

The Warsaw Pact Lives

[Caption under the photograph:] **“On 10 October 1982 the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, met with the leaders of the delegations to the meeting of the Military Council of the Warsaw Pact countries.”**

(c) ADM/CAF/Ireneusz Sobieszczuk

Despite many years’ efforts, historians from an international research project on the history of NATO and the Warsaw Pact have not achieved access to Polish military archives. The reason for this is an existing agreement binding the member-states of the now defunct Warsaw Pact, to which Poland adheres with unusual scrupulousness.

When in 1999 Professor Vojtech Mastny, an American historian of Czech origin, wrote to the Polish Minister of Defense Janusz Onyszkiewicz, asking that certain decades-old military documents should be made available to a number of designated Polish historians, he did not foresee the turbulent history of his request. After all, Poland had just joined NATO, and there was reason to believe that it would be happy to join the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (PHP), whose coordinator is Professor Mastny. The program aims at the declassification, publication and analysis of documents of the former Pact which have lost their operational significance, but which may bring to the light at least bits of the truth about the role of individual countries.

However, Onyszkiewicz’ answer, or more exactly a letter written on his behalf by Col. Henryk Porajski of the General Staff, is quite clear.

The agreement from 1991 about the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact prohibits Poland from making these documents public. To be more precise: Article 3 in the protocol signed on 25 February 1991, on the cancellation of agreements that were part of the Pact and on the dissolution of its organs and structure. According to Col. Porajski, documents that Poland received from the Joint Staff of the Warsaw Pact may be shown to third countries or made public only if the signatories sign a new agreement in this matter.

“A failure of the Polish Republic to observe the procedures necessary for the implementation

of international agreements might be regarded by its foreign partners as casting doubt on its credibility, and might raise questions about its future conduct,” the representative of the Polish Ministry of National Defense wrote in his letter to Professor Mastny.

Nowak’s intervention didn’t help

However, Mastny didn’t give up. His representatives approached other cabinet ministers and put pressure on the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. No result. Finally, early this year professor Mastny once more wrote an official letter to the minister of defense, Jerzy Szmajdziński. The argument for renewing the request was the changed political situation since 1999. Poland had been a member of NATO for several years, and became one the United States’ closest allies during the war in Iraq.

“It is our conviction that, regardless of the obsolete 25 February 1991 agreement among the members of the now defunct Warsaw Pact that barred access to the alliance’s documents to third parties, those documents should now be open to scholarly research in all the former member states of the communist alliance that are now members of NATO,” Mastny wrote. And he added: “The inaccessibility of Polish records concerning the role of the Polish armed forces within the Warsaw Pact contrasts with the ready availability of such documents in German or Czechoslovak archives.”

This time Professor Mastny’s letter was recommended to the Minister of National Defense by Jan Nowak-Jeziorański,¹ who tried to convince Jerzy Szmajdziński that Mastny and his team are “held in high esteem internationally”, and that the historian’s request “deserves a positive solution.”

However, even that didn’t help. Jerzy Szmajdziński, just as his predecessors, proved unmoved and did not give instructions to declassify the documents requested by the PHP, even though the documents in question were meticulously listed in Professor Mastny’s letter.

The reasons given were practically the same as in the answer to the letter he had sent to Onyszkiewicz four years earlier. The answer this time came from the head of the Central Military Archives, Cmdr. Waldemar Wójcik. Some of the phrases from the previous letter were even repeated. Nowak-Jeziorański received a letter of similar content from the director of the secretariat of the Minister of National Defense, Gen. Witold Szymański.

This was the price to be paid for the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact

The former head of the Ministry of National Defense [Janusz Onyszkiewicz] remembers Professor Mastny's letter. He claims that he turned for advice to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which gave a negative answer, referring to the agreement of 1991 already mentioned.

- One cannot remove the classification on the documents requested by Professor Mastny, because they are part of an international agreement. This can be ignored, but that would carry certain consequences, says Onyszkiewicz. He continues: "We are after all a normal country and if there is no extraordinarily pressing reason, one shouldn't disregard such agreements." What, then, was the reason for the agreement in the first place? – One has to remember, that this happened in 1991, and we were facing the difficult question of the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Poland – argues the former minister.

Onyszkiewicz is seconded by his successor as Minister of National Defense, Bronisław Komorowski: "At that time this was a price worth paying for the smooth dissolution of the Warsaw Pact."

- This is an old principle, when the partners to an agreement request secrecy, one cannot unilaterally disregard this – emphasizes the director of the archives of the ministry of Foreign Affairs, Marek Sędek. – In order to cancel this agreement, one would need the agreement of all the signatories or their successors.

Risking trouble with the military intelligence services

However, Polish historians see additional reasons for the unwillingness of the military establishment to make archival records available. – I think this is a matter of the usual military loyalty towards those who used to sign Warsaw Pact documents, and who might be embarrassed by the release of these documents now, says the historian, Professor Andrzej Paczkowski. In his opinion Professor Mastny's request could have been granted, without any adverse consequences at all for the Polish armed forces. Paczkowski had contacted Onyszkiewicz in the matter. – After all, we are talking about mostly political documents, he argues.

Paczkowski is of the opinion, that the impotency of the civilian ministers of defense in this matter is one more example of the weak civilian control over the army. – I think one could

call it a certain fear of the generals, he says. – The military strongly guards access to archival documents, and the civilian leadership in the ministry accepts this.

Polish historians have had access to various kinds of military documents from the period of People's Poland, sometimes even to secret documents. However, the procedures were mostly informal. From this experience, however, it has become known what “tricks” military archivists sometimes use to prevent access to documents. They may, for example, refuse to release more than 30 years old documents that are not even classified, and that according to the law should be available. The procedure is simply to group the old documents together with documents that are less than 30 years old, which makes the entire collection inaccessible. Among the intriguing documents that have thus far not been released, one could mention those related to the operation codenamed “Wisła” from the early 1960s. Within the framework of that operation, Soviet nuclear arms were stationed in Poland. – Of course, certain people linked to the old order don't like the release of certain documents, Komorowski confesses. – But it is also an open question whether publicity about Poland as an active participant in the Warsaw Pact's aggressive plans would bring much benefit at the present time.

- No institution likes to release its archives, and this goes for the military as well, Janusz Onyszkiewicz adds.

From his personal experience Komorowski knows the possible consequences of opening up the military archives. In 2001, toward the end of his tenure as Minister of National Defense, he decided to declassify military documents related to the events of August 1980. The documents were made public and presented at a press conference, with the result that Komorowski became the object of investigation by the Military Intelligence Service (WSI).

The WSI also played a crucial role in the handling of Professor Mastny's request. When Defense Minister Szmajdziński received Mastny's letter early this year, the head of the WSI, Gen. Marek Dukaczewski, prepared the first answer to the American historian's request. In a letter to the Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Czesław Piątas, he used the same arguments as in the previous letters sent to Professor Mastny – about the agreement of 25 February 1991, about Poland's international credibility, etc.

What has been released abroad?

Mastny's key argument is pointing to other countries of the former Warsaw Pact, where historians cooperating with his project have received the relevant documents – the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Germany taking the lead. As stated in Mastny's letter, the files of the Czechoslovak Ministry of National Defense are available up to 1972, and researchers representing the PHP have received a special permission to study documents even for the years 1972-1989. Hungary has opened its defense ministry files up to 1978, and the files for the years 1978-1989 are available to PHP researchers by special permission.

However, the Polish bureaucrats doubt this information. – If something has been made public, it would have been against the rules. I don't believe it until I see it – says Andrzej Żak, deputy director of the Central Military Archives. – He asks rhetorically: Could one imagine, for example, that the Bulgarians would release documents about the supposed role of their military special services in the attempt to assassinate the Pope?

However, the director of the Cold War History Research Center in Budapest, Csaba Békés, confirms that the information about access is correct, and Hungarian historians have access to almost all military documents up to 1978. Less than 5 per cent of the documents are withheld for reasons of state security.

Bronisław Komorowski similarly cannot believe that other countries of the former Warsaw Pact have formally denounced the agreement of 1991. "It may be a matter of a certain room for interpretation about which documents could be categorized as domestic, not concerning the Warsaw Pact." Wouldn't something like that be possible here?

Onyszkiewicz admits that Poland's present situation is different from, say, 1999, and that there ought to be better access to documents from before 1989. Andrzej Żak as well emphasizes that if a researcher writing for instance a study of the organization of the Polish People's Army presents a properly formulated request, he might be given access to relevant documents for the entire period of 1949-1989. He adds that some military documents are in the collection of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) in the Modern Records Archives. However, it is unlikely that access will be granted to such a range of documents as contained in Professor Mastny's request.

Thus, for the time being the historians of the PHP are unlikely to receive in Poland the documents they have been requesting. This explains why Poland was one of the countries with the weakest representation at the international PHP conference that took place in

Norway in June.

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Notes

¹ Note by translators: Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, longtime director of the Polish section of Radio Free Europe, was a leading advocate for the expansion of NATO to include Poland and other former Warsaw Pact countries. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Clinton in 1996 and the Order of the White Eagle and Order Virtuti Militari by the Government of Poland.