In October 1990 Polish intelligence officers rescued six Americans from Baghdad. In Poland the top-secret operation is popularly referred to as Operation Samum (Desert Wind) after the title of a 1999 film, directed by Władysław Pasikowski. The story was first made public in 1995 when John Pomfret published an article in the *Washington Post.*[1] A clipping of it is prominently featured on the book's cover.

Pomfret, a foreign correspondent with twenty years of experience (inter alia, covering wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Congo, Sri Lanka, and Iraq), was the *Washington Post* bureau chief in Beijing from 1997 to 2003. Notably, he spent four years reporting from Europe, including three of these in Warsaw. A graduate of Stanford University (East Asian studies) and author of books on US-China relations with vast experience gathered during his career, Pomfret is an award-winning journalist whose writing is light, engaging, and inquisitive at the same time.

Ostensibly, the book under review deals with the war with Iraq (Desert Storm) and American cooperation with Polish services in rescuing the US team from the war zone. Under the all-telling title, *From Warsaw with Love* is intended to “remind us how far allies go for America” (p. 2). Yet, upon careful examination, three intriguing themes are dominant throughout: the special (sentimental) relationship between the Americans and the Poles, American respect for Polish intelligence craft (HUMINT, human intelligence, intelligence collected from people) combined with diagnosed aversion to Soviet domination (or Polish nationalism) as a driving force behind American-Polish interactions, and—most interestingly—a fresh look into the story of Polish transformation in the 1990s.

The book begins in the late 1970s and examines bilateral relations with a special focus on intelligence interactions until 2015. It consists of well-written short chapters neatly transgressing the conventional caesura of 1989/1990. The author encrusts the story of US-Polish intelligence en-
counters with personal stories, which allows him to neatly intertwine elements of Polish history with the main narrative. Building on an impressive number of interviews of key protagonists, using recently released documents, supported by thorough research in the most recent literature, including works by Polish historians, and relying on consultations with experts, Pomfret succeeds in producing an excellent study of the origins of American-Polish cooperation in the field of intelligence. Moreover, he offers a nuanced picture, aptly representing both the Polish and American sentiments behind the “forging of an unlikely alliance.”

The first part of the book, “Cold War Capers” (chapters 1-5), covers the Cold War antecedents of bilateral contacts. Marked by confrontation and rivalry, the main protagonists resurface throughout the book. John Palevich and Gromosław Czemiński occupy a central place among them. Palevich (nicknamed Mr. Poland), an American officer, was a grandson of Polish immigrants. During the Cold War, he managed eighteen agents (recruited twenty-three) behind the Iron Curtain. Czemiński (Gromek), a professional communist-era spy, who refused an offer to spy for the United States, eventually became largely responsible for saving the six Americans with vital intelligence information from Iraq. The other parallel career paths presented by Pomfret, although not resulting in ultimate camaraderie, are those of Marian Zacharski (spying for Poland) and Ryszard Kukliński (spying for the US). The connection is validated by chronological coincidence. In the US, the trial of Zacharski started in October 1981, and Kukliński was evacuated from Poland in early November 1981. “At the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], the exploits of both men reinforced an image of the excellence of Polish spies; both were seen as courageous, creative, bold and professional” (p. 40).

Pomfret gives relatively little attention to the operations of the Polish counterintelligence (for example, the American intelligence officers who were forced to leave Poland as their operations were uncovered) or to the capture and imprisonment of Poles who worked for the CIA. However, he does include the story of Leszek Chróst, who spied for the Americans, was caught by the Poles, and later was exchanged (along with twenty-two other spies from Eastern Europe) for a few communist spies detained by the Americans (including Zacharski) on the famous Glienicke Bridge near Berlin in June 1985. Pomfret succeeds in neatly intertwining these stories.

The second part of the book, “An Unlikely Alliance” (chapters 6-9), reads as an alternative story to the Polish transformation charting its way out of communism on the basis of US-Polish intelligence cooperation. Witnessing changes occurring across the region, the CIA considered reaching out to intelligence agencies of the transforming states. Pomfret explains why the US agency decided to focus its efforts on Poland: the CIA knew the Polish People’s Republic Security Service, SB (Palevich “really knew the Poles” [p. 102]) and Poles had forty-five years of liaison with the KGB (the expertise Americans sought). Pomfret assesses that the Poles were most forward-leaning, had most capacity, and had an interest, which made the effort to connect mutual.

The story of the first free intelligence service in Eastern Europe is summarized in chapters 8 and 9, with the latter chapter focusing on the verification process. Pomfret describes how the CIA lobbied against purging intelligence services for the following reasons: the agents were good at their job and could be convinced to work with Americans and if left alone they might have derailed the transition. The practice turned out to be a lesson that was not applied to US policies in Iraq (discussed in the following chapters).

American contribution to the development of Polish intelligence described by Pomfret was remarkable: from lecturing in Stare Kiejkuty (Intelligence Training Center), via Polish trainees attend-
ing courses in the US in counterterrorism, counte‐
riintelligence, assistance, recruitment, etc., to fin‐
cancial support and equipment supply. Financial
support included a special operations unit—Group
for Operational Maneuvering Response (GROM)—
within the framework of the Polish Ministry of In‐
terior, not under the command of the Polish milit‐
ary. At one point the author refers to this special
unit as “a child of the CIA” (p. 179). Training and
support in the early 1990s did not mean automatic,
warranted trust in the Polish partners by the
Americans but this was soon to change because of
the excellent record of cooperation, proven by the
Iraqi operation.

The third part of the book, “Perilous Partner‐
ship” (chapters 10-19), focuses on the Polish opera‐
tion to evacuate US intelligence personnel from
Baghdad followed by a discussion of how the Amer‐
icans failed the Polish trust due to using Po‐
land as a site for illegal interrogations of the sus‐
pected terrorists. The centrality of the Iraq opera‐
tion narrative is well supported in the book. Cleary,
cooperation between the two intelligence structures divides American-Polish contacts into
two periods: before and after operation “Friendly
Saddam”—as we learn the case was truly coded. The detailed account of the operation is presented
on the basis of the accounts of the people who
took part in it. This is the best description of what
happened I have read thus far. Using the cover of
Polish contract workers for the people to be
smuggled out, building on intelligence networks in
the country, the Polish embassy personnel, and
personal bravado, the Poles performed a daring
operation that impressed the Americans. The suc‐
cess of the operation brought US gratitude, with
President George H. W. Bush not only thanking
Tadeusz Mazowiecki but also US lobbying the
West to forego a thirty-three-billion-dollar debt (p.
159). Afterward, the CIA had no doubts where Pol‐
ish loyalty was, despite the fact that some Soviet
troops were still stationed in Poland. Leaking the
news about the operation in 1995 might have pos‐
sibly contributed to debates surrounding Polish
membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organ‐
ation (NATO), implies Pomfret. Readers of H-Net
War will appreciate mentions of arms deals with
the Poles (for example, contras in Nicaragua and
controlled sale to the Ulster Volunteer Force) and
Polish intelligence signaling from Afghanistan
(chapter 16 includes the story of Aleksander
Makowski’s contacts with Ahmad Shah Massoud
and early information on Osama bin Laden’s loca‐
tions, which was not considered by the US intelli‐
gence community with due diligence).

After the daring Iraq ride, the CIA worked
with Polish spies globally, especially because Poles
held a rare advantage of communist-era intelli‐
gence networks located in countries like North
Korea, Cuba, Nigeria, Iran, and Angola and
Palestinian settlements. In this regard, Poles as as‐
sets expired by the mid-1990s as it became obvi‐
ous that the country was on its way to NATO
(chapter 14) but also due to destructive moves by
Antoni Maciarewicz, who compromised many of
the agents and their networks. Chapter 19 con‐
tains a good summary of his destructive and dan‐
gerous actions.

This section of the book is also devoted to ex‐
plaining the evolution of bilateral relations in the
following decade. Pomfret explains how the Poles
were eventually used (abused) by their new stra‐
tegic partners. The author gives multiple examples
of US overstepping its role of a partner, for ex‐
ample, when it needed locations for “black sites”
for illegal interrogations of terrorist suspects; in‐
tervened in internal decisions of the Polish state,
like demanding Kukliński’s pardon; advocated for
Zacharski’s resignation from a leadership position
in civilian intelligence in Poland; or asked for spe‐
cial units (most notably GROM) for US operations
in Haiti (aborted), Croatia, and Iraq in 2003, where
GROM served along US Navy SEALs in securing
the massive Khor Al-Amaya Oil Terminal. After Po‐
land became one of the occupying powers of de‐
feated Iraq (South Central Sector), its experts were
ignored when questioning Paul Bremer’s tactics of
de-Baathification. Poland’s long-established economic presence in Iraq prior to 1989 was not to be continued, as no contracts for the rebuilding of the country were going to Warsaw. On page 222, Pomfret quotes a Polish attorney who in nondiplomatic language described how the Polish effort to assure the US of its loyalty (by that time the country was run by ex-communist politicians) backfired. Poland was left alone to deal with the mess caused by the international scandal surrounding the “black sites.” The former communist spies who helped to make an early alliance with the US when “the future was in the balance” ended up impoverished and humiliated (p. 231). As their harassment by the Polish government increased since 2015, they could count even less on the CIA to intervene in and sign praises for their services. This book gives them the credit due. It is also a thinly veiled criticism of rejection by the current Polish government of peaceful gradual transformation, which included some of the old cadres.

The last part of the book (chapters 20 and 21) contains interesting observations on the nature of American-Polish relations. The title of this part, “Marriage with Hippos,” gives away the author’s thesis.

What I found most interesting is how the book cuts right through the thirty-year-old contested discourse on the Polish way out of communism. The US believes the Polish transformation to be a stunning success, including its own role in it (its diplomatic and intelligence involvement supporting Polish negotiations leading to the compromises of 1989: semi-free parliamentary elections and election of General Wojciech Jaruzelski paving the way for the first non-communist prime minister in a government still featuring the eponyms of the ancient regime).

The author argues that despite that the ardor had cooled, the Polish alliance with the US had a positive effect on Polish transformation in general, making it difficult for Russia to foment chaos in the country (p. 243). In Pomfret’s narrative, “Poland’s leaders made the epochal decision to preserve much of the Communist infrastructure as they transitioned to democracy. The Intelligence Command, backed by the CIA, played a key role in the drama” (p. 110). In the context of transition discourse in Poland, such a statement would probably be assessed as one-sided since some Polish authors present the same process as a stolen, or crooked, transition (despite obvious success of the Polish transformation). While not neglecting concerns regarding the Russian penetration of Poland, throughout the book Pomfret underscores Polish aversion to Russian domination of their homeland, and personal stories are used to prove it. The novelty of Pomfret’s approach is that he fills in the gap on US intelligence contacts with Polish counterparts over three decades with sentiments, motivations, and impressions representing both sides of the story. This is a much different take from what one of the historiographical and politicized currents of Polish historiography based almost exclusively on the secret security archives tries to prove.

However, at times the author falls for the sentimental narrative expressed during the interviews. For example, he writes that “Poles and Americans had an innate capacity to get along”; “something intangible drew Americans and Poles together. Things worked between the two cultures, a natural fellowship, an ease of understanding”; “we just couldn’t see the Poles as the bad guys”; and the US was never the enemy of the Poles but rather an opponent (pp. 63, 29, 31). Unquestionably, the author is mindful of the inequality of the American-Polish partnership, and he employs a remark by Radek Sikorski: “an alliance with the United States is like marrying a hippo. At first, it’s warm and cuddly. Then the hippo turns, crushes you, and doesn’t even notice” (p. 2). After American attention moved to another region, the Polish investment in the relationship was crushed. Despite shared ideals, a global country has interests. Only periodically do they align with Poland’s.
Poles learned their lessons and the love aspect is apparently gone. Pomfret’s book has just been published in Poland under the title *Pozdrowienia z Warszawy*, which literally means “Greetings from Warsaw.”[2]

For any future editions of this well-written and well-researched book, I would recommend that the author reconsider a few statements that may not be quite accurate. For example, the author cites CIA’s Paul Redmond recalling: “we wanted to know whether the service that had broken the Enigma code wants to work with us” (p. 85). This begs for a comment for it was definitely not the communist intelligence that broke the Enigma code but the Polish wartime exiles in the United Kingdom, who had nothing to do with the postwar, Soviet-steered intelligence organization and training in Poland.

Furthermore, the author writes on page 58 that in the beginning of February 1989, representatives from the opposition and the government gathered in a palace in Magdalenka near Warsaw to undertake long and painful preparations for the historic Round Table negotiations. In fact, on February 6, 1989, the actual Round Table Talks began in Warsaw (as the author states correctly on page 64). Magdalenka was (not a palace but a governmental conference center) a site of early attempts to prepare the talks since September 1988. These were broken, then reinstated in early 1989, and then the site was used during cleavages as the talks progressed in Warsaw, culminating on April 5. While it seems a minor correction, for some people in Poland “Magdalenka” is a synonym to “secret deals” between the opposition and communists, fueling the narrative of a communist plot (see also page 88).

When discussing the difficulties with electing General Jaruzelski, who could not muster enough votes in the National Assembly, Pomfret cites the deal that was struck: “your president, our government” (p. 65). It should read “your president, our prime minister,” as in fact when Tadeusz Mazowiecki became one, on August 25, 1989, his cabinet still included influential communists like General Czesaw Kiszczak, in charge of the Ministry of the Interior, or General Florian Siwicki, in charge of National Defense.

There are also some minor corrections. For example, the elections in Poland in 1989 were the first partially free elections since the 1930s in Poland but not across Eastern Europe as stated on page 64. Please note elections in Hungary on November 4, 1945 and in Czechoslovakia on May 26, 1946. Also, Pomfret writes that “ever since the CIA was formed during World War II as the Office of Strategic Services [OSS] it’d maintained a testy relationship with the FBI” (p. 34). The CIA was not formed until the National Security Act in 1947, while OSS was disbanded in September 1945. There was no direct institutional continuity. When the author explains border changes and mentions L’viv “given to Ukraine” or Rivne “assigned to Ukraine,” it would be worthy to mention that Ukraine was one of the Soviet republics at the time and not an independent subject (p. 95). Finally, for any future editions, I suggest applying some minor corrections (typos in names spelled) on several pages.

Notes


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