Relying upon documents newly declassified by the Jimmy Carter Library, Jakub Tyszkiewicz offers a case study of US policy toward human rights in relations with Poland during the Carter administration. President Carter's foreign policy record has been the subject of widely varying assessments by historians and political scientists, ranging from laudatory\(^1\) to damning\(^2\). The same disagreement is evident in treatments of Carter’s signature human rights policy. Carter’s approach has been variously portrayed as dangerously naive and damaging to American interests,\(^3\) as well intentioned, but incoherent,\(^4\) and as carefully crafted and effective.\(^5\) Tyszkiewicz’s own contribution to the debate paints the administration’s approach as cautious and finely calibrated, balancing human rights against competing interests in a pragmatic fashion.

Tyszkiewicz argues that although Carter is popularly credited with introducing human rights as a priority in US foreign policy, in fact Congress pressed the issue onto the agenda during the Gerald Ford Administration with a series of laws that tied foreign aid and trade to human rights considerations (310-311). Carter himself embraced a commitment to human rights as presidential candidate and, once in office, approved Presidential Decision (PD) 30, which provided formal policy guidance on human rights (312).

The specific application of human rights to relations with Poland was shaped by several factors. The Helsinki Accords, which were signed in 1975 by countries on both sides of Europe’s East-West divide, included “Basket III” provisions that committed states to respect rights pertaining to migration, family reunification, and the free flow of information and ideas across borders (312). These elements of the agreement inspired civil society groups in Eastern bloc countries to collaborate with governments and human rights

organizations in the West in order to demand that Communist states meet the human rights standards to which they had acceded at Helsinki, but which were denied in practice.

Carter’s National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski saw Helsinki and a strong human rights policy as opportunities for dividing and weakening the Soviet camp. Presidential Directive 21 set out a strategy of differentiating among Communist countries rather than treating them as a monolith (312). Countries that sought independence from Soviet control through closer ties with the West, or liberalized their internal political and economic systems, or both, would receive more favorable treatment from the United States in the form of trade, aid, and diplomatic overtures.6

Tyszkiewicz argues that even before Carter took office, Poland, under the leadership of Edward Gierek, stood out for its efforts to cultivate favorable ties with Western countries. Indeed, presidents Richard Nixon and Ford had already visited Poland in 1972 and 1975. Carter followed in 1977. Poland was also the recipient of a generous flow of major Western loans in the 1970s, which led to dangerous levels of over indebtedness later in the decade (310) and was a contributing factor in the economic turmoil and political unrest that then emerged.

Against this backdrop, two significant human rights issues came to the fore in relations with Poland. One was family reunification, a right that was specifically addressed by the Helsinki Accords. Polish authorities were reluctant to allow full reunification rights for fear of a brain drain. Instead, they allowed departures only in cases where Poles sought to reunify with spouses, children, and parents. As a result, over 1,800 Poles were prohibited from moving to the United States to reunify with their siblings (314). Related freedom of movement issues included Poland’s refusal to allow seven dissidents to leave Poland to speak or study in the United States or to approve visas for forty-one US citizens of Jewish origin who wished to visit Poland, their country of origin (316).

Tyszkiewicz also examines the Polish government’s treatment of dissidents. The combination of unpopular constitutional changes and economic crisis led in the summer of 1976 to widespread protests and the birth of the Worker’s Defence Committee (KOR) and other dissident groups. While the Carter administration welcomed the rise of dissidence, it also sought to preserve relations with a regime that was willing to act with a degree of independence from the Soviet Union. Moreover, despite incidents of repression, the United States considered Poland’s treatment of dissidents as relatively lenient in comparison with other Eastern bloc countries. Polish authorities also tolerated broader liberalizing tendencies in Polish society. Carter was mindful that any hint that the dissident movement was aided or sponsored by the West would provide the regime with grounds for a crackdown.

On both issues, Tyszkiewicz finds that the Carter administration preferred cautious, private diplomacy over public pressure, threats, or punishments. Through various channels and with growing insistence, US representatives persistently pressured Polish officials on the questions of family reunification and freedom of movement. Success was limited. Family reunification proceeded in dribs and drabs. Around half of the Polish-Americans of Jewish descent who applied for visas were eventually granted entry (317). Dissidents were not permitted to leave Poland. In the face of this lack of responsiveness, the Carter administration repeatedly warned that the broader US relationship with Poland would suffer. Yet Carter held back from

withdrawing export credits or curtailing diplomatic ties and declined to engage in a public pressure campaign (316-317).

The administration adopted a similar approach when repression grew in response to heightened dissident activity between 1978 and 1980. Carter fended off Congressional pressures for a tougher approach in 1978 and showed little interest in the early signs of growing trade union activity in 1979. Even US support for Solidarity remained low-key during its rise in 1980. In general, Tyszkiewicz’ case study offers no support for critical portrayals of Carter as a crusading moralist who was intent upon prioritizing human rights above all other considerations.

Indeed, Tyszkiewicz’s closing observation suggests the degree to which Carter understood the close linkage between human rights and power politics:

> From the emergence of Solidarity in September 1980, the Carter administration tacitly assumed that the political changes would increase Poland’s observance of human rights provisions, as agreed upon at Helsinki. Therefore, the most important task for Washington was to deter Soviet intervention, which would extinguish the fire of freedom in Poland, and discreetly support liberalization (324).

Patrick Vaughan’s study of Brzezinski’s role in the Polish Crisis of 1980 underlines the extent to which Realpolitik stood in service of human rights in this case:

> Brzezinski’s strategy throughout the Polish crisis was based on three primary goals: 1. To use economic incentives to encourage moderation from the Polish government …; 2. To avoid the apparent mistakes of the Johnson administration in [the] 1968 [Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia] by publicly articulating the consequences of a Soviet invasion and making them clear to Moscow; 3. To deter a Soviet invasion by urging Polish officials to inform Moscow that they could control the situation but that a Soviet invasion would be met with civil resistance.\(^7\)

Whether due to Washington’s efforts or not, Soviet intervention was avoided, and the Polish government assented to a set of demands forwarded by Solidarity in the form of the Gdansk Agreement, thus setting in motion a series of political events over the coming decade that would have profound implications for the human rights of peoples throughout the region. While Carter’s approach to human rights in Poland may have appeared overly cautious at the time, it might seem rather adept in hindsight.

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\(^7\) Vaughan, “Beyond Benign Neglect,” 14.

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