

Article 6

Dr Jacek Tebinka, Policy of The Soviet Union towards The Warsaw Uprising 1 August – 2 October 1944

The Warsaw Uprising was the greatest armed uprising by underground Europe against the German occupant during the course of the Second World War. It was begun by 20 thousand soldiers of the underground Home Army (AK), fewer than half of the total forces of the organisation in Warsaw at the time. They were subsequently joined by several hundred soldiers of the National Armed Forces (NSZ) and the communist People's Army (AL).

Almost from the start the Soviet Union showed an openly hostile attitude to the uprising. The roots of this attitude lay in the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin's idea of Poland's future, which was totally contrary to that of the Polish government-in-exile led by Stanislaw Mikolajczyk. With backing from the western powers, Great Britain and the United States, Mikolajczyk's intention was to rebuild an independent Polish Republic. Stalin's idea posed a threat to this, his aim being to impose a communist regime on Poland while maintaining a semblance of the country's sovereignty. Standing in the way of the Kremlin's plans were not just the activities of the Polish government's diplomats in Western capitals but also the strength of the Polish underground state with its military wing, the Home Army, which counted nearly 300 thousand people at the peak of its development in 1944.

As soon as he had broken off diplomatic relations with the Polish government in April 1943 Stalin pressed on with the formation of Polish communist political and military structures in the USSR, the idea being that at his behest these would in the future take control in Poland. An additional factor in arousing Moscow's hostility were the military actions of the Home Army in the eastern regions of Poland, which the USSR had occupied in the years 1939-1941 and still laid claims to. The British Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, realised this during the Moscow Conference when on 29 October 1943 he asked his Soviet counterpart, Viacheslav Molotov, whether he thought the Home Army should receive their support. The answer was negative, even though it was the same Home Army which was providing the Russians with vital intelligence information, relayed via London, regarding the military potential of the Third Reich. The Home Army also conducted sabotage, which included disrupting German lines of communication with bases on the eastern front.

This did not prevent Stalin from making an even more violent attack on the Home Army during the course of the Teheran Conference proceedings (28.11.-1.12.1943). His unfounded accusations against the Home Army of collaboration with the Germans were not challenged by either the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill or the US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, even though they were fully aware of the facts. During this time the Soviet staff headquarters was giving orders for its divisions to move into the eastern regions of the Polish Republic, at the expense of its fight with the Germans, with the aim of driving out the "bands of Polish nationalists", thus provoking conflict with the Home Army.

The Warsaw Rising was the culmination of the 'Burza' ('Tempest') operation, the aim of which was the liberation of Poland from German occupation by the Home Army and the gaining of control by the representatives of the Polish Government-in-Exile. As a result of Soviet counter-operations these actions in the Eastern Border Regions in the spring and summer of 1944 ended in failure. Home Army detachments took part in the liberation of Wilno (Vilna) and Lwow (Lvov), but following initial cooperation in the fight against the Germans, the Russians proceeded to arrest and deport the Polish troops into the interior of the USSR. There were occasional armed clashes as Poles resisted in self-defence. The openly hostile actions on the part of Moscow against an organisation which, after all, was on the same side as the western allies, met with no meaningful reaction in either London or Washington. They considered that the true test of Soviet intentions would be the conduct of the Red Army only to the west of the so-called Curzon Line, that is, in the territories the USSR laid no claims to.

However, Stalin did not intend to allow for the legal Polish government in London ever to return to Poland. With this aim he formed a puppet government, giving it the misleading title 'Polish Committee of National Liberation' (PKWN), announcing its formation on 22 July 1944. In order to allay the doubts of Churchill and Roosevelt, who were now growing worried by the new development, the Soviet dictator agreed to receive the Polish Prime Minister Mikołajczyk, who arrived in Moscow on 30 July 1944.

The Warsaw Uprising broke out on 1 August 1944 at a moment when the Soviet armies were approaching the suburbs of Praga, the right bank district of Warsaw, and it seemed they would soon enter the city. One of the aims of the Red Army offensive, begun on 23 June 1944 in Byelorussia, was, indeed, the taking of Warsaw and the formation of a bridgehead on the left bank of the Vistula river. The outbreak of the Uprising, however, coincided with the German counter-attack, which temporarily halted the Russian advance on the suburbs of Warsaw, which later gave Soviet propaganda the pretext when explaining the inactivity of its troops during the uprising.

The insurgents, at this stage, had gained control of most of the most important districts of Warsaw on the left bank of the Vistula. However, they did not manage take the bridges over the river, even though they did succeed in paralyzing the main German supply lines on the other side of the river. The fate of the Polish capital was now in the hands of Stalin. It was left to Mikołajczyk to seek from him help for the uprising, the very success of which threatened the political aims of the USSR. There was not much time left, though the Germans, fighting as they were on two fronts, no longer had sufficient reserves, and in trying to quell the uprising at the start they hastily sent in groups of police formed ad hoc.

During the course of his talks with the Polish Prime Minister on 3 August 1944 Stalin voiced his doubts as to the military potential of the Home Army to liberate their capital. That same day bad weather prevented allied planes, taking off from airfields in distant Italy, from airlifting arms to the insurgents. Churchill personally appealed to the Russians to help, but on 5 August Stalin replied that the reports coming from the Poles were vastly exaggerated and that the Home Army comprised merely several detachments, inaccurately calling themselves divisions, which were not capable of taking the city. When four days later Stalin saw off Mikołajczyk he seemed better informed of the situation in Warsaw and promised help, though in reality his intention was to make sure the uprising ended in failure. The Red Army offensive in the approach to Warsaw stopped in its tracks. Throughout the whole of August and the first part of September not once did Soviet airplanes fly over Warsaw, thus allowing several German Stukas to fly out of the nearby Okęcie airport to bomb Home Army positions unimpeded. At the same time Polish, British and South African airmen flew from Italy across half of Europe, sustaining heavy casualties, in order to deliver supplies of arms and other provisions to the insurgents. They were not granted permission to land on the Soviet side of the front, even in cases of aircraft damage.

Halfway through August Stalin laid bare his hostile opposition to the uprising, when Soviet diplomats denied the Americans permission to start an airlift by 100 American bombers which were to take off from bases in Great Britain with the purpose of dropping containers of arms over Warsaw and then landing at airfields in the Ukraine. A Soviet note received by the US embassy in Moscow stated: "the uprising in Warsaw, which has drafted in the civilian population is a reckless and irresponsible adventure and the Soviet government cannot lend it its support."

However plausible it was to explain the passive stance of the Red Army on the ground, Stalin's position regarding the issue of airdrops left no illusion that he wished the uprising ill. Stalin had thus revealed his intentions somewhat prematurely and risked conflict with his western allies, and in particular with Britain. His fears were exaggerated, since supplies delivered by air, without ground support, could not radically alter the constantly deteriorating military situation of the insurgents.

Churchill wished to come to the aid of the insurgents and attempted to persuade the Americans to support his efforts in Moscow. But the idea of adopting a very firm stand against the USSR did not gain the support of the White House. The British Prime Minister was only able to persuade Roosevelt to send a joint letter, dated 20.8.1944, to Stalin with a request for his consent for a fully concerted airlift. The Kremlin's response was once more negative. Churchill's next idea was for the western powers to present Moscow with a *fait accompli* and send planes with supplies for the insurgents, landing, if necessary, on Russian airfields without their formal consent; this idea was opposed by Washington. By the end of August 1944 the American president had concluded that the western allies were no longer in a position to do anything about airborne support for the insurgents. The information about the Uprising, and Stalin's view of it, which reached Roosevelt was first handled by his adviser Harry Hopkins, who sympathised with the USSR and was even suspected by some of secret collaboration with the Russians.

Washington did agree, however, to issue on 30 August 1944 a joint declaration with London, which recognised the status of the insurgents as military combatants. From the start Churchill had had no doubts concerning this matter, and the nearly month's delay was above all a result of waiting for the US decision. Moscow, setting as its aim the elimination of the Home Army, never intended to comply with this declaration.

The hostile attitude of the Kremlin towards the Warsaw Uprising gave rise to sharp criticism of the USSR at the 4 September session of the British war cabinet. The Ministers issued a direct letter to Stalin in which they expressed their concern over his policies, which they regarded as at variance with the spirit of the anti-German alliance. Churchill even considered halting the supply convoys to the USSR in retaliation, but was prevented from this course of action by the Foreign Office. Similar views to his were expressed in American circles by a promising young diplomat, George Kennan. Roosevelt was nevertheless far from sharing the outrage of the British, and next day sent a curious telegram to the British leader, in which he stated, quoting information supposedly supplied by American intelligence, that the insurgents had left Warsaw and the problem had thus solved itself.

Angered by the Soviet position the British government encouraged the press to report on the causes of the lack of support by the western allies. For the first time since the Katyn affair, which had been effectively censored, the British newspapers wrote openly of the discord within the alliance over the Polish question. The voices of the most important dailies echoed the very real worries of the British politicians and diplomats over Stalin's intentions and ever greater concern for future postwar relations. In the end the Warsaw Uprising did not threaten the relations between the western powers with the USSR. Under pressure, Moscow reluctantly agreed on 9 September 1944 to allow allied planes to drop air supplies, but their basic position remained the same as before.

Soviet propaganda left one in no doubt about this. Moscow Radio threatened the leaders of the uprising, including the overall head of the Home Army Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, with trials and the death penalty once the Red Army entered Warsaw. With his western allies, though, Stalin conducted a game of illusions. On 10 September he ordered the taking of Praga – the right bank district of Warsaw – which took the Russians four days, and instructed the Soviet airforce to commence air supplies for the insurgents. These were carried out by night by PO-2 planes, small bi-planes, which, moreover, dropped the arms and ammunition while flying low and without parachutes thus ending frequently in their destruction. Till then it had been entirely the work of allied planes taking off from Italy, which had supplied the insurgents with around 100 tons of provisions, in the process losing some 250 airmen.

Not until 18 September 1944 was it possible for more than 100 B-17 American flying fortresses to appear by day above Warsaw to drop 1330 containers of arms, ammunition and other provisions, and then proceed to land on the Soviet side of the front. This help came too late, however, and the effect was limited (only about 400 containers were recovered by the insurgents) due to the fact that the areas of Warsaw in the hands of the Home Army had diminished significantly when compared with the first half of August.

The actions by the Soviets on the right bank of the Vistula caused the leadership of the uprising to break off talks begun with the Germans on the terms of capitulation. The hope that help was at hand proved groundless, however. From 15-19 September several regiments of the so-called First Polish Army formed by the USSR as the initial armed forces of a communist Poland, attempted to seize the bridgeheads of Warsaw's left bank, but these suffered heavy casualties, about 2000 killed and lost, as a result of which the operation ended in fiasco. The numbers of men assigned for it had been too small and they were deprived of suitable artillery support.

The Soviet airdrops for the insurgents, their agreement to the allied airlift, attempted landing operations across the Vistula, all these could have given rise to the impression that the USSR had changed its mind about the uprising and was now wanting to help. However, this was far removed from the truth. The PKWN representative in Moscow, Stefan Jedrychowski, was soon to realise this. On 23 September 1944 he was trying to come to agreement with Molotov over the guiding principles for communist propaganda regarding the uprising. The PKWN representative had, till then, been mistaken in thinking that the attitude of the USSR had changed. This is what he heard from Molotov: "People's Commissar Molotov asked at the start whether I was familiar with the Soviet government's view of the events in Warsaw (ie. the Home Army's anti-soviet provocation). I answered that I knew this view and judged it to relate to the first phase of the Warsaw Uprising. To this I received the reply that the original view had not altered." These words were uttered by Stalin's subordinate just a few days after the survivors of the First Army's disastrous operation returned to Praga, the right bank district of Warsaw.

Deprived of hope for material assistance, the insurgents were forced on 2 October 1944, to sign the surrender agreement after 63 days of fighting in isolation against the Germans who proceeded in the following months to undertake the systematic devastation of Warsaw. The Red Army did not commence its next offensive in the territory of central Poland until January 1945, as a result of which the Germans were forced to leave the ruins of Poland's capital city on 17 January 1945.

The absence of practical help from the Soviet side for the Warsaw Uprising was a result of a consistent realisation by Stalin of his masterplan, which basically amounted to the formation of a vassal government in an apparently independent Poland. The destruction by the Germans of the biggest Polish centre of fighting for independence created a dream scenario for Stalin and his PKWN dependents, who, on 31 December, the last night of 1944, were re-formed in accordance with the plan into the so-called Temporary Government.

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