The Polish Crisis and the Soviets, 1980-1981

Kamila Kamińska

The Institute of Journalism
University of Warsaw

“Verily, Poland may become a stone of offence and the bedrock of depravity for all post-war socialism.”


Martial law, which was imposed on the night of December 12 to 13, 1981, resulted from events that took place on the Polish political scene in 1980-1981. The formation of a political opposition which questioned the managerial role of the Polish United Workers Party or PZPR in the state and which demanded democratization of the Soviet-designed system, undoubtedly resulted in a harsh reaction from the authorities.

On July 1, 1980, a crisis began when the authorities of the People’s Republic of Poland raised the prices of certain kinds of meat. They were available in company canteens at commercial prices. The workers' reaction came quickly thereafter. “Work stoppages” were held on the same day. A wave of strikes moved throughout Poland.¹

The government of the time was undecided. Edward Gierek mentioned his Interrupted Decade (Przerwana dekada) that the management attempted to satisfy all demands for pay

increases. The government acted according to the rule: “we will manage somehow.” Many members of the government were on vacation; out of 19 members of the Politburo and the Secretariat of the Central Committee only seven stayed in Poland. In the middle of August 1980, Mieczysław Rakowski wrote: " Strikes have lasted for 40 days without interruption. The party and the state management are silent. Edward Gierek stays in the Crimea where he is sunbathing. It is almost unbelievable. The political crisis gets deeper and deeper here and he is basking in the Southern sun."  

Work to implement martial law was introduced before the strikes ended. Existing legal documents "concerning protection of state safety and public order during the ‘state of war’" were sent from the Ministry of Interior to the Polish National Defense Committee (PNDC) on July 17. The latter had been formed by a resolution of the Council of Ministers on February 18, 1959. The committee was responsible to the Central Committee’s Political Bureau, some of whose members also sat on the committee.  

The PNDC was authorized to comment on priority issues concerning state security and defense from the beginning of its existence. Its deputy secretary returned the same legal acts with amendments and notices to the Ministry of Interior at the end of July. On October 22, the PNDC ordered Chief of Staff of the Polish Armed Forces General Florian Siwicki to start work on a conceptual design for imposing a state of war stemming from “an outside threat." However, the party management soon encountered a problem: the lack of legal regulation. The constitution did not provide for a state of emergency, which meant preparing new, suitable rules, legislation,

---

and reasons explaining the need for its introduction. They set about preparing full documentation for the introduction of martial law. Preparations to impose martial law took place in the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of National Defense at the same time.

The Kremlin observed the situation in Poland with growing anxiety. On August 25, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s Political Bureau appointed a Committee for Polish Matters, which became known as the Suslov Committee and was responsible for careful observation of the situation in Poland. The committee comprised Mikhail Suslov (the head), Andrei Gromyko - Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Dmitriy Ustinov - Secretary of Defense, Yuri Andropov - the head of the KGB, and five other members of the Politburo. The first decision of the committee was to issue a one-page memorandum suggesting that one hundred thousand reservists and fifteen thousand vehicles should be put on a state of alert; in the event of an escalation in protests in Poland, they could be used to intervene militarily. The plan also took into account the possibility of the Polish Army joining the counterrevolution.

The formation of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity, the July and August strikes in 1980, as well as the signing of social agreements gave rise to changes in government policy towards the opposition. Rakowski recollects signing the August agreements as follows:

Strange things started to happen. Tonight a TV station transmitted news coverage of the signing of the agreements in Szczecin and Gdańsk. Not so long ago, Lech Wałęsa, who was persecuted by the SB, holding a portrait of the Pope and wearing a pin with the image of the Mother of God on his jacket lapel, signed the

---

6 M. Rakowski, op. cit., p. 86.
7 Ibid., p. 52.
agreement with a huge pen. It was signed in a venue that has a bust of Lenin on one side and the cross on the other. Wałęsa is a deeply devout person; undoubtedly, he is strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. Nota bene, during the strike in the [Gdansk] shipyard, two holy masses were held and the portrait of John Paul II was placed on a fence. Priests heard confessions in the shipyard during the mass. These are the crops of the ideological work that the PZPR has been cultivating for 35 years!  

The organization with which the party had to deal, consisted no longer of several thousand people, but of ten million.

The intelligence agencies of the United States discovered army movements in the western military districts of the Soviet Union during the first half of September 1980. However, the scale of these reallocations was unknown. Most likely, four divisions were put on alert by the Suslov Committee. The director of the CIA sent a memorandum to the US president, in which he warned of the Soviet army units’ increased activity. Four days later, during a meeting in which the head of the CIA, the National Security Advisor, and the Secretary of Defense took part, it was concluded that the USSR might undertake military intervention in Poland. However, the scale and form of the opposition were hard to predict. It was though that thirty divisions would intervene. The mobilization of such forces would give the US two or three weeks’ time to decide on a political response to a possible Soviet invasion.  

The purpose for the army maneuvers in the western part of the USSR, the call-up of reservists, and the moving of additional forces under the pretense of military training, was to exert pressure on Polish policymakers. CIA analysts emphasized that these activities were similar to those which took place before the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.  

---

12 Ibid.
The possibility of Soviet intervention occurred for the first time at the beginning of December 1980. It was then that the "Soyuz 80" maneuvers for the Soviet, East German, Czechoslovak, and Polish armies were supposed to begin in Poland and elsewhere. General Tadeusz Hupałowski, who was second in command of the General Staff and who had returned that same day from Moscow where Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov had urgently summoned him, informed General Wojciech Jaruzelski of the details. This surprised General Jaruzelski, who upon receiving the information, hid in his office and was unavailable to his co-workers.\(^\text{13}\)

Maneuvers were supposed to take place in two stages. The first consisted of training on the territory of the participating states, including Poland. The second stage consisted of military and command training that would bring foreign troops onto Polish territory. Five to six Soviet divisions, four Polish divisions, two Czechoslovak divisions, and one German division were to take part in the maneuvers. The training was supposed to take place in the largest cities and were to start on December 8, but no final date was given.\(^\text{14}\)

A week before, US President Jimmy Carter, who had been informed by Colonel Ryszard Kukliński and the CIA about the army movements, warned Leonid Brezhnev by "hot line" about the negative effects of an intervention on Soviet-American relations.\(^\text{15}\) Letters to the leaders of the most important countries were also sent and the press was notified about the situation in Poland. United States National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzeziński also phoned Pope John

---

\(^{13}\) M. Rakowski, *op. cit.*, p.109.


Paul II and reported to him on the Soviet plans. Colonel Kukliński suggested in the information that he relayed to the CIA that the maneuvers of the Soviet, East German, Czechoslovak, and Polish armies were a cover for intervention. However, he provided the wrong number for the Soviet divisions that were to take part in the training. The mistake became known in mid-December, when atmospheric conditions improved and intelligence satellites could be used. It turned out that only three mobilized units were stationed on the eastern border of Poland instead of the fifteen Soviet divisions Kukliński had reported.\footnote{Ł. Kamiński, \textit{op. cit.}, p. XXVI.}

Seven members of the Polish Political Bureau came to Moscow on the evening of December 4, 1980. A meeting was held the next day, and after that, a meeting between First Secretary of the Polish United Workers Party Stanisław Kania and Leonid Brezhnev took place. Finally, Brezhnev said to Kania: “Then we won't enter. However, if it gets complicated - we will enter. But without you - we won't.”\footnote{S. Kania, \textit{Zatrzymać konfrontację}, Warszawa 1991, p. 91.} Kania mentioned as well, that the First Secretary had given him a sharp reprimand and that his answer was that if a Soviet intervention had taken place at that time, the reaction of Polish society would have been one of national uprising. Even if “angels” had entered, they would have been called “bloody occupiers.” The Americans would start organizing the world according to their way and “socialism would be immersed in blood.” Kania had to convince Brezhnev that it was not only in the Polish interest to abandon the plan of intervention but also in the Soviet interest.\footnote{Ibid., p.165.}

The purpose of the meeting of the heads of the Warsaw Pact countries was to exert pressure on Polish policymakers to solve the crisis by force. Soviet leaders neither considered
sending their own nor any of Poland's neighbors troops onto their ally’s territory.\(^{19}\) The aim of the Warsaw Pact’s maneuvers was to "(...) test the reaction of world opinion and the [reaction of] Poles; first of all, to scare both Solidarity and the management of the PZPR, to incite the first to peace and the other to act (...) Certainly, they did not mean an intervention of "<<bez tibia>> type."\(^{20}\) The maneuvers were supposed to act as a threat to Solidarity and the Polish leadership.

Ronald Reagan was sworn in as president of the United States in January 1981. That same month, a delegation of the CPSU with Leonid Zamiatin, a member of the Commission for Polish Matters, came to Poland. Zamiatin recounted his discussions in Poland on January 22 after he returned to Moscow at a meeting of the CPSU Political Bureau. He emphasized that there was no serious turning point in Poland and that continuous pressure should be exerted on the Polish leadership, because the allies "(...) don't want to undertake any extraordinary measures," what is more "(...) they don't even think of" solving the crisis using methods which Moscow would consider to be the most appropriate.\(^{21}\) During the same meeting, Marshal Dmitriy Ustinov reminded the others about the large maneuvers of Warsaw Pact troops code-named "Soyuz 80" which were planned to take place in March on Polish territory. The maneuvers were supposed "(...) to make others understand that (...) [Soviet] forces are ready"\(^{22}\) and to exert pressure again on the leadership of the PZPR so that they deal with Solidarity by their own means.\(^{23}\)

Eighteen Soviet generals came to Poland to check the state of readiness for the maneuvers, and thirty-two MI-6 combat helicopters from Czechoslovakia flew at low levels over the country without permission. In the case of both trainings, code-named "Soyuz 80" and

\(^{19}\) M. Rakowski, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{21}\) W. Pawłow, *op. cit.*, p. 290.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
"Soyuz 81," the purpose was to frighten the Polish leadership and Solidarity. However, no intervention followed.²⁴

However, tension between the authorities and Solidarity increased. In March, the so-called Bydgoszcz crisis took place, which was related to the registration of Rural Solidarity. Shortly after, on March 27, Stanisław Kania and General Wojciech Jaruzelski signed a document prepared by the General Staff entitled “Keynote for Introducing Martial Law on the Territory of the Polish Peoples Republic," which comprised a final summary of current preparations for introducing martial law. An outline for military activities was formulated, with the State Council presumably introducing martial law by resolution.²⁵

The meeting of two members of the Soviet Political Bureau, Minister of Defense Marshal Dmitriy Ustinov, and KGB head Yuri Andropov, with Polish leaders Kania and Jaruzelski was the next step in exerting pressure on the Polish leadership. The meeting was held during the night of April 3 to 4. It was of a highly secret nature and took place in a carriage on a siding near Brzeście. The Soviet party insisted upon a fast introduction of a state of war and gave directives, even going so far as to bring a draft document on the introduction of martial law that only required the signatures of Kania and Jaruzelski.²⁶

The Soviet communists continued to press and demanded a solution to the problem of the “solidarity plague." On June 5, the head of the CPSU Central Committee sent a letter addressed to the PZPR Central Committee in which he warned that "(...) a deadly threat loomed over the

²⁴W. Polak, op. cit., p. 50.
²⁶Wejdą nie wejdą…, p. 199.
revolutionary acquisitions of the Polish nation."27 Traditionally, dignitaries from Warsaw blamed not only "a causative factor of history," that is to say, workers, but mainly "imperialistic and anti-socialistic forces," "opportunists," and "the radical wing of Solidarity, which deceitfully involves workers in the Polish crisis."

The party leadership faced a different problem, namely the state of deterioration of the Polish economy. Foreign loans and an excessive scale of investment, which financed undertakings in all branches of the economy, turned out to be the most serious generator for the crisis that led to a slump in the country's finances. By the end of April 1981, the debt reached almost 24 billion dollars.28 Defense expenses were the other major cause of the crisis, having increased 14% annually and exceeding the sum of 5.5 billion USD in 1981.

Meanwhile, preparations for imposing a state of war continued to progress. General Jaruzelski and First Secretary Kania came to the Crimea in the mid-August to meet Leonid Brezhnev. He encouraged the Polish leaders to act in a quick and decisive way.29

Code-named “Zapad 81,” eight days of Soviet navy maneuvers on the Baltic Sea and land forces on the territory of the Soviet republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Belarus, began at the start of September. According to NATO estimates, they were the largest such maneuvers held since World War II. Their purpose was to threaten the Poles and to prepare "the groundwork" for a possible future military intervention.30

---

27 „1981 czerwiec 5, Warszawa – List KC KPZR do KC PZPR w sprawie sytuacji w PRL i w
PZPR,” [in:] Przed i po 13 grudnia. Państwa Bloku Wschodniego wobec kryzysu w PRL 1980–
the letter is also fund in: S. Kania, Zatrzymać..., pp. 265-268; Tajne dokumenty..., pp. 392-396.
28 J. Muszyńska, A. Osiak, D. Wojtéra, Obraz codzienności w prasie stanu wojennego: Gdańsk,
29 W. Jaruzelski, op. cit., pp. 231-246.
30 Ibid., p. 209.
On the evening of October 16, a meeting of the PZPR Political Bureau was held with one critical agenda point: "Considering a change in the office of the PZPR CC First Secretary." Admonished by Moscow, Stanisław Kania, resigned from office the next day and on the morning of October 18, General Wojciech Jaruzelski became the new first secretary. He received 180 out of 184 votes cast by the Central Committee members. Jaruzelski became first secretary, prime minister, and minister of national defense.

During a phone conversation between the newly-elected first secretary and Leonid Brezhnev, which took place the next day, General Jaruzelski explained that he accepted the office "(...) after a long internal struggle, only because I knew that you supported me. (...) I wouldn't have accepted it for any other reason.” He also openly assured Brezhnev that he would take radical steps towards solving the crisis in the country, saying: "(...) we will beat the enemy and of course, we'll be effective." During a phone conversation between the newly-elected first secretary and Leonid Brezhnev, which took place the next day, General Jaruzelski explained that he accepted the office "(...) after a long internal struggle, only because I knew that you supported me. (...) I wouldn't have accepted it for any other reason.” He also openly assured Brezhnev that he would take radical steps towards solving the crisis in the country, saying: "(...) we will beat the enemy and of course, we'll be effective." 34

Moscow had directed the change in the office of first secretary, which CPSU Politburo member Konstantin Rusakov explained to East German party chief Erik Honecker a few days later. Rusakov said "(...) the politics of compromise and concession, which Kania had performed, finally went bankrupt. Kania turned out to be the main brake in the development of a fight. A change in the office of the first secretary was necessary. The CPSU undertook numerous precise actions with the intention of healing the situation." In addition, Lech Kowalski wrote in his book dedicated to General Jaruzelski that the decision to put him in the office of the PZPR first secretary had been made in Moscow. The Kremlin needed a man who it could use in its military

32 „Protokół nr 11 z posiedzenia Biura Politycznego KC PPR 7 października 1981 r. godz. 21.00,” [in:] Tajne dokumenty..., p. 504.
33 A. Paczkowski, Droga do „mniejszego zła”..., p. 225.
34 Teczka Susłowa..., pp. 53-59.
dealings with Solidarity. Kania was not the proper person for this position, as he was psychologically too weak.\(^{36}\)

The defense ministries of the Warsaw Pact countries met in Moscow between December 1-4, 1981. Vice-Minister General Florian Siwicki represented Poland. At the request of the Polish representatives, it was suggested to place a phrase in the final report that would emphasize the dangerous "(...) development of the situation in Poland" and a need for "(...) assuring the security of the socialist commonwealth."\(^{37}\) The Polish party wanted support from other communist countries that would defend Poland against "counter-revolution." The Hungarian and Romanian delegations opposed the proposal and as a result, the report was not accepted.\(^{38}\)

The PZPR Political Bureau had met on December 5 for the last time before the decision on the implementation of martial law was made. General Jaruzelski recalled that the mood during the meeting was "gloomy."\(^{39}\) During the meeting, the General devoted a few words on the ignominy of the PZPR: “The fact that the party has to be defended by police after 36 years of rule is a horrible, terrible disgrace for the party. However, there is nothing in front of us. We have to be prepared to make a decision which will let us save the base.”\(^{40}\) It is worth defining what, according to General Jaruzelski, required immediate help. Marian Orzechowski stated it as

\(^{40}\) *Tajne dokumenty...*, p. 568.
follows: "Our strategic aim is to defend socialism." Comrades from the Politburo also disputed the party's strategy. According to Zbigniew Messner,

"(...) actions shall be undertaken in advance if martial law needs to be implemented in a short period of time, without embarrassment, without watching passively how the mood is getting worse because in a few days, there might be no one for whom martial law could be implemented. (...) Our propaganda and actions should stress the following mottos: we want to save the country, which Solidarity wants to destroy, we want to do everything not to allow for civil war, to which <<S>> aims."

Meanwhile, General Jaruzelski advised his government to seek out social authority that could legitimate martial law and convince the public that the state was in peril, and that only the party was able to fight the evil that was harassing society.

A few days before martial law was implemented, General Jaruzelski met with Soviet Marshal Viktor Kulikov, who had come to Poland along with his co-workers to supervise the process of implementing martial law. The mission was planned to last two nights: from 11 to 13 December. General Jaruzelski demanded economic and military help during the meeting and made the implementation of martial law conditional on Moscow's help. The Soviet comrades confirmed that troops would enter even if the Polish leadership failed to solve the situation by its own means. Jaruzelski complained to General Miroslaw Milewski and to other comrades that the Soviet Politburo would not allow Warsaw Pact troops to intervene in the event that Polish security forces proved unable to manage on their own: “First, they put pressure on us to undertake radical actions and the Soviet leaders promised us all help and necessary support. (....)

---

41 Ibid., p. 557.  
42 Idem.  
43 Ibid., p. 568.  
44 Ibid., p. 266.
We are about to launch an offensive but I'm afraid that they will pronounce us conspirators and they will hang us.”

General Jaruzelski’s demands were also discussed at the meeting of the CPSU Politburo on December 10. Yuri Andropov's statement was the most radical: "(...) we cannot risk bringing Soviet troops into Poland. The USSR does not intend to do it, even if Solidarity were to rule Poland.” He stated that the USSR would not invade capitalist countries because it would result in different types of economic and political sanctions. A readiness to lose Poland appeared during the meeting. Andropov stated "(...) I don't know what will happen to Poland and even if (...) it was ruled by Solidarity, that would be all." Andrei Gromyko's opinion was similar: "(...) there cannot be any troops brought into Poland." Mikhail Suslov agreed, claiming that the Soviet Union would not force Poland to undertake any actions. Speaking for the USSR, he stated, "(...) I think that we all have a common view, that is, no army can be brought in.” Viktor Grishin expressed his opinion in similar spirit: “Bringing troops in is out of the question.”

The same day, General Viktor Anoszkin noted information which he had received from Soviet ambassador to Poland Boris Aristov. It stated that Secretary of the PZPR Central Committee General Miroslaw Milewski had called on behalf of General Jaruzelski and asked if they could count on military help from the USSR. Konstantin Rusakov answered: "(...) we won't

---

46 W. Bukowski, op. cit., p. 570.
47 Ibid.
bring the troops in." General Jaruzelski summed up the refusal with a statement: "You distance yourselves from us."\(^{49}\)

They made the final decision on the morning of Friday, December 11. They planned to start the mission on the night of Saturday, December 12 to Sunday, December 13. They did not choose the date for the implementation of martial law accidentally. On December 15, a two month period of prolonged army service for 46,000 soldiers was to expire. According to the authorities, long-serving soldiers were more loyal than new soldiers, who could have ties to Solidarity. The Council of Ministers decided to prolong military service on October 16, the time limit for was to expire on December 15. Further prolonging service terms would have been possible only if the country was in a state of war. They decided to choose Sunday as the most suitable day because factories were closed, which would considerably hinder quick mobilization of the Solidarity activists and would delay possible resistance for several hours.\(^{50}\) Almost all of the armed forces were used to impose martial law.\(^{51}\)

The CIA knew neither the exact date nor the hour of the implementation of martial law, although it did have detailed information on the state of preparations for its imposition. Colonel Ryszard Kukliński, their only source in the General Staff, was evacuated with his family to the United States for safety reasons on November 7. At that time, the date for the imposition of martial law did not exist. The American administration found out about it about a week before it actually happened, although it did not inform Solidarity.\(^{52}\) According to Paweł Machcewicz, Washington’s passivity could have resulted from the conviction of the American administration that an invasion by the Soviet army was more dangerous to Solidarity than the martial law that

\(^{49}\) „Zeszyt roboczy”,..., p. 25.

\(^{50}\) J. Eisler, „Polskie miesiące”, czyli kryzys(y) w PRL, Warszawa 2008, p. 55.


\(^{52}\) P. Machcewicz, op. cit., p. 489.
was to be implemented by General Jaruzelski's team. In December 1980, the CIA sent a memorandum to the White House in which it warned that the Soviet communists were preparing to intervene. However, they did not act in the same way as they had in December 1980, since this time Moscow was not preparing to bring in troops.53

General Jaruzelski appeared on the first program of state radio and television at 6 a.m. that Sunday. He said, "Citizens of the People's Republic of Poland! Today I address myself to you as a soldier and as the head of the Polish government. I address you concerning extraordinarily important questions. Our homeland is on the verge of collapse."54

On December 22, during the first meeting of the Politburo after martial law had been implemented, General Czesław Kiszczak informed those present that: "There came a turning point when Solidarity became unable to threaten the people's government any more." General Florian Siwicki's opinion was similar: "On this day, we reached the goal (...) we paralyzed (...) the enemy." General Jaruzelski's statement is interesting as well. He called on party members to "radically oppose propaganda which states that implementation of martial law was imposed from the outside. It offends us. We made this decision, we accomplished it, and we are responsible for it. On behalf of the Politburo, Comrade W. Jaruzelski expresses recognition and gratitude for the performance of a difficult operation in defense of the socialist country" to Comrade Florian Siwicki and Comrade Czesław Kiszczak,56

---

54 A. Paczkowski, Droga do „mniejszego zła”..., p. 276.
56 Ibid., p. 587.
Martial law was cancelled on July 22, 1983 after 586 days. During his visit to Moscow on May 4-5, 1984, Generał Wojciech Jaruzelski was awarded the highest Soviet decoration, the Order of Lenin for “strengthening socialism on Polish soil.”\textsuperscript{57}