



Ryszard Kukliński in 1998, photo: A. Iwańczuk/Reporter/East News

Kukliński: How the CIA's Best-Placed Cold War Spy Escaped the Eastern Bloc

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According to many in US intelligence, Poland's Colonel Ryszard Kukliński was one of the best-placed spies in the Eastern Bloc. Between 1972 and 1981, he provided the CIA with thousands of pages of Soviet intelligence, including the Soviet Union's military plans for Western Europe. Who was Ryszard Kukliński and what led him to spying on his own country?

The meeting

It seemed like a routine officer meeting for Colonel Ryszard Kukliński. Considering he was a high-ranking military officer in the Polish Army, meetings of this nature, as one would expect, were quite frequent.

Upon walking into the conference room, Kukliński noticed that something was not quite right. His superiors and colleagues sat in silence, waiting for him to take a seat. The tension in the room was almost tangible. He took his seat and, after a few moments, one of his superiors, General Skalski, finally broke the silence. There had been a leak, an act of treason.

After years of sending information regarding Polish and Soviet military plans to the United States, he was about to be discovered. Though not specifically accused during this meeting, he was one of the few officials that had had access to the leaked information.



A still from the movie Jack Strong, 2014, photo: promo materials

Kukliński knew this day would eventually come, though he had hoped against it. Over the years, he had narrowly avoided being discovered on several occasions. And some of his unorthodox activities had naturally raised the suspicions of many high-ranking officials.

If the leak were traced to him, the punishment would likely be death. Plenty of other spies throughout the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc had been executed for supplying the United States with classified information. Kukliński knew he would share their fate if he did not act fast.

If he wanted to survive, as well as ensure the safety of his family, he had to leave Poland. And time was running out.

A resilient child

Born in 1930 in Warsaw, Poland, Kukliński's childhood was characterised by tragedy and struggle. On the day of the German invasion of Poland, the 9-year-old Kukliński walked to school and was startled by the wail of sirens that reverberated throughout the city.

During the occupation, Kukliński witnessed first-hand the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the streets of Warsaw. When the Warsaw Ghetto was constructed, and subsequently liquidated, he was horrified by the suffering and brutality he witnessed.

Angered by what he saw, he tried to join the Home Army when he was just 13 years old. While he was not allowed due to his age, he did join the Sword and Plough resistance movement and helped place recruitment posters around the city.

Shortly thereafter, Kukliński's life took a tragic turn. His father, who was actively involved in a resistance movement against the German occupation, was beaten and sent to a concentration camp.

When the war had ended in May 1945, Kukliński desperately tried to figure out what had become of his father, but to no avail. He would later discover that his father had died in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, a depressing yet all too common occurrence during the Second World War.

In the first years after the end of the war, Kukliński, who had spent time in a labour camp in Germany, returned to Poland and moved to southwestern Poland for work. He briefly worked as a night watchman at a soap factory in Wrocław before enlisting in the Polish army in 1947 at the age of 17.

A reluctant officer



Last army ID of Colonel Ryszard Kukliński, photo: Wikipedia

For the next twenty years, he climbed through the ranks of the Polish Army and, by 1967, he had established himself as a reputable and dedicated military officer. He also became the leading author of many of the military exercises conducted by Poland with other Warsaw Pact nations.

Yet, as Kukliński climbed through the ranks, he became cognisant of a disturbing trend: the Sovietisation of the Polish Army. The Polish army was being entirely remade along Soviet lines in every imaginable respect: drills, teachers, uniforms, ideological training, and so on. Deviations from Soviet orthodoxy were discouraged and oftentimes purged.

When he joined the army, Kukliński did not think that it would remain Soviet-dominated in perpetuity. He hoped that one day Polish officer candidates, like himself, would replace Soviet commanders and serve Polish interests rather than Soviet interests. While he loathed the Soviet Union, he believed that their control of the Polish Army would only be temporary.

But it soon became apparent that the Soviet Union had no intention of relinquishing their control of the Polish army. This was a disheartening reality for Kukliński. He realised that Poland had essentially traded one oppressor for another and that there would be no reprieve for his beleaguered nation.

Kukliński was deeply conflicted and constantly wondered for whom he was truly fighting. Was it the Polish people or the Soviet Union?

Though Kukliński had always tried to fight for the interests of the former, he increasingly felt that he had become but an appendage of the Soviet military apparatus. A cog in their domineering machine.

The disillusionment of an unlikely dissident



Chris Niedenthal's photo of Warsaw, December 1981. First day of Martial Law. Kino Moskwa screens Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, photo: press material

In 1967, Kukliński was sent to Vietnam for six months as a member of Poland's delegation to the International Control Commission, the organisation that oversaw the partition of Vietnam.

While in Vietnam, he came into contact with American soldiers. The Soviet Union had required the Polish government to demonise Americans and Westerners in their propaganda, but, after interacting with them extensively, he found that he rather enjoyed their company. He had always known that the Soviet demonization of the West was vastly over-exaggerated, but his time in Vietnam made him realise just how untrue this propaganda was.

When he returned from Vietnam, Kukliński became involved in Operation Danube, a supposed military exercise involving several Eastern Bloc countries. Upon closer inspection, Kukliński discovered that the operation was in fact launched to suppress the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, a country that had sharply deviated from Soviet orthodoxy. When it was carried out in 1968, Kukliński was angered by the needlessness of such an attack as well as his superiors' enthusiasm for the operation.

Two years after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, Poland descended into economic crisis. In response, the communist government decided to drastically raise the prices of foodstuffs and everyday items. This came as a real shock to the Polish people as they became unable to purchase even the most basic of goods. Consequently, the sharp rise in prices fomented unrest and led to riots across northern Poland.

Considering that the invasion of Czechoslovakia had occurred only two years earlier, Poland's communist government was fearful of the destabilising effects of these protests. Moreover, if they did not quickly quell the protests and riots, then a Warsaw Pact invasion would not be out of the question. The government decided it was in their best interest to crush these protests. And they did so in particularly brutal fashion.

When the smoke had cleared, over 40 people were killed and 1,000 hospitalised in the government crackdown. Many officials in the military felt that this action had been justified, but Kukliński was appalled. He wondered how a government could treat their own citizens so callously, especially when all they were asking for were basic goods.

It was fairly evident that Kukliński had always been disillusioned with the Polish military, but the brutal suppression of protestors in 1970 was a tipping point. He felt that the Polish Army had betrayed the interests of the Polish people. He no longer wanted to serve such a corrupted institution that had contributed to the undermining of Poland's sovereignty.

Moreover, the Soviet Union was, as Kukliński believed, the ultimate threat to world peace, not the West. If war broke out between the East and West, Kukliński said:

Our front could only be a sacrifice of Polish blood at the altar of the Red Empire.

And for these reasons, he decided to cross the Iron Curtain for help.

First meeting with the West



Ryszard Kukliński during a meeting, photo: PAP

In August of 1972, Kukliński and other military officers travelled to German, Dutch and Belgian ports for a surveillance mission aboard the *Legia*, a yacht owned by the Polish general staff. For Kukliński, this trip provided the perfect opportunity to reach out to Western intelligence agencies and offer his services.

While on the yacht, he wrote a letter in broken English:

*Dear Ser,
I'm sorry for my English. I am an foregen MAF from Communistische Kantry. I want to meet (secretly) with U.S. Army Officer (Lt Colonel, Colonel) 17 or 18, 19.08 in Amsterdam or 21, 22 in Ostenda. It have no many time. I am with my camrade end they kan't know.*

The US could not ignore an opportunity like this, so US agents were sent to meet with Kukliński in Amsterdam. When they finally met with Kukliński, they learned about his motives as well as his burning desire to collaborate with the Americans. Kukliński informed them that his high ranking in the Polish army would allow him access to highly classified documents, which would obviously be of great help to the CIA.

He informed them that he had access to Soviet military plans for Western and Eastern Europe, the latest military exercises, equipment developments, and other important information. And Kukliński sought to provide the West with all the information he possibly could. As he later said himself:

I consider the small contribution I make to the strengthening of your country, my duty. Your country does not represent strength only, but also serves as an example and all the changes to the better in my country are generated by this example of yours, from your

country and the entire West. I consider it the highest honor and my duty, to extend assistance in order to make your strength a formidable deterrent, which will ensure that the world will go in the direction in which it is now going. I consider myself a servant not of your country alone, because I work for the freedom of all, but since this freedom emanates mainly from your country, I have decided to join with you, and I shall continue as long as my strength lasts.

A dangerous game

After returning to Poland from this meeting with the Americans, Kukliński kept this activity to himself, refusing to even tell his family. It would be incredibly difficult to prevent them from becoming aware of his covert activities, but he felt that it was necessary for their safety.

At the first meeting with the Americans in Poland, Kukliński presented them with eighteen rolls of film filled with pictures he had taken of highly classified Soviet documents. In return, they presented him with a Tubka camera hidden inside a cigarette lighter, due to his predilection for heavy smoking.

It was also at this meeting that the logistics of the operation were discussed, which included dead-drop locations, chalk signals, and how package exchanges would be conducted. It was crucial that these instructions were clear and specific, for if there was a mistake, even a seemingly insignificant one, the entire operation could be compromised. And for Kukliński, a mistake would likely result in death.

So, for the next few years Kukliński provided US intelligence with droves of information. By 1980, he had passed along thousands of documents containing Soviet military secrets, many of which were highly consequential. And he showed no signs of slowing down.

During the last months, I reanalysed my situation again, and I came to the conviction that any kind of attempt to escape realities is much too early. Speaking of retirement, I never had in mind interruption of our collaboration, because this collaboration has become not only the essence but the highest goal of my life.

Defection

Despite his success, Kukliński was well-aware that suspicions were growing. Military officials had suspected that someone had been leaking information over an extended period of time, but they had been unable to trace the leaks to a particular individual. Kukliński had miraculously avoided being discovered until this point, but it was apparent his luck was running out.

In 1980, the Solidarity trade union was established. Membership quickly ballooned to over a million people and there was widespread support for the union, both from within Poland and from abroad. Even though the government allowed this independent trade union to form, plans were simultaneously being made to crush Solidarity and implement martial law.



Strike at the Lenin shipyard, 1988, Gdańsk, photo: Chris Niedenthal, promo material

Because of his high ranking, Kukliński was made aware of these plans early on and was understandably horrified. Naturally, he wanted to pass any information he could obtain regarding martial law along to US intelligence agencies, hoping that they might prevent the crackdown on Solidarity as well as a potential Soviet invasion.

Not long after he sent documents pertaining to martial law to the United States, he was called into a meeting and told that a leak had been discovered. He was one of the only officials who had access to said documents, so it was only a matter of time before he was interrogated and discovered.

He informed the CIA that both his safety and that of his family were in jeopardy and, in turn, an escape plan was formulated. Kukliński and his family were to meet at a surreptitious location in Warsaw where they would be picked up by US agents who would take them across the border into East Germany and subsequently to West Berlin.



German-Poland checkpoint... A still from the movie Jack Strong, 2014, photo: promo materials

When Kukliński and his family were picked up, they were first driven to the US Embassy, where they climbed into the back of van and were sealed into large cartons. The van then left the embassy and headed towards the border.

Upon arriving at the border, it was apparent that something was amiss. The Kuklińskis could faintly hear the driver of their van heatedly arguing with border guards. Though they didn't know it at the time, it turned out that the license plates for the van weren't registered with border control. This meant the van was liable to be searched.

The Kukliński family sat in silence as the border guards approached the rear of the van. They waited in fear for the doors to be opened, but fortunately that moment never came. After several moments of unbearable silence, the van started up again and began to move forward.

The arduous journey was over. They had succeeded in escaping Poland.

Legacy & controversy

After escaping Poland, Kukliński and his family were flown to the United States and settled in Virginia. Only a day after his arrival, Kukliński received the Distinguished Intelligence Medal from the CIA for his efforts. The citation read:

While facing great personal danger, Col. Kukliński consistently provided extremely valuable and highly classified information about the armed forces, operational plans and intentions of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact members. Having accomplished the above, he made an unparalleled contribution to the preservation of peace, especially in crisis situations. Throughout all that time, Col. Kukliński was motivated by the most noble patriotism, a deep sense of duty and dedication to the ideals of freedom.

Though Kukliński was universally praised by US intelligence officials, his legacy in Poland was for a time much more complicated. Only a few years after he defected to the United States, he was sentenced to death in absentia by the communist government for 'treason of the Fatherland'

According to one former communist official, Czesław Kiszcak:

Kukliński has betrayed the Polish state. It is not significant which adjective we attribute to Poland. If Poland is socialist, capitalist, social-democratic — it is always our Polish state, our country.

However, the attitude of the Polish government has changed drastically in recent years. Several years after the collapse of communism, Kukliński's original sentence was commuted to twenty-five years before being dropped entirely. The court that made this ruling stated that Kukliński had been acting under special circumstances that warranted higher need.

In 1998, after years of exile, he was finally given permission to return to the country of his birth. Upon arriving, he was met with cheering crowds, singing choirs, parades, and celebrations. He was lauded as a hero by the Polish people and government alike. Towards the end of his trip, he delivered a widely-anticipated speech in Kraków that was broadcast throughout Poland:



Ryszard Kukliński in Poland, 1997, photo: K. Wojciewski/Forum

I consider myself to be an ordinary soldier of the Republic, who did not do anything beyond the sacred duty of serving one's homeland in need. What perhaps differentiates me from the enormous number of people involved in the historic transformations of Poland and Europe is the specific nature of the mission I undertook and the [consequences it caused.] It is, therefore, still hard for me to believe that everything I am experiencing at the moment is really happening.

And the praise of Kukliński didn't stop with his return trip. Shortly after his death in 2004, the Polish government promoted him to the rank of general. He was then buried with honour in Warsaw and given honorary citizenship of several cities in Poland, thus cementing his heroic and selfless legacy.

Source: 'A Secret Life: The Polish Colonel, His Covert Mission, and the Price He Paid to Save His Country' by Ben Weiser. Written by Michael Keller, July 2017

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