

Article 20

Prof. Norman Davies C.M.G., F.B.A., Britain and the Warsaw Rising

As Britain's 'First Ally', Poland played a role in most aspects of allied military strategy, not least in relation to underground resistance movements. Hence, Britain's SOE was closely involved with the Polish Underground from 1940 onwards; and SOE's 'Polish Section' was actively engaged in operations designed to strengthen the Home Army and to maintain its links with the western powers. One of the groups of SOE agents, or *Cichociemni* was flown into German-occupied Poland on 31 July 1944, reaching Warsaw on 1 August.

Both the British and American governments were well aware from mid-1943 onwards that Polish underground leaders were planning to launch an insurrection against the Germans as soon as the time was ripe. A memorandum to this effect reached President Roosevelt's desk, prior to the Teheran Conference, on 23 November 1943. At no point did the Anglo-Americans advise the Polish Government that a Rising might not be opportune. On the contrary, the general climate in Allied circles constantly urged the Poles to attack the Germans and thereby to assist the allied war effort.

It is also important to stress that a period of at least seven months was available to the Allied Coalition for making contingency plans. The Red Army crossed the frontier of Poland in early January 1944, heading west, but it did not reach the Vistula until the last week of July. Throughout that time, it was reasonable to expect the Coalition to consider its dispositions in three crucial respects. The first was in Intelligence, which in the absence of any British or American officers in Warsaw, was signally deficient. The second was in the field of Military Liaison, which made little progress since the British consistently ignored all requests to send a military mission to the Polish Underground (along the lines of the mission that was operating in Yugoslavia.) And the third was in diplomacy. Everyone knew that the Red Army was marching in the direction of the capital city of a country that was formally allied to Great Britain, Yet., since the 'Big Three' kept all major strategic decisions to themselves, and since Stalin had severed relations with the Polish Government, it was self-evident that the Western leaders alone could have approached Moscow and have prepared the political ground for an eventuality that was bound to affect the Coalition as a whole. No such initiative was taken.

Six weeks before the Rising, Prime Minister Mikołajczyk travelled to Washington with General Tatar for meetings with President Roosevelt, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the OSS. At each step, the intention of the Polish underground to attack German forces on the approach of the Red Army was openly discussed. Roosevelt received Mikołajczyk enthusiastically, urging him to speak directly with Stalin, and assuring him that Poland would emerge 'undiminished'. He also provided a generous subsidy of \$10 million for the Home Army. The Joint Chiefs of Staff grilled the Poles closely about the prospects of Soviet co-operation, and may have been misled by General Tatar's overoptimistic assessment. Tatar, was an eager advocate of the Rising and a political opponent of his Commander-in-Chief, General Sosnowski. He does not appear to have passed on Sosnowski's strong reservations. But the British were well pleased with his performance. On returning from Washington he was awarded the Order of the Bath. At the award ceremony, Lord Selbourne said:

'There [are] grounds to hope... that Poland's Armed Forces [will] be able to free their country from the enemy in the very near future.'

In the last week before the Rising, the British Government was kept fully informed. On the 25th, the day of the Polish Cabinet's decision, Ambassador Raczynski passed on the news that the Rising would take place in Warsaw. Shortly after, he passed on the information that the outbreak was imminent. The announcement caused a deep rift in British policy. The Foreign Office reacted negatively, telling Raczynski bluntly that no form of assistance could be given. The leaders of SOE, in contrast, reacted positively. At a meeting with General Tatar on 29 July, General Gubbins expressed approval of Polish requests for fighter support, bombing raids, and the deployment of the Polish Parachute Brigade. Lord Selborne sent the requests to Churchill in person, adding a strong recommendation for support.

Once the Rising broke out, British policy and British public opinion were necessarily subdued owing to the absence of independent sources of information. On the evening of 2 August Churchill addressed the House of Commons on the political problem within the Alliance by stressing both Poland's courage and 'Russia's need for friendly neighbours'. (He pointedly made no reference to Poland's need for friendly neighbours.) He then ordered the RAF to fly supply missions to Warsaw from their bases in southern Italy, thereby initiating the long saga of the Warsaw Airlift.

The Foreign Office, in contrast, displayed an extraordinary degree of lethargy, which can be partly explained by divided counsels and partly by the existence of Soviet moles in its ranks. (Christopher Hill, the historian, who was later shown to have been a secret member of the Communist Party, was in charge of the Foreign Office's Soviet Desk.) It took four weeks for Eden to remedy his long-standing opposition to the despatch of a British Military Mission to Poland, and seven weeks to react to Ambassador Raczynski's remonstrations about the killing and arrest of Home Army soldiers by the Soviet NKVD. On this last point, he casually informed the House of Commons on 27 September that the Soviet Embassy had denied the truth of the allegations (which, as is now known, were perfectly accurate.)

SOE, whose advice in support of active involvement was overruled, quickly lost its earlier enthusiasm for the Polish cause. General Gabbins, who had met Tatar on a weekly basis before the Rising, left for France on 13 August and was not seen again for three months. His deputy, Col. Perkins, reverted to the Foreign Office line and brutally berated the Poles for the lack of co-ordination. In reality, SOE had failed to match its earlier promises with regard to the supply of aircraft and the preparation of a regular 'air bridge' to Poland. According to a British specialist on the subject, (Ted Harrison), it would appear to have written the Warsaw Rising off and to have concentrated its efforts on the two countries, France and Yugoslavia, where its plans had been better laid.

Churchill was genuinely furious at Stalin's callous reaction to the Warsaw Rising, and in particular at the Soviets' denial of landing facilities for the RAF. He was eager that Roosevelt should join him in a forceful protest, and was dismayed by the President's refusal to do so. Warsaw revealed Churchill's declining influence among the 'Big Three'.

Many British politicians were irritated by the frantic attempts of the Polish Government to arouse a greater sense of urgency. The Deputy PM, Clement Attlee, exclaimed 'What more could we have done?' But real anger was aroused by the Commander-in-Chief's Order of the Day on 1 September – the 5th Anniversary of the outbreak of war – when he openly criticised Britain for repaying a loyal ally with less than fulsome support. One British minister commented: 'The Empire has been insulted'. Few Britishers realised that the Commander-in-Chief had been personally opposed to the Rising. He was now blamed for the crisis caused by the Rising; and his dismissal was widely demanded.

In September, the most urgent item of business was to repair Poland's rift with Moscow and thereby to increase the chances of a Soviet rescue for Warsaw. Premier Mikołajczyk's revised proposals were submitted to the Foreign Office on 30 August, and were thereon transmitted to the Soviet Embassy. But once again, the Foreign Office showed no willingness to act as an honest broker or to speed a settlement. Similarly, no energy was displayed in organising the British military mission to the Home Army, even when the matter had been decided in principle.

Throughout the Warsaw Rising, British public opinion was deeply divided. A vociferous section of the left-wing press led by the *Daily Herald* and the *Daily Worker* was actively pro-Soviet, shamelessly repeating Moscow's line about the Rising being a 'criminal adventure' run by 'fascists' and 'reactionaries'. The foreign columns of *The Times*, led by E.H. Carr, followed a similar line in more guarded language. Yet most people were simply bewildered. There was no shortage of praise for Poland's courage but equally no explanation why Allied policy was so ineffective. The underlying problems were rarely understood. And little discussion was spent on critical issues, such as Stalin's ban on the airlift or the weeks of Soviet inactivity on the Vistula after Rokossovsky's initial setback. The Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, did not face prolonged or determined questioning from the House of Commons until the Rising's very last days.

Only one powerful voice was raised against the prevailing complacency. On 1 September, George Orwell, who at the time was writing *Animal Farm*, published a trenchant piece to the socialist journal *Tribune*. He condemned the lack of principle in the press in general and in the left-wing press in particular. His immediate target was a young historian, Geoffrey Barraclough, then working at the Foreign Office. But his criticisms were aimed at the public at large whose infatuation with the Soviet Union obstructed all serious analysis.

Once the Home Army had capitulated, there was an effusive outpouring of sympathy, and widespread hand-wringing about 'the Warsaw tragedy'. But there was little readiness among the British public and still less in Government circles, to reflect on Britain's contribution to the tragedy. Britons, already anticipating the end of the war, were in no mood to dwell on their failures.

Churchill took Mikołajczyk with him to Moscow in early October to resume the Polish-Soviet talks postponed for two months. In the course of a dramatic meeting with Molotov, it was revealed that a year earlier at Teheran Churchill had secretly proposed the Curzon Line as a basis of the future Polish-Soviet frontier. In other words, all the territorial plans and negotiations throughout 1944, which had poisoned relations with Stalin, and had minimised the chances of his co-operation during the Rising, had been conducted on false assumptions. Churchill, shame-facedly admitted his fault, but later turned his rage on the Polish premier whom he had so inexcusably misled. This must be one of the most discreditable episodes of Churchill's career. Mikołajczyk soon resigned; and the close alliance between the British and Polish Governments ceased to function.

In 1944-45, a series of events occurred which may be seen as the tail-end of affairs connected with the Rising. On 26 December 1944, for example, the Freston Mission to the Home Army finally landed in Poland and made contact with the Underground. It quickly found itself in an NKVD jail. This was the mission which PM Mikołajczyk had requested in February, and which could greatly have improved intelligence and liaison in the run up to the Rising. In the words of one of its participants, it was 'a complete waste of time'. In January-February 1945, the Yalta Conference took place. Western leaders abandoned all effective influence in Poland and Eastern Europe in return for Stalin's co-operation in Germany and in the Far East. This outcome would have been unthinkable if the Warsaw Rising had succeeded. Shortly afterwards, 16 democratic leaders from the Polish Underground, who had lived through the Rising and who would have formed a crucial element in the political system proposed for Poland at Yalta, were arrested by the NKVD. Their show trial in Moscow in June, coincided with the formation of the so-called Government of National Unity in which they might otherwise have participated. The Chief Defendant, General Okulicki – Bór-Komorowski's sometime deputy and successor as Commander of the Home Army, who had originally been flown into occupied Europe by the RAF, was not broken by his interrogators and delivered a defiant speech from the dock. He subsequently died in the Lubyanka. His British allies, whose Ambassador was present at the trial, did not protest.

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