

Duranty of the *New York Times*. Most Westerners, such as socialist Beatrice Webb of Britain's *New Statesman*, were too busy looking for an earthly paradise to be troubled by nasty rumors. Conquest has chronicled the shame as well as the sorrow of this murderous harvest.

Contemporary Affairs

**LETTERS FROM PRISON
And Other Essays**
by Adam Michnik
translated by Maya Latynski
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Independent organizations are the bane of the totalitarian state—a truth that has steered historian Michnik's political career during most of his adult life in Poland. Born in 1946, he was imprisoned in 1968 for organizing student demonstrations in sympathy with Czechoslovakia's brief "Prague Spring"; later, he helped organize the Workers' Defense Committee, a sort of mutual assistance society, and served as an adviser to Solidarity, for which role he was twice imprisoned.

The seven letters written from prison bear largely on the tactics of political resistance in the specific Polish context, but their force and conviction transcend their immediate cause, as do the writings of, say, Thomas Paine or Mahatma Gandhi. Addressing his captors in one, Michnik makes a searing statement of individual defiance: "Let my little gesture of denial be a small contribution to the sense of honor and dignity in this country that is being made more miserable every day. For you, traders in other people's freedom, let it be a slap in the face." His instructions to the West are explicit: "In a way, ever since Yalta, Poland has been . . . a precise litmus test of Soviet intentions in foreign policy." On the effectiveness of linking economic ties with respect for human rights: "They constantly repeat that no American moves can have any impact. . . . They lie. Even Josef Stalin was once forced to open the gates of his camps and release Polish prisoners."

The historical essays that wrap up the volume provide background to Poland's current plight, but there is nothing musty about them. (In one detailing the turn-of-the-century debates between Polish nationalists and Polish socialists, Michnik sides, interestingly, with the latter.) Even when looking backwards, Michnik writes with the passion of an engaged political man.