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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

10 January 1985

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Possible KGB Involvement in Murder of Polish Priest

Whatever the outcome of the trial currently in progress in Warsaw, definitive evidence clearly implicating or absolving the Soviets in the mid-October murder of human rights activist priest Father Jerzy Popieluszko by officials of the Polish Internal Affairs Ministry may never surface. This speculative memorandum examines possible disadvantages and advantages the Soviets could have seen in arranging or allowing the murder. Whether or not the KGB was actively involved in the murder of Father Popieluszko, the Soviets bear some indirect responsibility. By encouraging hardline factions in the Polish party and police to push for harsher measures against Solidarity, they helped create the climate in which such an act could occur. [Redacted]

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Case Against Soviet Involvement

Several arguments can be advanced against the hypothesis of Soviet complicity in the murder:

- It is not at all clear that the Soviets see any viable alternative to Jaruzelski. If they do not, they would not wish to take any action aimed at weakening his ability to rule. [Redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] of the Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments or questions may be addressed to the Chief, Policy Analysis Division, on [Redacted]

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-- Even if the Soviets wanted to remove Jaruzelski or to increase pressure on him to hew more closely to Moscow's wishes, they could not be confident that they could control developments in Poland following the murder. They might have feared that the murder would backfire, leading to an undesirable level of popular turmoil or to a strengthening of Jaruzelski's position. For example, the Soviets might have anticipated Jaruzelski would use the murder as a pretext for a lower-level housecleaning of the pro-Soviet faction of the Interior Ministry. He now appears to be trying to single out Soviet-backed Politburo member Miroslaw Milewski for negligence, setting the stage for his removal. [REDACTED]

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-- The timing of the murder argues against KGB participation. At a time when the Italian Government is trying a Bulgarian for the attempt on the life of the Pope amid suspicions of KGB complicity, the Soviets might well hesitate to undertake an operation that could draw attention to a possible KGB role in a political assassination. [REDACTED]

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-- It is not necessary to posit KGB involvement to account for the priest's murder. Sentiment for harsher measures against Solidarity exists within some circles of the Polish party and security forces. A Polish faction could have acted independently to kill the priest in order to scare Solidarity, to cause unrest that would force the government to crack down harder, or to create a complete impasse between the regime and Solidarity elements and thereby undermine Jaruzelski's position and strengthen the hand of hardliners. [REDACTED]

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Case for Soviet Involvement

On the other hand, several reasons can be adduced that could have impelled the Soviets to seek the priest's death:

-- The Soviets have faulted Jaruzelski for not moving effectively to rebuild the Polish party and for being too accommodating to opposition elements (e.g., Solidarity, the church). They could have believed the murder would be instrumental in reminding Jaruzelski of their ability to create problems for him, in creating an environment that would make his objective of establishing a modus vivendi with the church impossible to achieve, or even in weakening the Polish elite's confidence in his ability to control events and thereby

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setting the stage for a move against him.

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-- The Soviets had publicly raised concerns about the activities of Polish church figures. In September 1984, for example, before his abduction and murder, Izvestiya had attacked Popieluszko by name as a counterrevolutionary. Since his murder, Soviet media have reiterated the need for the Poles to get tough with "political clericalism." [Redacted]

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-- Before his murder Popieluszko had reportedly just opened a photographic exhibit of Polish history in Torun that included photographs of the Katyn Forest massacre--a World War II incident in which the Soviets are believed to have killed large numbers of Polish military officers. This action could have given the Soviets a particular incentive to want Popieluszko out of the way. [Redacted]

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KGB Capability

There is no doubt that the KGB had the capability, through its assets in Poland, to arrange for the murder to be committed by the Polish security service or to gain knowledge of such an operation if it were initiated by high-level Polish security officials:

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KGB on Its Own?

If the KGB was involved in the assassination, approval for it probably came from the Politburo.

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Nevertheless, the possibility cannot be dismissed categorically that the KGB acted on its own without seeking appropriate authorization, or that lower-level KGB officers broke discipline and acted without clearance from Moscow to conspire with hardliners in the Polish Interior Ministry to kill Father Popieluszko. The influence and status of the KGB within the political hierarchy have grown considerably in recent years.

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it is possible that the KGB's inclination to act autonomously has increased. If the KGB or individuals within it did overstep recognized authority boundaries in a case with such major implications, those responsible would lose their jobs.

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