The Polish Desk: Radio Free Europe, Human Rights, and Jimmy Carter's Polish policy 1976-77 – Brian Trenor, NC State University

You may ask, why Poland? Overwhelmingly attention toward Poland during the Carter Administration drifts towards the rightly monumental Solidarity movement as one of the key elements in the so-called Revolution of 1989. Solidarity and Lech Walesa did not emerge from a vacuum, however. It is this process in part that I seek to study. This paper briefly analyzes Jimmy Carter's Polish policy during the 1976 presidential campaign and during his first year in office, paying special attention to two factors: human rights and Radio Free Europe.[1]

In the 1976 presidential campaign, candidate Jimmy Carter was working to differentiate himself from incumbent President Gerald Ford and establish his own image. Crucial in this strategy was Zbigniew Brzezinski, a key advisor to Carter on foreign policy, and later his National Security Advisor. According to historian Patrick Vaughan, foreign policy memos heading to Carter had to first pass by Brzezinski's desk. Brzezinski argued "only by putting Ford on the defensive could he shatter the advantage of Presidential incumbency."[2] Ford's Eastern Europe policy, the so-called Sonnenfeldt Doctrine, essentially advised a more organic relationship between Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, arguing that Soviet control was inevitable and therefore influencing the use of Soviet power was the only option. Carter charged the U.S. had let the Soviets get the better of détente by allowing human rights to be neglected, and Brzezinski worked in speeches to juxtapose "Carter's liberal internationalism from George McGovern's neo-isolationism, Kissinger's amoral emphasis on balance of power diplomacy, and

[1] The chapters this article is based on draw primarily from original research in the Jimmy Carter Library, Radio Free Europe Research publications, declassified government documents, and the five volume: United States Congress, *The Presidential Campaign, 1976*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979).
[2] Patrick Vaughan, "Zbigniew Brzezinski: The Political And Academic Life of a Cold War Visionary," dissertation, West Virginia University, 2003, pg. 239, 263; Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), pg. 699.

Ronald Reagan's anti-détente rhetoric that rejected any form of engagement with the Soviet Union."[3]

The Carter campaign also leveled criticism on the Helsinki Final Accords, signed by thirty-five countries in 1975, which contained three sections or baskets. Basket One stressed military and political cooperation, recognized the inviolability of borders, and in essence legitimized the division of Europe. Basket Two called for economic and scientific cooperation between the communist and capitalist camps. Basket Three called for respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, access to information, and the right of emigration. Many criticized Helsinki as a second Yalta, a sellout of Eastern Europe. Yet, in a debate preparation memo to Carter, Brzezinski clearly stated "Do not attack the Agreement as a whole:"

> The so-called 'Basket III' gives us the right – for the first time – to insist on respect for human rights without this constituting interference in the internal affairs of communist states. Accordingly, this is a considerable asset for us, and you should hammer away at the proposition that the Republicans have been indifferent to this opportunity.[4]

This strategy would pay major dividends at the second presidential debate on October 6, 1976, when Ford boldly declared "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford Administration." Pressed for clarification, Ford kept digging, claiming he didn't believe that the Yugoslavians, Romanians, and Poles "consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union." A "delighted" Carter leapt to the attack, charging:

---

[3] "East European Reactions to Sonnenfeldt," Radio Free Europe/Open Society Archives, Box-Folder-Report 99-6-83, pg. 7, http://files.osa.ceu.hu/holdings/300/8/3/text/99-6-83.shtml; Norman Friedman, *The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007), pg. 414; Leo Ribuffo, "Is Poland a Soviet Satellite? Gerald Ford, the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine, and the Election of 1976," *Diplomatic History,* Vol. 14, No. 3 (July 1990), pg. 394; Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, in Patrick Vaughan, "Zbigniew Brzezinski: The Political And Academic Life of a Cold War Visionary," dissertation, West Virginia University, 2003, pg. 245.

[4] Elizabeth Drew, "Human Rights," *The New Yorker*, July 18, 1977, pg. 36; Patrick Vaughan, "Beyond Benign Neglect: Zbigniew Brzezinski and the Polish Crisis of 1980," *The Polish Review*, Vol. 64, No. 1, 1999, pg. 6; Patrick G. Vaughan, "Zbigniew Brzezinski and the Helsinki Final Act," in Leopold Nuti, *The crisis of détente in Europe: from Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), pg. 14-15.

> [Helsinki] may have been a good agreement in the beginning, but we have failed to enforce the so-called Basket 3 part…The Soviet Union is still jamming Radio Free Europe…We've also seen a very serious problem with the so-called Sonnenfeldt document which, apparently, Mr. Ford has just endorsed, which said that there is an organic linkage between the Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union. And I would like to see Mr. Ford convince the Polish-Americans and the Czech-Americans and the Hungarian-Americans in this country that those countries don't live under the domination and supervision of the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain.[5]

James Naughton of the *New York Times* reported an "audible intake of air" from the crowd. Ford adviser Brent Scowcroft was said to have gone white backstage. The uproar following the debate saw no less than William F. Buckley, Jr. call Ford's answer "the ultimate Polish joke." For several more days, Ford would try to backtrack before finally acknowledging his slip of words. *Time* Magazine called it the most damaging statement of Ford's career. Having gained traction in the aftermath of the second debate, Carter would keep Eastern Europe on the front burner, criticizing the USSR's violation of the Helsinki agreement. In Carter's view, this was not only in alignment with American and Western traditions, but constituted part of a "moral" foreign policy, while also putting the Soviet Union on the defense.[6]

On October 10, Jimmy Carter attended a Pulaski Day dinner held by the Polish community in Chicago. Carter told the audience "Eastern Europe must never, and can never be a stable region until the Eastern European countries regain their independence." In this speech, Carter drew together the strands of his proposed Polish policy for the first time and presented the overarching program as a whole. Carter stated that while he wanted to seek cooperation with the

---

[5] *The Presidential Campaign, 1976*, Volume 3, pg. 100; Ribuffo, pg. 385.

[6] Ribuffo, pg. 386-399; Vaughan, "Helsinki Final Act," pg. 15; Mark Rozell, *The Press and the Ford Presidency*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); William F. Buckley, Jr., "Mr. Ford's Polish Joke," *National Review*, November 12, 1976, (Vol. 28 Issue 43), pg. 1252; Rudy Abramson, "President Defends Dominance Remark," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1976, pg. A1; David Shipler, "Poland Is Definitely a Soviet-Style Autonomy," *New York Times*, October 10, 1976, pg. 177; Seth King, "Ethnic Groups Score Ford's Views on Soviet Role in Eastern Europe," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1976; Campaign Memo from Brzezinski to Carter staffers – October 8, 1976, "Items to Bear in Mind Regarding Eastern Europe," personal archives of Zbigniew Brzezinski, cited in, Vaughan, "Political and Academic Life," pg. 267; Jeffery Jones, "Gerald Ford Retrospective," December 29, 2006, Gallup, http://www.gallup.com/poll/23995/Gerald-Ford-Retrospective.aspx#1; "The Blooper Heard Round the World," *Time*, October 18, 1978.

Soviet Union rather than a renewed cold war, he would take several firm, concrete "steps to show that we do care about freedom in Eastern Europe." These steps can be grouped together in four main themes.[7]

First, Carter sought the USSR's increased compliance with the Helsinki Accord's guarantee of human rights. He called for America to be "constantly concerned about the preservation of human rights throughout the world" and pledged "as President, I will do nothing by deed or word to give the slightest indication that we will ever accept permanent Soviet domination over countries that want to be free. And you can depend on that." Second, Carter detailed, "we must insist, soundly, that the Soviet Union, as agreed to in the Helsinki Agreement, cease jamming Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty…there has to be access to those who live in Poland from the free world." Third, the candidate pledged to work "for an expanded network of human and commercial ties between the countries of the East and the countries of the West." Finally, Carter called for bilateral relations with the nations of Eastern Europe, asserting "United States-Soviet détente depends upon recognizing the legitimate aspirations" of the Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, and other peoples of Eastern Europe. This would serve to keep "the alternative of freedom always open in the Eastern European countries." These final two prongs built upon the first two: if Helsinki obligations are fulfilled, the United States will continue a bilateral relationship which will lead to favorable exchanges, credits, accords, and national prestige.[8]

This may strike some as boilerplate campaign rhetoric, but although this speech had been framed in the wider context of Eastern Europe, it outlined almost exactly the forthcoming policy toward Poland under the Carter Administration. Now let's look at a few applications of this rhetoric in the first year of the Carter presidency.

---

[7] Ribuffo, pg. 389; *The Presidential Campaign, 1976, Volume One, Part Two*, pg. 1004.
[8] *The Presidential Campaign, 1976, Volume One, Part Two*, pg. 1004-5.

In 1976, while Americans across the country were fixated on the ongoing presidential campaign, important changes were also taking place in Poland, thousands of miles away. While supporters in America took to the streets to rally and vote for their candidates, Poles took to the streets to agitate first for lower food prices, and then for their imprisoned friends and neighbors as part of the Committee For Workers' Defense (KOR). First formed in solidarity with demonstrators who had been beaten and jailed during rioting over food prices that June, KOR soon developed into a full-fledged human rights movement. Here the worker, intellectual, and Catholic factions were beginning to come together for the first time in Poland.[9]

Indeed, 1977 was marked by a surging tide of human rights activism, starting on January 1, when Czechoslovakia's Charter 77 sent shockwaves with its 3,000 word protest of the government's oppressiveness. In his inaugural address on January 20, Carter gave his strongest statement on human rights to date, declaring an "absolute" commitment to human rights. On the recommendation of National Security Advisor Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Carter directed the State Department to publicly reprimand the Czechoslovak government for its treatment of the Charter 77 signatories, many of which had been beaten and jailed. This marked the first time the State Department publicly criticized a government for failure to comply with the Helsinki Final Accords, a major symbolic and concrete step.[10]

The Carter Administration condemned the arrest of Alexander Ginzburg and Yuri Orlov, members of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group. The White House responded by corresponding with Soviet dissident and Nobel Prize winner Andrei Sakharov and meeting with Vladimir

---

[9] Situation Report Poland/1, January 14, 1977, *Radio Free Europe Research*, in "Radio Free Europe Research Vol. 2, No. 1," pg. 14.

[10] Adam Bromke, "Czechoslovakia 1968 – Poland 1978: A Dilemma for Moscow," *International Journal* (Autumn 1978), pg. 22; Norman Friedman, *The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War* , (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007), pg. 412-13; Vaughan, "Helsinki Final Act," pg. 17.

Bukovsky.[11] In response, the Soviet press accelerated its campaign against Carter's support for East European and Russian dissidents, culminating in early March with a direct mention of "President J. Carter," which the *New York Times* noted "in Soviet terms an important escalation of polemics."[12] It was in fact the first time the official Soviet press had criticized an American President by name in this way. Some felt perhaps the new Administration was going too far in its criticism. However, historian Patrick Vaughan has argued, "Carter's early emphasis on human rights provided [Poland's] Edward Gierek with a vested interest in distancing the Polish leadership from the heavy-handed tactics of the Husak regime" in Czechoslovakia. A Radio Free Europe situation report noted "the fact that the [Helsinki review] conference in Belgrade is coming up next summer would also encourage moderation."[13]

On March 22, President Carter issued a report to Congress requesting funding for eleven 250-KW transmitters to bolster the nine already in operation for RFE/RL, effectively doubling their operations on the grounds that "International broadcasting is a key element of United States foreign policy…Our most crucial audiences for international broadcasting are in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe."[14] When approved by Congress, these upgrades would almost double the transmitting capacity of RFE/RL to Eastern Europe, and that of VOA to the Soviet Union by 25%. The report also asked for twelve VOA transmitters for Africa and Asia. The installations, the report estimated, would take from three to five years and cost around $45 million. This

---

[11] "The President's News Conference," February 8, 1977, American Presidency Project; "The Month in Review," *Current History*, Vol. 72, No. 426 (April 1977), pg. 191.
[12] Oswald Johnston, "Détente Can Survive Rights Issue, Vance Says," *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 1977, pg. 1; Bernard Gwertzman, "Vance Says Moscow Still Seeks Détente," *New York Times*, March 5, 1977, pg. 45; Oswald Johnson and Norman Kempster, "U.S. Struggling to Set Human Rights Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 1977, pg. A6; "The Month in Review," *Current History*, Vol. 72, No. 427 (May/June 1977), pg. 235.
[13] Situation Report Poland/1, January 14, 1977, Radio Free Europe Research, in "Radio Free Europe Research Vol. 2, No. 1", pg. 15-16; Patrick Vaughan, "Beyond Benign Neglect," *The Polish Review* (Vol. 64, No. 1, 1999), pg. 8.
[14] BIB Annual Report 1977, cited in Gene Sosin, "Sparks of Liberty: An Insider's Memoir of Radio Liberty," (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), pg. 171; David Binder, "Carter Requests Funds for Big Increase in Broadcasts," *New York Times*, March 23, 1977, pg. 6.

investment in the radio services represented a long-term commitment toward the worldwide dissident movement, which depended upon Western radio for news and information. Carter also argued against the reduction or consolidation of programming to save costs and transmitter requirements, as the "political disadvantages of such measures far outweigh the budgetary savings or technical efficiencies," or worse, a "weakening" in American commitment to the provisions of the Helsinki Accords. *Trybuna Ludu*, Poland's party daily, called the report "astonishing" and contrary to the spirit of improving relations, calling RFE and RL "subversive, cold-war institutions."[15]

Operating out of Munich, RFE transmitted American programming to Eastern Europe, and unlike the Voice of America, RFE's shows included commentary alongside the news and music. For this reason, in Poland and its neighbors RFE was their primary source of news alongside VOA and the BBC, much preferred to the censored or state-run media. Poland had the highest share of RFE listenership in Eastern Europe. During the campaign, Carter said of Radio Free Europe and its partners, "The radios are more than mere transmitters of information. They are the symbol of the U.S. commitment to peaceful change in Eastern Europe and a sign of continued engagement in Europe's future." Polish Defense Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski, who would as First Secretary impose martial law to squash the Solidarity trade union in 1981, recalled the "peaceful engagement" strategy Brzezinski had been pushing, noting, "The Polish government understood that Brzezinski's approach was very dangerous. Indeed, it was far more dangerous than that proposed by any other American politician or political scientist."[16]

---

[15] Report, President Carter to Congress, "Report on International Broadcasting," March 22, 1978, in BIB Annual Report 1978, pg. 40.

[16] *The Presidential Campaign, 1976, Volume One, Part One*, pg. 694; Patrick G. Vaughan, "Zbigniew Brzezinski and the Helsinki Final Act," in Leopold Nuti, *The crisis of détente in Europe: from Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), pg. 19.

The next major watershed in Eastern Europe policy would come with PRM/NSC-28, issued on May 20, 1977. The memo advised for policy toward Eastern Europe to be, "Firm and consistent but non-polemical…we should make it clear that our commitment to human rights is a very basic part of our policy, and our ideas should be directed to the people of these countries as well as their governments. We should emphasize implementation of the Helsinki Final Act." Although some felt the human rights criticism jeopardized détente, the memo wrote due to "the inevitable strain of a massive arms race, a need to take increasing consumer demands into account and potential unrest in Eastern Europe," the USSR needed SALT, "technological transfer agreements" and "commercial credit arrangements" too badly to jeopardize on the basis of U.S. human rights advocacy.[17]

The Belgrade conference to review the implementation of the Helsinki Final Accords was also the scene of what scholar David Forsythe called "Carter policies of publicly embarrassing communist countries in the Helsinki Follow-up Conferences and in other international meetings."[18] The Soviet Union was flustered by an unrelenting torrent of human rights criticism, and the months-long Belgrade conference ultimately disbanded without any document of agreement from the participants. As the conference was taking place, Presidential Directive 21 was formally adopted on September 13, 1977. Just as Brzezinski had argued and as Carter himself had campaigned for in 1976, the U.S. moved to sharpen the traditional policy of "working with governments of the region to enhance their independence internationally and to

[17] Presidential Review Memorandum, "Comprehensive Review of European Issues," PRM/NSC-28, May 20, 1977, pg. 7-19.
[18] David Forsythe, "Human Rights in U.S. Foreign Policy: Retrospect and Prospect," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990), pg. 446.

increase their degree of internal liberalization," and that the government should "show its preference" for regimes that comply.[19]

Accordingly, Poland was one of several stops on Carter's first major tour abroad in December, where he was welcomed warmly by the Polish government as well as students who stood in the rain bearing signs reading "We count on you America. Do not let us down." In part to alleviate Poland's food shortage but also to reward a relatively liberal Communist regime, Carter announced the United States would award Poland $200 million in loans and credits for agricultural products. The First Lady and Brzezinski also met with the powerful Cardinal Wyszynski of the Polish Catholic Church, and a powerful voice for many in the Polish opposition.[20] Over the next three years, the Polish opposition would galvanize into the powerful Solidarity trade union backed by the Polish Pope John Paul II, a movement which would change the course of Eastern Europe.

This in essence, was a small snapshot of Carter's policy on human rights and Poland during 1976 and 1977, which were but part of his administration. Ford's famous gaffe at the second debate served as the impetus for Carter to adopt a sharper criticism of the Ford Administration's policy toward Eastern Europe. What was initially a chance to score points with the electorate became an opportunity for Carter to develop his policy. An outline for action was sketched that would be translated directly into policy toward Poland during the incoming Carter Administration. Centered in the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Accords, Carter sought to encourage human rights, particularly through Radio Free Europe and with an array of cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges. Although some of the policies were more successful than others, together they constituted the major themes of the next four years of U.S.-Polish relations.

---

[19] Presidential Directive, "Policy toward Eastern Europe," PD/NSC-21, September 13, 1977.
[20] Bill Neikirik, "Warsaw 'cool' to Carter," Chicago Tribune, Dec. 30, 1977; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981,* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), pg. 298.

It was a policy that explicitly rejected the Sonnenfeldt doctrine and aggressively sought to liberalize the Polish social, economic, and political systems. While it was but one of many factors, it is reasonable to assume that Jimmy Carter's policy toward Poland – his promotion of human rights, Radio Free Europe, trade and cultural ties, and independence from Moscow – contributed to the success of the Solidarity movement. These events demonstrate that words do matter, and that human rights have the potency to become more than simply high flying rhetoric. Some charge Carter during his tenure did not do enough to protect the human rights of many throughout the world. However, in contrast to other policies of the Administration which were met with resistance or even stymied, the Polish policy would turn out to be quite effective and successful at the cost of remarkably little political capital.