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Iron Curtain Chills

A Cold War Spy Doesn't Dare Go Home

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WARSAW

COL. RYSZARD KUKLINSKI may go down in cold war history as one of the United States' most valuable spies. For nine years he gave the Central Intelligence Agency top-secret documents that detailed the inner workings of the Polish army and the Warsaw Pact, until on a cold November night in 1981 he left his post on the Polish General Staff and was bundled onto a plane to America. The Polish authorities were on his tail, and Poland's Communist Government was about to crush the Solidarity movement with martial law.

But even though the Warsaw Pact is no more, the Communists are out of power and Poland is seeking admission to its former adversary, NATO, Mr. Kuklinski may be a cold war hero without honor, a spy first and last. At a secluded conclave here last week where embittered Soviet Generals, triumphant American policymakers and Polish resisters faced each other for the first time since they tried to outfox each in the early 80's, his was the key missing voice, and he might well have been upset at what was said about him.

By those he served, his intelligence had been ignored at a key moment; to those he aided in Poland, his treason therefore still seemed futile; to those he betrayed, he remained an enemy.

'This So-Called Patriot'

Mr. Kuklinski, who lives in the United States under an assumed name, was invited to the conference by its organizers, the Cold War International History Project and the National Security Archive, both of Washington. He declined, saying he was nervous about how he would be received, and indeed, Marshal Viktor Kulikov, the former Warsaw Pact head who at age 75 wore his military uniform with Communist-era decorations, bellowed the Soviet judgment: "This so-called patriot, who I call a treacherous spy, who gave all our military plans to the enemy."

The Polish resisters, many now among Poland's mainstream politicians, wanted to know why the United States hadn't used Mr. Kuklinski's information in 1981 to warn them of impending martial law. Many resistance leaders were interned unnecessarily, they said.

But Mr. Kuklinski's secrets were so closely held in 1981, Professor Richard Pipes told the conference, that only a handful of people in the Reagan Administration knew about them. Even as the National Security Council's expert on Russian and Eastern European affairs at the time, he said, he was shown only one Kuklinski cable in September 1981. And from then until the imposition of martial law in December, there was a leadership vacuum in the National Security Council.

Further, said Thomas Blanton, executive director of the National Security Archive, the C.I.A. officials who, thanks to Mr. Kuklinski, knew about the approaching martial law, deliberately withheld the information from the Polish opposition. The last thing the C.I.A. wanted, he said, was an uprising that might invite Soviet tanks into Poland, as in Hungary in 1956.

In place of Mr. Kuklinski, the Cold War Project presented the conference three of the spy's cables, the only ones among thousands that the C.I.A. has allowed to be declassified. Perhaps tellingly, they show Mr. Kuklinski in a favorable light, as a concerned Polish patriot.

PAP/CAF Archive

Poland tried and convicted Col. Ryszard Kuklinski in absentia for spying for the United States.

A Warning for the Kremlin

The most revealing was from December 1980, when unlike a year later, the information was acted upon. The cable listed the number of Soviet, Czech and East German divisions poised to enter Poland. "Depending on how things develop, all major Polish cities, especially industrial cities, are to be sealed off," the cable said. That information, combined with satellite imagery, prompted the Carter White House to warn the Kremlin to step back.

The cable, signed Jack Strong, barely made it. Mr. Kuklinski, a military planner who describes himself as technologically inept, has told Mr. Blanton he pushed the wrong button on his C.I.A.-provided encryption machine and shorted it, forcing him to find another way to get the message out. He chose a dead drop in Warsaw, but when an American diplomat arrived to pick it up, snow trucks had heaped mounds of snow over the dispatch. The diplomat had to dig it out with a windshield wiper.

Even after Communism collapsed in 1989, Mr. Kuklinski was considered a traitor by many Poland. Astounded by the loss of such valuable information to the enemy, the Polish Communists tried him in absentia in 1984. He was found guilty of treason and sentenced to death.

> Even when nations change sides, spies are remembered for their betrayal.

When the Communists were swept out, the new Solidarity Government reduced the sentence to 25 years but declined to forgive him. And for many Poles, even those stridently anti-Communist, he remains an equivocal figure. After all, they argue, even if he was trying to prevent a Soviet invasion, he gave secrets to an enemy. As recently as two years ago, surveys showed that only 16 percent of Poles favored a full pardon.

For his part, Mr. Kuklinski has emphasized how he "gave" secrets. He was not actively recruited and was never paid by the United States, he says. Indeed, when he volunteered to tell the Americans what he knew in the early 70's, he was twice turned down, according to a senior American official who knows him.

The spy's salvation has been Poland's hunger for membership in NATO. It made little sense, from Washington's point of view, to have a Polish military officer who had incalculably helped the United States remain a traitor in Poland. In September, after intense diplomatic maneuvering, a Polish Government composed of former Communists finally pardoned Mr. Kuklinski.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Adviser in the Carter White House and one of the cold war victors here last week, considers Mr. Kuklinski an authentic hero. He is trying to persuade him, he said, to return to Poland next month, to accept an honor being offered by the fathers of the southern city of Cracow.