

They fought for freedom and yet were supposed to be forgotten

After 1945, the world paid tribute to the soldiers who had contributed to the victory over Nazi Germany. Not so in Poland. The communist government did all it could to make people forget about war-time heroes, and those who dared oppose the new regime were mistreated most persistently and adamantly. It is only today that we can honour them as they deserve.

Andrzej Ciepliński quickly became a half-orphan. He was just a few months old when the communist secret police arrested his father, Łukasz, in November 1947. Łukasz was still young, but he was also an experienced and highly distinguished officer. Three years later, he was sentenced to death after a brief show-trial. It was in the courtroom that he caught one last glimpse of his wife and little son. He later communicated with his loved ones by means of secret messages sent from the prison cell until the end of his life. “We all fought for Poland,” he wrote to his brothers, “and I will die for her today. That leaves Andrzejek. (...) You need to take my place at his side.”

On Thursday, 1 March 1951, lieutenant colonel Łukasz Ciepliński was murdered by a shot to the back of the head. The same fate was shared by his six subordinates who were also held at the Mokotów prison in Warsaw. Their bodies were not handed over to the families.

For eleven years now, every 1 March, Poland has celebrated the National Day of Remembrance of the “Cursed Soldiers.” That is how we call those who opposed the Sovietisation of their homeland after WW2 and who were persistently deprived of dignity by the communist authorities.

Second time underground

Countless crowds lined the streets of London on 8 May 1945. Enthusiastic Londoners surrounded Winston Churchill’s car. On his way to lunch with King George VI, the British prime minister smiled patiently back, raising his fingers in a V, a sign of victory.

That Tuesday, similar scenes took place on Champs-Élysées in Paris, Times Square in New York and in many other places around the world. The German Reich had capitulated unconditionally. Victorious powers celebrated the end of WW2 in Europe.

In Warsaw, there was also a display of fireworks and a victory rally organised by the authorities a day later. However, the general mood was far from enthusiastic – and not only because the city was in ruins. The bloody German occupation might have been over, but it looked like the Poles would not be allowed to live as they wished. With the Red Army stationed in the country, it was the Soviets who laid down the law. A puppet government dominated by the communists was installed in the capital. The underground soldiers who until recently had fought bravely against the Germans were still hiding in the forests as they ran the risk of being imprisoned or deported to Siberia.

Ciepliński was also under constant threat. During the war, he was commander of the Rzeszów inspectorate of the Home Army, an underground military force reporting to the London-based Polish émigré government. His subordinates had scored many successes like getting hold of parts of the German V1 and V2 rockets. However, their war-time achievements did not count for much in a communist-controlled Poland. Quite the contrary, those who proved their mettle

during German occupation were considered dangerous by the new government as seasoned freedom fighters.

After the war, Ciepliński continued his underground activities. He held leadership positions in several clandestine organisations that carried on the mission of the disbanded Home Army. The objectives were clear: make Soviet troops and the NKVD leave Poland, ensure fundamental civic freedoms and establish democracy as understood in the West. No one with any sense of realism could hope to defeat the Soviets by military means. Armed resistance was therefore limited to necessary self-defence. The point was rather to counter the communist propaganda with one's own information campaign targeted at compatriots and western countries. Eventually, Stalin assured the Americans and the British that Poland would have free elections.

Condemned to be forgotten

I am full of admiration for those unbowed people who, after six years of German terror, stood up to fight for freedom, this time against the Soviets and their home-grown backers. Tens of thousands of Poles did not lay down their weapons when the war ended. If we add those who were involved in post-war underground operations in other roles or simply supported such efforts, we should be talking of several hundred thousand people. Given the scale of the phenomenon, some historians even use the term “anti-communist uprising.”

After the communists rigged the parliamentary elections at the beginning of 1947, Poland's last hope for freedom seemed to be an armed conflict between western countries and the Soviet Union. But no such conflict was on the horizon. More and more underground soldiers were arrested or killed in skirmishes. The last “Cursed Soldier” – Józef Franczak, alias “Lalek” – was killed in a manhunt in 1963.

The red terror did not affect only those who offered armed resistance to the new government. The soldiers who believed in communist “amnesties” and came out of their hiding to live normally and help rebuild the country were also arrested and even condemned to death. Jan Rodowicz, alias “Anoda”, decorated many times for bravery in fighting the Germans, enrolled at the Warsaw Polytechnic after the war. Arrested by the security service, he died in 1949 during a brutal interrogation under circumstances that remain unknown. General August Emil Fieldorf, one of the key Home Army officers, was hanged in 1953 even though he had not conspired against the communists after 1945. We may assume that, right after the end of WW2, the communist regime cost the lives of tens of thousands of Poles who were killed in action, tortured to death in prisons or murdered as a result of judicial crimes.

The government installed by Stalin not only killed its opponents, but also trampled on their memory. Ciepliński's widow could not light a candle on her husband's tombstone as he had no grave. She lived with the stigma of a “bandit's wife.” Tellingly, the same word, “bandit,” had also been used by the Germans to refer to the members of the Polish underground. Under communist rule, people like Ciepliński were erased from history or slandered by regime historians and propaganda officers for many years. The lies about the Cursed Soldiers became so ingrained that they are repeated by some journalists and democratically elected politicians even today.

Honoured years later

In recent years, however, the opposite trend has emerged – a genuine cult of the Cursed Soldiers. Young people wear T-shirts with their images; rappers and rock stars write songs about them. Efforts to restore the memory of post-war underground soldiers have been made by football fan groups as well as the authorities and state institutions including the Institute of National Remembrance which I have the honour of managing.

A belated tribute has also been paid to Ciepliński. He was posthumously decorated with the Order of the White Eagle – the highest Polish state distinction – and his name was given to streets, schools and a scouting team. The image of his face was put on a post stamp and a silver collectible coin. For all that, we still do not know the location of Ciepliński's anonymous grave. The Institute of National Remembrance is trying to find and identify his remains like it has done for many other Cursed Soldiers murdered by the communists. We will do everything in our power to give our heroes a decent burial.

Karol Nawrocki, President of the National Remembrance Institute