

## **Empowering Revolution. America, Poland, and the End of the Cold War**

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Gregory Domber's detailed history of relations between Poland and the United States covers the period from the imposition of martial law in Poland on 13 December 1981 to the formation of the Mazowiecki-led government in September 1989. Contributing to diplomatic and international history, the author explores the extent of US foreign policy influence on 1980s Poland. Domber's multifaceted approach follows the historiographical shift from the Cold War's origins to its conclusion.

Focussing on relations between the US administration and its diplomats, the Polish government, and Solidarity-inspired opposition and its NGO-based supporters, the book also points out the influence of the USSR, West European states, and global-scale actors like the World Bank. Exploring ground-level practices of "empowering revolution," Domber highlights the role of NGOs, including the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), Catholic charities, and Polish diaspora organisations. The National Endowment for Democracy, formed in 1983 to allocate US government funds to soft power projects, made explicit the links of such efforts to the hard power of diplomacy and foreign policy, executed largely by "great men." The book frames Poland's democratic transition as an outcome of complex interactions involving actors, networks, and institutions across local, national and global scales.

Domber's monograph is not, however, a history of 1980s Poland, nor does it explicitly further the transnational historiographical turn. [1] Instead, it challenges the "conventional wisdom" (4) of triumphalist US accounts of how Reagan and Bush supposedly won the Cold War. Disrupting purported causality between US policy and democratisation, *Empowering Revolution* seeks "to complicate, historicize and internationalize the understanding of Poland's revolutionary moment in 1989, with an analytical emphasis on gauging the effectiveness of American policy to promote democracy." (p.3) While the detailed depiction of political and diplomatic processes could be read against current attempts in Poland to instrumentalise the negotiated transition, Domber positions his book primarily against hawkish US foreign policy. Supporting "indigenous grassroots political movements that deserve ultimate credit for transforming Eastern Europe in 1989" (p.3) should guide US actions today, "rather than forcing an American-led model of transformation." (p.10)

Domber proceeds chronologically to illustrate how "very few examples of direct, causal links between American policies and shifts in Poland" exist (p.254). Chapter one covers the brief but intense period from December 1981 to January 1982, with the US surprised by Jaruzelski imposing martial law. Ending in September 1982, the second chapter shows American hard-liners' and moderates' disagreements with Reagan's administration ultimately imposing differentiated sanctions with consequences for US-Soviet relations. Covering the longer period to January 1985, Chapter Three explores the origins of the United States' "step-by-step" policy. The gradual lifting of sanctions resulted from the fact that Poland's "decision-making process was driven by domestic factors" (p.93) rather than produce these changes, such as economic reforms and the suspension of martial law. With US-Polish relations riven by "anger and distrust," (p.132) Poland had turned towards the USSR but "[m]ore than any other players, reformers in the PZPR and leaders of the Catholic Church produced these changes." (p.133) Indeed, by depicting Jaruzelski and his government as nuanced actors in the political transformation process, Domber makes an important historiographical contribution, as Chapter Four, ending with the September 1986 release of almost all opposition figures, shows.

As political "relations moved towards zero" (p.135) with the US, Jaruzelski engaged with European and global partners to ease the economic crisis, with solutions bound to human rights factors. Domber believes this "allied triumph" (p.163) emerged with little influence from the US administration, which still shunned Jaruzelski. This chapter is exceptional as it focuses on the full constellation of actors involved in Poland's transition. The following chapter, covering events to February 1988, traces Polish and US officials' reengagement, which involved growing diplomatic contacts with the opposition. Rather than dictate, the United States consulted opposition figures as experts on the state of the country, which Domber's expert interviews with figures from both sides confirms (p.183).

Washington's newfound trust extended to funding civil society and NGOs with NED money allocated to Polish moderates. This financial soft power was, in Domber's argument, a central pillar of US empowering influence, leaving the Polish opposition and Church in leading roles. Thus "the direction of influence was frequently reversed from the one commonly assumed in [US] triumphalist accounts." (p.264) When then Vice-president George Bush visited Warsaw in September 1987, the highest-level US visit for a decade, his presidential campaign's "symbolic imagery" benefitted more than Polish oppositionists. (p.203) The US' biggest direct influence, illustrated in the sixth chapter that concludes the chronological history, was enabling the "historical anomaly" of electing a communist president (p.239). This shows that the US was not only a "catalyst" to political change but also, when necessary, "an inhibitor," ensuring moderate figures remained central to evolutionary transition (p.251). The thirty-page conclusion almost equals some chapters in length. Domber summarises concisely his diplomatic history while adding some welcome cultural-historical flourishes, including reference to more radical opposition elements and the absurdist-inspired *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa* (273).

This conclusion creates the unfortunate impression, however, that readers could skip the often heavy-going empirical chapters. Domber's form reflects the content in detailing the painstaking, slow and often fruitless endeavours constituting much of the efforts of diplomats and foreign policy actors. Readers join the journey down many policy dead-ends, deep into the various encounters and cancelled meetings that cumulate in policymaking and, ultimately, historical change. Readers can become bogged down in sparingly-contextualised

names and organisations. *Empowering Revolution* is no thrilling read. Several well-chosen photographs offer some visual relief.

Domber's sound approach to archives, including reading US policy and responses to it through Polish sources, enables both the Polish government and opposition to appear as subjects, rather than merely objects of US foreign policy calculations. Numerous freedom of information requests to UK and US institutions supplement his broad source base, likewise the expert interviews which stress the significance of subjective, personal, and affective elements in political decision-making. Domber thus convincingly counters "triumphalist" accounts, making "limitations of American power" (281) clear. However, the evidence is less convincing for substantiating his constant ranking of US influence behind other powers. He claims that "the minor role played by the United States' political and economic policies becomes even more apparent when compared with the overarching role played by the Soviet Union." (pp.260-261) He historicises his rankings, arguing that in 1986, for example, "the most important international actors were the Soviet Union, Western Europe, and the United States, in that order." (p.160) But this desire to rank creates tension with the sense that Cold War-era international politics were a precarious balancing act, with all actors enmeshed in Poland's negotiated transition.

The ranking underplays this complexity, as does the geographical and institutional fragmentation of some chapters, as different arenas are presented in isolation. So releasing Lech Wałęsa from prison on 14 November 1982, the PZPR was acting not according to "Western demands" but "the decision-making process was driven by domestic factors." (p.93) Ten pages later readers learn that Brezhnev had died on 10 November. Only the conclusion connects the events (p.258). Poland's multidirectional foreign policy is also underplayed as readers are left to establish that while Jaruzelski met Mitterrand in December 1985 (p.147), his foreign minister was in Moscow assessing "new Soviet attitudes" under Gorbachev (p.148). The mass of detail overwhelms attempts to provide detailed analysis, with the author stating his approach was to "let the documents and the historical actors speak for themselves." [2] In practice, readers must conduct much of the synthesis and analysis of the evidence pointing towards intersections of the global, national and local, of the state and civil society, in Poland's transformation. Domber's attempt "to complicate, historicize and internationalize the understanding of Poland's revolutionary moment in 1989" (p.3) applies predominantly to discourses on America's role in the end of the Cold War. In relation to Poland, *Empowering Revolution* produces curiously nationalizing and Polonocentric claims.

There are several questionable translations (e.g. "Uwagi o kompromisie" as "Beware of compromise" [n. 29, 329]), while ten of 25 Polish glossary entries and over 50 in the bibliography contain spelling and/or grammatical errors. The publishers' and editors' carelessness limits the book's contribution to a multilingual history while raising questions over Domber's symbolic competence in reading Polish sources. The book's global perspective and demythologisation of American triumphalism resonates awkwardly with Polonocentric mythologies: American politicians and celebrities are said to have travelled "for the honour of meeting these Polish martyrs," while ordinary Poles are visible primarily through connections to the Roman Catholic Church. In *Empowering Revolution*, influence is not redistributed socially and internationally but recentred in "domestic factors" (281) and the "indigenous Polish opposition." (p.282)

Domber communicates the painstaking, step-by-step realities of international relations and diplomacy, showing multiple actors, ranging from diaspora organisations to the World Bank and IMF. But his account may interest political scientists working on the United States more than students and scholars of Polish history. The extensive conclusion provides an adequate summary, with traces of an analytical thrust largely lacking from often heavy-going empirical chapters.

[1] See, for example: Padraic Kenney and Gerd-Rainer Horn, eds, *Transnational Moments of Change: Europe 1945*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

[2] H-Diplo, H-Diplo Roundtable Review, VolumeXVII, No. 1 (2015), *11 September 2015*, p. 16. *PDF available at:* <https://networks.h-net.org/pdf-h-diplo-roundtable-xvii-1-11-september-2015> [accessed 22 May 2016].



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