

POLAND

Bronisław Kawęcki: The Polish dissident who helped preserve the memory of Europe's struggle against Communism

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Bronisław Kawęcki

Bronisław Kawęcki (pictured), a Polish anti-communist activist who devoted much of his life to preserving the memory of the workers' uprising in Radom in 1976, died on 29 August 2026, aged 72.

For many, his name was inseparable from Radom and from one of the defining chapters in Poland's long struggle against communist rule. But Kawęcki's legacy extends beyond one Polish city. His life was a reminder of the role that ordinary citizens played in the political transformation that eventually brought democracy to Poland and helped reshape Europe.

Born in Sandomierz on April 29, 1954, Kawęcki moved to Radom as a young man. He initially worked as a carer at a state children's home before joining the medical supply company Cezal. It was there that he became increasingly involved in the civic and political ferment that would define his life.

The turning point came with the events of June 1976.

Workers in Radom took to the streets following sharp government-announced increases in food prices. The demonstrations were brutally suppressed by the communist authorities. Hundreds of workers were dismissed, prosecuted or subjected to beatings by security forces. The protests in

Radom and nearby Ursus would later be recognized as an important precursor to the emergence of the Solidarity movement.

Kawęcki understood early that the struggle was not only about what had happened, but about whether Poland would remember it.

He began collecting the testimonies of workers who had been beaten, dismissed or persecuted. What started as an effort to document the events of 1976 became a mission that would occupy him for decades.

When Solidarity emerged in 1980, Kawęcki joined the movement and helped establish its organization at Cezal. He subsequently became involved in the regional leadership of Solidarity and, in 1981, was selected as a delegate representing the Radom region at the union's first national congress in Gdańsk.

He was also at the center of an effort to build a monument to the victims of the 1976 protests. A foundation stone was laid in 1981, but the monument itself was never completed.

Then came martial law.

On December 13, 1981, the communist authorities banned Solidarity and launched a nationwide crackdown on its activists. Kawęcki was arrested and interned. He was moved between detention facilities and a prison hospital before being released in July 1982. He lost his job almost immediately afterward.

Yet imprisonment and repression did not end his activism.

During the 1980s, Kawęcki participated in the distribution of underground publications, including the clandestine newspaper *Wolny Robotnik*, which he later helped edit. He remained under surveillance by the communist security services while continuing to work within the opposition movement.

The foundation stone of the unrealized Radom monument acquired a significance of its own. It became a place of remembrance, where laying flowers could itself be treated by the authorities as a political act.

For Kawęcki, memory was never simply historical.

It was political, civic and ultimately European.

When communism began to collapse in 1989, he helped establish the Citizens' Committee of the Radom region and participated in the first free electoral campaigns. But unlike many activists who subsequently moved into formal political life, Kawęcki continued to concentrate on documenting and preserving the history of those who had challenged the communist system.

He worked as a consultant and assistant director on documentaries about the 1976 protests and the life and death of Father Roman Kotlarz, whose death was widely associated with his alleged beating

by the security services. He also became one of the central figures in the documentary *Kamień* (The Stone), which explored the history of the unfinished monument and Kawęcki's own role in preserving the memory of Radom's workers.

His contribution was eventually formally recognized by the Polish state. In 2018, he received the Cross of Freedom and Solidarity for his opposition activities and contribution to Poland's independence. He was also awarded the Officer's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta.

But perhaps the most fitting description of his achievement was one that required no official decoration: he became a custodian of memory.

The importance of that role is particularly clear from a European perspective.

The democratic Europe that exists today was not created solely through treaties, institutions and political leaders. It was also built by workers, dissidents, journalists, religious figures and civil society activists who challenged authoritarian systems long before the political structures of a free Europe could take shape.

Poland's experience was central to that transformation. The protests of 1976, the emergence of Solidarity in 1980, the repression of martial law and the democratic breakthrough of 1989 formed part of the chain of events that ultimately helped bring an end to communist rule across Central and Eastern Europe.

Kawęcki was a participant in that history, but also one of its chroniclers.

He spent decades ensuring that the experiences of those who had suffered would not disappear from public memory. His work reflected a simple conviction: that political freedom has little meaning if societies forget the sacrifices through which it was achieved.

Late in his life, when asked whether the years of internment, professional reprisals and unpaid work devoted to preserving the memory of Radom's June 1976 uprising had been worth it, his answer was characteristically direct.

"Yes. It was worth it."

Bronisław Kawęcki's death marks the passing of one of the generation that experienced Poland's struggle for freedom firsthand. His legacy, however, belongs to a much larger European story.

It is the story of how democracy is defended before it becomes inevitable, and how the preservation of memory can itself become an act of resistance.

Kawęcki spent his life making sure that Poland remembered.

Europe should remember him as well.