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AN ESCALATING PROBLEM

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF POLAND AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE CSCE PROCESS, 1975-1983

Since the second world war, human rights have increasingly attracted the attention of various social groups. Their definition has become broader and more detailed and, most importantly, attempts have been made to guarantee them not only country by country, but also through international legislation and other international commitments.

Governments across the communist bloc, true to their system's ideological precepts, focussed on what they saw as social rights. Individual freedoms and especially political rights were treated as subordinate to these social and collective rights. The thinking of the decision-makers in People's Poland, too, was heavily burdened by communist doctrine and although the country's constitution frequently served as a mere façade which the government treated instrumentally, it nonetheless expressed a distinct political philosophy giving precedence to collective rights: The preamble to the constitution read that the state is to be a 'republic of the working people' (and not of all citizens), whose power is founded on an 'alliance of the working class and the working peasantry'. The People's Republic of Poland was to attain and develop a 'socialist democracy' (art. 7), and its laws 'expressed the interests and the will of the working people' (art. 8). The constitution generally presented the rights and duties of citizens in the systemic context of the state, as it did the freedoms of expression, publication, assembly, marches and demonstrations.¹

The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which after years of preparations convened on 3 July 1973 in Helsinki, introduced broadly defined human rights into great power politics on an unprecedented

¹ Konstytucja Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej uchwalona przez Sejm Ustawodawczy w dniu 22 lipca 1952 r. Jednolity tekst z dnia 16 lutego 1976 r., Dziennik Ustaw nr 7, poz. 36.

scale.² In its talks, human rights appeared as a bargaining chip: The USSR only agreed to include them in the final document produced by the conference because otherwise the United States and the other western countries would not have accepted the document's provisions recognising the political and territorial status quo in Europe – though it has to be noted that the latter did not mean that changes in the status quo would be out of the question. The Helsinki Final Act took into account the protection of human rights both in the Declaration of Principles and in the thematic provisions.³ To be sure, the Final Act was an international agreement and not an international treaty; fulfilling its commitments relied on its signatories' good will. The political realities of 1975, however, proved that it could also have a practical effect – if the political will was there. Thus, the west began to take advantage of cases of implementation and violation of the agreement's human rights provisions to formulate their policies towards the states of eastern Europe. This article intends to demonstrate the impact of this western strategy on domestic developments in Poland and on its government's decisions.

The Domestic Situation, the CSCE and Human Rights in International Relations

In the 1970s, Poland witnessed growing social unrest and the emergence of a number of new organised opposition groups. This was unquestionably influenced by (to use communist terminology) both turbulence in the 'base', i.e. the declining economy, and problems with the 'superstructure', i.e., growing popular dissatisfaction with the regime itself. First Secretary Władysław Gomułka had been removed from power in December 1970 after a series of strikes and the government's ensuing massacre of workers in the coastal cities. Replacing him was Edward Gierek, whose star had been rising in the party, most visibly since 1968.⁴ Once in power, the new

² Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³ Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Final Act, available at www.osce.org/mc/39501?download=true (last visited 15 July 2013). Principle VII of the Declaration was entitled 'Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief' and the relevant chapter was entitled 'Co-operation in Humanitarian and Other Fields'.

⁴ Jerzy Eisler, *Grudzień 1970: Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (Warszawa: PWN, 2000).

Polish leadership – the so-called ‘Gierek team’ (*ekipa Gierkowska*) – bandied about slogans of opening Poland to the west, modernising the country, creating prosperity and turning Poland into a second Japan. There is no doubt that Gierek’s economic policies in the short term raised the average person’s standard of living, bringing improvements in everyday life and making consumer goods available, which unquestionably influenced the population’s approval of the regime.⁵ Soon, however, problems began to emerge, both those stemming from the inherent characteristics of the system and those caused by current economic mistakes. From the authorities’ perspective, the swelling foreign debt was playing an especially negative role.⁶

Public dissatisfaction with the regime manifested itself in criticism of economic policies as well as of the system’s founding principles or of the powerful ideological pressures in areas such as education. In 1975, protests over changes being planned for the constitution became an important landmark in the birth of a progressively organised opposition to government policy. The protesters questioned the phrasing of the changes, which were to affix Poland’s alliance with the USSR in the constitution and to include a phrase about the communist party’s leading role. They also challenged the close connection being made between civil rights and obligations towards the state, as well as the mention of raising young people in the socialist spirit. Protest letters were sent to the authorities, and many demanded the creation of a parliamentary democracy. The Catholic church also spoke up against the changes. These numerous voices of protest were a new experience for the Gierek team, and could have served as a warning – but were probably not heard as such. The government tempered its proposal, but nonetheless, on 10 February 1976, amended the constitution.⁷

New groups challenging real socialism surfaced. After the government ruthlessly suppressed strikes in 1976, people representing various milieux of the intelligentsia formed a committee to provide assistance for workers suffering repression. While some of its members had wanted to call this group the Committee for the Defence of Human and Civic Rights and to use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its founding principle, it

⁵ Łukasz Dwilewicz, ‘Polityka gospodarcza a spokój społeczny: Posunięcia władz partyjnych i państwowych od grudnia 1970 do grudnia 1971’, in Elżbieta Kościak, Tomasz Głowiński, eds., *Gospodarka i społeczeństwo w czasach PRL-u (1944-1989)*, (Wrocław: GAJT 2007), 333-353, at 333-334.

⁶ Leszek J. Jasiński, *Blżej centrum czy na peryferiach? Polskie kontakty gospodarcze z zagranicą w XX w.* (Warszawa: Centrum Europejskie Natolin, Trio 2011), 253.

⁷ Cf. Peter Raina, *Rozmowy biskupa Dąbrowskiego z władzami PRL* (Olsztyn: Warmińskie Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 1998), 232-233.

was decided to adopt the name Workers' Defence Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*) instead.⁸ A few months later, a second opposition group – the Movement for the Defence of Human and Civil Rights (*Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela*) – came into being, followed by the Young Poland Movement (*Ruch Młodej Polski*) in 1978. In 1979 the Confederation for an Independent Poland (*Konfederacja Polski Niepodległej*) was the first opposition group to define itself as a political party.⁹ Though representing different ideological orientations, these groups shared a specific political strategy: they operated in plain sight, making their existence and their membership public, and only keeping secret their ties to organisations engaged in publishing and collecting funds to support their activity. In 1978 so-called Founding Committees of Free Trade Unions (*Komitet Założycielski Wolnych Związków Zawodowych*) were created in Katowice and Gdańsk; those in Gdańsk maintained contacts with intelligentsia organisations. This period also saw the development of a publishing movement. It put out periodicals about social, political and literary issues, as well as books, both Polish, some of which had been rejected by the censor's office, and translations of foreign literature, such as Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Bohumil Hrabal's *Too Loud a Solitude* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

These developments were supported by members of the Polish diaspora abroad: Following the second world war, hundreds of thousands of Poles had remained in the west, most in the United States, France and Britain, where some of them published Polish-language literature, journals and newspapers. One of the most influential of these émigré publications was the monthly *Kultura*, published in Paris, which became an important outlet for independent political thought. Using various routes, these publications were brought to Poland.

⁸ Andrzej Friszke, *Czas KOR-u: Jacek Kuroń a geneza Solidarności* (Kraków: Znak, ISP PAN, 2011), 114-115; Jan Józef Lipski, *KOR: Komitet Obrony Robotników*, with an introd. by Andrzej Friszke, Warszawa 2004.

⁹ There is a rich literature about the history of popular resistance and opposition, which includes both monographs and collections of documents. Andrzej Anusz, Łukasz Perzyna, *Konfederacja: Rzecz o KPN* (Warszawa: Wspólnota Samorządowa Województwa Mazowieckiego, 2009); Andrzej Friszke, *Opozycja polityczna w PRL 1945-1980* (London: Aneks, 1994); Paweł Sasanka, *Czerwiec 1976: Geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje* (Warszawa: IPN, 2006); Grzegorz Waligóra, *Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela 1977-1981* (Warszawa: IPN, 2006); Łukasz Kamiński, Grzegorz Waligóra, eds., *Kryptonim "Wasale": Służba Bezpieczeństwa wobec Studenckich Komitetów Solidarności 1977-1980* (Warszawa: IPN 2007); Łukasz Kamiński, Grzegorz Waligóra, eds., *Kryptonim "Gracze". Służba Bezpieczeństwa wobec Komitetu Obrony Robotników i Komitetu Samoobrony Społecznej "KOR" 1977-1981* (Warszawa: IPN, 2010).

When the CSCE Final Act was signed, many in the émigré community feared lest it could be interpreted as recognising the Soviet domination in Europe – which was precisely how the Polish government presented it. Individuals, including the president of the government in exile, Edward Raczynski, as well as organisations lobbied western governments to refrain from treating the CSCE as de facto confirmation of the post-1945 regime changes in Europe.¹⁰ The émigré organisations also engaged in activities to provide support for the opposition groups in Poland. In March 1978 the London Polish community affiliated with the government in exile created the Fund for the Defence of Freedom of Expression and Human Rights in Poland (*Fundusz Obrony Wolności Słowa i Praw Ludzkich w Polsce*), which gave financial assistance to organisations in Poland. Such connections between Poland and the émigré community were of great interest to Poland's Ministry of Internal Affairs, which understood the implications of this support.¹¹ The Polish émigré community – enlarged after 1981 by an influx of political refugees following the imposition of martial law – remained active throughout the 1980s.

The Catholic church in Poland, too, played an important role. With the government refusing to recognise a political opposition, the church protested in an official way, i.e., by sending memoranda to the government, against issues such as the deteriorating standard of working and living, educational policy or state policies concerning families.¹² Its role was strengthened by the election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła to the papacy in October 1978, and especially in the period after he made his first pilgrimage to his native land in 1979.

In January 1978 the Society for Scientific Courses (*Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych*) was created, continuing the nineteenth-century tradition of independent teaching under foreign partitions. Since the group met in alternating private homes and its lecturers included university professors, it was called the 'flying university'.¹³ Programmes broadcast by Radio Free

¹⁰ Wanda Jarząbek, *Polska wobec Konferencji Bezpieczeństwa i Współpracy w Europie. Plany i rzeczywistość 1964-1975*, (Warszawa: ISP PAN, 2008); eadem, *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa wobec polityki wschodniej Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1966-1976: Wymiar dwustronny i międzynarodowy* (Warszawa: ISP PAN, 2011), 441-442.

¹¹ See, among others, 'Informacja na temat kanałów łączności KSS "KOR" z ośrodkami zagranicznymi, opracowana przez inspektora Wydziału IX Departamentu III MSW kpt. E. Kudybińskiego', 28 Feb. 1979, in *Kryptonim "Gracze"*, 502-508.

¹² Antoni Dudek, *Państwo i Kościół w Polsce* (Kraków: Arcana, 1995); Peter Raina, *Kościół katolicki a państwo w świetle dokumentów 1945-1989* (Poznań: W drodze, 1995), vols. II and III.

¹³ Łukasz Kamiński, Grzegorz Waligóra, eds., *Kryptonim "Pegaz": Służba Bezpieczeństwa wobec Towarzystwa Kursów Naukowych* (Warszawa: IPN, 2008).

Europe, the domestic and émigré publishers and the various forms of alternative education combined to break the state's monopoly over the public sphere. Now, discussions of issues disallowed by the communist authorities could take place underground.¹⁴ The opposition's reach was quite significant, albeit restricted mostly to the urban intelligentsia and to some worker communities.

The government attempted to destroy these independent movements and to confiscate their publications: Participants in the 1976 protests were punished and in May 1977 leading members of the Workers Defence Committee were arrested. In the summer of 1977, however, an amnesty was implemented and the Polish regime refrained from radical measures such as mass arrests, political trials or forced exile.¹⁵ What were the reasons? Apparently, some groups in the security structures believed that the opposition groups were not numerous and that they could be kept in check with so-called 'operational methods' such as surveillance and subversion.¹⁶ Others, including members of the Foreign Ministry, appear to have shared that perspective, and it is difficult to tell now whether they were swayed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs or whether their ideas came from elsewhere. This thinking appears for instance in documents of the Foreign Ministry about implementing the Final Act. It seems that some optimism was even prevalent in the top tiers of the communist regime.

To be sure, there were some proponents of harsher measures, but there was agreement that the opposition should be fought without creating publicity and visibility. Available Central Committee and Politburo documents permit only an incomplete reconstruction of the process by which the Polish leadership arrived at this tactic: The documents revealing the inner workings of the Politburo do not provide conclusive evidence and former Politburo members relate that this policy was discussed mainly behind the scenes. I believe that the international factor played an important role in these calculations especially from 1977. Key among these considerations

¹⁴ Justyna Błażejewska, *Papierowa rewolucja: Z dziejów drugiego obiegu wydawniczego w Polsce 1976-1989/1990* (Warszawa: IPN, 2009); Paweł Sowiński, *Zakazana książka: Uczestnicy drugiego obiegu 1977-1989*, (Warszawa: ISP PAN, 2011); Paweł Machcewicz, "Monachijska menażeria": *Walka z Radiem Wolna Europa* (Warszawa: ISP PAN, IPN, 2007); Sig Mickelson, *America's Other Voice: The Story of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (New York: Greenwood Publ., 1983).

¹⁵ 'Notatka z narady odbytej u sekretarza KC PZPR Stanisława Kani, 22 Oct. 1976', in Andrzej Friszke, ed., *Rozmowy na Zawracie: Taktika walki z opozycją demokratyczną październik 1976 – grudzień 1979* (Warszawa: ISP PAN, 2008), 54-55.

¹⁶ Promoting this view in September 1976 was the director of Department III of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Gen. Adam Krzysztoporski, as quoted in *Rozmowy na Zawracie*, 12.

was the role of human rights in international politics, which was growing thanks to the CSCE process, and the connection between the east's honouring of human rights and the west's (foremost the United States') readiness to assist Poland's with some of its economic needs.¹⁷

Already during the Multilateral Preparatory Talks for the CSCE in Helsinki in 1972-73, both in the multilateral plenary meetings and during bilateral talks with western politicians and diplomats, human rights had appeared as one of the key issues on the CSCE agenda, indeed, one without which the conference could not begin. Even though initially neither Warsaw nor Moscow treated these harbingers seriously,¹⁸ diplomatic and Ministry of Internal Affairs documents nonetheless show that the Polish leadership noticed the growing importance of human rights already during the initial conference. But the relevant documents underlined not only potential threats but also benefits for Poland and the other east bloc countries, such as opportunities for using some of the agreement's provisions in propaganda.¹⁹ Warsaw also believed that the Declaration of Principles would become the most important part of the Final Act. The Declaration's recognition of the sovereign equality of the states (principle I) and of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states (principle VI) was therefore expected to reduce the importance of the provisions in the chapter on 'Co-operation in Humanitarian and Other Fields' (Basket III).²⁰ The latter covered access to printed, filmed and broadcast information, working conditions for journalists, the freedom of opinion, including political opinions, and protection of civil liberties, including religious freedoms.

While the western, especially west European, countries focussed mostly on the conditions for cultural and educational cooperation as well as the founding of cultural institutes and multilateral research projects, People's Poland was only interested in some aspects of this cooperation: The authorities favoured scientific co-operation giving Poland access to new technologies but did not want to cooperate on developing the humanities, unless

¹⁷ Wanda Jarzabek, *Od Helsinek do Belgradu – władze PRL a problematyka trzeciego koszyka KBWE w latach 1975-1978*, in *W dekadzie Gierka, Wrocławskie Studia z Polityki Zagranicznej*, vol. III (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek 2010), 124-125; eadem, *Hope and Reality: Poland and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1964-1989*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 56, Washington 2008, available at www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP56_Web.pdf (last visited 15 July 2013).

¹⁸ Jarzabek, *Polska wobec Konferencji*, 93.

¹⁹ Kierunki działania PRL w związku z realizacją uchwał Konferencji Bezpieczeństwa w Europie, 1 Dec. 1975, Departament Studiów i Programowania (henceforth: DSiP), z. 5/82, w. 2, Archiwum Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych (henceforth: AMSZ).

²⁰ Jarzabek, *Polska wobec Konferencji*, 155-156.

they could be closely monitored. They also did not want too much information about other countries, their standards of living, their media and societies, to reach the Polish public. The Polish government therefore attempted to prevent western states from opening cultural institutes and had no intention of abandoning the system of issuing permits to accredit journalists. Another set of issues Poland and the other members of the bloc found difficult to accept concerned movement: easing travel and, most prominently, emigration. Warsaw wanted emigration to remain a domestic issue and to be handled bilaterally. In the 1970s emigration was especially germane in its relations with the FRG and the United States.²¹

Poland, much like its fellow bloc members, all along treated the inclusion of human rights in the CSCE process as a necessary evil - something they had to do because of the west's insistence. Meetings on the various levels of the bloc (the Warsaw Pact's Committee of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Political Consultative Committee), conferences of various departments of the bloc's ruling communist parties, meetings of representatives of the Foreign Ministries and Ministries of Internal Affairs and discussions among general secretaries of the bloc all debated this question. Human rights were thus not an issue to be decided independently by Poland, but rather a bloc-wide one on which to confer and agree jointly, even though the extent of these conferences and agreements fluctuated and left room for manoeuvre for each bloc country.²²

There were some similarities in the Soviet bloc members' strategies, most importantly introducing diplomatic initiatives that could distract the western CSCE members from violations of the Final Act's human rights provisions. Already at the Seventh Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party on 8-12 December 1975, a mere four months after the Final Act had been signed, Leonid Brezhnev spoke of the imperative of convening three conferences to discuss important issues, namely, the protection of the environment, the development of transport and energy policies, and the implementation of CSCE resolutions on bilateral and multilateral economic and technical cooperation. The bloc countries considered that resolutions on disarmament would interest the west; at the review conference of the CSCE in Belgrade (October 1977-March 1978), the Soviets thus presented a proposal for what they called a pan-European platform on military

²¹ Jarzqbek, *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa*, 327-328, 449-450; Dariusz Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949-1989* (Warszawa: ISP PAN, IPN, 2010).

²² Csaba Békés, 'Der Warschauer Pakt und der KSZE-Prozess 1965 bis 1970', in Torsten Diedrich, et al., eds., *Der Warschauer Pakt: Von der Gründung bis zum Zusammenbruch 1955-1991* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2009), 225-244, at 225-226; Jarzqbek, *Polska wobec Konferencji*, 43-44.

détente.²³ Even as Moscow engaged in intensive military build-up, the countries of the bloc lay significant emphasis on military détente.

The individual countries also deliberated on ways to distract the first review meeting from the parts of Basket III that would be especially problematic to them. Poland developed a plan named after Edward Gierek for public peace education. Though the Belgrade conference did not adopt this initiative, it was partly implemented in different form by a UN declaration in December 1978. The plan was to propose at the Madrid conference that a meeting devoted to education for peace be held in Warsaw, with UNESCO participation as well.

Warsaw thus participated in Soviet bloc efforts to shift debates within the CSCE away from human rights issues and focus on questions of détente, disarmament or east-west technological and economic cooperation. At the same time, the Polish leadership, heavily dependent on western credits to modernize its economies, had understood already in the early 1970s that it benefitted from presenting itself as a relatively liberal country and from cultivating an image of Gierek as an open leader. Owing especially to Warsaw's close observation of developments in the United States, this political line was continued after the Helsinki conference. Despite some resistance from the Ford Administration, especially Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in June 1976 the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, usually called the US Helsinki Commission was formed. The Commission consisted of nine members from the Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. It put out reports about human rights violations, including – at times, mostly – eastern Europe, and organised hearings about conditions in individual countries; thus, a May 1977 hearing on Poland focussed on repressions of people involved in the June 1976 protests.²⁴ In addition to the Commission's work, some steps of the US administration also seem to have been taken to show disapproval of Polish government policy, for example, Kissinger's cancelling his meeting with Polish Foreign Minister Stefan Olszowski during the 1976 autumn session of the UN General Assembly (at least American media suggested such an explanation). Focussing on developments in the United States, Warsaw noted that Jimmy Carter was making the protection of human

²³ See, among others, 'Notatka: Narada ministrów spraw zagranicznych krajów wspólnoty socjalistycznej w Moskwie', 24 Dec. 1975, in Wanda Jarząbek, *PRL w politycznych strukturach Układu Warszawskiego 1955-1980*, (Warszawa: ISP PAN, 2008), 348-349; 'Notatka informacyjna z pierwszego posiedzenia Komitetu Ministrów Spraw Zagranicznych państw – stron UW w Moskwie', 27 May 1977, *ibid.*, 368-373.

²⁴ Jarząbek, *Od Helsinek do Belgradu*, 125.

rights a key component of his identity as a presidential candidate, later as president, something that became especially visible during the Belgrade review conference.²⁵

The importance of human rights also increased in Warsaw's relations with other countries. From 1975 to the Belgrade conference, western governments repeatedly lodged complaints against the treatment of their citizens, making reference to the CSCE Final Act. These often involved reuniting families (which in the case of the FRG was regulated by bilateral agreements) and mixed marriages. Most active in this area were US, Dutch and Swedish diplomats.²⁶ In the case of Sweden, many of the challenges consisted of demanding that Polish border officials not exclude former Polish citizens of Jewish origin, who had left Poland after the events of 1968, from the group entitled to travel between the two countries without a visa.

The American and West European press also began to pay considerable attention to human rights violations in Poland, especially after June 1976, a fact that was duly noted in Warsaw. Western social activists, especially the emergent transnational network of Helsinki monitoring groups, played an important role in calling for close oversight of human rights observance.²⁷

During the preparations for the Belgrade conference, the Polish authorities granted an amnesty to people who had been arrested for taking part in the June 1976 protests. In 1977, the Polish Council of State (*Rada Państwa*) – nominally the country's highest political institution – ratified the UN's two human rights pacts of 1966: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Interestingly, the Polish government tried to exploit the ratifications as an example of its own liberalism. However, the pacts were signed out of utilitarian motives: Legal analyses of the covenants had shown that they featured not only civic rights, but also duties of

²⁵ Breck Walker, 'Neither Shy or Demagogic: The Carter Administration Goes to Belgrade', in Vladimir Bilandžić and Milan Kosanović, eds., *From Helsinki to Belgrade: The First CSCE Follow-up Meeting in Belgrade 1977/78*, (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2008), 185-204.

²⁶ Szyfrogram z Waszyngtonu w sprawie interwencji amerykańskiej dotyczącej rodzin podzielonych, 6 Apr. 1978, ZD 29/80, w. 20, t. 155, AMSZ; Notatka informacyjna o wizycie w Polsce premiera Szwecji T. Fälldina (12-15 kwietnia 1978 r.), Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej (henceforth: KC PZPR), V/148, Archiwum Akt Nowych (henceforth: AAN).

²⁷ Sarah Snyder, 'Follow-up at Belgrade: How Human Rights Activists Shaped the Helsinki Process', in *From Helsinki to Belgrade*, 189-190.

the citizens and that they defined exceptional situations in which certain rights could be suspended.²⁸

The first review conference in Belgrade was an important lesson for Warsaw. Its debates largely confirmed that Warsaw had chosen the correct strategy – no show trials, an amnesty for people arrested for being directly or indirectly involved (for example, by giving assistance) in the June 1976 protests, a somewhat more liberal treatment of foreign correspondents and access to foreign press, a more liberal policy for travel outside Poland (which included agreements with Austria, Finland and Sweden about travel without visas) meant that during the discussions about violations of the Helsinki Agreement's human rights provisions Poland was rarely mentioned. Poland's policies were diametrically opposed to Czechoslovakia's (Charter 77) and the USSR's (the Moscow Helsinki Group), which staged trials of opposition activists and forcibly exiled individuals inconvenient to the government; they also had problems with emigration, including the Jews, and church activity was seriously curtailed.²⁹

Warsaw's relations with Washington also confirmed the advantages of this strategy. When Poland had difficulty obtaining new credit, the United States offered economic assistance. The Commodity Credit Corporation and the Export-Import Bank extended sizeable credits to Poland in 1977 and 1979.³⁰ Talks about additional credits continued even after strikes began in the summer of 1980: up to the imposition of martial law in December 1981, a total of \$788.6 million was granted for agricultural and food products. Washington was also considering a stability loan, which was promoted by Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State Alexander Haig as supporting the democratisation process and helping to loosen the Soviet grip on Central Europe.³¹ The imposition of martial law rendered this plan moot. By the late 1970s, then, Poland was heavily dependent on external sources of finance, which, the government in Warsaw knew, the other countries of the bloc were unable to provide. The opposition, on the other hand, was not strong enough to threaten the foundations of power, as long as the economy did not suffer a major collapse and protests did not become widespread. Apparently with this in mind, the Polish leadership decided that it

²⁸ Jarzabek, *PRL wobec Konferencji*, 156.

²⁹ Jarzabek, *Od Helsinek do Belgradu*, 130.

³⁰ Andrzej Mania, *Détente i polityka Stanów Zjednoczonych wobec Europy Wschodniej: Styczeń 1969-styczeń 1981*, (Kraków: Wydawn. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2003), 178.

³¹ Alexander Haig, 'Memorandum for Ronald Reagan: U.S. Assistance Program for Poland', 1 Dec. 1981, in: Andrzej Paczkowski and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *From Solidarity to Martial Law: The Polish Crisis of 1980-1981. A Documentary History* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2007), 409.

could afford less radical steps than the other bloc countries in order to sustain its positive international image as a comparatively liberal state. It is noteworthy that in the late 1970s Moscow was not pleased with Warsaw's decisions. Warsaw, facing a difficult economic situation and unable to count on help from its neighbours, nonetheless defended its choices. In a meeting with Gierek in April 1978, Leonid Brezhnev spoke directly of Poland's inappropriate policies vis-à-vis the opposition and the Catholic church. Gierek admitted that opposition activity had intensified, but expressed optimism about his ability to manage the situation.³² It is difficult to gauge whether the Polish government failed to recognise the scale of its problem, for it appears that it saw no alternative to tolerating the opposition. While the other countries of the bloc did not directly criticise the Polish government in the 1970s, they began to do so after the August 1980 strikes and the creation of the Solidarity trade union. They saw a lack of ideological vigilance and economic mistakes, including excessive indebtedness to the west, as the roots of the Polish situation.³³

Moscow consistently demanded that Warsaw take more radical steps. It increased its pressure after the legalisation and growth of Solidarity and the creation of an independent student movement and farmers' unions.³⁴ Immediately after the government signed its agreement with Solidarity, on 3 September 1980, the Soviet Politburo adopted a resolution expressing Moscow's position on the crisis to present to the Polish leadership. It described the agreements between the Polish leadership and the workers as 'legalising the anti-socialist opposition', and suggested that to the system's

³² Informacja o rozmowie I Sekretarza KC PZPR Edwarda Gierka z Sekretarzem Generalnym KC KPZR, Przewodniczącym Prezydium Rady Najwyższej ZSRR Leonidem Breżniewem, KC PZPR, XIA/523, AAN; Record of Comrade Leonid Brezhnev's statements (during this visit), KC PZPR, XIB/131, AAN. The ideological carelessness in the PRP was discussed by people including Konstantin Rusakov in a conversation with Ryszard Frelek, Note from conversation, dated 11 Dec. 1978, KC PZPR XIA/127, AAN. Kostikow wrote that the Polish government did not understand the dimensions of the problem, not even in the summer of 1980. Gierek was warned not to make light of the protests in Poland during the meeting in the Crimea. Cf. Piotr Kostikow, Bohdan Roliński, *Widziane z Kremla: Moskwa – Warszawa. Gra o Polskę* (Warszawa: BWG, 1992), 242. It is difficult to tell whether things were really like this.

³³ Erich Mielke's letter to the heads of organisational units of the State Security Ministry of the GDR about the situation in Poland, 12 Aug. 1980, in Łukasz Kamiński, ed., *Przed i po 13 grudnia: Państwa bloku wschodniego wobec kryzysu w PRL 1980-1982*, vol. I (Warszawa: IPN, 2006), 3-4; 'Informacja o aktualnej sytuacji w PRL opracowana dla KC KPCz i kierownictwa Federalnego MSW, 21 Aug. 1980', in *ibid.*, 10-16.

³⁴ Andrzej Paczkowski, *Droga do "mniejszego zła": Strategia i taktyka obozu władzy lipiec 1980 – styczeń 1982* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Lit., 2002), 35.

opponents, it would not be enough.³⁵ It called on the party leadership to fight the opposition and to purge and mobilise the Communist party.

While it appears that until 1980 the growing international importance of human rights in the context of the CSCE had played a major role in Poland's policy vis-à-vis the opposition, from the autumn of 1980 the domestic situation took precedence as the Polish government turned its attention to avoiding street confrontations and weighing its options for combatting Solidarity. As the domestic situation threatened to get out of hand, the external factor ceased to be decisive; martial law was introduced in disregard of possible western reactions to defend the clearly besieged communist government and under pressure from the Kremlin. Still, after the experiences of the second half of the 1970s the government must have been aware that a clampdown would spoil its relations with the west and, at least in the short term, worsen the conditions of its economic cooperation with the west. But Warsaw also hoped that at least some of the western countries would appreciate that ending the Polish crisis would bring stability to this part of Europe.

Polish Government and Opposition Views on the CSCE Review Conference in Madrid

The issue of human rights had dominated the follow-up conference in Belgrade to the point that the participating states failed to agree on a concluding document. Thus, the Warsaw Pact countries were concerned that the west could try to amend the Final Act during the next review conference – to be held in Madrid in 1980 – by making human rights even more prominent. The Soviet bloc countries therefore intensified their diplomatic efforts in preparation for the conference in Madrid. The east also wondered whether the western countries would speak in one voice or whether it might be possible to exploit differences among them.

In April 1979, the first deputy Soviet foreign minister accepted Poland's invitation to come to Warsaw for consultations on international issues, in preparation for the meeting of the Committee of Foreign Ministers being planned for May.³⁶ As with the Belgrade meeting, Moscow did not want the Madrid conference to be as important as the Helsinki meeting. The

³⁵ Tezy do rozmów z przedstawicielami kierownictwa polskiego, 3 Sep. 1980, in Andrzej Krawczyk, et al., eds., *Teczka Sułowa: Dokumenty* (Warszawa: Polska Agencja Informacyjna, 1993), 16-27.

³⁶ Pilna notatka z konsultacji I z-cą ministra SZ ZSRR W. Malcewem /26-27.04/, E. Wojtaszek, 2 May 1979, Dep. IV, z. 4/84, w. 8, AMSZ.

meetings in the Spanish capital were supposed to review adherence to the provisions of the Final Act, not to make new decisions. Moreover, meetings were to be held on the lower diplomatic level of the national delegations with the foreign ministers joining them only towards the end of the conference.

When the Committee of the Foreign Ministries of the Warsaw Pact countries convened in Budapest on 14-15 May 1979 the preparations for Madrid were one of the dominant themes (disarmament being the second major issue).³⁷ The Soviet bloc countries discussed ways of avoiding what they called the 'negative aspects of the meeting' in Belgrade, i.e., focussing on Basket III.³⁸ With this goal in mind, east bloc diplomats were to continue their individual efforts to influence the western states in bilateral meetings, so as to obstruct or stop western efforts to create a common policy on human rights and on the exchange of information between east and west (this chiefly meant facilitating the work of journalists). But the countries of the east bloc could not agree: Romania, for one, had its own vision, believing that a new CSCE summit should be convened to revise the Final Act by creating a permanent agency of the CSCE. But Romania did see eye to eye with the rest of the bloc on Basket III. A communiqué from the Committee of Foreign Ministers proposed a political gathering of the 35 CSCE countries to discuss military détente. After the Committee's next meeting in East Berlin on 5-6 December 1979, a communiqué outlined the concept of a European conference on military détente in Europe, affiliated with the CSCE, whose tasks would include confidence-building measures, reducing military confrontation and arms reduction.

The east bloc countries held talks on this issue with France, which was developing its own idea for a similar meeting. Warsaw was involved in it, partly because of its earlier experience in disarmament talks and its good relations with France. The goal of the east bloc countries was for the Madrid conference to resolve to hold such a conference on military détente. With these steps, the Soviet bloc governments were trying to come up with ideas and topics that would reduce the importance of human rights. At a time when east-west relations were deteriorating, arms reduction and maintaining peace were the key issues in international relations, and the east wanted them, and not human rights, to be the primary topic of discussion.

³⁷ Notatka informacyjna o posiedzeniu Komitetu Ministrów Spraw Zagranicznych państw stron Układu Warszawskiego, 16 May 1979, in Jarzabek, *PRL w politycznych strukturach*, 404-410.

³⁸ Notatka informacyjna o posiedzeniu Komitetu Ministrów Spraw Zagranicznych państw stron Układu Warszawskiego, in Jarzabek, *PRL w politycznych strukturach*, 408.

Warsaw was also apprehensive about the upcoming meeting, primarily because of public criticism and the publicity about the opposition movements that had appeared in Poland. It was also hoping that the issues of Basket II, easing trade relations, would be discussed more.

Another problem facing the Polish government was the opposition's desire to use the Madrid conference to expose human rights violations in Poland. Until the late 1970s, the Helsinki Final Act had not been a major point of reference for the Polish opposition. Criticism of the domestic situation and the discussion about human rights violations arose from domestic experiences and traditions. In the wake of the Belgrade conference, however, the opposition became aware of the potential power of raising international awareness of the human rights situation in Poland. In 1980, a Polish Helsinki Commission began to function formally, largely in preparation for the Madrid conference.

The main goal of this Commission was to compile a report on the observance – or rather violation – of human rights. Its 'Madrid report about the compliance with human and civil rights in Poland' was completed in October 1980 and published as Document 1 of the Helsinki Commission.³⁹ Bringing together and annotating the materials were commission members Ludwik Cohn, Edward Lipiński, Zbigniew Romaszewski and Aniela Steinsbergowa. Assisting them were associates of the Intervention Bureau of the Committee of Social Self-Defence of the Workers' Defence Committee (*Biuro Interwencyjne Komitetu Samoobrony Społecznej 'KOR'*), which had been created in order to record instances of government abuses and to counter them. Among the latter were Jerzy Geresz, Aleksander Horodyński, Krystyna Iwaszkiewicz, Jarosław Kaczyński, Jan Kelus, Anka Kowalska, Jacek Kuroń, Jan Józef Lipski, Jan Lityński, Zofia Romaszewska and Jan Walc. The attorneys Andrzej Grabiński, Witold Lis-Olszewski, Jan Olszewski, Władysław Siła-Nowicki, Stanisław Szczuka and Jacek Taylor lent a hand.

The Madrid report discussed social and political conditions in Poland, including the observance of fundamental human rights as prescribed by – significantly – the 1966 UN covenants and not CSCE documents; the legal system; abuses by the police and judiciary, which included the unexplained murder of Jagiellonian University student Stanisław Pyjas in May 1977; beatings of detainees in police stations; the goings-on in courts and misdemeanour courts; the situation in prisons; and repressions of opposition activists for which the report provided an overview and individual case studies.

³⁹ Komisja Helsińska, *Raport madrycki o przestrzeganiu praw człowieka i obywatela w Polsce* (Warszawa: Wyd. im. Konstytucji 3 maja, 1980).

Though Helsinki Commission member Zbigniew Romaszewski, who was to carry the document to Madrid, did not receive a passport,⁴⁰ the report was published and distributed in Madrid in November nonetheless.⁴¹ It was also sent to other international organisations as the Polish security apparatus duly noted.

From its opening day, the mood of the Madrid conference was dominated by renewed east-west tensions. East bloc documents from the time ascribe the tensions to 'NATO's drive to gain military dominance'. According to the west, they stemmed from 'the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the USSR's increasing speed of armaments (SS-20) and violations of human rights in the socialist countries'.⁴² Because the conference began already after the Solidarity trade union had been legalised, the Polish delegation was able to sustain its image as one of the more liberal countries of the bloc, which did not mean, however, that it wanted to distance itself from its allies. As before, Poland hoped that discussions of Basket III would stay away from political freedoms. In background documents, Basket III issues were labelled 'cultural-educational' and 'humanitarian'. Warsaw went on to declare its preparedness to cooperate on implementing concepts of Basket III in this context. After its initial assessment of the western proposals, it deemed worthy of support France's idea of creating a 'Scientific forum' and a French-Italian-Luxembourg plan to cooperate on historical preservation and artistic heritage.⁴³ Poland also considered offering its support to a Nordic scheme to train young scholars – although it did not back the idea of creating an international organisation charged with it.

However, Warsaw was opposed to a plan from Austria, Spain and Switzerland on access to information and the treatment of foreign correspondents, which would have committed the CSCE signatories not to expel foreign journalists. The Polish government also seriously objected to a joint scheme by the European Community and the US submitted on 10 December 1980 regarding information, subscriptions to foreign publications, the treatment of correspondents and a reduction of the jamming of radio programmes. It is noteworthy that the reason why Poland did not espouse

⁴⁰ Robert Zuzowski, *Political Dissent and Opposition in Poland: The Workers' Defense Committee "KOR"* (Westport, London: Praeger, 1992), 17-53.

⁴¹ It was translated and published in the United States as *Prologue to Gdansk: Report on the Observation of the Human and Civil Rights in the Polish People's Republic*, New York 1980.

⁴² Notatka informacyjna, Problematyka zasad KBWE na Spotkaniu Madryckim /11.09.-19.12.1980/, J. M. Nowak, (opr. A. D. Rotfeld), 6 Dec. 1981, Dep. IV, z. 44/86, w. 5, AMSZ.

⁴³ Letter, R. Korczewski to Wł. Konarski, deputy director of the Research and Planning Department of the Foreign Ministry, 14 Jan. 1981, Dep. IV, z. 45/84, w. 11, AMSZ.

some of these plans was economic: Polish background documents explained that an increase of import duty on foreign publications was tied to Poland's shortage of foreign currency reserves. It was for ideological reasons, however, that Poland refused to adopt the principle that journalists should not 'be punished' – for instance by deporting them – and that they were not responsible for the contents of the information they relayed. Warsaw also approached the issue of the free flow of information traditionally. A document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recommended that: 'The issue of jamming foreign radio programmes must be tied to the policy of exploiting [as in the case of Radio Free Europe] radio programmes for the goals of anti-communist propaganda'.⁴⁴

Warsaw also did not favour some of the provisions facilitating human contacts. Poland made it difficult for people to cross its borders in both directions. Yet so did some western countries, which were protecting themselves from the frequent attempts by east bloc citizens to overstay their visas, and so they, too, did not favour all such reforms. The western countries required that to travel in the west, an east bloc citizen must carry a given amount of their currency, which was difficult for many from the east to afford. Thus, from the perspective of the east (at times their official positions reflected reality), western countries were *de facto* limiting the right to emigrate, or the right to free movement for some categories of people. Poland intended to exploit this fact. For instance, it wanted to bring up the case of Britain's treatment of Polish citizens, who would be interrogated in consulates and later, as they crossed the border, also asked about issues that did not appear on visa forms. Poles were also required to provide statements from their employers that they had been given leave and that their jobs would await their return, and they had to have a return ticket.

The countries of the east bloc, including Poland, wanted the Final Act to be viewed, as they defined it, integrally, and also primarily as a document that expressed political will and not as an international treaty, which, in fact, it was not (albeit principle VII did refer to international law).⁴⁵ According to the reports of the Polish delegation to the CSCE in Madrid, the Soviet bloc diplomats tried to establish a connection between the process of *détente* and 'progress in the area of respecting human rights, broadening freedoms, increased contacts' during the conference talks.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Problematyka zasad KBWE na Spotkaniu Madryckim, Dep. IV, z. 44/86, w. 5, AMSZ.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

All along, the western countries, including the United States, did not hide their priorities.⁴⁷ Détente was over, at least in relations with the Soviet Union, and this also influenced relations with Moscow's satellites. The USSR became the main target of criticism because of its violations of religious rights (much attention was paid to the situation of the Eastern Catholic churches, Roman Catholics in Lithuania and the Ukraine, or the discrimination of the Jews).⁴⁸ The western countries used the method of 'naming names', which the US delegation headed by Arthur J. Goldberg had pioneered in Belgrade, that is, they cited specific cases of human rights violations by identifying the victim by his or her name. The west also demanded freedom of emigration from the Soviet bloc.

Initially, Warsaw was in quite a good position in these debates. Poland was evaluated positively, as its delegation reported from the conference, for settling the August 1980 strikes peacefully, which included granting independent trade unions the right to register, easing the government's monopoly of information and broadening religious freedoms (by allowing radio broadcasts of Masses).⁴⁹ Poland was not always mentioned by name in situations that it was involved in, for example, clandestine troop movements, which mostly concerned the Red Army anyway. Warsaw largely restricted itself to responding to western charges and focused its criticism only on the West Germans. To quote a note: 'following the general principle of not worsening bilateral relations, we formulated critical opinions exclusively towards the FRG, but in a form that did not require the FRG delegation to respond'.⁵⁰ Overall, the Polish delegation played on the east bloc's team and had no intention of supporting proposals that could be used, for example, to broaden the right to information or journalistic activity.⁵¹

The Soviet bloc pushed for the implementation of its priorities, including the Conference on Military Disarmament and Military Détente. But the

⁴⁷ On human rights, see, e.g., Thomas, *Helsinki Effect*. On US policy: William Korey, *The Promises We Keep: Human Rights, the Helsinki Process, and American Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Snyder, *Human Rights Activism*. On relations between the superpowers regarding human rights, e.g., Douglas Selva, 'The Superpowers and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1977-1983: Human Rights, Nuclear Weapons, and Western Europe', in Matthias Peter and Herrmann Wentker, eds., *Die KSZE im Ost-West-Konflikt: Internationale Politik und gesellschaftliche Transformation 1975-1990*, (München: Oldenbourg Verlag 2012), 15-58.

⁴⁸ Problematyka zasad KBWE na Spotkaniu Madryckim, Dep. IV, z. 44/86, w. 5, AMSZ.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Note for W. Konarski, 14 Jan. 1981, Dep. IV, z. 45/84, w. 11, AMSZ.

west was playing as a team, too, and more or less officially made this conference contingent on the fulfilment of seven human-rights conditions.⁵² These included convening a conference on human rights, putting on a meeting about family reunification, the sanctioning of social groups monitoring the implementation of the Final Act, facilitating the work of foreign correspondents, ending radio jamming, granting freedom of religious practice and agreeing within the CSCE on its next meeting. Even before Poland introduced martial law on 13 December 1981, there was no agreement between the two sides, and afterwards tensions grew even more.

After the imposition of martial law, Warsaw found itself at the centre of western criticism. The first international reactions were restrained, but once France and the United States issued the first declarations on 16 December, other governments followed. On 18 December all the delegations that gave speeches in Madrid described the situation in Poland as a massive violation of the principles of the Final Act. The United States was the most severe, the Vatican moderate and Austria issued an appeal for economic assistance for Poland and acceptance of refugees.⁵³ Warsaw's delegation followed instructions and asserted that martial law was a domestic matter, but it did anticipate that the session scheduled to resume in February 1982 would bring new questions and challenges.

Yet when the conference reconvened in February 1982, criticism was not as sharp anymore as had been expected. In Warsaw, it was believed that this was driven by the United States, which did not want the Polish question to dominate the conference; at least in part, this assessment seems to have been correct. Polish diplomatic documents indicate that the Vatican, too, attempted to temper the general mood.⁵⁴ Many western delegates continued to bring up the imperative of reactivating Solidarity and argued that internees should be released, gradually and not all at once – but Warsaw paid no attention to such nuances.

Yet the western governments' moderate criticism did not mean that western publics did not react to the events in Poland. According to the Polish government, public opinion in the west had 'largely given in to a disinformation campaign'. The French and the Swedes were particularly active, influencing their governments' policies. Solidarity's Coordinating

⁵² Notatka informacyjna dot. konsultacji polsko-radzieckich nt. spotkania KBWE w Madrycie, J. Wiejacz, 7 Oct. 1981, Departament Instytucji Europejskich (henceforth: DIE), z. 32/93, w. 15, AMSZ.

⁵³ Notatka informacyjna, Wpływ wydarzeń w Polsce na spotkanie madryckie KBWE, S. Dąbrowa, 22 Dec. 1981, DIE, z. 32/93, w. 15, AMSZ.

⁵⁴ Notatka informacyjna, Wnioski dot. problematyki polskiej na spotkaniu madryckim KBWE, 26 Mar. 1982, DIE, z. 32/93, w. 15, AMSZ.

Office Abroad – the official representation of the trade union in the west – informed western publics about developments in Poland.⁵⁵

As Warsaw was hit by a wave of criticism, some western delegates to the CSCE, for example the Austrians, offered advice to Polish diplomats on how to deal with this situation. According to a member of the Polish delegation, 'It was pointed out to us that in case martial law is extended, we should assist the process of "getting the western public opinion used to" the current state of domestic relations in Poland...through articles placed in the western press and public statements in the west by Polish personalities considered trustworthy there'.⁵⁶

Using the fact that it chaired the CSCE sessions in Madrid in early 1982, Warsaw attempted to obstruct discussions about the situation in Poland.⁵⁷ Together with the USSR and the other countries of the bloc, it refused to promote legalising Helsinki Committees and to grant the freedom to form trade unions in the Soviet bloc (Solidarity had been suppressed on 13 December 1981); it also did not agree to allow an experts' conference on human rights being planned for May-June 1985 in Ottawa to pass binding provisions. The issue of Poland led the United States to weigh suspending the conference, but decided that in the atmosphere of growing international tension, it would be best to retain this forum, where the different countries could meet and talk.⁵⁸

For Warsaw, too, taking part in the works of international organisations and international conferences during martial law was very important. Poland had been isolated diplomatically in protest against martial law and its restrictions. Some, albeit not all, exchange visits were suspended (talks continued on signing the protocols of existing agreements and some more technical ones). Thus, during the meeting in Madrid, on 7 September 1983, for example, Polish Foreign Minister Stefan Olszowski was able to meet with the West German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. Still, taking part in these meetings entailed hearing much criticism. What is more, demonstrations were staged in front of Polish diplomatic missions,

⁵⁵ Gunter Dehnert, 'Entspannung gegen das Volk – Sanktionen für das Volk? Die Solidarność nach Ausrufung des Kriegesrechts und die Nachfolgekonzferenz von Madrid', in *Die KSZE*, 249-250; Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Lobbying Allies? The NSZZ Solidarność Coordinating Office Abroad, 1982-1989', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 13, No. 3 (Summer 2011), 83-125.

⁵⁶ Wnioski dot. problematyki polskiej na spotkaniu madryckim KBWE, 26 Mar. 1982, *DIE*, z. 32/93, w. 15, AMSZ.

⁵⁷ Notatka informacyjna, V runda spotkania państw KBWE w Madrycie /9.02.-12.03.1982/. W. Konarski, 17.03.1982, *DIE*, z. 30/93, w. 6, AMSZ.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

international organisations and conference centres in which Polish delegates were present.

Conclusion

As new opposition organisations came into being, as the economic situation worsened and strikes were staged, human rights became an increasingly problematic aspect of international relations for the government of People's Poland in the 1970s. There were limits to its tolerance of the opposition groups: as long as the groups' activities did not threaten the authorities' position, the survival of the political regime and Soviet interests, the Polish authorities made life difficult for them, but did not attempt to crush them. The introduction of martial law doubtless became a turning point, maybe revealing the real face of the regime. The Madrid conference was undoubtedly a breakthrough regarding the place of human rights in world politics, to which, paradoxically, the situation in People's Poland contributed. Human rights violations in eastern Europe became an increasingly regular presence in the media. They were also used in western policies towards the Soviet bloc, although protests against human rights violations were largely a means to other political goals.

The period between the Helsinki and the Madrid conferences represented a learning process for both the government and the fledgling organised opposition in Poland. For the authorities, this meant realising that human rights were indeed important, for them, too, if they were to win concrete political gains in their dealings with the west. Still, the belief prevailed that in inter-governmental dealings, political and geopolitical concerns were more important. The opposition also became aware of the potential of internationalising their struggle for human rights. Thus, human rights were evolving into a problem for the communist governments, including the Polish one. They were prepared to make some concessions on them, but only when their domestic situation was not too turbulent. To the Polish government in 1981, its ties to the Soviet bloc, and to Moscow itself, were certainly pre-eminent. In this period, the retribution Poland suffered, however painful, did not mean that the Polish government would yield on human rights. The period of martial law saw their violations, and after martial law ended, the state of affairs did not return to what it had been before 1981.

In the long term, the defence of human rights contributed to the collapse of communism, but was not a force that could act in isolation. The end of communism was decided by a combination of other factors, foremost among them the communist states' economic incompetence and its consequences.