

INTERNAL ASSESSMENT

**“To what extent was martial law imposed in Poland on
13 December 1981 in order to pre-empt the military
intervention of the USSR?”**



NAME

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¹ On the banner of the cinema “Moscow” is written: “Apocalypse, now!”
Niedenthal, Chris. December 1981. *Świat obrazu*. Web. 05 February 2014.

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1. Identification and evaluation of sources

The investigation, examining the situation in Poland in 1980 and 1981, that is the economic conditions, dependence upon the USSR and the interactions between the Polish United Workers' Party and Solidarity movement, will try to answer the question: **To what extent was imposition of martial law in Poland on 13 December 1981 in order to pre-empt the military intervention of the USSR?**

The primary sources which will be evaluated are a script from the session of Politburo, which clearly reflects the attitude of the USSR towards the situation in Poland, and the proclamation of martial law by General Jaruzelski, in which he argued why martial law had to be imposed in Poland.

*Working notes from the Session of the CPSU CC Politburo:*²

This source is the working notes from the session of the Politburo, presided by Leonid Brezhnev, on the question of the situation in Poland from December 10, 1981. It was kept by the secretary Chernenko, and published 26 years later in a collection of secret documentation. Its purpose was to record the secret meeting and it was intended only for use within the Politburo.

It is valuable because it shows the intentions of the USSR towards Poland in a period of a particular unrest. It reveals many details about the economic situation in Poland and a predicted Soviet financial aid, which were not, and would not have been, publicized by Polish authorities. It clearly states the opinion of the USSR about invading Poland in 1981, expressed by Andropov: "We do not intend to introduce troops into Poland. [...] even if Poland falls under control of Solidarity, that's the way it will be."³ This strong statement renders Politburo's treatment and attitude towards Poland. However, the formal nature of the document limits an insight into a process of reaching the agreement between the comrades. Only Andropov's recollection of "a very thorough exchange of opinions", suggests that the consensus did not emerge truly spontaneously and that the view regarding military intervention differed among the Politburo.⁴

² Brezhnev, Leonid. "On the Question of the Situation in Poland", 10 December 1981. Cold War International History Project, *Virtual Archive*, CWIHP, May 14, 2008. *Making the History of 1989*. Web. Accessed: 28 November 2013.

³ Brezhnev, Leonid. "On the Question of the Situation in Poland", 10 December 1981. Cold War International History Project, *Virtual Archive*, CWIHP, May 14, 2008. *Making the History of 1989*. Web. Accessed: 28 November 2013, p.9

⁴ Brezhnev, Leonid. "On the Question of the Situation in Poland", 10 December 1981. Cold War International History Project, *Virtual Archive*, CWIHP, May 14, 2008. *Making the History of 1989*. Web. Accessed: 28 November 2013. Translator's Note n.21

A proclamation of martial law by Wojciech Jaruzelski:⁵

This speech was given by General Wojciech Jaruzelski on December 13, 1981 on the TV and radio. Its purpose was to explain the causes of the imposition of martial law. It described the current situation, the steps which had to be taken by the Party to counteract it, and the nature of the newly established Military Council for National Salvation.

The value of the document is that it clearly expresses the opinion of the communist Party about the culprit of the martial law. The General blamed Solidarity for refusal of cooperation with the Party, and lack of any agreement on the reforms. This speech is an example of the Party's propaganda which manipulated with facts and language in order to obtain popular support and present the Party as the only seeker for cooperation.

The document is limited by lack of information on the numerous debts incurred by the government, and brutal repressions by the militia on Solidarity activists. Furthermore, the General called martial law 'legal', while in reality its introduction was against the Constitution.⁶ Another inaccuracy is the mentioned list of 'interned', which, according to Jaruzelski's memoirs, was unknown to him.⁷

⁵ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. „Przemówienie radiowe i telewizyjne wygłoszone 13 grudnia 1981 r.” [„The speech addressed on December 13, 1981 on radio and television”]. *Przemówienia 1981-1982*. [Speeches 1981-1982]. Książka i Wiedza: Warszawa, 1983.

⁶ Gmyz, Cezary. “Nielegalny stan wojenny” [“The illegal martial law”]. *Rzeczpospolita*, 16 March 2011. Web. 17 December 2013

⁷ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. *Stan wojenny. Dlaczego...* [The state of war. Why...]. Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza „BGW”: Warszawa, 1992

2. Investigation

Many years after the imposition of the martial law General Jaruzelski still claimed that he had chosen a 'lesser evil' preventing a 'bloodbath' of the Soviet military intervention.⁸ He evoked French president Mitterand's opinion: "I'd always seen only two possibilities: either Polish government would restore the order, or the USSR would do it."⁹ Since the government was losing control over the country where a trade union had risen in strength, the second solution seemed likely to happen. The Soviets had to take action in order to secure their link with the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany and keep Warsaw Pact together.¹⁰ Therefore, they directly participated in the events in Poland, yet there was no promise or threat of their military intervention anywhere. Instead, there were frequent meetings held with Polish authorities, and an engagement into Polish economy, which in 1981 was on the brink of decline with 3 billion \$ of interest rate and approx. 7 billion \$ of installments to pay back to the Western creditors.¹¹

Due to empty shelves in shops and rises of food prices, Polish society lost trust in the Party and saw the only hope in the democratic Solidarity movement, which with its 9.5 million membership had already represented one third of the entire population.¹² The Party feared national strikes organized by Solidarity, and was ready to compromise with the union by all means. The terms reached in March 1981 with the 'Warsaw agreement', in which Solidarity leaned to suspend a national strike, brought a split and not only inside Solidarity, but also between the communists. New Party members called 'pragmatists', like Mieczysław Rakowski, demanded internal reforms and negotiations with Solidarity. These were fully opposed by the 'fundamentalists' so-called 'hardheaded', hard-line communists.¹³ Furthermore, Moscow had lost trust in the abilities of the First Secretary Stanisław Kania to restore order, and it began searching for a new leader who could silence the opposition without further Soviet engagement in Polish matters. The Soviets did not want to intervene directly in Poland, because they were already occupied since December 1979 with the war in Afghanistan, and since this intervention had considerably weakened European détente, another action of such type could have completely ruined it.¹⁴ And this could have further completely ruined the USSR.

⁸ Ścisłowska, Monika. "Leader's daughter: Fear behind Polish martial law." 28 May 2013. *The Associated Press*. Web. 28 November 2013.

⁹ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. *Stan wojenny. Dlaczego...* [*The state of war. Why...*] Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza „BGW”: Warszawa, 1992, p. 7, trans. Michalska, Magda

¹⁰ Zubok, Vladislav. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War. From Stalin to Gorbachev*. University of North Carolina Press: USA, 2009

¹¹ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. *Stan wojenny. Dlaczego...* [*The state of war. Why...*] Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza „BGW”: Warszawa, 1992

¹² Wałęsa, Lech. *A Path of Hope. An autobiography*. Pan Books: London, 1988

¹³ Zubok, Vladislav. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War. From Stalin to Gorbachev*. University of North Carolina Press: USA, 2009

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

However, the talks between both Soviet and Polish governments took place quite often. Their main focus was to draft plans of the martial law, which were officially signed in April 1981.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Polish authorities had declared that they would not resort to martial law unless Solidarity "forced them to do so".¹⁶

Summer 1981 brought a deepening economic crisis and a regiment of meat, butter, flour, rice and grits.¹⁷ As a response Solidarity proposed to establish a joint commission to control food production.¹⁸ The government rejected it as an attempt to take power and instead, in August 1981, suggested they accept the leading role of the Party in the country, but Solidarity straightaway broke the negotiations. In September the Party faced Soviet hostility, as they refused to deliver the Poles in 1982 important resources like oil or cotton, blaming it on the instable political situation and "a growing anti-Soviet campaign" in Poland.¹⁹ Poles read it as an economic blockade which was supposed to threaten the Party unable to take any radical steps against the opposition.²⁰

However, in reality, the USSR had also been going through the financial problems. As Anatoly Chernyaev, a member of International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, wrote in his journal in August 1980: "We simply cannot afford to keep Poland as our economic dependent."²¹ By the 1980s, the USSR had to maintain or assist sixty-nine satellites and clients, but due to the economic sanctions placed by President Carter after the invasion of Afghanistan, the Kremlin could not pay its commitments.²² Therefore, Moscow blamed lack of the economic support for Poland on political unrest, and on 18 October 1981 agreed to General Jaruzelski as new First Secretary, because he seemed in favor of a 'force solution'.²³

Jaruzelski believed that imposition of martial law would mean economic aid from the USSR for Poland and Moscow knew it well.²⁴ He began secret preparations for a military coup, such as deploying the troops, and on November 28, the government concluded a demand for an

¹⁵ Chernenko, K. "On the Results of the Meeting Held by Cdes. Yu. V. Andropov and D. F. Ustinov with the Polish Friends", 9 April 1981. Cold War International History Project, *Virtual Archive*, CWIHP, May 14, 2008. *Making the History of 1989*. Web. Accessed: 28 November 2013.

¹⁶ Brehnev, Leonid. "On the Question of the Situation in Poland", 10 December 1981. Cold War International History Project, *Virtual Archive*, CWIHP, May 14, 2008. *Making the History of 1989*. Web. Accessed: 28 November 2013, p. 8.

¹⁷ Łabędź, Krzysztof. „Przerwa na wolność” - lata 1980-1981” [„A break for freedom” - period of 1980-1981”]. *Wielka historia Polski po 1945*. [Great history of Poland after 1945]. PINNEX: Kraków, 2003.

¹⁸ "Kalendarium sierpień 1981" ["Chronology of August 1981"]. *Encyklopedia Solidarności*. Web. 9 December 2013

¹⁹ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. *Stan wojenny. Dlaczego...* [The state of war. Why...] Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza „BGW”: Warszawa, 1992, p. 246, trans. Michalska, Magda.

²⁰ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. *Stan wojenny. Dlaczego...* [The state of war. Why...] Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza „BGW”: Warszawa, 1992.

²¹ Zubok, Vladislav. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War. From Stalin to Gorbachev*. University of North Carolina Press: USA, 2009, p. 268.

²² Ibid.

²³ Łabędź, Krzysztof. „Przerwa na wolność” - lata 1980-1981” [„A break for freedom” - period of 1980-1981”]. *Wielka historia Polski po 1945*. [Great history of Poland after 1945]. PINNEX: Kraków, 2003.

²⁴ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. *Stan wojenny. Dlaczego...* [The state of war. Why...] Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza „BGW”: Warszawa, 1992.

Extraordinary Powers Bill.²⁵ Solidarity responded threatening a 24h general strike if the Bill was passed, and an unlimited general strike if the Extraordinary Powers were applied.²⁶ The internal conflict grew bigger with every day and the use of riot police against the students on an occupation strike in the Warsaw Fire Officers' Academy on December 2nd provoked Solidarity to react. The next day the National Presidium of the union met in Radom for a debate, and this response was later used by the Party as one of the pretexts for the military takeover as a few days later the official media broadcast the extracts of Solidarity's members' speeches which had been covertly recorded and taken out of their context.²⁷ They were meant to demonstrate the people Solidarity's 'true face'.²⁸ In response to this, Solidarity declared that "Talks on national agreement have been used as a screen, concealing preparations to attack the union".²⁹ Accuracy of this statement turned out two weeks later, when on December 13, martial law or the 'state of war' was imposed, and all the prominent opposition activists, with Lech Wałęsa on top, were interned, being accused of spreading chaos and anarchy.³⁰ General Jaruzelski justified this action in his address to the nation from December 13, saying that "troublemakers had to be 'tied up' to avoid an abyss of a civil war".³¹

The preparations to the martial law took place earlier both in Poland and the USSR. On December 5, the decision about the imposition of martial law was taken unanimously by the Central Committee of the Polish Communist Party which also authorized General Jaruzelski to decide on its date on his own.³² Five days later the same issue as well as possible economic aid to Poland were discussed by the CPSU CC Politburo.³³ However, the Soviets did not exactly know when and what would happen, as comrade Rusakov said: "No one knows what will happen over the next few days. There was a conversation about 'Operation X.' At first, they [Poles] said it would be on the night of 11-12 December, and then this was changed to the night of the 12th and 13th. And now they're already saying it won't be until around the 20th." ³⁴

²⁵ Zubok, Vladislav. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War. From Stalin to Gorbachev*. University of North Carolina Press: USA, 2009

²⁶ Ash, Timothy Garton. *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*. Granta Books: London, 1991

²⁷ Ash, Timothy Garton. *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*. Granta Books: London, 1991

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p.255

³⁰ Wałęsa, Lech. *A Path of Hope. An autobiography*. Pan Books: London, 1988

³¹ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. „Przemówienie radiowe i telewizyjne wygłoszone 13 grudnia 1981 r.” [„The speech addressed on December 13, 1981 on radio and television”]. *Przemówienia 1981-1982. [Speeches 1981-1982]*. Książka i Wiedza: Warszawa, 1983, transl. Michalska, Magda.

³² "Kalendarium grudzień 1981" ["Chronology of December 1981"]. *Encyklopedia Solidarności*. Web. 9 December 2013

³³ Brezhnev, Leonid. "On the Question of the Situation in Poland", 10 December 1981. Cold War International History Project, *Virtual Archive*, CWIHP, May 14, 2008. *Making the History of 1989*. Web. Accessed: 28 November 2013.

³⁴ Brezhnev, Leonid. "On the Question of the Situation in Poland", 10 December 1981. Cold War International History Project, *Virtual Archive*, CWIHP, May 14, 2008. *Making the History of 1989*. Web. Accessed: 28 November 2013.

This quote proves that despite the direct participation of Moscow in the events in Poland, the decision, and later application of, the 'state of war', was absolutely and only dependent on the Polish United Workers' Party, especially its highest authorities represented by General Wojciech Jaruzelski. Although Brezhnev said in December 1980 about Poland: " We won't come in. But if it gets complicated, we will"³⁵, the USSR forcefully maintained that they would not intervene, basing it on their own financial situation and the engagement in the Afghan war. Therefore, imposition of the national martial law cannot be justified as a way to save the country before the Soviet or Warsaw Pact military forces intervention. It was rather meant to silence the opposition or prompt an economic aid from the USSR, than pre-empt any military intervention.

³⁵ Jaruzelski, Wojciech. *Stan wojenny. Dlaczego...* [*The state of war. Why...*] Polska Oficyna Wydawnicza „BGW”: Warszawa, 1992, p. 42, trans. Michalska, Magda.

3. Reflection

The question 'Why?' about the imposition of martial law in Poland appears in the mass media almost every year during anniversaries of December 1981. Its relevance has not diminished with time because some people's freedom or at least good fame still depend on the answer. None of the authorities could be condemned nor victims compensated until martial law is unambiguously judged as a military coup or, on the opposite, considered as the only way to save the country before the civil war.

Unfortunately, historians have quite a big problem trying to solve this issue because both field of work as well as evidence are limited. Many of the Party members, who directly participated in the imposition, are already old and ill, some of them dead. The opposition, like interned Solidarity members, represent only one side of the conflict, which is an important source of information but does not show a full image of happenings. The documents, like scripts documenting gatherings, agreements signed by Party and Solidarity, or correspondence between Moscow and Warsaw, which could serve as proofs of secret meetings and discussions of the Polish Workers' Party and the Soviet Politburo, are still sealed and hidden in unknown archives, or simply destroyed.

The method I, as a historian, could use during my investigation was reading the books written by witnesses, talking with them (I talked with my parents about the reality of 1980's) and searching for primary sources such as newspapers, documents, television and radio excerpts. This method, however, is time-consuming and still does not bring expected results. Thus, the sources the historians can rely on are press publications and people's memoirs which often are not fully objective and show only a partial truth. An explicit and true assessment is impossible, which disables the whole process of investigation.

Apart from the historical point of view, which always requires seeking the truth, the historians who work on this issue are being under social and ethical pressures. If they prove that martial law was truly a military coup, many Party authorities, who ever since have lived with no repercussions of their decisions, should at last be put on trial. Similarly the victims, who have never got any type of indemnity or compensation, should receive such. Lives of so many people, which could have been completely different for years, can change depending on the historical examination and assessment. The responsibility put on historians is enormous therefore any conclusions must be drawn very carefully.

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