

A Secret Life

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Benjamin Weiser. New York: Public Affairs, 2004. 383 pages.

Reviewed by Thomas M. Troy, Jr.

A Secret Life is author Benjamin Weiser's riveting account of the life and career of Polish Army Col. Ryszard Kuklinski, a member of the Polish General Staff who worked secretly for the US government for over nine years. Kuklinski, one of the most important agents who ever volunteered to the CIA, provided crucial data about Soviet-Warsaw Pact military topics beginning in the early 1970s. Weiser's relatively brief tale of Kuklinski's life as a spy is superb; it should be "must reading" for anybody interested in intelligence matters, the Cold War, or simply a good read.

In pulling this fascinating story together, Weiser acknowledges that he received a great deal of cooperation from the CIA. He hired Agency veteran Peter Earnest, who reviewed the huge CIA file on Col. Kuklinski, made notes, selected important documents, and eventually came up with more than 750 pages of material. CIA staff officers then reviewed the information, made any needed changes or deletions, and turned this incredible source material over to Weiser.

Those in the CIA who made the enlightened decision to facilitate this process should be commended. At a time when the daily papers and television news programs seem to be full of official and journalistic criticisms of the CIA for "intelligence failures," the "politicization of intelligence," and "CIA incompetence," *A Secret Life* provides an antidote: sometimes the CIA did it right. In the case of Col. Kuklinski, the Agency "ran" a remarkably important and productive agent, in a denied area, for almost a decade. Then, when the Polish security service began focusing an investigation on Kuklinski, it successfully exfiltrated him and his family

and later even helped him regain his reputation and citizenship in Poland.

The author supplemented the CIA material by conducting numerous interviews, including with Col. Kuklinski. Weiser explains in the introduction that he wanted to focus on the "human side of the operation—the interaction between Kuklinski and the Americans he worked with." He made a wise decision. *A Secret Life* reads almost like a novel as Weiser expertly weaves in "personal" letters between Kuklinski and his principal case officers and quotes from internal memorandums by members of the Directorate of Operations (DO) who were concerned with protecting Kuklinski's safety. Weiser never introduces extraneous material, embellishes the story, or speculates about what people were thinking, saying, and doing. He obviously recognized that he had a gripping story to tell and did not need to add flourishes. As a result, even when you know the ending, *A Secret Life* is so engrossing and suspenseful, and so intrinsically interesting and well written, that it is very difficult to put it down before finishing.

Seeds of Discontent

Weiser explores Kuklinski's motivation for spying. Ryszard Kuklinski was born in 1930 and, like nearly every Pole, suffered during World War II. At the age of 17, he joined the Polish Army but soon recognized that the Soviets were just as oppressive as the Nazis had been.¹ Nonetheless, intelligent and an indefatigable worker, he rose through the ranks. In 1960, he was appointed to the General Staff Academy in Warsaw, and, after graduation in 1963, he began preparing strategic exercises for the Operations Directorate in General Staff Headquarters. He soon realized that all Soviet-Warsaw Pact exercises corresponded to Moscow's military strategy, which was exclusively offensive. He concluded that, if there were a World War III, Poland would be obliterated by US and NATO nuclear counterattacks against Soviet reinforcements crossing Poland. The seeds of disillusionment with communist rule grew.

In 1968, Poland joined the Soviet-led military attack against Czechoslovakia. Kuklinski was enraged that his superiors in the military

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enthusiastically supported the invasion of a fellow member of the Warsaw Pact. He deeply regretted that the West was so preoccupied with the war in Vietnam and the mass antiwar protests at home and in Europe that it failed to protest the invasion of Czechoslovakia. He later said that the official Polish military view of the invasion was that it was an "exceptional achievement"; however, unofficially, military officers regarded it as an "unforgivable mistake," for which the Poles would "one day have to pay a high price" According to Kuklinski, "my judgment and my opinions were strongly rooted in this current, and this is probably how [the idea to establish some form of communication with the West] all began."²

Two years after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Polish troops were ordered to fire at fellow citizens demonstrating against the regime in several cities along the Baltic coast. At least 47 people were killed and over a thousand wounded. Once again outraged by the Polish leadership, Kuklinski began to think in concrete terms of contacting the West.

In August 1972, Kuklinski, an avid sailor, captained a yacht owned by the Polish General Staff that was dispatched to reconnoiter various German, Dutch, and Belgian ports and naval installations. While "sight seeing" in a German port, Kuklinski addressed a letter to the US military attaché in Bonn asking for a meeting. The attaché gave the letter to the chief of station, and soon two CIA officers met clandestinely with Kuklinski. The Polish colonel volunteered to work in-place in Warsaw and provide information on the Soviets and the Warsaw Pact. The CIA accepted.

The Operation

Weiser devotes the bulk of *A Secret Life* to describing the nine years in which Kuklinski operated as an agent for the CIA. Using material from interviews and the CIA's operational cables and memorandums, he depicts the risks that Kuklinski took on a daily basis and the ruses that CIA officers used to foil Polish security in order to stay in touch with their agent. On four occasions during 1973-76, the colonel was able to sail to the West and hold personal meetings with CIA officers, but contacts after that had to be in Warsaw.

The hero of *A Secret Life* obviously is Kuklinski, but several CIA officers play major supporting roles. By July 1981, CIA officers had held 63 "exchanges" with Kuklinski. Weiser skillfully describes the care with which Agency personnel prepared for these encounters, and it is clear that he holds the officers in high esteem.

Kuklinski provided a treasure-trove of mainly documentary material, which he photographed using micro cameras disguised as every-day objects.³ Citing CIA memorandums, Weiser relates that, as of July 1981, Kuklinski had passed over 40,200 pages to the CIA! To protect Kuklinski, the DO disguised the documents' source descriptions to ensure that even the Russian- and Polish-language translators did not know their origins. For additional safety, the Agency issued the reports based on Kuklinski's material in highly restricted channels. At times, the only people outside the CIA who received these reports were the president, the national security adviser, and the secretaries of state and defense.

In late 1980, the CIA provided Kuklinski with a miniaturized electronic transmitting device for sending encoded messages to the CIA's officers in Warsaw. Although the device did not always function, it may have saved his life: In November 1981, he was able to alert the CIA that he was one of four Polish Army officers under suspicion for spying.

The Crisis in Poland, 1980-81

Without overwhelming the reader with detail, Weiser deftly describes how Kuklinski played a major behind-the-scenes role during the crisis in Poland from July 1980 to December 1981. The beleaguered and essentially bankrupt Polish communist regime sought to buy time in late August 1980 by concluding a set of agreements with the fledgling Solidarity trade union that promised to allow a number of democratic practices. At the same time, the regime began preparing contingency plans to strengthen its power, including the possible imposition of martial law. Kuklinski was asked to join a small group of General Staff officers and other senior officials to write the martial law plan. Although he privately supported Solidarity's goals and admired the union's charismatic leader, Lech Walesa,

Kuklinski decided to accept the assignment so that he could warn Washington of the regime's plans.

The Soviet Union, then led by Leonid Brezhnev, made it clear, publicly and privately, that it could not tolerate the anti-regime activism in Poland. In December 1980, Moscow informed the Polish military that there would be a major "exercise" involving many Soviet divisions and East German and Czechoslovak troops. Kuklinski reported the information to the CIA and also predicted a massive crackdown on Solidarity. US President Jimmy Carter twice warned the Soviets not to intervene in Poland. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski used his own channels to warn Solidarity of imminent repressive moves. The "Polish Pope," John Paul II, also cautioned Brezhnev against intervening. In the event, nothing happened.

In March 1981, with seemingly nobody in control in Poland, the Soviets again seemed on the brink of intervention. Again, Kuklinski reported on Soviet activities to Washington. Again, there was no Soviet intervention and no martial law.

Six months later, on 7 September, the chief of the Polish General Staff told a select group of officers, including Kuklinski, that martial law was imminent. As before, Kuklinski reported to the CIA. The next week, the colonel learned that the Polish Interior Ministry was investigating a "leak," because Solidarity had learned the details of the martial law plan. Shortly thereafter, he noticed surveillance and began preparations to flee. Weiser builds tension in describing Kuklinski's activities and the efforts of CIA officers in Warsaw to bring him and his family to the West. After many problems, they succeeded. On Veterans Day, 11 November 1981, Kuklinski and his family arrived in a US military aircraft at Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington, DC. Kuklinski's extraordinary career as an agent-in-place was over.

Aftermath

Weiser devotes about 50 pages of *A Secret Life* to describing what happened to Kuklinski after he reached the United States. In 1984, he was

tried in absentia by the Polish regime and sentenced to death. Meanwhile, he lived under a new identity and did some consulting for the CIA and the US military, although he found life in his adoptive country difficult. The Polish communist regime continued to work to blacken his reputation. After a democratic government came into power in Poland in 1989, Kuklinski was able to have his trial and sentence invalidated, but only after concerted effort by friends in high places—according to Weiser, the administration of President Clinton made it clear that Washington would oppose Polish membership in NATO unless Kuklinski were exonerated. In 1998, Kuklinski made something of a triumphal return to Poland, where he was received as a hero. He and his wife continued to live in the United States under assumed identities until his death in February 2004.

Weiser's masterful book, of necessity, leaves a few mysteries unsolved. One of these "loose ends" involves how the Polish regime learned in the autumn of 1981 that the CIA had the latest version of the martial law plan, triggering its investigation of a leak. Likewise, Weiser's account of the hectic days in early December 1980—based mainly on Kuklinski's words—does not resolve the major question of whether the Soviets were preparing to invade Poland or getting ready to help the Polish regime impose martial law.

"Loose ends" and quibbles aside, *A Secret Life* is a joy to read. Col. Ryszard Kuklinski is a hero, and Benjamin Weiser has written a great book about him.

Footnotes

1. Until 1956, the Soviets basically controlled the Polish military. The Polish Defense Minister, for example, was Soviet Marshal Konstanty Rokossowski.
2. Ryszard Kuklinski, "The War Against the Nation Seen From the Inside," *Kultura*, no. 4, 1987: 9. *Kultura* was published in Paris by Polish exiles and emigrés. Kuklinski's "interview" with *Kultura* was subsequently translated into English and reprinted as "The Crushing of Solidarity," in *Orbis* 32, no. 1, Winter 1988: 7-32.

3. Initially, Kuklinski used his Russian-manufactured camera to photograph documents for the CIA—a sweet irony, because the Russian commander of Warsaw Pact forces had presented the camera as a gift.

Thomas M. Troy, Jr., served in the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence. This article is unclassified in its entirety.

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