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The Soviet Response to Martial Law in International Perspective

Einleitung

The imposition of martial law in Poland has been generating controversies ever since December 1981. Throughout the Polish crisis, many Western observers were expecting that the Soviet hegemon would intervene to forcefully end the experiment that had begun with the legalization of Solidarity. The suppression of the latter by Polish forces, however, caught almost everyone in the West by surprise and initiated a fierce debate what martial law meant and how the West was supposed to respond to it.¹

For some Western observers, martial law was merely a Soviet "invasion by proxy"—the re-assertion of Communist orthodoxy and Soviet dominance over Poland by Polish forces. It was the response of the U.S. administration of Ronald Reagan of imposing economic sanctions on both Poland and the Soviet Union which reflected this line of thinking most clearly. "What the Poles have in Jaruzelski," Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger said, "is a Russian general in a Polish uniform."² Another group of commentators, including U.S. foreign policy veteran George Kennan as well as many West German politicians and columnists, saw martial law differently. While Solidarity's suppression was tragic, they argued, it nevertheless preserved a certain degree of Polish sovereignty and it prevented the bloodshed as well as the international crisis a possible Soviet invasion would have brought about.³

According to the West German politician Horst Ehmke: The choice was not between Jaruzelski and Wałęsa, but between Jaruzelski and the Russians.⁴

During the 1980s, the main author of martial law, Wojciech Jaruzelski, strenuously denied any Soviet influence insisting that the imposition of martial law was a sovereign Polish decision to prevent an economic collapse and civil war. After 1989, though, he began to change his justification of the "lesser evil" emphasizing the geopolitical situation of Poland instead. In Poland’s Third Republic, the question of Moscow’s role in the events of December 1981 are one of the most contentious issues in a country rich with historical controversies leading to a parliamentary investigation and two trials.

For historians, the major problem in trying to reconstruct the process that led to the imposition of martial law is that we are forced to piece together evidence from a wide array of archives and collections. Some records – especially Soviet ones – remain classified; others have been destroyed leaving us with flashlight cast on specific aspects leaving others in the dark—a situation epitomized by the fact that one of the most important sources, excerpts from a notebook by Soviet Lieutenant-General Viktor Anoshkin, found its way into the hands of historians in a somewhat peculiar way.

However, major pieces of the puzzle did emerge contradicting the thesis that martial law preempted an impending Soviet invasion. A protocol of a Soviet Politburo meeting held on 10 December 1981 suggests, at the very least, that, in the days directly preceding the imposition of martial law, there were no immediate plans for a Soviet invasion of Poland; the Soviet Politburo seems to have actually declined a Polish request for military assistance should the plans to suppress Solidarity go awry. Anoshkin’s notebook corroborated these findings.

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7 For a recent survey of the available evidence see Patrizia Hey, Die sowjetische Polenpolitik Anfang der 1980er Jahre und die Verhängung des Kriegsrechts in Polen. Tatsächliche Bedrohung oder erfolgreicher Bluff? (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010).
Yet evidence remains fragmentary and more recently declassified sources, such as the records of the Polish Committee for National Defense (Komitet Obrony Kraju), the remainder of the Anoshkin notebook, or documents the CIA obtained from Ryszard Kukliński, a Polish office who worked as an informant for the Americans, do not fundamentally improve the situation. The debate on martial law, therefore, has not been settled and it is doubtful whether it ever will be.

Against the background of these difficulties, this Lelewel-Debate is an attempt to shift the debate somewhat away from the question of what the Polish leadership knew or did not know, intended or did not intend. Instead of re-reading the same documents, we propose to look at them in a changed analytical frame of reference shifting the focus on the Soviet Union and its position in a changing international environment.

A number of historians of the Cold War, working outside of Poland, have interpreted the findings on the Polish crisis in terms of their broader theory of how East-West politics had been transformed during the 1970s. One of the representatives of this view is Wilfried Loth—the first contributor to this discussion. Professor of Modern History at the University of Essen-Duisburg, Wilfried Loth’s major research interests are the history of the East-West conflict and of European integration. Among his many publications in this field are monographs on the Soviet Union and the German Question, a history of the early Cold War, as well as a history of détente; moreover, he is the member of a number of editorial boards of major journals or publication series on political and international history, most notably for our context, the journal Cold War History.

Soviet restraint during the Polish crisis indicates, Loth argues, that the Soviet leadership had begun to reevaluate the importance and the costs of sustaining its political and ideological hegemony over Eastern Europe well before Gorbachev’s rise to power; under the pressure of economic decline, bogged down in the Afghan quagmire, and facing a new round in the arms race and/or because of the changes ten years of détente had effected in the culture of East-West relations, Moscow may have


actually begun to fundamentally reconsider or even to abandon the so-called "Brezhnev doctrine." Placing the events in Poland into a wider interpretive framework thus supports the thesis that Jaruzelski did not act under a direct Soviet threat.

This interpretation of the Polish crisis is not without critics. Chief among them is our next contributor, Mark Kramer. He is professor at Harvard University where he also directs the Harvard Project for Cold War Studies, serves as editor in chief of the Journal of Cold War Studies, and works as a senior fellow of the Davies Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. He played a major role for the historiography of the Polish crisis; making a number of sources available in English translation. More than that, he publishes widely on Cold War history combining impressive language skills with an interest in theoretical questions such as the role of ideology for East-West politics.

Like Loth, Kramer does not believe that there was a direct threat of a Soviet invasion in December 1981. He strongly disagrees with Loth, though, that this indicates an erosion of Soviet willingness to impose its hegemony on Eastern Europe. He argues that the leadership in Warsaw was exposed to relentless Soviet pressure throughout the Polish crisis. Using all available channels – bilateral relations, intra-party diplomacy, military relations – Moscow communicated the Poles that the Soviet leadership expected a forceful response to the situation created by Solidarity's emergence and growth. In Kramer's view, the refusal of a military guarantee for Jaruzelski, evidenced by the Soviet Politburo protocols of December 1981, does not indicate an erosion of the Brezhnev doctrine; instead, the Politburo wanted to make sure that Jaruzelski, instead of relying on Soviet assistance, cracked down as vigorously as he could with Polish forces. In the end, Kramer concludes, martial law was no Polish solution but the Soviets got what they had wanted in the first place.

Our final contributor, Andrzej Paczkowski, professor emeritus at the Institute for Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, is one of this country's major authorities in contemporary history. He has


\[14\] In addition to the texts cited above see for instance Mark Kramer, "Ideology and the Cold War," Review of International Studies vol. 25, no. 4 (October 1999), 539-576., which started an exchange with William Wohlforth; Mark Kramer, "Gorbachev and the demise of east European communism," in Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War, ed. Silvio Pons and Federico Romero (London: Routledge, 2005), 179-200. See also his "The Collapse of East European Communism and the Repercussions within the Soviet Union" published in three parts in Journal of Cold War Studies vol. 5-7 (2003-2005).
been a member of the advisory board of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) since its inception and currently serves as the board's chairman. In 1997, his history of post-war Poland, which was translated into English, received the Prize of the Foundation for Polish Science—colloquially called the "Polish Nobel; among his many publications are two monographs as well as a collection of sources on martial law. Andrzej Paczkowski's contribution leads the discussion back to Poland and the vexing problem of the lack of historical sources. Declassified Polish military sources, for instance, at best allow for the negative statement that there is no evidence of Polish preparations for an expected invasion of Warsaw Pact troops.

Paczkowski's statement makes it all the more important to try to look for evidence outside of Poland and to find new ways of interpreting existing evidence. Therefore, we hope that the thesis discussed at the Lelewel-Debate will prove as controversial in Poland as they were in international debates, help to provide a new angle on the existing sources, and thus breathe some fresh air into the debates on martial law. We are delighted that three of the main protagonists of this debate agreed to discuss their thoughts and interpretations with us.