it was humanitarian or technical. The Solidarność Coordinating Office Abroad, seated in Brussels, was the vital link between the Polish underground and its supporters. At the end of the day, the Polish opposition had a great share in the colouring of the solidarity movement. The mobilization of the support for Nicaragua was not different.

## 2. Defending the Revolution: Solidarity with Nicaragua

In July 1979, following a lengthy armed struggle, a revolution led by the Nicaraguan Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza regime, which had ruled over the Central American country for several decades. The revolution brought a government of national reconstruction under the leadership of the young Sandinista *guerillero*, Daniel Ortega, into power.<sup>27</sup> The Sandinista revolution attracted much attention across western Europe and grew into a symbol for many Third World activists. A US-backed regime had been defeated by a popular movement whose young

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<sup>25</sup> Goddeeris, 'Belgium', 252.

<sup>26</sup> Notes of Maurits Walraet to the president, 7 and 14 Mar. 1985, No. 30, Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving, Leuven (hereafter: KADOC); letter of ACV president Jef Houhuys to Leo Tindemans, 30 Apr. 1985, No. 31, KADOC.

<sup>27</sup> Matilde Zimmermann, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2007, 69-87.

charismatic leaders sought to construct a new society via grand-scale economic and social reforms. With dictatorships clinging to power over most of Latin America, this could not but have a great symbolic value for activists who had in previous years established committees and organizations focusing on countries such as Chile, Brazil and Argentina. Comparisons were made between the triumph of the FSLN in Managua and Castro's seizure of Havana twenty years earlier.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, unlike the Cuban revolution which occupied only the small niche of the extreme left in the intellectual market, the Sandinista revolution resonated across political and ideological borders. Even in the Belgian Christian trade union movement, there were – at least initially – positive voices which saw the revolution as the start of a peaceful revolution across Latin America.<sup>29</sup> Much of it had of course to do with the terror by the Somoza regime. Furthermore, the policy of non-alignment professed by the new regime, tied in with *dependencia* school of thinking, which had in the 1970s grown into the main paradigm in circles of Third World solidarity activists and which advocated an independent course for Third World countries, freed from the bipolarity of the cold war system. Additionally, the Sandinista revolution also fitted theories of liberation theology: the inclusion of Catholic, self-declared 'revolutionary' priests such as Ernesto Cardenal and Miguel d'Escoto in the new government seemed for many progressive Christians proof that revolution and Christianity were compatible.

After the Sandinista take-over, scores of activists and leaders of NGOs like Oxfam-Belgium and Socialist Solidarity travelled to Managua looking for ways and projects to help reconstruct the completely ruined country. The backbone of the actions in Belgium, however, was made up of local solidarity committees which sprang up in various cities like Brussels and Antwerp and even in smaller-sized towns. The activists in these committees collected money and informed public opinion via meetings and bulletins about Nicaraguan reality and the ambitious plans of the new leaders in Managua. The committees were marked by the great variety in their ideological background, organisation and profile.<sup>30</sup> In Leuven, a committee was established by students. In Bruges, solidarity with Nicaragua took shape in a Central America committee with a strong Christian inspiration, while the committee in Ghent had a more Trotskyite character. In Hasselt, militants of the Christian trade union ACV/CSC, who had been in contact with Nicaraguan exiles residing in Belgium before the revolution, established a

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<sup>28</sup> *Solidaridad. Maandelijks Tijdschrift Latijns-Amerika*, 15 Sept. 1979, 3.

<sup>29</sup> *De Volksmacht*, 9 Oct. 1980.

<sup>30</sup> Kim Christiaens, 'States Going', 1293.

local committee. In most of the committees, however, the organizational form of a 'committee' enabled activists to gather around to support Nicaragua beyond their own political and ideological divisions, according to the recipe drawn from previous mobilizations for countries such as Algeria, Vietnam or Chile.<sup>31</sup>

Despite their grassroots appearance, these committees were not entirely spontaneous responses to events in Latin America. Most of them emerged out of committees formed back in 1977 by Nicaraguan exiles. While many of the latter returned to their country, they had established networks through which contact and the flow of information continued. Many of the Belgian activists made use of these contacts to arrange a stay in Nicaragua, which were very often the immediate cause of the foundation of a local committee. In Belgium, the Nicaraguan embassy in Brussels, led by the former exile and newly appointed ambassador, Gonzalo Murillo Romero, functioned for many activists as a place where they found information and opportunities for working on Nicaragua. The strong grassroots dimension of these early local and informal committees, however, soon became encased in a more organized and structured network, which came not so much from the activists themselves as from the Sandinista government, which aimed at integrating and transforming them into a well-structured and coordinated movement. Commandante Bayardo Arce's visit to the Belgian activists in the spring of 1980, then, was more than an informal meeting or sign of gratitude from the Sandinista authorities.

Instead, this central figure of the Sandinista revolution urged the activists to professionalize their committees and to organize them with more structure and coordination.<sup>32</sup> At the organizational level, the locally based committees were brought together under a National Nicaragua Coordination, where they discussed national actions and joint projects.<sup>33</sup> This national coordination was in turn integrated into a European coordinative structure, with a European Secretariat in Utrecht (The Netherlands) and regular conferences attended by representatives of the solidarity committees from across western Europe as well as FSLN delegations. With this struc-

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<sup>31</sup> Kim Christiaens, 'Die Suche nach wirksamer Solidarität: Der vietnamesische Faktor bei der Mobilisierung gegen den Vietnamkrieg in Belgien in den 1960er- und frühen 1970er-Jahren', *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, 11, 2 (2012), 77-101.

<sup>32</sup> Meeting Nicaragua Committee Ghent, 18 Mar. 1980, No 119, Archives Jules Verhelst (hereafter: AJV), Centre of Communist Archives in Belgium, Brussels (hereafter: DACOB); *Links: Weekblad voor een Strijdend Socialisme*, 22 Mar. 1980, 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Kim Christiaens, 'States Going', 1293-1294.

ture, the FSLN tried to canalize and enhance the effective power of its western European supporters in line with its interests.

In the first months after the Sandinista revolution, the local committees focused their activities mainly on spreading information about the situation in Nicaragua and on collecting funds and setting up projects for the reconstruction of the country, notably in the framework of the literacy and reconstruction campaign by the Sandinista government. A variety of easily accessible activities, such as information stands and evenings focused around a Nicaraguan movie or a speaker from the FSLN (provided via the Nicaraguan ambassador or the Secretariat in Utrecht), combined the aims of both public sensitization and the collection of funds. In Ghent, for example, the local solidarity committee, which was made up of students and people active in local Third World groups, organized a solidarity evening in the famous socialist meeting centre 'De Vooruit', where about 400 people listened to performances by the Chilean group Sonkoy and attended an exposition with pictures made by an activist during his stay in Nicaragua.<sup>34</sup> It is quite obvious that the funds collected during these informal and local activities were far from impressive and yielded only a few thousand Belgian Francs. Greater amounts of money were gained from projects at the level of the National Centre for Development Cooperation, the umbrella organization of Belgian NGOs for development cooperation recognized by the Belgian government. The Nicaragua committees submitted a number of projects to this Centre to take advantage of the co-financing policy of the Belgian government.<sup>35</sup>

The Belgian solidarity committees, however, had to recognize that the administrative and organizational burden of submitting such extensively documented projects went beyond what they could shoulder with their group of volunteers. Therefore, they tried to cooperate with more professionalized NGOs that also had a great interest in Nicaragua, notably Socialist Solidarity and OXFAM-Belgium. They functioned in several ways for these NGOs: as a source of information on Nicaragua, as an entrée to official Nicaraguan state agencies, and above all as an avenue to combine the administrative work inherent to the projects done in the headquarters of NGOs with public activities to garner attention from grassroots groups for projects in Nicaragua.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Nicaragua Committee Ghent, Feb. 1980, AJV, DACOB.

<sup>35</sup> Projects Nicaragua, 11.11.11., Archives National Centre for Development Cooperation, Brussels.

<sup>36</sup> OXFAM-Solidariteit vzw, *1964-2004 Veertig Jaar voor een andere Wereld: Oxfam in België: Een verhaal, een beweging, een strijd* (Brussels: Oxfam-Solidariteit, 2004), 12-13.

Not only did the Nicaragua solidarity committees have to recognize their limited capacity to collect large amounts of money for the reconstruction of Nicaragua, but they also encountered many difficulties in executing what they saw as their main task: providing the public with reliable information. Indeed, the lack of information about Nicaragua in mainstream Belgian press and media confirmed activists in their conviction that the committees had to counter a disinformation campaign promoted by the US and conservative forces in western Europe.<sup>37</sup> Constraints were not so much on the output side. Although it remained difficult to get access to mainstream media, activists could inform Belgian society about Nicaragua through a variety of ways: an assortment of bulletins, newsletters and journals of a various Third World organizations to which they were connected via their members, and through speaking tours in schools and information stands during activities organized by related Latin America solidarity groups, such as The Friends of Cuba. The greatest constraint was at the input side. A substantial amount of the activists' time and energy was devoted to simply collecting information, books and pictures about the developments of Nicaragua, something which stimulated many of them to learn Spanish. Yet, in 1980, when activists of local Nicaragua committees in Antwerp, Liège or Leuven surveyed their information, all they could refer to was a small box of mostly dated publications, most of them in Spanish, complemented by some telegrams, letters or reports forwarded by the Nicaraguan embassy in Brussels or the National Coordination of solidarity committees.

Communication among local committees improved significantly with their integration into a nationwide network around the National Nicaragua Coordination, whose meetings took place in the Nicaraguan embassy in Brussels and whose secretariat received regular information on the policies of the FSLN via the European Secretariat in Utrecht. Participation in European conferences or telegrams from Nicaragua sent via the Brussels embassy further helped the situation. But ongoing complaints about the lack of a consistent and sufficient flow of information regularly gave food for discussion when western European solidarity committees met delegates of the FSLN and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the European conferences when they were sketching out the chalk lines for the solidarity movements.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Nicaragua, 1980, Oxfam-Belgium, Archives Committee Europe Latin America, Brussels.

<sup>38</sup> European Conferences of Nicaragua Solidarity Committees after the Madrid Conference in 1979, Private Archives Hans Langenberg, Secretary European Nicaragua Movements, Utrecht (hereafter: PrA HL); National Coordination, 26 Mar. 1985, No. 124, Midden Amerika Komitee (hereafter: MAK), Amsab-ISG, Ghent.



The constraints on information were part of broader discussions and internal debates about the identity and function of the committees, which came to the foreground in the meetings and communication between western European solidarity activists and the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry in the months after the Sandinista take-over. Even worse, for some activists the problems in organization and communication were seen as more than the growing pains of the network, but were interpreted as a sign of the Sandinista authorities' lack of interest in the added-value of solidarity committees. This situation changed fundamentally in early 1981 when Ronald Reagan's assuming office as President of the US signalled a hardening of American foreign policy toward the Sandinistas.

The renewed interest of the FSLN in the power of solidarity expressed itself in the organization of the *Encuentro de Comités de Solidaridad con Nicaragua*, staged from 26 to 31 January 1981 in the capital Managua and attended by delegations from western European committees together with an impressive delegation of about 70 people from the US.<sup>39</sup> Organized against the background of a hardening US policy against Nicaragua, this grand-scale meeting, attended by the *capita selecta* of the Sandinista Liberation Front, was a place where solidarity with Nicaragua was defined in ideological and practical terms. Ideologically, the lengthy speech by FSLN leader Tomás Borge to the about one hundred and fifty solidarity activists from around the world, placed Nicaragua in the lineage of the combative international solidarity movements which had developed for Vietnam and Chile. Over and above the projects which were presented to the committees for work inside Nicaragua, the idea for the creation of Anti-Intervention Fronts was launched, which the FSLN set out as a strategic priority for its solidarity movements abroad. Inspired by the mobilization against the Vietnam War, the goal of these fronts was to create a broad protest movement against US foreign policy, notably by reaching out to the on-going peace protests against the arms race.<sup>40</sup>

Whereas the idea was taken over by several western European groups, Belgian activists needed more time to be convinced of the feasibility of the

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<sup>39</sup> *La Dirección Nacional en el Primer Encuentro Internacional de Solidaridad con Nicaragua "El Salvador vencerá!"* (Managua: Departamento de Propaganda y Educación Política del FSLN, 1981); Documents First International Meeting of Solidarity with Nicaragua, 1981, No. 72, Nicaragua Komitee Nederland (hereafter: NKN), International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam (hereafter: IISH); *El Día*, 27 Jan. 1981.

<sup>40</sup> European Nicaragua Meeting in Genève 'El movimiento anti-intervencionista debe incorporarse y participar en los movimientos anti-imperialistas que se desarrollen a nivel suizo y europeo', Oct. 1981, No. 72, NKN, IISH.

project.<sup>41</sup> Eventually, what was instrumental in overcoming their scepticism was the example of other western European committees, and the persistence of the FSLN during European meetings. As other western European committees planned a European wide anti-intervention campaign, the Belgian National Nicaragua Coordination set up a Flemish and Walloon Anti-Intervention Front in October 1981. It aimed at mobilizing a protest that was as wide as possible (after the example of that against the Vietnam War) and was timed to dovetail with the international campaign staged by the European Nicaragua committees. Despite the embeddedness of the Nicaragua activists in the broader network of Third World and Latin America organizations and groups in Belgium, the foundation of this Anti-Intervention Front was not an easy job. Practically, it raised debates about who would shoulder the organizational and practical burden. Furthermore, making this front presupposed a tactical frame to rally as many groups as possible and to make the Central American anti-intervention issue compatible with the agenda of the peace movement in Belgium.

In a time span of a few months, the platform text of the Anti-Intervention Front was signed by more than 250 organizations, ranging from political parties on the left (the socialist and communist parties) to peace organizations like Pax Christi and to NGOs like Oxfam. It organized regular demonstrations in front of the US embassy in Brussels and the house of the Belgian Foreign Minister, Leo Tindemans, to protest against the foreign policy of the Reagan Administration towards Central America and the Atlantic policy pursued by the Belgian government.<sup>42</sup> The Anti-Intervention Front helped empower the Nicaragua committees to develop political lobbying and to bring the issue of Central America into political arenas. A group of parliamentarians drawn from the Belgian Socialist Party, Communist Party and Agalev (Green party) formed a group of 'Politicians against Intervention' (*Politiekers tegen de Interventie*).<sup>43</sup>

The Belgian solidarity committees benefited more broadly from the renewed interest of the FSLN in their work. The increased access to information via FSLN publications such as *La Barricada Internacional* and a stream of telegrams and telexes from Managua invigorated the solidarity activists' information campaigns, who then started their own bulletins to counter growing negative rumours of human rights violations by the

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<sup>41</sup> Encuentro de Paris, Resumen de Actividades, 18-20 Apr. 1981, No 72, NKN Komitee Nederland, IISH.

<sup>42</sup> Het Anti-interventiefrent: hoe en waarom? Voorkomen dat het erger wordt, *Solidaridad*, 112 (1981), 8.

<sup>43</sup> Verslagen en briefwisseling van de Nationale Coördinatie: Politieke analyse, sine dato, No. 124, MAK, Amsab-ISG.

Sandinista regime. Information, however, was not simply drawn from FSLN publications and journals, but was also based on the personal experiences of an increasing number of activists who went to Nicaragua in the framework of so-called ‘solidarity brigades’. After the Sandinista government had launched a worldwide appeal to its solidarity committees to form an international brigade to help with the coffee harvest in November 1983, in the years following, the committees recruited a few hundred people in Belgium to form volunteer national brigades to contribute personally to the Nicaraguan revolution.<sup>44</sup>

Yearly, a summer and winter brigade composed of a few dozen Belgian activists went to Nicaragua, where they worked during several weeks on projects granted by the FSLN, such as the construction of schools and health centres or they helped with the harvest, notably of coffee and cotton. These brigades were not informal outings, but were strongly managed and regulated by the CNSP (*Comité Nicaragüense de Solidaridad con los Pueblos*), the official FSLN organization which coordinated the work of the brigades inside Nicaragua. For their part, the participants went through training by the Nicaragua committees in the weeks before their departure. In the period of 1983-1987, more than 250 Belgians participated in these brigades with an additional 200 activists participating in brigades organized by the Catholic Labour Youth or regional sections of the ABVV/FGTB and the ACV/CSC.<sup>45</sup> The importance of these brigades was less so the actual help they provided than the personal experiences they afforded to the activists. A central aim of this form of action was that, after their return, *brigadistas* could function, in the FSLN's own terms, as ‘little ambassadors’ of Nicaragua in the west.<sup>46</sup>

The economic situation of the country was dramatic, and it was exacerbated by the effects of the Contra War, the American economic embargo, and boycotts from international organizations like the World Bank. In response to this, efforts for finding material and financial aid for the FSLN and Nicaragua gained prominence from 1984 onwards, with the main intermediary being the *Fundación Augusto César Sandino* (FACS), which was a state agency coordinating the help of foreign NGOs in Nicaragua.

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<sup>44</sup> Roger Peace, ‘Peace Movements and the Cold War in the Third World: The Case of Sandinista Nicaragua’, paper presented at ‘Peace Movements in the Cold War and Beyond’, LSE-Conference, London, 1-2 Feb. 2008.

<sup>45</sup> *Amérique Centrale: Périodique Mensuel*, 91/92 (1989), 38; Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 157.

<sup>46</sup> Hazel Smith, ‘Revolutionary Diplomacy Sandinista Style: Lessons and Limits’, *Race & Class*, 33 (1991), 69.

After the FACS had launched a campaign for medical aid, the Belgian Nicaragua committees organized a variety of fund-raising activities such as cultural performances by Latin American groups, door-to-door collections, expositions, and lobbying of politicians and local trade union groups. These succeeded in collecting 600,000 BEF for the purchase of an ambulance.<sup>47</sup>

The most important relief campaign was the worldwide action *Nicaragua Debe Sobrevivir* (Nicaragua Must Survive), which was launched by Nicaraguan authorities, with the country on the verge of bankruptcy. In Belgium, local committees set up their own campaigns such as the collection of kitchen materials, drugs, school materials, and the organization of a Third World café.<sup>48</sup> The committees also lent their support to the grand-scale relief action set up in 1984 by Belgium's biggest NGOs for development cooperation, (these included organizations such as OXFAM and *Broederlijk Delen / Entraide et Fraternité*). These groups countered the opposition of the Belgian government against development projects for Nicaragua by forming a mini-consortium organizing joint projects for development cooperation. It grew in the following years into a forum for coordinating efforts on behalf of Nicaragua.<sup>49</sup>

It should be clear that the local Nicaragua committees did not operate in isolation in Belgium, but formed part of a broader movement consisting of NGOs, Third World and peace groups, and local trade union sections which were inspired by Nicaragua. Thanks to their privileged relation with the FSLN, the committees – although informal in structure – could take a central role in this movement: relations with the FSLN provided not only legitimacy; they also had an important agenda-setting function. As it was expressed by the Sandinista diplomat Francisco de Asís Fernández during his visit to Belgium in 1984, it was the task of the solidarity committees to function as defenders of the revolution by reaching out to sectors in Belgium's society which were critical or hostile towards the Sandinista regime.<sup>50</sup> More specifically, trade unions were among the preferred organizations where the Nicaragua solidarity movement tried to find support. This was not only because of their important resources, but also because of the influence they could have on the Belgian government and at the level of their international confederations. These efforts, however, were met with scepticism from the leadership of both the Christian and socialist trade

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<sup>47</sup> Meeting of the National Coordination, 10 Oct. 1984, No. 124, MAK, Amsab-ISG.

<sup>48</sup> Nicaragua Committee, Meeting of the National Coordination, 26 February 1986, Mol.

<sup>49</sup> Sandino Vive!, 11.11.11., No. 1444, Archives NCOS, Brussels.

<sup>50</sup> Speech by Francisco de Asís Fernández, President of the CNSP, 06 Oct. 1984, No. 124, MAK, Amsab-ISG.

unions, which were bound to the policies of their respective international confederations, which supported their affiliated Nicaraguan members in their struggle against control by the Sandinista authorities.<sup>51</sup> Yet, the committees succeeded in mobilizing support in the circles of some regional sections, which opposed what they saw as the cold war thinking of their trade unions, and then founded trade union support groups for Nicaragua and participated in several brigades.<sup>52</sup>

### Making up the Balance

Beyond the fact that they were simultaneously active in Belgian society during the 1980s, the mobilizations in support of Solidarność and Sandinista Nicaragua seem to have had little in common. Organizationally, they rested on different *acteurs*. Solidarity with Poland came about mainly via trade union circles and notably in the quarters of the Christian workers' movement. On the other hand, the mobilization for Nicaragua was channelled through committees of activists working in cooperation with a locally based network of Third World groups. These had their roots in previous solidarity campaigns for Vietnam, Chile and other Latin American countries, as well as with a number of well-established NGOs for development cooperation. Despite the grassroots and local dimension of the Nicaragua committees, they formed part of a well-coordinated western European movement which launched joint campaigns, worked towards common goals, and organized regular meetings between activists of different countries under the auspices of Sandinista diplomats.<sup>53</sup>

The solidarity movements for Poland and Nicaragua were not only virtually separated from each other, there existed also a strong antagonism toward one another. Jerzy Milewski regularly attempted to give Solidarność a more international profile by connecting it to other causes, but he never referred to Nicaragua. In the second half of 1982, he travelled to Venezuela and Mexico, and in 1983 he visited Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Kenya,<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Nicaragua, No. 22-26 and No. 56, KADOC.

<sup>52</sup> Trade Union Movements and Solidarity, sine dato, No. 124, MAK, Amsab-ISG, 7 ff.; *Nieuw Links*, 26 June 1987, 7 and 9.

<sup>53</sup> European Meetings (1979-1985), PrA HL.

<sup>54</sup> Wojciech Gontarski, 'Biuro Koordynacyjne NSZZ "Solidarność" za granicą w Brukseli', master's thesis, Akademia Spraw Wewnętrznych, Instytut Kryminalistyki i Kryminologii, Warszawa 1989, 66, retrieved at Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (hereafter: AIPN), 01521/2175, letter from J. Milewski to the TKK, Brussels, 7 May 1983, AIPN, BU 01820/49, vol. 11, 227-230.

but he particularly linked the Polish crisis with the ones in Chile and South Africa. The Solidarność Coordinating Office Abroad sent a message of solidarity to the Chileans on 11 September 1983, on the tenth anniversary of Pinochet's coup, and Wałęsa invited the Chilean fellow unionist Rodolfo Seguel to the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Solidarność issued a message on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Soweto massacre and regularly referred to common successes, such as the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Wałęsa in 1983 and to Desmond Tutu in 1984, or the exclusion of both Poland and South Africa from the ILO.<sup>56</sup>

It is true that it was sometimes difficult to find a balance, since both the South African and the Chilean opposition identified far more with the left than did Solidarność. Sometimes, this international contextualization led to internal criticism.<sup>57</sup> However, what matters here is the total absence of reference to Nicaragua, which seems to have been entirely at odds with Solidarność. When the German writer Günter Grass highlighted similarities between Solidarność and the Sandinistas after a visit to Nicaragua, he was fiercely criticized by the Poles.<sup>58</sup> Conversely, the Sandinista leader Bayardo Arce pooh-poohed parallels (drawn by western European social democrats of the Socialist International) between the Polish and Central American crises.<sup>59</sup>

This is not surprising. Nicaragua and Poland could be seen as each other's mirror image at another side of the cold war world. Nicaragua was threatened by the United States' hostility; Poland was threatened by the Soviet Union. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the solidarity campaigns organized on behalf of the two countries similarly were in an antagonistic relationship both organizationally and ideologically. The mobilization for Solidarność was characterized by an almost complete absence of any criti-

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<sup>55</sup> *Solidarność News*, 7-8 (25 Sept. 1983) and 11 (15 Nov. 1983).

<sup>56</sup> *Solidarność News*, 71 (30 June 1986). See for instance also a special file on Apartheid in Zdzisław Najder's papers kept at the Ośrodek Karta in Warsaw (file Biuro Zagraniczne 'S', 1986).

<sup>57</sup> When Milewski protested against the South African recruitment of labor forces in Polish refugee camps in Vienna, and the consequent increasing immigration of Polish (white) workers, he was fiercely criticized in South African and by other Polonia organizations. See: *Solidarność News*, 10 June 1983, 1 and Edward de Virion, 'List otwarty do Pana J. Milewskiego', *Kultura*, 429 (June 1983), 170-171.

<sup>58</sup> Günter Grass, 'Im Hinterhof: Bericht über eine Reise nach Nicaragua', *Die Zeit*, 40, 1 Oct. 1982, 45 and 'Istnieją granice siły: Rozmowa Przeglądu Politycznego z Günterem Grassem', *Przegląd Polityczny*, 3 (1984), 3-15.

<sup>59</sup> Fernando Pedrosa, 'Políticas informales y redes transnacionales: Los socialdemócratas europeos en los procesos de democratización de la tercera ola en América Latina', *Anuario de la Escuela de Historia Virtual* 2, 2 (2011), 52-53.

cal edge towards Belgian society or the Belgian government. Rather, actions for *Solidarność* had a strongly conformist character. Even if activists did not say it in so many words, they often seemed to be more motivated by anti-Soviet feelings than by a generalized aversion to the bipolarity of the cold war international order. The Nicaragua movement, on the other hand, was a countermovement, characterized by a strong opposition not only against the foreign policy of the Belgian government, but also against the existing societal and cultural situation in the First World in general. It modelled itself in the tradition of the mobilizations against the Vietnam War and the Chilean coup, which were staged by activists who found in international issues and the drama of the Third World ammunition for fuelling their unrest with Belgian society.

As noted above, activists of the Nicaragua committees and other Latin America solidarity groups frequently complained about the overwhelming media attention and support for *Solidarność*. There seems to be some truth in it. In the volume of collected aid and money, the mobilization for *Solidarność* dwarfed those for Nicaragua and other Third World countries, even if Belgian NGOs, via various development projects, provided millions of Belgian Francs in aid to the Central American country during the 1980s. Even the collected aid for the Chilean resistance during the 1970s seems not to have come up to the level of the support for Poland in the 1980s. Also, in terms of media attention, the issue of Poland clearly overshadowed many international issues at stake in the 1980s.

Yet, there were also important limitations in the mobilization for *Solidarność*. Compared to the repertoire of actions and colourful expressions of solidarity towards Nicaragua, the mobilization in support of *Solidarność* was rather monotone and colourless. Building on the experiences of previous Third World solidarity campaigns (such as those for Cuba, Vietnam and Chile), activists mobilizing for Nicaragua expressed their solidarity in a variety of ways welding political activism to cultural exchange and personal experience to public collective action. They combined political lobbying with excursions into Nicaraguan culture and cuisine, which included learning Spanish and travelling to Nicaragua where they worked in brigades to contribute to the Nicaraguan revolution. They hosted various Nicaraguan music groups and artists like the famous singer Carlos Mejía Godoy to perform during public actions and they screened Nicaraguan movies. In doing so, they benefitted from multiple connections with Nicaragua, not only via indirect contact through letters and journals, but also via direct personal contact through stays in Nicaragua or regular meetings with Sandinista diplomats and politicians, all of which stimulated this exchange. This variety in the repertoire of actions was largely absent from the mobilization in support of *Solidarność*.



After the apogee of humanitarian operations in the wake of the declaration of martial law in 1981, which were loosely organized rather than well-coordinated, actions in support for Solidarność retreated into the headquarters of Belgian trade unions, which were largely invisible to public view. Indeed, solidarity with Solidarność became very quickly the realm of some high-ranking trade union leaders who travelled to Poland, met with Solidarność delegates in a discreet atmosphere, provided political support via discreet contact and redirected financial support through discrete transfers to the account numbers of their international confederations or those of the Solidarność Coordinating Office.

What explains these differences? As alluded to above, the solidarity movements in support of Nicaragua and Solidarność were populated by groups with different traditions of solidarity. Whereas solidarity with Poland modelled itself in the tradition of international labour solidarity, the Nicaragua solidarity movement was tied in with that international solidarity as practiced during the Vietnam War. It also drew its inspiration from earlier solidarity campaigns, such as those supporting the opposition against Franco in Spain or the Algerian independence movement.<sup>60</sup> In hinting at the causes of the different nature of these solidarity initiatives, however, it is important not to look exclusively for explanations at the supply or donor side, as has traditionally been done in the literature. Indeed, studies of solidarity movements have overwhelmingly been centred on the role and agency of activists and the inspiration that propelled them to take action for issues beyond their own country.<sup>61</sup> Factors such as domestic ideology and instrumentality on the side of activists have been advanced as the main reasons why solidarity movements emerged.<sup>62</sup>

The strategic location of the struggle of Solidarność or that of Sandinista Nicaragua in the bipolar cold war has conventionally been put forward as the main reason why these causes provoked so much reaction within particular groups, whereas other issues went largely unheeded. From this per-

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Olesen, 'Globalising the Zapatistas: From Third World Solidarity to Global Solidarity?', *Third World Quarterly* 25, 1 (2004), 255-258.

<sup>61</sup> Kim Christiaens, 'Making Solidarity Effective: The Interaction between Vietnamese Actors and Solidarity Activists in the Mobilization for Vietnam in Belgium in the 1960s and early 1970s', in Berthold Unfried & Eva Himmelstoss, eds., *Die eine Welt schaffen: Praktiken von "Internationaler Solidarität" und "Internationaler Entwicklung"*. *Create One World: Practices of "International Solidarity" and "International Development"* (Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 185.

<sup>62</sup> Dieter Rucht, 'Distant Issue Movements in Germany: Empirical Description and Theoretical Reflections', in John A. Guidry, Michael D. Kennedy and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Globalisations and Social Movements: Culture, Power, and the Transnational Public Sphere* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 76-105.

spective, solidarity is mostly understood as an endogenous phenomenon in which activists shaped the content and contours of solidarity themselves, whereas the recipients of this solidarity rather passively received this support. In short, solidarity movements have traditionally been understood as a one-way street between active donors and passive recipients abroad.

It should however be clear, as we have tried to demonstrate in this article, that both Polish and Nicaraguan *acteurs* played a crucial role in the emergence, development and nature of the solidarity that developed in Belgium. The solidarity actions cannot be understood apart from them. In assigning emphasis to the active role of the recipients of solidarity, we may appear to be moving towards the conclusions of the political scientist Clifford Bob. He conceptualized (in his well-known study *The Marketing of Rebellion*) the interaction between political movements demanding support and the overseas audiences supplying the support as a relationship of demand and supply in which demanders of support have to actively deploy marketing strategies to gain international attention for their cause.<sup>63</sup> Yet, whereas Bob has argued that it is the donating *acteurs* who eventually shape the recipients, this study makes clear that the reverse is also true, because it is not always clear who the demanders and the suppliers are. Solidarność in Poland and the FSLN in Nicaragua sought support abroad, but were also confronted with demands from activists who were keen to put their solidarity into practice.

Indeed, in many aspects, the ways in which Belgian groups concretized their support for Nicaragua and Poland were determined and conditioned by the input they received from the Nicaraguan and Polish movements they identified with. This input was in turn dependent on the existence and availability of connections through which contact and information could proceed. For example, the reason why the Christian trade union largely abstained from support actions immediately after the Polish coup of 1981 was mainly rooted in the fact that even if it had the will, it did not have or see any means or channels for organizing support. After the defeat of the FSLN in the elections of 1990, Nicaragua committees ran dry, to a large degree because the flow of information which had been proceeding via the diplomatic channels of the FSLN stopped abruptly. Although crucial, information was only one aspect.

For another thing, the strategic and tactical lines set out by the FSLN and Solidarność provided direction for much of the solidarity work, and explain to a large degree the different outlooks of the mobilizations for

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<sup>63</sup> Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Clifford Bob, 'Merchants of Morality', *Foreign Policy*, 129 (2002), 36-45.

Nicaragua and Poland. Solidarność, being a trade union itself, had a special preference for accessing trade union groups for garnering support. Moreover, it was concerned that support by political parties or groups could give credence to accusations that Solidarność was not a trade union but a political movement dependent on foreign support. The Brussels Coordinating Office led by Milewski, therefore, prioritized working discreetly via the offices of the trade unions, rather than engaging in public actions. Such limitations were absent from FSLN foreign policy, whose priority was in mobilizing as many groups as possible to find an entry to governments and in this way to change western European policy towards Nicaragua.<sup>64</sup>

As part of the public diplomacy of the FSLN, Nicaragua activists, then, were pushed to establish as many connections as possible with other groups, to find support among trade unions and political parties, and to engage in public actions to bring the issue of Nicaragua to the fore. Moreover, the opportunities for solidarity actions in Belgium for Poland or Nicaragua were strongly determined by the agenda given by Solidarność and the FSLN, which suggested to their supporters ways to concretize their solidarity in order to fit their interests, thereby providing them with templates for action. The idea of organizing solidarity brigades to Nicaragua was not a creation of Belgian activists, but of Nicaraguan authorities. Conversely, the technical aid provided to the Polish underground was asked for by the Polish dissidents. Obviously, for various reasons, the degree to which solidarity activists were dependent as donors on the strategic, programmatic and practical input from the receiving side was mostly not something that they publicly advertised. Rather, they have conventionally presented and seen their engagement in terms of spontaneously generated actions, driven by a plethora of moral, political and ideological concerns. It is a discourse that many historians have to date easily adopted and widely spread in their writings, but that we have tried to counterbalance with this article.

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<sup>64</sup> Héctor Perla, 'Si Nicaragua venció, El Salvador vencerá: Central American Agency in the Creation of the US-Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement', *Latin American Research Review*, 43, 2 (2008), 136-158.