

## To what extent was Poland's Martial Law justified?

Martial Law in Poland, imposed December 13, 1981, sparked controversy across the world. The question is, whether Jaruzelski's decision to impose absolute military control was justified? The policy faced severe criticism from already struggling Poles who, overwhelmed by economic crisis, lacked stability leading up to the events of winter 1981. When closely analyzing the implementation of Martial Law, one can find evidence of substantial military documents and testimonials of military officials that support Jaruzelski's decisions. However, simultaneously, accounts of other respected figures, like Gorbachev, clearly emphasize no plans of invasion. While Martial Law succeeded at bringing order back to Poland, the policy was a subterfuge by Polish Communists to consolidate power.

By 1981, Poland was lead by chaos. The economic crisis angered citizens who were already frustrated with the authoritarian government. After rising food prices, strikes emerged across the nation. Amongst the protesters, Lech Wałęsa, the future president of Poland, lead the demonstration at the Lenin Shipyard. Ultimately Lech Wałęsa became the leader of Solidarity, the first independent trade union in the Eastern Communist bloc. After gathering millions of supporters, Solidarity secured the right to strike, greater freedom for religious and political expression, and the establishment of independent trade unions. What is now described as a democratic revolution, a path towards constitutional liberalism, was, for the Soviets and many Polish politicians, simply chaos. With legitimate opposition rising in politics, the government felt threatened.

Opposition in parliament was unheard of in Soviet-controlled nations. In desperate times of conflict, shortage, and crisis, civilians begin questioning their current government and start searching for alternatives to address demands. Solidarity was a revolutionary path that, as it seemed, paved the way to political freedom, constitutional liberalism, and democracy. However, reflecting upon the organization's behaviors, historian Karol Modzelewski describes the issues that Solidarity advisors faced: "They had a sense of mission, that they had to save Poland... to save Poland, you had to force the masses to respect the demands of reason, the demands of political realism. However, since you cannot forcibly teach a crowd reason, you had to force the

leader to learn, and to inflate him, just enough, so that he could curb the masses,” (qtd in Paczkowski and Werblan 34). Solidarity’s supporters were guided by passion and a mystical dream of freedom from communism; their actions were driven by their despair and rage caused by years of oppression, rather than a diplomatic agenda. Solidarity’s leadership soon lost control of the masses and eventually the passion for freedom became a self-destructive weapon that paved the way to anarchy. As historian Bogdan Boruszewicz asserts when discussing Solidarity’s activity, “Frenzy erupted. Thinking in political categories stopped, and mysticism took over...” Despite attempts at cooperation, like in August 1980, “[f]or a long time, neither side respected the existing laws, in their entirety” (qtd in Paczkowski and Werblan 33). Solidarity would often go beyond the law even questioning its validity as a means of protest. The authoritarian regulations set by the government were regularly broken by aspiring democratic citizens; however, no new policies followed. This left Poland in a state of turmoil “outside the legal dimension,” (Paczkowski and Werblan 34). This begs the question, if Poland’s laws were inoperative, how could Martial Law be considered a breach of non-existent law?

The main reason for Martial Law was the threat of Soviet invasion. Assessing the situation, Jaruzelski began drawing parallels between the Hungarian Uprising, the Prague Spring and Poland. As head of the Polish politburo, Jaruzelski had the obligation to anticipate any foreign invasion; Poland’s safety should be the priority. According to the Soviet General Dmitri Volkogonov, when reflecting upon meetings with Soviet authorities and Jaruzelski, “It was said: if the Polish leadership doesn’t demonstrate that it has total control of the situation, the Soviet leadership will feel obliged to undertake adequate actions under the circumstances,” (qtd in Werblan 28). Meanwhile, Soviet archives document the “Soyuz-81” program outlining military plans of three Soviet armies<sup>1</sup> and their plan to penetrate Polish territory. In a 1994 letter addressed to General Jaruzelski, General Dubynin and General Volkogonov wrote, “You saved Poland from a Soviet invasion.” Jaruzelski could not have relied on informers as no intelligence operations were conducted against the Soviets. Outside sources, in particular the NATO nations investigating the threat of invasion, determined the risk of Soviet aggression as serious. Margaret Thatcher, in her memoir *My Years on Downing Street*, wrote: “Beginning at the end of 1980, the

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<sup>1</sup> 21st, 23rd, and 38th

Americans were convinced that the USSR planned direct military intervention to break the Polish reform movement, the same way they did with Prague Spring of 1968,” (qtd in Werblan). Jaruzelski’s plan was to restore order, protecting Poland from Soviet intervention. Considering the long Cold War with the Americans, Poland was on Ronald Reagan’s radar who was following the events from the Oval Office in Washington D.C.

However, there is evidence suggesting no threat of invasion. According to historian Rudolf G. Pichaja, the USSR’s hands were tied; Soviet archives confirm that with war in Afghanistan still being the focus, the Red Army was not able to send military to the West. The United States Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. stated that the US were “seriously concerned” about Martial Law imposed in Poland, and warned the USSR not to interfere in the crisis. On December 23, Reagan suspended economic ties with both Poland and USSR stating that he will impose sanctions if the “outrages in Poland” did not come to a stop. On December 29, Reagan imposed sanctions against the Soviet Union and warned that “further steps may be necessary and I [Reagan] will be prepared to take them,” (“Back in Time”). In addition, the US containment policy further suggests that the US would intervene and protect Poland during an invasion. As Margaret Thatcher writes, “Instead of seeking merely to contain communism, we wished to put freedom on the offensive,” (Thatcher 389). Thatcher further describes Reagan’s speech promoting democracy as a “manifesto of the Reagan doctrine under which the West would not abandon those countries which had had communism forced upon them,” (Thatcher 389). Therefore, even if the USSR were to invade, Western democracies were prepared to intervene. However, Pichoja reiterates that the Soviets could only pressure Poland diplomatically and only threaten with invasion. In fact, historian Artur Brożyniak asserts that the “Soyuz-81” trainings that took place at the Soviet-Polish border, were orchestrated to manipulate the Polish officials into considering invasion a possibility. However, the USSR was careful not to push Jaruzelski to the extent that he’d seek help from the USA; Soviets feared their Cold War rivals’ involvement. However, as discussed by Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski, the USSR would not have even crossed the Polish borders. He calls upon secret reports given to CIA by Ryszard Kukliński<sup>2</sup>, which conclude that Soviet invasion wasn’t a threat since mid-1981. Furthermore,

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<sup>2</sup> stolen Soviet documents about their military plans

proven with Soviet archives, Brzezinski asserts, the Soviet Politburo<sup>3</sup> wouldn't invade even if Solidarity came to power. Historian Antoni Dudek suggests Martial Law could have been avoided: "If Solidarity's revolution would have lasted until this period [November of 1982 when Brezhnev died], the Kremlin would have surely come to terms with it," (qtd in Godlewski). Historian Jan Żaryn agrees with this, stating, after the conviction of Jaruzelski and Stanisław Kania<sup>4</sup>, "This is a remarkable day for the settlement of painful moments in the post-war history of Poland, because until now there were problems with the settlement of communist crimes," (qtd in "Historyk").

Remarkably, both Pichoja and Brzezinski suggest that it wasn't the Soviets, but Jaruzelski himself who wanted the USSR to invade Poland. Pichoja states that Brezhnev strongly disagreed with Jaruzelski's demands and protested invading; he even bribed Jaruzelski with 30 thousands tons of meat. Jaruzelski wanted to demonstrate what consequences opposition could bring. Furthermore, alarmed by the rising approval of Solidarity, Jaruzelski wanted to gain more power by provoking chaos and restoring order through extreme consolidation of power. Jaruzelski could have negotiated with Solidarity, however, this would mean introducing opposition into the government. One can conclude that Martial Law was introduced as a way for communists to remain in power. Soviet evidence regards the threat of invasion as legitimate, however, it could be political manipulation and attempts to mask weaknesses. Jaruzelski saw an opportunity to let chaos burst into flames in a nation already hit by a heat wave of political turmoil.

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<sup>3</sup> KC KPZR

<sup>4</sup> accused by the Institute of National Remembrance in Katowice for the imposition of Martial Law