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PRESSURES IN POLISH-SOVET RELATIONS

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The recurring question in all commentary on the legalization of the political and trade union opposition in Poland is: What will be Moscow's reaction? The assumption underlying that question is that the USSR cannot permit so much freedom right across its borders, that some kind of crisis is brewing.

Such a line of argument misses the point that new dynamics are at work not only in Poland but also in the USSR, and in Polish-Soviet relations as well. At various levels the old system of power is breaking up, and new relationships are emerging. Above all, civil society is beginning to assert itself. The effects of these stirrings are palpable, undeniable, but problematic. Although the process has just begun, it has already taken hold. And it is taking unprecedented forms for which our old analysis, based on the totalitarian or client-state models, is no longer adequate.

It is not easy to convey the dynamics of the process and to pinpoint the decisive elements in a constantly changing situation. We do know that Mikhail Gorbachev and Wojciech Jaruzelski like and trust one another and share an interest in liberalizing their regimes. Beyond that, the picture gets fuzzy, for so many groups both in and out of power contribute to reform, its shape and progress.

Recently I have had the opportunity to observe and study one strand in that process—the official decision to subject the
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history of Polish-Soviet relations to critical scrutiny, and the side-effects this guarded and limited step towards liberalization has created.

Two years ago, in April 1987, Gorbachev and Jaruzelski signed a new agreement on cultural relations and a month later set up a Joint History Commission to address and clarify the so-called "blank spots" (the tabooed or grossly falsified topics) in the common history of the two countries. These "spots" include such sensitive topics as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 1939, which gave Hitler free rein to invade Poland, and the Red Army's inactivity on the other side of the Vistula River during the Warsaw uprising in 1944, which let the Nazis crush the pro-Western resistance movement. To most Poles, the blank spots are a symbolic reminder that the imposition of Communist rule was accompanied by a crude rewriting of history that whitewashed every Soviet action.

Both regimes had their own reasons for setting up the Commission. In Warsaw it was viewed as a substitute for domestic political reform, as an easy way to narrow the gap between government and society and regain some popularity for the regime. In Moscow it was seen as a painless substitute for serious reform in intra-Bloc relations. Both governments took vigorous steps to have the media propagandize the creation of the Commission as the
start of a new era and to launch yet another series of officially sponsored "friendship" happenings.

But in fact the Commission has brought quite different, unintended results. On the official level, instead of agreement it has produced deadlock and dissent. The carefully picked party and army historians cannot agree on the key issue: what happened to some 4,000 captive Polish officers executed during World War II at Katyn. It is Blank Spot No. 1 in the tangled history of Polish-Soviet relations because it encapsulates for most Poles Moscow's nefarious plans to subjugate their country. Like most of their compatriots, Western specialists, and various international inquiries, the Polish members of the Commission date the mass murder to the spring of 1940, i.e., before the German invasion of the USSR. The Soviet side stubbornly refuses to budge from the official Moscow position that the executions were carried out by the Germans in 1941.

Outside the confines of the Commission, however, the Gorbachev-Jaruzelski decisions of spring 1987 have brought far different results. Society in both countries has demonstrated that it has the will and the resources to make its own use of the opportunity.

Friends in Moscow told me that the setting-up of the Joint Commission was taken as a sign that the curtain of silence, lowered on all subjects dealing with Poland at the time of Solidarity, was being raised. It became possible to translate and publish the works of Polish writers and scholars, to show Polish
films, stage Polish plays, and print Polish authors in the Soviet press. Soviet liberals had been taking intense interest in things Polish ever since 1956, when Gomulka's advent to power brought on a pretty thoroughgoing de-Stalinization in culture. Many learned Polish—not so difficult for Russian speakers—in order to get a whiff of greater freedom, to read Polish translations of Western authors from Beckett and Camus to Kafka and Sartre that were unavailable in the USSR. But whereas 30 years ago the attraction of a freer and Westernized Poland was a matter of individual, private curiosity, it has now assumed different proportions. At present that attraction is responded to and openly acknowledged by Soviet liberals both within and outside the establishment.

There are reciprocal developments in Poland. And these are without precedent. For the first time since World War II, Poles are talking positively about what is happening in the USSR. There is genuine enthusiasm for Gorbachev's perestroika. The Polish press prints translations of the most daring Soviet revelations about Stalin's crimes and the attacks on more recent misuses of power—not just in independent Catholic publications (especially those of the liberal Catholic intelligentsia) but also in the official or pro-regime press. Some political activists in Warsaw even envy the Soviets that their de-Stalinization has gone further than in Poland—meaning that some of Brezhnev's henchmen, unlike Gierek's, have been brought to justice. Adam Michnik is quite impressed by the spirit and substance of Soviet reforms and longs to visit the USSR. Altogether, for the first time there is a
widespread feeling that Poles and Russians have a common goal, the struggle against totalitarianism.

On the history front the common goal has created horizontal linkage between Party liberals and independent reformers in both countries that create pressures and goad the Joint Commission to action. For example, since the Commission did not at first propose to deal with Katyn, Polityka, the liberal Party weekly, interviewed Yuri Afanasev, the crusading Soviet historian, who called Katyn the "foremost problem" to be dealt with by scholars in the two countries. Printed in October 1987, that interview put Katyn on the pages of the legal press and forced the Commission to address the issue. Ever since, the Polish press has been publishing increasingly damning evidence that saddles the Soviets with the mass murder of the Polish officers. So much so, that in February 1989 Jerzy Urban, the Polish government spokesman, conceded that "everything indicates the crime was committed by the Stalinist NKVD."

The Soviet side has as yet made no official response, other than to excise those words in reporting Urban's press conference. But Polish doggedness on Katyn has had repercussions across the border. I heard in Moscow that the insistence of Belorussians and Ukrainians on the whole truth being told about the mass graves of Stalin's political victims in Kuropaty and Bykovina (also blamed on the Germans by Soviet authorities) was inspired by the Polish example.

Within the Joint Commission there have been disagreements.
from the start. My interviews with several members revealed that
the differences lie not so much, or solely, along national lines:
the accusing Poles against the unrepentant Russians.
Increasingly, the division lies between the liberal historians
swayed by objective facts and the conservatives motivated by
political considerations, regardless of their nationality. Take,
for example, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with its secret protocols
that handed over Eastern Poland and the Baltic states to the
Soviets. Here the objective historians now agree that it is
essential to study the circumstantial evidence in Western
diplomatic sources. The conservatives keep insisting that the
absence of any Soviet copy of the original of the protocol is
enough to deny its existence.

Horizontal links between like-minded individuals are growing
outside existing institutional networks. In February 1988,
leading Polish intellectuals addressed an open letter to their
Soviet counterparts, asking for a genuine breakthrough in
relations between the two nations by way of a free, open dialogue
on divisive historical issues, among other matters. The gesture
was denounced by both governments as a misguided usurpation of
authority vested in the Commission. But such strictures are not
inhibiting these days. Already in April 1988 Soviet and Polish
documentary film makers met to discuss "glasnost and taboo in
historical films." Their agenda took up most of the topics under
consideration by the Joint Commission. A candid spirit prevailed
and common language was easily found on the need to eliminate blank spots not only in films but also in the press, on TV, and in textbooks.

The film makers met again in September to discuss measures to promote a speedier de-Stalinization of culture. That meeting, among other things, decided to publish the text of speeches and discussions under a title that harks back to the common endeavors of Russian and Polish revolutionaries against Tsarism in the 19th century: "For Your Freedom and Ours."

The activities of young historians are another illustration of the emergent civil society. With travel restrictions lifted, many Soviets arrange private visits or apply directly to Polish universities for admission. In the past, any arrangement of this sort could only be carried out under the inter-state cultural exchange agreements.

Since the Joint Commission has not produced any notable results, plans are afoot to hold a conference of young historians from the two countries to discuss the blank spots. In Moscow, an Association of Young Historians (SAMI) was formed last fall, eager to contribute its share to de-falsifying history and clarifying the tangled Polish-Soviet relations.

The professional integrity and liberal aspirations of individuals are at times astounding. At one Polish university I attended a seminar on modern Polish history that is based wholly on emigre and Western publications--versions that are very much at
variance with the official account. The instructor considered the 1987 agreements as his green light. In Moscow last November I saw on the wall-newspaper at one of the research institutes a sharply worded letter from a young researcher criticizing the conduct of a member of the Joint Commission, who, during a roundtable discussion conducted by Literaturnaya gazeta on the "blind spots" in Soviet-Polish relations, tried to skirt some issues and whitewash others. The letter called on the institute's Scientific Council to disassociate itself from such views, for they reflected negatively on its standards of scholarship. In both countries, people told me that innumerable letters have been sent to the authorities to either disband the Joint Commission or enlarge it by including more reputable historians who enjoy public confidence.

All this may strike Westerners as very small potatoes. But to someone like myself who has regularly visited Poland and the USSR over the past decades, the developments resulting from the official efforts to improve relations between the two countries are extremely encouraging. They testify that taking off the lid can bring out the best in each nation. The alignments inside the Commission, the independent contacts between intellectuals, the mutual respect, the concern for the common fate show that some 40 years of enforced "friendship" based on falsifications and silence have not managed to squelch either the need for the full truth or respect for the neighboring nation.
More than anything else, the unintended results of the Joint History Commission have given me an inspiring glimpse of what I would not hesitate to call another "spring of nations."