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## **A Tale of Two Poles: Culture, History, Personalities, Politics, and Film Converge**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the connection between reality and fiction using the film “Operation Hyacinth” as a backdrop. While the film is a police procedural based on a fictional crime, the context within which the story occurs is based on the registration program that was implemented in Poland between 1985 and 1987. The article is divided in six sections. Sections 1 and 2 introduce General Czesław Kiszczak and actor and director Piotr Domalewski, respectively, the two Poles in our title. We then address the actual Operation Hyacinth and the role of the Security Service in its implementation. In Section 4 we provide a review of the film. Section 5 provides a connection between the latter days of communist Poland and what the LGBTQ Community currently faces in present-day Poland. We close by providing a final comment on how government, whether in the present or in the past, continues to forward a repressively homophobic stance.

**Key Words:** fictional reality; LGBTQ matters; sexual repression; 1980s Poland; 2022 Poland

### **1. Introduction**

History is replete with stories of individuals whose lives may be inextricably intertwined, but who in all probability have never met in person because of circumstances or timing. Such is the case of actor and director Piotr Domalewski and General Czesław Kiszczak, who served briefly as the last communist Prime Minister of Poland (Roberts, 2015).

Czesław Jan Kiszczak (October 19, 1925 – November 5, 2015) was one of the most ubiquitous and controversial figures in communist Poland. Kiszczak was a Polish general, Minister of the Interior (1981–1990), and briefly served as Prime Minister during 1989. Kiszczak has been the subject of many published biographies and commentaries. In the context of this article, we have summarized the most important points of reference, especially relying on General Kiszczak’s extensive obituary in the *New York Times* (Roberts, 2015).

#### **1.1. The General**

Czesław Kiszczak was born on October 19, 1925, in [Roczyny](#) in Southern Poland, near Wadowice where Pope John Paul II (Karol Józef Wojtyła) was born. Kiszczak’s father had been fired as a steelworker because of his communist affiliations. In 1942, when Kiszczak was 16 years old, he was arrested by the German occupiers along with his mother, an older brother, and an aunt. Kiszczak was sentenced to forced labor, first at a German coal mine, and later he was sent to Austria as a slave laborer. In the later part of the war, as Soviet troops began to enter Polish territories from the East, Kiszczak joined a communist-led anti-Nazi resistance group which collaborated with the Red Army, serving as a translator (see Appelbaum, 2012).

After the conclusion of the war, Kiszczak returned to Poland and joined the [Polish Workers' \(Communist\) Party](#) (*Polska Partia Robotnicza* or *PPR*) (Dziewanowski, 1976) and was sent to the Central Party School in [Łódź](#), which was responsible for training civilian and military Communist Party functionaries. Kiszczak then entered the [Polish Army](#). Kiszczak later commented on the influence this period of internal struggle between pro- and anti-Soviet factions in Poland had on his life (including an episode where his father had been beaten by a group of anti-Soviets):

"Experiences linked with that drama, that fratricidal struggle, are among the major reasons that shaped my role in the complicated years of 1980–82." Kiszczak added that "I did not want that tragic history to repeat itself" (reported in Roberts, 2015).

Kiszczak was assigned to the office of [military intelligence](#), and served there until 1981. In 1946, Kiszczak was posted to the Polish consulate-general in London, where he helped to repatriate to Poland members of the Polish armed forces who had served in the West during the war (Ostrowski, 1996). In 1951, he became a chief of the Department of Information in the 18th Infantry Division, stationed in the city of [Elk](#). In 1952, he was transferred to [Warsaw](#) where he became chief of the Department of Information in the Directorate of Information of Military District Number 1. Later Kiszczak was moved to the headquarters of the [Ministry of National Defense](#), and became chief of the General Section in the Department of Finances.

In the period 1954–1957, Kiszczak studied in the [Polish General Staff Academy](#) in Warsaw, and after graduation was assigned to the newly formed counter-intelligence agency, the [Internal Military Service](#) (*Wojskowa Służba Wewnętrzna* or WSW). From 1957 to 1965, Kiszczak was the head of counter-intelligence for the Polish Navy (*Marynarka Wojenna*) in the WSW, and in 1967 became deputy head of the WSW. By the end of the decade of the 1960s, Kiszczak occupied top positions in the Polish military and military intelligence services, and in 1973 he was promoted to the rank of general. In 1972–79, Kiszczak served as a head of military intelligence (Second Directorate of General Staff of the Polish Army - [Zarząd II Sztabu Generalnego Wojska Polskiego](#)) and in 1978, he became deputy head of the [Polish General Staff](#). In June 1979, Kiszczak returned to military counter-intelligence. Until 1981, Kiszczak served as the head of the Internal Military Service.

In July 1981, Kiszczak was appointed to the important position of Minister of Internal Affairs (Markham, 1981), which along with the [Ministry of National Defense](#), were two of the most powerful ministries in Poland. The Ministry of Internal Affairs was the successor to the Ministry of Public Security of Poland (*Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego* or MBP), which was the postwar communist [secret police](#), [intelligence](#), and [counter-espionage](#) service which operated from 1945 to 1954 under Minister for Public Security General [Stanisław Radkiewicz](#), and which was supervised by [Jakub Berman](#) of the [Politburo](#) of the Communist Party of Poland. The main goal of the MPB was the destruction of [anti-communist](#) structures and the base of the underground [Polish "Secret State"](#) (see generally Karski, 1944), as well as the persecution of individuals from the [Polish Home Army](#) (*Armia Krajowa* or AK) and others who were active during World War II and who were seen as potential oppositionists to communist rule.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs held wide administrative and supervisory powers over the [police force](#), the [secret police](#), government protection, confidential communications, supervision of local governments, Polish correctional facilities, and [fire services](#).

## 1.2 Kiszczak and Martial Law

Hunter and Ryan (1998, p. 55) write:

"Between October and December of 1981, tensions grew as the economy further deteriorated. The Communist party once again reverted to its old form and began to attack the various 'antisocialist' elements in Solidarity. The government initiated a new round of price hikes for food and tobacco in October. More than 300,000 workers engaged in a series of bitter wildcat strikes. Industrial production declined by an additional 15 percent and exports were down by 25 percent. In addition, the Party had ousted Kania and selected General Wojciech Jaruzelski as its first secretary."

As the Minister of Internal Affairs, Kiszczak participated in the preparation and implementation of [Martial Law](#) that was declared in Poland on December 13, 1981 (see Glinski, 2011).

Jaruzelski would later claim that Poland faced "imminent famine and a collapse of its health support system" (quoted in Weschler, 1982, p. 126). A government spokesman stated: "Poland could easily break apart because there is no government or Communist party structure left" (U.S. News and World Report 1982, pp. 33-34). On the morning of December 13, General Wojciech Jaruzelski addressed the nation at 6 a.m.:

“Today I address myself to you as a soldier and as the head of the Polish government. I address you concerning extraordinarily important questions. Our homeland is at the edge of an abyss. The achievements of many generations and the Polish home that has been built up from the dust are about to turn into ruins. State structures are ceasing to function. Each day delivers new blows to the waning economy.

The atmosphere of conflicts, misunderstanding, hatred causes moral degradation, surpasses the limits of toleration. Strikes, the readiness to strike, actions of protest have become a norm of life. Even school youth are being drawn into this.

Yesterday evening, many public buildings remained seized. The cries are voiced to physical reprisals with the 'reds', with people who have different opinions. The cases of terror, threats and moral vendetta, of even direct violence are on the rise. A wave of impudent crimes, robberies and burglaries is running across the country. The underground business sharks' fortunes, already reaching millions, are growing. Chaos and demoralization have reached the magnitude of a catastrophe. People have reached the limit of psychological toleration. Many people are struck by despair. Not only days, but hours as well are bringing forth the all-national disaster.

Citizens!

The load of responsibility that falls on me on this dramatic moment in the Polish history is huge. It is my duty to take this responsibility – concerning the future of Poland, that my generation fought for on all the fronts of the war and for which they sacrificed the best years of their life. I declare that today the Military Council of National Salvation has been formed. In accordance with the Constitution, the State Council has imposed martial law all over the country. I wish that everyone understood the motives of our actions. A military coup, military dictatorship is not our goal.

In longer perspective, none of Poland's problems can be solved with the use of violence. The Military Council of National Salvation does not replace constitutional organs of power. Its only purpose is to keep the legal balance of the country, to create guarantees that give a chance to restore order and discipline.

This is the ultimate way to bring the country out of the crisis, to save the country from collapse.

I appeal to all the citizens. A time of heavy trials has arrived. And we have to stand those in order to prove that we are worthy of Poland.

Before all the Polish people and the whole world I would like to repeat the immortal words: [\*Poland has not yet perished, so long as we still live!\*](#)”

However, Korab-Karpowicz (2002, pp. 12-13) provides a contrary view and writes:

“With the approval of Moscow, by imposing martial law, the party-state apparatus decided on the tactic of terror because it represented an insignificant part of Polish society and was unable to otherwise impose its will on the majority. The ten million Solidarity members, along with members of Rural Solidarity and other independent organizations, such as the Independent Association of Students, together with their families, constituted the vast majority of the population of Poland. Less than one hundred thousand specially selected police and military forces were able to terrorize the movement of millions of unarmed, peaceful people.”

## 1.2. WRON and Martial Law

Kiszczak became a member of the [\*Military Council of National Salvation\*](#) (*Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego*, better known in Poland as *WRON*) which was essentially a [\*military junta\*](#) which administered Poland during the period of Martial Law between 1981 and 1983 (Paczkowski, 2015). The Council was headed by First Secretary of the [\*Polish United Workers' Party\*](#) (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza or PZPR*) General [\*Wojciech Jaruzelski\*](#) and was dissolved on July 22, 1983 when Martial Law was ended. According to Paczkowski (2007, p. 270) “about 20 people were victims of the Martial law, most of whom lost their lives in the first days.” Further, “2874 people were put into detention centres during the first Martial law night of December 12/13, 1981; 5179 before December 22, and over ten thousand during the whole period between December 1981 and July 1983” (Paczkowski, Byrne, Domber, & Klotzbach, 2007).

The Council was comprised of 21 members: fifteen [generals](#), one [admiral](#), and five [colonels](#) (Paczkowski and Werblan, 1997). In 1982, Kiszczak became a deputy member of the [Politburo of the Polish United Workers' Party](#) and became a full member in 1986 (see United Press International, 1989). It is generally recognized that from December of 1981 through June of 1989, Kiszczak was certainly the second most important person in Poland, only ranking after General [Wojciech Jaruzelski](#) in the Polish governmental structure. Jaruzelski and WRON jointly orchestrated the crackdown aimed at crushing the Solidarity movement. Martial law involved the mass roundup and internment of Solidarity activists, the impositions of curfews, and other actions (Swidlicki, 1984).

According to Kempinski (2007), the Polish People's Army (*Ludowe [Wojsko Polskie](#)*), Citizens' Militia (*Milicja Obywatelska or MO*), [ZOMO](#) (*Zmotoryzowane Odwody Milicji Obywatelskiej*), joined by special paramilitary units, were deployed to crack down on demonstrators, begin regular street patrols, control sensitive Polish state-owned enterprises, seal off Poland's borders, close off all airports, engage in wiretapping of all public phone booths and state institutions, ban intercity travel without a permit, impose censorship on all media and correspondence, and maintain a strict [curfew](#) from 7:00 p.m. through 6:00 a.m. Between 70,000 and 80,000 soldiers of the People's Army and 30,000 individuals associated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs were deployed for action. Around 1,750 tanks, 1,900 armored combat vehicles, 500 militarized transport units, 9,000 cars and several helicopter squadrons were placed into service (Glinski, 2016).

Opposition activists were [imprisoned](#) without trial. Thousands of journalists, teachers, artists, (Ferenc, 2020) and professors were dismissed from their professions (BBC, 2006). Special military courts were established to bypass the normal court system (Swidlicki, 1984; Los, 2015). Although Martial Law would officially end in July of 1983, many [political prisoners](#) were not released until a general [amnesty](#) was declared in 1986. Contrary to achieving its stated purpose of pacifying the population, the Rand Corporation reported that the Polish Crisis "increased the potential for violent instability in the Eastern part of Poland" (Johnson, 1982).

With the support of the Roman Catholic Church (Jocher, 2015; Sikorska, 2008; Korba, 1987) segments of the population engaged in public protests over the imposition of Martial Law. On December 16, ZOMO squads "[pacified](#)" the pro-Solidarity miners' strike in the [Wujek Coal Mine](#) in the industrial city of [Katowice](#), resulting in the deaths of nine demonstrators (Korab-Karpowicz, 2002; Francisco, 2006; Magier, 2014). Demonstrations were dispersed by the use of [water cannons](#), [tear gas](#), [batons](#), truncheons, and clubs. Reports indicate that as many as 91 Poles were killed.

Although officially crushed, Solidarity remained a force in thousands of clandestine underground organizations throughout Poland (Braun, 1993; Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2022). By August of 1982, social unrest again surged. On August 31, 1982, demonstrations took place in around 66 towns and cities, including [Wrocław](#) and [Lublin](#).

The costs of Martial Law were enormous. A steady exodus of Poles saw 700,000 migrate to the West between 1981 and 1989 (Gebert, 1990; Kicinger & Weinar, 2007) — many to the United States and Great Britain (Salt & Okolski, 2014). Ironically, both Kiszczak and Jaruzelski would later claim that the imposition of Martial Law actually staved-off a possible [Soviet-led](#) invasion, citing events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 known as the [Prague Spring](#) — although this justification remains hotly debated and factually challenged (e.g., Mastny, 2010).

### 1.3. Towards the "Round Table"

At the end of the 1980s, with the near collapse of the Polish economy and Poland in the throes of a new wave of debilitating strikes, Kiszczak was designated to negotiate an agreement with the opposition Solidarity movement and unofficially with the Roman Catholic Church (represented by several laymen affiliated with Catholic publications and organizations (Kosela, 1990)) on behalf of the teetering communist regime. The Round Table discussions led to the re-legalization of Solidarity and set the terms for the 1989 semi-free parliamentary elections. Lech Walesa commented that "either we'll be able to build Poland as a nation in a peaceful way, independent, sovereign and safe, with equal alliances, or we'll sink in the chaos of demagoguery, which could result in civil war in which there will be no victors." Kiszczak simply added that "there's only one victor, the nation, our fatherland" (Tagliabue, 1990, pp. 33-36).

Hunter and Ryan (1998, p. 3) note that “despite a very limited pre-election period and an extensive pre-election spending spree by the government,” Solidarity-backed candidates went on to win an overwhelming victory in the June 1989 elections, capturing every available seat in the lower house or Sejm and all but one seat available in the Senate. “Only two of the communist-backed candidates on the National List of 35 ‘unopposed’ nominees attained the required majority vote necessary for election. Among those who failed to win seats included such notables of the Communist party elite as Prime Minister Mieczyslaw Rakowski, Interior Minister Czeslaw Kiszczak, Defense Minister Florian Siwicki, and the official trade union representative Alfred Miodowicz. In all, six Politburo members suffered humiliation at the polls” (Hunter & Ryan, 1998, p. 3).

Despite the massive rejection of the government by the Polish electorate, nevertheless, Kiszczak was nominated for the position of Prime Minister, but Solidarity and two minor political parties refused to enter a communist-led coalition government. Kiszczak was forced to resign as Prime Minister, but as part of a power-sharing agreement which permitted General Jaruzelski to serve as President, Kiszczak continued as Interior Minister until mid-1990, when he “retired” from political life. Tadeusz Mazowiecki then assumed the position of Polish Prime Minister. “Mazowiecki was a 62-year-old journalist, editor of Solidarity’s weekly newspaper, *Tygodnik Solidarnosc*, a devout Roman Catholic, and a close advisor and partner to Solidarity leader, Lech Walesa” (Hunter & Ryan, 1998, p. 1). On the economic front, Prime Minister Mazowiecki turned to Dr. Leszek Balcerowicz to reconstruct the Polish economy (Hunter & Ryan, 1998, Chapter 5). Balcerowicz was a professor of economics at the Central School of Planning and Statistics, now the Warsaw School of Economics and had studied economics at St. John’s University in New York City from September 1972 through January 1974.

Aided by Harvard professors Jeffrey Sachs and David Lipton, Poland “confronted an economy that was both bankrupt and deeply scarred through 40 years of communism... as well as the political and administrative collapse of the former system” (Sachs, 1993, p. 9). Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Balcerowicz introduced a program of far-reaching economic reforms based upon the twin principles of *stabilization* and *privatization* into the economy known as “Shock Therapy” (see Sachs, 1994; Hunter, Hrechak, & Ryan, 1994; Hunter & Ryan, 2008; Hunter & Ryan, 2009).

Interestingly, Dabrowski (2017, p. 9) notes:

“The failure of the parliamentary bid to establish Czeslaw Kiszczak as prime minister, and the subsequent de-composition of the post-communist parliamentary coalition led the SB to a reaction concerning its own structure; disposing of compromising materials, securing operative assets (functionaries and informants), and disguising its own structure as “apolitical state security guards... On the 24th of August 1989, the day of the swearing in of the first non-communist Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the then minister of internal affairs, Czeslaw Kiszczak, ordered the reorganisation of MSW departments. The central units of the SB were merged building new structures. Department III MSW, the unit in charge of invigilation and containment of political opposition was renamed “Department Ochrony Konstytucyjnego Porzadku Państwa” (“the department for the protection of the constitutional state order”). Department IV MSW, the unit in charge of the invigilation of Church was dismissed, its structures and assets were merged with the former Biuro Studiów MSW (also an operative unit) to the new Department Studiów i Analiz MSW (“the department of study and analysis”). Departments V and VI were merged into the new Department Ochrony Gospodarki (“the department for the protection of the national economy”). The SIGINT unit (Biuro RKW) was merged into Department II.

The reorganisation intended to simulate the transformation of the SB to the “state political police”. The 11th section of the 1<sup>st</sup> department MSW (Wydział XI Department I MSW), the unit in charge of “countering ideological diversion”, which acted against Polish émigrés, was dismissed on the 1st of September 1989. In the October of 1989 the SB officers’ school (Wyższa Szkoła Oficerska im. F. Dzierżyńskiego, WSO) in Legionowo (named after Cheka founder and chief of Polish descent, Feliks Dzierżyński) was reorganised, formally dismissed, and merged into the MSW academy (Akademia Spraw Wewnętrznych, ASW) as a “state security department” (Wydział Bezpieczeństwa Państwowego ASW).

Similarly, in 1989, ZOMO was renamed to “Oddziały Prewencji MO” (MO prevention units”). The internal political unit of MSW, Sluzba Polityczno-Wychowawcza (“political-education service”) was dismissed in November 1989. Departments I (foreign intelligence) and Department II (counterintelligence) and the technical-operative units were allegedly excluded from the structure of the SB (although those units were mentioned in December 1989 as parts of the SB.”

After the [fall of communism in Poland](#) in 1989, members of a parliamentary commission determined that Martial Law had been imposed in clear violation of Poland’s [constitution](#), which authorized the executive to declare Martial Law only between parliamentary sessions (Time Note, 2020). At all other times, the decision to impose Martial Law was to be taken by the [Sejm](#). The Sejm had been in session at the time when Martial Law was instituted. In 1992 the Sejm itself declared the 1981 imposition of Martial Law to be unlawful and unconstitutional (Zubic, 2014). To many, the fact that General Kiszczak and General Jaruzelski never faced real punishment for the imposition of Martial Law and for the imposition of other repressive measures, or for the deaths of nine miners during the “pacification” of the Wujek coal mine remained most troubling. Kiszczak was in fact acquitted of personal responsibility for these deaths and was handed only a two-year suspended sentence for his role in imposing martial law.

Kiszczak died in Warsaw on November 5, 2015 at the age 90 (see Gera, 2015). Interestingly, to some critics, General Kiszczak had redeemed himself in 1984 when, as Minister of Internal Affairs, he oversaw the prosecution and conviction of secret police officers who had abducted and murdered Fr. [Jerzy Popiełuszko](#), who had become a symbol and later martyr to the Solidarity-cause (Smuniewski, 2013). To others, Kiszczak remained as an unredeemed symbol of Poland’s repressive communist past.

The [Polish Ministry of Defense](#) refused to allot a burial plot for Kiszczak at the [Powązki Military Cemetery](#) or to provide [military funeral honors](#). Instead, Kiszczak was buried at the [Orthodox Cemetery](#) in Warsaw in the presence of a limited number of his family members and friends. No government or military officials participated in the ceremony. In contrast, Wojciech Jaruzelski died on May 25, 2014 at the age of 90. Polish President [Bronisław Komorowski](#) and former Presidents Lech Wałęsa and Aleksander Kwaśniewski were among the hundreds of other Poles who attended a funeral mass at the [Field Cathedral of the Polish Army](#) in Warsaw on May 30. Both Wałęsa and Komorowski, who were among the thousands of Poles imprisoned during the crackdown on Solidarity in 1981, stated that judgment against Jaruzelski “would be left to God.” Jaruzelski was cremated and unlike Kiszczak, Jaruzelski was buried with full military honors at [Powązki Military Cemetery](#) in Warsaw. To the end, the decision to bury Jaruzelski at Powązki, the burial place of Polish soldiers killed in defense of the Polish nation since the early 19th century, caused protests throughout Poland.



Photo 1: General Kiszczak(left); General Jaruzelski(right)(AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski, file) (The Associated Press)

## 2. The Actor, Director, and Writer

Piotr Domalewski’s biography is much shorter, but none the less important. Piotr Domalewski is a Polish actor, director, and screenwriter. Domalewski was born [April 17, 1983](#) in [Łomża](#), a city located in North-East Poland, approximately 50 miles from the city of Białystok. After graduating from secondary school, Domalewski was admitted to the Aleksander Zelwerowicz Academy of Dramatic Art in Białystok and began his studies at the puppetry department. After graduating in 2009, Domalewski began his studies in acting at the Ludwik Solski State Drama School in Kraków

*Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna Ludwika Solskiego* or *PWST*) and directing at the [Faculty of Radio and Television of the University of Silesia in Katowice](#) in 2013.



Photo 2: Piotr Domalewski (www.imdb.com)

As an actor he performed in the Wybrzeże Theatre, working with such prominent Polish directors as [Anna Augustynowicz](#), [Grzegorz Wiśniewski](#), and [Ewelina Marciniak](#). In 2010, he was recognized for portraying the part of the son in the play “*On Foot*,” directed by Anna Augustynowicz. Domalewski received the Jan Świdorski's Prize at the 16<sup>th</sup> National Competition for the Polish Contemporary Play Staging in Gdańsk. Four years later, Domalewski was awarded the Jacek Woszczerowicz's Prize for playing the part of Ted Bundy in Rodrigo Garcia's play '*Versus*' directed by Szymon Kaczmarek of the Wojciech Bogusławski Theatre in Kalisz. Domalewski was the winner of *Golden Lions* – Grand Prize of the 42nd [Polish Feature Film Festival in Gdynia](#) 2017 and five individual [Polish Film Awards](#) 2018 for [the film “\*Silent Night\*.”](#)

Domalewski's prolific filmography includes 21 credits as an actor since 2009, most recently in the television series *Sexify* (2021), *Television Theatre* (2011-2016), and *Ojciec Mateusz* (*Father Matthew*, 2015) and several films. His writing credits include the series *Sexify* and the screenplays for the films *Chicha Noc* (*Silent Night*, 2017) and *Jak Najdalej Stad* (*I Never Cry*, 2020). Domalewski also directed these two films and has several credits as director, including the series *Sexify*, and the film *Hiacynt* (*Operation Hyacinth*, 2021). The film *Operation Hyacinth* would bring Kiszczak and Domalewski together—but in a wholly unexpected manner.

### 3. Reality and Film Converge

The Security Service (*Śłużba Bezpieczeństwa* or *SB*) was a [state security organ](#) that was a critical part of the structure of [the Ministry of the Interior](#), operating in [the Polish People's Republic](#) in the years 1956-1989. It was ostensibly established to ensure [the internal](#) and [external security of Poland](#). It was finally dissolved in 1990.

At the beginning of Poland's transition to a free market democracy in August of 1989, the SB employed 24,300 [officers](#) who supervised 90,000 [secret collaborators](#) (*tajni współpracownicy*) in Poland and many [intelligence agents](#) among foreign citizens—including members of the Roman Catholic clergy (Smith, 2007). It has been estimated that the TW constituted approximately 0.2% of the total population of the People's Republic of Poland.

“*Akcja Hiacynt*” (Operation Hyacinth) was a secret mass operation of the Polish police carried out in 1985–87 in Poland. The purpose of the operation was to create a national database of all Polish homosexuals and their contacts. The operation resulted in the registration of around 11,000 people. There was an official propaganda that provided justifications for the actions:

- fear of the newly discovered HIV virus, as homosexuals were regarded as a group of high risk;
- control of homosexual criminal gangs; and
- fighting prostitution.

In reality, agents of the SB were intent on gathering compromising evidence (*kompromitujące informacje*), which would later be used to blackmail those caught up in the operation or to keep a check on opposition movements prominent within the Polish LGBT community or the broader Polish society.

Upon the order of Minister of Internal Affairs Czesław Kiszczak, Akcja Hyacynt began on November 15, 1985. Agents and other functionaries of the SB arrested numerous persons suspected of being homosexual or of having connections with homosexual groups in venues across Poland. Those arrested were categorized in “special files” entitled *Karta homoseksualisty* (Card of a homosexual) and many were induced into signing a statement:

*“I (first name and last name) have been a homosexual since birth. I have had multiple partners in my life, all of them were adult. I am not interested in minors.”*

In addition to signing the document, many of those arrested were ordered to provide their fingerprints. Some were blackmailed into describing intimate parts of their sexual lives (including sexual positions), and some were blackmailed into denouncing or identifying their LGBT colleagues or sexual partners.

The operation officially lasted until 1987, but reports indicated that files were continued to be added until 1988. It has been estimated that some 11,000 homosexuals were documented under the program. These files are now referred to as the “Różowe Kartoteki” (Pink card index). While Members of the LGBT community in Poland have asked the Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* or *IPN*) to destroy the files, thus far the IPN answered that it would have been illegal to do so, striking fear and consternation among the community that the files might surface once again in the current social atmosphere of Poland in the hands of far-right political parties who have once again sought to marginalize members of the LGBT community in Poland.

As a result of Operation Hyacinth, many members of the LGBT community went “underground” (Nizolek, 2017) and several of them left Poland rather than subject themselves to fear and intimidation. Not unsurprisingly, the Polish government denied allegations relating to the creation or operation of the program. The clownishly ubiquitous spokesman for the government Jerzy Urban, when asked in December 1988 by Kay Winthers of the *Baltimore Sun*, stated that no such operation had ever taken place in Poland (reported in *Queer.pl*, 2004). One of the first persons who became known as a victim of this operation was gay rights activist Waldemar Zboralski, who was a participant and organizer of the Warsaw gay movement and gay rights activities (Szulc, 2017; Majewska, 2018). In March 1988, Zboralski and a group of 15 people filed a formal application to officially register the *Warsaw Gay Movement* with the government. The application was rejected due to an intervention from [General Kiszczak](#), Minister of Internal Affairs, for stated reasons of “public morality.”

In September 2007, two prominent LGBT activists, Szymon Niemiec and Jacek Adler, asked the Institute of National Remembrance to open an investigation against “Communist crimes” committed against the LGBT community, and specifically against General Kiszczak. On February 15, 2008, the Institute issued a statement in which it wrote that the operation was legal in light of the 1980s regulations that were in force at that time. The Institute refused to open an investigation. Shockingly to some, the Institute took the position that Hyacinth was an operation of a legitimate “preventive character,” whose purpose was to infiltrate clandestine homosexual circles and their connections to organized crime (Zycie Warszawy, 2008).

In 2015, upon the 30th anniversary of Operation Hyacinth, two books were published:

- *Różowe Kartoteki (Pink files)* by Mikołaj Milcke, which was a fictionalized history of a right-wing politician, who in his youth was detained under Akcja Hyacynt; and
- *Kryptonim Hyacynt (Codename Hyacinth)* by Andrzej Selerowicz (Zuk, 2016). Perhaps as important, in October 2021, a Polish crime thriller *Operation Hyacinth*, directed by Piotr Domalewski and starring Tomasz Ziętek, a Polish film and theatre actor as well as musician and guitarist, was released on Netflix.

#### 4. “Operation Hyacinth” and Fictional Reality in Film: A Critique

Not satisfied with the result of a murder investigation in Warsaw's gay community, an officer in 1980s communist Poland resolves to uncover the truth.

The Polish film *Operation Hyacinth* is set sometime between 1985 and 1987, when the titular secret police action was enforced. Cops were tasked with tracking down known or perceived homosexuals, entering them into a database and often forcing them to sign confessions or to out other people (Henderson 2021; Miller, 2021).



Blackmail and violence were common tools employed by officers and higher-ups. The film confirms that during the operation, over 11,000 people were registered in this database.

Director Piotr Domalewski and screenwriter Marcin Ciastoń use the operation as a backdrop for a police procedural involving a serial killer of gay men and the cop who goes undercover to solve the case. Along the way, the protagonist starts to wonder if he is identifying too much with his temporary role as a gay man. As the story unfolds, the director with a clever noir-quality of the cinematography, keeps the viewer off-guard as to whom they can trust.

Officer Robert Morawski (Tomasz Zietek) is a rising star in his precinct. He is young, enthusiastic, and a little green, but has the support of his partner Wojtek (Tomasz Schuchardt) and perhaps more importantly, he has the full support of his father Edward (Marek Kalita), a colonel in the Security Service, who insists that Robert call him “colonel,” not “Dad,” when they are at the office. Robert is engaged to a fellow officer, Halinka (Adrianna Chlebicka), who oversees the evidence lockers.

When several murders occur with the same type of fatal wounds, the police think they have a serial killer on the loose. The higher-ups demand that the case be solved as soon as possible. When a suspect Robert brought in for questioning has a confession beaten out of him before subsequently killing himself in a cell, the police abruptly close the case. Robert, who is in line for a promotion that his father has championed, is perturbed by the quick and all-too-clean resolution that is being pushed by the powers-that-be. Robert believes there is no evidence, especially none that is incriminating. The fact that a confession was obtained from a badly beaten suspect makes it not reliable in Robert’s opinion.

Robert is allowed to go undercover to satisfy his own suspicions. Posing as a gay man, he encounters Arek (Hubert Milkowski), a confident and bold young man who complains about the Hyacinth raids and has an uncanny talent for avoiding capture. Considering that he knew some of the victims, Robert decides to use him as an informant. While Arek turns out to be a good choice for information (he personally knew some of the victims), he is also a very flirtatious person who sees Robert as a rather repressed man. “You can’t be afraid of everything,” he tells Robert, “especially not freedom.” To throw Robert off balance, Arek kisses an unprepared Robert. This is a turning point in Robert’s story.

*Operation Hyacinth* uses the background of the real police actions of mid-1980’s Warsaw to explore Robert’s latent homosexual desires in familiar ways that add an extra layer of tension to an already tense police procedural. Danger is equally close at home as is work on the street, especially when the evidence in the murder case casts a wider, more sinister, and conspiratorial net. There is a terrifying scene with a wary, very angry Edward, who suspects his son Robert may not be straight. There are some powerful men with powerful secrets, and as Robert gets closer to the truth, he becomes increasingly endangered and obsessed. Zietek does a very good job with both the action scenes and the difficult moments of emotional and sexual confusion, and Milkowski provides a liberated and loose counterpoint for him to play against.

In his review, Henderson (2021) equates *Operation Hyacinth* with films that had been made back in the 1940s. Henderson believes that the film would positively compare with such films as *Detour* or *The Maltese Falcon* because of its approach to the crime at hand and its focus on the motivations of its characters. Additionally, *Operation Hyacinth* offers an opportunity to reflect on the harsh costs of repression brought about by societal homophobia. Serba’s (2021) review concludes in that *Operation Hyacinth* is a well-directed, finely acted deep-cover thriller about police corruption with an added layer of social commentary.

## 5. Where History May Repeat Itself

*“LGBT ideology comes from the same roots as Nazism” and that its adherents “are not equal to normal people” so we should “stop listening to this idiocy about human rights or equality...” “They try to tell us that [LGBT] are people, but it is an ideology...”*

Polish Minister of Education, Przemysław Czarnek

*LGBTQ politicians should "sit at the back of the parliament" or even "behind a wall." He went on to state that the queer community should not "take away" from and "spoil" things for the majority. "They should know that they are a minority and must adjust to smaller things and not rise to the greatest heights....,"*

Former Polish President Walesa, adding that he "would never support LGBTQ rights."

*"The red pestilence no longer marches across our land, but a new, neo-Marxist one has appeared, which seeks to conquer spirits, hearts and minds — not red, but rainbow."*

Krakow's Catholic archbishop, Marek Jędraszewski on Aug. 1, 2019, the 75th anniversary of Poland's uprising against the Nazis

By creating a fictional world that truly reflects the reality of gay men in the 1980s Warsaw, Domalewskinot only highlightsthe extreme dangers of sexual repression during the latter days of the Communist regime in Poland, but he also signalshow insidious homophobia can be, and how its effects seem to be pervasive.In today's Poland, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have faced legal challenges not faced by non-LGBT citizens. According to ILGA-Europe's 2021 report, the status of LGBTQ rights in Poland is the worst among European Union countries (Rainbow Europe, 2021).

The current governing party in Poland, PiS, in both the Sejm and the Polish presidency, has "relentlessly attacked LGBT rights in Poland and homophobia is on the increase, with large parts of the country declaring themselves "LGBT-free zones." On January 13, 2022, the lower house of Poland's parliament, the Sejm, narrowly passed an education reform dubbed "Lex Czarnek," or "Czarnek's Law," named after Minister of EducationPrzemysławCzarnek, which would remove LGBT-inclusive education in Polish schools. The final vote saw 227 in favor and 214 voting in opposition. While the bill would now moveto the Senate, passage was more problematic because PiS no longer had maintained its majority in the Polish Senate in the last parliamentary elections (Cassell, 2022).

In some senses, the current situation from the *formal* legal standpoint does not appear as drastic—but this may be only in that formal context. It is certainly true that since 1932, the age-of- consent for homosexuals and heterosexuals has been set at 15.Poland provides LGBT people with the same civic rights as heterosexuals in several important areas: gay and bisexual men are allowed to donate blood and gays and bisexuals are allowed to serve openly in the Polish Armed Forces.

However, in many other areas, discrimination or unequal treatment under the law abounds. Openly transgender people are officially barred from military service on medical grounds (Kacprzak, 2018). Diagnosis of gender dysphoria (a condition where a person experiences discomfort or distress because there is a mismatch between their biological sex and gender identity) results in being automatically assigned as "permanently and completely unfit for military service, both in the time of conflict and peace" (Kacprzak, 2018).Transgender persons are allowed to change their legal gender, but only if they following certain requirements, including undergoing hormone replacement therapy (Rainbow Europe, 2021). Polish law bans employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, although such protections may not be effective in practice (Gorski, 2020). Gorski (2020) writes:

"However, the overall picture emerging from these detail-focused considerations is that the principle of equal treatment in Poland appears generally ineffective. State authorities, predominantly the government ruling since 2015, have endeavoured to deprive anti-discrimination provisions (mostly enacted in the process of implementation of EU law) of any practical significance, whereas courts were neither eager nor able to resist this process, to put it delicately."

Poland has not adopted specific protections relating to health services orto punishing hate crimes and hate speech, and in fact, the government has pushed-back on Facebook's decision to ban the far-right party Confederation for "spreading Covid disinformation and hate speech" (Hartwell, 2022).At the same time, Article 18 of the Polish Constitution, which states that "Marriage, as a union of a man and a woman, shall be placed under the protection and care of the Republic of Poland," has been interpreted to ban same-sex marriage and would require that the legalization of same-sex marriage could only be accomplished through a constitutional amendment.Stated Gallo, Paladini, and Pustorino, (2014):

“The drafters of the 1997 Polish Constitution included a legal definition of a marriage as the union of a woman and a man in the text of the constitution in order to ensure that the introduction of same-sex marriage would not be passed without a constitutional amendment.”

Poland also does not currently recognize civil unions. By April 2020, 100 municipalities (including five voivodships or Polish administrative divisions), which accounted for nearly one-third of the country, informally declared themselves "LGBT-free zones" (Ciobanu, 2020).

Same-sex couples are unable to legally adopt in Poland. Furthermore, lesbian couples do not have access to IVF. While Poland's Supreme Administrative Court in 2018 ruled that a lesbian couple was able to register their 4-year-old boy as their child, in July of 2020, President Duda formally proposed an amendment to the Constitution that would ban adoption by a person in a same-sex relationship.

Not unsurprisingly, in a country that unofficially counts approximately 92% membership in the Roman Catholic Church, opposition to introducing same-sex marriages or civil unions comes from the church (Reuters, 2019; Luxmore, 2019), although the Church's role in Poland during the period of communism has not escaped scrutiny (Valladares, 2007).

As one of the flashpoints in Poland's continuing disagreement with the European Union, in June 2018, the European Court of Justice ruled that EU member states must grant married same-sex couples full residency rights where at least one partner is an EU citizen, and recognize the freedom of movement to members of the LGBT community (BBC, 2018).

In terms of the controversial use of “conversion therapy” in Poland, McLean (2020) reports that in August 2020, the Polish Episcopal Conference released a document which recommended the creation of counseling centers to help those who want to regain their sexual health and natural sexual orientation.

## 6. A Final Comment

In April 2019, PiS party chairman Jarosław Kaczyński called the LGBT rights movement a “foreign imported threat to the nation.” Could that signal yet another concerted attempt by official governmental structures to intimidate members of the LGBT community? However, in this case, the actions would not be clandestine or carried out by an essentially secret organization such as the Security Service, but *overtly* by Polish politicians, generally on the “right” of the spectrum of Polish politics, who speak openly of rolling back those protections currently in force in Poland and certainly in opposition to expanding the rights of the LGBT community to be free from intimidation, hate speech, or restrictions on the right to marry or to adopt children.

The lessons learned from studying the communist period in Poland—more specifically in viewing one of its more important institutions of repression, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, operating through the Security Service—as seen through the lives of two very different persons, Czesław Kiszczyk and Piotr Domalewski, and viewed through the prism of *Operation Hyacinth* and the character Robert Morawski, provide a unique insight into the recurring nature of the debate over LGBT rights in contemporary Poland, but from two wildly divergent perspectives.

Despite the fictional aspect of the crime at the center of the film *Operation Hyacinth*, the behavior of the Polish secret police was horrifying and traumatizing to gay men in the 1980s and should not have happened and should not happen again. But the current environment in Poland is fraught with signs that it might.

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