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**The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980/81
and the End of the Cold War**

by

Vojtech Mastny

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The Polish crisis of 1980-81, precipitated by the emergence of the anti-communist "Solidarity" movement, marked the penultimate challenge to Soviet control of Eastern Europe before the communist regimes in the area and eventually the Soviet Union itself collapsed ten years later. Yet, unlike on previous such occasions—East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968—the Kremlin abstained from resorting to military force to avert the presumed threat to its vital security interests. Instead the Polish military under Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski performed this task by itself, thus preventing a radical disruption of the established East-West order in Europe.

In the longer perspective, informed by the knowledge of how the Cold War ended, the particular question of whether the imposition of martial law in Poland prevented the greater tragedy of a Soviet invasion relates to the larger question of Moscow's willingness to acquiesce in the incipient dissolution of its empire even while possessing abundant military power to prevent or at least slow down the process. So extraordinary was this behavior, belying the conventional realist wisdom about states' imperative to defend their power interests, that it cannot be properly understood without taking into account the experience that had preceded it. Newly available archival evidence and previously unheard testimonies by several of the key participants now allow the Polish crisis to be closely examined as a formative experience for the final phase of Soviet policy.¹

With the benefit of hindsight, the irresistible question is whether already in 1980-81 Moscow may have been prepared to give up its control of Poland and perhaps the rest of Eastern Europe with it, for this was the country that eight years later would give the push that brought down communist rule in the region. Or, did the temporary containment of the Polish upheaval without the use of outside force allow for the necessary gestation of the subsequent

¹Many of the new sources used in this study were made available for the conference "Poland, 1980-82: Internal Crisis, International Dimensions," organized on 8-10 November 1997, at Jachranka, near Warsaw, by the Institute for Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, the National Security Archive at the George Washington University in Washington, DC, and the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC. Sources included in the compendium, edited by Malcolm Byrne, Pawel Machcewicz and Christian F. Ostermann, are referred to as "Compendium," with the document number; statements made at the conference are cited as follows: name of the participant, Jachranka, and date. Copies of archival documents located at the National Security Archive are cited with the abbreviation NSA.

non-violent demise of the Soviet superpower? In any case, did Moscow seriously contemplate a military intervention in Poland at any time in 1980-81, and if so, why did it not take place?

Whatever the answers, they reflect not only on the utility of Soviet military power, then at the peak of its expansion, but also on the constraints on the use of military power in general for pursuing political goals in the security environment shaped by the Cold War at its terminal stage. In that unique environment, how did perceptions and misperceptions influence Soviet decisions? Were Kremlin leaders responsive to the actions or inaction of their Western adversaries? How did domestic considerations, including the integrity of their empire, influence their behavior? Did their ideological preconceptions and the quality of their leadership matter? These fundamental questions are elucidated in the documentation of the Polish drama with a startling clarity.

December 1980: Intervention Postponed

By 1980 the détente between the superpowers, shattered by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the year before, had all but ended as the rivals braced themselves for an intensified military competition. The prospect was particularly dismaying for Europeans who, having become accustomed to the division of their continent for the foreseeable future, placed their hopes in a gradual rapprochement between its two parts within what had come to be generally accepted as a desirable equilibrium between its two military blocs. Now an accelerated arms race threatened to upset the equilibrium, with unpredictable consequences.

Widely blamed for mishandling the relations with Moscow, the administration of President Jimmy Carter was ending its last year in office in disgrace, magnified by the humiliation brought about by the captivity of its diplomats in Iran. Having tried and failed to induce the Kremlin to accept deep armament cuts and treat Soviet citizens in accordance with Western human rights ideals, the outgoing administration projected an image of incompetence and naiveté. In retrospect, Carter's questioning of the utility of Soviet weaponry and the viability of Soviet domestic practices actually anticipated the doubts that would later prompt the Gorbachev leadership to initiate changes that would bring both the Cold War and the Soviet state to an end. Yet at the time, what Carter was unsuccessfully

aiming at was better management rather than abolition of the East-West rivalry—reasonable accommodation with the other superpower rather than its demise.

In contrast to the West, the Soviet Union appeared to many U.S. and Western commentators to be ascendant. It particularly impressed outsiders with the arrogance of its military might. Having achieved much vaunted strategic parity with the United States, Moscow sent troops into Afghanistan and fought a bloody war there in defiance of international public opinion. Western experts worried about what the Kremlin might do next, not knowing, as we now know, that its aging leaders themselves did not know and worried about what to do. As the West's condition was not nearly so weak as it seemed, neither was the Soviet Union's so strong.

However, in managing its respective alliance to suit its political goals, Moscow seemed to be doing indisputably better than Washington. While NATO barely withstood the double impact of détente and its collapse, the Warsaw Pact was successfully reformed to become a more effective instrument of Soviet policy. The reorganization of the alliance, initiated in 1969 to modernize and integrate the armed forces of its member states, was accomplished by their acceptance in 1980 of the subordination of their military to Soviet command in wartime.

Romania's continued insistence on the preservation of its sovereignty did not prevent the effective integration of the more important "northern tier" countries—Poland, the German Democratic Republic, and Czechoslovakia. There an officer corps unswervingly loyal to the Warsaw Pact was formed and firmly established by the 1980s. Its members were truly—as President Ronald Reagan later publicly described Jaruzelski, to the latter's intense dismay—Soviet officers in Polish, East German, and Czechoslovak uniforms; they believed their countries' future to be inextricably linked with membership in the Moscow-controlled alliance. Graduates of Soviet military schools, they were thoroughly dedicated to serving that alliance, from which they derived their considerable privileges and prestige. The Sovietization of the military was particularly striking in Poland, where during the Warsaw Pact's early years reform-minded officers had gone the farthest in advocating its reform on the NATO model, with the aim of giving the national armies greater freedom of action at Moscow's expense.²

²Cf. "Memorandum w sprawie Uk adu Warszawskiego oraz planu rozwoju Si Zbrojnych PRL"

The emergence in August 1980 of Solidarity as a mass movement striving to emasculate but not replace the communist government in Poland—a country strategically critical to the Soviet bloc—was an insidious challenge to the Kremlin's vested interests in Eastern Europe. Here was an authentic workers' rebellion trying to hold the avowedly working-class government to its promises of the socialist dream, including self-rule by the people and less work for more pay. The demands and phenomenal growth of Solidarity spelled the bankruptcy of a regime which had outrageously mismanaged the country; its leaders acknowledged as much by allowing the opposition to be registered as a legitimate political organization, thus compromising the established principle of the communist party's monopoly of power.

Moscow's initial reaction to these startling developments was predictable: calling up reservists, increasing the combat readiness of the Soviet Northern Group of Forces (promptly detected by Solidarity because of its ability to intercept secret communications), and dispatching warships for "friendly" visits to Polish ports.³ Less predictable was the establishment on August 25 of a special Kremlin commission whose composition reflected greater sensitivity to the kind of challenge Solidarity posed and its likely ramifications. Headed by senior party ideologist Mikhail A. Suslov, the commission included KGB chief Iurii V. Andropov and foreign minister Andrei A. Gromyko, besides defense minister Dmitrii F. Ustinov.⁴

As the chief guardian of doctrine, Suslov was better equipped than others to grasp the authentically proletarian origins of Solidarity and the propriety of dealing with the rebellion by political rather than by military means, lest the Soviet Union's credibility as the citadel of socialism suffer perhaps irreparable damage. He reminded his Politburo colleagues of what had happened in 1970, when Polish party secretary Władysław Gomułka, against Soviet advice, had used force to suppress striking workers, with dire consequences for himself and

[Memorandum on the Warsaw Treaty and the Plan of Development of the Armed Forces of the Polish People's Republic], and commentary by Drzewiecki, 3 November 1956, reels W-25 and W-15, microfilm (o)96/6398, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³Bogdan Borusewicz, *Jachranka*, 8 November 1997.

⁴Extract from minutes of CPSU politburo session, 25 August 1980, "Dokumenty `Komissii Suslova': Sobytiia v Pol'she v 1981 g." [Documents of the "Suslov Commission": The Events in Poland in 1981], *Novaia i Noveishaia Istoriiia*, 1994, no. 1: 84-105, at p. 84. An English translation of this document appears in the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 5 (Spring 1995), p. 116.

his party's standing.⁵ Suslov's reluctance to resort to the same course was shared by Andropov and Ustinov—the men most directly responsible for the decision to intervene in Afghanistan, whose similarly disastrous consequences had by then become sufficiently evident—as well as by Gromyko, who had harbored misgivings about the wisdom of the adventure in the first place.⁶ All the same, the commission members concurred with Gromyko's opinion that "we cannot afford to lose Poland," but remained uncertain about how the desirable outcome could be accomplished.⁷

No such doubts and inhibitions constrained the party bosses of Poland's other neighboring countries—East Germany's Erich Honecker and, less conspicuously, Czechoslovakia's Gustáv Husák. Concerned more about power than about ideology, Honecker took the lead in lambasting the Polish party for surrendering one position after another to the opposition. Insisting that political means had already failed, he clamored for the use of "administrative" ones, namely arrests, even if these were to lead to bloodshed.⁸ Husák, brought to power after the forcible Soviet suppression of the Czechoslovak reform movement in 1968, agreed with Honecker that the Polish situation was similar to that in his country before the intervention, and had to be handled accordingly.⁹

Regardless of their "capitulationism," the Polish communists had in fact begun early on to consider an "administrative" action against Solidarity in the increasingly probable event the situation would get out of hand. On August 24, even before the Suslov commission came into being, they had secretly created a party-government "steering staff" to prepare for that contingency. Yet what exactly was to be done remained unclear until October 22, when Minister of Defense Gen. Jaruzelski took the initiative in launching in deep secrecy a working group of military officers to prepare for the imposition of martial law.¹⁰

⁵Minutes of CPSU politburo session, October 29, 1980, copy, NSA.

⁶Odd Arne Westad, "The Road to Kabul: Soviet Policy on Afghanistan, 1978-1979," in *The Fall of Détente: Soviet-American Relations during the Carter Years*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1977), pp. 118-48, at pp. 132-36.

⁷Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 29 October 1980, copy, NSA.

⁸Record of Honecker-Olszowski conversation, 20 November 1980, in *"Hart und kompromißlos durchgreifen!": Die SED contra Polen 1980/81, Geheimakten der SED-Führung über die Unterdrückung der polnischen Demokratiebewegung*, ed. Michael Kubina and Manfred Wilke (Berlin: Akademie, 1994), pp. 101-14, at p. 107.

⁹Honecker to Brezhnev, 26 November 1980, *ibid.*, p. 122. For an English translation of this document see: *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 5 (Spring 1995), p. 124.

¹⁰Ryszard J. Kukliński, "Wojna z narodem widziana od rodka" [The War against the Nation As Seen from the Center], *Kultura* [Paris] 475, no. 4 (April 1987): 3-57, at pp. 17-18.

Under the supervision of Jaruzelski's closest associate, chief of staff Gen. Florian Siwicki, the working group responded to the growing pressure exerted by Warsaw Pact "friends" for decisive action. Yet even without this pressure, such an action conformed with the innermost desires of the members of the military clique around Jaruzelski, indignant at Solidarity's audacity and the looming political chaos threatening the loss of their privileges and ruin of their Soviet-made careers. Their implacable hostility toward the democratic opposition was forcefully and consistently voiced in the military press, ruling out a compromise.¹¹

The tone of Moscow's relations with the embattled Polish regime was largely set by Soviet party general secretary Leonid I. Brezhnev who, between spells of feebleness, was still capable of articulate expression and decisive action. Guided more by the vivid memory of the successful Czechoslovak intervention, for which he had been prominently responsible, than by dim forebodings of failure of the Afghanistan intervention, which other politburo members had surreptitiously foisted on him, Brezhnev agreed with Honecker and Husák that the Czechoslovak and Polish situations were similar and the use of outside force was perhaps needed. Yet he also placed exaggerated hopes in the curative effects of the considerable material assistance the Soviet Union was providing Poland to prevent its economic collapse.¹² Above all, Brezhnev took the lead in pressing his Polish counterpart, Stanisław Kania, to stand up against Solidarity.

Resisting Soviet military intervention as a prescription for disaster, Kania in October managed to persuade Brezhnev to postpone the potentially provocative annual "Soiuz" maneuvers of the Warsaw Pact forces until the following year. Moscow subsequently reversed the decision, however, and set the beginning of the exercise for December 8, anticipating its completion by December 21. At the same time, Brezhnev accepted Honecker's proposal that the party chiefs of the alliance's member states meet in Moscow on December 1, although he yielded to the Polish demand that the gathering be postponed until

¹¹Andrew A. Michta, *Red Eagle: The Army in Polish Politics, 1944-1988* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), pp. 87-91.

¹²Minutes of CPSU politburo sessions, 29 and 31 October 1980, and Brezhnev to Honecker, 4 November 1980, copies, NSA.

December 5.¹³ Meanwhile plans for an invasion of Poland by Warsaw Pact armies within this time frame were drawn up.

The Moscow summit coincided with preliminaries to the maneuvers which, at variance with the routine exercises annually conducted by the Warsaw Pact at that time of the year, entailed movements patterned after those that had preceded the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Unlike then, however, when the invaders had unsuccessfully tried to discredit the Prague government and encourage the immediate formation of a puppet substitute, the action against Poland was to take place with the knowledge and cooperation of its existing authorities. Although candidates for the role of puppet were readily available among Polish party hardliners, these did not receive the necessary encouragement from Moscow. No escalation of Soviet demands on Kania preceded the planned intervention. Rather than replacing a loyal, if weak, leadership by a more subservient, but untried one, the Kremlin sought to strengthen Kania's hand to strike against the opposition in accordance with the Soviet wishes.

The Polish authorities' cooperation with the invading troops was designed to be purely formal and as such thoroughly humiliating. The plans, revealed by Soviet chief of staff Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov to Polish deputy chief of staff Gen. Tadeusz Hupaowski and his assistant Col. Franciszek Pucha during their visit to Moscow on December 1, envisaged the entry of Soviet, East German, and Czechoslovak troops into Poland under the pretext of the "Soiuz" maneuvers, during which Polish units would do their part by not moving out of their locations. Fifteen Soviet, one East German, and two Czechoslovak divisions would then deploy in the proximity of big cities and industrial centers, thus creating an appropriately intimidating setting for the kind of "political" solution Moscow wanted.¹⁴

The news brought to Warsaw by the two officers properly created consternation among the highest Polish military, who had become accustomed to being treated by Soviet commanders as valuable subordinates rather than dispensable pawns. Jaruzelski was reportedly "in a state of shock, locked himself in his office, and was completely inaccessible

¹³Anatolii I. Gribkov and Stanislaw Kania, *Jachranka*, 9 November 1997.

¹⁴"Col. Ryszard Kukliński's Interview, Washington, 28 October 1997," paper presented at the *Jachranka* conference, pp. 3-4; Wojciech Jaruzelski, *Mein Leben für Polen: Erinnerungen* (Munich: Piper, 1993), pp. 234-35.

even for his closest entourage."¹⁵ He did attempt to negotiate, to at least persuade the Kremlin to exclude East German troops from the intervention force, but did not succeed; after all, those troops—alongside the Polish ones under the command of Siwicki—had previously participated in the invasion of Czechoslovakia as well. In the end, Moscow made the dubious concession of agreeing that two Polish divisions would cooperate by actively supporting the German and Czechoslovak units to prevent incidents of resistance or, as it was euphemistically phrased, to ensure a "collision-free regrouping" of the invading forces.¹⁶

According to Soviet estimates intercepted by U.S. intelligence, the intended size of those forces would have been insufficient if they had not received cooperation from Polish authorities or had even met with organized resistance; in the former case no less than thirty, in the latter case as many as forty-five divisions would have been needed.¹⁷ That Moscow felt comfortable enough to discount such possibilities was a devastating commentary on the quality of Poland's current communist regime; twenty five years earlier, when Gomu ka had been similarly threatened by Soviet chiefs intending to march their army on Warsaw, he had been capable of rallying the nation behind him and faced them down, forcing them to desist. In 1980, his successors did not have the same capacity to differentiate their country's interests from Soviet ones, nor could they hope to compete for the people's allegiance with the more inspiring leaders of Solidarity.

Even so, smooth progress of the intervention could not be guaranteed. The East German plans for what was camouflaged as a "common training action . . . to demonstrate readiness for the defense of socialism" included the preparation of field hospitals.¹⁸ The movement of troops, expected to extend over seven days, began shortly after the December 1 visit to Moscow by the commander of East Germany's ground forces, Gen. Horst Stechbarth. Their units were to enter Polish territory in several directions, as marked on a map preserved in the Berlin archives.¹⁹ Meanwhile the Czechoslovak army, equipped with large amounts of ammunition, fuel, and supplies, conducted reconnaissance operations on the assumption that

¹⁵Kukli ski, " Wa ka," p. 23.

¹⁶Message by Kukli ski to Washington, early December 1980, "Compendium," doc. no. 22.

¹⁷U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "CPSU Estimates on Polish Intervention Forces," 4 November 1980, "Compendium," doc. no. 17.

¹⁸Commentary by East German command on forthcoming military exercise in Poland, undated, beginning of December 1980, in Kubina and Wilke, "*Hart und kompromißlos*," pp. 136-38.

¹⁹Copy of the map presented at the Jachranka conference.

bloodshed would take place.²⁰ On December 3, the Warsaw Pact supreme commander Marshal Viktor G. Kulikov asked the despondent Jaruzelski to permit the allied forces to move into Poland at zero hour on December 8.²¹

Given the advanced state of the operation and its timetable, its subsequent halting was an extraordinary event. Claiming credit, Jaruzelski later asserted in his memoirs that he had denied the permission requested by Kulikov,²² in the absence of a more credible witness, however, the most that may be assumed is that the defense minister begged for postponement, and received no answer. In any case, the Warsaw Pact's military machine kept moving toward Poland while the alliance's top political representatives gathered for consultations in Moscow. There Kania desperately tried to see Brezhnev before the crucial meeting would start on December 5, but the Soviet leader was not available.

Instead, Kremlin functionaries handed to the Polish party chief the draft of a communiqué to be issued after the gathering, which included the pledge for Poland to "remain a socialist country." Unable to guarantee this, Kania vainly tried to substitute the phrase with a reference to the Polish party's entering "the road of socialist renewal." Late at night prior to the scheduled opening of the summit, he finally received word that Brezhnev would be able to meet him, but only after the end of its deliberations—a message that made Kania expect the worst.²³ At about the same time, a meeting of high Soviet officials preparatory to the conference ended, according to one of the participants, on a "hard line."²⁴ This could only mean that the worst was still coming.

All this time, the U.S. government had been exquisitely informed about what was in the offing, from its superb satellite surveillance, from Col. Ryszard Kukliński—a Polish officer working in the very group commissioned to prepare martial law—and from other well-placed sources. Not only were all the facts that mattered known in Washington but they were also accurately interpreted there by Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Determined to ensure that this time, unlike during the previous Hungarian and Czechoslovak crises, the United States would not send Moscow wrong signals, he did all the

²⁰Oldrich Tuma, "The Czechoslovak Communist Regime and the Polish Crisis 1980-1981," paper presented at the Jachranka conference, pp. 8-12.

²¹Jaruzelski, *Mein Leben*, p. 236.

²²Ibid.

²³Kania, Jachranka, 9 November 1997.

²⁴Witalij Swietow, "Bez względu na cenę" [Regardless of the Cost] *Gazeta Wyborcza* [Warsaw], no. 291,

right things to deter the invasion. These included public disclosure of the military build-up around Poland to deny the invaders the advantage of a surprise, and the dispatch of carefully calibrated warnings to impress upon Moscow the costs of aggression as well as the benefits of restraint.²⁵ A message to that effect, composed by Brzezinski, was sent to Brezhnev via the White House hot line on December 3, to which the president felt compelled to add the redundant expression of his "best wishes."²⁶

With or without the wishes, however, the American warnings had no noticeable effect on the Kremlin leaders, who by this time had all but written off the lame-duck Carter administration. Nor did they give any evidence of a desire to avoid burdening in advance their relations with its incoming Republican successor. If they were determined to invade they could just as well have done so before the new president was installed in office and was ready to act. In any case, it was Kania's performance at the December 5 summit, which he retrospectively characterized as "the trial of Poland," that influenced the course of development more than anything the West could do.

In his presentation at the gathering, the Polish leader drew a grim picture of his country's situation, but gave assurances that its communist party would recover and rout the opposition by political means. Honecker, as well as Husák and the Bulgarian party chief Todor Zhivkov, found this utterly unconvincing, and called all the more urgently for the use of force, now ready to be applied.²⁷ Yet the Soviet representatives were favorably impressed by Kania's exposition;²⁸ Brezhnev's concluding statement, while clamoring for decisive action, omitted any reference to armed intervention.

The Kremlin had never been enthusiastic about this option, withholding the green light to Kulikov until the last moment. As the CIA correctly put it, Moscow's "military preparations were undertaken in anticipation of a political decision which would determine whether military forces would be moved into Poland."²⁹ Brezhnev's statement showed that

11December 1992.

²⁵Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 463-69.

²⁶Carter to Brezhnev, December 3, 1980, in Zbigniew Brzezinski, "White House Diary, 1980," *Orbis*, Winter 1988: 32-48, at pp. 36-37..

²⁷Minutes of Warsaw Pact summit meeting, December 5, 1980, in Kubina and Wilke, "*Hart und kompromißlos*," pp. 140-95.

²⁸Minutes of CPSU politburo session, December 11, 1980, copy, NSA.

²⁹"Poland's Prospects over the Next Six Months," National Intelligence Estimate 12.6-81, 27 January 1981, "Compendium, no. 38, p. 13.

such a decision had not yet been made, although it had not been ruled out either. His *tête-à-tête* with Kania, which immediately followed, was wholly devoted to the Poles' likely reaction to an attack. At what may have been his finest hour, Kania did all he could to convince the Soviet chief that "if there were an intervention there would be a national uprising. Even if angels entered Poland," Kania predicted, "they would be treated as bloodthirsty vampires and the socialist ideas would be swimming in blood."³⁰ This quintessential apparatchik, who had spent much of his previous career dealing with security matters yet had not soiled his hands, may have been rapidly losing faith in his shattered party's future, but he had not forfeited his fundamental humanity and common sense.

Brezhnev memorably replied, "OK, we will not go in, although if complications occur we would. But without you we won't go in."³¹ Hence the invasion, which American officials correctly expected to start on December 8, did not take place. It was not called off but was rather conditionally postponed. The condition Brezhnev set—collaboration by the country's incumbent leadership—made the Polish situation fundamentally different from those that had previously prompted Soviet interventions elsewhere. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan had all been invaded without their governments' consent and with the intention to overthrow them. The extent of Moscow's dependence on subordinates it could not adequately control was indicative of its growing difficulty in converting military power to political advantage. The top Polish military, having begun on their own preparations forcibly to suppress the anti-communist movement, therefore became indispensable for the attainment of Soviet goals.

³⁰Kania, Jachranka, 9 November 1997; Jane Perlez, "Poland '80-'81: Players Do a Surprising Postmortem," *International Herald Tribune*, 12 November 1997.

³¹Stanisław Kania, *Zatrzymania konfrontacji* [Avert Confrontation] (Warsaw: BGW, 1991), p. 91.

April 1981: Intervention Disrupted

The Western signals that followed the halting of the intervention were not suited to discourage its resumption in another form. The December 12 statement by NATO foreign ministers, which proclaimed the desirability of avoiding both Soviet and Western interference in Polish affairs, was followed by an exceptionally clumsy commentary by the chairman of the alliance's military committee. Giving higher priority to Western than to Soviet restraint, he noted that NATO "is a defensive alliance which does not include Poland. And so it is terribly important that whatever the alliance does it does not exacerbate the situation and adversely impact on the intentions of the Soviet Union."³²

President Reagan's Secretary of State-designate, Gen. Alexander M. Haig, Jr., balanced warnings to Moscow of the damage its intervention would inflict on U.S.-Soviet relations with promises of rewards for restraint.³³ The Republican administration followed in the footsteps of its predecessor by helping to reschedule Poland's massive debt to Western creditors and otherwise proffering it economic assistance on the premise that alleviating its "desperate economic situation" would facilitate a political rather than military resolution of its crisis. Such reasoning was congenial to that of the Soviet government, which also sought to keep the Warsaw regime afloat with substantial economic aid in the hope of making it more capable of solving the crisis by itself, or at least forestall further political deterioration. Overestimating the ability and willingness of either side in the Polish confrontation to adapt its political behavior to economic imperatives, both superpowers thus proved susceptible to the Marxist fallacy about the primacy of economics over politics.

Meanwhile the Soviet military machine kept moving, but differently than before. The "Soiuz" maneuvers, conducted outside Polish territory, were about to end on 21 December 1980 when, unexpectedly, the Warsaw Pact's chief of staff, Gen. Anatolii I. Gribkov, was directed by Ustinov that they should continue.³⁴ According to Kulikov, this occurred at

³²Communiqué by the North Atlantic Council, 12 December 1980, *Texts of Final Communiqués Issued by Ministerial Sessions of the North Atlantic Council, the Defence Planning Committee, and the Nuclear Planning Group, 1975-1980* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, n. d.), pp. 153-57, at pp. 153-54; quote in Richard T. Davies, "The United States and Poland, 1980-82," *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 1982: 143-49, at p. 146.

³³Thomas H. Cynkin, *Soviet and American Signaling in the Polish Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 84.

³⁴Anatoli Gribkov, *Der Warschauer Pakt: Geschichte und Hintergründe des östlichen Militärbündnisses* (Berlin: Edition Q, 1995), p. 184.

Jaruzelski's request.³⁵ In any case, neither Jaruzelski nor Kania objected any more to letting foreign troops enter the country, as they had done so assiduously before. They must have become reassured about the purpose of the exercise which, even while involving staffs rather than battle units,³⁶ was bound to create enough threatening commotion to help intimidate Solidarity and repair the regime's position. It was, Kukli ski rightly commented, "irresponsible playing with the fire, to put it mildly."³⁷

At a closed meeting between the Warsaw Pact's supreme command and high-ranking officials of the Polish defense ministry on 13 January 1981, Kulikov described the task as an internal solution of the increasingly critical situation, and entrusted it to Jaruzelski. Although the plans for an outside military intervention had been shelved, new measures lent support to the impression that it remained possible. They included in particular the establishment of a command, control, and communications system centered at Legnica—the base the Soviet military kept in Poland since the end of World War II. The system was operated by Warsaw Pact officers kept carefully insulated from the potentially subversive influence of the surrounding Polish media.³⁸

In mid-February, Soviet reconnaissance groups began arriving in Poland to assess the situation, particularly the attitude of the rank and file of the Polish military, on whose active cooperation, unlike the previous December, the forthcoming operation hinged.³⁹ A contemporary CIA assessment got it right:

Moscow will seek to enlist the backing of the Polish leadership and to co-opt the Polish General Staff. They would probably hope that Polish security forces would take the lead in domestic repression, leaving Soviet forces to concentrate on maintaining order and crushing armed resistance. They would also try to maximize the ambiguities of their move into Poland by utilizing such pretexts as "exercises" in order to minimize the possibility of full-scale military resistance by the Poles and in an attempt to lessen the international costs. We do not believe that the Polish military would present armed opposition organized under central authority.⁴⁰

Soviet estimates of the Polish party's ability to reverse its spectacular decline varied. Back from a fact-finding mission to Warsaw, the head of the CPSU international department, Leonid M. Zamiatin, was moderately optimistic. At the end of January, he told the Moscow

³⁵Viktor G. Kulikov, Jachranka, 9 November 1997.

³⁶Gribkov, Jachranka, 9 November 1997.

³⁷Kukli ski, " Wa ka," p. 32.

³⁸"Col. Ryszard Kukli ski's Interview," pp. 5-6.

³⁹Kukli ski, " Wa ka," p. 31.

⁴⁰"Poland's Prospects over the Next Six Months," pp. 13-14.

politburo that he could at least detect "a gradual process . . . taking place during which the party organizations are increasing their activity . . . trying hard to regain the confidence of the masses."⁴¹ Certainly Kania, despite his hope to avert confrontation, was, together with Jaruzelski, now actively planning the suppression of Solidarity.

Most of the Soviet politburo members remained skeptical. Gromyko suspected that "our Polish friends, regardless of our recommendations, do not want to adopt emergency measures." And Ustinov shared with Kulikov the correct impression that "there has not yet been any real turnaround in the Polish situation." Therefore, he insisted,

we need to constantly keep pressure on the Polish leadership and constantly keep checking on them. We intend to hold maneuvers in Poland in March. It seems to me that we should somehow bolster these exercises to make it clear that we have forces ready to act.⁴²

Jaruzelski did better than Kania in convincing the Kremlin that he was not only willing but also able to impose the emergency measures it wanted while taking advantage of the looming threat of its armed intervention. He received Moscow's backing for assuming, on February 10, the premiership while retaining the title of minister of defense as well, thus taking a greater share of responsibility for the management of affairs which had gone so badly under Kania. He called for a ninety-day "truce," although he did nothing to use the opportunity for promoting an understanding with the opposition. Instead, the military press controlled by his subordinates stepped up its propaganda against Solidarity, asserting programmatically that "only Poland as a socialist state, joined in the alliance with the Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact, can remain an independent and free country, a country within secure borders."⁴³

Indeed, no sooner did Jaruzelski take charge of the government with the public display of conciliation than he secretly accelerated the plans for martial law. The plans proceeded despite estimates by those in charge of the preparations that the attempt to implement them risked provoking a national upheaval.⁴⁴ It is not known whether Jaruzelski had been encouraged by the inept commentary on the change of government in Warsaw by State Department spokesman William Dyess, who suggested that an intervention by Polish forces to "establish order" in their own country would be regarded by the United States as a

⁴¹Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 22 January 1981, copy, NSA.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Michta, *Red Eagle*, p. 101.

"Polish matter." What is certain is that Washington's subsequent "clarification" that even such an intervention would be "a matter of very great concern to us" did not discourage the martial law planners from moving ahead.⁴⁵ In a conversation in late February with Cuban leader Fidel Castro during his visit to East Berlin, Honecker unreservedly hailed Jaruzelski's new appointment as creating "the possibility to announce a state of siege at the right moment to smash the counterrevolution."⁴⁶ And true enough, hardly a week after his assuming the premiership the introduction of martial law was secretly rehearsed in a "war game," complete with a dry run of mass arrests and the internment of Solidarity activists. On February 20, the finished plans were submitted to Jaruzelski for approval, who two weeks later informed Soviet premier Nikolai Tikhonov while attending the Soviet party congress in Moscow.⁴⁷

Taking issue with Jaruzelski's reasoning that martial law should only be introduced once the alignment of forces in the country has changed in favor of the government, the Soviet leaders insisted that the measure should be timed with the progress of the Warsaw Pact maneuvers and implemented without further delay.⁴⁸ They showed no signs of concern about the possible consequences for their relations with the new U.S. administration. Regardless of Reagan's anti-communist rhetoric, they still believed he might turn out to be another Nixon, ready to do business in accordance with the principles of *Realpolitik*, rather than a crusader who takes his ideological beliefs seriously.⁴⁹ Nor was the lifting by the President of the grain embargo imposed on the Soviet Union by his predecessor suited to disabuse Moscow of that illusion, which only occurred later.

Thus the combined "Soiuz" and "Druzhba" maneuvers started on both East German and Polish territories on March 16 as scheduled. Brezhnev commented with satisfaction that the Polish government "is now headed by comrade Jaruzelski—a good and intelligent comrade who has great authority."⁵⁰ In anticipation of joint action with forces under his command, the Warsaw Pact's communications network was now extended into Poland proper. Headed by the alliance's liaison with its military, Gen. Afanasii Shcheglov, teams of

⁴⁴Kukli ski, " Wa ka," pp. 28-29.

⁴⁵Cynkin, *Soviet and American Signaling*, p. 90; *The New York Times*, 11 February 1981.

⁴⁶Record of Honecker-Castro conversation, 28 February 1981, "Compendium," doc. no. 43.

⁴⁷Kukli ski, " Wa ka," pp. 29-30.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁹Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1994), pp. 54-74.

⁵⁰Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 12 March 1981, copy, NSA.

Soviet officers crisscrossed the country to reassure themselves about the loyalty of their local counterparts.⁵¹ As a result, Kulikov was able to conclude that "the Polish Army and the security organs were prepared to fulfill any assignment given to them by the party and state leadership."⁵²

But before the assignments could be given, the "Bydgoszcz incident" disrupted the plans which had been prepared, in the marshal's words, "in close cooperation by Soviet and Polish comrades."⁵³ The March 19 incident involved the beating up of Solidarity activists by thugs most likely commissioned by party hardliners and acting under police protection—an outrage resulting in a nationwide uproar deeply embarrassing to the government. Showing Brezhnev's estimate of Jaruzelski's authority to be overstated, the general proved unable to control even the security apparatus assigned to play the key role in putting martial law into effect. The masterminds behind the provocation may have sought to prod him into acting faster than he had intended.

If this was the calculation, it initially succeeded. The "Soiuz" war game, originally scheduled to end on March 25, was extended beyond that date at Jaruzelski's and Kania's request. "They wanted to utilize the exercises to strengthen their position," Kulikov later explained in a briefing to East German generals, "to show `Solidarno` . . . that the Warsaw Pact countries are prepared to render Poland help all around."⁵⁴ Like the previous December, the U.S. government publicized reports that Soviet-led forces were about to enter Poland, and American officials anticipated their entry during the weekend of March 28-29.⁵⁵ Washington had been alerted, probably by a Polish diplomat in Germany, that Jaruzelski planned to declare a state of emergency with "very discreet . . . external support" and crush the opposition by using the Polish army and police.⁵⁶ Yet the information, though correct, was misleading.

The realignment of forces on which the regime had been counting did not occur in its favor but in favor of the other side. On March 27 Solidarity flexed its muscle by organizing a

⁵¹Kukli ski, " Wa ka," p. 31.

⁵²Report on meeting between Kulikov and East German generals on 7 April 1981, "Compendium," doc. no. 50, p. 4.

⁵³Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁵*The New York Times*, 27 March 1981; Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 230.

⁵⁶U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, "Weekend of 28-29 March Ominous for Poland," 27 March 1981,

four-hour warning strike which brought the country to a standstill, and threatened to follow four days later with a general strike of indefinite duration. Moscow responded by sending a team of KGB experts to Warsaw who, having examined the martial law plans and found them wanting, demanded the suspension of the constitution and much harsher repression, including summary trials of Solidarity activists. But the Polish Ministry of Defense, quite in contrast to its previous compliance with Soviet wishes, refused, leaving the whole project in limbo.⁵⁷

The Defense Ministry had no choice, for the party leadership had panicked and, instead of preparing to use force, began to seek compromise. The extraordinary plenum of the party central committee on March 29-30 authorized an agreement with Solidarity, which averted the general strike at the eleventh hour. "But at what price?" Brezhnev exploded at the Soviet politburo session, "The price of a subsequent surrender to the opposition."⁵⁸ Indeed, the massive display of popular support for Solidarity dashed the hopes for the assistance of Polish forces in its suppression.

The record of Kulikov's briefing to East German generals describes vividly what happened:

Up until the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee of the PZPR [Polish United Workers' Party], the work proceeded more or less normally during every meeting of Comrade Kulikov with Comrade Kania and Comrade Jaruzelski. It was frankly explained to the Polish comrades how the work should continue to proceed, to which they all agreed After the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee Comrade Kania declared surprisingly that the party is too weak to lead an offensive against "Solidarno " . . . [and] took the position that they could not rely on the army and the security organs The very next day Comrade Jaruzelski also defended this view that the army and security forces were not prepared for internal deployment Due to the view of the Polish party, state, and army leadership, the subordinate generals and admirals up to division commanders immediately joined their superiors in their estimate. Even those commanders who had previously affirmed to Marshal of the Soviet Union Kulikov that they and their troops would follow any order of the party and state leadership, now swore at once that they could not rely upon 50 to 60 per cent of their soldiers and non-commissioned officers It was also subtly brought to Comrade Marshal of the Soviet Union Kulikov's attention that it could even be possible that, in the event of an invasion by other Warsaw Pact troops, certain units might rebel.⁵⁹

"Compendium," no. 47.

⁵⁷Kukli ski, " Wa ka," pp. 33-34; "Col. Ryszard Kukli ski's Interview," p. 7.

⁵⁸Minutes of CPSU politburo session, April 2, 1981, copy, NSA.

⁵⁹Report on meeting between Kulikov and East German generals on April 7, 1981, "Compendium," doc. no. 50, pp. 4-5.

To Kulikov, all this was nonsense and flimsy excuses. He tried to impress on Kania and Jaruzelski that "they should follow the example of the capitalists in reacting to strikes."⁶⁰ But the marshal's Moscow superiors were not so sanguine.

Gromyko confided to his Politburo colleagues his doubts about whether the Polish army would in fact "fulfill its duty." Considering what had happened when "just two Solidarity people were somehow injured and at once the whole country was literally up in arms," Ustinov appreciated that "Solidarity knew how to mobilize its forces quickly."⁶¹ Exasperated though the Kremlin was with both Kania and Jaruzelski, it saw no credible substitutes for them. Having no plans for action without their cooperation, it decided to accede to their request for a meeting and send Andropov with Ustinov to hear what they would have to say.

At the secret rendezvous with the Soviet emissaries during the night of April 3-4 in a railroad car near the border town of Brest, the Polish pair looked understandably "dejected." "As far as the introduction of troops is concerned," Andropov reported after his return, "they flatly said that this was absolutely impossible, and so was the introduction of martial law."⁶² He had brought along for Jaruzelski's signature documents declaring martial law, with the date left blank, but the general dodged them. The Kremlin was left with no choice but to unhappily acquiesce in his and Kania's protestations—whatever these were worth—of their readiness to rout Solidarity without the Warsaw Pact assistance that had been planned before.

At the Politburo meeting on April 2, Brezhnev still advocated "as a back-up option the possibility of convening the seven member-states" of the alliance, presumably to authorize their joint armed intervention.⁶³ But four days later he told the Czechoslovak party congress in Prague that the way out of the Polish crisis was now in Polish hands.⁶⁴ The "Soiuz" maneuvers ended, and while menacing over-flights of Poland by Soviet aircraft flying supplies to Soviet bases on its territory continued for several more days, for all intents and purposes the military option had been abandoned.⁶⁵

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 7.

⁶¹Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 2 April 1981, copy, NSA.

⁶²Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 9 April 1981, copy, NSA.

⁶³Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 2 April 1981, copy, NSA.

⁶⁴Speech by Brezhnev, 6 [incorrectly dated 16] April 1981, "Compendium," doc. no.53.

⁶⁵Kukli ski, " Wa ka," p. 35.

On orders from Ustinov, Gribkov moved out of the Legnica headquarters of the Soviet support staff for the intervention, thus substantiating the American estimates that its threat had receded.⁶⁶ While the previously created infrastructure remained in place just in case it might be needed, the Kremlin now proceeded on the premise that "all the necessary measures must be taken to ensure that our Polish friends act on their own."⁶⁷ Kulikov's new task consisted in ruthlessly and relentlessly putting pressure on them to do as they were expected to do. But "it is very important," Brezhnev postulated, that

we keep the relations with our friends in the right mode. On the one hand, we shouldn't pester them without need, and should avoid making them so nervous that they would give up in despair. On the other hand, we should keep them constantly under pressure while patiently reminding them of their mistakes and the deficiencies of their policy, and we should offer them comradely advice about what they should do.⁶⁸

In trying to ensure the outcome it desired, the Soviet Union had to appear omnipotent while in reality its choices had become precariously limited.

December 1981: Intervention Abandoned

Once Moscow discarded the military option, the Polish leaders were given choices they had previously lacked. Even if they could not be absolutely certain whether that option had in fact been abandoned, the increased pressure they felt hardly left a doubt about how much more than before the attainment of Soviet goals depended on them. Ultimately the decision about whether force would be used to suppress Solidarity was theirs. In that regard, as Andropov noted after the Brest meeting, there were "many differences of view between Kania and Jaruzelski."⁶⁹

As the Polish confrontation mounted, the Kremlin progressively lost all confidence in Kania, and eventually Brezhnev even refused to talk to him. Although he vowed a determination to "seize the counterrevolution by its throat,"⁷⁰ he had in fact concluded that the party he headed was beyond repair and accommodation with Solidarity was the only way out. This was a common sense and far-sighted view, vindicated eight years later by the

⁶⁶Gribkov, Jachranka, 9 November 1997.

⁶⁷Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 2 April 1981, copy, NSA.

⁶⁸Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 16 April 1981, copy, NSA.

⁶⁹Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 9 April 1981, NSA.

⁷⁰Report to the Hungarian politburo on Kania-Brezhnev conversation on 21 July, dated 22 July 1981, "Compendium," doc. no. 63.

party's collapse and surrender of power to Solidarity-led opposition. Even though in 1981 Kania could not possibly anticipate this outcome, he facilitated it by giving Moscow empty promises while trying to postpone the declaration of martial law indefinitely. Such a policy, though not heroic, was sensible under the circumstances.

In contrast, Jaruzelski despised Solidarity, ruling out any compromise with it as a prescription for anarchy. He considered its leaders "social fascists," lamenting to his associates that "the smashing of three noses at Bydgoszcz has brought us to the verge of a precipice."⁷¹ Unlike Kania, he recovered enough self-confidence to proceed, as the Soviets demanded, with preparing martial law even though, by refusing ever to sign the undated documents they submitted to him, he kept its timing in his hands. Moscow still remained uneasy about whether he had enough nerve to act.

In late summer, rumors alleged a Soviet-inspired conspiracy of hardline generals about to give Jaruzelski an ultimatum to hurry up or else replace him. Yet the putative plot has never been substantiated, and he himself has plausibly denied any knowledge of it.⁷² Having been minister of defense for nearly fourteen years, he had packed the military hierarchy with followers tied to him with "broad, genuine, and strong personal loyalty."⁷³ And the Soviet leaders considered him, despite his shortcomings, as their best available choice in Poland. They respected him as someone who "had suffered from us but did not bear grudge"⁷⁴—a reference to his youthful experience in Stalin's labor camps and the extermination of his relatives as "class enemies."

In August, Brezhnev asked Honecker in despair: "Respond to me please, Erich, on a delicate question: Can Kania master the situation? Do you personally have confidence in him?"⁷⁵ Having predictably given the negative answer, the East German added advice about how to get rid of the Pole: "Convene the leaders of the fraternal parties in Moscow, invite comrade Kania, and then tell him that he had agreed to resign; then recommend comrade Olszowski to succeed him as PZPR First Secretary."⁷⁶ Yet rather than this notorious ultra

⁷¹Kukli ski, " Wa ka," pp. 36-37.

⁷²Tomasz Mianowicz, "Pucz generalów?" [A Putsch by the Generals?], *Fakty* [Warsaw], 29 October 1997.

⁷³Col. Ryszard Kukli ski's Interview," p. 2.

⁷⁴Swiet ow, " Bez wzgl du na cen ."

⁷⁵Record of Brezhnev-Honecker conversation, 3 August 1981, in Kubina and Wilke, "*Hart und kompromißlos*," pp. 331-36, at p. 335.

⁷⁶Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 17 September 1981, copy, NSA.

hardliner, Moscow preferred Jaruzelski and the more dignified way of allowing Kania to step down at a meeting of the Warsaw politburo.

In assuming the top party position on October 18 while remaining both premier and minister of defense, Jaruzelski sighed at taking upon himself "a terrible burden with utmost reluctance."⁷⁷ But while the burden was obvious, the reluctance was not. Having made a spectacular career since his days as laborer in Soviet camps, the general could now look forward to the opportunity to crown his other achievements by salvaging the Soviet-made Polish regime that had been so generous to him. In an obsequious telephone call to Brezhnev, he described himself as having accepted the additional job as a communist and a soldier;⁷⁸ what was conspicuously missing in his conduct at the time was any trace of the patriotic motivation he would so assiduously invoke in retrospect.

Jaruzelski benefited from the apocryphal story according to which he had refused to order "Polish soldiers to fire on Polish workers" during the 1971 demonstrations on the Baltic coast; the truth was that the firing soldiers had been under his command.⁷⁹ Despite his long service as the chief of the armed forces' political administration—the ideological watchdog of the military—he had acquired the reputation of a dedicated and competent professional respected by the many patriotic Poles who retained pride in their army regardless of its degradation under the communists. Admired for his intellect, Jaruzelski had so far mostly applied it to military matters; now he was venturing into politics, which required a different sort of mind. He may have been properly daunted by the task he faced, yet all the more determined to prove to himself and others that he was up to it. The projected imposition of martial law was, first and foremost, a heady challenge for an ambitious yet profoundly insecure man.

At the end of October, the Polish workers' lackadaisical response to another call from Solidarity for a warning strike seemed to signal that the long-awaited realignment of forces to the regime's advantage, on which Jaruzelski's readiness to act had hinged for so long, might finally be at hand. His decision to impose martial law followed shortly, although he gave no

⁷⁷Minutes of Polish politburo session, 18 October 1981, *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego: PZPR a "Solidarność", 1980-1981* [Secret Documents of the Politburo: The Polish Communist Party and "Solidarity," 1980-81], ed. Zbigniew Wodek (London: Aneks, 1992), p. 505.

⁷⁸Record of Brezhnev-Jaruzelski telephone conversation, 19 October 1981, "Dokumenty `Komissii Suslova'," pp. 85-86, at p. 85. An English translation appears in the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no.5 (Spring 1995), p.132.

date during his conversations with Kulikov.⁸⁰ What Jaruzelski and his associates did begin to mention, to the Kremlin's astonishment, was the desirability of backing their intended action by the promise of "military assistance from the fraternal countries."⁸¹ An internal document of the Polish Ministry of the Interior specified that "assistance by Warsaw Pact forces is not ruled out" if the proclamation of martial law were to provoke a general strike, attacks on public buildings, or severe clashes with the security forces.⁸²

The October 1981 Warsaw Pact maneuvers, conducted in Poland with its army's participation, were, unlike the preceding ones, not designed to prepare the ground for the kind of assistance the document envisaged. No outside intervention was mentioned in Marshal Ogarkov's report to the high-level meeting at the Soviet Ministry of Defense convened at the end of the month to address the Polish situation. In the discussion that followed, however, Kulikov is said to have expressed himself in favor of such a measure, whereas Gribkov reportedly opposed it, and deputy chief of staff Marshal Sergei Akhromeev voiced no opinion.⁸³ On October 29, the subject was tackled and disposed of at the CPSU politburo session, where Andopov confirmed its consensus about the necessity "to adhere firmly to our line that our troops will not be brought into Poland."⁸⁴ Afterward Ustinov notified Gribkov accordingly.

The Kremlin's decision to rule out the commitment of Soviet forces was severely tested by Jaruzelski's indecision about committing his own. Worried lest he might be losing control of the situation, Brezhnev wondered whether the general was "a brave enough man."⁸⁵ As the moment of truth approached, Jaruzelski and his entourage agonized about whether they could manage by themselves. Despite Soviet exhortations that they must, they still found reasons to include in their plans a provision for "the transportation of our own and the allied armies."⁸⁶

⁷⁹Michta, *Red Eagle*, pp. 67-71.

⁸⁰Kukli ski, " Wa ka," p. 47.

⁸¹Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 29 October 1981, copy, NSA.

⁸²"Supplement No. 2: Measures Planned by the Foreign Ministry," "Additional Documents from Polish Archives," paper presented at the conference "Poland 1980-1982: Internal Crisis, International Dimensions," Jachranka-Warsaw, 8-10 November 1997.

⁸³Gribkow, *Der Warschauer Pakt*, pp. 185-88.

⁸⁴Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 29 October 1981, copy, NSA.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Andrzej Paczkowski and Andrzej Werban, *On the Decision to Introduce Martial Law in Poland in 1981: Two Historians Report to the Commission on Constitutional Oversight of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland*, Working Paper No. 21, Cold War International History Project (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International

Suspecting that history might judge him harshly for having turned arms against his own people, Jaruzelski sought to procure for himself "some sort of an alibi."⁸⁷ At the Moscow meeting of the Warsaw Pact defense ministers on December 1-4, his confidant Siwicki made a bid for the alibi by proposing to supplement their concluding communiqué with a statement intended to justify the impending crackdown to the Polish nation and the wider world. In shifting the responsibility for the action from its local executors to the Soviet-controlled alliance, his text alluded to internal subversion that supposedly made the country's obligations toward its allies difficult to meet, thus requiring "suitable steps aimed at ensuring common security in socialist Europe."

Siwicki accompanied his proposal with the unconvincing commentary that the request was "not about any concrete military steps but about moral and political support," so that the West could not allege that such support by Poland's allies was lacking.⁸⁸ In the animated discussion that followed, proponents and opponents of the use of force clashed, while the Soviet representatives tried to mediate the acceptance of the proposal, lest its rejection make Jaruzelski stall. Yet among those present, only representatives of the regimes that had been clamoring for intervention all along—East Germany's, Czechoslovakia's, Bulgaria's—agreed. Romania's Gen. C. Olteanu dissented openly, and his Hungarian counterpart Gen. L. Czinege obliquely—by expressing a readiness to agree if everyone else did. The Hungarian officer took exception to Ogarkov reminding him of the lesson supposedly to be drawn from Hungary's own fate in 1956. Despite several attempts at a revision, the statement introduced by Siwicki eventually failed to pass because of the Romanian veto.

Now the Polish military were left truly on their own. When Kulikov arrived in the country on December 7 to supervise the martial law operation, Jaruzelski once again seemed to be losing his nerve. Soviet planning chief Nikolai Baibakov, who came to Poland at the same time to assess the extent of its economic plight, found Jaruzelski "in an extremely agitated state . . . , turned into quite an unbalanced man unsure of his abilities." Lamenting that the communist party "in essence no longer exists," the general was but a caricature of

Center for Scholars, 1998), p. 20.

⁸⁷Kukliński, "Wakacje," p. 47.

⁸⁸Report on meeting of Warsaw Pact defense ministers on 1-4 December 1981, Paczkowski and Werban, "On the Decision," pp. 33-39.

Marshal Józef Piłsudski, the strongman whose example of imposing authoritarian rule on a largely supportive Polish populace in 1926 he anxiously hoped to imitate.⁸⁹

Unlike previously, this time the U.S. government misjudged entirely what was happening. Mesmerized by the vision of Soviet troops marching into Poland, it had become blinded to the more probable alternative of martial law implemented locally. At the beginning of October, the main source of information about its preparation—Kukliński—had had to be spirited out of the country to avoid detection. But even earlier, the CIA had held the information he provided so tightly that it became all but useless to policymakers. Once the spy reached Washington, even the President was prevented by his solicitous aides from meeting him reportedly in order to prevent a leak.⁹⁰ Since, moreover, National Security Adviser Richard Allen was distracted by trivial accusations of graft and no one of Brzezinski's stature provided the necessary expertise on Poland, it is hardly surprising that Washington was ignorant about the events unfolding in Warsaw.

What is more surprising is that Moscow was quite ignorant as well. So much had its grip on Eastern Europe loosened since Stalin's and Khrushchev's times that their successors could not reliably estimate the true intentions of the man in whom they entrusted their interests in their empire's key country. "No one knows what will really happen in the next few days," Soviet ambassador to Warsaw Boris I. Aristov was quoted as having reported at the 10 December 1981 CPSU Politburo meeting. "There was a conversation about 'Operation X.' First there was talk that it would happen the night of the 11th to 12th, then the night of the 12th to 13th. And now they are already saying that it will only be about the 20th." "It would seem," Andropov commented, "that either Jaruzelski is hiding from his comrades the concrete plan of action, or he is simply giving up the intention to carry out the measure."⁹¹

The Kremlin chiefs were particularly incensed to learn that Jaruzelski, far from being dissuaded from seeking their military guarantee, appeared to be making his action conditional on its promise. He cited Kulikov's alleged assurance that "if the Polish forces do not manage to break the resistance by Solidarity" they could "expect assistance from other

⁸⁹Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 10 December 1981, "Dokumenty `Komissii Suslova'," pp. 97-103, at p. 99.

⁹⁰Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, *Jachranka*, 9 November 1981.

⁹¹Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 10 December 1981, "Dokumenty `Komissii Suslova'," pp. 97-103, at pp. 99-100.

countries, up to the introduction of armed forces into the territory of Poland."⁹² On December 10, at 4:35 p.m., Gribkov recalls Jaruzelski having given Moscow four conditions for a successful fulfillment of his mission: the dispatch of a Soviet Politburo member to Poland to supervise the operation, a public statement justifying it as being in the interest of the Soviet Union (as Siwicki had vainly tried to elicit in Moscow the week before), outside military support should the situation become critical, and the promise of more economic assistance.⁹³

The CPSU Politburo rejected the request for military backing out of hand. While there was no disagreement among its members about this, Andropov—the one with a lion's share in the decision to move into Afghanistan—was the most adamant. "We cannot risk it," he explained. In the most explicit expression of Soviet willingness to acquiesce in the possible loss of control over Poland, Andropov stated that "even if Poland were to be ruled by Solidarity, so be it."⁹⁴ Incredible as it sounded in 1981, his position retrospectively received support from none other than Kulikov, who in 1997 stated that even the country's defection from the Warsaw Pact would not have been a catastrophe but merely an inconvenience to Moscow. In his opinion, if a war with NATO came, Soviet forces would have always had enough warning time to force their way through Poland without difficulty.⁹⁵

At the December 10 politburo meeting, Andropov hinted at the reasons why the Kremlin's priorities had changed since the time in 1956 when he as Soviet ambassador to Hungary had been instrumental in forcibly preventing its defection from communism and the Warsaw Pact. Citing "a variety of economic and political sanctions" already prepared by the West that would "make things very difficult for us," he reminded his colleagues that, after all, "we have to take care of our own country." Suslov supported him by adding that the Soviet Union's investment in détente made it "impossible for us to change our position. World public opinion will not allow us to do so."⁹⁶ Thus the tired leaders of the declining superpower proved to have greater sensitivity to long-term Western pressure and the subtle power of ideas than most of their contemporaries, misled by the formidable appearance of Soviet military machine, were prepared to believe.

⁹²Ibid., p. 99.

⁹³Gribkov, *Der Warschauer Pakt*, pp. 177-78.

⁹⁴Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 10 December 1981, "Dokumenty `Komissii Suslova'," pp. 97-103, at p. 100.

⁹⁵Piotr Jendroszczyk, "Uk ad" [The Pakt], *Rzeczpospolita* [Warsaw], 7 November 1997.

⁹⁶Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 10 December 1981, "Dokumenty `Komissii Suslova'," pp. 97-103, at pp.

Moscow's replies to Jaruzelski's desiderata, transmitted to him through ambassador Aristov, were crushing. No Politburo member was coming; no troops would be sent; a statement of support would be prepared some time but without any indication when; and economic help would only be considered later.⁹⁷ "You are distancing yourselves from us," the general complained to Kulikov on December 11, according to the startling entry in the service diary of the marshal's adjutant. Jaruzelski tried to convince Aristov that "we cannot start such a risky adventure if the Soviet comrades don't support us." He even added the implicit threat that "we have been seriously evaluating the situation, and if there is not going to be political, economic, and military support by the USSR, then our country might be lost" to the Warsaw Pact.⁹⁸

On the same day, at 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning, Kulikov remembers having learned for the first time that martial law would be proclaimed on December 13; according to Siwicki, however, he only received this crucial piece of information from the Poles on the following day, the 12th.⁹⁹ On that day the Soviets seemingly relented on at least one of Jaruzelski's demands: Ustinov sent word that Suslov and several other high officials would come to Poland, although in the end none did.¹⁰⁰ And while the Soviet Politburo maintained its "unanimous opinion that any introduction of troops is out of the question . . . for their entry would be a catastrophe,"¹⁰¹ some troops were actually moving.

During the night preceding the proclamation of martial law, East German army and border troops were put on alert and their December 1980 marching plans were updated.¹⁰² The commander of a Soviet tank division in Belorussia, Gen. Viktor Dubynin, later recalled having received orders to be ready to move into Poland on December 14 and take positions south of Warsaw;¹⁰³ that, too, looked like brushing up the plans from the year before.

100 and 102.

⁹⁷Gribkow, *Der Warschauer Pakt*, p. 178.

⁹⁸Entries for 11 December 1981, "Workbook" by Kulikov's aide Viktor I. Anoshkin presented at the Jachranka conference, to be published in the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* No. 11 (forthcoming), annotated and introduced by Mark Kramer.

⁹⁹Kulikov and Siwicki, Jachranka, 9 November 1997.

¹⁰⁰Gribkow, *Der Warschauer Pakt*, p. 179.

¹⁰¹Minutes of CPSU politburo meeting, 10 December 1981, "Dokumenty `Komissii Suslova'," pp. 97-103, at p. 102.

¹⁰²Manfred Wilke, Reinhardt Gutsche, and Michael Kubina, "Die SED-Führung und die Unterdrückung der polnischen Oppositionsbewegung 1980/81." *Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien* 1994, No. 36, p. 26.

¹⁰³Viktor P. Dubynin, "Spasibo poliakam za to, chto terpeli nas 47 let" [Thanks to the Poles for Having Suffered

Whatever the commotion, however, the political will to implement them was no longer present. Ridiculing Dubynin as supposedly mistaking supplies stockpiled for a war with NATO for preparations of an invasion of Poland, Kulikov has denied Soviet troops went on alert. Nor did Western intelligence detect any signs of it.

In trying to justify the need for emergency measures, Jaruzelski's propagandists played on people's fear that Soviet tanks were coming.¹⁰⁴ Yet the fear that gripped the Polish leader as the zero hour approached was not that of Moscow's intervention but of its non-intervention. In the end, all his fears proved unnecessary. Meticulously prepared, the crackdown on December 13 caught both Solidarity and its Western supporters by surprise. The lack of any significant resistance made the question of Soviet military backing moot.

Under these circumstances, Jaruzelski's donning the mantle of the nation's savior was a travesty. His inaugurating military rule by quoting from the national anthem that "Poland has not yet perished so long as we are alive" added insult to the injury. Yet he impressed enough people who had mistakenly regarded the threat of a Soviet invasion as real rather than pretended, thus giving rise to the myth that not only Poland but also the European order had been saved from a dangerous threat to its stability. West Germany's chancellor Helmut Schmidt delighted Honecker during their meeting, which happened to coincide with the Jaruzelski's action, by expressing his satisfaction at this turn of events.¹⁰⁵ Much though Schmidt, a social democratic politician, later tried to dispel the bad taste of his remark by protesting his sympathy for Polish workers, he remained genuinely convinced that any attempt to disrupt the established balance in Europe could mean war.¹⁰⁶

While the Reagan administration did not subscribe to this fallacy, its estimates of the situation suffered from other flaws. Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence S. Eagleburger believed the danger of a Soviet intervention to be "probably as real under martial law as it was before," making its deterrence a foremost U.S. priority.¹⁰⁷ He considered Jaruzelski "a brilliant, intellectually independent officer, who has a decided preference for action . . . [and]

Us for 47 Years], *Novoe Vremia* [Moscow], 1992, no. 26: 28-29.

¹⁰⁴Paczkowski and Werb an, "On the Decision," pp. 21-22.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted by Honecker in minutes of Honecker-Jaruzelski meeting, 29 March 1982, J IV/2/201/1422 Bd 20, Zentralarchiv der SED, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, Berlin.

¹⁰⁶*The New York Times*, 3 January 1982.

¹⁰⁷Memorandum by Eagleburger, 18 December 1981, "Compendium," doc. no. 96.

is a problem solver"¹⁰⁸—this about a man pathetically incapable of addressing, much less resolving, any of the major problems he cited to justify his military rule in the first place!

Whereas Secretary of State Haig initially advised caution pending further developments, Reagan, infuriated by martial law's unexpected success, pushed through American sanctions, albeit mild ones, against both Poland and the Soviet Union. He wanted to punish not only Jaruzelski but, on the mistaken assumption he acted as Moscow's puppet, his presumed Kremlin wire-pullers as well. The President's letter protesting to Brezhnev against alleged Soviet intervention could then be self-righteously answered by its recipient with an indignation that was not entirely feigned. When "you speak about military exercises near Poland," Brezhnev wrote, "you apparently want to read what you want out of these exercises, linking them to the situation in Poland. But this is a contrived proposition without any foundation."¹⁰⁹ More precisely, it was without a foundation at the time of the writing—after the Polish crisis had taught the Soviet leaders lessons about the limits of their military might.

* * *

If the Polish military had not acted as they did, the remnants of the country's communist regime would have almost certainly been soon swept away and a Solidarity-led government installed in its place. Arguably, the nature of the Soviet system might then have allowed its managers to change their minds and send in troops after all—as had happened in the case of Afghanistan before.¹¹⁰ Yet precisely this discouraging precedent would have made it much more likely for the Politburo to adhere to its line and accommodate itself—as Andropov said it would—to the unpleasant reality of a Poland not governed by communists. This would have been all the more feasible since Solidarity was sensitive to the need to reassure Moscow about the safety of its vital lines of communication through the country. And Kulikov has testified that even its secession from the Warsaw Pact would have been a tolerable nuisance.

Poland was thus on its way to becoming for the Soviet Union something of another Finland when Jaruzelski cut the process short. Whatever the happy consequences of a

¹⁰⁸Memorandum by Eagleburger, 16 December 1981, "Compendium," doc. no. 94.

¹⁰⁹Brezhnev to Reagan, 25 December 1981, "Compendium," doc. no. 99.

¹¹⁰Stanisław Ciosek, Jachranka, 9 November 1997.

"Finlandization" would have been for the Poles, however, its wider repercussions would have been different. In the early nineteen-eighties, Moscow was in a strong position to contain Polish defection, preventing any "domino effect" in the rest of its empire. A product of very specific local conditions, Solidarity made little impact there. Its "Appeal to the Peoples of Eastern Europe" may have thrown Brezhnev into a hot rage,¹¹¹ but it left its intended recipients cool. This was especially true about neighboring East Germany and Czechoslovakia, whose conservative regimes were safely entrenched and whose relatively affluent populations viewed the unruly Poles with indifference if not hostility because of the economic chaos they engendered.¹¹²

A "Finlandized" Poland would have been an unlikely catalyst for the end of the Cold War. The prohibitive cost of the bloated Soviet military establishment and the futility of the arms race had not yet been sufficiently impressed on the Kremlin leaders to make them radically change their notions about security—the necessary prerequisite of their quest for accommodation with their Western adversaries. No such bold step could be expected from the moribund Brezhnev, although it would have been conceivable from his perceptive, if also terminally ill, successor Andropov, alerted by his adviser Viacheslav Dashichev to the security dilemma the Soviet Union faced as a result of its having provoked the West's military buildup.¹¹³ But then, even if Moscow had been ready to terminate the confrontation, Washington was not.

The Reagan administration's behavior during the Polish crisis demonstrated its still uncertain grip on foreign policy. Rightly convinced that the Soviet system was bound to collapse but not expecting this to happen soon, the President was only beginning to implement the massive armament program designed to bring the rulers of the "evil empire" to their knees. Meanwhile he was far from ready to give their sincerity the minimum benefit of the doubt indispensable to help them abandon their positions. He would hardly have considered giving such a benefit to the former KGB chief Andropov as willingly as he later did to the more attractive Gorbachev.

¹¹¹Minutes of CPSU politburo session, 10 September 1981, copy, NSA.

¹¹²Record of Brezhnev-Honecker-Husák conversations, 16 May 1981, in Wilke and Kubina, *"Hart und kompromißlos,"* pp. 270-85.

¹¹³Memorandum of 3 January 1983, quoted in Wjatscheslaw Daschitschew, "Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik Rußlands gegenüber Europa," *Berliner Europa-Forum* 6 (1997), no. 6: 15-23, at pp. 19-20.

The systemic deficiencies that would eventually bring the Soviet empire and the Cold War to an end were already well advanced when the Polish crisis brought them to the fore. But it is all but inconceivable that those two unexpected developments could have occurred at that time in any way comparable to the way in which they did occur later on. Rather, by prompting Moscow to consolidate the rest of its empire, Poland's escape from Moscow's fold would have made its final break-up more difficult. Having imposed his inept rule on his compatriots for another eight years, Jaruzelski certainly did a disservice to them. Otherwise, however, he unwittingly provided the Soviet Union with the time it needed to decay sufficiently from within, thus making its later leaders more amenable to a peaceful East-West settlement. He could claim no credit for his ineptitude, but for his unintended contribution to the Cold War's happy ending, this unhappy and tortured man at least earned the right to be left at peace.

More importantly, the evidence of Soviet reluctance to unilaterally apply force in Poland shows that the danger of a large-scale military confrontation arising from local causes had substantially diminished by the early nineteen-eighties. Despite heightened fears that such a catastrophe could result from carelessness or miscalculation, the Kremlin leaders became more rather than less conscious of their constraints, thus making the likelihood of a crisis getting out of hand smaller than it had been during the previous period of *détente*. Gone was Brezhnev's superficial belief in the Soviet Union's irresistible global ascendancy; his more somber colleagues and successors knew better, and acted accordingly.

Moscow's conduct in the Polish crisis was not significantly influenced by any specific Western policies. The Soviet leaders, anxious lest their vulnerabilities be exposed, proved largely impervious to both pressures and inducements by the West in the short run. Viewing the world through their Marxist glasses, however, they could not be indifferent to the "correlation of forces" tilting to their disadvantage in the long run. Even if they were determined to ride out particular U.S. sanctions, they were still concerned about Washington's overall policy of sanctions as an indication of worse things yet to come, and tried to preventively mitigate their impact by greater restraint. Under these circumstances, Reagan was right that adding military pressure on the Russians would do no harm. But so, too, were his critics in insisting that it was the West's vitality, in other attributes of power than the military, that impressed the embattled communist chiefs more.

In the final analysis, the Soviet assessment of correlation of forces hinged on internal considerations. The Polish crisis revealed how Moscow's capacity to hold its empire together by the old crude methods progressively corroded. Jaruzelski's action created the impression that an acceptable remedy was found. But the substitution of party rule by military rule never made the Kremlin leaders comfortable. Made aware of the limitations of the military power they had so prodigiously accumulated, the Soviet leaders were losing confidence in it. This was dispiriting for them, but was otherwise a heartening indication of how much the Cold War had changed the world for the better by making old-style power politics so much less effective than before.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vojtech Mastny, a senior research scholar of the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, is member of the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities in Essen, Germany. His most recent publications include The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).