

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

27667

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
National Foreign Assessment Center  
19 October 1978

CIA SPECIAL COLLECTIONS  
RELEASE AS SANITIZED

MEMORANDUM

2000

SUBJECT: The Impact of a Polish Pope on the USSR

Key Judgement

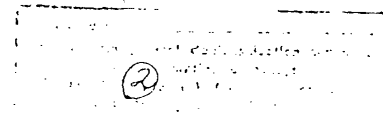
*The elevation of the Archbishop of Poland's former royal capital and ancient cultural center--Krakow--to the Papacy will undoubtedly prove extremely worrisome to Moscow, if only because of the responsiveness his papacy is likely to evoke in East European communist societies. The selection of a Polish Pope, which reflects the uniquely vital Polish church, will make even more difficult Moscow's traditional attempts to bind culturally Western Poland more closely to the East, to integrate the Poles more closely into a Soviet-dominated bilateral and multilateral system of alliances, and to foster greater social and political discipline in Poland by consolidating the power of the Polish communist party. Because of the impact of John Paul II, particularly his impact on Polish nationalism, the Soviets will now find it even more difficult to check and to counter Poland's instinctive, cultural, and political gravitation to the West.*

When the USSR faces its so-called empire in East Europe, it confronts a seriously unstable area where problems of nationalism have caused major rifts with the Soviet Union (Yugoslavia in 1948 and Albania in 1961), significant policy deviations with the Romanians, and differences among Warsaw Pact states over such disputed areas as Macedonia, Bessarabia, and Transylvania. The Soviets have never been able to cope successfully with the legacy of Polish nationalism, particularly Polish opposition to foreign occupiers and alien political systems. The origin of the state itself is linked to the

---

*This memorandum was prepared in the Office of Regional and Political Analysis. Comments on it are welcome and may be addressed to*

RPM 78-10395



papacy when--more than a millenium ago--the king of Poland converted to Roman Catholicism and turned his back on Kievan Rus. The election of Cardinal Wojtyla as Pope will give a tremendous boost to this formidable national pride and thereby make it more difficult for the regime to ignore the church's wishes.

A Polish pope will in particular have a long-term impact on a variety of internal issues between church and state that will ultimately demand Moscow's attention. Polish Catholics have been treated as second-class citizens by the party and have always looked to the church as a political alternative. Now the church can be expected to stiffen its position on such issues as establishing the legal status of the Roman Catholic church, permitting greater access to the media for church officials and religious services, and allowing an uncensored church press. The Pope's support for human rights issues as well as the emphasis by the Polish Catholic church on the country's cultural heritage could increase problems for Edward Gierek as well as the potential for mass discontent. Gierek's reaction to these problems will be watched closely in every Warsaw Pact capital, but none so closely as Moscow.

The elevation of the Cardinal to the papacy also marks an irreversible setback for Moscow's efforts since the end of WWII to weaken the various connections between the East European branches of the Catholic Church and Rome, and to create in their place docile national churches. A Polish pope not only buttresses the position of the Polish church as an alternate source of power but lends verisimilitude to the Polish view that only the church genuinely represents Polish national interests. Soviet actions in the past have already implicitly acknowledged that the neutrality of the church is essential to rule Poland, and Soviet leaders presumably must realize that the bargaining position of the church on a variety of issues has now been enhanced. The inability of the Poles to collectivize agriculture, for example, is in part a reflection of the power of the church's support for an independent peasantry.

The Soviets have in recent years been well aware of the need for caution imposed on their dealings with Warsaw due to Poland's intractable domestic economic and foreign trade problems and to the fact that Poland has a higher level of social tension than that of any other East European country. In fact, Moscow's careful response to the worker riots in Poland in 1970 and 1976 revealed that its ultimate concern was to ensure that political stability reigned in Poland. As long as Poland's nationalistic feelings do not give vent to overtly anti-Soviet actions, Moscow is likely to continue

to show caution in response to any disruptive effects of Poland's societal and intellectual tensions. If this occurs, Gierek will probably have increased bargaining leverage in getting Soviet cooperation in responding to issues between the party and the church.

Both the Church and the Kremlin, moreover, presumably share the popular Polish view that there is no viable alternative to what have thus far been Gierek's cautious tactics in handling Poland's domestic and social problems. In 1976, for example, the Soviets supported his careful response to the riots against the regime; last year, the church supported his efforts to maintain social peace in the country. In the near term, therefore, there should be no crisis in Soviet-Polish relations as a result of Wojtyla's elevation to the papacy.

Over the long run, however, the election of a Polish pope will contribute to an increase in nationalism in East Europe and will raise the consciousness of Orthodox churches and churchmen in the area. East European perceptions of Moscow's handling of any domestic crisis that results will be significant. Intellectual dissent in Poland and Czechoslovakia is already increasing and dissident groups will press the outer limits of permitted expression if the Soviets are perceived as too conciliatory. Hungary's quiet and careful experimentation in economic reform would also be enhanced by any signs of Soviet willingness to allow additional church freedom in Poland. A revival of the Protestant church in East Germany is already underway.

Indeed, the ripple effect on all of the East European countries as a result of any increase of Polish nationalism will cause the Soviet leadership to pay close attention to each sign of responsiveness to a Polish papacy in communist societies. The selection of a pope from Poland, moreover, adds to the problems of an aged and tired leadership in the Kremlin that is already facing its own pre-succession problems. Finally, the Soviets will be especially alert to any fallout from the Pope's election because the current Chinese leadership is particularly anxious to exploit any signs of a revival in East European nationalism and any signs of Soviet vacillation in responding to the challenge of such a revival.

The potential spillover effect of East European nationalism to the USSR is also considerable, particularly in the Ukraine where the Uniate Church has many adherents, in Byelorussia which contains former Polish territories that were once heavily Catholic, and in the Baltic countries where there are several million Catholics. The Soviets have always

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

been more hostile toward Catholicism than toward officially recognized and relatively subservient churches, such as the Russian Orthodox, because of the Western orientation of the Catholics and their susceptibility on Soviet borders to outside influence. A Polish pope will reinvigorate the Catholic faith in these areas and may embolden Catholic dissidents to engage in more vigorous protest activities. These issues were presumably discussed in a meeting between Ukrainian First Secretary Shcherbitsky and the Polish Ambassador to the USSR in a meeting in Kiev on 17 October, only one day after the Pope's election.

If nothing else, a Polish papacy provides resonance to the activities of the Lithuanian Catholic dissidents, whose samizdat publication--The Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church--is already one of the most vital underground journals in the USSR. Dissent in Lithuania is largely a product of religious-national sentiment, and the two most important external influences on Lithuania are the Catholic church and Poland. For several centuries Poland and Lithuania were united in a single state and the Lithuanian capital still contains a sizable Polish minority.

The impact of a Polish papacy on the Ukraine will depend largely on the position of the new pope toward the Uniate church. Unlike the Catholic church in Lithuania, which has a precarious legal status, the Uniate church was formally outlawed after the war. As a condition for better Soviet-Vatican relations, Moscow has unsuccessfully insisted on Rome's recognition of the liquidation of the Uniate church. Such recognition would be a particularly difficult decision for a Polish pope.

On balance, it will take a long period of time for these problems to sort themselves out, but the Soviet leadership is probably already anxious about how to cope with the ultimate impact of a Polish papacy on East European nationalism as well as such derivative issues as Eurocommunism and Soviet dissidence. Having successfully coexisted with a Communist regime in Poland, the new Pope will have more than symbolic impact on those communist parties in such heavily Catholic countries as Italy, France, and Spain. The communists in these countries may now feel more free to stress their independence from Moscow. Conversely, it will be more difficult for such parties as the Christian Democrats in Italy to use the influence of the Church against these communist parties. The long-range problems are thus far different from those that have faced previous Soviet regimes and once led Stalin to rhetorically but derisively dismiss the impact of the Vatican by asking "how many divisions has the Pope?"