

SOLIDARNOŚĆ AND LECH WAŁĘSA
IN JAPANESE NEWSPAPERS, 1980–1981¹

1. Introduction

In Japan, it is widely recognized that NSZZ *Solidarność* (Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity”) played a crucial role in Poland’s democratization. During the 1980s, numerous books about *Solidarność* and its leader Lech Wałęsa were published in Japan.² In recent years, the *Solidarność* movement and Japan’s support for it have also gained attention.³

This article examines how Japanese newspapers reported on the strike in Gdańsk in the summer of 1980 and the founding of *Solidarność*, with a particular focus on their portrayal of Wałęsa, especially in relation to his visit to Japan in May 1981.

Japan’s five major national newspapers are „Yomiuri Shimbun,” „Asahi Shimbun,” „Mainichi Shimbun,” „Nihon Keizai Shimbun,” and „Sankei Shimbun.”⁴

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¹ This article is a record of research conducted by the author in 2024. The theses and materials were presented during a stay at the University of Gdańsk as part of the “Visiting Professors at the University of Gdańsk” program.

² Typical examples include: G. Bernard [ベルナール・ゲッタ], *Poland no Natsu. Gekidou no 20 nichikan* [『ポーランドの夏 激動の20日間 現地ルポ』大空博、川島太郎共] [“Polish Summer: 20 Turbulent Days: Local Report” by Hiroshi Ozora and Taro Kawashima], [新評論、東京1981] Shin Hyōron, Tokio 1981; L. Wałęsa [レフ・ワレサ], *Kibo be no Michi* [『ワレサ自伝 希望への道』筑紫哲也、水谷駿訳] [Walesa Autobiography: The Road to Hope, translated by Tetsuya Chikushi and Takeshi Mizutani], [社会思想社、東京1988], Shakai shisō-sha, Tokio 1988. In Japanese, “Wałęsa,” is written “ワレサ.” This is thought to be derived from English and other writing systems without the *ę* and *ł*.

³ See: T. Sekiguchi [関口時正], M. Taguchi [田口雅弘] (eds.) [編著], *Poland “Rentai” – undo to sono Isan* [ポーランド「連帯」運動とその遺産: 民主化と変革] [The Polish Solidarity Movement and Its Legacy: Democratization and Change] [ふくろう出版、岡山2011] Fukurou Publishing, Okayama 2011.

⁴ See: Kotobank “National Newspapers” [コトバンク「全国紙」], <https://kotobank.jp/word/%E5%85%A8%E5%9B%BD%E7%B4%99-88222> (accessed: 14.03.2025).

Among them, “Yomiuri,” „Asahi,” and “Mainichi” are regarded as the three leading newspapers (hereafter referred to as “Yomiuri,” „Asahi,” and “Mainichi”). This article primarily uses „Asahi” to trace events in Poland, as it provides more detailed coverage of Poland and other international affairs compared to the other newspapers. To further clarify the perspectives of each newspaper, “Yomiuri” and “Mainichi” are also referred to for purposes of comparison. Politically, „Asahi” is generally considered more progressive, “Yomiuri” more conservative, and “Mainichi” relatively neutral.⁵

For texts from „Asahi,” “Yomiuri,” and “Mainichi,” this article relies on each newspaper’s database.⁶

2. Reporting on anti-government protests in communist Poland

This section examines articles in Japanese newspapers about the protests in Poland in 1956, 1970, and 1976, shedding light on how Japan perceived these events.

2.1. The 1956 Poznań Protest

In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party triggered a wave of de-Stalinization across Eastern Europe. On April 6, the „Asahi Shimbun” reported that Władysław Gomułka had been politically rehabilitated.⁷

On June 29, the first report on the Poznań Protest appeared. That morning, around 8 a.m., workers gathered in the city center, demonstrating in front of the offices of the Polish United Workers’ Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*,

⁵ Shimbun-Chousakai [新聞調査会], *Dai 2 kai Media ni kansuru Zenkoku-Seron-Chousa 2009* [第2回メディアに関する全国世論調査] [The 2nd National Public Opinion Survey on Media] [公益財団法人 新聞通信調査会2009], Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association 2009, p. 6, <https://www.chosakai.gr.jp/wp/wp-content/themes/shinbun/asset/pdf/project/notification/jpyoronreport02-2009.pdf> (access: 14.03.2025). Also, on the tone of the newspapers, see, T. Kaneko [金子智樹], *Gendai-Nihon no Shimbun to Seiji* [現代日本の新聞と政治—地方紙・全国紙と有権者・政治家] [Newspapers and Politics in Modern Japan: Local and National Newspapers, Voters, and Politicians], [東京大学出版会, 東京2023] University of Tokyo Press, Tokyo 2023.

⁶ For the “Asahi,” “Asahi Shimbun” [『朝日新聞』] [朝日新聞クロスサーチ] [Asahi Shimbun Cross Search], <https://xsearch-Asahi-com.agulin.idm.oclc.org/top/>. For the “Yomiuri,” “Yomiuri Shimbun” [『読売新聞』] [読売新聞データベース「ヨミダス」] [Yomiuri Shimbun Database Yomidas], <https://yomidas-yomiuri-co-jp.agulin.idm.oclc.org/>. For “Mainichi,” “Mainichi Shimbun” [『毎日新聞』] [毎索(マイサク)] [Mainichi Shimbun My Search], https://dbs-g-search-or-jp.agulin.idm.oclc.org/WMAI/IPCU/WMAI_ipcu_menu.html.

⁷ The „Asahi,” evening edition (hereafter E), 7.04.1956, p. 1.

hereafter PZPR). The protests escalated as crowds attacked police stations and prisons. By 2:30 p.m., army tanks had entered the city to restore order.⁸ In its morning edition on June 30, the „Asahi” reported that thirty-eight people had been killed and 270 injured in the June 28 riots. An article in the same edition attributed the unrest to Poland’s industrial imbalances and poor working conditions. The *Editorial* in this issue stated:

Historically, Poland has been a remarkably sensitive and dynamic nation in response to Russian actions. There may still be underground movements fueled by anger over the 1939 partition of the country by Germany and the Soviet Union. If the Polish government simply suppresses these riots as acts of “enemies of the motherland” without addressing the people’s genuine grievances, it will be returning to the days before Stalin’s criticism. People are most discontent when their government operates under the influence of a foreign power. It remains to be seen what lessons the Polish government – and indeed, other governments in Eastern Europe and beyond – will take from the Poznań incident, or whether they will continue to crack down on these growing undercurrents.⁹

Also on June 30, the *Tensei Jingo* (天声人語) column praised Poland as “an outstanding nation that has produced various great geniuses” such as Copernicus, Chopin, Marie Curie, Sienkiewicz, and Paderewski, concluding with the poignant warning to beware “Lest the eggs of genius be washed away with the blood of riots.”¹⁰

2.2. The 1970 and 1976 protests

Gomulka’s rise to power brought a degree of liberalization, and on June 6, 1962, the „Asahi” reported a “bright atmosphere, a Western mood” in Warsaw.¹¹ However, by the mid-1960s, this optimism had faded, and by the late 1960s, the „Asahi” began covering anti-establishment demonstrations.

In its evening edition on December 16, the newspaper reported violent clashes on December 15 between plainclothes police and civilians in Gdynia, Gdańsk, and Sopot, resulting in numerous deaths. The morning edition of December 17 further reported that similar clashes had occurred in Szczecin, with casualties among both police and civilians. By this time, the death toll had reached several dozen.¹²

From December 18 onward, the „Asahi” covered the government’s response to the riots. Gomulka resigned and Edward Gierek took over as prime minister.¹³

⁸ The „Asahi,” E, 29.06.1956, p. 1.

⁹ The „Asahi,” morning edition (hereafter M), 30.06.1956, p. 2.

¹⁰ The „Asahi,” M, 30.06.1956, p. 1.

¹¹ The „Asahi,” M, 6.06.1962.

¹² The „Asahi,” E, 16.12.1970, p. 2; M, 17.12.1970, p. 1.

¹³ The „Asahi,” E, 21.12.1970, p. 1.

In its “Commentary” section, the „Asahi” analyzes Poland’s economic instability and agricultural decline, noting that, like the Poznań Protest of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968, the unrest stemmed from “the deep current of the people’s desire for bread and freedom.”¹⁴

The *Tensei Jingo* column in the morning edition of December 18 opens with: “Riots have erupted in Poland. Workers and citizens have rebelled against sharp increases in food and fuel prices, leading to widespread unrest.” It describes Poland as a “socialist country where all prices are determined by government decisions rather than by a supply-and-demand market economy.” Because of this system, it notes, “A demonstration against price hikes is no small matter. It is a direct act of defiance against the state – a revolt for survival.” The column continues: “The same was true of the Poznań riots 14 years ago. After that, I had heard that Poland was leading the liberalization of Eastern Europe in every aspect of life, customs, and culture. But was that really the case? I don’t understand.”¹⁵

In the early 1970s, the „Asahi” viewed the Gierek government’s economic policies and moderate liberalization efforts somewhat favorably. An article in the morning edition of August 8, 1974, describes Poland’s development in the thirty years since liberation from Nazi Germany as “one of the economic miracles” and states that Poland was “already a fully industrialized country.” However, it also cautions: “Compared to my visit four years ago, it seems as if the engine has started running at full speed. I wonder whether such rapid growth is sustainable.”¹⁶

Major protests also occurred in 1976, but they received less coverage than the protests of 1956 and 1970.

On June 25, 1976, a protest against food price increases took place. That evening, Prime Minister Piotr Jaroszewicz announced the withdrawal of the price hikes. The following day, reports confirmed that the strike had ended within a day, with seventeen deaths reported.¹⁷

Between 1976 and 1980, reports frequently covered the rising prices of essential goods, including food, coal, oil, and other fuels. During this period, the dissident movement also gained attention. In April 1977, the „Asahi Shimbun” reported the arrests of Jacek Kuroń and Jan Józef Lipski, spokesmen for the Workers’ Defense Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, hereafter KOR). On October 20, a dissident declaration signed by 110 individuals was issued, attributing the economic crisis to the lack of citizens’ rights and the state’s lack of independence. The declaration

¹⁴ The „Asahi,” M, 17.12.1970, p. 7.

¹⁵ The „Asahi,” M, 18.12.1970, p. 1.

¹⁶ The „Asahi,” M, 8.08.1974, p. 5.

¹⁷ The „Asahi,” E, 26.06.1976, p. 2; M, 27.06.1976, p. 7.

called for freedom of speech, freedom of information, freedom of association, and the right to strike.¹⁸

In 1979, reports covered demonstrations and arrests in Warsaw and other cities in August, November, and December.

The 1956 *Editorial* reflects a stereotypical view of Poland in Japan. First, Poland is seen as a tragic nation that had lost its sovereignty. Second, it is regarded as a culturally superior country. Each time an incident occurred in Poland, newspapers reinforced these perceptions, shaping what can be called a “traditional” understanding of Poland.

From the 1970s onward, a new perspective emerged: while Poland was undergoing industrialization, it was also facing a severe economic and financial crisis. This view often included criticism of the rigidity of the socialist state. As a result, there was a particular sense of sympathy in Japan for protests against the socialist system, especially those driven by repression and systemic failures.

3. The August 1980 strike and the birth of *Solidarność*

3.1. From the start of the strike to the MKS's clarification of its objectives

On July 1, 1980, the government announced an increase in meat prices, triggering a wave of strikes across the country, particularly in Warsaw and Lublin. The „Asahi” reported that the Gdańsk Shipyard went on strike on August 14, with workers demanding the creation of a new trade union and the construction of a memorial for those killed in the 1970 riots.¹⁹

It was also reported that on August 17 workers from twenty-one sites in Gdańsk, including shipyards, oil refineries, and port facilities, had formed the Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee (*Międzyzakładowy Komitet Strajkowy*, hereafter MKS). Through KOR, they conveyed their sixteen-point list of demands to the Western press. These demands included highly political issues such as the liberalization of restrictions on free trade unions, guarantees of freedom of speech and the press, and the release of political prisoners.²⁰

On August 18, Gierek delivered a speech rejecting the political demands, offering wage increases as a concession, and urging workers to end the strike.²¹ However, workers responded with extreme skepticism. Meanwhile, on August 19, the MKS announced that its membership had exceeded 100,000, and that negotiations with

¹⁸ The „Asahi,” M, 17.04.1977, p. 7; M, 22.04.1977, p. 7.

¹⁹ The „Asahi,” M, 16.08.1980, p. 7.

²⁰ The „Asahi,” E, 18.08.1980, p. 1.

²¹ The „Asahi,” E, 19.08.1980, p. 2.

the PZPR leadership were ongoing to establish a trade union based on workers' free will.²² On August 20, the MKS ordered the suspension of individual negotiations.²³ At this point, the „Asahi” began publishing articles expressing its own perspective on the situation.

In its August 21 Editorial, the „Asahi” points out that, in theory, there should be no strikes in a “workers’ state.” The fact that strikes had persisted for nearly two months is described as “abnormal.” It views the workers’ demands positively, emphasizing their calls to “end the export of meat and other scarce goods, provide full transparency regarding the nation’s current situation, and convene representatives of various associations to discuss reforms.” It describes these demands as “natural and rational opinions.”²⁴

3.2. The Gdańsk Agreement

3.2.1. Negotiations between the MKS and the Government

On August 21, First Deputy Prime Minister Mieczysław Jagielski traveled to Gdańsk. Negotiations between the MKS and the government began shortly after 9:00 p.m. on August 22. During the talks, three MKS representatives presented the government with a document outlining their twenty-one demands.²⁵

During these direct negotiations, the workers made it clear that they would continue their strike indefinitely unless all twenty-one demands were met. In response, Jagielski took a firm stance.²⁶

However, on the night of August 24, the PZPR recognized the Free Trade Union, and Józef Piłsudski was appointed as the new Prime Minister. The evening edition of the „Asahi” on August 25 reported that “strike leader Lech Wałęsa” had declared, “This is our victory,” but had also stated that the strike would continue. “Crane operator Anna Walentynowicz” similarly remarked that the agreement was “not enough to call off the strike.”²⁷

At this point, an *Editorial* on August 26 in the „Asahi” expresses “surprise” that Gierek had accepted “the formation of trade unions based on democratic elections,” which was one of the workers’ core demands. It argues that the establishment of “free trade unions” could serve as an example of the loosening up of Poland’s rigid system. The article describes this achievement as something that

²² The „Asahi,” M, 20.08.1980, p. 7.

²³ The „Asahi,” M, 21.08.1980, p. 7.

²⁴ The „Asahi,” M, 21.08.1980, p. 5.

²⁵ The „Asahi,” E, 23.08.1980, p. 1.

²⁶ The „Asahi,” M, 25.08.1980, p. 7.

²⁷ The „Asahi,” E, 25.08.1980, p. 1.

could not be “silenced,” but notes that it was unlikely to spread immediately to neighboring countries.²⁸

3.2.2. The final stage of negotiations and the Agreement

A second round of negotiations took place on the afternoon of August 25, during which the government made further concessions and informed the workers that they would be granted the right to strike.²⁹ However, the workers rejected the proposal as “inadequate.”³⁰

On the evening of August 27, an agreement was reached on most of the demands, though the free trade union issue remained unresolved.³¹ Wałęsa stated that “The striking workers do not want Poland to fall apart for their sake.” The following day, August 28, he called for the strike not to expand further.³²

However, on the evening of August 28, negotiations were abruptly suspended, and the government revoked its agreement on trade union liberalization. As a result, the strike spread even further across the country, with over 300,000 people participating in it.³³ Negotiations resumed at 10:00 a.m. on August 30, and the strike finally came to an end when the government officially recognized an independent, self-governing trade union alongside the existing state-controlled unions. The conclusion of the strike was reported in the morning edition of the „Asahi” on August 31.³⁴

3.2.3. Reactions from Japanese newspapers

Japanese newspapers expressed their perspectives on the resolution of the strike and the signing of the Gdańsk Agreement.

The „Asahi Shimbun” (September 1, *Editorial*)³⁵

The „Asahi” notes that anti-government movements, even when widely supported at the outset, often become radicalized and divided if they drag on. While there had been concerns that the Polish workers’ struggle might take such a turn, the final outcome – winning recognition for independent trade unions – is considered “a significant success.”

²⁸ The „Asahi,” M, 26.08.1980, p. 5.

²⁹ The „Asahi,” M, 26.08.1980, p. 5.

³⁰ The „Asahi,” M, 27.08.1980, p. 1.

³¹ The „Asahi,” E, 28.08.1980, p. 2.

³² The „Asahi,” M, 29.08.1980, p. 7.

³³ The „Asahi,” E, 29.08.1980, p. 1.

³⁴ The „Asahi,” M, 31.08.1980, pp. 1, 7.

³⁵ The „Asahi,” M, 1.09.1980, p. 5.

The *Editorial* reflects on Poland's past labor struggles in 1956, 1970, and 1976. It points out that this time, KOR took the lead, and praises KOR's strategy, focusing on securing workers' rights within workplaces rather than resorting to street protests. This is seen as a lesson learned from past experiences.

At the same time, while the government had made significant concessions, it had managed to maintain the existing political framework. The „Asahi” calls this “a remarkable achievement.” However, it also warns that once the strike ended, there was a risk that the agreement could be overturned. Furthermore, although Soviet intervention had been avoided for the time being, it concludes that “Poland's future still does not warrant optimism.”

The „Yomiuri Shimbun” (September 1, *Editorial*: “The Historic Polish Labor Movement”)³⁶

The “Yomiuri” describes the recognition of free trade unions with the right to strike, however limited, as “a landmark event.” It asserts that, for the first time, a genuine labor movement had taken root within the Soviet bloc. However, the *Editorial* also cautions that the future of these unions remained uncertain and that Poland's political and economic situation was still precarious. It emphasizes that “Poland's new path” was fraught with challenges, particularly regarding economic recovery and Soviet influence.

The “Mainichi Shimbun” (September 2, *Editorial*: “Polish-Style Socialism”)³⁷

While the Polish strike had ended, the economic issues that had triggered it remained unresolved. The *Editorial* predicts that tensions would persist, as Poland's political contradictions had not been fully addressed. Nonetheless, it describes the strike as a “historic event” and “a new page in world history,” as it had led to the emergence of “Polish-style socialism,” a system distinct from Soviet-style socialism. Unlike the Prague Spring of 1968, which had failed to establish “socialism with a human face,” the Polish movement had succeeded in securing greater autonomy within the Soviet bloc. Despite lingering fears of Soviet intervention, the “Mainichi” concludes that the Polish strike had demonstrated “the correctness of European détente” and ultimately proved that “the pen is mightier than the sword.”

The Japanese press responded very positively to the 1980 strike. In particular, there was a sense of optimism among workers, who saw the recognition of free trade unions as a potential path to a new form of socialism.

³⁶ The “Yomiuri,” M, 1.09.1980, p. 4.

³⁷ The “Mainichi,” M, 2.09.1980, p. 5.

At the same time, there was widespread concern about possible Soviet intervention, a fear that persisted during the founding of *Solidarność*. „Asahi” notably emphasized the leadership role of the KOR, a group of intellectuals, alongside the contributions of the workers themselves.

3.3. The Birth of *Solidarność*

On September 1, the newly formed Workers’ Trade Union held its first congress, bringing together 3,000 representatives from socialized enterprises across Poland. The congress was chaired by Lech Wałęsa.³⁸

In the following days, reports from various regions confirmed that strikes had ended and self-managed trade unions were being established. The evening edition of the „Asahi” on September 6 reports that Gierek had been ousted and replaced by Stanisław Kania as First Secretary.³⁹

The first national delegate congress of *Solidarność*, which aimed at establishing and promoting the new trade union, took place on the evening of September 17. The congress brought together 250 delegates representing hundreds of thousands of workers from thirty-one cities across the country. Under Wałęsa’s leadership, discussions centered on drafting a unified charter for the new trade union.⁴⁰

On the evening of September 22, the “Conference of Delegates of Self-Governing Trade Unions” officially adopted the national charter and named the new national organization *Solidarność*. It was also decided that *Solidarność* headquarters would be in Gdańsk.⁴¹

On October 25, the „Asahi” reported that *Solidarność* had been officially registered as a legal entity by the Warsaw District Court on the afternoon of October 24. However, the court added a clause to the statutes asserting the “superiority of the party.” In response, *Solidarność* rejected the amendment and filed an appeal with the Supreme Court.⁴²

On October 31, Prime Minister Pinkowski met with thirty-nine union representatives, including Wałęsa. The workers demanded that the amendment be revoked by November 8, warning that they would call a strike starting on November 12 if their demand was not met.⁴³ On the morning of November 10, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the unions, overturning the previous decision. As a result, the planned general strike was called off, and Wałęsa declared a “victory.”⁴⁴

³⁸ The „Asahi,” E, 2.09.1980, p. 2.

³⁹ The „Asahi,” E, 6.09.1980, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁰ The „Asahi,” E, 18.09.1980, p. 2.

⁴¹ The „Asahi,” E, 25.09.1980, p. 2.

⁴² The „Asahi,” M, 25.10.1980, p. 7; E, 25.10.1980, p. 2.

⁴³ The „Asahi,” M, 1.11.1980, p. 7.

⁴⁴ The „Asahi,” M, 11.11.1980, pp. 1, 7.

In its November 11 morning edition, the „Asahi” describes this victory as follows: Poland’s new trade union, representing around ten million of the country’s thirteen million employees in state enterprises, had once again demonstrated, both domestically and internationally, its “unity and strength far beyond expectations” against both the ruling party and the government. The party now appeared to acknowledge workers as “equal partners” in Poland. However, the key question remained: how would the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist bloc perceive this apparent “weakness” on the part of the Polish authorities?⁴⁵

4. Wałęsa’s visit to Japan

4.1. Wałęsa’s emergence in Japanese newspapers

Lech Wałęsa’s name first appeared in the „Asahi” on August 25 in an article entitled *Strike Leader is a 37-Year-Old Electrician: Calling for Rejection of Imposed Conditions*. The article introduces Wałęsa as the leader of a strike unprecedented in the Soviet bloc, which was taking place in Gdańsk. Thirty-seven years old, he was an electrician and the chairman of a twelve-member executive committee, elected from among two representatives from each striking workplace. The article notes that Wałęsa had been a member of the Committee of the Free Trade Unions of the Baltic Sea Coast (*Wolne Związki Zawodowe Wybrzeża*), formed in May 1978, and had signed the Charter of Workers’ Rights in September (actually August) 1979. The charter emphasized the formation of an independent trade union with the right to strike as a primary goal.⁴⁶

The “Yomiuri” also introduced Wałęsa on the same day, describing him as a “battle-hardened, tenacious fighter.” The article highlights how an “unknown young organizer” leading the MKS, had suddenly been thrust into the spotlight. It describes his dignified negotiations with First Deputy Prime Minister Jagielski on the night of August 23. The negotiations were “broadcast live” via loudspeakers outside the venue, and Wałęsa’s “distinctive, sweet voice” reportedly moved the workers deeply. He is described as a handsome man with a mustache, a devout Catholic, and a father of six. The article concludes by portraying Wałęsa as a key figure in Poland’s new labor movement, a movement that emphasized workers’ unity in reclaiming their economic and political rights. Though a strong leader, he is also seen as someone “open to compromise” in the pursuit of democracy.⁴⁷

The “Mainichi” first mentioned Wałęsa’s name on August 25 in an article on the start of negotiations between Jagielski and the MKS. Unlike the „Asahi” and the “Yomiuri,” which introduced Wałęsa based on foreign reports, the “Mainichi” did

⁴⁵ The „Asahi,” M, 11.11.1980, p. 7.

⁴⁶ The „Asahi,” M, 25.08.1980, p. 7.

⁴⁷ The “Yomiuri,” M, 25.08.1980, p. 7.

not publish a separate profile. However, a correspondent visited the Lenin Shipyard on August 31, as the strike was coming to an end, to interview workers directly. They saw the strike as a “victory,” explaining, “For the first time, we’ve won the right to form our own trade union. This was possible because many factories came together and stood united. The strike leadership was brilliant.” They noted that Wałęsa, “only thirty-seven years old,” had been fired for leading a previous strike in 1976, but they had fought for his reinstatement and had finally succeeded.⁴⁸

4.2. Preparing for Wałęsa’s visit to Japan

Japanese labor and socialist organizations such as the *Akahata* (赤旗 Red Flag), the official newspaper of the Japanese Communist Party, the General Council of Trade Unions of Japan (日本労働組合総評議会, 総評: hereafter, *Sōhyō*), the Japan Socialist Party (JSP), and the Japanese Communist Party itself, had a high regard for the Gdańsk workers’ strike from an early stage.

After the strike ended, the *Sōhyō*, at its executive board meeting on September 1, discussed the settlement of the Polish workers’ strike and issued a statement fully supporting the Gdańsk Agreement, which allowed the formation of a self-governing trade union. It was also announced that the JSP would send a joint survey team to Poland in November to investigate the situation firsthand.⁴⁹

On September 2, the Japanese Confederation of Labor (全日本労働総同盟, 同盟: hereafter, *Dōmei*) also published a statement, praising the resolution of the Polish workers’ strike as “a great victory for the Polish workers in having the government recognize their self-governing trade union and the right to strike.”⁵⁰

On November 12, the *Sōhyō* delegation (including the General Secretary of *Sōhyō*, Mitsuo Tomizuka) left for Poland.⁵¹ On the evening of November 14 (Polish time), the *Sōhyō* delegation and Chairman Wałęsa met, with Tomizuka inviting Wałęsa to visit Japan. Wałęsa accepted the invitation, and the *Sōhyō* delegation issued a joint communiqué pledging mutual cooperation with and support for *Solidarność*.⁵²

On February 5, 1981, it was reported that Wałęsa was scheduled to visit Japan in mid-May. In response, the *Press Section* published a comment with the headline “Wałęsa is the ‘Messiah’.” For Tomizuka, Wałęsa’s visit to Japan was “a unique opportunity” for the JSP and the *Sōhyō*, as they were working to create a “socialist image of miso soup” and reviewing “the road to socialism in Japan” amidst a debate on the realignment of opposition parties.⁵³

⁴⁸ The “Mainichi,” M, 25.08.1980, p. 1.

⁴⁹ The „Asahi,” M, 2.09.1980, p. 2.

⁵⁰ The „Asahi,” M, 3.09.1980, p. 2.

⁵¹ The „Asahi,” M, 12.11.1980, p. 2.

⁵² The „Asahi,” M, 16.11.1980, p. 2; M, 13.11.1980, p. 3.

⁵³ The „Asahi,” M, 5.02.1981, p. 2.

On April 17, it was announced that Wałęsa had confirmed his visit to Japan on May 10. The delegation to Japan would consist of nine people, including five representatives from the district organizations that made up *Solidarność*, and two intellectuals. Two members of the delegation were women.⁵⁴

On May 4, an article entitled *From Right to Left: Wałęsa Fever* was published. According to the article, the *Sōhyō* had created a twenty-two-member welcoming project team. In addition to this, the “caretaker association for the gathering for Mr. Wałęsa” consisted of thirty-two bipartisan members, from right to left, and “welcome posters were sold out,” signaling that there was a “fever” surrounding his visit.⁵⁵

On May 8, the dates of Wałęsa’s visit to Japan and his plans were officially announced. A column in the „Asahi” notes that *From the Right to the Left: Wałęsa Boom Finally Bipartisan*, highlighting that sixty bipartisan volunteer members of parliament were organizing the welcome party. Among those expected to attend were former Prime Minister Miki, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives Okada, and other senior figures from various parties. Although there was an offer from the Wałęsa side that he be welcomed “without any political color,” it was clear that it would be difficult to do so.⁵⁶

The evening edition of the „Asahi” on May 8 gives the content of a press conference held by Wałęsa at the *Solidarność* headquarters on May 7, just prior to his visit to Japan. Wałęsa had long expressed his desire to make Poland a second Japan and said he wanted to “learn even half of the diligence of the Japanese people and instill that in Poland.” At the same time, he reiterated that no significant results should be expected directly from his visit to Japan.⁵⁷

4.3. Wałęsa’s activities during his visit to Japan in 1981

In the morning edition of May 10, the introductory article in the „Asahi” ahead of Wałęsa’s visit to Japan describes him as “the ‘star of hope’ for a renewed Poland.” It highlights his role in “winning the historic Gdańsk Agreement” and his ability to attract worldwide attention with his leadership, which “balanced hardline and flexible tactics” against the Soviet Union. The article also introduces him as a devoted Catholic and father of four boys and two girls, noting that he “never leaves his Black Mary brooch.”⁵⁸

On the afternoon of May 10, Wałęsa and the *Solidarność* delegation arrived in Japan. The May 11 morning edition of the „Asahi” newspaper featured a front-page

⁵⁴ The „Asahi,” E, 18.04.1981, p. 2.

⁵⁵ The „Asahi,” M, 4.05.1981, p. 3.

⁵⁶ The „Asahi,” M, 8.05.1981, p. 2.

⁵⁷ The „Asahi,” E, 8.05.1981, p. 2.

⁵⁸ The „Asahi,” M, 10.05.1981, p. 3.

article on Wałęsa's arrival. At 2:44 a.m. on May 10, the delegation, including Wałęsa, arrived at Narita Airport on Scandinavian Airlines, after a stopover in Anchorage. Wałęsa appeared in the airport lobby "in jeans and a rough style." During a press conference, Wałęsa emphasized the importance of "human-to-human encounters beyond just labor exchanges," saying he hoped to "set an example of Japan's excellent fields." The „Asahi” article praises this approach, describing it as reflective of Wałęsa's personality.⁵⁹ Another article on page 22, entitled *Cheerfully Gutsy First Step on Visit to Japan in Jeans*, focuses on Wałęsa's personality, particularly his appearance and demeanor. Wałęsa is described as wearing "a jumper of pale blue jeans and a shirt with no tie" and sporting "a humorous figure-eight (in *Kanji*) mustache, which had become familiar to the Japanese public." At the press conference, Wałęsa took questions with the help of his interpreter Henryk Lipszyc, while "puffing on his favorite pipe" and speaking in a "relaxed, leisurely manner."⁶⁰

The same day's *Editorial* reflects on the past activities of *Solidarność* and the harsh situation in Poland at the time. It notes that Wałęsa's visit was aimed at studying how to "make Poland like Japan," but also points out the limits to such exchanges because of the two countries' different systems. It concludes with hope, wondering if the future of socialism could open up through exchanges with Wałęsa and his colleagues.⁶¹

May 11: Wałęsa met with *Sōhyō* to exchange information about the labor movements in both Japan and Poland. Wałęsa expressed great interest in the "diligence of the people and the management of companies" in Japan. He declared that "We wanted to be Polish citizens before we are union activists," adding that "the form of the struggle will gradually change to suit our objectives."⁶² In the afternoon, official talks continued. Later that day, a bipartisan welcome party was held at the Parliamentary Museum in Tokyo.⁶³

May 12: Wałęsa and his delegation visited *Dōmei* headquarters to discuss economic issues.⁶⁴ In the afternoon, Wałęsa held another press conference. He stated that *Solidarność* would be reorganized and that a new organization would be created in a few years, with organizing being an immediate task. On the relationship between religion and socialism, Wałęsa stated that "A man who believes in nothing is not a man," calling for the coexistence of religion and socialism. Later that evening, the delegation attended a party hosted by the Polish Ambassador.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ The „Asahi,” M, 11.05.1981, p. 1.

⁶⁰ The „Asahi,” M, 11.05.1981, p. 22.

⁶¹ The „Asahi,” M, 11.05.1981, p. 5.

⁶² The „Asahi,” E, 11.05.1981, p. 1.

⁶³ The „Asahi,” M, 12.05.1981, p. 2.

⁶⁴ The „Asahi,” E, 12.05.1981, p. 1.

⁶⁵ The „Asahi,” M, 13.05.1981, pp. 1, 3.

May 13: The delegation left Tokyo on the 9 a.m. *Shinkansen* and arrived in Osaka shortly after noon. Wałęsa described the ride as a “nice” and seemed impressed by the 200 km/h speed. At the same time, he expressed his impression that the rows of houses he saw from the train window in Tokyo were “rabbit hutches and match-boxes,” and said he felt “sorry for the children” because of the lack of greenery in the environment. In the afternoon, after a meeting with Osaka District Council (大阪地評) leaders, the delegation split into two groups. One group visited the Ibaraki Factory of Matsushita Electric Industrial, while the other visited the Kobe Shipyard of Kawasaki Heavy Industries, “at the request of Mr. Wałęsa, who used to be an electrician,” allowing the delegates to interact with workers at the sites. Later, they attended a reception in Osaka City.⁶⁶

On May 13, 1981, Pope John Paul II was shot and critically injured at the Vatican. This news came as a great shock to Wałęsa and his colleagues, who had arrived in the Kansai region and were staying in Kyoto City.⁶⁷

May 14: In the afternoon, Wałęsa and his group arrived in Nagasaki by air from Osaka. At a welcome gathering held in the plaza in front of Nagasaki Airport shortly after 3 p.m., Wałęsa said: “Nagasaki is like Auschwitz. Human beings had created a hell for other human beings.” In the evening, they visited the Atomic Bomb Museum and laid flowers at the Peace Statue. Reflecting on the experience, Wałęsa said, “We have learned enough here. We will not allow such monuments to be built again.” They also visited the Urakami Cathedral, which Pope John Paul II had visited in February, as well as the Memorial Hall of the 26 Martyrs of Japan. At a press conference at a hotel in the city after 7 p.m., Wałęsa expressed his desire to send a *Solidarność* delegation to the World Conference on Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs if he received an official invitation. However, the planned peace appeal was canceled due to the shock of the Pope’s assassination attempt, as he admitted that he had lost the energy to speak.⁶⁸

May 15: Upon returning to Tokyo, Wałęsa and his delegation spoke at the Tokyo Press Centre in the afternoon about their impressions of the visit. They highlighted some negative aspects of Japanese industry and working conditions, stating, “Thanks to the development of machines and technology, work has become easier, but as human beings, we may be showing some bad aspects.” Later, shortly before 4 p.m., Wałęsa and his group visited the headquarters of the „Asahi Shimbun” newspaper.⁶⁹

May 16: In the evening, at a hotel in Tokyo, the *Solidarność* delegation to Japan presented a joint statement from *Solidarność* and the *Sobyō*. The statement declared

⁶⁶ The „Asahi,” E, 13.05.1981, p. 12.

⁶⁷ The „Asahi,” M, 14.05.1981, p. 23.

⁶⁸ The „Asahi,” M, 15.05.1981, p. 22.

⁶⁹ The „Asahi,” M, 16.05.1981, pp. 3, 23.

that “this visit to Japan has made a significant contribution to the exchange and development of the people of both Japan and Poland.” It also affirmed their commitment to facilitating a future visit of Polish Farmers’ *Solidarność* to Japan, not only to strengthen exchanges between the *Sōhyō* and *Solidarność*, but also to promote interactions between farmers and workers alike. Furthermore, the joint statement emphasized the importance of fundamental labor rights. Wałęsa also confirmed his willingness, if invited, to send a *Solidarność* representative to the World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, scheduled to be held in Nagasaki on August 9.

Earlier that day, on the morning of May 16, Wałęsa spoke at Sophia University. Afterward, he visited a department store in Nihonbashi, where he selected souvenirs for his family, including Japanese *yukata* kimonos, stuffed robots and toy dogs, video games, and other gifts from the *Sōhyō*.⁷⁰

In the afternoon of May 17, the delegation returned to Warsaw. At a press conference at the airport, Wałęsa stated that he would urge the government to seek Japan’s assistance in making Poland a “second Japan.” He added that this goal was achievable while also learning from Japan’s mistakes to avoid repeating them. Reflecting on his visit, Wałęsa praised Japan as a great success and an exceptionally well-organized country. He also joked that the Japanese were so extremely polite that his neck still hurt from too much bowing.⁷¹

The story of Wałęsa’s visit to Japan, as covered in the „Asahi,” came to an end.

Other newspapers published articles summarizing Wałęsa and the *Solidarność* delegation’s visit to Japan.

The „Asahi,” in the columns of the „Asahi Shimbun” evening edition on May 16, compiles Wałęsa’s statements as the “Wałęsa Glossary.” His remarks were characterized by his “frankness and straightforward, easy-to-understand expressions,” while terms like “ideology” and “regime” were “rarely used.” At the same time, he is described as having “a soft approach, often wrapping his words in wry humor.”⁷²

The “Yomiuri” focuses even more on Wałęsa’s personal side than the „Asahi Shimbun,” reporting on his dancing to Polish folk songs at a welcome party on the evening of May 11.⁷³ It also notes his appearance in a suit when attending mass at St. Dominic’s Convent in Shibuya early in the morning of May 12.⁷⁴ The article further highlights Wałęsa’s deep religious faith.

Additionally, a “Yomiuri” column on May 16 summarizes Wałęsa’s visit to Japan under the title “A Week with ‘Mr. *Solidarność*.’” It describes how he kissed a female

⁷⁰ The „Asahi,” M, 17.05.1981, p. 2.

⁷¹ The „Asahi,” M, 18.05.1981, p. 3.

⁷² The „Asahi,” E, 16.05.1981, p. 3.

⁷³ The “Yomiuri,” M, 12.05.1981, p. 23.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

high-school student on the cheek aboard the *Shinkansen*, moved swiftly wherever he went – keeping veteran security personnel on edge – and maintained “worker’s style by forgoing a tie,” except for his first mass in Japan. The column highlights that the *Solidarność* delegation on this trip was primarily made up of people in their twenties and thirties, and notes that “their youthfulness stood out.”⁷⁵

The “Mainichi,” like the “Yomiuri,” also focuses on Wałęsa’s humanity, and in its *Reporter’s Eye* column on May 16 appears under the title *Full of charm: Human Wałęsa*. Wałęsa is described as a man of faith, and a “cheerful, jovial, and mischievous” man, as well as an outspoken critic of Japanese labor organizations and working conditions. The reporter notes that “the greatest weapons of Mr. Wałęsa and his group are their youthful energy, frankness, and cheerful spirit.” The correspondent notes being particularly struck by Wałęsa’s repeated emphasis on his “strong belief” that “everyone has the right to live with dignity.” The article suggests that the “secret” behind Wałęsa’s appeal, not only to the Polish people but also to the Japanese public, was his deep belief in the human condition. It concludes that “We have been taught more about how human beings should be and how to live” from Wałęsa and his group.⁷⁶

5. Conclusions

The Japanese press widely covered the “success” of the 1980 strike in Gdańsk and the establishment of *Solidarność*. This was because it marked the first instance of a successful anti-establishment workers’ movement in a socialist state.

Japanese socialist political parties and trade unions also highly valued the Polish workers’ achievement. There was hope that their success would reinvigorate Japan’s own labor movement, which had been losing momentum. It was for this reason that the General Council invited Wałęsa to Japan.

Wałęsa’s presence was reported in newspapers from the middle of the strike. Unlike traditional portrayals of Polish leaders, he is described in personal terms: he was young (thirty-seven years old), a father of six, and a devout Catholic. When he arrived in Japan, his image was further shaped by descriptions of him as jovial, friendly, and at the same time, outspoken. He became Japan’s first portrayal of a Polish leader with a human face.

⁷⁵ The “Yomiuri,” E, 16.06.1981, p. 3.

⁷⁶ The “Mainichi,” M, 16.05.1981, p. 5. See: Zbiory dotyczące Japonii w Archiwum Historycznym Komisji Krajowej NSZZ „Solidarność,” 9.07.2024, <https://archiwapomorskie.pl/zarchn-szss/zbiory-dotyczace-japonii-w-archiwum-historycznym-komisji-krajowej-nszz-solidarnosc/> (access: 26.11.2025).

The “success” of Polish workers and this more personal image of Wałęsa marked a significant shift from Japan’s traditional perception of Poland as a nation defined by tragedy.

However, as history would later unfold, the imposition of martial law in December 1981 would once again reinforce the image of Poland as a country enduring hardship.

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STRESZCZENIE

„SOLIDARNOŚĆ” I LECH WAŁĘSA W GAZETACH JAPOŃSKICH Z LAT 1980–1981

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje doniesienia o wczesnej fazie ruchu solidarnościowego i jego przywódcy Lechu Wałęsie publikowane w trzech największych japońskich gazetach: „Yomiuri”, „Asahi” i „Mainichi”. Kiedy latem 1980 r. wybuchły strajki w Gdańsku, japońska prasa codziennie relacjonowała te wydarzenia w tonie przychylnym wobec strajkujących. Pozytywnie przedstawiano również samego Wałęsę i jego charakter. Kiedy Wałęsa odwiedził Japonię w 1981 r., gazety donosiły o każdym jego kroku, a jego popularność wśród Japończyków osiągnęła poziom, który można by określić mianem „gorączki”. Prasa podkreślała jego ludzkie cechy, takie jak: młodość, żarliwa wiara katolicka, rola jako ojca sześciorga dzieci, pogoda ducha i prostolinijność. Obraz ten można postrzegać jako krytykę japońskiego ruchu socjalistycznego, znajdującego się w tamtym czasie w stagnacji. Warto również zauważyć, że Wałęsa był pierwszym polskim przywódcą, u którego tak mocno uwypuklono ludzkie cechy. Można uznać, iż czynnik ten wpłynął na postrzeganie polskiego ruchu opozycyjnego przez Japończyków.