

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Lech Walesa

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(b. 1943)

Trained as an electrician, Lech Walesa assumed leadership of the independent trade union Solidarity and played a key role in leading Poland out of Soviet domination. Walesa won the presidency in 1990 and held it until 1995.

From "Walesa, Lech." Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2001.

Polish labor union activist, Nobel laureate, and president of Poland (1990-1995), Lech Walesa rose to international fame in August 1980 as the leader of the independent trade union Solidarity. Solidarity played a decisive role in bringing down communism not only in Poland but throughout Eastern and Central Europe.

Walesa was one of eight children born into a Catholic worker-peasant family in Popowa, a village between Warsaw, the capital of Poland, and Gdansk, on the Baltic coast. He received a primary education, trained as an electrician in a local agricultural-machinery college, and began work in 1961. In 1967 he left home to find work as an electrician at the huge state-owned Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk.

In December 1970 Walesa participated in protests that erupted along the Baltic seaboard after the Polish government imposed drastic increases in food prices. In the months that followed, open debate between Solidarity, the Communist Party, and the Roman Catholic Church blossomed while the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its aging leadership under Leonid Brezhnev looked on anxiously. In Poland the economic situation deteriorated so much that rationing of basic foodstuffs had to be introduced.

On December 13, 1981, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, Poland's head of government, declared martial law. Solidarity was banned and Walesa was arrested and interned. He was released in November 1982 and martial law was lifted in July 1983. That December Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, partly to maintain pressure on the Polish authorities. Afraid that he would not be readmitted if he left the country to collect the prize, Walesa remained in Poland. His wife Danuta traveled to Oslo, Norway, on her husband's behalf.

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When Walesa stood for election as president in October 1990, he was challenged by his own prime minister, Mazowiecki, and a Polish-Canadian businessman, Stanislaw Tyminski. Having gained the presidency, Walesa became increasingly active on the political stage, making and breaking governments and prime ministers. At first he had to operate in a relatively hostile setting with a Communist-dominated parliament. In October 1991, however, the first genuinely free elections of the postwar period were held. With 29 parties represented, the newly elected parliament was highly fragmented, giving Walesa even greater room for political activity. An unstable parliamentary situation led to new elections in September 1993, and a coalition of parties with links to the Communist Party, which was disbanded in 1990, was returned to power. Over the next two years Walesa used his presidential base as part of the wider struggle against the ruling parties.

Many observers believe that Walesa overplayed his hand from 1993 through 1995, earning a nuisance reputation that displeased many Poles. The confrontational Walesa tried to exert too much control over government, from handpicking prime ministers to stalling on signing the nation's budget when it failed to meet his approval. The presidential election in November 1995 became a straight fight between post-Communism, represented by Aleksander Kwasniewski, and Solidarity. Walesa narrowly lost the election, taking 48.3 percent of the votes to Kwasniewski's 51.7 percent. After his defeat, Walesa played a marginal role on the political scene. In 1996 he returned to work at the Gdansk shipyard in protest of a law that barred ex-presidents from collecting a pension; he remained at the shipyard for only one morning and within a month he was granted a pension.