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The largest underground army in the world

The Polish Home Army was among the largest underground armies that challenged Nazi Germany. As opposed to other such large forces operating in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, it was also the only one which fought for genuine freedom and democracy.

Located near Lichfield, just over two hours away from London, is the National Memorial Arboretum, a vast site of national remembrance visited by thousands of people each year. The British go there to pay homage to the soldiers and civilians who lost their lives in conflict, including during the two world wars. One of the monuments scattered amongst the trees, the one with the characteristic eagle on top, is devoted to the Poles. The bronze figures of an infantryman, navy soldier and pilot symbolise the different formations of the Polish Armed Forces in the West that assisted the Allies in the fight to free Europe of the murderous tyranny imposed by Nazi Germany. The fourth figure, a woman dressed in civilian clothes, seems to be the odd one out. However, she too is a soldier, serving as a courier in the famous Home Army whose 80th anniversary we are now celebrating.

EUROPEAN PHENOMENON

In September 1939, Poland was stormed by two totalitarian states: first Nazi Germany and then, over a dozen days later, the Soviet Union. The Polish Army stood no chance against such mighty aggressors. But it never capitulated and, before regular fighting finally stopped, its emigration government was already set up in France under the leadership of General Władysław Sikorski. The prime minister soon became commander-in-chief, standing at the head of an army that was being reconstructed at the side of Western Allies. A fully-fledged part of these forces – or their “key part” according to Sikorski – was the clandestine army organised in occupied Poland. It started to be developed as early as 1939, but it is known today under the name it got on 14 February 1942, i.e. the Home Army (AK).

The name sent a clear signal that the force was not supposed to be an armed wing of some political party like the communist partisans in Yugoslavia. The AK was conceived as a nationwide army reporting to the authorities in exile, the legal government of the Republic of Poland that had moved to the UK after the defeat of France. General Stefan Rowecki, AK's first Commander, consciously restricted himself to vague declarations about post-war Poland being “a country of democracy” where “the ideal of social justice will be put in practice.” Decisions about the form of the future state were to be made by citizens themselves after liberation.

Serving “no individual or political group,” the army enjoyed the support of the vast majority of the population. It was open to people from all social classes who held different political views: socialists, peasant activists, former adherents of Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, Christian Democrats, and many nationalists. Some of Home Army soldiers were also Jews who served as both privates and officers, like the highly decorated Stanisław Aronson.

In spite of the terrors of occupation, AK ranks grew rapidly. In the summer of 1944, it numbered ca. 380,000 sworn soldiers. Some of them were partisans who have left their family homes to hide in the forests. Others were conspirators staying in cities under assumed names or people who led double lives, going to work every day, but always ready to carry out the orders of their commanders. Many of their number, including brave women and plenty of patriotic youth, reported for duty in August 1944 to fight a 63-day-long unequal battle with the Germans during the Warsaw Uprising.

Preparing the insurrection against the occupying forces was the fundamental task of the Home Army. But even before that, the Polish underground engaged in large-scale sabotage and diversion activities. Prisoners were sprung from the hands of the Gestapo. Death sentences were carried out on traitors and collaborators and over-zealous functionaries of the German terror apparatus were killed. Spectacular successes were also achieved by AK intelligence – its work made it possible to postpone the development of German V1 and V2 missiles. At the same time, underground couriers travelled West with reports on occupation atrocities, including the destruction of the Jews. All that was only one part of the Polish Underground State which also had its own judiciary, social care system and a network of clandestine schools.

Many Home Army members and their compatriots paid the highest price for serving their country. Scores of thousands of AK soldiers fell in battle or were murdered during the war. Those who lived to see peace in Europe could not feel safe either as the Gestapo was replaced by the Soviet NKVD and the home-grown communist security service.

BELATED TRIBUTE

In the late spring and summer of 1945, as the world celebrated the victory over the Third Reich, war heroes from the anti-Nazi coalition had their moment of glory.

Countless crowds of New Yorkers lined the streets on a cloudy Tuesday, 19 June 1945, to welcome Dwight Eisenhower. The American general who commanded the

Normandy landings and then led Western Allies to triumph over the Third Reich could feel fulfilled to see his countrymen cheering in his honour. Riding on the wave of that popularity, he was elected president of the United States twice: in 1952 and 1956.

Another person to capitalise politically on his wartime record was Charles de Gaulle. The ambitious general who saved the honour of France during WW2 was made prime minister twice after the liberation and then has gone down in history as a strong president of the Fifth Republic.

In the totalitarian Soviet state Marshal Georgy Zhukov could not obviously step out of Joseph Stalin's shadow. But even he had his big day on 24 June 1945 when he reviewed the grand victory parade on Moscow's Red Square.

Just three days before, in the same city, General Leopold Okulicki, the last commander of the Home Army, was sentenced to 10 years in prison in a show trial that was a clear mockery of justice. Okulicki never regained freedom. He died one and a half years later in a Soviet prison. His predecessor, General Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, chose the difficult life of an emigrant in the UK, doing jobs such as upholsterer and goldsmith to earn his living.

The Home Army soldiers who stayed in Poland were not fêted but subjected to repression in the form of excruciating interrogations, torture, executions and long prison sentences. The new totalitarian government was right to fear those who had fought tenaciously to free their homeland for several years. As a result, the very same people who, in a normal country, would have been decorated and entrusted with positions of responsibility were pushed to the margins of society in a Poland controlled by Stalin. Communist propaganda portrayed them as "bespittled dwarves of reaction" and German collaborators, the latter accusation being particularly painful for those who risked their lives to oppose the Third Reich.

Until 1989 the Home Army could not be commemorated in the way it deserved. Today, in a free Poland, we are rectifying this omission. The Institute of National Remembrance that I have the honour of managing spares no effort to pay tribute to the Home Army and remind the world about its contribution to the victory over Hitler.