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Prof. Michael R.D. Foot, The British and the Home Army

The British attitude to the Home Army was friendly from the start. Major (later Major-General Sir Colin) Gubbins, one of the war office's few experts on guerilla, had visited Poland in the spring of 1939 for secret conversations with the General Staff about the principles of clandestine warfare. In August 1939 he was back in Poland, as chief of staff to General Carton de Wiart, VC, of No 4 Military Mission, escaped southwards, and in winter 1939-40 headed the mission in Paris. It provided liaison between the British military authorities and the Polish and Czechoslovak armies re-forming in exile. He then began a warm personal friendship with General Sikorski, who escaped to England in June 1940.

By the end of 1940 Sikorski headed the government in exile in London, with the survivors of his army round Dundee in eastern Scotland, and Gubbins, by now a brigadier, was chief of operations to a new British secret service, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), founded in July 1940 (and disbanded in January 1946), of which the objects were to foster and sustain resistance movements in all enemy occupied countries. Gubbins took Hugh Dalton, the minister in charge of SOE, up to Dundee to spend Christmas 1940 with Sikorski; they then converted Dalton to belief in the military value of guerilla.

In mid-February 1941 SOE and the RAF together achieved the first of many thousands of successful parachute dropping operations, supplying men and arms to resistance movements: at the fourth attempt, this put two officers and a few warlike stores into western Poland. They dropped from a Whitley - already an obsolescent bomber, but all the RAF could spare. Navigating by starlight and dead reckoning, the pilot put them down thirty miles away from the intended spot; this sort of error was then unavoidable. Flights to and from Poland might easily take twelve, or even fourteen, hours in unheated aircraft. A strict rule, imposed by Stalin and Beria and only ever once broken, forbade aircraft carrying supplies for non-Soviet resisters to land in soviet territory; so most of the payload of any aircraft trying to supply Poland from the west had to be taken up with fuel, to get the plane there and back. The strength of Germany's anti-aircraft defences imposed extra long flights, north about round Denmark.

Gradually, the RAF was persuaded to allot a few more aircraft to this task, and its 138 Squadron, formed on Newmarket racecourse in August 1941, included three Polish crews, but their work was not - could not be - confined to drops to Polish targets; one of them was lost early on an unsuccessful drop into France. When in late in 1943 the Allies occupied southern Italy, 1586 Flight RAF, almost entirely crewed by Poles, operated from Foggia airfield (near the heel of Italy) into Poland - still a very long flight.

This Polish flight had almost a dozen aircraft, some of them American B24 Liberators, secured by Sikorski with the help of the American General Donovan; though neither general took in, when the order was given in 1942, that it would take a year for the Liberator to be safe to fly at night, as its exhaust flames needed screening. The flight's losses were catastrophically heavy in August 1944, as it tried to supply the Warsaw rising; Slessor, the local RAF commander, forbade it to try any more.

Friendship between Sikorski and General Sir Alan Brooke (later Lord Alanbrooke), chairman of the British chiefs of staff committee, and with Churchill the prime minister, helped ensure British strategic support for the Home Army; but the British leaders, with their world view of strategy, necessarily took a different attitude towards the Soviet forces from that taken by the Poles. The British were stuck in an impossible fix - wishing to assist the Poles, but unable to win the war without cooperating with the Russians. The British foreign office had by 1942 become frankly pro-Soviet; this was another obstacle in the path of the Polish government in exile in its efforts to support the Home Army.

In the end, the sum total of warlike stores the RAF was able to drop into Poland to help the Home Army amounted only to 600 tons: contrast the 10,000 tons sent to France or the 18,000 sent to Yugoslavia, under quite different travel constraints. In return for the design of a time pencil detonator, brought back by Gubbins from Poland in 1939, the British were enabled to supply the Poles with a recent British invention, plastic explosive, useful for blowing up trains. The agents they sent into Poland - over 300 of them - had received training in sabotage methods, devised in part by SOE's expert Colonel G T Rheam, delivered in the Polish language in Polish schools, held in requisitioned English and Scottish country houses. The Home Army's railway sabotage alone inflicted - through the destruction of some 7,000 locomotives - perceptible, aggravating delays on the supply system of the Wehrmacht operating on the eastern front against the Red Army; this did not prevent Stalin from denouncing the Home Army as crypto-fascist.

For communications between the London government and the Home Army SOE provided plentiful wireless telegraphy equipment; the Poles wrote their own ciphers, which the British could not break, and supposed the Germans could not break either. By an extra secret concession, the Poles were excluded from the restriction imposed in the run-up to the Normandy invasion on all other diplomats and governments in exile in London: they were allowed still to use their own ciphers in messages to the Home Army. The British also made available the colossal engine of the BBC, which was able after its Polish news broadcasts to broadcast prearranged tunes, well known in Poland, which carried operational significance; tunes were thought less liable to interference by enemy jamming than messages.

All the agents SOE sent to Poland were Polish, until the last winter of the war, when - on the chiefs of staffs' orders - operation 'Freston' was mounted. This was a mission into southern Poland in January 1945, headed by Colonel D. T. Hudson (who had served with distinction in Yugoslavia) and intended to report on the strength and capacities of the Home Army. It landed close to the fighting lines, and only survived immediate capture because a Home Army platoon sacrificed itself to give it a chance to get away; it was rapidly overrun by the Soviet army, and imprisoned in loathsome conditions until the Yalta conference was over. It was then taken to Moscow, mildly feted, and flown out, having achieved nothing.

Potsdam secured little if any improvement on Yalta, so far as the Poles were concerned: the British and Americans had to stand idly by while Stalin broke his word. Members of the Home Army got slight chances to fade back into normal civil life after its formal dissolution, by its own chiefs, early in 1945; the Soviet secret police mopped up as many as it could, knowing that they would not make obedient citizens under a pro-soviet regime.

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