

*The Unequal Alliance: Explaining the Low Number of Military Coups in Communist States*

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**Abstract**

Why are military coups a rare occurrence in communist countries, despite the fact that democratic, and authoritarian regimes in the developing world have repeatedly demonstrated serious vulnerability to such way of seizing power? Although there is an abundance of scholarly works that concentrated on explaining the nature of military coups, none have delivered a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon identified above. This paper provides a broader examination of military coups by way of case studies, as well as the creation of new datasets on civil-military relations in communist party-states utilizing both primary and secondary sources. I identify exceptional patterns in the command structure of communist armies that sets them apart from armed forces in other types of political regimes. Specifically, I argue military coups only occur in communist countries when the military leadership perceives the party leadership as impotent and incapable of handling a prolonged domestic crisis driven by the masses that threatens the very survival of the regime.

Keywords: military coup, communist regimes, authoritarian stability.

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## Introduction

On 18 August 1991, a group of unexpected guests hurriedly arrived at Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's dacha at Cape Foros, Crimea. Sent by Gorbachev's opponents back in Moscow, members of the delegation urged the Soviet leader to take drastic measures and stabilize the crumbling political system. Their demands were clear; Gorbachev must support the declaration of a state of emergency for the whole country and relinquish all powers to the Soviet Vice President (Gorbachev, 1991, p. 20). The conversation ended after a heated exchange between the two parties, and the Moscow delegation left the dacha without getting what they wanted (Gorbachev, 1991, p. 21). The next day, troops under the direction of coup makers from the Soviet armed forces entered Moscow and secured strategic chokepoints. A *pronunciamento* was released via state television blaming Gorbachev's liberal reforms for the political upheaval and economic downturn that devastated the Soviet Union. The coup makers, now collectively speaking to the public as the State Committee for the State of Emergency in the USSR, better known by its Russian acronym GKChP, were confident that the coup would succeed without any problems. But no one thought that just three days later, the coup would collapse swiftly as it came, making it the second and last military coup ever to occur in a communist state.

The Soviet coup of August 1991 was significant because no one expected such incident to strike at the heart of the Soviet Union, the world's one and only communist superpower. The Soviet military was always understood to be the loyal defender of the state, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, or CPSU. Although there were reports on tensions between Gorbachev and the generals (Gelman, 1990, pp. 93-96), a coup spearheaded by the military against the Soviet leader was at the time truly unthinkable because military coups were almost non-existent in established communist states. From 1950 to 2014, there were a total of 481 coups around the world, and only nine occurred in communist states (Author's own tabulations; Powell & Thyne, 2011, p. 255; Powell & Thyne, 2015). This begs the question, why do military coups seldom occur in communist states; despite other regime types have repeatedly fallen victim to such way of seizing power? In this paper, I argue the established relations between the communist party and the military should be characterized as an "unequal alliance" where both parties, bond by their mutual interest in preserving the Leninist single party-state system commit themselves to an alliance with the communist party at the commanding post. Therefore, as long as the communist party is in charge, and its leaders making decisions favorable towards sustaining the party-state system, chances of a military coup that removes the party leader from power is unlikely. In addition, I argue military coups only occur in communist countries when the military leadership perceives the party leadership as impotent and incapable of handling a prolonged domestic crisis driven by the masses that threatens the very survival of the regime.

Country	Coup Date
South Yemen	20 March, 1968
Mozambique	17 December, 1975
Ethiopia	3 February, 1977
Angola	27 May, 1977
South Yemen	26 June, 1978
Poland	13 December, 1981
Grenada	14 October, 1983
Afghanistan	7 March, 1990
Soviet Union	19 August, 1991

**Figure 1. Coups that occurred communist states.**

Sources: Author's own tabulations; Powell & Thyne, 2011, p. 255; Powell & Thyne, 2015; "Freedom in," 2015.

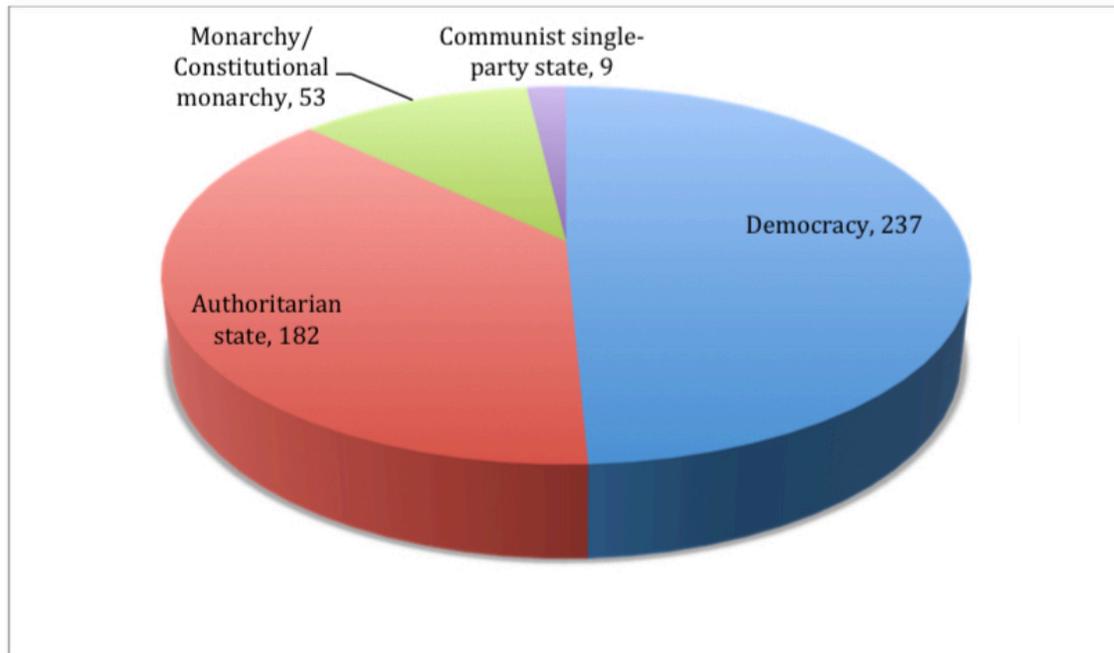
## Literature Review

Although several authors have written extensively on the topic of military coups, none have directly and adequately addressed the question of why there are a low number of military coups in communist countries. Edward Luttwak (1979), in his magnum opus *Coup d'État: A Practical Handbook* briefly examined how the armed forces are controlled in "socialist" states and "people's republics" (p. 115). In *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Military Coups*, Naunihal Singh, using the 1991 Soviet coup as a case study, concentrated more on the key factors determining the successful outcome of a coup. Other scholars like S.E. Finer and Amos Perlmutter explored the relations between the CPSU and the Soviet army but omitted from explaining the question posed above.

Nonetheless, the late Eric Nordlinger proposed a theory in an attempt to decipher how party-states control the armed forces. In *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments*, he conceptualized the "penetration model" as a way of controlling the military that differs from the traditional model (where members of the civilian elites are also the military elites) and the liberal model (a professional military that obeys the orders of the civilian government). Nordlinger (1977) succinctly explains the penetration

model as “Civilian governors obtain loyalty and obedience by penetrating the armed forces with political ideas (if not fully developed ideologies) and political personnel” (p. 15). In other words, the penetration model assumes the civilian governor as the more powerful party in the relationship, as it emphasized on the civilian governor’s ability to insinuate, and assert one’s control of the military. According to Nordlinger (1977), the penetration model is most popular in communist regimes, where official ideology and the loyalty to the communist party have been incorporated and internalized as part of the art of soldiery (p. 17).

Indeed, “the penetration model is a powerful one for buttressing civilian control” (Nordlinger, 1977, p. 17). Moreover, history has attested to the penetration model’s power in minimizing the numbers of military coups in communist countries. However, Nordlinger’s model does have its flaws. He for one assumes that the penetration is a unidirectional matter where the party has most, if not all the initiative. Such assumption simply discounts the military’s power to shape policy, and ignores the bidirectional exchanges, and the penetration of military influence into politics and society. Examples of this abound in the history of communist states. Despite having its ranks filled with political officers and secret agents from the internal security apparatus, the Soviet army seized opportunities to lobby (successfully on several occasions) and reduce the level of control imposed by the Party (Scott & Scott, 1984, pp. 258-266). After propelling the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) into power, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) played a significant role in both the political arena and society at large. National political campaigns were launched with the PLA at the forefront, and each generation of Chinese leader must win the PLA’s loyalty if he wants to rule in a secure environment (Kamphausen, Lai, & Tanner, 2014, pp. 414, 418). This however does not only apply to the two communist titans of Soviet Union and China, smaller states like Vietnam and Yugoslavia also have a military force that has been quite active in politics (Herspring & Völgyes, 1978, pp. 186-194; Adelman, 1982, pp. 68-70). Therefore, I believe Nordlinger’s penetration model is a great starting point in understanding civil-military relations in communist countries, but inadequate in illustrating the whole picture.



**Figure 2. Total number of coups from 1950 to 2014, shown according to regime types.**

Sources: Author's own tabulations; Powell & Thyne, 2011, p. 255; Powell & Thyne, 2015.

### **On the Unequal Alliance**

Building upon William Odom's symbiosis model of party-military relations, the best way to understand civil-military relations in communist countries is seeing it through the lenses of a mutually beneficial, yet at the same time unequal alliance. While the communist party asserts its absolute control over the military using a combination of political officers, propaganda, purse strings, promotion, and privileges, the military maintains its autonomy to a certain degree and benefited immensely from safeguarding the party-state system. This is the foundation of the alliance. The demise of the party-state system means the end of this symbiotic relationship where the military has enormous leverage vis-à-vis the civilian government as the guarantor of party power and the strongest defense against foreign and domestic enemies. Therefore, it is natural that the military would opt to keep the party in power instead of forcing a regime change that could well lead to uncertainty. In fact, when surveying the history of communist states, one notice a distinct pattern in which the armed forces, designed to defend the country from hostile foreign forces, is also used to suppress internal uprisings that pose a threat to the state. This clearly shows some of the domestic priorities of a communist state, and its military's commitment to upholding the regime's security in a volatile environment. After all, most of the military's top generals are staunch party stalwarts.

However, the military gets concerned when the party leadership no longer demonstrates a similar degree of commitment to the party-state system, especially in a situation when subterranean popular discontent manifests into open street demonstrations that prolongs

into a political crisis. An alliance is strong when both sides honor its terms. When the leader of an alliance becomes a passive actor, it only encourages the other member of the alliance to act more dominantly and restore the strength of the alliance. A gradual fragmentation of the party-state system, combined with weak and feeble political leaders sends an ominous message to the disciplined military leadership fearful of disorder and a possible disintegration of their own *esprit de corp*. Therefore, it is common to see coups only happen in communist states when there is a major political crisis threatening the system that is staffed with conciliatory political leaders. In the following paragraphs, I would test my hypothesis using case studies of the Polish coup of 1981 and the Soviet coup of 1991.

Before delving into the two cases, I would like to first define the term military coup to differentiate it from similar events such as palace coup, revolution, political assassination, purge, and armed uprising. I define military coup as **an action or a series of actions initiated and led by members of a country's armed forces with the aim of ousting the current government in power and replacing it with a military junta**. Judging by this definition, what occurred in Poland on 13 December 1981 and in the Soviet Union on 19 August 1991 are military coups because the military acted independently and initiated a series of actions that eventually led to the downfall (in the Soviet case, a temporary removal) of the existing government, and the prompt formation of a junta led by high-ranking officers belonging to the armed forces.

On the contrary, the Soviet military's involvement in the overthrow of Lavrentiy Beria, the secret police chief who succeeded Stalin as the leader of the Soviet Union cannot be considered a military coup because of the military's secondary role and its lack of operational independence in delivering the coup de grâce that eliminated Beria as the head of the ruling coterie. In this particular case, Nikita Khrushchev was the chief plotter who orchestrated the entire affair, not the Soviet generals (Knight, 1995, pp. 198-199). Moreover, the arrest of Beria did not bring down the entire government. Therefore, this case may be considered a palace coup, instead of a military coup.

Similarly, the moment when Romanian armed forces turned against Nicolae Ceausescu is another instance where the label of military coup cannot be attached. The military's decision to side with the Romanian protesters cannot be understood independently if not placed in the proper context, that is the Romanian Revolution of 1989. The main driving forces of the Romanian Revolution were the protesters on the streets voicing their grievances against the Ceausescu regime. The military's change of heart was largely due to the magnitude of the demonstrations and the fleeing of Ceausescu and his ruling cabal from the capital (Siani-Davies, 2007, pp. 125-126). Although the defection of the military signified a decisive turning point in a continuum of events that brought the collapse of the Ceausescu dictatorship, the military's secondary role in leading the Revolution makes the classification of military coup a difficult one in this case.

Among the eight communist states that experienced coups, the Soviet Union, and the Polish People's Republic (PPR) are the most representative of the Leninist governing system since with the exception of the small island nation of Grenada, the other six

developing world states that adopted Marxism-Leninism as their guiding ideology or the title of “people’s republic” never truly achieved stability to begin with, and were soon embroiled in drawn-out civil and foreign wars that prevented the consolidation of a Leninist government. That makes an analysis of why coups occurred in these countries especially difficult because too many factors besides the governing system are at play here. With that being said, what does the Polish and Soviet cases tell us about the proposed hypothesis? Does it support my claim that “military coups only occur in communist states when the military leadership perceives the party leadership as impotent and incapable of handling a prolonged domestic crisis driven by the masses that threatens the very survival of the regime?”

### **The Case of Poland**

For most of modern Polish history, the military has been the most respected institution because of Poland’s peculiar geopolitical situation. Caught between a resurgent Germany to the West and an imperialist Soviet Union to the East, the Polish military, although lacking behind Germany and Soviet Union in advanced technology and numerical superiority, still managed to serve as a deterrent against pressure from both sides. The liberation and subsequent subjugation of Poland towards the end of the Second World War fundamentally changed the role of the Polish military with regard to the state and society. No longer was the Polish military a guardian of national interests from foreign aggressors, it was restructured as a protector of the Soviet-backed Polish United Workers’ Party (PUWP) from disgruntled classes of the Polish population (Mitchta, 1990, p. 46). The communist PPR, forced upon the Poles by their Soviet overlord never gained genuine public support. Mass uprisings plagued the PPR’s existence. Poland, as a country of vital geopolitical value within the Soviet sphere, continued to be shaken by internal turmoil. Under the command of the PUWP, the Polish army was repeatedly used to quell domestic unrests.

The Polish military’s alliance with the Party faced its first trial by fire during the Poznań riots of 1956 that saw resentful workers taking to the streets in demand of bread (Mitchta, 1990, p. 50). With the Party’s orders, the military crushed the protests using brute force. In 1968, the military participated in the Warsaw Pact coalition that invaded Czechoslovakia before returning to the domestic battlefield to suppress another massive riot in 1970 (Mitchta, 1990, p. 68). The political settlement of the 1976 crisis averted another bloody military crackdown (Mitchta, 1990, p. 74), but the rise of Solidarity; an independent, nationwide trade union posed the greatest challenge to the PUWP. If the previous protests of 1956, 1970, and 1976 were less coordinated and limited in scale, the Solidarity strikes of late 1970s and early 1980s were highly disciplined and of profound national impact. In fact, when it came to signing-up new members, and mobilizing people to partake in street demonstrations, Solidarity outmatched the power of the PUWP by large margins (Kemp-Welch, 2008, p. 317). The grassroots power of Solidarity and its growing stature in Polish society made its demands hard to dismiss. In fact, Solidarity’s overwhelming strength forced the party leadership into negotiations where it must prepare to make concessions to the workers’ demand of better working condition and freedom of association. Fearful of losing control over the inflammable situation, the new

General Secretary of the PUWP, Stanisław Kania adopted a conciliatory stance vis-à-vis Solidarity and sought compromise (Paczkowski, Byrne, Domber, & Klotzbach, 2008, p. 245). But negotiations turned from weeks to months of deliberations. The Polish military, without the Party's directive, did not intervene and watched anxiously from the sidelines. Yet the crisis in Poland worried another party even more. Nervous that Poland's descent into near anarchy could trigger a domino effect in the Soviet bloc, the Kremlin leadership urged Kania to deal with Solidarity with an iron fist (Paczkowski, Byrne, Domber, & Klotzbach, 2008, p. 239). But when such pressuring came to nothing, the Soviets threw their weight behind General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense in charge of the armed forces (Paczkowski, Byrne, Domber, & Klotzbach, 2008, pp. 392-394). A career army man respected by the Soviet leadership (Paczkowski, Byrne, Domber, & Klotzbach, 2008, p. 270), Jaruzelski was a dyed-in-the-wool communist and a true believer in the Polish-Soviet alliance (Mitchta, 1990, pp. 61-62). On 18 October 1981 Kania was forced out of his post as the General Secretary of the Party. Jaruzelski took over and immediately began preparing for the imposition of martial law to end the crisis. On 13 December, before the cameras of national television, Jaruzelski announced the imposition of martial law in his typical cool and calm demeanor. A junta was formed to tackle the crisis facing the nation. Staffed with twenty-one high-ranking military officers, the Military Council of National Salvation replaced the normal functions of the government (Jaruzelski, 1985, pp. 30, 34). A few days after, the clampdown on Solidarity began with mass arrests across the country (Mitchta, 1990, pp. 132-133). Poland entered into the era of stratocracy.

### **The Case of the Soviet Union**

If the army of communist Poland had to be purged and remodeled along Soviet lines to make it a governing partner of the PUWP, then armed forces of the Soviet Union could trace its origin as the CPSU's confederate all the way back to the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Red Guards detachments, constituted primarily of armed factory workers, were indispensable in the Bolshevik's seizure of power on 7 November 1917 (Scott & Scott, 1984, pp. 2-3). The civil war that subsequently ensued made the Soviets realize the need for a professional army to face seasoned generals of the old Tsarist regime who commanded the opposing White Army. But the recruitment of officers, called "military specialist," became a source of concern for the Bolsheviks since most of these "specialists" received their education in Tsarist military academies, and fought for the Tsar during the First World War. Suspicious of their loyalty and commitment to the communist ideal, a system of control was instituted with the insertion of political commissars all the way down to the company level (Scott & Scott, 1984, p. 264).

Although the commissar's degree of authority fluctuated throughout history (from countersigning the corresponding military commander's orders during the Russian Civil War to mainly focusing on political education in the post-WWII period), it nevertheless remained a potent force in exerting party influence in the army until the implosion of the Soviet Union. Grouped under the command of the Main Political Administration (MPA), a department of the CPSU Central Committee, the main task of the commissar was to educate the soldiers on political matters, assess the unit commander's performance

according to specific political criteria, and identifying potential party members in addition to singling out political nonconformists (Brzezinski et al., 1954, pp. 9-11). Indeed, although the commissar's power declined as trust between the Party and the military began to cement with time, it still played a vital role in making sure that the entire army is staffed with politically reliable party faithful that will not conspire against the state.

To add another ring of protection against potential troublemakers, the KGB also has its agents planted within the military. The *osobyi otdel*, otherwise known as the OO was tasked with counterintelligence within the Soviet armed forces. Unlike the commissars, which may be considered as the visible eyes of the party given its presence among the Soviet soldiery, the OO was for the most time invisible and difficult to detect. Anyone could be an OO informant. In fact, not only the commanders, but also the commissars themselves had to conduct their daily routines under the watchful gaze of OO personnel (Brzezinski et al., 1954, pp. 54-70).

With such mechanisms in place, the Soviet military resembled in many ways the Soviet society where loyalty to the State was rewarded, and deviance from the officially sanctioned ideology was severely punished. Being a member of the Soviet armed forces carried many perks due to the amount of resources the army could access with ease. In a Spartan society like the Soviet Union, being an officer was a step closer to becoming a part of the elite that enjoyed a relatively comfortable lifestyle apart from the masses (Brzezinski et al., 1954, pp. 45-47). For most of its existence, the Soviet army exercised great influence on political decision-making. The Central Committee of the CPSU always reserved seats for the military top brass, and the Soviet high command's assessment was essential in formulating national policies (Gelman, 1990, p. 88).

But the alliance between the political leadership and the military leadership began to crack after Gorbachev came to power in 1985. Appalled by the rampant corruption in the military and determined to change the thoroughly militarized Soviet economy, Gorbachev embarked upon a series of reforms – arms reduction, force reduction, and transferring the control of the MPA to the state, just to name a few – that challenged the military's core interests (Odom, 2000, pp. 131, 214-215, 273-280). The generals were not happy with those moves. Moreover, other national policies pushed by Gorbachev, such as Glasnost, *Demokratizatsiya*, and Perestroika deeply shook the Leninist understructure of the Soviet Union that penalized free speech, rejected liberal democracy, and championed command economy. The overhaul of the system opened up the Pandora's box that simultaneously unleashed the forces of economic thievery, demand for political change, and ethnic nationalism (McClellan, 2014, pp. 143-146). The semblance of stability, forcefully backed up by the Party-military alliance for more than six decades was shattered after Gorbachev came to power.

The Soviet Union was in a state of perpetual crisis in its last years. Massive changes in the country made benefactors of the old system uncomfortable and they feared the unintended consequences of Gorbachev's radical reforms. The Soviet President's decision to sign the Union Treaty, which stipulated a further decentralization of power

proved to be the last straw that broke the camel's back. On 18 August, coup plotters in the Russian capital decided to send a delegation to Cape Foros, Crimea to negotiate with the Soviet leader for a solution to the crisis. They demanded Gorbachev hand over his powers to the Vice President and support the declaration of a state of emergency. Gorbachev strongly rebuffed members of the delegation and was placed under house arrest. The next day, a *pronunciamento* was issued on state television announcing a state of emergency had begun.

In interviews with the coup makers after its speedy termination, they all indicated that the main reason behind the coup was because of Gorbachev's bullheaded insistence on changing the Soviet society, in the process tanking the economy and creating instability that seriously threatened the survival of the regime (Bonnell, Cooper, & Freidin, 1994, pp. 56, 66). Even Yevgenii Shaposhnikov, the Commander of the Soviet Air Force who refused to join the coup admitted the common concerns that permeated the Soviet rank and file, "the [Soviet] Union was cracking, the armed forces were breaking apart and allying themselves with separate republics, and the economy was prey to chaos" (Bonnell, Cooper, & Freidin, 1994, p. 201). Others were even more critical and blunt when it comes to pointing out Gorbachev's errors. The Soviet Defense Minister Dimitrii Yazov, also the chief conspirator of the bungled coup d'état, confirmed that prior to the coup, private discussions were held among the Soviet top brass about the dire situation in the country, in particular "the disintegration of the Party, the economy, growing foreign debt, [and] impoverishment of the people" (Bonnell, Cooper, & Freidin, 1994, p. 57). The conclusion was that Gorbachev was to be blamed since "he had put distance between himself and the Party, ... [and] he had betrayed the army" (Bonnell, Cooper, & Freidin, 1994, p. 57). The last point is specially telling given the close partnership the Party and the army had enjoyed as rulers of the Soviet Union, which finally came apart amid the moribund years of that country spent in permanent crisis.

### **Analysis of the Two Cases**

When juxtaposed next to one another, the Polish coup of 1981 and the Soviet coup a decade later exhibit striking similarities with only minor differences. To begin, both countries' army enjoyed close relations with the ruling communist party. Although subordinated to the Party, the military's role as a keeper of communist power made it an indispensable ally of the government. The army therefore, fares quite well in this system, and luxuriates in an environment where political influence and access to precious resources was a privilege.

All began to change however, when a political crisis struck and the party leadership proved incapable of managing the situation. Specifically, Kania's indecision when it came to taking a tougher stance against Solidarity, and Gorbachev's liberal reforms that drew the ire of Soviet generals. Prolonged political crisis is, without a doubt bad news for any government, but such a development is especially troublesome in a communist state because it often involves indignant members of the underclass seeking not mere political reforms but the overhaul of the entire single party-state system. Inaction or propitiative actions by the political leadership during such dire straits worries the other half of the

alliance, i.e. the military, which holds the maintenance of stability as its number one priority. Thus, we see both coups occurring at a time when the Party is incapacitated, or seemingly unable to take any action to turn back the clock. When this happens, the military sees no other options but to take on the assertive role and mount a take over of the government to salvage the system from the edge of precipice.

Of course, there are differences between the Polish and Soviet cases. For one, the Polish colluders had to obtain Soviet support before executing the coup (Paczkowski, Byrne, Domber, & Klotzbach, 2008, pp. 473-474), while the Soviet generals had no need to request for any other party's permission (after all, the PPR was a Soviet satellite). Compared to the Soviet coup, which was conceived by senile bureaucrats, on some occasions in the midst of a drunken stupor (Bonnell, Cooper, & Freidin, 1994, pp. 58-59), the Polish coup was well planned ahead and carried out with precision. But since we are concerned more with the cause of the coups rather than the execution and outcome, these factors do not impact the validity of my hypothesis.

	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Soviet Union</b>
<b>Duration of domestic crisis</b>	July 1980 – December 1981 (>1 year).	c. 1986/1987 – 1991 (>4 years).
<b>Crisis powered by the masses</b>	Yes. Sustained nationwide strikes as a reaction to the government's decision to raise food prices.	Yes. Prolonged nationalist unrest as a reaction to liberal reforms under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.
<b>Coup planned and executed by high-ranking military officers to restore stability</b>	Yes.	Yes.

**Figure 3. Comparing key characteristics of the Polish and Soviet coup.**

Sources: MacEachin, 2000, p. 1; Beissinger, 2002, p. 73.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Communist militaries, as guarantors of stability and established interests have similar interests with militaries of other regimes. The reason behind the low number of military coups in communist countries is that the party, as the leader of the unequal alliance, is for the most part keen on maintaining stability and has no qualms in terminating a crisis situation with force, an unsparing character that coincides with the character of the military. Since the party's suprema is also the leader of the state and government, a resolute, authoritative party chief deters the military from intervening via a coup. Vice versa, a weak and incapable leader unable to deal with forces trying to overturn the entire political system forces the military to take action and save the alliance. In summary, the

party and the military are both benefactors of the communist party-state system. Being opportunistic political entities, they will safeguard the system from collapsing as long as it still has some value to hold on to. And if the party is hesitant to take on this role, the military will gladly rise to the occasion.

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