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A Bitter Victory: The Fate of the Polish Armed Forces in the West after the Second War, 1945-1949

(Summary)

The fate of the Polish Armed Forces in the West after the Second War was a dramatic one, and one that they did not deserve. This monograph is an attempt to reconstruct that fate and record it for future generations. It was the fate of soldiers who, from the first day of the conflict on 1 September 1939, remained loyal allies of the Western democracies. However, as a result of decisions made at the Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam conferences, they became losers and victors simultaneously. The legally constituted civil and military authorities of the Polish Republic in exile had always directed their efforts to securing the victory of the anti-Hitler coalition, in the hope that this would open the path to a free and independent Poland.

In July 1945, the British and American governments recognized the Warsaw government – the Provisional Government of National Unity – which had existed for only few days and was dominated by communists. This decision determined once and for all the status of the legally constituted authorities of the Polish Republic. It meant the rejection of the constitutional, allied Government of the Polish Republic. The immediate consequence of this decision was – as far as the British government was concerned – that the leading Polish authorities in exile lost the right to carry out their duties. Authorities affected were the President of the Republic of Poland, the Commander-in-Chief, the Government of the Polish Republic, and the Minister of Defence. As a consequence, command over the Polish Armed Forces in the West was assumed by the British. They wished to dispose of the Polish Army in the West as quickly as possible. In July 1945, this consisted of 230 000 troops, and in December 1945 of around 250 000.

Because Poland now fell within the Soviet sphere of influence Poles in the West were faced with having to answer the dramatic question – to return or not to return to Poland.

The dramatic situation of Polish soldiers in the West was made more so by the policy of the British Government to dispose of its recent ally. The Provisional Government of National Unity officially declared itself ready to take all soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West, with only some exceptions. However, the Warsaw government, in

reality, did a great deal to make sure that as few soldiers as possible returned to Poland, especially before the first post-war elections in the country. The communists showed particular hostility towards soldiers of General Anders's Second Polish Corps, which had been saved from Russia. Source materials indicate that the communists' primary aim was not the repatriation of the Polish Armed Forces in the West, but their liquidation. They also wished to disperse the soldiers, for preference in countries outside Europe.

To the great disappointment and concern of the British, the matter of the repatriation of soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West proved to be a difficult process and one that could not be quickly concluded. Despite officially declaring full support for the process of repatriation, the Warsaw government worked against it. Communist terror in Poland and falsified election results made a return from the West to Poland impossible for thousands of Poles, including soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces and their families. Large numbers of soldiers of the Second Polish Corps, saved from transportation into the depths of Soviet Russia, rejected repatriation; they had no wish to renew their acquaintance with the NKVD.

The British government quickly realised that the Provisional Government of National Unity – despite official declarations urging return – was in reality doing everything to ensure that as few soldiers as possible of the Polish Armed Forces returned to Poland. That was also the interpretation of the Warsaw government's policy on the part of Poles who recognised the Government of the Republic of Poland abroad. Here one can point to the declaration of 9 August 1945, which was characteristic for the policy of the Provisional Government of National Unity. This declaration contains an ambiguous formulation of its desire that all soldiers return as soon as possible, with the exception of antidemocratic and fascist elements. Of course, the criterion for making such a judgment belonged exclusively to the Warsaw government. Other examples of the ways in which the Provisional Government of National Unity blocked repatriation were the curious and perfidious demand of the Warsaw government that the British transfer command of all the Polish Armed Forces in the West to the former Red Army general Karol Świerczewski, and also its taking Polish citizenship away from five generals and several high ranking officers of the Polish Army in the West.

The British government refused to transfer command over the Polish Armed Forces in the West. The communists used this refusal as an excuse to issue a declaration on 14 February 1946 withdrawing recognition of the Polish Armed Forces as part of the Polish Army. In this situation the British government decided to conduct the demobilization of soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West who refused repatriation. They decided to do this through preparing them for civilian life within the framework of the Polish Resettlement Corps, which existed from September 1946 to September 1949. Signing up for the Polish Resettlement Corps did not make repatriation or emigration (re-emigration) impossible. One should note that the British government could not tolerate the further existence of the Polish Armed Forces in the West, above all because of the politicisation of the problem by the Warsaw government, and thus by Moscow, but also because of the difficult internal situation in Great Britain.

The Polish authorities abroad were deprived of any possibility of determining the fate of the Polish Armed Forces in the West, and had to accept the decisions of the British government. Therefore they did not actively protest against the British policy of *fait accompli* – withdrawing recognition from them, the decision to demobilise the Polish Armed Forces in the West, and creating the Polish Resettlement Corps even before elections in Poland. (The Warsaw government postponed elections to the *Sejm* to January 1947, and falsified the results.) The powerful elite within Polish emigré circles realised that they could under no circumstances undertake actions that would worsen their already difficult relations with the Western democracies.

Communist terror tactics in Poland meant that the majority of soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West and their families decided, against their will, to remain abroad, and to bear the heavy load of exile. Fate was not kind to those who opted for repatriation. About 105,000 soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West returned to Poland, the majority of them soldiers who had earlier been forced to serve in the Wehrmacht. All were persecuted, many thrown into prison, and others executed.

In *General Anders and the Soldiers of the Second Polish Corps* (1997), the American scholar Harvey Sarnier writes: “The fate of Poland and its citizens was being disposed of almost as if Poland was a defeated country rather than a loyal ally of the Western democracies.”

The eloquent, symbolic sign of the fate of the Polish Armed Forces in the West after the Second War is their absence from the Victory Parade on 8 June 1946 in London.

Translated by David Malcolm