

The ZSD Nysa vans, like the one pictured below, were produced in Poland from 1958 until 1994.



# Stepping Back *into Poland's* Communist Past

*The days when Soviet troops roamed freely across Poland and the communist government in Warsaw kept a firm grip on the country's political, economic and social fabric seem long gone. For many Poles, however, time has done little to erase the bitter memories of that difficult post-war period.*

Soon after Nazi troops were pushed out of Poland and eventually defeated by the Allies and the Red Army, the Soviet Union instituted an interim communist government in Warsaw. This was done under the guise of a fair, democratic, electoral process. The Soviets also annexed portions of Poland's eastern regions and established permanent military bases across the country to house Soviet troops as part of what later became the Warsaw Pact alliance. Then, with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's approval, the People's Republic of Poland was officially named in 1952.

The communist government's control remained relatively unchallenged until the late 1970s, when the country's economy started to shrink and its foreign debt became unmanageable. This resulted in general discontent in its workforce, and a series of labor unrests ensued, mainly in the port city of Gdansk. By 1980 the growing turmoil helped form the independent trade union called *Solidarność* (Solidarity), which began to challenge the government's authority.

By the middle of 1981, Solidarity's membership exceeded 9.5 million,



The Old Town (upper center of picture) is one of the few areas of Warsaw to have survived the war, but the city's communist-era reconstruction is still the dominant architecture.



representing almost a third of Poland's labor force. Furthermore, given the West's interest at the time to weaken the Polish government, the U.S. (through the CIA) began secretly supporting Solidarity with money, equipment and training.

But things took a sudden turn on December 13, 1981. That day, with the Soviet Union's tacit approval, Polish General Wojciech Jaruzelski and his Military Council of National Salvation declared martial law. The action unleashed a brutal crackdown by army, paramilitary and police forces across the country. Consequently, the government tried to dismantle Solidarity, but the opposition movement remained strong and continued to grow after martial law ended in 1983.

As the Soviet Union's control over its satellite states in Eastern Europe weakened further toward the end of the decade, Poland was finally able to hold free elections. In 1990, the co-founder and former leader of Solidarity, Lech Walesa, was elected President of Poland.

### *Warsaw's Communist Era Architecture*

Warsaw's architecture reflects the region's long history, including the changing styles, influences and also the consequences from various wars, foreign occupation, and changing borders and alliances. The city, in fact, traces its earliest inhabitants to the 6th century, and its first fortifications date back to the 9th century.

Nearly every European architecture style is represented in Warsaw, though many of these historical structures had to be rebuilt or restored following World War II. The Royal Castle and the Jesuit Church are examples of mannerist architecture that survived in the city's Old Town. The city also has several examples of baroque and rococo architecture. But to most visitors, the predominant architecture is the contemporary, socialist-influenced style that became part of just about all post-war reconstruction.

All over Warsaw you can find block-houses that are quite typical of former

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Several modern skyscrapers have been built recently in downtown Warsaw.





Warsaw's most iconic communist-era building is the Palace of Culture and Science, designed by Soviet architect Lev Rudnev built and built in 1955.





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communist countries. Generally, these buildings were built quite cost-effectively, but the emphasis on speed of construction and low-cost materials meant that the quality of the housing, especially plumbing and electrical systems, was no match to standards in the West.

Today, hundreds of these buildings in Warsaw and nearby towns are in dire need of substantial repair and renovation. Though some have been fully or partially renovated in recent years, a growing number of property developers are opting for a simpler, less expensive approach: demolition and new construction.

### *Communist Era Lifestyle and Consumer Goods*

For curious Westerners and nostalgic Poles wanting to be immersed in the look and feel of a communist-era life, an exhibit on the outskirts of Warsaw is the perfect place. There, a typical living room, kitchen, office and even a small refreshment store have been recreated using original furnishings, accessories and products that were available in the 1970s/80s. Old books, newspapers, food packaging, cameras, radios, bicycles, and other consumer goods, as well as various patriotic symbols, also help to bring visitors back in time. The walls are also adorned with all kinds of authentic memorabilia, ranging from football jerseys to police riot gear. Every detail has been carefully preserved.

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① A.C. Frieden holds a copy of *Kapitan Kloss*, a popular secret agent comic book series by Mieczysław Wiśniewski.

② A.C. Frieden handles former police equipment used during the period of martial law.

③ Popular local brands of tobacco products from the communist era.

④ An example of socialist-style housing complexes that were built throughout Warsaw starting in the 1960s.

⑤ A.C. Frieden stands next to a Scud-C transport-erector-launcher and missile formerly used by the Polish military.

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### *Vestiges of the Warsaw Pact*

Remnants of the communist era are also found in Poland's armed forces, which was an important contributor to the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. While the government has recently procured a significant amount of Western military hardware—and upgraded a portion of its domestically made equipment—some Soviet-made or designed material remains in service. The military museum in Warsaw has an extensive collection of Soviet-era aircraft and weapons systems recently retired from the Polish military. ⚡

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