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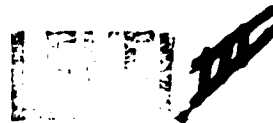


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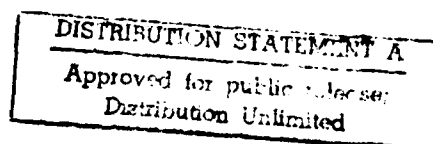
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Alex Alexiev, A. Ross Johnson, S. Enders Wimbush



December 1980

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The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California

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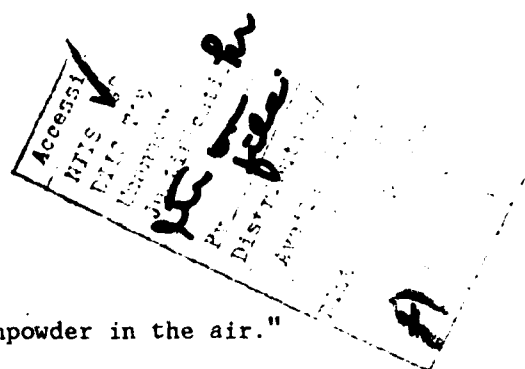
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If the Soviets Invade Poland



Once again, there is in Europe "a smell of gunpowder in the air." This time the crisis spot is Poland. The Poles remain optimistic that Soviet military intervention can be avoided. As a Polish intellectual noted recently, "The Soviets' analytic ability must not be underestimated. They know Poland well." Certainly, the Soviet leadership has tolerated developments in Poland that it has not tolerated elsewhere in Eastern Europe or in the USSR itself. Yet, the Soviets will not permit dismantling of Communist rule in Poland, for that would constitute a fatal weakening of the Warsaw Pact and a fatal blow both to the Soviet empire and to the legitimacy of the Soviet system itself.

The fundamental problem for the USSR is not the existence of independent trade unions, easing of censorship, or other reform measures. The issue for Moscow is whether or not the Polish Communist leadership remains in control of events.

If the Soviet leadership concludes that the erosion of Party control has reached the point of no return, it will intervene with military force, but only as a last resort, for it has some understanding of the costs. We, too, need to be clear about those costs in thinking about how the United States and its allies should respond if the Soviets invade Poland.

Should the Soviets intervene militarily, they will pay a very high price in Poland itself. The Soviet leadership recognized this in 1956. Then, challenged by a movement for greater liberalization and national autonomy in Poland, it threatened to use military force. But it backed

down, both because it gambled (successfully, as it turned out) that Polish Party leader Gomulka would remain in control of the situation and because military units loyal to Gomulka were deployed around Warsaw and were prepared to resist. Unless Soviet-controlled forces marching on Warsaw were stopped, Gomulka told the Soviet leaders (as Khrushchev recounts in his memoirs), "something terrible and irreversible will happen." The Soviets understood that this was not a bluff. "It would have been a fatal conflict," Khrushchev noted, "with grave consequences that would have been felt for many years."

1980 is not 1956. Then, Gomulka, the symbol of popular hopes for liberalization of the Communist system, threatened the Soviets with military resistance if they attempted to use force against Poland. Today, Kania, the product of a weak and demoralized Party apparatus, seeks to calm the situation by threatening his countrymen with Soviet invasion.

But if Moscow need be less concerned today about the prospect of a defiant Polish Party leadership, it must understand that military intervention would, nonetheless, meet resistance--both spontaneous popular resistance and organized resistance by Polish armed forces.

In 1956, Soviet generals ran the Polish army. Even so, many military units switched their loyalty to Gomulka. "As we began to calculate which Polish regiments we could count on," Khrushchev recounted, "the situation began to look somewhat bleak."

After 1956, the Soviet generals were recalled to Moscow, and the armed forces again became a Polish institution. A modern, professional military establishment emerged, the most competent and best-equipped in Eastern Europe--and a far cry from the "Polish cavalry" of 1939.

Responsive to the Polish, not the Soviet, Party leadership, the Polish military became, more than any other Communist military establishment, master of its own house.

Demoralized by its involvement, however limited, in suppressing rioting workers in 1970, the military indicated it would not allow itself to be so utilized in the future. "Polish soldiers will not fire on Polish workers," Defense Minister Jaruzelski reportedly said during another wave of unrest in 1976. The Polish army has maintained this position during the current crisis, calling for a "political solution."

This refusal of the Polish military to allow itself to be used for internal repression imbues it with something of the ethos of Polish armies in earlier times, as the defender of national traditions. Faced with Soviet military attack, national pride and a determination to fight are as likely to predominate in the army as among the Polish population.

Under no conditions can the Soviets count on the Polish army to help them subdue Poland. In the likely absence of a unified political leadership ready to resist the Soviets, the upper levels of the Polish army might crumble--although in some circumstances unified military resistance by the entire army, commanded by the General Staff, is not to be excluded.

But even if there were a vacuum at the center, the Soviets can expect organized military resistance. Regimental or even division-level commanders would act on their own in defending Polish military installations and Polish towns.

That resistance would be of a different magnitude than the Soviets have faced in Afghanistan and responding to it would severely strain

Soviet military reserves. The Polish armed forces (counting internal security troops) number nearly 400,000 men--the third largest in Europe. In 1968, even though they were certain that they would encounter no resistance, the Soviets utilized nearly a half-million Warsaw Pact troops to occupy Czechoslovakia. Soviet military doctrine, which calls for overwhelming local military superiority, suggests that the Soviet high command would be reluctant to intervene in Poland, where they know they would face resistance, without considerably more troops than they used in 1968--perhaps as many as 750,000.

Undoubtedly, with enough manpower and time, the Soviets can conquer Poland. But this is likely only as the result of a bloody war, lasting for weeks or even months, with Soviet casualties many times those in Afghanistan. And from the onset of conflict, if not before, the Soviets will have to write off entirely the 15 Polish divisions that play a key role in their contingency planning for conflict with NATO.

A Polish-Soviet war would create severe problems in the USSR's relations with its East European allies. As they did in 1968, the Soviets would want their allies to participate in the intervention. Then, the forces invading Czechoslovakia contained several divisions from Poland and East Germany as well as token forces from Hungary and Bulgaria. Although there is evidence that most of these troops were deployed in second echelon positions, their participation did give the Soviet invasion the semblance of a collective Warsaw Pact undertaking.

For similar political reasons, and also because of limits on their military manpower, the Soviets would want to draw the East Europeans into a Polish invasion as well. But what kinds of allies would they

make? Given the likelihood of actual combat, how reliable would they be in fighting fellow East Europeans?

Although the East German army is often regarded by Western analysts as the most reliable of the Warsaw Pact armies, even its utility in a Soviet invasion of Poland is questionable. While the officer corps may be reliable, recent unrest among East German youth and the frequent references by the East German media to "pacifist attitudes" in the army may be indicative of a morale problem among the soldiers. And there are indications that the Soviets may harbor serious reservations about the East German army's reliability: It alone among Warsaw Pact armies is subjected to rigid Soviet controls and is directly subordinated to the Soviet Group of Forces in East Germany.

Further, the Soviets should not overlook the psychological effect of deploying East German soldiers in Poland. Not only their field gray uniforms would recall the Nazi invaders of World War II. Another invasion by a German army would very likely result in a violent emotional reaction and stiffen Polish resistance.

The Czechoslovak army is even less likely to prove a useful component of an invading force. Memories of 1968 are still very vivid, and the army is by no means immune to the wide-spread Russophobia among the population.

Soviet leaders have not forgotten that in the wake of the 1968 invasion, the Czechoslovak army, considered previously the most reliable in the Warsaw Pact, nearly disintegrated as a result of a mass exodus from the officer corps. It is significant that the five Soviet divisions introduced to Czechoslovakia in 1968 are not deployed along NATO

borders but primarily around the country's major cities, suggesting an internal policing function.

The Hungarians were probably the most reluctant participants in 1968, sending no more than a token force. They are unlikely to be more enthusiastic this time, given the traditional ties of friendship between Poland and Hungary and the Hungarians' own traumatic experience of the bloody Soviet suppression of the 1956 Hungarian revolution.

As in 1968, any massive involvement of the Bulgarians is precluded for reasons of geography.

Romania, on the other hand, is already on record as warning against Soviet intervention in Polish affairs and cannot be expected to provide any assistance.

Significant as these immediate problems may be for the Kremlin, the long-term repercussions in Eastern Europe of a ruthless suppression of Poland could be much more serious. It is not inconceivable, particularly if protracted fighting should take place, that the Polish example could bring to a boil the large reservoir of discontent existing just below the surface in most East European countries. The likely economic retaliation by the West would seriously exacerbate an already grim economic picture throughout Eastern Europe and make new upheavals more likely.

Countries such as Yugoslavia which have steered a neutral course might feel threatened enough to tilt to the West. Whatever the scenario, Eastern Europe after an invasion of Poland would not be a congenial place for the Soviet Union.

Conflict in Poland would also confront the Soviet leadership with real problems at home, most notably of a military- manpower and economic nature. An invasion of the type envisaged would require an immense commitment of military forces. Obviously, so many divisions cannot be deployed from Soviet soil without leaving some gaps in current Soviet manning levels or upsetting other planned or possible military operations.

Many Soviet divisions are not fully combat ready, including most of those along the USSR-Polish border. Soviet military authorities are unlikely to strip other strategic regions of the country of fully-staffed divisions, a move which would result in other military vulnerabilities. Therefore, incompletely-staffed divisions would have to be upgraded, preparations which are time-consuming and costly. Moreover, reserve call-ups to fill these divisions would be made at the expense of the nonmilitary economy which is already labor-short in the USSR's European regions.

In view of the nearly 10 divisions the Soviets have stationed in Afghanistan, a large troop commitment to Poland would have numerous, significant implications for Soviet military capabilities elsewhere.

First, if many of the 20 Soviet divisions stationed in East Germany were utilized, Soviet military capabilities for use against NATO would be reduced substantially.

Second, if a number of divisions were taken from the Sino-Soviet border, Soviet military capabilities there would be weakened.

Third, a large commitment of troops to strengthen the Soviet position in Afghanistan would become unlikely unless large numbers of reser-

vists were called up and put through additional training.

Fourth, any designs to invest troops in operations in Iran or the Persian Gulf region would be made more difficult.

Fifth, even after Soviet military forces subdued the Poles, Soviet military manpower requirements in Poland would not end. To consolidate and hold military gains in Poland, certainly more than 10 Soviet divisions would have to remain in place, thereby burdening the Soviet military with another permanent or semi-permanent military commitment.

Military intervention in Poland could also exacerbate ethnic tensions within the USSR itself, particularly in areas adjacent to Poland. Ethnic Russians can be counted on to support a Soviet intervention in Poland with little reluctance, if not enthusiasm. The same cannot be said about the non-Russian peoples nearest to the Polish border.

Over a million Soviet Poles live in the USSR and most are concentrated in a strip running southwestward from the Lithuanian city of Vilnius to the Polish border. A substantial number of Soviet Poles were repatriated to Poland in the early 1960s, suggesting that most have preserved their identity as Poles despite Russian efforts to assimilate them.

For Catholic Lithuanians, Poland represents a staunchly Catholic state on its border with which it feels considerable sympathy. Ukrainian Uniates, who observe the Eastern Orthodox rite but honor the Pope and not the Moscow Patriarch as the leader of their church, probably are similarly inclined, especially since Pope John Paul II (a Pole) has indicated publicly his desire to improve the lot of Uniates in the USSR. Western Ukrainians generally might be infected by Polish resis-

tance. It should be recalled that they initially welcomed Hitler's armies as liberators and supported armed opposition to Russian domination well into the 1950s.

The costs the Soviets would have to pay for military intervention in Poland are thus likely to be enormous. To recount them is to indicate why the Soviets will intervene in Poland reluctantly, and only as a last resort. But there should be no illusions: Intervene they will if they feel that Poland is slipping out of their grasp. For control of Poland is the key to Soviet control of Eastern Europe, which remains the primary Soviet foreign policy interest. The Soviets' dilemma is that they may be compelled to intervene in Poland to maintain their empire, yet intervention can only exacerbate their immediate problems at home and abroad with little prospect for long-term solutions. Such are the usual dilemmas of empires in decline.

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