

**Janusz Gmitruk**

**Head of the Museum of the Polish Peasant Movement in Warsaw**

## **VILLAGES AND PEASANTRY IN THE POLISH UNDERGROUND STATE**

September 1939 marked the beginning of the most tragic and difficult period for the Polish people – a fight for survival not only in the national and cultural sense, but also in biological terms. This struggle began the moment the occupation began. Initially uncoordinated and spontaneous, it claimed many victims. The economic exploitation, which was on its own unprecedented in the history of the country, was accompanied by intensifying efforts to exterminate the Polish population, which were dangerous from the biological perspective. All aspects of life in the occupied state were subordinated to the exigent plans of the Third Reich. This applied both to the economy and labour force.

The local peasantry supported Polish independence and stood against the occupier, especially with regard to the policy of denationalising Poles, destroying their culture and the physical ruination of the Polish people.

Rural areas had to shoulder the burden of providing food for Polish society, as well as securing its survival and fighting for independence. Villages were a bastion of patriotism, social solidarity and self-help, where cultural assets were protected from being looted by the occupier. Villages constituted a unique example of how the Underground State and society could work together. Polish villages produced and were in possession of food, rendering it possible for members of the intelligentsia, POWs, captives, Jews, deportees and those members of the underground whose cover was blown to survive in the biological sense. The peasantry's defiance and resistance against the laws imposed by the occupier were an example of civic attitudes, self-sacrifice and responsibility for others to follow. Also conducive to that were the personality traits inherent in the peasantry, such as mental fortitude in the face of adversity and threat, realism, a practical attitude towards life, as well as an attachment to and love of the land they defended and which gave them economic independence and a sense of dignity.

Villages were places of group solidarity – everyone knew one another, the rules of conduct were clear and rooted in the Christian faith and traditions supported by local leaders. The peasants themselves organised their public life by rejecting the influence of the occupiers and establishing underground authorities, which were a manifestation of independence under occupation and which would frequently decide on whether to allow in the Polish Underground

State, which took over these spontaneous structures and used them to organise civilian and armed resistance movements.

The term *Polish Underground State* is a conventional category from the legal point of view. For the Poles, it is a manifestation of the high level of organisation, operation, availability and the wide area covered by the civilian and armed resistance of the Polish nation during World War II. Battles were fought in all areas of life, both against the Germans and the Soviets. The establishment and the status of the Polish Underground State was a result of the need to resist the total war, protect the Polish national identity and the biological existence of the Polish people.

27 September 1939 is considered to be the day the Polish Underground State was born – it was the day of the establishment of the Service to Poland’s Victory organisation. By 1940, approx. 200 underground organisations functioned on the Polish territories.

Pre-war opposition parties dominated the independence movement, including the Polish Socialist Party – Freedom-Equality-Independence (codename “Koło” – circle), the “Roch” People’s Party (“Trójkąt” – triangle), the National Party (“Kwadrat” – square), the Labour Party (“Romb” – rhombus) and the Alliance of Democrats (“Prostokąt” – rectangle). “Roch” possessed the most well-developed network of assets in the rural areas. In total, 60,000 of their soldiers, divided into three to five man-squads, served across ten districts, 166 counties, 1000 communes and 8000 communities. Other parties’ networks in the rural areas were not as extensive as in the case of the People’s Party, and were mostly limited to cities.

The Polish Underground State encompassed the underground networks which operated on the occupied territories after being established or approved by the Polish government-in-exile (located in first France, and later in London). These networks included the Union of Armed Struggle/Home Army, the Government Delegation for Poland and the Political Consultative Committee/Council of National Unity, and thus the following underground political parties: the Polish Socialist Party, the People’s Party, the National Party and the Labour Party. The underground parliament of the Polish Underground State, which represented the political parties, was the Political Consultative Committee established on 26 February 1940. It was later transformed into the Home Political Representation on 21 March 1943, before being transformed into the Council of National Unity in early 1944. The latter operated until July 1945. The Polish Socialist Party was composed in 70% of peasantry.

The Polish Underground State was administered by the Government Delegation for Poland, which had its own police force and courts, and which coordinated the entire civilian branch of the underground. The underground administration was led by the vice prime

minister, who was a government delegate. The nature and position in the system of the Government Delegate for Poland was the key element of the Polish Underground State. The organised structures of the Polish Underground State (administrative, police and military) were estimated to have comprised approx. one million people, excluding all levels of underground schooling.

The following men served as Government Delegates for Poland: Cyryl Ratajski (from 3 December 1940 to 5 August 1942; he was not officially nominated); Jan Piekalkiewicz (from 5 August 1942 to 19 February 1943); Jan Stanisław Jankowski (from 19 February 1943, formally from 21 April 1943 to 27 March 1945); as well as Stefan Korboński (acting in the capacity of the Government Delegate for Poland from April until the end of June 1945). They contributed greatly to the establishment of the structures and governing the Polish Underground State between 1940 and 1945.

The fates of the Polish delegates were tragic. Stefan Korboński was the only one to survive the occupation. Cyryl Ratajski died, Jan Piekalkiewicz was brutally murdered by the Germans, Jan Stanisław Jankowski was abducted by the Russians and sentenced in a trial as one of sixteen leaders of the Polish Underground State which took place in 1945. He never returned to Poland, having died in Vladimir on the Klyazma on 13 March 1953. The circumstances surrounding Jankowski's death and the place where he was buried are still unknown.

The central office of the Government Delegation for Poland in Warsaw employed nearly 1000 people. Outside the headquarters, field delegations operated in many regions of the country, spanning districts and counties, and often expanded to span entire communes.

The Delegate Office was made up of a number of departments. These included: the Presidium (the Presidial Department, the Financial and Budgeting Department, the Control Department, the War Damage Repair Department); the departments tasked with managing day-to-day operations – the Interior Affairs Department, the Information and Documentation Department, the Education and Culture Department, the Labour and Social Department, the Directorate of Civilian Resistance/Directorate of Social Resistance; and the economic departments – the Agriculture Department, the Treasury Department, the Industry and Commerce Department, the Post and Telegraph Department, the Communication Department, the Civil Works and Reconstruction Department, the Economic Committee, the National Reconstruction Council. The remaining central departments of the Government Delegation included: the Justice (and legislation) Department, the Foreign Affairs Section (Department), the Nationality Office, the Legislative Coordination Committee, the Central Commission for

Investigating and Registering the Crimes of the Occupier in Poland, the Administrative Committee, the Political Committee, a department tasked with helping British POWs and the National Defence Department.

The above parts of the Polish Underground State, in addition to being involved in the ongoing armed conflict with the occupier, developed plans and educated personnel required to operate openly after emerging from the underground during a planned nation-wide uprising, as well as during the post-war period – which was unprecedented in occupied European countries.

The underground administration operated on the backs of the “Roch” People’s Party. Two out of four Government Delegates for Poland were members of the Party (Piekalkiewicz and Korboński), as well as 100 out of all 181 county delegates in occupied Poland, in addition to seven provincial delegations and several central departments.

The National Security Corps and the Local Authority Guard were units operating as part of the civilian administration, first commanded by Marian Koziński before being replaced by Dr Stanisław Tabisz, a People’s Party member, in December 1943. Soldiers of the Farmers’ Battalions constituted the majority of the 50,000 police officers of the Polish Underground State.

The civilian struggle of the Polish Underground State was coordinated by the Directorate of Civilian Resistance established in April 1941. In mid-1943, the DCR became part of the Directorate of Underground Resistance, a joint department of the Delegations and the General Command of the Home Army. The DCR was managed by Stefan Korboński, and the DUR was commanded by General Tadeusz “Bór” Komorowski.

The Polish underground was the first to emerge from among all occupied countries. Rural inhabitants formed the base of the national resistance movement, serving in the Farmers’ Battalions, the Home Army, the National Armed Forces and the People’s Army. Many underground military organisations were established – more than 50 central, district, county, commune and regimental divisions of the underground movement were formed in total. Those were also consolidated and transformed into divisions of the Home Army. Starting in the autumn of 1939, the Union of Armed Struggle carried out a consolidation operation, taken over by the Home Army in February 1942, incorporating the majority of the existing military organisations, including parts of the Farmers’ Battalions, the People’s Guard, the National Military Organisation and the National Armed Forces.

The Home Army operated in all occupied territories and was divided into six command centres. The General Command and its staff coordinated all efforts, and was

divided into six units. The General Command of the Home Army employed 2000 officers. The HA was led by General Stefan “Grot” Rowecki, then General Tadeusz “Bór” Komorowski, and finally by General Leopold “Niedźwiadek” Okulicki. As many as 360,000 soldiers made up the Home Army during the final stages of the war.

Its main goal was to combat the occupier and prepare an anti-German, nation-wide uprising. Gathering intelligence, counter-intelligence, diversionary operations, assassinations of Nazi officials, freeing political prisoners, propaganda and warfare formed the main activities of the HA.

Operation Tempest initiated on 1 August 1944, which started the Warsaw Uprising, was an attempt at regaining control over Poland. Large units had been formed for the purpose of the operation, which was part of a plan of restoring the armed forces. The Home Army deployed 14 infantry divisions, three battalion groups, two cavalry brigades and several independent regiments – approx. 150,000 soldiers in total. The 27th Volhynia Infantry Division was the most numerous unit which participated in Operation Tempest.

The Farmers’ Battalions were the second largest military organisation of the Polish Underground State. Established in 1940, they operated in 10 districts, 160 counties, 2000 communes and more than 10,000 communities. Towards the end of the war, the FB numbered 157,000 people, including 8,000 Red Cross nurses. They were led by the General Command of the FB, commanded by Franciszek Kamiński, aka Zenon Trawiński. The FB included 400 special and 70 partisan units, which were made up of approx. 20,000 well-armed partisans.

Combating the biological extermination and economic exploitation of Polish villages was the main priority of the FB. They carried out approx. 6000 military operations during the occupation, including 930 battles and skirmishes. The first battles fought on the territory of Poland were the Battle of Wojda (30 December 1942) and the Battle of Zaboreczno (1 February 1943). As many as 10,000 soldiers of the FB, members of the “Roch” People’s Party and the People’s Women’s Association died in battle.

Approximately 60,000 soldiers of the FB were sent to join the Home Army as part of the consolidation efforts of 1943-1944.

As a result of a consolidation operation of the Lizard Union and the National Military Organisation opposition, the National Armed Forces were established on 20 September 1942. The NAF operated in 17 districts. In 1944, they numbered 90,000 soldiers, who were all well trained and armed. Fighters were responsible for the majority of their operations. Parts of the NAF combined with the HA in March 1944 and fought in the Warsaw Uprising. Several independent organisations within the NAF formed the Świętokrzyskie

Brigade from the units operating in Kielce Province (in August 1944), which numbered approx. 800 soldiers and which managed to make its way west. The NMA and the NAF suffered heavy losses as a result of German repressions.

The People's Guard was another party-affiliated army of the Polish Underground State, albeit less numerous. Formed in 1939 by the Polish Socialist Party, it was incorporated into the UAS-HA in 1940 while preserving its autonomy and still answering to the leadership of the PSP. Kazimierz "Bazyli" Pużak was its commander-in-chief. Between 1943 and 1944, the PG-FEI numbered approx. 40,000 soldiers. In May 1944, it changed its name to Military Organisation of the Socialist Insurgent Emergency Service. The PG-FEI contributed to preparing a nation-wide uprising, participated in day-to-day resistance efforts, carried out acts of sabotage, gathered intelligence and formed units. The military units of the PSP fought in the Warsaw Uprising.

In 1942, the People's Guard was formed with ties to the communist movement, and was transformed into the People's Army in 1944. The Army was led by General Michał "Rola" Żymierski. Its ten brigades numbering 200 soldiers each focused on destroying transports, disrupting communications and carrying out acts of sabotage. Peasants constituted approximately half of these units. This formation never swore allegiance to the Polish Underground State, but the two did collaborate on occasion on the local level.

During the final stages of the war, 700,000 freedom fighters fought in the ranks of the Polish Underground State, and rural inhabitants constituted a large percentage of these soldiers. Peasants made up 45% of the AK, 90% of the FB, approx. 20% of the NAF, 20% of the PG of the PSP-FEI, and 40% of the People's Army. Which formation the peasants would join was determined by the territory on which a given organisation operated, and was not always ideologically motivated. The most important reason to join was being able to protect other people and the land.

According to incomplete German data, units of the Polish resistance carried out more than 110,000 major armed diversionary operations between 1942 and 1945, 6243 of which were executed by large units. 2300 attacks on transports were carried out, and 1300 trains transporting troops and war front supplies were derailed. More than 150,000 German police officers, soldiers and collaborators were killed in combat.

When the frequency of attacks increased, the Germans were forced to increase the number of troops stationed in the occupied territory to an equivalent 850 battalions in order to ensure security. The Wehrmacht helped in 1278 operations against the partisans carried out by the German police forces. In 1943, the British SOE (Special Operations Executive) assessed

the Polish Underground State very favourably, and the Joint Planning Staff considered the Polish resistance to be the *strongest, best organised and the most determined in Europe*.

Many Polish villages became strongholds, impregnable not because of their walls and trenches, but because of the personalities of the peasants, who frequently paid a high price for working with the underground, suffering arrests, executions and pacifications.

We do not know if the creators of the Polish Underground State remembered the following words of Jean Jacques Rousseau, a prominent Enlightenment philosopher of democracy who addressed 18th-century Poland, which was facing the prospect of losing her independence: *You cannot possibly keep them from swallowing you; see to it, at least, that they shall not be able to digest you.* (Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, Warsaw 1966).