

6 Karol Wojtyla and the end of the Cold War

Agostino Giovagnoli

The Vatican and the Cold War

Relations between the Holy See and the Soviet Union began in 1917, when the Vatican initiated a series of attempts to institute more or less formal relations with the Soviet regime while, during the same period, it issued a series of negative pronouncements attacking communism, culminating in 1937 with Pius XI's *Divini Redentoris* (though the best-known event of this kind was the excommunication of 1949). As Andrea Riccardi has observed, while the conflict with communism deeply affected the entire history of the Catholic Church during the twentieth century, the face-to-face confrontation between communism and the Holy See was relatively short in duration, coinciding with the papacy of Pius XII.¹ It may consequently be said that, for the Vatican, the 'Cold War' in the strict sense of the term lasted for less than 15 years, ranging from the post-World War I period until the death of Pius XII. Things began to change thereafter, with the ascension of John XXIII. In 1963 John XXIII published his encyclical *Pacem in terris*, which may be defined as the 'Vatican's reflection', alongside the US and Soviet responses, on the Cuban missile crisis (a crisis in which the Pope himself had played a role). This was the same time that Monsignor Casaroli made his first visit to an eastern European nation, marking the birth of the Vatican's policy of *Ostpolitik*.

The Vatican's *Ostpolitik* is known to have advanced most significantly under the leadership of Paul VI, who transformed John XXIII's intuitive openness into a full-fledged diplomatic program closely linked, as Paul saw it, to a particular vision of European unity. Moving away from the views cultivated by Pius XII, Paul VI was a convinced Europeanist, vigorously upholding the cause and process of European integration. His vision was informed by three aims, all quite dear to him: to succeed once and for all to pacify Europe; to turn Europe into a sort of 'laboratory' for overcoming the tensions and oppositions of the Cold War; and to encourage European assumption of a role as a world leader, no longer in any colonial sense, of course, but as supporter and source of aid to the underdeveloped countries of the Third World. Paul VI often summarized these three objectives in a single term, 'peace', which referred to John XXIII's encyclical. Without a doubt, the Vatican's *Ostpolitik* subscribed to these objectives even though its

actual practice primarily addressed religious concerns: facilitating the life of the Catholic churches and promoting ecumenical contacts in eastern European countries and in the USSR itself.

Within the Soviet bloc, beginning with the Poles, these visionary goals were considered the potential grounds for a partial convergence with the Holy See. In 1967, the Vatican became involved in what would eventually develop into the Helsinki conference. The path was cleared by agreements between the Western Germans and the Soviets that formalized the European borders that had been established at the end of the Second World War. This allowed the Catholic Church to normalize its internal structure in such areas as Silesia, which had been transferred from German to Polish sovereignty after the war. Paul VI made a linkage between this border stabilization and the recognition of human rights, which was then confirmed by the Helsinki Conference, where Monsignor Casaroli represented the Holy See. Indeed, the representatives of the Vatican and the Soviet Union were even seated near one another at the conference, owing to their states' alphabetical proximity.

Many have argued that the papacy of John Paul II marked a resumption of the Cold War mentality, that the new Pope supported a renewed frontal assault against the communist world (which eventually resulted in its ruin). The mass media has made much of the contribution by the Catholic Church, and by the Pope in particular, to the changes that brought about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union's demise. The Pope's critical contribution has been identified as an ability to foster a vast 'ideological' mobilization, made possible by Karol Wojtyla's clear, courageous 'global' anti-communism.

This view of Wojtyla's pontificate is not a new one. It was initially fed by hopes raised in the wake of Paul VI's death and the election of a Polish Pope among opponents of Paul VI's conciliatory policy towards the communist regimes. They were eager for a radical revision of this policy, that is, for a transition from *Ostpolitik* to *Ostmission*.² Similar views on John Paul's anti-communism, although opposite in character, were advanced (mostly during the early years of his papacy) by those who saw his native Polish Catholic culture as foreign to the Western approaches of those years. Some perceived John Paul as representing a kind of return to the days of Pius XII. With time, opposition to communism became the main prism for interpreting this pontificate in general.³ Gorge Weigel's biography of the Pope is a clear reflection of such an orientation, describing as it does John Paul II from a highly 'American' perspective, through a comparison with Ronald Reagan. As Weigel contends, both Reagan and the Pope shared a similar perception of communism as a 'moral evil' and both embraced 'interests basically in agreement as regards challenging the Yalta system...committed to liberating what their generation called the "imprisoned nations"...[T]hey took different paths to achieve the same goal.'⁴

Nevertheless, John Paul II's championing of human rights and, in particular, religious freedom cannot be equated to Western diplomacy's promotion of these same causes. Those who emphasize Karol Wojtyla's anti-communism – for instance, his explicit condemnation of communist ideology and the political

regimes that rested on it, the moral rebellion encouraged by his denunciations of communism, his refusal to negotiate or to compromise with communist regimes, and his rejection of Paul VI's *Ostpolitik* – reduce complex questions involving historical, cultural, geographical and religious forces of great consequence to a uni-dimensional issue of ideology.⁵ Although John Paul II's anti-communism is beyond question, so was that of Pius XII, of John XXIII and of Paul VI. What distinguishes John Paul II from these other popes, and what can explain the greater practical impact of his opposition to communism, is not to be found on the ideological level but, rather, in this pontiff's Slavic origins and his roots in Polish history, in his experience of World War II and in his own personal encounter with life under a communist regime. These are what inform John Paul II's unique spiritual, cultural and geopolitical vision.

***Ostpolitik*: from Paul VI to John Paul II**

Many popular interpretations of Wojtyła's papacy identify an opposition between Paul VI's *Ostpolitik* and Wojtyła's Eastern policy. According to his critics, Paul VI yielded too much and made too many compromises in his relations with the communist regimes. His Polish successor, as staunch an adversary of communism as was the 'church of silence' from which he came (definitions Karol Wojtyła was not enamored of), refused to endorse similar compromises. This critical view of Paul VI often points to his role in the Helsinki accords, which were formulated through the direct participation of Monsignor Casaroli.⁶ Much has been made of Paul VI's expectations – ultimately disappointed – that the agreement would bring about a practical improvement in the condition of civil rights and thus in church life in communist countries.

Such a simplistic version of events is contradicted by a number of factors, beginning with the fact that the Catholic Church did not escalate its anti-communist rhetoric after the ascension of John Paul II to the papacy (even though his teachings certainly contained explicit criticism of the communist regimes).⁷ Even more significant was Casaroli's appointment as Secretary of State following the sudden demise of Villot. This choice in favor of continuity was confirmed by John Paul II's decision not to dismantle the Vatican's diplomatic team that was responsible for implementing the *Ostpolitik* policy. The new Pope's election, in other words, did not signal a reversal of the Vatican's Moscow policy but, as Andrea Riccardi has observed, marked 'a strengthening of those very themes of religious freedom which, as Paul VI's pontificate was drawing to a close, that Pope and his Helsinki document had indicated as fundamental'.⁸ And so we see that the cause of religious freedom, considered by some as especially characteristic of John Paul's vigorous anti-communism, was not a new Vatican policy at all.

John Paul II gradually supplemented the continuing Vatican policy with personal emphases that were designed to 'strengthen' *Ostpolitik*. This was the case, for example, with Wojtyła's approach to the issue of dialogue, so typical of Paul VI's papacy and diplomacy. Dialogue meant that 'protest [did not] preclude realistic contacts with governments'.⁹ For John Paul II, dialogue came to mean, above

all, an unwavering expression of one's values together with a demand for the basic human respect to which one is entitled. Another important feature 'added' by this Pope to the ongoing policy of *Ostpolitik* was its linkage to a more intense pastoral dynamic. Diplomacy was not seen to be the only sphere of praxis; the national Church itself was expected to take part in the struggle on behalf of its growth and development. In this sense, John Paul II rejected the model represented by Cardinal Lekai in Hungary, where diplomatic agreements had guaranteed a certain degree of tranquility for the Church but at the cost of restricting it to certain areas of life.

John Paul II's view of the Church's problems and future in eastern Europe were given expression during his first papal journey to Poland, and most particularly in the speech he delivered at the Jasna Gora sanctuary. In that speech John Paul stressed the importance of the role of the national Church and extolled the unity of the episcopate, a 'source of spiritual strength' for a Church able to defend and preserve the nation's identity even in times of aggression and division so commonplace in Poland. Citing the example of St. Stanislaus who also opposed the use of political power, John Paul II aspired to a normalization of relations between Church and state that would be based on religious freedom. This program was not only meant for Poland; the Pope aspired to see a strong, united Church in other eastern European countries that would be capable of assuming an important social role in the service of the entire nation, and that would eschew a political role when that would be necessary in order to pursue its other aims. Clearly, this strategy was not aimed at immediately overturning or radically delegitimizing communist governments. Rather, John Paul sought to strengthen the Church to the point where it could function as the 'soul' of an entire nation, as was the case in Poland.

Karol Wojtyla and Poland

This original program does not coincide with the actual impact John Paul's papacy had on the communist regimes of eastern Europe. Gorbachev is known to have recognized the great significance of John Paul II's papacy for the future of communism, an opinion shared by many. But while there exists a general consensus over the role of John Paul II's ties to his native Poland in the break-up of Soviet rule in eastern Europe, opinions differ as to the practical ways these ties actually influenced the situation in Poland and, more generally, in the Eastern bloc in general.

John Paul II's relationship with his native land cannot be understood without taking into account the prior 30-year history of the Polish Church, as experienced by Karol Wojtyla, under communist rule.¹⁰ In fact, the attitude of Polish Catholics towards communism diverged from Catholic sentiment prevalent elsewhere in eastern Europe. Deeply rooted in history and society, the Church in Poland simultaneously opposed the regime and stood for a sense of national responsibility, at once displaying intransigence towards communism and realism towards the communists in power. This position was advanced, above all, by Stephan Wyszyński, the great leader of Polish Catholicism, who, after years of harsh imprisonment,

chose the path of collaboration with his great adversary, Gomulka. He considered this to be for the good of both Church and nation. Wyszyński did not always receive Rome's support and understanding for his policy. Karol Wojtyła grew up in a Church that suffered from Pius XII's inability to comprehend its choices.

Much of what truly distinguished John Paul II from his predecessors was his direct experience of life under a communist regime: first-hand knowledge of the sufferings inflicted by the regime on the Church, and of communist reality itself, including both its strengths and weaknesses. This is why John Paul II's attitudes cannot be interpreted in strictly ideological terms. He accepted the need for a considerable degree of realism, not so much in the political and diplomatic meaning of the term but as the result of his extended familiarity with people and events. What's more, this experience unfolded in a country where Catholics constituted the majority and the Church had always played a socially important role. Thus, engaging in a dialogue or even negotiating with the government did not necessarily mean that the Church was yielding – as exemplified in the behavior of Wyszyński, whom no one could accuse of cowardice.

Such an orientation was evident during John Paul II's first journey as Pope to Poland in 1979. The circumstantial link between the popular enthusiasm generated by the trip and the rise of the Solidarity movement is often emphasized. This relationship, debated by scholars, was considered emblematic of John Paul II's ability to excite a 'moral revolt' against communism in the public conscience. It is no less noteworthy, however, that this Pope (and the Polish episcopate, at his urging) exercised constant vigilance in ensuring that domestic disturbances did not provoke Soviet intervention. In his memoirs, Cardinal Casaroli, then Undersecretary of State, recalled the questions and concerns raised by Kanja during the trip. Casaroli notes that all polemic was avoided, as if to ask for 'understanding and assistance (the shadow of the Soviet Big Brother, although not explicitly evoked, fell continuously not so much on the Pope as on the Polish leaders)'.¹¹

John Paul II was later known to be fond of the Solidarity movement and to have supported its cause, perhaps more than Wyszyński himself or the other Polish bishops. Nevertheless, although supported by the Church, Solidarity was primarily an expression of a profound break between the working class and the communist party brought on by economic and social factors. It was the significance and justness of this break that attracted the sympathies of John Paul II. But regardless, he was ever vigilant in trying to keep the Solidarity movement and other opposition forces from weakening the Polish government in Soviet eyes.

This perspective is confirmed in John Paul II's letter to Leonid Brezhnev, brought to light by Gorge Weigel, insisting on respect for Poland's national sovereignty and on the internal nature of Poland's problems.¹² This was a clear attempt to stave off military invasion, adopting diplomatic arguments likely to impress his interlocutor, including an appeal to the Helsinki agreements. Information obtained from the so-called Mitrokhin Archive suggests that Jaruzelski's later *coup d'état* met with a 'certain understanding' from the Polish episcopate and, in particular, from Cardinal Glemp, who always took positions close to those of the Pope's.

In the long run, this 'moderate' choice proved to be the winning one. In fact, it established a link, even if characterized by conflict, between the Church and the Polish authorities based on a common interest in preventing Soviet intervention and resolving issues 'among Poles'. The Mitrokhin documents shed light on the growing tension between Polish and Russian communists, and even between the two nations' secret services. The battle lines had already been drawn during John Paul II's first journey to Poland, which Brezhnev himself had sought to prevent.¹³ The Soviets did all they could to hamper these trips, repeatedly accusing the Polish communists of excessive leniency in their policies towards the Catholic Church and the Solidarity movement. In fact, as Andrew observes, a deep difference in perspective separated Polish and Soviet communists. For the Poles, the policy towards Wojtyla and the Polish Church was an internal Church-state matter. For the Soviets, it was part of a larger question regarding the USSR's struggle against the Vatican. In the end, this difference proved decisive. And so, we can understand that John Paul II's role in the collapse of communism in Europe lies not in his political and diplomatic activity – however important that activity was – but in his influence on the Polish Church and the consequent resumption of geopolitical, social and cultural rifts within the Eastern bloc that eroded Soviet hegemony.

Pope John Paul II's spiritual geography

More significant than what he *did*, John Paul II 'destabilized' the Soviet Union and its allies because of what he *was*: the first leader of universal Catholicism from a communist country. The KGB, and particularly Andropov, were known to have vividly perceived the danger that his election constituted. This suspicion appears to have informed Soviet policy as a whole. Indeed, much of the Soviet bloc's religious policy was conducted directly by the secret services of the USSR or by those of other communist nations.¹⁴ Right away in 1978 the KGB viewed the election of a Polish Pope as disastrous. Karol Wojtyla had already been the target of onerous 'attention' by the Polish secret services while he was Archbishop of Krakow. Two of their agents managed to win the trust of one of his colleagues, consequently allowing the security services to be aware of the relations between the Archbishop and the opposition movement (although such clandestine means of intelligence gathering were patently unnecessary, the main 'proof' of Wojtyla's anti-communism being found in his homilies; even when in Poland, that is, Karol Wojtyla acted in public fashion, never hiding his views and positions).

The conflict between John Paul II and the Soviet bloc may be defined as 'geopolitical' rather than ideological. The Pope's Slavic roots lie at the base of a world view, a 'spiritual geography' particular to him, that also affected his actual behavior. As a Pole, Wojtyla always conceived Europe as a unitary whole, 'from the Atlantic to the Urals'. This formula had been promoted by de Gaulle before him. In a certain sense, the same vision inspired the Helsinki accords. Clearly, Wojtyla's Europe did not correspond to any political plan but expressed, rather, a

historical and cultural vision resting on common Christian roots. Save for the Christian element, this vision paradoxically brought him closer to his Soviet adversaries (or at least to some of them; Gromyko's own memoirs make similar allusions) because it emphasized long-standing continuities – of a more geographical than political nature – difficult to ignore. From the Soviet point of view, however, this very complicity made John Paul II, who spoke the same language and shared the same perspective as those populations living under communist regimes, particularly 'dangerous'. John Paul II posed a problem for the USSR and the other communist nations of eastern Europe because his person and attitudes were born of long-standing tendencies deeply rooted in the history and culture of eastern Europe. This is probably the sense of the papacy's discussion of an 'alternative' to communism. Rather than opposing those regimes ideologically, Wojtyla embodied and proposed an alternative to communism's explanation of the needs of those populations, an alternative that the communist regimes were 'ideologically' unable to defeat.

John Paul II's 'spiritual geography' found several expressions in the sphere of relations between the Churches, or, better put, between the various Christian traditions. It is no accident that his teachings frequently adopt the well-known 'two-lung' image: there is only one Church to be reunited that has always breathed with two lungs, the Western and the Eastern one. One indication of Wojtyla's vision is his decision to make Cyril and Methodius patrons of Europe. This was a religiously elegant way to claim equal dignity for both the eastern and western European traditions, as well as to call attention to the Church's unitary roots in the diversity of traditions and rites. This vision of European unity is particularly pleasing to the Slavic world, which has always been attracted to western Europe while also being apprehensive of its hegemony.

Wojtyla's European vision is thus a deeply Slavic one. But it is also a Polish vision that necessarily clashes with a Russian understanding of European geography. This was manifest in Wojtyla's approach to Eastern-rite Catholics in the Ukraine. Immediately upon his election he resolutely defended this Church's tradition, guaranteeing a succession to the aged Cardinal Slypij while also trying to satisfy Orthodox requests.¹⁵ These decisions were unwelcome both to the Soviets, who feared a Church alliance with Ukrainian nationalism, and to the Russian Orthodox Church, which traditionally opposed 'interventions' by Rome.

This conflict was not only with the Soviets but with the Russian world as well. Not coincidentally, it began before John Paul II's pontificate and continued after the fall of the Soviet Union. For example, Andropov was 'obsessed' with the 'ideological subversion' wrought by the Holy See in the USSR through the Ukrainians. The KGB sought to provoke divisions among Ukrainian Catholics forced into hiding by the regime's persecutions. The Soviet secret service aspired to extend its activities to Rome as well. After Patriarch Slipyi was freed, the KGB attempted to discredit his successor, Vasyl Velychowsky, in his eyes. Although the campaign succeeded in infiltrating the clandestine Ukrainian Church, the results were not those hoped for. There is no trace of a break between Slipyi and Velychowsky. Such episodes are emblematic of the Soviets' general failure to

defeat this unique adversary – a weak, persecuted body like Ukrainian Catholicism, and the Catholic Church in general.

Other issues, less well known and studied than human rights but no less rooted in John Paul II's 'religious geography', are worthy of consideration in trying to understand this Pope's contribution to the fall of the Soviet bloc. One of those is peace, an issue often skillfully mobilized by the communist world to call attention to a problem difficult to oppose: the peril of war, and of nuclear war in particular. This is a recurring theme in John Paul II's teachings, one that dissented from the positions of Western governments. His pronouncements on the Gulf War and, later, on the Kosovo action are well known. The issue of peace again shows that John Paul II did not constitute a 'danger' to communism because of his ideological antagonism or his pro-Western positions, but because of his origins in the Slavic world and his 'geopolitical' affinity with the populations living in the Soviet bloc. Those affinities were what made him feared even more than his predecessors who, like Pius XII, were deeply committed to the struggle against communism.

Notes

- 1 A. Riccardi, *Le religioni dei due 'imperi'*, in A. Giovagnoli and L. Tosi (eds), *Un Ponte sull'Atlantico. L'alleanza occidentale 1949–1999*, Guerini e associati, Milano 2003, pp. 79–92.
- 2 A. Riccardi, *Il Vaticano e Mosca (1940–1990)* (Roma and Bari: Laterza, 1992), p. 47.
- 3 G. Weigel, *Testimone della speranza. La vita di Giovanni Paolo II protagonista del nostro secolo* (Milano: Mondadori, 1999), p. 546.
- 4 Weigel, *Testimone della speranza*, p. 549.
- 5 Riccardi, *Il Vaticano e Mosca*, p. 349.
- 6 Weigel, *Testimone della speranza* p. 763.
- 7 Riccardi, *Il Vaticano e Mosca*, p. 349; Weigel, *Testimone della speranza*, p. 50.
- 8 Riccardi, *Il Vaticano e Mosca*, p. 355; Weigel, *Testimone della speranza*, p. 475.
- 9 Riccardi, *Il Vaticano e Mosca*, p. 351.
- 10 Riccardi, *Il Vaticano e Mosca*, p. 366.
- 11 A. Casaroli, *Il martirio della pazienza. La Santa Sede e i paesi comunisti (1963–89)* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), p. 318.
- 12 Weigel, *Testimone della speranza*, p. 505.
- 13 C. Andrew and V. Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1999), pp. 634ff.
- 14 This holds true above all for the Russian Orthodox Church, to which, during World War II, Stalin restored a kind of 'right to exist', albeit under harsh conditions. KGB documents speak of Russian bishops, metropolitans and patriarchs as 'our agents', not only subjected to extremely close monitoring but also forced to accept choices, orientations and initiatives dictated by the authorities.
- 15 Weigel, *Testimone della speranza*, p. 759.