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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

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MEMORANDUM

THE PROSPECTS FOR SOVIET MILITARY INTERVENTION IN POLAND

SUMMARY

We do not think that Moscow is now seriously considering military intervention in Poland. Although the Soviets are deeply troubled by developments there, they probably do not view the concessions granted so far regarding independent trade unions as sufficient cause for the use of Soviet military force in Poland. The Soviets probably also do not consider these concessions irreversible and will place substantial pressure on Warsaw to curtail them. In fact, with Kania's replacement of Gierek as first secretary, their hopes appear buoyed that the development of political and social chaos in Poland that might have compelled them to use military force in the near future has been forestalled. Nevertheless, Moscow's anxieties are still high, and if Kania does not limit the concessions granted the strikers or if he cracks down too forcefully and sparks a violent popular reaction which the government cannot control, the Soviets may yet have to step in militarily.

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Current Soviet Attitudes

The Soviets behaved cautiously during the Polish labor crisis. Only after the settlement of the strikes on the Baltic coast--that is, when the immediate danger of an explosion had lessened--did they openly begin to express their

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] USSR-EE Division, Office of Political Analysis, and was coordinated with the Offices of Strategic Research and Economic Research, and the National Intelligence Officer for USSR-Eastern Europe. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, USSR-EE Division, OPA,

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anxieties. Subsequent critical commentary reflected Moscow's recognition that the negotiated settlement with the strikers may have set in motion a process of political liberalization of the Polish system, which could at some point prove to be beyond the control of the Polish Communist Party and could spread elsewhere in Eastern Europe. It also was a sign of Soviet dissatisfaction with Gierek's handling of the crisis. Whether or not Moscow had a hand in Gierek's ouster, the Soviet leadership is openly pleased with the choice of Kania as first secretary and consider him to be the best possible replacement at this juncture. [redacted]

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It remains to be seen whether Kania will live up to his image as an orthodox, hardline apparatchik, who will strictly limit the gains made by the strikers. At the very least, the Polish party has bought time as far as Soviet military intervention is concerned. But if Kania proves unable or unwilling to curtail the new unions, the Soviets would step up first the political, then the military, pressure tactics on him to reverse the erosion of party control in Poland. If these pressures failed, Moscow would intervene militarily. [redacted]

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Fundamental Threat to Party Control

The agreement reached between the strikers and the Polish regime at the end of August, if implemented liberally, would threaten the very foundations of the Communist system in Poland. The theoretical justification of the Communist party's control is its claim to rule as the vanguard of the working class. But with the overwhelming majority of the workers rejecting the party-run unions for unions that will truly represent their interests, that justification would be undermined. [redacted]

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The Soviet Union, quite clearly, would not stand by idly if this occurred. The case could even be made that Moscow has already decided that its military intervention is necessary--that the threat is so dangerous that it should be stamped out before it has a chance to spread. [redacted]

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The Soviets may have already decided that the Polish leadership has given up too much of its authority in agreeing to the unprecedented establishment of free trade unions and the partial lifting of censorship. The Politburo may have reasoned that, as in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the political and social conditions for continued dissipation of the party's authority had been established. There is no reason to believe, however, that this is the case and that the Soviets have gone that far in their thinking--let alone their contingency planning. We believe that the Soviet decision to intervene will depend on where the situation goes from here, not on what has happened so far. [redacted]

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Even if the Soviets had decided in favor of intervention-- and there have been no signs of Soviet military preparations that would precede such a move--Kania's accession to power would call for a delay in plans. If Kania can erode the concessions and restore the Polish party's shaken authority, thus obviating the need for Soviet military intervention, Moscow would be delighted. It would much rather achieve its goals without suffering the substantial damage to Soviet global interests military intervention would bring. [REDACTED]

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Possible Precipitants of Intervention

The Soviets nevertheless realize that the situation in Poland will continue to be unpredictable and unstable for the immediate future and that they must monitor events closely during the coming months for any signs that their concerns are materializing. A rapid breakdown of the Polish party's control does not appear imminent, but should it occur, the Soviets would move in quickly with force. [REDACTED]

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The essential grounds for Soviet military intervention in Poland are:

- the Communist Party's loss of control over Poland, including its ability to contain the political actions of the workers and the dissidents, and
- any compromise of the basic socialist orientation of the regime's domestic and international policies.

The path to either or both of these worst case scenarios (from Moscow's point of view) could be lengthy and full of zig-zags. An accumulation of seemingly minute factors could convince the Soviet leaders to intervene. We will not necessarily realize when the Soviets, themselves, actually cross that decision threshold to intervene, but once they do there may not be any turning back even if it appears to Western analysts that the Polish regime is getting the situation under control. [REDACTED]

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Moscow will keep an especially sharp eye on the development of the new independent trade unions, which pose a potential serious threat to the Communist Party's control over Polish society. Moscow would be particularly concerned if unions spring up across the country, cohere into a potent political force, and influence national economic decision-making, especially trade with the USSR and defense spending. In the wake of Cardinal Wyszynski's meeting with Lech Walesa, the Soviets will be especially sensitive to any signs that the unions are developing meaningful alliances with the Catholic Church or political dissidents, receiving

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substantial aid from unions and other organizations in the West, or adopting openly hostile attitudes and policies toward the Soviet Union. Soviet media are already attacking assistance provided to the independent unions from Western trade unions. [redacted]

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The relaxation of censorship is another issue that the Soviets will find difficult to live with. Although the media restrictions the Gierak regime pledged to lift are minimal when compared to the near total abolition of censorship agreed to by the Dubcek regime in Czechoslovakia in 1968, this issue was one of the primary Soviet complaints to the Czechoslovak party in the months before the invasion. [redacted]

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Although it appears unlikely at the moment, the possibility exists that the present or a future Polish leadership--whether out of fear of the consequences a crackdown could bring or from a genuine sympathy with the workers' desires--could assume the lead in the liberalization process and take it much further. This could create a situation reminiscent of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Soviet party officials have already noted [redacted] that there are trends evident in Polish society similar to those present in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring. If Moscow perceived these trends in the Polish party leadership, it might feel compelled to take preventive action before the process reached an unmanageable stage. [redacted]

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An opposite course by the Polish leadership--a crackdown on the unions and all opposition--while probably more in line with the desires of the Soviet leaders, could inadvertently lead to Soviet intervention. If the workers responded to this tightening by resuming their strikes, there would be a strong likelihood of violent confrontation which, if it got out of the Polish authorities' control, could trigger the use of Soviet force. [redacted]

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Another development that would profoundly disturb the Soviets is a serious outbreak of labor unrest elsewhere in Eastern Europe or in the USSR. Unrest appears unlikely in the USSR at the moment, but the reports of strikes at major automotive plants in Tolgiatti and Gorkiy earlier this year have to give the Kremlin pause. Strikes and/or calls for free trade unions in other East European countries will induce the Soviets to step up their pressure on the Polish leadership to curtail the new unions. [redacted]

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These variables will interact in a complex, protracted process, the specific developments of which cannot be predicted with any certainty. Moscow's perception of this process may be quite different from ours or the Poles'. No one of these factors is likely to develop by itself. But a combination

of developments could suggest to Moscow that a trend toward liberalization was approaching the point of irreversibility, that Soviet vital interests were at stake and that the situation could only be put right by military intervention.

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A Decision to Intervene

Once the Soviet threshold of tolerance is crossed, Moscow would take direct action. The Soviets would first demand that the Polish leadership contain the liberalization process. If Warsaw either refused or was unable to bring the situation under control, the Soviets might opt for still another change in leadership, believing that only a more hardline group could put a stop to the erosion of power.

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Past experience suggests that the Kremlin would resort to political and military pressure to get the Poles themselves to bring the situation under control before sending in troops. This would probably include high-level visits between Moscow and Warsaw, increasingly explicit warnings in the Soviet press, and possibly threatening military movements. Several factors probably would be at work here--among them a hope that the Poles would back down when faced with a display of overwhelming force. The absence of unanimity within the Soviet Politburo could also be a vital factor. It would be no easy matter to get the entire Politburo--or perhaps even a significant majority--to agree that armed intervention was the only way to hold the Poles in line. This certainly seems to have been the case in 1968, when Kosygin, Suslov and others reportedly held out to the last moment in opposing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

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The Soviet leaders, in reaching a decision to use military force, would have to weigh the constraints, which are substantial. They must assume that:

- the strongly anti-Russian Polish people would fight, as might part or all of the Polish Army.
- Poland's submission would require the largest military operation by the Soviet armed forces since World War II and would involve protracted combat.
- Moscow's effort to salvage detente in one of its most critical areas--Europe--would receive a setback from which it would be a long time recovering.
- intervention would probably entail a substantial long-term occupation that would complicate Soviet security planning in both Europe and Asia.

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In the final analysis, however, the Soviet leaders would decide to bear these enormous costs rather than lose control of Poland:

- Poland lies astride the traditional invasion routes to and from Russia and is thus a vital corridor, essential to Soviet military planning.
- A less politically reliable Poland would leave East Germany in an exposed position.
- A Soviet failure to act forcefully could encourage similar unrest elsewhere in Eastern Europe and, possibly, in the Baltic republics of the USSR as well.

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