

Comment on the Article by Piotr Śmiłowicz

by Wojtech Mastny

"The Warsaw Pact Ever Alive" lifts for the first some of the cloud surrounding Poland's remarkable reluctance to share the secrets of its former Soviet alliance with its present Western allies. It calls attention to the consequences of the implicit deal concluded in 1991 between the already non-communist Polish government and the government of the still existing Soviet Union. As we now know from the persons interviewed by Mr. Śmiłowicz, Polish representatives promised at that time to keep Warsaw Pact secrets from the eyes of third parties in return for Soviet promise to withdraw Soviet troops from Poland.

The quid pro quo reflected the awkward position Poland had found itself in, ironically, because of its having been the first Warsaw Pact country that succeeded in breaking the communist monopoly of power, but then jeopardized that accomplishment by miscalculating its security needs.

The negotiated end of communist rule in 1989 left in influential governmental positions such Warsaw Pact loyalists as Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski who, not surprisingly, favored Poland's continued membership in the Soviet alliance. This was in contrast, for example, with post-communist East Germany's minister for "defense and disarmament," Rev. Rainer Eppelmann, who, as evident from the record of his May 1990 conversations in Warsaw¹, tried vainly to convince the Polish leader that the alliance was finished.

More surprising is that noncommunist members of the Polish government, too, considered the Warsaw Pact worth saving to help achieve unqualified German recognition of Poland's western border. The concern about its recognition by foreign minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski, a noted expert in international law, though not entirely unfounded, was nevertheless misguided.

From my own stay in Bonn as a Fulbright scholar in 1989-90, I remember a conversation with a high-ranking West German diplomat telling me what a problem his government was now facing because of its wanting to be a friend of democratic Poland which, however, insisted on a border that was impossible to recognize for legal reasons. I ventured the opinion that there was no problem at all and that chancellor Helmut Kohl, being a good politician, would surely find a way around those dubious legal reasons to give the Poles the satisfaction they wanted, and that the parliament would support him.

It did not take long before this happened, but meanwhile Poland was left with Soviet troops on its territory, having been reluctant to press for their withdrawal as other countries had been doing, lest it lose a potentially valuable asset in trying to obtain the border recognition by Germany. Poland was the last country other than the Soviet Union that still found a merit in preserving the Warsaw Pact in some form, after all others had already jumped the sinking ship. This was the situation in which paying for the troop withdrawal the price of promising to keep the Warsaw Pact's secrets looked like a good bargain; in less than a year, however, the Soviet Union was no more and Poland could have had the troops out for free.

All this is now water down the stream since things turned out well after all, thus making the "unusual scrupulousness" with which the successive Polish governments have felt compelled to still pay the price all the more difficult to understand. Professor Paczkowski suggests there might be more at issue than the curious supposition that Poland's reputation as a reliable international partner in the eyes of its current Western allies depends on its respect for a bad deal with its no longer existent arch-enemy. He may or may not be right in suspecting continuing "military loyalty towards those who used to sign Warsaw Pact documents, and who might be embarrassed by the release of these documents;" what is beyond doubt, however, that the information being kept hidden is unique.

We have learned from interviews with Polish generals, available on the PHP website, as well as from interviews with former East German generals, which soon will be published there too, that the military plans against the West during the Cold War were made in Moscow. But they were shared with trusted officers in other Warsaw Pact countries, especially in those two that were critical for their implementation at the so-called "central front," namely, against West Germany, the Low Countries, and Denmark. These are Poland's current NATO allies.

The records of the former Soviet general staff remain completely out of reach. The former East German chief of staff Gen. Fritz Streletz, who according to his colleagues was the main person in the know, has been evasive in answering the pertinent questions. And before Germany became unified, the East German military had had both the time and the motivation to destroy or cart away the most important operational files, although important clues about what was in them can be found in the records still left behind and now readily accessible to anyone. No such destruction has occurred in Poland.

As a result, the hidden Polish records are crucial for NATO's finding out what its Soviet enemy was really up to. Polish generals who served the Warsaw Pact, citing their military honor, have also been reluctant to divulge the secrets of the alliance although less so than their German counterparts. Generals Jan Drzewiecki and Tadeusz Tuczapski, in particular,

have been refreshingly candid. From them, we know enough about of the role of Polish army in the Soviet war plans against Denmark and other countries to be certain that there is much of importance we still do not know.

The article raises the question of "whether publicity about Poland as an active participant in the Warsaw Pact's aggressive plans would bring much benefit at the present time." It certainly could - if the respect Poland gained because of its handling of the evidence of Polish participation in the Jedwabne atrocities during the Nazi era is any indication.

Former defense minister Bronisław Komorowski suggests that there might be a way out of the embarrassing situation if the documents in question could be "categorized as domestic, not concerning the Warsaw Pact." This is in fact what other countries have done. The vast majority of the documents they have released, including such key ones as the "1964 war plan" that can be seen in facsimile on the PHP website, do not bear a formal "Warsaw Pact" stamp although a few do.

Mr. Śmiłowicz rightly deplores the meager representation of Polish military historians in the flourishing international research on the Cold War. On a hopeful note, he cites Mr. Andrzej Żak, the deputy chief of the Central Military Archives, as suggesting that if someone made a "properly justified" case for writing about the Polish army during the communist era, he or she would "stand a chance of obtaining the relevant documents from the entire 1949-1989 period." We hope very much he is right. For our part, the PHP is ready to help underwrite the necessary cost of declassification, research, and eventual publication of the results for the benefit of both Polish and international scholarship.

¹ Record of Eppelmann's meetings with Siwicki, Onyszkiewicz, Jaruzelski, and Mazowiecki, 22 May 1990, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg i. Br., DVW1/44501.