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# The Polish Resistance Movement in the Second World War

Chester M. Nowak



The European Resistance Movement provides us with one of the more engaging and captivating stories of the Second World War, and the Polish Resistance Movement has a central place in that story. Yet, the history and the struggles of the Polish Resistance are not well known. Few people are aware, therefore, of the Polish Underground's reports about the German extermination of Jews and about German preparations for the invasion of the Soviet Union; the penetration of the German rocket center at Peenemunde by Polish agents, or the fact that Poles delivered into Allied hands the plans and actual parts of German V-2 rocket engines. Even many professional historians remain unfamiliar with such facts. No study of European resistance during the Second World War which does not include the resistance in Poland can be considered complete. As Colonel Harold B. Perkins of the British SOE pointed out, the Resistance in Poland was "...the largest and best organization in Europe" (Nowak, *Courier From Warsaw*, p. 236). But at the time few people knew much about it.

After their defeat by the German Army, and the subsequent occupation of Poland by the might of the German Reich and that of the Soviet Union, the Poles responded in a most natural way. The whole of the Polish society went underground, and within this clandestine realm they created a Secret State which took control of the resistance against the occupying powers.

The genesis of this Resistance followed the usual patterns of spontaneity and command. In a society whose state institutions are destroyed by a violent act of war and occupation, any resistance must initially be a spontaneous one. Under such circumstances, groups of individuals tied by some previous common bonds -- be they prewar membership in social, fraternal, or political organizations, or more recent wartime experiences -- such aggregates of indivi-

duals formed clandestine groups which shaped their own goals and activities. It is here within the nature and the dynamics of these early secret organizations that we find the source of the variety and complexity of both the resistance organizations and their clandestine activities. In Poland this spontaneous aspect of resistance in its scope and intensity soon reached the level of a revolutionary mass movement that was unique to Poland. Hence, writers and artists organized to carry on literary and artistic activities forbidden by the occupying authorities. Actors performed forbidden plays and musicians played forbidden music in private and in public concerts. Writers produced hundreds of books which were published, printed, and distributed by the underground. Journalists too published in the underground press, and during the years 1939-1945 there were more than 2,000 underground papers and periodicals published in German occupied Poland; some of them were published continuously through the war in large editions. Polish educators ran a whole system of secret secondary schools based on a prewar curriculum which the Germans considered too elitist for a "sub-human" species such as the Poles. In Warsaw alone there were two secret universities and one polytechnic institute continuing their educational functions under the German noses.

Since the majority of the officers of the prewar Polish Army were either in German and Russian prisons or abroad, there was a shortage of trained military personnel, and the underground had to train most of its own cadres. Consequently, all through the war there were numerous officers' candidate schools, non-commissioned officers' schools, and other military schools training the military cadre for the clandestine army. Even the scouts got involved, and from the very beginning performed "little sabotage," which included such activities as writing anti-German slogans on walls and destroy-

ing German property. Individually these activities may have seemed unimportant, but in their totality they had a positive impact upon the Poles and made the Germans feel unwelcomed and insecure.

Political parties of all persuasions also went underground. They published their own presses and journals and formed their own military detachments. By the end of 1939, at the very beginning of the German and Soviet occupation, there were approximately 140 such secret groups and organizations. This spontaneous process continued throughout the war, and as one group was liquidated another took its place. We must remember that all of this occurred under the most difficult and strenuous conditions of clandestine operations, and under the watchful eyes of a cruel occupier who had at his disposal the mobilized machine of a totalitarian state. All of these activities were, of course, *Verboten* and punishable by a trip to a concentration camp -- or death.

The growth and the diversification of such spontaneous activities and organizations made unification an important early objective of the movement. This unification was to be achieved by the command aspect of the resistance, which brought order into the chaos of spontaneity by providing the movement with the structural means for the unification of its actions, organization, and plans. What we are witnessing here is a healthy reaction of a society in a state of war responding to the conditions of foreign occupation that called for a total mobilization and total resistance. Interestingly, many historians of the Resistance Movement seem to have missed this point and the obvious fact that the major objective of the Resistance was to resist, and to resist by all the means at its disposal. Thus in Poland, resistance included the whole of society which reacted spontaneously in a variety of ways to a common danger. It was a society which was directed by a set of common values and



rules strongly entrenched by a long tradition of national resistance. These traditional values and rules were in turn reinforced by the underground courts and the legitimate structures of the Underground State.

In the Polish case, the source for the legitimacy of the Underground State was the fact that both the Resistance and the Polish Government abroad were recognized by the majority of the Poles as the *bona fide* legal extension of the prewar Polish State. Because there was no question of legitimacy, the differing political orientations of most resistance groups did not hinder the process of unification. Consequently, by 1944 the resistance movement in Poland was successful in unifying most of its military units under a single command and in consolidating most of its political activities under the central authority of the Secret State.

Politically, the process of unification and centralization had begun in February of 1940 with the formation of a Political Coordinating Committee (*Polityczny Komitet Porozumiewawczy*, PKP). By 1944 the PKP had unified most of the political groups, with the exception of the Communists and a small radical faction of the National Democrats who refused to join the unified resistance organization. Thus, the formation of the PKP in 1940 was the real beginning of the Polish Underground State. It was headed by a Delegate, who by 1944 held the rank of a Deputy-Premier within the Polish Government of National Unity in London. The first of the Delegates was the prewar Speaker of the Polish Parliament, Cyryl Ratajski; and the last Delegate, after Stanislaw Jankowski, was Stephan Korbonski, who today resides in Washington, D.C.

It must be understood, however, that under clandestine conditions, this process of unification and centralization was a gradual one. But in the end, in Poland the resistance movement became the most unified and the most centralized in Europe. It was the only resistance organization with all the comprehensive infrastructure of a legitimate state, ranging from civic and civil institutions on both the central and local levels, to a well organized military structure.

By the end of the September Campaign, just before the Polish Government left the Polish territory during the days of September 17-18 of 1939, Marshal Eduard Rydz-

Smigly, the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army, appointed General Michael Tokarzewski to organize the underground resistance in both parts of occupied Poland. Colonel Stefan Rowecki became his Chief-of-Staff. Later, Rowecki was to be the first commander of the unified underground army, which by 1942 was known as the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK).

The first of the underground military units formed was named the Service for the Victory of Poland (*Sluzba Zwyciestwu Polsce*, SZP). But it was Tokarzewski's Union for Armed Struggle (*Zwiazek Walki Zbrojnej*, ZWZ), organized in November of 1939, which became the vehicle for the unification and centralization of the underground detachments. And in February of 1942, General Wladyslaw Sikorski, the Prime Minister of the Polish Government in London, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army abroad, renamed the ZWZ the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK). By that time the ZWZ had about 100,000 men, who by 1943 were joined by

40,000 men of the Peasant Battalions (*Bataliony Chlopskie*, B.Ch.) of the Polish Peasant Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* PSL). Another 40,000 troops of the Peasant Battalions joined the Home Army in the spring of 1944. Simultaneously the majority of the 70,000 nationalist troops of the National Democratic Party also joined the Home Army. But some detachments belonging to the Radical Faction of the Nationalist Party would not place themselves under the unified command of the Home Army. The Polish Workers' Party (*Polska Partia Robotnicza*, PPR -- the wartime name of the Polish Communist Party, which earlier in 1938 was dissolved by the Comintern) with its Peoples' Army (*Armia Ludowa*, AL) also stayed outside the Secret State. In addition, the detachments of the Polish Peoples' Army (*Polska Armia Ludowa*, PAL), which was under the control of a radical left-wing socialist faction, also refused to unite with the rest of the Resistance. Although the Communists and the Radical Socialists were neither politically nor militarily powerful, they were supported by the Soviet Union. The Polish Socialist Party (*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*, PPS) and their military units, however, were an integral part of the centralized Resistance.

By the spring of 1944 the Home Army (AK) had about 350,000 men who for a clandestine army were not badly trained. But they were poorly armed. The Poles had access only to arms they were able to hide after the 1939 campaign and those captured from the Germans. The British dropped some supplies through the war, but they were helpful only in small sabotage activities and were inadequate for arming such a large number of men. It seems that the military potential of the Polish Home Army was never understood by the Allies. In fact, in early 1944 at a meeting in Washington held between the American authorities and the then Prime Minister of the Polish Government in London, Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, and the Chief of Operations of the Home Army, General Stanislaw Tatar, a final and irrevocable decision was made not to include the Polish Home Army in Allied Operational Plans. By that time the die was cast. Earlier, as a result of the Teheran Conference of 1943, it was decided that Poland and Eastern Europe were to be left in the Soviet sphere of influence. Thus, at the 1944 meeting in







Platoon 227 B.S. of the Home Army (AK) in which the author served during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. (Note author designated by circle.)

Washington the Americans were quite adamant about not giving in to the Polish demands for large scale military assistance for the Home Army. Once more, as in 1939, the Poles were abandoned by their allies and left to face formidable obstacles alone. And there was no hope for help from the Soviet Union either. By then the Soviets had broken relations with the Polish Government over the issue of the missing 10,000 Polish officers who earlier in 1940 had been murdered by NKVD (the Soviet Secret Police) in the Katyn Forest Massacre. Furthermore, the Russians viewed the non-communist Polish Underground as their political and class enemy. And when in 1944 the Red Army entered the former Polish territories, which the Soviet considered as their own since the Soviet-German Agreement of 1939, the Russians refused to cooperate with the Home Army and treated it as an enemy. Some members of the Home Army were executed, some forced to join Polish units under the Soviet command, and some were sent to Siberia. Yet, all that the Poles wanted was to be left alone as masters of their own home, free to govern themselves, and free to determine their own destiny.

During the war the main military objective of the Polish Home Army was to prepare itself for a general uprising at the final stages of the war, to be carried out behind the German lines in support of Allied and Soviet operations. Through the war all plans and training of the Home Army were directed toward this general

uprising, known by its cryptonym *Burza* (Tempest).

The interim military objectives were devoted to self-defense, sabotage, and intelligence work. The self-defense operations of the Underground were responsible for the liquidation of about 6,000 German functionaries. The intelligence work of the Polish Underground was extensive and reached beyond the borders of Poland; and its contributions to the war efforts were not small, but are not well known.

The sabotage was carried out under the Directorate for Sabotage (*Kierownictwo Dywersji*, KeDyw), which up to June 1944 alone was responsible for the destruction of 1167 railroad petroleum cars, 6930 railroad engines, 19,058 railroad cars, 4326 cars and trucks, 600 telephone and electric lines, and the blowing up of 443 trains and 732 transports. These figures do not include the damage inflicted upon the German forces by the Partisan Units, the Tempest Operation, and the Warsaw Uprising. The sabotage actions cost the resistance forces 62,000 men killed; civilian losses are not included.

The best known and most dramatic episode of the Polish resistance was the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. It was aimed at the liberation of the Polish capital so that the Poles could act in their own country as hosts to the advancing Soviet armies. The Russians and their communist allies, who initially called for such an uprising, were to condemn it as an adventurous act hostile to the Soviet Union. Marshal Stalin for exam-

ple wrote to President Roosevelt denouncing the Polish insurgents as a "group of criminals who have embarked on the Warsaw adventure in order to seize power..." (Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p. 130).

The uprising was designed to last three days until the Red Army, already at the Warsaw suburbs, would enter the city. Instead the fighting lasted for sixty-three days, from August 1st to October 3rd. At Stalin's order the Red Army stopped its advance, and Warsaw and its people were sacrificed to the Germans. The halting of the Soviet Army was not based on military grounds, as is still claimed by Soviet historians. Rather it was basically a political decision aimed at the destruction of the Polish Underground. Even later when the Red Army finally reached the other side of the Vistula River and gained control of the eastern suburbs of Warsaw, the Russians extended only sporadic help which merely prolonged the agony, and did not insure victory. Earlier, the Western Allies had reluctantly flown-in limited supplies in planes manned by Polish pilots and Allied volunteers, most of them from South Africa and New Zealand; but their losses were extremely high. On September 18 the Russians finally permitted the USAAF to fly a large sortie, flown by the planes from the 390th Bomb Group. Most of the needed supplies landed on German positions.

As a result of the sixty-three days of fighting Warsaw was destroyed, and what remained was burned and blown up by the Germans on a direct order of Adolph Hitler. In the end the Warsaw Insurgents lost over 20,000 men killed and wounded; 16,000 of the soldiers became POWs, including the staff of the Home Army and its commander, General T. Bor-Komorowski. About 5,000 of the troops escaped. The losses among the civilian population of the city were equally high. Over 250,000 civilians were dead. Fifty thousand were killed in mass executions, and sixty thousand were sent to German concentration camps. Half a million were shipped to labor camps in Germany, and another half million were left homeless and were dispersed. The Germans lost 310 tanks and armored vehicles, 340 trucks and cars, 22 artillery pieces, three planes, and over 30,000 men killed.

The rest of the Home Army outside of Warsaw continued to fight under the plans of Operation Tempest, but by then they



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knew that their cause was lost. Now, they fought only for posterity. By February of 1945, after the Russians had overrun most of Poland, the Underground Army was officially dissolved, but many continued to fight. Many of the Home Army troops were disarmed by the Russians and shipped to Siberia. And in March of 1945 the leaders of the Polish Secret State were arrested and taken to Moscow, where in June of 1945 they were put on trial before a Soviet court and condemned to Russian prisons. Back at home former members of the Underground -- over a million of them -- were shipped to Soviet concentration camps of the infamous Gulag Archipelago. Most of them never returned home.

The Second World War cost the Poles a great deal in human and material sacrifices. Most of the country was destroyed, and as a result of the German and Soviet policies of extermination the Polish losses were enormous. Over twenty percent of the population was killed. Two and a half million Polish Jews alone were killed by the Germans in the ovens of Auschwitz and other places of execution. It must be remembered that Poland became the most decimated country in Europe, and these losses were inflicted upon Poland by both the Germans and the Russians.

After the war the Russians and their ideological followers attempted to deny the very existence of a viable Resistance in Poland. For the last forty years they have tried to denigrate the memories of the Polish Underground State, and to defame the wartime sacrifices of the Polish people. They claim now that the country without a Quisling was a country of Quislings; that the Poles, who fought the Germans with such a fanatic persistence, fought them the least. This kind of propaganda was not well received by the Polish people, and in fact it had a reverse effect. The Poles took it as an insult and as a denial of their wartime sacrifices, freely placed upon the collective altar of human freedom. Today in Poland the interest in the heroic deeds of the wartime Resistance is greater than ever before.

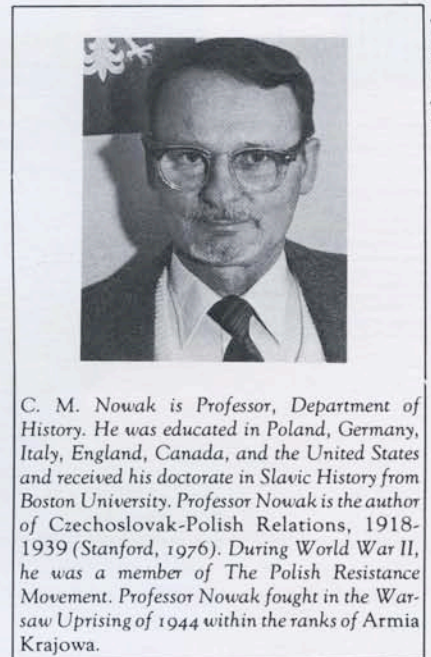
However, forty years of propaganda can leave its marks, and we can even see it in such supposedly scholarly works as those of the young sociologist Jan Gross, and in the vitriolic anti-Polish work of amateurish historians like Shmuel Krakowski. Furthermore, the 1985 review of Krakowski's

book in the American Historical Review, and the ensuing correspondence, reveals how little American historians seem to know about the matter. Of course, American unfamiliarity with everything Polish or East European is well known by now, and it is best represented by the "joy-fool" acceptance of the wartime German propaganda about the Polish cavalry charging German tanks. This story, by the way, is still being repeated in the American press and in American schoolrooms today! The answer to the question why such stories are so easily accepted by some might provide us with food for thought, and might also provide us with some insights into the American psyche. After all, attitudes like this seem to have a long and continuous history in America. And after the war -- just as before -- Poland and the Poles were seldom presented in a positive light, be it in American press, literature, or films. The Poles were usually presented -- if not as outright stupid -- at least as dull, slovenly, and untrustworthy. Such negative stereotypes serve to dehumanize people. That is how the Nazis arrived at their ideas of subhuman races. Once these racist teachings were accepted it was easier for Germans to accept as morally acceptable all atrocities against such "subhuman" groups as the Jews and the Poles.

Stereotypes like these were also common during the war, even in some surprising quarters. During the war leading western politicians loved to refer to Poland as the "Inspiration of Nations" and as "a country without a Quisling." However, their true feelings were quite different. President Roosevelt, for example, never was an admirer of the Poles. This is best illustrated by

his reference to Poland as a country which was "a source of trouble for over five hundred years..." (Churchill, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p. 372). And Winston Churchill had similar views of Poland as a country which was "Glorious in revolt and ruin; squalid and shameful in triumph. The bravest of the brave, too often led by the vilest of the vile! And yet there were always two Polands; one struggling to proclaim the truth and the other grovelling in villainy" (Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, p. 323). Now, if this was true of Poland, would not such a description fit everybody else?

No wonder that with such attitudes at Teheran and Yalta both Roosevelt and Churchill so easily condemned Poland and the whole of Eastern Europe to a new tyranny and slavery. But were their actions right, and were they just? These are the questions that have puzzled many ever since. And on that subject General Bor-Komorowski was to write after the war: "To conduct world peace at the expense of injustice and wrong done to small nations is a dangerous experiment. It can only result in acute political tensions and a perpetual smouldering of grievances -- a most precarious state of international affairs, so clearly demonstrated by our present times" (Komorowski, *The Secret Army*, p. 396).



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