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## The Impact of the Soviet Union on Poland's Political Situation in 1981

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**Kazimierz Łastawski**

## **THE IMPACT OF THE SOVIET UNION ON POLAND’S POLITICAL SITUATION IN 1981**

The impact of the Soviet Union on development of Poland’s socio-political situation in 1981 is variously evaluated by researchers, journalists and politicians, which is mainly caused by different life courses experienced by the people who formed part of the authorities and those that formed part of the opposition at that time. However, this is also strongly related to the lack of access to Russian sources from the period. As a result, the degree of the USSR’s control over Poland in Brezhnev’s years remains a controversial issue. Some authors one-sidedly equal Polish interests in the period with the Soviet Union’s interests, which is a view opposing the stance taken by General Wojciech Jaruzelski and Mieczysław F. Rakowski. On the one hand, Rusophobia continues to be articulated in some Polish milieus. On the other hand, the amount of more in-depth analyses concerning the Polish-Russian relations during that period is increasing. Such analyses have been authored inter alia by Adam Daniel Rotfeld, Stanisław Bieleń, Andrzej Walicki, Andrzej Paczkowski and Andrzej de Lazari.

In the period 1980–1981 the situation in Poland was dominated by an intensifying conflict between the weakening political party-state authorities and the growing societal rebelliousness that aimed at changes in the political system. The confrontation between the two sides resulted from the clash between actions taken by the constitutional authorities of the State – who were acting in a manner resembling the Weberian „ethics of responsibility” – and the actions by the rebelled society that strongly emphasized the „ethics of convictions” (Weber 1998: 102; Walicki 2000: 351–352). Even though PRL (Polish People’s Republic)’s sovereignty was deficient, the state was nonetheless recognized in an international arena, had developed state institutions, had its own special/secret services and its own army (Łastawski 2002: 148;

Hall 1997: 69; Szczepański 1993: 85). In turn, the expanding Solidarity („Solidarność”) revolution most frequently identified the existing state institutions with an apparatus of repression. It voiced libertarian slogans and severely criticized Poland’s dependence upon the Soviet Union, which was reinforced by Układ Warszawski (Warsaw Pact) and RWPG (Comecon), disregarding, in general, the then existing geopolitical and geostrategic realities of Europe’s division into two blocks.

On their part, the Soviet authorities viewed the independent trade union NSZZ „Solidarność” in terms of a „counter-revolutionary” organization that was to be eliminated from the state’s life. Their main objective was to act to prevent Poland from changing its political regime and making Warsaw independent from Moscow. What counted for the USSR most was the geostrategic location of Poland between Moscow and Berlin. Zbigniew Brzeziński was of the opinion that for Moscow its rule over Poland had vital importance from the vantage point of its dominance in Eastern Europe (Brzeziński 1987: 48).

In order to block the political transformation in Poland, the Soviet authorities tried various tactics. Among the most important there were:

- an implicit threat of their military intervention which was hinted by organizing military maneuvers that could be easily turned into an armed intervention;

- exerting constant political pressure on the Polish authorities to make them cope with „Solidarność” in a decisive manner;

- maintaining heightened combat readiness in the western military districts of the USSR, in the Northern Group of Armies as well as in the military forces of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Czechoslovakia;

- consulting the heads of „brotherly parties” about the course in which the situation in Poland developed;

- threatening to impose drastic restrictions on the supply of raw materials to the Polish economy, and especially of oil and natural gas (starting in 1982);

- mounting criticism of the activities by the Polish opposition in the mass media.

The internal conflict in Poland was constantly watched and analyzed in Moscow. Already in August 1980 a special committee dedicated to the Polish matters was called into existence, grouping members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s Political Bureau, headed by the party’s chief ideologue Mikhail A. Suslov. The committee included

also, inter alia, the Minister for Foreign Affairs Andrei A. Gromyko, KGB's Director Jurii W. Andropov, the Minister for National Defense Dmitri F. Ustinov as well as Mikhail S. Gorbatshev and Konstantin U. Tschernenko (Jazborowskaja 2010: 551). This committee systematically traced the development of situation in Poland, formulating also recommendations as far as safeguarding the Soviet influences in Poland. The committee's recommendations constituted a basis for decisions taken by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's leadership (Woronkow 1995: 96).

In Moscow, the so called Brezhnev's doctrine had prevailed at that time (called also the doctrine of „limited sovereignty”) – Inieśsa S. Jazborowska discerns in it Moscow's determination to maintain „the unity of the socialist community and to increase the USSR's role, including its right to intervention, including a military one, in internal affairs of the states-parties to the Warsaw Pact, in order to prevent them from leaving the alliance” (Jazborowskaja 2010: 550; cf Gribkow 1992: 46–51). Poland occupied a special place in Brezhnev's doctrine because it was through the Polish territory that the main communication routes passed that linked the USSR with its 300-thousand soldier strong army that had been stationed in the GDR. Moscow was determined to preserve its hold on Poland. Many factors indicate that „the option of a violent solution was considered” (Paczkowski 2010: 540; cf Jazborowskaja 2010: 551). The pressure exerted on the Polish authorities to act was combined with support for „healthy forces” within the Polish party authorities (Tadeusz Grabski, Andrzej Źabiński, Stefan Olszowski, Stanisław Kociołek) as well as for activists of „Forum Katowickie” (Paczkowski 2010: 541 and 548).

Since the autumn of 1980, the Russian authorities engaged in various attempts aimed at influencing the situation in the „rebelled Poland”. They prepared plans for military operations, analyzed the atmosphere in the Polish army and within the Polish security apparatus's authorities. In turn, the Polish authorities were not able to decipher fully the intentions of the Soviet authorities, which is why it was difficult for them to foresee to which degree the declared „brotherly assistance” could turn into a military invasion (Jaruzelski 1999: 235). The Polish military leaders – having been aware of the Russians' conduct that had preceded the Soviet interventions in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan and knowing about the re-location of the Warsaw Pact's military forces (commanded by Russians) – feared that those military preparations could end in an armed intervention. They remem-

bered that the earlier Soviet interventions had been launched unexpectedly, usually preceded by political declarations whose contents spoke to the contrary (*O stanie wojennym...* 1997: 229). The Polish authorities were afraid that in case the political and economic pressure had been evaluated as ineffective, the Soviets might ultimately decide in favour of a military intervention.

Following a meeting of the USRR's and PRL's leaders in Moscow, on 1 December 1980 the Russian authorities took a decision to stage in Poland joint maneuvers of the Warsaw Pact's military forces under the codename of „Sojuz 80”. They were to start on 8 December. The armies from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, German Democratic Republic and Poland were to participate in the maneuvers, which could easily turn into an intervention against the Polish opposition. On 5 December a meeting was called in Moscow of the party leaderships of the Warsaw Pact's states. During the meeting pressure was exerted to force the Polish authorities to take a joint action intended to „rectify” the situation in Poland. The Polish authorities' refusal to agree to have the Warsaw Pact's military forces in the Polish territory together with the US pressure on the Kremlin resulted in the postponement of the date of the planned maneuvers. In Ryszard Kukliński's opinion, this Moscow summit did not by any means remove the threat of the invasion. It only made the Polish leadership aware that the strike was unavoidable. If they did not execute the strike on their own, the Red Army would do it on their behalf with the assistance from the Warsaw Pact's military forces (Kukliński 1987: 25).

In the night of 3/4 March, in a railway carriage on the Russian-Polish border at Brześć on the Bug River a violent exchange of views took place involving the top Soviet authorities, including Jurii Andropow, Marshal Dmitri Ustinov, Stanisław Kania and General Wojciech Jaruzelski, during which the Russian politicians demanded that more effective action should be taken by the Polish authorities. The preliminary conclusions of that meeting stated that the state of war could be imposed by the Polish forces on their own. Nevertheless, the Warsaw Pact's forces were to remain ready to support the Polish armed forces in case the operation was threatened to fail (Paczkowski 2010: 545). However, the Polish authorities did not agree to have any Russian advisors installed within the structure of the top Polish military commandership (Jazborowskaja 2010: 565). Kania and Jaruzelski avoided an open confrontation with „Solidarność” and concentrated on preparing

a prolonged series of actions to be carried out in the state of exception (Kersten 1997: 65).

Having learnt from the Russian generals about the attitudes prevailing in the Polish army's commandship, the military maneuvers „Sojuz 81” were ordered to be started in Poland and along Poland's borderline. Some analysts believe that the imposition of the state of war in Poland during the maneuvers of the Warsaw Pact's military forces in March 1981 could have been provoked by the so called *wydarzenia bydgoskie* (Bydgoszcz events) that led to a confrontation between the „Solidarność” activists and the militia forces. The Warsaw Pact's maneuvers were then prolonged until 7 April. During the maneuvers, important Polish strategic objects were targeted. The equipment of general staffs and military units of the Soviet army that had stationed in Poland was supplemented and a war-time system of command was developed (Kukliński 1987: 31–32). The manpower and equipment of the general staff of the Northern Group of Armies at Legnica was strengthened as well.

In April 1981 the chairman of the special Moscow committee, Mikhail A. Suslov, arrived in person. During his talks with the Polish authorities he indicated that in Poland as well as in the neighboring countries an ever more threatening political situation had been developing. The Russians feared at that time that Kania and Jaruzelski would stall for time, while the course of events in Poland might trigger developments in the other member states of the Warsaw Pact.

There is considerable evidence that Brezhnev – influenced by Erich Honecker and Gustav Husak – decided in May to exert pressure in order to have Kania dismissed from the post of the I Secretary of KC PZPR (Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party) because the latter had delayed taking decisive steps against the opposition. In a letter mailed 5 June 1981 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to KC PZPR there was a warning addressed at Kania and Jaruzelski. This kind of letter was not a traditional form of contact between the leaders of the ruling parties. It was meant to reach broader party circles. In the letter a clear-cut disapproval was expressed of poor effectiveness of the actions taken so far by Kania and Jaruzelski. Indirectly, the letter hinted at a need to seek an alternative for the current leadership of the Polish state's and party's authorities. During a plenary session of KC PZPR that was held on 9 June 1981, the „healthy forces” in the party – encouraged by the letter from Moscow – engaged in an attempt to replace the existing leadership (Paczkowski 2002: 182–194). However, this attempt failed. Tadeusz

Grabski's proposal to have Biuro Polityczne replaced was supported only by 24 members of KC PZPR. Over the next few weeks more pressure was being exerted on Kania to make him take more decisive steps. When those efforts proved ineffective, an attempt was made to have him dismissed from the post of the I Secretary of the United Polish Workers' Party. Ultimately, on 18 October, PZPR's leadership replaced Kania with General Wojciech Jaruzelski. During the ensuing preparations for extraordinary measures to be introduced, the concentration of functions of the party leader, head of government and minister for defense in one hand proved very useful.

The Polish authorities tried to reach an agreement with all milieus that could have an impact on the state's stabilization. Using the slogan of strengthening the national community, they sought support from allied political groupings, war veterans and branch trade unions. At the same time, they intensified intelligence operations that were aimed at having a better knowledge of the external situation. They used both diplomatic services and intelligence units (Siemiątkowski 2009: 308–320) The IX Nadzwyczajny Zjazd PZPR [Extraordinary Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party], convened in June of 1981, only temporarily added some dynamism to the authorities' actions. An unusual situation, whereby two centers of power operated in parallel – this of the government's and that of the opposition's – developed ever more clearly in Poland.

Moscow was especially irritated by „Apel do ludzi pracy Europy Wschodniej” [An appeal to all Eastern Europe's Workers], elaborated and made public during the first round of I Zjazd „Solidarności” [I „Solidarity” Congress] in Gdańsk, in which the delegates urged all Eastern Europe's Workers to follow the Polish independence movement. The Suslov committee interpreted the conclusions of the Solidarity Congress in terms of actions aiming at the political regime change and at removing PZPR from power. Following the Solidarity Congress, on 17 September 1981, Ambassador Boris I. Aristov handed in a vociferous protest by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's leadership that was addressed at the Polish authorities, in which the Solidarity Congress was labeled anti-Soviet and anti-socialist (Jazborowskaja 2010: 566). In Andrzej Paczkowski's view, the Solidarity Congress and its „Apel” had thus constituted a *casus belli* for Moscow (Paczkowski 2010: 547).

In the autumn, under Moscow's strong pressure (Jazborowskaja 2010: 549–575; Woronkow 1996: 93), the authorities had elaborated

a bill on the basis of which extraordinary competences were to be granted to the government. At the same time, they continued preparations in the army, security forces and the militia to make them act in the conditions of the state of emergency. However, in many statements by the government an assumption was inherent – as testified by documents revealed by Sejmowa Komisja Odpowiedzialności Konstytucyjnej [Parliamentary Commission of Constitutional Accountability] – that the imposition of the martial law was to be treated as a means of the „last resort” (*O stanie wojennym...* 1997: 48–49, 82, 96).

The Polish authorities received signals indicating that the Warsaw Pact was preparing for a military action and that it carried out intelligence operations in the country. Especially strong pressure was being at that point exerted on the Polish authorities by Marshall Victor Kulikov – commander-in chief of the Military Forces of the Warsaw Pact, the Russian ambassador in Warsaw Boris I. Aristov and a KGB (the Soviet State Security Committee) resident in Poland, Vitalii G. Pavlov. They constantly watched the developments within the governing circles and in the Polish army (Pawłow 1994: 25–107; Jaźborowskaja 2010: 501). Moreover, they had been all the time in touch with the top leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and that of KGB. Kulikov and Krutschkov recommended that the Polish authorities should suspend the Constitution, while the army should take over power in the country (Paczkowski 2010: 545; Kukliński 1987: 34).

The difficult situation of the Polish authorities was being further aggravated by confrontational and rebellious attitudes exhibited by many milieus in the country, a „moral crusade” of the opposition against PZPR, their own „natural wearing and tearing”, and especially by facing accusations related to the socio-political crises of 1956, 1968, 1970 and 1976. In Ryszard Kukliński's eyes, the decision to impose martial law in Poland, taken under the Soviet pressure in early November 1981, was practically unavoidable. If General Jaruzelski had failed at the last moment, the statement to the nation through the Polish state television and the radio was to be delivered by Lieutenant General Eugeniusz Molczyk or some of the other generals supporting this solution (Kukliński 1987: 4–5).

The Russian authorities exerted pressure in order to have a forceful solution introduced in Poland, to have the Polish party purified out of its „revisionists” and to have its „healthy forces” strengthened (Paczkowski 1999: 558–563). The military leadership of the USSR as well as the commandship of the Warsaw Pact had by then mobilized consid-



erable armed forces in the western military districts of the USRR, had reinforced armed forces in the western Polish voivodships and units stationing in GDR and Czechoslovakia. This power trip was to exert even more pressure and to make the Polish authorities accelerate their extraordinary measures. In addition, an economic blackmail was used. The Russian authorities were afraid that the dangerous course of events in Poland could hamper the functioning of the Warsaw Pact. However, they were also aware that their military invasion in Poland could bring about unpredictable consequences.

That state of affairs, combined with a proclamation that had announced big changes on 17 December, the proceedings of Komisja Krajowa „Solidarności”'s session held in Gdańsk (11–12 December 1981) and the failure to reach an agreement with the opposition – plus external pressures – had influenced the authorities' decision to impose martial law in Poland. Its implementation was entrusted to the Polish armed forces and the state security forces.

The imposition of the martial law regime in Poland was received with some relief in Moscow since it „unburdened the Soviet Union from responsibility and made it more difficult to accuse it for direct intervening” (Paczkowski 2010: 548). At that time General Wojciech Jaruzelski took the most difficult decision in his life. The extraordinary measures introduced by the Polish authorities could not have been imposed under the label of a „state of exception” since such a term had not existed in the Polish constitutional regulations. By necessity, the term of „stan wojenny” (literally „the state of war”) had to be used, which shocked the society and provoked opinions that a war was being waged – namely, the “war against the nation” („wojna z narodem”).

The introduction of the martial law at just that moment was justified by the state of emergency in the country (*O stanie wojennym...* 1997: 220–221, 237–241). It stopped the reforms and inflicted much suffering and harm on the Polish society. Nevertheless, it was a means to avoid the planned foreign armed intervention in Poland that could have had consequences which are hard to imagine. In the circumstances, Jaruzelski's decision meant opting for a lesser evil (Jaruzelski 1992: 409–411): it wrought havoc upon some Poles, while bringing some relief to many other milieus and families as well as saving all Poles from a probable fratricide conflict (Łastawski 2002: 154). There is no evidence that could support erroneous claims that just before the martial law was declared, Jaruzelski had asked the Russians for their military assistance. However, faced with blockages and market shortag-

es, he did ask for some economic assistance. Later, the resolute and relatively mild Polish martial law regime enabled the start of the evolutionary socio-economic changes in which W. Jaruzelski played his part.

In its motion of 25 January 1982, the Polish parliament (Sejm) stated that the martial law had been introduced „because the nation's and the state's vital interests had been endangered and in order to counteract the disorganization of socio-economic life in the country as well as in order to enable the state organs to function effectively” („ze względu na zagrożenie żywotnych interesów narodu i państwa oraz w celu przeciwdziałania dezorganizacji życia społeczno-gospodarczego i zapewnienia sprawnego funkcjonowania organów państwowych” (*O stanie wojennym...* 1997: 220). Nevertheless, both outside Poland and inside the country diverse opinions and evaluations of the martial law period continue to be expressed.

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