

# US Intelligence and the Polish Crisis 1980-1981

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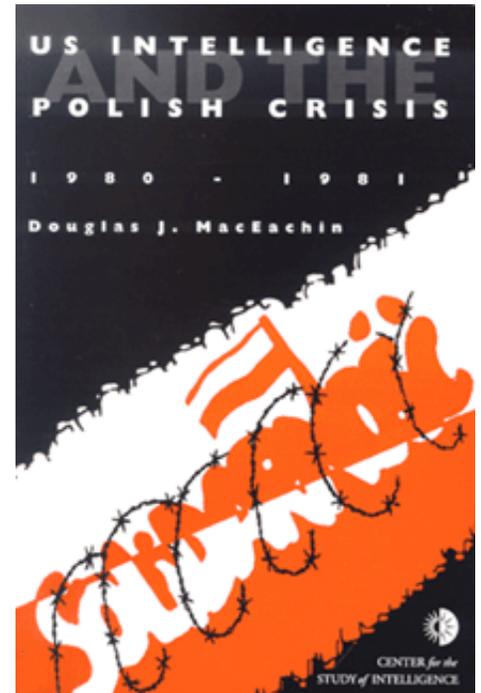
## Summary

In mid-November 1981, US Secretary of State Alexander Haig sent President Reagan a memorandum outlining the implications of what he described as a “peaceful revolution” underway in Poland under the leadership of Solidarity, the national trade union. The Secretary said that if what was taking place in Poland could be “consolidated,” it would be an historic event that would “confound” Moscow’s power over Eastern Europe and provide a boost for “Western values.” Barely a month later, on the evening of 12 December, this peaceful revolution came to a screeching halt when the Polish regime deployed its military and internal security forces to suppress Solidarity and impose martial law throughout the country.

## Caught Off Guard

The US administration let it be known that it had been surprised and unprepared for this move. Probably the mildest public statement to this effect by a US official came from Secretary Haig himself. He noted that although the US government had received what he considered “a fair, acceptable level of intelligence” on what the Polish regime “might” do, Washington had been surprised by the Polish army’s willingness to carry it out. Most public accounts by other officials were harsher, stating that the US government had been caught off guard because of a lack of intelligence. One Defense Department official described the episode to the press as a “collective failure in intelligence gathering and assessment.”

The absence of any alert in Washington was in sharp contrast to the reactions during the preceding year to what US officials described as the threat of Soviet military intervention and suppression of Solidarity. In December 1980, the Carter administration issued two presidential



statements, gave frequent public briefings, and dispatched messages to Allied leaders, in an effort to generate a reaction strong enough to deter what the administration described as an imminent move by large Soviet military forces into Poland. These warnings were explicitly described by President Carter as having been based on US intelligence indicating that the “probability” of a Soviet military intervention was “sufficiently high” to warrant Western governments taking “whatever steps they can to affect Soviet decisionmaking.”

- The Reagan administration launched a similar, albeit somewhat lower-decibel public offensive in the spring of 1981, citing intelligence indications of an impending Soviet military intervention to suppress the burgeoning challenge to Moscow’s client communist regime in Warsaw.
- Washington, however, was silent in the six weeks preceding the Polish regime’s use of its *own* means for a forceful suppression.

## **Col. Kuklinski’s Contribution**

Another aspect of these events surfaced some years later, with the public disclosure that long before martial law was imposed, the United States had been clandestinely receiving detailed information on the Polish regime’s plans and preparations from a military officer on the Polish General Staff, Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski.

Only a few of the reports provided by Kuklinski have been declassified thus far, but they include reports received by Washington at critical junctures in the unfolding events. In addition, Kuklinski himself, with support from CIA, has published a detailed account of his knowledge of the Polish regime’s martial law planning and preparation. CIA also has cleared descriptions of the timing and substance of much of this information – including descriptions by former DCI Robert Gates and by the author of this study, who was engaged in the analysis and the reporting on the situation during most of the period.

## **Why Wasn’t Solidarity Alerted?**

Various theories and judgments have since been put forth as to why, having the benefit of this intelligence, the US government made no demonstrable effort to warn Solidarity of the impending crackdown—and no attempt to deter the move. The leader of the Polish regime that carried out the plan, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, has asserted that he knew the United States had information on his intentions. He said he had interpreted Washington’s silence as signaling acceptance of his internal crackdown as a “lesser evil” than the otherwise “inevitable” Soviet intervention. US actions and statements during the preceding year and some public statements by US officials after the martial law crackdown have been interpreted by many Western observers as lending some support to this version. An alternative interpretation that has received some attention is the charge that CIA had obsessively protected the information to the point that it was useless—for example, by withholding it from those analysts and policy officials who needed it.

## **The Intelligence Flow**

The volume of US intelligence documents on these events that have now been declassified, as well as a sizable quantity of materials from various US policy agencies and components, permit a much more informed scrutiny of the intelligence performance and of US policy actions taken

at the time. The declassified materials include some 400 reports on Poland that were disseminated in CIA's *National Intelligence Daily* between the emergence of Solidarity in mid-1980 and the imposition of martial law in December 1981, as well as a number of in-depth intelligence assessments and National Intelligence Estimates produced at the time. The declassified documents from US policy components include State Department cables, records of policy meetings at the White House, and accounts of government officials who participated in the decisionmaking process. These documents reflect the perceptions of those policy officials who received the intelligence at the time.

Drawing on this information, the book presents a reconstruction of the intelligence flow from July 1980 to the imposition of martial law 18 months later. It describes the intelligence information received, the interpretations made by analysts at the time, the descriptions and judgments presented to policy officials, and--to the extent possible--the impact of this intelligence on US policy deliberations.

- The book includes, for example, information on the timing and nature of Soviet military activity in areas bordering on Poland, as well as other intelligence received prior to the US warnings of threatened Soviet military intervention.
- This material is blended with descriptions of information that was concurrently being received on the Poles' preparations for imposing their own internal military crackdown, as well as discussions of these plans taking place between Warsaw and Moscow.

The book places the intelligence flow in the context of the overall picture of ongoing events in Poland that was presented in day-to-day coverage by the public media and in the accounts of observers who were on the scene at the time, reporting the events as they were occurring. This material is intended in part to demonstrate the scope of the information then available from open sources, and to compare the portrayals and forecasts of those who were and those who were not in possession of the then-classified intelligence information.

## **Bloc-Country Archives Open**

Finally, this study also draws extensively on materials now available from the governmental archives of Poland, the former Soviet Union, and various other countries of the old Soviet bloc. These documents reveal the deliberations, planning, and actions of their respective leaderships in reaction to the growing threat to communist party supremacy. This information bonanza has provided an opportunity for comparison with the evidence then available to US intelligence analysts, and with the analysts' interpretations and judgments. And from a purely historical perspective, the synthesis of the information from the diverse sources on different sides offers a chance to shed new light on what actually transpired over this 18-month period.

This study shows, for example, that Soviet military activity near the Polish border, detected at various times by US intelligence, meshed closely with what the archival documents show to have been the actions being discussed and plans being formulated in Moscow at the time. The primary difference was in how the actions were interpreted by US intelligence analysts in terms of Soviet intentions. The same is true of the intelligence on Polish preparations for martial law. The declassified intelligence materials also show that whatever the assertions and/or convictions about the "inevitability" of a Soviet military intervention, no preparations were underway for even a minimal Soviet support force at the time martial law was imposed.

## The “Mind-Set” Problem

The bottom line is that the intelligence deficiency was not in the “gathering” of information, but in how the information was interpreted and how its potential implications were portrayed. The record also shows that the causes of the US “failure” to react to the information were not as conspiratorial or malfeasant as has commonly been asserted. The problem was, in a sense, much as described by Secretary Haig: Intelligence analysts and policy officials alike simply did not believe the Poles would or could--absent a Soviet military intervention--employ their own military troops in massive force against their own citizens to suppress a popular civil opposition. This was the view at the outset of the rising civil confrontation in mid-1980, and it became the mind-set through which all subsequent information was interpreted and communicated.

Mind-set is often a more difficult problem to contend with than the kinds of malfunctions that have been cited in many other accounts of these events, precisely because it is not a conscious or deliberate action. Rather, it is systemic to the human cognitive process and has been demonstrated as a critical pitfall in analytic fields ranging from science to financial markets. Psychological studies show that mind-set cannot be entirely eliminated from the human cognitive process, but steps can be taken that offset much of the negative impact. To accomplish this, the problem must be acknowledged; the treatment cannot be designed and applied until the malady is recognized.

It is explicitly for this purpose that CIA has supported this study and others of a similar vein. The goal is to identify the pitfalls that have caused the failings of the past, as a first step in developing professional practices designed specifically to help avoid such failings in the future.

This book was originally published by the Center for the Study of Intelligence in 2000. A somewhat expanded edition of this book is to be published soon by Penn State University Press. Inquiries can be made through that organization’s website, [www.psypress.org](http://www.psypress.org).

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