

## The Vilification and Vindication of Colonel Kuklinski

Benjamin B. Fischer



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On a warm, sunny day in November 1999, a crowd gathered in the courtyard of the George Herbert Bush Library on the Texas A&M University campus to honor Americans and foreign agents who had lost their lives during the Cold War. The ceremony, “In Memory of Those Who Died That Others Might Be Free,” was organized by the University’s Corps of Cadets. Former President George Bush and Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George Tenet presided as former DCIs Richard Helms, William Webster, and Robert Gates looked on.

Near the end of the event, Polish Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski, read a tribute to his “many anonymous colleagues who served on both sides of the front line [in the Cold War].” Kuklinski said, “I am pleased that our long, hard struggle has brought peace, freedom, and democracy not only to my country but to many other people as well.” Although DCI Tenet called Kuklinski “a true hero of the Cold War,” he is almost as anonymous to most Americans as those he was eulogizing. Few know about the important contributions he made to the defense of the West during one of the most dangerous periods of the Cold War.

### A Source of Controversy

In his native Poland, Kuklinski is far from anonymous. His case has been a *cause célèbre* for more than a decade. With the exception of the

Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss, no other Cold War espionage case has aroused so much passionate debate in Poland and elsewhere. But the controversy surrounding the American spies turns on questions of guilt and innocence and allegations of government frame-up. The Kuklinski case is simple and yet complex. The colonel has freely—and proudly—revealed what he did during the Cold War. For more than a decade, he passed Warsaw Pact military secrets to US intelligence. Thus, the controversy is not about what Kuklinski did but whether his motives were patriotic or treasonous, and whether his actions helped or hurt Poland. On another level, however, the furor is over what Poles think about their Communist past and their future in the Western community of nations.

For years, polling organizations surveyed public opinion about Kuklinski as if the statistics held national political significance. In fact, they reflected change and continuity in the political landscape. Poland has advanced further than any other former Soviet Bloc country toward democracy and free-market economics, yet it has done less than most in coming to terms with its Communist past. National politics have swung like a pendulum since 1990, when post-Communist forces first won and then lost to neo-Communists in presidential elections. In a poll taken about two years ago, when Kuklinski returned to Poland for the first time in 17 years, and almost a decade after the collapse

almost a decade after the collapse of Polish Communism, more Poles (34 percent) considered him a traitor than a hero (29 percent).<sup>1</sup> But most had no opinion, unable to decide whether he was one or the other. Ambivalence and irony reign supreme in the Kuklinski story.

### Kuklinski's Opponents

For seven years, a clique of generals, all Communist-era holdovers tried to block Kuklinski's legal exoneration. Having lost that battle, the "generals' lobby" formed what one observer termed a "strange alliance" with ex-Solidarity activists opposed to Kuklinski.<sup>2</sup> The generals despised Kuklinski because he reminded them of what they really were—Soviet officers in Polish uniforms.

Lech Walesa, Solidarity's leader and the first freely elected president of Poland, dismissed Kuklinski as a traitor and refused to pardon him. The Solidarity crowd still resents the colonel, contending that hero worship of Kuklinski denies workers the credit they deserve for starting a rebellion that brought down the Soviet empire. For some Poles, Kuklinski is an unpleasant reminder of their own collaboration with the Soviet-imposed regime or their failure to resist it. Some on the left fear that Kuklinski will become an icon of the Russophobic right or, worse yet, might return to Poland and enter politics.

Wounded national pride also plays a role. Some Poles resent the intervention of influential

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Polish-Americans on Kuklinski's behalf. A majority of Poles wanted to join NATO, but they did not like being told that Kuklinski's acquittal on treason charges was a price of admission. As the chief editor of one of Warsaw's leading dailies put it, "Kuklinski is a tragic character, entangled in history, in which there are not and there will not be easy answers—at least for my generation."<sup>3</sup>

### Urban Warfare

The world probably would never have heard of Ryszard Kuklinski if Jerzy Urban had not tried to embarrass Ronald Reagan. In 1986, Urban was press spokesman for the Military Council of National Salvation, the junta headed by General Wojciech Jaruzelski that had seized power and instituted martial law in December 1981. Known for his acerbic wit, sharp tongue, and occasional profanity, Urban stood out among the colorless bureaucrats who ruled Poland. He was always combative and never apologetic, even when defending an illegitimate government that had suppressed the first free trade union in the Soviet Bloc.

Warsaw had failed to improve or even normalize relations with Washington. Although the White House had lifted most of the sanctions it had imposed in 1981, the strongest measures, including withdrawal of Most Favored Nation status, remained in force. Even more important, Urban and his bosses knew that the United States was covertly supporting the underground opposition in order "to keep the spirit of Solidarity alive," and the National Endowment for Democracy, a quasi-private, government-funded, public diplomacy initiative, was about to receive \$1 million in congressionally appropriated funds earmarked for Solidarity.<sup>4</sup> Jaruzelski and company were in a foul mood because they were losing the battle against the underground, and the economy was in worse shape than ever. Most important, however, Urban and his bosses could not abide Ronald Reagan. Next to Pope John Paul II and Lech Walesa, the American president was the most revered figure in Poland. The "evil empire" rhetoric of Reagan's first term, while controversial at home, cheered the Poles on in their struggle against Soviet hegemony; in 1984, many prayed for his reelection.

On 3 June 1986, Urban met with Michael Dobbs, the former *Washington Post* bureau chief in Warsaw, then based in Paris. Urban offered Dobbs a scoop: in a few days, the Polish minister of internal affairs would reveal that CIA had had an agent inside the general staff who had drafted the operational blueprint for martial law. CIA had "evacuated" the agent and his

family from Warsaw on 8 November 1981 and flown them to safety in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The scoop was a setup. Perhaps because the Kuklinski case was potentially embarrassing to the Polish Army and to state security, Urban wanted it to surface in the US media before it appeared in Poland. He also wanted the Reagan administration to confirm the story. Thus Urban insisted that his remarks were “off the record,” unless the *Post* obtained some form of official comment on the impending revelation.

If that was Urban’s intention, he succeeded. The next day, the *Post* ran a front-page story under the joint byline of Dobbs and Watergate reporter Bob Woodward. It repeated what Urban had told Dobbs: “The US administration could have publicly revealed these plans to the world and warned Solidarity,” Urban said, “Had it done so, the implementation of martial law would have been impossible.”<sup>6</sup>

With his own spin on the story, Urban was in a position at a 6 June 1986 press conference to comment on Washington’s (not Warsaw’s!) revelation that CIA had been in liaison with a senior Polish Army officer involved in martial law planning.<sup>7</sup> In his briefing, Urban elaborated the theme he had developed with Dobbs. The Polish government, he said, assumed that CIA had withdrawn Kuklinski so that Washington could alert its “friends” in Solidarity—Urban often sarcastically referred to the Polish opposition as America’s “friends” and “allies”—and thereby foil

Warsaw’s martial law plans. “Washington, however, kept silent,” Urban noted. “It did not warn its allies. It did not boast of its agent as it customarily does.” The Reagan administration had “lied to its own people and to its friends [in Solidarity] in Poland,” when it denied having prior knowledge of martial law. Kuklinski, he maintained, was living proof to the contrary.

Urban even blamed President Reagan personally for the plight of the Polish opposition, asserting that Reagan “could have prevented the arrests and internment” of Solidarity leaders but did not because the White House was hoping to provoke a “a bloodbath of European proportions.” It had intended to use Solidarity as a “bloody pawn” in its “imperialist aims” and in its geopolitical rivalry with the USSR. Reagan was no friend of Poland; his policy was “morally repulsive.”

As intended, Urban also stirred up trouble for the White House within the large and politically influential Polish-American community. Alojzy Mazewski, President of the Polish American Congress (PAC), fired off an open letter to the President demanding to know why Solidarity had not been warned, why Kuklinski had been kept incommunicado, and why he had not been allowed to meet with the Polish-American community or given a job. The White House delayed its reply, giving Urban another opportunity to denounce America’s alleged “disregard for the [Polish-American] community.” When the response came, Polish media noted that the messenger was not a top-level official.

The brouhaha eventually died down, but Urban had caused some damage. A commentator on Poland’s state-run television gloated as he read from Mazewski’s letter asserting that the “trust and friendship of the of the Polish nation toward America has been undermined.” “And not for the first time,” the commentator added.<sup>8</sup> The Washington correspondent of *Trybuna Ludu*, the Polish equivalent of *Pravda*, cited a letter from a Polish-language daily in New York warning that foreign leaders from Napoleon to Roosevelt, Churchill, and Truman had betrayed the trust of the Polish people.<sup>9</sup> Now the underground opposition was flying close “to the flame of Reagan’s candle.”<sup>10</sup> When Mazewski expressed dissatisfaction with the slow response he was getting from the White House, Urban publicly invited him to Warsaw for a meeting with Polish officials.

### Impact of Accusations

A decade later, a respected journalist could write that the allegation that “the most vocally anti-Communist US president” had failed to warn Solidarity “is still a subject of much discussion in Poland.”<sup>11</sup> Some Poles felt betrayed. But how much truth was there to Urban’s accusations? The answer is—not much. Having Kuklinski in the United States was a disadvantage, not a benefit. The blueprint he had worked on was a contingency plan. Having lost its source, the Agency did not know and could not predict when or if the plan would be implemented.

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whether Jaruzelski was a hero or a traitor, the colonel replied:

*My view has been consistently that in Poland there existed a real chance to avoid both Soviet intervention and martial law. Had he [Jaruzelski], together with Stanislaw Kania [his predecessor], proved capable of greater dignity and strength, had they honestly adhered to the existing social agreements, instead of knuckling under to Moscow, present-day Poland would undoubtedly look completely different.*<sup>16</sup>

More important, perhaps, the policymaking community (and, in all fairness, the Intelligence Community as well) still seemed “mesmerized by the vision of Soviet troops marching into Poland” after months of Moscow’s saber-rattling and almost continuous military exercises and operations in Poland and along its borders.<sup>12</sup> This saber-rattling had accomplished its objective: the West had been confused, Solidarity had been intimidated, and Jaruzelski could claim that, by instituting martial law, he had chosen the “lesser evil” (internal repression) and avoided the “greater catastrophe” (external intervention).

Some policymakers complained after the fact that they had not seen or been briefed on Kuklinski’s reporting, but, as former Deputy Director for Central Intelligence Bobby Ray Inman confirmed, at least 20 senior officials, including President Reagan and his closest advisers, knew about the colonel and his information. But it did not matter; no one saw an internal crackdown as likely or even feasible, given the questionable loyalty of the Polish Army.<sup>13</sup> As one observer noted only half in jest, “US policy would have likely remained the same even if Kuklinski’s reports had been underlined in red and posted in every men’s room in Washington.”<sup>14</sup>

Urban’s assertion that the United States wanted a bloodbath in Poland was especially odious. The Reagan administration, like the Carter administration before it, had worked to avoid just such an outcome. As former Secretary of State

Alexander Haig noted, even if the White House had known martial law was coming, he would have advised against warning Solidarity for fear of inciting the opposition to suicidal resistance.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Kuklinski Goes Public**

In the final analysis, Urban hoisted himself on his own petard. By surfacing the Kuklinski story, he unintentionally made it possible for the colonel to emerge from seclusion long enough to tell his side of the story. He did so in a lengthy interview in *Kultura*, a Polish émigré journal published in Paris that was officially banned but still widely read and highly respected in Poland.

The interview exploded like a bombshell in Poland. Kuklinski revealed that planning for martial law had begun in late 1980—far earlier than the regime had admitted—and that the Communists had intended all along to crush Solidarity, belying their claim of having negotiated in good faith with union leaders and the Polish episcopate. Kuklinski also described how the Soviets had pressured the regime to declare martial law, thus refuting Warsaw’s claim that it had been an internal decision. When asked

#### **Poles Apart**

With these words, Kuklinski launched a national debate about the events of 1980-1981. The ensuing battle of wits between Kuklinski and Jaruzelski was intensely personal—and Poles helped make it so by asking who was the traitor and who was the national savior. But it also was a metaphor for Poland’s history since 1945 and the conflicting loyalties that coexisted in the People’s Republic and still persist in the Third Republic.

Jaruzelski started it. In 1984, he had pushed the military chamber of Poland’s supreme court to sentence Kuklinski to death in absentia and confiscate his property. The property was seized, sold at a bargain-basement price to a government minister, and then quickly resold for a substantial profit. The only “evidence” introduced at the sham secret trial was based on affidavits from Jaruzelski and several general staff officers.



General Jaruzelski

Jaruzelski represents Poland's eastern or Russophile orientation. Descended from nobility, he was born to a family of Polish Junkers, estate owners in the eastern reaches of Poland. He was raised a Catholic and educated in a religious boarding school. Fate changed his life forever in September 1939, when Stalin, acting under the terms of his nonaggression pact with Hitler, invaded, occupied, and then annexed pre-war eastern Poland. In what today would be called ethnic cleansing, the Red Army and the NKVD, the secret police, rounded up and deported more than one million Poles to Siberia and Central Asia.<sup>17</sup> Soviet forces also incited Jews, Ukrainians, and Belorussians, among other aggrieved minorities, to attack Poles and seize their property.

The Jaruzelski family fled to independent Lithuania, but then Stalin grabbed it, too. Jaruzelski's father

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died shortly after being released from an NKVD concentration camp. Jaruzelski, his mother, and his sister, were then deported to Siberia, where he worked in a logging camp and a warehouse. Despite this experience, Jaruzelski embraced the Soviet Union as his second homeland, learning to fear and respect its awesome size and power. He also became a born-again Communist. (He compared his conversion to a religious experience, calling it a spiritual “rebirth.”<sup>18</sup> Kuklinski went the other way, having “in his youth embraced the Communist faith only to undergo a dramatic conversion later.”<sup>19</sup>) Years later, when the Soviet Politburo was debating whether Jaruzelski would follow Soviet orders, party boss Brezhnev concluded that the general was reliable precisely because he “had suffered from us but did not bear a grudge.”<sup>20</sup>

Strangely enough, Jaruzelski has always denied the importance of his Soviet-made career to his actions in 1981. As he told a French television interviewer in 1992:

*Martial law was the lesser evil for everyone. It enabled the Poles to avoid disaster. And please don't*

*tell me that I did the work of the Soviets for them. That is an insult.*<sup>21</sup>

Yet he may have may have made a “Freudian slip” when he told the German weekly *Der Spiegel* that, “Given the strategic logic of the time, I probably would have acted the same way if I had been a Soviet general. At that time, Soviet political and strategic interests were threatened [by upheaval in Poland].”<sup>22</sup> Would he have acted? Or did he? The general had spent so much of his life acting as if he “had been a Soviet general” that he did so unconsciously.

### **Soviet Intransigence**

Jaruzelski's claim to be the savior of Poland stands or falls on his assertion that he faced a Hobson's choice between martial law and Soviet military assistance. Unfortunately for him, virtually all the evidence that has appeared since 1991 in Polish, Soviet, and other East European records indicates that the Kremlin had no intention of intervening—one of the most surprising revelations found in the Soviet archives. Worse yet, there is solid information that Jaruzelski actually preferred Soviet intervention to martial law. He apparently pleaded with the Soviets to do his dirty work for him, and, when they refused, he asked for assurances that Moscow would provide military backup if Polish forces proved incapable of suppressing Solidarity. The Soviets also refused that request.

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Jaruzelski suffered a major (and highly publicized) humiliation during a joint US-Polish-Soviet conference on the Polish crisis of 1980-1981 held in a Warsaw suburb in September 1997. Marshal Viktor Kulikov, former supreme commander of Warsaw Pact forces and Moscow's proconsul in Warsaw, denied that the USSR had intended or had threatened to intervene. During the next break, participants overheard Jaruzelski shouting at Kulikov in Russian, "You know what you said to me then. How could you let them do this to me—in front of the Americans!"<sup>23</sup>

Minutes of Soviet Politburo meetings support Kulikov. They go even further, suggesting that the Kremlin was prepared, if necessary, to give up Poland altogether, even if it meant the end of Communist rule. During a 10 December session on the eve of martial law, for example, KGB chairman Yuri Andropov (and Brezhnev's heir apparent) told his fellow Politburo members:

***We do not intend to introduce troops into Poland. That is the proper position, and we must adhere to it until the end. I don't know how things will turn out in Poland, but even if Poland falls under the control of Solidarity, that's the way it will be.***<sup>24</sup> (emphasis added)

At the same session Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko noted that the Politburo "...must somehow dispel the notion that Jaruzelski and other leaders in Poland have about the introduction of troops. There can be no introduction of troops."<sup>25</sup>

Jaruzelski's worst fear was not, as he claims, Soviet intervention, it was nonintervention. "Under these circumstances," a perceptive observer wrote, "Jaruzelski's donning the mantle of the nation's savior was a travesty."<sup>26</sup>

These revelations underscore how prescient Kuklinski was in 1987, when he said:

*Had the Kania-Jaruzelski duumvirate said no to the Russians from the very beginning, then, under the pressure of overt attacks and threats from Moscow, Solidarity would have had to alter its front of struggle and primarily champion the country's sovereignty and integrity. I am certain that it would have been more inclined toward compromise and that the Soviet Union would have retreated, had the Party-Army leadership and the nation created a united front.*<sup>27</sup>

If so, then Poland was on its way, perhaps, to becoming something like another Finland for the USSR.<sup>28</sup> Instead, Poles had to continue to endure the most repressive regime in their post-Stalin history and to put up with six more years of Jaruzelski's inept leadership, which led the country to the brink of economic disaster.

### Jaruzelski's Allegations

Since 1992, Jaruzelski has defended himself by asserting that the United

States in effect approved or at least accepted his view of martial law as the "lesser evil." This, he says, is the conclusion he drew when the Reagan administration refrained from warning Solidarity or blowing the whistle on his martial law plans (allegedly provided by Kuklinski in a new version of Urban's 1986 disinformation ploy). "Did this give you the green light?" asked one French interviewer. "I cannot answer on behalf of the Americans," Jaruzelski said, "but I had the right to believe that a lack of reaction on their part was a signal to act."<sup>29</sup>

Jaruzelski embellished the "green light" story during the 1997 conference mentioned above. According to the general, he dispatched General Eugeniusz Molczyk, deputy chief of the general staff, to Washington to confer with then-Vice President Bush just before martial law was declared. The Vice President, Jaruzelski told the conference attendees, agreed with Molczyk that martial law was a better option than intervention. "We took that as a sort of signal," the general said, "Do it yourselves, or there will be the more feared option."<sup>30</sup> The only problem is that this exchange never happened.<sup>31</sup>

History and geography have often forced Poles to make tragic choices. During World War I, they fought in the armies of the three powers (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) that had partitioned their country in the 18th century, with Poles sometimes shooting at each other. In World War II, Poles fought in the Red Army, even though Stalin had murdered thousands of their fellow

officers and soldiers because he thought they might fight against the USSR. Tens of thousands of Poles were forced to serve in the Wehrmacht even as the Nazis were occupying their country and terrorizing their countrymen.

### Siding With the West

When Kuklinski acknowledged his CIA association for the first time in 1992, he said: "In the beginning I asked myself if I had a moral right to do this [supply military secrets to CIA]. I was a Pole. I understood that Poles should be free and that the United States was the only country that might support the fight for freedom for Poland."<sup>32</sup> He chose cooperation with US intelligence work as a form of resistance. On several occasions, he referred to a group of pro-Western officers who wanted to make contact with the West. They were prepared to sabotage the Soviet war machine in the event of a Warsaw Pact-NATO conflict. Kuklinski's US contacts discouraged this plan as too dangerous. But this only inspired him to find another form of anti-Soviet opposition. "The conspiracy that was organized within a small group of commanding officers in the Army became my directive."

These officers, all Polish patriots, decided to act because they had unique access to Soviet military plans—plans that made it clear that in the event of war Poland would provide cannon fodder and an invasion route to the West and would probably be destroyed in the process. Soviet plans were, in

Kuklinski's words, "unambiguously offensive," aimed at invading and conquering all the European states, not just NATO countries. Poland's role was central. Its Army would be used as a battering ram against NATO forces. "Our front could only be a sacrifice of Polish blood at the altar of the Red Empire, which needed it to help the Soviet Army open the gate to West."<sup>33</sup> Even more important, in Kuklinski's view, NATO—forced to use tactical atomic weapons to counter Warsaw Pact superiority in conventional forces—would turn most of Poland and part of Czechoslovakia into a nuclear no-man's land.

Before forcing Poland to commit suicide, the Soviet Union planned to turn it into an aggressor, an ironic role for a country that had been repeatedly invaded by its neighbors. Two of Poland's three armies would sweep across the north German plain toward the Netherlands, Belgium, and France while the third would invade and occupy Denmark. So Kuklinski, in order to save Poland, decided to fight a silent war against the Soviet juggernaut on an invisible front. He would tell the West what was in store for it—and for Poland—in the event of war with the Soviet Union.

### A Super Spy

When asked to assess Kuklinski's importance, a senior CIA strategic expert called him "our second Penkovsky." He was referring to GRU Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, who provided information to US and British

intelligence for 17 critical months during 1961-1962. Many believe that Penkovsky's information was a key element in resolving the so-called missile gap of the late 1950s and early 1960s and played a vital role during the Berlin crisis of 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis a year later. Some even consider him CIA's most important source during the Cold War, the "spy who saved the world."<sup>34</sup>

The comparison between the two colonels may be unfair to Kuklinski. He worked in place far longer—almost 10 years—and produced far more information—an estimated 35,000 pages of documents compared to Penkovsky's 8,000.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Kuklinski was active at a far more dangerous time in US-Soviet relations. During the Cuban missile crisis, the United States had overwhelming strategic superiority over the USSR; it had a wide margin of security, and it ultimately forced Moscow to back down. When Kuklinski approached US intelligence, it seemed to him that the world was becoming more dangerous because of rising Soviet power and assertiveness and American isolationism. As he told one interviewer:

*The United States began losing interest in Europe. The free world was terrified by the military power of the USSR and did not prevent the quelling of the Prague Spring uprising [in August 1968]. On the other hand, Moscow, dizzy from its worldwide success, accelerated its armament program. . . . You could smell the gunpowder in Europe, and*

*the consequences for Poland and the Poles would have been tragic.*<sup>36</sup>

The information Kuklinski provided to CIA remains classified, but he has revealed the most important details in a series of interviews. Even General Czeslaw Kiszczak, the former minister of internal affairs who supervised the official damage assessment, acknowledged: "When we started to analyze the range of information he had got hold of, we realized that he knew so much there was no point in changing anything (in Polish military plans) because we would have had to change virtually everything."<sup>37</sup> Highlights of these interviews include:<sup>38</sup>

- *Soviet war plans:* Kuklinski outlined the Soviet game plan for waging an offensive war against NATO.
- *Wartime command and control arrangements:* Kuklinski revealed that, in wartime, the national armies of the Warsaw Pact (with the exception of Romania) would come under direct Soviet operational control. Polish commanders would have been reduced to the status of liaison and logistics officers taking orders from Soviet superiors.
- *Warning of war:* Warsaw Pact planning documents and military exercises yielded insight into how the Soviets would mobilize for war. Kuklinski's information "allowed us to develop an intimate understanding of the way they worked. It was invaluable

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for warning," according to a US strategic expert.<sup>39</sup>

- *Project Albatross:* Kuklinski had knowledge of three highly secret, deep underground bunkers the Soviets had constructed in Poland, the USSR, and Bulgaria for wartime command and control. He identified the exact location, construction, and communications systems used for the Polish complex. According to President Carter's National Security Adviser, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Kuklinski's information permitted us to make counterplans to disrupt command-and-control facilities rather than only relying on a massive counterattack on forward positions, which would have hit Poland."<sup>40</sup>
- *Information on some 200 advanced weapon systems and a manual on electronic warfare:* Kuklinski also alerted US intelligence to a massive Soviet denial and deception program, highlighting the use of dummies and decoys to foil US satellite surveillance.

**"The First Polish Officer in NATO"**

In September and December 1992, Benjamin Weiser, then a staff writer for *The Washington Post*, published a two-part series on Kuklinski's life based on more than

70 hours of conversation.<sup>41</sup> The September article created a sensation in Poland, where state television and all the major dailies gave it extensive coverage. The Warsaw correspondent for *Moscow News* was not exaggerating when he said that "the Kuklinski case is becoming yet another factor tending to divide the already fragmented political scene [in Poland]."<sup>42</sup> Poles learned for the first time that Kuklinski had worked with US intelligence for more than a decade before defecting in 1981. (In the 1987 *Kultura* interview, Kuklinski had limited his remarks to the Polish crisis of 1980-1981.) "I think I have to unveil what I have done," Kuklinski told Weiser. "Let's judge on the basis of what I have done." This was an opening bid in an effort to have the legal case against him dropped.

In early 1990, Poland's supreme court, acting under a December 1989 amnesty law, commuted Kuklinski's death sentence to 25 years in prison and loss of civil rights. (The court let stand the forfeiture of property, even though the law had been erased from the post-Communist criminal code.)

Two days after the *Post* article, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, head of the center-right Center Alliance Party, sent a letter to President Walesa, challenging him to pardon Kuklinski or state publicly why he would not do so. Walesa, in a statement to the leftist daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, replied: "It is a complicated issue: on the one hand, one can admire the colonel for his courage; on the other hand, the story still has some white spots which are waiting to be



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explained. History will pass the final verdict....”<sup>43</sup> This buck-passing would continue for another five years.

Dr. Brzezinski was Kuklinski’s earliest and ultimately his most effective champion. (He coined the phrase “the first Polish officer in NATO,” which became the rallying cry for Kuklinski’s exoneration.) In a letter to Walesa, he cited Kuklinski’s role in heading off Soviet intervention in 1980. “Such things should not be considered treason,” he told a Polish television interviewer. “I believe it is high time to acknowledge that Kuklinski served Poland well.”<sup>44</sup>

This plea fell on deaf ears. Walesa waffled, saying the matter required “time and preparation.”<sup>45</sup> The former opposition leader needed to work with the national defense ministry and the high command, which were staffed by officers from the old regime. To them, Kuklinski was anathema. “The Army is something that is subject to orders, and every colonel cannot chose an ally for himself and say that he will work for that ally. On the other hand,” Walesa continued, “now the Third [Polish] Republic cannot take for itself such a model and such heroism, for this is another country.” He also argued that exonerating Kuklinski would make things difficult for the new Poland if it caught US intelligence agents: “[A]fter all, we still do not know how many CIA or other agents we have, and precisely, will we now forgive the next ones everything? I think not. Those who we catch now will be brought to account.”<sup>46</sup>

In mid-1993, Kuklinski announced his intention to return to Poland,

despite his legal problems, to commemorate the 54th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of the country. The visit would have coincided with parliamentary elections, and some accused Kuklinski of playing “electoral poker.”<sup>47</sup> The military prosecutor’s office said that he would be arrested if he returned, and the Polish Government quietly persuaded him to cancel the visit.<sup>48</sup>

In 1998, Kuklinski took his case directly to the Polish people for the first time in an interview in *Tygodnik Solidarnosc*.<sup>49</sup> He sought to counter accusations and rumors being circulated by the senior Polish officer corps. To strengthen his case, Kuklinski presented the paper with a copy of his last communication to the CIA, dated 14 September 1981; it contained the contingency plan for martial law.

### **Spy Versus Spy**

Also, in 1994, Kuklinski’s case became entangled in a controversy surrounding Marian Zacharski, a former Polish intelligence officer, who was dubbed the “Silicon Valley spy” by the US media because of his success in stealing US defense secrets and technology. The neo-Communist press hailed him as the “biggest star of Polish intelligence in the Communist era.” The fact that the former Soviet Union was the main beneficiary was not mentioned.

When the FBI arrested him in 1981, Zacharski was operating under commercial cover, posing as a salesman for a Polish export firm. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Four years later, he was exchanged for 25 Western agents held in Soviet and East European prisons in one of the Cold War’s periodic spy swaps.

On 15 August 1994, the Polish Government announced Zacharski’s appointment as head of civilian intelligence in the Office of State Protection. He never got to see the inside of his office. Brzezinski and Jan Nowak, another prominent Polish-American, both protested the appointment, warning that it would cast a shadow on Poland’s chances for joining NATO.<sup>50</sup> Warsaw denied that the appointment had political overtones, but conservatives complained that it was part of a Communist restoration. On the 17th, the US Embassy delivered a *démarche* to the Polish Government. It noted that Zacharski was still under a life sentence in the United States and requested that Warsaw reconsider his appointment.<sup>51</sup> Zacharski withdrew his name the next day. But the episode left a bad feeling in Poland. Once again, Washington and Polish-Americans had intervened in an internal matter and pressured Warsaw to reverse an official decision.

In response to a poll that paired Kuklinski and Zacharski,<sup>52</sup> most respondents answered “neither one” when asked, “Which colonel better served Poland?” But more (17 percent) chose Zacharski over Kuklinski (7 percent). Ten percent of those polled said they were

comparable, and 70 percent were not interested and had no opinion. In addition, 22 percent said Zacharski was fit to head Polish intelligence, and 22 percent disagreed. Ten percent thought Kuklinski was suited for the job, but 48 percent placed him in the unfit category.

### Vindication

While opinions toward Kuklinski remained divided, many Poles were critical of the government's foot-dragging and believed that the case should be resolved one way or the other.<sup>53</sup> Poland's desire to join NATO added a new—and ultimately decisive—reason to do so.

On 30 March 1995, the first sign of movement appeared. The acting chief justice of the supreme court signed an extraordinary appeal annulling Kuklinski's 25-year sentence for treason and desertion. The judge cited "blatant violations of legal procedures and lack of sufficient evidence." The military chamber of the supreme court formally annulled the sentence in May 1995 and remanded the case to the Office of the Chief Prosecutor of the Warsaw Military District, a post roughly equivalent to that of a US Judge Advocate General. The ruling read in part:

*One must take into account the widely known fact that the sovereignty of Poland was severely diminished [at the time] and that there was an imminent threat of an invasion by the Soviet Union and other contiguous member states of the Warsaw Pact. One must also take into account the*

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*fact that R. Kuklinski was fully informed then about the situation and, through his desperate actions, tried to head off the impending threat of invasion by conveying this information to the leaders of the states that are strong enough to alter the world's fate.... The security of the state unquestionably takes precedence over the disclosure of a secret, especially if the disclosure is intended to serve a higher cause.<sup>54</sup>*

The statement concluded that the colonel's actions "were in the interest of [Polish] sovereignty and independence."

Next, the military prosecutor sent Kuklinski a notice to appear in Poland for an interview, offering him an "iron letter," or safe-conduct pass, because the colonel was still legally a fugitive from justice. Kuklinski refused and reacted angrily to the prosecutor's demand, saying that a "retrial in my favor is of no significance to me personally." He had no interest in either a new trial or a pardon. "I am not guilty. All I did, I did for Poland," Kuklinski declared.<sup>55</sup>

Jaruzelski and the anti-Kuklinski lobby sensed, however, that the logjam had been broken and that it was time for counteraction. Jaruzelski sent a letter to the

commission of constitutional responsibility in the *Sejm* (parliament) in which he took issue with Kuklinski's claim to have prevented a Soviet invasion. It was martial law—and by implication Jaruzelski himself—that was responsible, he claimed. The letter also impugned the colonel's motives and therefore the basis of the court's decision, calling Kuklinski an ordinary spy who was trying to vindicate himself by claiming "noble intentions."

In August 1996, the military prosecutor's office announced that a long-standing warrant for Kuklinski's arrest had been rescinded. It set 30 October as a date for the interview. It also announced that the charge of treason would be dropped. Kuklinski would instead be tried for espionage, which also carried the death penalty but in most cases resulted in a five-year sentence. Kuklinski was not interested and refused to appear. In response, the military prosecutor threatened to suspend the investigation or try Kuklinski in absentia. The colonel's Polish defense attorney observed, that in this bizarre set of circumstances, the prosecutor's office had not even specified the charges against his client. Was Kuklinski charged with treason against the Polish People's Republic or the Polish Republic? Equally disturbing, only witnesses for the prosecution, including Jaruzelski and Kiszczak, had been called. This meant, he said, that the investigation was being conducted "on someone's orders."<sup>56</sup> Kuklinski ignored a second summons to appear in November.

A poll taken in mid-November 1996 showed that 27 percent of the respondents still considered Kuklinski a traitor. Twenty-one percent regarded him as a patriot.<sup>57</sup> Another survey showed that most Poles stood by Jaruzelski. Fifty-four percent said that martial law was correct; only 30 percent disagreed.<sup>58</sup> (Jaruzelski, in the meantime, had been exonerated by a parliamentary commission for his role in the events of 1981-1982.)

In July, the deputy chief military prosecutor declared that Kuklinski could visit Poland to accept an standing invitation from the city of Krakow, whose government had voted to confer honorary citizenship on the colonel. At first, Kuklinski said he would go, but on the advice of Washington and Warsaw, he changed his mind.

Then came the big news. On 2 September 1997, with the reluctant approval of Walesa's successor, Aleksander Kwasniewski, a former minister in Jaruzelski's government, the chief military prosecutor revoked all charges against Kuklinski, allowing him to return home a free man. His civil rights and military rank were restored. The final decision declared that he had "acted out of higher necessity" that was "intended to benefit the nation." Kuklinski was told privately on the 4th, but the decision was not made public until 22 September, the day after balloting in parliamentary elections.<sup>59</sup> The announcement said simply that: "Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski acted in conditions of higher necessity, taking up collaboration with the

American intelligence service."<sup>60</sup> Kuklinski's response:

*I accept the decision restoring my good name and honor with some relief, although after the 16 years of living in exile and the tragedy that my family has experienced here, it has symbolic rather than practical meaning for me. I thank God for letting me live to see this moment.*<sup>61</sup>

In the same statement, he referred to "people who saw servility towards the USSR as a path to careers and promotion," while most soldiers had been "devoted patriots...concerned about the security and fate of our country."

Kwasniewski said later that he had been motivated by a desire for good relations with the United States and had discussed the case with President Clinton during his state visit in July. The Polish President had a strong motive for settling the case. US opponents of Poland's admission to NATO were threatening to use it as an issue to impede, if not prevent, Senate ratification. Warsaw and Poland's backers in the United States needed to neutralize the issue once and for all.

Walesa called the decision by the *Belweder* (the Polish White House) a publicity stunt by "post-Communists" intent on demonstrating their patriotism. Exonerating a spy was not a good example for Poland, he said for the umpteenth time.

## Sour Grapes

In a bizarre twist, Walesa claimed he had been told on good authority that Kuklinski was actually a double agent working for the KGB who had been sent to the United States to plant disinformation on American intelligence. Whatever the origins of this story—Kuklinski blamed aides around the former president who wanted to make Walesa look foolish—Walesa's decision to go public with it suggests intent to discredit the colonel, perhaps as a way of trying to impede the lionization process that was certain to follow his acquittal.

Walesa was not alone in his displeasure. Jaruzelski asked, "If Colonel Kuklinski is declared a hero, what does that make the rest of us?"<sup>62</sup> He told Polish radio that the military prosecutor's decision was "incomprehensible," adding that he expected him to reveal the basis for his action. It showed, he said, that the prosecutor was not independent.

## Emotional Reactions

In Poland, the left generally reacted with outrage. Mieczysław Wodzicki wrote in the neo-Communist *Trybuna*: "A bad thing has happened. Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski—a spy, deserter, and traitor—has been turned into a model of virtue and a national hero of the rightists." In the event of war, he added, "Polish units would have been destroyed in the very first phase of the war."<sup>63</sup>

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**Polls in November showed that the country was still almost evenly divided on the hero or traitor issue.**

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National pride—or was it anti-Americanism?—also played a part. Jerzy Urban’s new tabloid *NIE* ran a sarcastic piece which stated that, “After all, one has to understand that you do not turn down ‘Big Brother,’ mighty and rich, especially if you are standing at NATO’s gates.”<sup>64</sup> A later article suggested with Swiftian hyperbole that Poland should exonerate all 715 Poles convicted of spying for the United States from 1944 to 1984.<sup>65</sup> Polls in November 1997 showed that the country was still almost evenly divided on the hero or traitor issue. The right generally rejoiced. The conservative daily *Zycie Warszawy* ran a banner headline declaring “Kuklinski Innocent!”

Jaruzelski now took a new tack. He began asserting in public appearances that Kuklinski could not possibly have revealed Soviet war plans because he did not have access to them. The Soviets did not share their military secrets with their allies, even generals like Jaruzelski himself. They were buried in deep bunkers somewhere, he claimed. The most Kuklinski could have revealed was plans for the Polish Army and weapons on Polish territory. But this, the general went on, was already known to NATO through satellites and data exchanges at arms control negotiations. (Jaruzelski apparently was not bothered by the contradiction with earlier assertions that Kuklinski had seriously damaged Poland’s national security.) The neo-Communist tabloid *NIE* echoed this line, though in less elegant language: “It seems our colonel passed a lot of crap, for example, on how our

Polish armies were training for a defensive war on the territory of Denmark.”<sup>66</sup>

Jaruzelski and 31 other retired generals assailed the military prosecutor’s decision in a letter-writing campaign and demanded the release of his final decision. (The justice minister had sealed the decision, saying that it was based in part on classified information.<sup>67</sup>) In the first of three letters, Jaruzelski said, “Glorifying Kuklinski’s actions automatically puts the moral blame on myself and other Polish officers.”

Brzezinski was the key figure in Kuklinski’s acquittal, the culmination of confidential negotiations he initiated with Poland’s neo-Communist government in early 1997.<sup>68</sup> In April of that year, he hosted a four-day meeting of the Polish and American sides in his office at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. Kuklinski, his personal attorney, the Polish ambassador, and two officers from the military prosecutor’s office were present. The officers had brought with them a 47-page document of evidence and legal reasoning cited in the decision for dropping the case. Kuklinski insisted on being addressed as “Colonel.”

### More Poll Results

A poll taken and released in late October 1997 showed that 46 percent thought the military prosecutor’s office had made the right decision, and 24 percent thought the opposite.<sup>69</sup> But those who still took an interest were divided. Seventeen percent said Kuklinski was a traitor, and 18 percent a hero; 18 percent said he was partly a hero and partly a traitor, and 9 percent said he was primarily a traitor, not a hero. Only 7 percent thought the military prosecutor had been guided by strictly legal reasons; most said he was acting on political considerations or some combination of legal and political considerations.

A December 1997 poll revealed that 54 percent thought Jaruzelski had acted properly in declaring martial law; 60 percent thought Poland had avoided a “worse fate.”<sup>70</sup> Another poll concluded that 41 percent regarded Jaruzelski as a hero, and only 27 percent thought he committed treason. Thirty-four percent still considered Kuklinski a traitor, 29 percent a patriot.

### Triumphal Tour

In March 1998, Kuklinski announced through a spokesman that he would return to Poland to visit Warsaw and Krakow and might even remain permanently.<sup>71</sup> Krakow officials, former Solidarity leaders, several veteran organizations, and Brzezinski implored the government to promote Kuklinski to general. The President’s office

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said Kwasniewski would do so, but apparently it has not happened.

Kuklinski made an 11-day victory tour of sorts in April-May 1998, visiting six Polish cities and receiving numerous awards. Poland's press gave him mostly favorable treatment. Some media compared his visit to Pope John Paul II's pilgrimages to his homeland. Before leaving Washington, Kuklinski made a brief appearance at the Polish Embassy, where he was the guest of honor at the Polish-American Congress's annual Tadeusz Kosciuszko Day celebration.

In Poland, Kuklinski met the foreign minister and other government officials, though not President Kwasniewski. Walesa snubbed him completely, saying he would meet only if Kuklinski requested it. The colonel declined. Heavily armed bodyguards traveled with him, and a bomb scare interrupted a visit to an elementary school. Otherwise, the visit was uneventful. "We saw the need to escape the Soviet grip. The tools to do it were abroad, in the West and in the United States," Kuklinski said during a news conference.<sup>72</sup>

### Caustic Commentary

The left refused to reconcile itself to Kuklinski's vindication. Adam Michnik, a political prisoner during martial law and now editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, articulated the anti-Kuklinski case in a commentary in which he rebuked Kuklinski for cooperating with US intelligence, saying he "had crossed a line" that even the opposition had

refused to cross.<sup>73</sup> (Some former Solidarity leaders, however, have acknowledged and expressed their gratitude for US covert assistance during the underground period.)

But Michnik was more interested in current politics than past events. He warned that Kuklinski might become a "graphic symbol evoking crowd enthusiasm" and that the "right can resort to that symbol in the future." He also complained that "Colonel Kuklinski tolerated becoming a standard-bearer of forces other than those desirous of conciliation and broad consensus on Poland's road to NATO and the EU [European Union]," that is, he was anti-Russian. Worst of all, however, in Michnik's eyes Kuklinski symbolized Polish subservience to the United States. "If this entire hullabaloo surrounding Kuklinski's visit is to signify that the attitude to Kuklinski and the American special services is to be a litmus test of patriotic Poles, then that will be the pitiable finale to the Polish dream of freedom." Poland should not become a "collective Kuklinski."

Michnik seemed to labor under the misapprehension that NATO and the Warsaw Pact were equivalent treaty organizations while ignoring why the Poles rushed to join the Western alliance the moment they were eligible. NATO originated as a voluntary coalition of sovereign

states that united for their common defense. The Warsaw Pact was part of a bigger imperial arrangement for yoking the East European armies to the Soviet high command. When the USSR summoned its "allies" to Warsaw in 1955 without prior consultation, it forced them to sign a defense pact with a secret annex specifying the military contingents they would have to provide in wartime. Perhaps because it chafed under the Soviet yoke more than the others, Poland was "in a class by itself" in showing "consistency of purpose and commitment by its government and people alike" to joining NATO.<sup>74</sup> In doing so, Poles were seeking security, but they also were seeking to avoid the tragic choices they had had to make in the past.

One conservative commentator criticized Michnik's editorial as "ordinary political prevarication intended to exonerate" Communist Poland.<sup>75</sup> He could have added "and arouse anti-American feelings." But even Michnik's critics would probably agree with his article's closing words: "I think that it is time to understand that in Poland there will always be some who consider Kuklinski a hero and some who consider Jaruzelski a hero, and we will have to live with that."

### Notes

1. Jane Perlez, "Spy Recounts Passing Data to CIA," *The New York Times News Service*, 30 April 1998. [References cited without page numbers were retrieved from electronic databases, which lack pagination.]

2. See Janusz Ostrowski, "The Generals' Lobby," *Zycie Warszawy*, 9-10 May 1998, p. 18.
3. Dariusz Fikus, "There Are No Easy Answers," *Rzeczpospolita*, 1-2 April 1995, p. 5.
4. See Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 358-359.
5. The December 1982 edition of *Newsweek* reported CIA's penetration of the Polish Army without identifying Kuklinski by name. The article mistakenly stated that the anonymous colonel had remained in Warsaw until just days before martial law was instituted and that the Reagan administration had refrained from warning Solidarity in order to protect him. See David C. Martin, "A Polish Agent in Place," *Newsweek*, 20 December 1982, p. 49.
6. Bob Woodward and Michael Dobbs, "CIA had Secret Agent on Polish General Staff," *The Washington Post*, 4 June 1986, p. A1.
7. For the complete text, see Paris AFP in English, 1927 GMT, 6 June 1986.
8. Warsaw Television Service in Polish, 1730 GMT, 6 June 1986.
9. Warsaw Television Service in Polish, 1700 GMT, 11 June 1986. Since Napoleonic times, many Poles, both in their homeland and in the diaspora, had looked to the West for help in restoring Poland's territorial integrity and sovereignty after the partitions of the 18th century and its freedom from Russian/Soviet and German domination. Their faith in the Western democracies was often misplaced, as the letter implied.
10. The letter may have been planted by Polish intelligence.
11. Tina Rosenberg, *The Haunted Land: Facing Europe's Ghosts After Communism* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 205.
12. Wojtech Mastny, "The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland in 1980-1981 and the End of the Cold War," *Europa-Asia Studies* 51:2 (1999), p. 203.
13. Rosenberg, *The Haunted Land*, p. 206.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski, "The Crushing of Solidarity," *Orbis* 32:1 (Winter 1988), p. 31.
17. See Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 226.
18. Michael Dobbs, *Down with Big Brother: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 70.
19. Janusz Ostrowski, "The Trap of Ideological Friendships," *Zycie Warszawy*, 12 May 1998, p. 10.
20. From the minutes of a Soviet Politburo meeting, 17 September 1981, cited in Mastny, "The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland," p. 210.
21. Interview with *Journal du Dimanche*, "Jaruzelski: Yes, I Did Consider Suicide," *Trybuna*, 21 April 1992, p. 2.
22. Interview with former President Wojciech Jaruzelski by *Der Spiegel* staffers Siegfried Kogelfranz, Andreas Lorenz, and Andrej Rybak, "It Was Psychological Torture," *Der Spiegel*, 11 May 1992, p. 188.
23. Malcolm Byrne, "New Evidence on the Polish Crisis 1980-1981," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 11 (Winter 1998), p. 4.
24. Session of the CPSU CC Politburo, Document No. 21, in *ibid.*, p. 165.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
26. Mastny, "The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland," p. 205.
27. Kuklinski, "The Crushing of Solidarity," p. 12.
28. Mastny, "The Soviet Non-Invasion of Poland," p. 206.
29. *Trybuna*, 21 April 1992, p. 2.
30. Jane Perlez, "Warsaw Journal: Old Cold War Enemies Exhume One Battlefield," *The New York Times*, 11 November 1997, p. 14.
31. At the author's request, the staff of the George Herbert Walker Bush Library checked Vice President Bush's appointment book and found no record of a meeting with General Molczyk. Telephone interview with James Olsen, CIA officer-in-residence, Texas A&M University, 8 September 1998.
32. Benjamin Weiser, "A Question of Loyalty," *The Washington Post Magazine*, 18 December 1992, p. W9.
33. Marat Miklszewski, "Colonel Kuklinski Speaks!," *Tygodnik Solidarnosc*, 9 December 1994, p. 12.
34. See Jerrold L. Schecter, *The Spy Who Saved the World: How a Soviet Colonel Changed the Course of the Cold War* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1992).
35. See sources cited in note 38 below.
36. Miklszewski, "Colonel Kuklinski Speaks!."

37. Adam Jasser, "Former Polish Intelligence Boss Says CIA Mole Knew All," Reuters Library Service, 29 September 1992.
38. The following section is based on Benjamin Weiser, "Polish Officer was U.S.'s Window on Soviet War Plans," *The Washington Post*, 27 September 1992, pp. A1ff; Weiser, "A Question of Loyalty;" Mark Kramer, "Colonel Kuklinski and the Polish Crisis of 1980-81," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 11 (Winter 1998), pp. 48-59; and Mikszewski, "Colonel Kuklinski Speaks!"
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41. See note 38, above.
42. Valery Masterov, "Spy Kuklinski: Traitor or Patriot?," *Moscow News*, 25 October 1992, p. 7.
43. Quoted in Jasser, "Former Polish Intelligence Boss Says CIA Mole Knew All."
44. Warsaw PAP in English, 2148 GMT, 27 September 1992.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Krzysztof Debek, "Kuklinski To Attend Anniversary," *Wroclaw Slowo Polskie*, 4 August 1993, p. 1.
48. Warsaw PAP in English, 1601 GMT, 16 September 1993.
49. Mikszewski, "Colonel Ryszard Kuklinski Speaks!"
50. Nowak is one of Poland's best known heroes from World War II, when he acted as a courier between the Home Army and the government-in-exile in London. After the war, he served as the chief of Radio Free Europe's Polish service and, at the time of his intervention in the Kuklinski case, was national director of the Polish American Congress.
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52. NIKA, "OBOP: Zacharski Would Have Been a Bad Intelligence Chief," *Zycie Warszawy*, 15 September 1994, p. 2.
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57. *Polish News Bulletin*, 13 December 1996, p. 30.
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59. Polskie Radio First Program in Polish, 1700 GMT, 22 September 1997.
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64. "L," "State of Higher Murkiness," *NIE*, 2 October 1997, p. 7.
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