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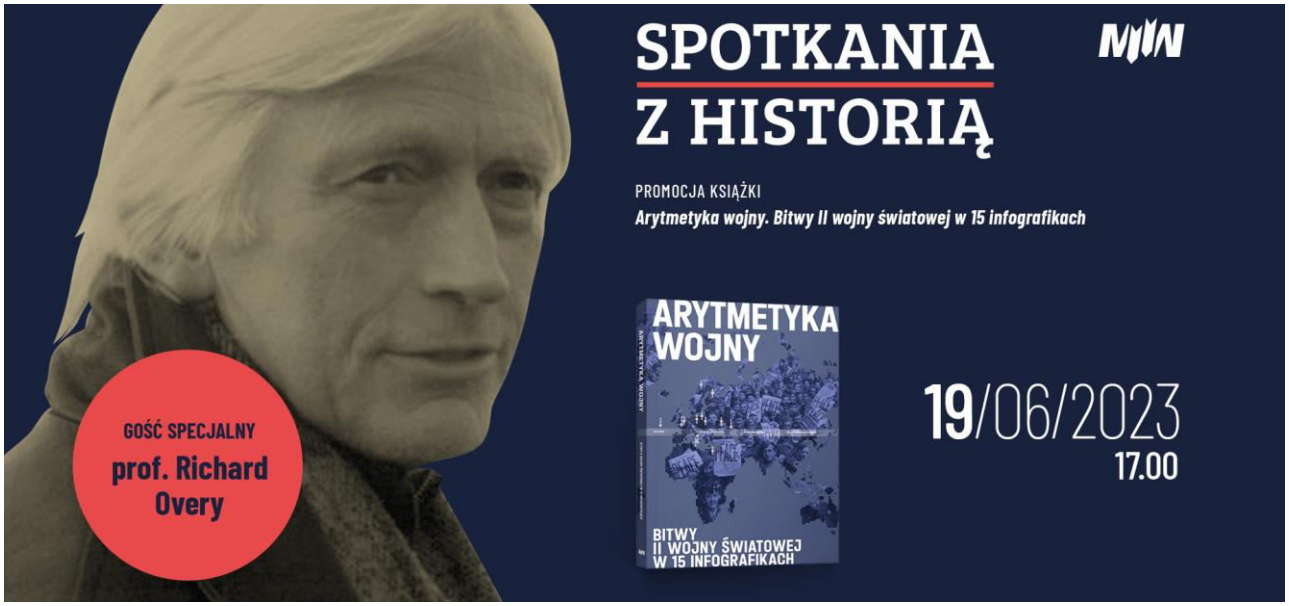
An Awkward Guest? The Western Allies and Poland in World War II



The starting point for any discussion of Poland's role alongside the Western Allies in World War II can be found in the unexpected decision by the British government to offer Poland unilaterally a guarantee to protect its sovereignty, followed shortly by a similar guarantee from the French government. To make Poland an ally of Britain and France was in effect accidental. For the two Western powers, Poland had previously been regarded with distrust as a potential ally of Hitler's Germany and disliked for its authoritarian politics. Neville Chamberlain, Britain's prime minister, announced the guarantee because faulty intelligence information had suggested that Poland might be invaded by Germany within weeks of the occupation of Prague in March 1939. The guarantee was given not so much to support Polish resistance to German demands, as to give Hitler a clear indication that his policy of imperialistic expansion had to stop.

Despite Polish pleas for financial assistance and modern weapons, Britain and France provided very little. As is now well-known, Anglo-French strategic planning for a possible war in 1939 accepted that Poland could be given little assistance if Germany invaded and would have to be reconstituted after German defeat. The rough timetable for victory over Germany was three years, indicating that the West expected to fight the same kind of war as they had between 1914 and 1918, bottling Germany up and eroding the German will to continue the war. Although the French army commander, Maurice Gamelin, had made a half-hearted promise that French forces would attack the Germans at least two weeks after the declaration of war, the promise was never redeemed. There was no desire on the part of the two Western allies to fight alongside the Polish armed forces if war broke out.

Much Western historical writing largely ignores the significance of Polish resistance and plays down the failure to give Poland assistance. There is even an argument current today that it was an 'unnecessary war' because Poland should have accepted German demands, a view that had been supported in some circles in London and Paris before September 1939. Yet Poland was fighting, as the British historian Roger Moorhouse has emphasised in the first full-scale English-language account of the campaign, the 'first to fight', and it did so to the best of its ability without Western help. Once Poland was defeated and divided between the two totalitarian dictatorships, there was the question of what to do with an awkward ally that no longer existed as a state. Polish forces that escaped to the West were to be reorganised to assist the Western Allies, reversing the situation of 1939, when the Allies should have been assisting Poland.

Both the French and the British found it difficult to integrate Polish forces into their own wartime army and air force. Polish army units were trained and armed with antiquated equipment too late and with little enthusiasm in order to help stem the German defeat of France. They were housed in barracks little better than an internment camp. Most of the two divisions sent to fight in June were

captured by the Germans. The remaining 19,000 Poles were transferred to Britain by the Royal Navy, but there remained great uncertainty about what to do with soldiers and airmen who were evidently allies but whose status was unclear. The Royal Air Force was at first reluctant to recruit and integrate Polish pilots for the Battle of Britain, partly because of the language problem, but the fear that the Luftwaffe was much more powerful than was in fact the case persuaded the RAF leadership to activate Polish squadrons within the British system. Again, it is well-known that the Polish airmen displayed an exceptional and effective aggression, earning the merit of being the highest scoring units in the battle. Churchill thought each Pole was worth at least four Frenchmen; the commander of RAF Fighter Command thought the ratio was ten to one. At the same time a Polish government-in-exile was set up in London, which held a precarious existence in British eyes and was divided politically. When the Soviet Union became one of the Allies in June 1941, the British government had to overlook Soviet responsibility for seizing half of Poland in 1939, leaving the London Poles as ‘awkward guests’. The Anglo-Soviet treaty signed in May 1942 did not directly endorse Soviet ambitions to retain what had been seized in 1939, but the alliance made it difficult for the Polish government to insist that Britain honour its pledge to restore pre-war Polish territory.

For Britain, and from December 1941 the United States, Poland was a secondary issue when compared with the priority to defeat and turn back German, Italian and Japanese empire-building. Polish soldiers who had made their way to the Middle East in 1939-40 were useful additions to manpower for the war in North Africa (there were very few British divisions, but divisions from Australia, New Zealand, India, Poland, and later South Africa). Polish forces were under British command, although the Polish government-in-exile exercised a nominal sovereignty over them. Many of the Polish soldiers and airmen must indeed have wondered why they were fighting to defend Tobruk against a mainly Italian army, with whom they were not formally at war, when they wanted to engage with the German enemy in Europe. When Polish deportees were allowed by Stalin to leave the Soviet Union, they too ended up in the Middle East, where the British debated

what to do with the influx of potential new soldiers. The so-called ‘Anders Army’ was the result, giving Polish forces much more sense of national identity, but still leaving them hostage to the strategy of the Western Allies, over which Poles were allowed no effective involvement. If Poland was an ally, it was not treated as an equal. The Anglo-American strategic decision-making involved only the two major powers, with Canada occasionally invited too. Like China in the Asian war, allies regarded as juniors were not expected to participate

The Western Allies were also aware that for the Soviet ally, Poland’s future was a difficult question to address as long as the priority was the defeat of the European Axis. The reaction of the West to the German discovery of the mass graves in the Katyn forest exemplified the problem. Although the British and American governments always suspected that this was a Soviet crime, for which they possessed their own intelligence information, nothing was to be gained by undermining the joint commitment to fighting Hitler by blaming the Soviet ally. Even later, at the Nuremberg Tribunal, the British and American prosecution teams were reluctant to admit openly that they knew this was a Soviet responsibility, even when evidence emerged in court from the German defence attorneys. The Western view was to accept the Soviet version, or risk a major crisis for the joint prosecution case. Up to the 1980s, the official British government position was not to acknowledge Soviet responsibility. The Western desire not to alienate Stalin also meant treating the government-in-exile cautiously during the last years of the war, from fear that the Soviet side would react negatively to any commitments made about the Polish future. The Western priority was to keep the Soviet Union as a wartime and post-war partner, despite the evident fault lines between them.

Whatever the ambivalence in Western attitudes to Poland, Polish forces continued to fight with distinction and bravery in the major theatres of war. The *Arithmetic of War* chronicles that contribution, at El Alamein, in the invasion of Sicily, and in the long and arduous campaign along the Italian peninsula, culminating in the heroic storming of the peak at Monte Cassino in May 1944.

Even that success was compromised by British insistence that a Union Jack flag should be hoisted alongside the white and red Polish flag on the ruins of the Cassino abbey. In the invasion of France, the Polish 1st Armoured Division, of 13,000 men, under Canadian command was landed in August 1944 to help trap the retreating German armies. Polish forces played a distinguished role in the effort to block the disorganised German retreat, and had they been fully supported by the US army coming from the south, might have completed the encirclement and capture of the entire German army in western France at Falaise.

In the long pursuit of the German armies across France, Polish forces were sidelined to clearing the pockets of German resistance along the north French coast and then into Belgium and the Netherlands, but by this stage there existed a real hope that the imminent defeat of Hitler's Germany would open the way to a restoration of Polish sovereignty and territorial integrity. This was, after all, the reason that Polish soldiers and airmen had fought for four years against the common enemy, even if the British government had made no such firm commitment. On the Soviet side, there were Polish forces in the Red Army too - the First Polish Army - who also hoped to restore a sovereign Poland, but only the version in territory and politics that suited Stalin and his pro-Soviet Polish provisional government.

The future of Poland was finally negotiated at the highest level when the leaders of the Grand Alliance, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt met first at Tehran in November 1943, then at Yalta in February 1945. The issue was not debated openly at Tehran, but by the time of the second conference, the Red Army was on the point of recapturing the whole of pre-war Polish territory. At Yalta S\\talin had no intention of returning to Polish sovereignty the areas seized in 1939, and Churchill and Roosevelt reluctantly endorsed their ally's former aggression. Stalin too had no intention of allowing the Western Allies, now joined once again by France following its liberation, to share in the reestablishment of Poland or to prevent the replacement of the London Polish

government-in-exile by the Poles on the ‘Lublin Committee’, who planned to democratise Poland in the Soviet sense of the term.

Much has been written about the failure of Roosevelt and Churchill to stand up to Stalin and to demand a renewed Polish state, able to determine its own political future, but there was in truth little that they could do about it once the Red Army was in occupation. The West had to avoid a public rift between the three major allies to ensure that the Soviet Union would later assist in defeating Japan and establishing a new global order. In Austria it later proved possible to turn back Soviet influence, but for Stalin a pro-Soviet, communist Poland was essential to the Soviet Union’s long-term security. The existence of the atomic bomb made no difference, since the American government would never have sanctioned the threat of its use against the Soviet ally in order to deter Stalin from his Polish strategy.

Poland in its pre-war form was abandoned by the West, as it had been in 1939. At the Nuremberg Tribunal, no mention was made of the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland. Indeed, a map of German aggression drawn up by the American prosecution team left blank the area occupied by the Soviet Union with the caption ‘jumping-off point for further German aggression’. Although the term genocide was coined by a Polish lawyer, Rafal Lemkin, to be used at the trial to define the way German occupation destroyed the culture and national identity of the conquered area, his chosen example was Norway, not Poland. Aggression against Poland was certainly included in the prosecution’s case of conspiracy to wage world war, but more attention was given to the invasion of the Soviet Union. The initial Soviet prosecution speech omitted altogether mention of the German invasion of Poland in order to avoid any awkward questions about Soviet participation in the division of the pre-war state.

The treatment of Polish forces fighting with the West also reflected the secondary status the West applied to Poland. At the June 1945 victory parade through central London, the Poles were not permitted to take part, despite their long and courageous contribution to the Allied cause, and the high losses they sustained. This final insult fitted with the ambivalent way the British and American governments had reacted to fighting with the Poles. Poland was not treated as an 'ally' even though defence of Poland was the original *casus belli* for the West. The object of the British government at first was to return to Soviet-dominated Poland all those who had served in the British forces, but finally the government relented when it became clear how badly the returnees might be treated by the distrustful Soviet security service, and 115,000 were permitted to stay in Britain or the British Commonwealth.

In the years since 1945, the attitude of the Western public to Poland's contribution during the war has chiefly been one of indifference. This outcome is not difficult to explain. In both Britain and the United States, the memory of the war focuses on the key moments in their own wartime experience – Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, Pearl Harbor, Iwo Jima, the atomic bombs, and so on. The wartime narrative has become an important element in the national identity of both states and it does not include recalling what happened to Poland either in 1939 or subsequently. There seems little sense of guilt for the failure to support Poland in 1939, or the subsequent failure to defend Polish interests more robustly against Soviet communism. Much more attention is focused on the Holocaust, whose main sites were in what was Polish territory, but little of that interest extends to empathy with non-Jewish Poles, at least three million of whom perished, nor with the harsh conditions of German occupation. The great merit of the *Arithmetic of War* is to remind Western readers of the contribution Poland made to fighting the European Axis states, and perhaps to win recognition that Poland, for all the trials faced during the Soviet era, was one of the Allies, not merely an 'awkward guest'.