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# HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CASES OF FOREIGN COMBAT: A LOOK BEYOND IRAQ AND SYRIA

AN INTRODUCTION AND FOREWORD TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON  
FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Péter Marton<sup>1</sup>

The concept of „foreign fighters” has in the contemporary context come to imply jihadi combatants joining armed conflicts on the side of their ideological comrades in the broader Middle East and the wider Islamic world. At a time like this it is often overlooked that the two words that constitute the term, i.e. „foreign” and „fighter,” have meanings that befit a far larger and diverse universe of cases.

„Foreign fighter” may be interpreted as someone who fights in the territory of a country different from one’s own (where one grew up or spent most of one’s life), under foreign command, i.e. the command of people from a different country than one’s own. This may be a conveniently broad definition but it is also important to take into account that combatants’ status with respect to where they are fighting and under whose command they do so, as well as their identity as to which country they define as their own, may shift.

Participation in foreign combat may be related to movements of migration out of the preference of the individuals involved, yet even so constraints of all kinds will shape their decision in choosing this path. In some cases forced migration leads to the emergence of a population that can be mobilized for the purpose of combat.

Notwithstanding the diversity of foreign combatants’ motives and circumstances, there may be certain general features of involvement in foreign combat. Based on an overview of related fields of literature, there is a set of expectations that may be universally warranted. These should, consequently, be critically reviewed in the framework of case studies on the subject.

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In light of such an overview<sup>2</sup> – which shall not be presented in detail here for lack of space – the following properties of the phenomenon are anticipated as likely or at least potentially present in most cases.

(1) That many foreign combatants may be young males seeking social status rewards as well as adventure through partaking in what they and their social environment regard as a righteous fight.

(2) That there may be among them some who join fellow combatants, i.e. those significant others who may fit the previously mentioned profile more clearly, out of peer or social pressure.

(3) That language skills play an important role in structuring the dynamics of the migration of prospective and actual combatants, and that such skills are critically important for foreign combatants to make a valuable contribution to the fight.

(4) That the movement may have key „bridge” and „rockstar” figures who play a critical role in its organisation.

(5) That foreign combatants may be looking for a substitute fight in the conflict they join, and may see it as a prequel to eventually continuing essentially the same fight at home.

(6) That given the transnational nature of mobilisation as well as migration for combat, pre-existing transnational human networks and resource bases may play a role in breathing life into the movement of combatants.

(7) That there may develop conflict between foreign and local combatants.

This special issue offers consideration of two cases. In a research article, Hubert Chudzio and Anna Hejczyk, of the Center for the Documentation of Deportations, Expulsion, and Resettlement at the Pedagogical University of Cracow, provide an historical narrative of the creation and the fate, during the course of World War Two, of the 2nd Polish Corps which had its beginnings in the form of the Polish Army in the USSR that was set up in 1941. Subsequently, in a review article Kacper Rękawek

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Thomas Hegghammer, „The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security*, Winter 2010/2011, 35:3, pp. 53-94; Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, „Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2008, 31:5, pp. 412–433. The overview alluded to here builds on extensive literature beyond these sources.

of the Polish Institute of International Affairs takes a look at a recent documentary film (“The Polite People,” 2015) to consider the motives, experience and impact of Western European and other foreign volunteers who have joined combat in the Ukrainian conflict on the rebel side supported by Russia. Both case studies offer careful contextualization of their subject based on extensive prior research, and thus allow for an appreciation of nuances as to the crucial questions this special issue sets out to answer, where these questions are applicable.

In particular, generally intriguing questions may include: Why have combatants in the cases investigated ended up fighting in either foreign land or under foreign command? How did this affect their identities? How has their status changed during the course of the armed conflict they were involved in, and what was the contribution they made? What happened to them upon the end of their respective wars? And how are they seen or remembered in the collective memory of the different political communities concerned?

Beyond this, an assessment of how much the above listed universal expectations turn out to apply in the cases considered in this special issue may also be possible on the basis of the two articles. Some preliminary findings can be advanced at this point to encourage further thought of their findings.

The Polish Army in the USSR emerged in the extraordinary circumstances of World War Two. The mass deportation of Polish people to the Soviet Union, in large numbers, in several waves, resulted in the manpower being in place, and it took the attack by Germany on the USSR in 1941 to change Stalin’s mind as to their fate. The case is thus a hard test of the propositions listed above where most of them are in fact unlikely to apply. The one theoretical assumption that stands out as an exception in this respect is that of battlefield substitution: the members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps were clearly looking at their fight in Italy as indirectly a fight for Poland (with reference to proposition #5).

It may also be worth noting that some aspects of this story are not unique to the case of Poles deported to the Soviet Union. Examples of deportations, forced migration, and the presence of uprooted populations during and after World War Two abound, and in many of the other cases one similarly finds connections to the appearance of combatants in conflicts/combat away from the home countries of those concerned. To point out but one such

instance, with a view to Central-Eastern Europe's history, much of the surviving Jewish population of the region found themselves in Displaced Persons (DP) camps in German territory, and in other countries, in the wake of the war. Many of them went to Palestine eventually, and many of those fought in the Israeli war of independence as "Gahal," i.e. "overseas volunteers." Some had arrived there even before the end of the war, and stayed in Palestine from among the members of the Polish force that made its way to the Middle East via Iran, upon its evacuation from the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

Another theoretical assumption with relevance to the case of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps is the expectation in the literature that the relationship between foreign combatants and other parties may hold potential for conflict. Here this may be worth noting even as the Polish forces made an outstanding contribution to the Allied war effort. The Soviet Union's plans to deploy the Polish Army in the USSR against Germany as they saw fit resulted in General Anders' decision to evacuate to Iran in the first place. Conflict was also manifest in how deals were made by the Allies about the future of Poland with the exclusion of the Polish government in exile. The clash of interests in this respect lay primarily between the Soviet Union's imperial designs and the exiled Polish leadership but this inevitably affected the strategy and decisions of the Western Allies as well.

Moving to a discussion of Kacper Rękawek's review article: the case of Western European and other foreign volunteers in Ukraine is peculiar for its own reasons.

The number of those concerned seems low at the present, and this irregular presence on the battlefield is difficult to research for lack of sufficiently reliable and comprehensive data. On the basis of the scarce anecdotal evidence that is available, the volunteers seem to be mostly young men, fighting in Ukraine referring to their home countries as combat-prohibitive environment. They are nevertheless fighting with the vision of a different social order in mind. For now they seem to be content with self-awarded status rewards, seeing themselves as a vanguard or spearhead of

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<sup>3</sup> Yaacov Markovitzky, *Machal – Overseas volunteers in Israel's War of Independence*. Tel Aviv, World Machal (internet edition), 2007; Nir Arielli, „When are Foreign Fighters Useful? Israel's Transnational Soldiers in the War of 1948 Re-examined,” *Journal of Military History*, 2014, 78:2, pp. 703-724.; Hanna Yablonka, „Holocaust Survivors in the Israeli Army during the 1948 War: Documents and Memory,” *Israel Affairs*, 2006, 12:3, pp. 462-483.

transformation. Exactly for this reason, however, Kacper Rękawek warns that further research is warranted about them, and that the “polite people” of the documentary discussed in his review may in the future stir up calmer waters outside Ukraine. These findings thus lend some validity to a combination of propositions #1 and #5 (i.e. young males fighting a war as a potential prequel to other feats).

Language skills for the purpose of more effectively liaising with local combatants in the case of “Team Vikernes” and other volunteer groups are apparently only inconsistently available via Russian-speaking members of these groups (with reference to proposition #3). As to propositions #4 and #6, i.e. with regards to the role of “rock stars,” “bridge figures” and “pre-existing transnational social networks,” presumably these may have been, and may continue to be, playing a role in the Ukrainian context, too. It ought to be the role of the further research alluded to above to reveal the details of this, with a view to the far right political scene in Europe.

At the same time, it is worth adding that the Ukrainian conflict also exerts a pull in the eyes of other types of foreign volunteer groups. To point to but one example related to this, Chechen combatants are involved on both sides of the war in eastern Ukraine, albeit with very different motives, it seems. The Dudaev Battalion on the pro-Kiev side, for instance, originates from networks around the late Isa Munaev who, once he had to leave Chechnya, used to be based in Denmark – before the Ukrainian war where he eventually died in battle. This battalion is only partly staffed with Chechens. Those concerned come from the Western European Chechen diaspora but Chechens living in Ukraine are also present among them, e.g. Adam Osmaev, the current commander of the Battalion. For these combatants involvement in the war is clearly a case of battlefield substitution.<sup>4</sup>

The Chechen combatants on the rebel side, on the other hand, possibly include men of the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and others from the North Caucasus, at least some of whom may not

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew E. Kamen, „Islamic Battalions, Stocked With Chechens, Aid Ukraine in War With Rebels,” *The New York Times*, 7 July 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/world/europe/islamic-battalions-stocked-with-chechens-aid-ukraine-in-war-with-rebels.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/08/world/europe/islamic-battalions-stocked-with-chechens-aid-ukraine-in-war-with-rebels.html?_r=2) (accessed: 22 November 2015).

have, strictly speaking, volunteered for this mission but may have been under considerable pressure to participate.<sup>5</sup>

## IN CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, these and other cases may show that whilst one rarely finds the overall validity of the universal profile of the foreign fighter phenomenon outlined in seven points above, that list of theoretical propositions may nevertheless provide a useful framework in order to ask meaningful questions that can help understand individual cases at hand.

This special issue of *Biztpol Affairs* may thus offer both general and case-specific insights related to its subject.

It also moves beyond the presently dominant understanding of the phenomenon informed by the discussion surrounding the role of foreign fighters of the jihadi movement, and may thus invite further research on other cases in the future.

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<sup>5</sup> Emil Souleimanov, „The Sundry Motivations of Caucasians in Ukraine,” *The Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, 15 October 2015, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13068-the-sundry-motivations-of-caucasians-in-ukraine.html> (accessed: 22 November 2015).

# ESSAY

“FOR OUR FREEDOM AND YOURS ...”

## POLISH DEPORTEES IN THE RANKS OF THE 2ND POLISH CORPS

Hubert CHUDZIO, Anna HEJCZYK<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*The article provides an historical narrative of the creation and the fate of the 2nd Polish Corps, which had its beginnings in the form of the Polish Army in the USSR that was set up in 1941, in the wake of the Sikorski-Majsky agreement. It provides an account of how Polish people, who were forcibly deported to the Soviet Union, became soldiers of the Polish Army in the USSR as a result of changes in the political circumstances of the day, and it outlines the situation in which they decided in favour of evacuation to Iran. The article then traces their journey through the Middle East and the battles of the Italian campaign of World War II, to conclude by a discussion of what awaited the soldiers – heroes of the Battle of Monte Cassino and other major combat engagements – in the wake of the conflict.*

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. hab. Hubert Chudzio (Associate Professor) is a university lecturer and Director of the Center for the Documentation of Deportations, Expulsion, and Resettlement at the Pedagogical University of Cracow; mgr. Anna Hejczyk (MA) is PhD Student, and Secretary and research fellow of the Center.

*Keywords: Poland, government-in-exile, 2nd Polish Corps, Anders Army, Soviet Union, World War II.*

The battle of Monte Cassino is known as one of the most famous, bloodiest and most vicious struggles of the World War II. Having conquered the monastery and the hilltop, the Allies were able to break through German military fortifications known as the Gustav Line and the road to Rome was thus opened<sup>2</sup>. For Poles, this battle was a symbol of the fortitude, bravery and steadfastness of the Polish soldiers. After hard struggles beginning from January 1944, the Allies (American, British, Canadian, New Zealand, Indian and French troops) could not achieve the goal of the offensive before the soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps joined the fight. On May 18, 1944, first the Polish and subsequently the British flag were raised above the Monte Cassino Benedictine monastery<sup>3</sup>. Polish soldiers fought bravely, hoping to regain an independent country after defeating the Germans. Today, the military cemetery on the slopes of Monte Cassino, where over 1000 Polish soldiers of various religions were buried, reminds us about those events, and so do two sentences in commemoration of their sacrifice near the cemetery: “Pedestrian, tell Poland that we died in the battle, devoted to its service” and “For our and your freedom, we, Polish soldiers gave God – the spirit, Italian soil – the body, and Poland – the heart”<sup>4</sup>. Who were they, and what happened in the earlier lives of these soldiers? Today hardly anybody knows that a majority of them, before reaching Italy, had the tragic experience of deportation to the Soviet Union.

September 1, 1939, was a tragic date in Polish history. The attack of Germany on Poland (without an official declaration of war) started World War II. However, 17 days later, Poland was attacked by another totalitarian country – the Soviet Union. It

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<sup>2</sup> After the Battle of Monte Cassino there followed the battles of Piedimonte, Passo Corno and Monte Cairo, after which the road to Rome was eventually opened.

<sup>3</sup> Władysław Anders, *Bez ostatniego rozdziału. Wspomnienia z lat 1939 - 1946* [*Without the Last Chapter. Memoirs from the Years 1939–1946*] (Kielce: JP: Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Ziemi Drohobyckiej. Koło w Warszawie), p. 247; Harvey Sarnier, *Zdobywcy Monte Cassino: General Anders i jego żołnierze* [*General Anders and the soldiers of the Second Polish Corps*], transl. by Piotr K. Domaradzki (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Zysk I S-ka, 2002), p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> See: Mathew Parker, *Monte Cassino: Opowieść o najbardziej zaciętej bitwie II wojny światowej* [*Monte Cassino*], transl. by Robert Bartoń (Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 2005), p. 389.

was not a coincidence but an effect of the treaty of non-aggression between Nazi Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed on August 23, 1939. The classified protocol enclosed to this treaty determined “spheres of influence” of these two countries in Europe and, in fact, a partition of Poland,<sup>5</sup> which did result from it – a new partition of Poland after the historical precedent of the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the aim of the Germans was to enslave the Polish nation and use them as forced labourers in the area of Nazi Germany, to extend their living space, and to annihilate Jewish people and also Roma people, the eastern occupiers for their part wanted mainly to Russify the inhabitants of the conquered country. According to Stalin’s strategy, all those people who could impede this process had to be eliminated along with the Polish intellectual elite as “enemies of nation”.

In the spring of 1940 in Katyn, Kharkov, Kalinin and other places the NKVD<sup>7</sup> executed with a shot in the back of the head over 21,000 Poles – among others police officers, members of the prison service, soldiers of the Border Protection Corps, Border Guards and also troops captured by the Red Army as prisoners of war. There were over 10,000 military officers and police officers among the casualties of the so-called Katyn massacre.

Simultaneously, in the years of 1940 and 1941 there were four mass deportations of Polish people,<sup>8</sup> where, as Russian sources indicate, at least 315 to 330 thousand Polish citizens were deported (according to Polish historians in exile, this number was substantially greater and may have reached 1.2 to 1.3 million

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<sup>5</sup> Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Bessarabia and eastern Poland ranging up to the rivers Pisa, Narew, Wisła, and San were supposed to belong to the USSR. On the other hand, Latvia together with Vilnius and a border area, as well as western and central Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania (excluding Bessarabia), Hungary and Bulgaria were to belong to Germany. On September 28, 1939, the German-Soviet Frontier Treaty was signed. The partition border of Poland was moved from the Wisła to the Bug river and, in exchange, Latvia passed to under the Soviet control. See: Zbigniew S. Siemaszko, *W sowieckim osaczeniu 1939 – 1943 [In the Soviet besetment 1939 – 1943]* (London: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1991), pp. 17–21.

<sup>6</sup> In the 18th century Russia, Prussia and Austria eliminated Poland in three acts of partition (1772, 1793, 1795). It was not until 123 years of enslavement that Poland regained independence again.

<sup>7</sup> NKVD – Народный комиссариат внутренних дел СССР or the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs – was the central law enforcement agency in the USSR in the years of 1934 to 1946 (and earlier on in Soviet Russia, after 1917). Known as the political police, it was used by Stalin in his politics of terror.

<sup>8</sup> Deportations were carried out in February, April, June and July of 1940 and in May and June of 1941.

persons)<sup>9</sup> to Siberia, northern areas in the European part of Russia (mainly to Arkhangelsk Oblast) and to Kazakhstan (at that time: the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic). Deportations were extended to, among others, military settlers, foresters, railwaymen, clerks (together with their families), refugees from central Poland (fleeing the German invasion into the Eastern Borderlands), and also the families of soldiers and police officers who had been arrested earlier by the Soviet authorities. Most of the deportees were civilians.

The action of the deportation of Polish people was very carefully prepared by the NKVD. In the time allotted to them, armed groups of NKVD soldiers, together with local accomplices, came in the middle of the night or in the early morning to houses where Polish families were sleeping. They woke up terrified men, women and children by knocking their rifles on the door. The deportees had often a few dozen minutes only to pack all their life's possessions while their houses were searched. Then, in a column, Polish families were taken on sleds or carriages (depending on the season of the year) to the nearest railway station where freight trains were already waiting for them. After a long journey in overcrowded cattle wagons, the deportees reached their destination where they had to work. They were cheap labour force for the Soviet Union. They worked in Kazakhstan in kolkhozes, sovkhoses and mines. In Siberia, on the other hand, where temperatures often dropped below minus 40°C, they worked mainly in the forest, cutting down the taiga and loading the trees on rafts.

This is how Stanisław Krauz (deported on February 10, 1940 to Mokotow oblast, who later took part in the Italian campaign) recalls his work in exile: "I worked with my father in the woods. The trees were huge. Seven men were able to embrace them with their hands (of course not all trees were so big). We were cutting them down. When there was 3 to 4 meters of snow, we needed to dig it out because when a tree was cut evenly with

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<sup>9</sup> Julian Siedlecki claims that four mass deportations included over 1,200,000 Polish citizens. See: Julian Siedlecki, *Losy Polaków w ZSRS w latach 1939 – 1986* [*History of Poles in USSR 1939 – 1986*] (Gdańsk: Graf, 1990), p. 45; and Piotr Żaroń – 1,230,000, see: Piotr Żaroń, *Ludność polska w Związku Radzieckim w czasie II wojny światowej* [*Polish people in the Soviet Union during the World War II*] (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1990), p. 132. Daniel Boćkowski has a different opinion. See: Daniel Boćkowski, *Czas nadziei. Obywatele Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w ZSRS i opieka nad nimi placówek polskich w latach 1940 – 1943* [*Time of Hope. Polish citizens in USSR and their care of Polish agencies in years 1940 – 1943*] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo NERITON, Instytut Historii PAN, 1999), p. 95.

the snow layer, it stemmed out of the ground when the snow melted... They came [Soviet guards] and shouted at us that we should have cut it lower”<sup>10</sup>.

Work from the dawn till dusk was not enough for a decent portion of food. The daily allotment was, for example, 800 grams of bread per day for a labourer, and 400 grams for a child. People were starving. Józef Leszczyński (deported on February 10, 1940 to Sverdlovsk oblast, and later a participant of the battle of Monte Cassino) recollected: “The work was hard, of course, but the worse thing was that there was nothing to eat. A man was dying there of starvation. [...] That was a feeling difficult to describe, very strange. When a man is starving, he has no strength to work. [The Soviets] they commanded us to work, and additionally, that we should reach the working standards”<sup>11</sup>.

In the meantime, Poles were also deported to the Gulags, the forced labour camps in the USSR, and they were kept in prisons and prison camps, under investigative arrest or in similar status. This is how Juliusz Szolin (who, after leaving the USSR was a soldier in Polish army in the Middle East and took part in the Italian campaign) recalls his stay in the Gulag (in Komi ASSR) in this way: “I have to say that there was hunger ... there was not enough food. Some people, including me, were keeping some bread until the next day so that we could eat something in the morning. There was even such a rule in the Gulag, that when a prisoner stole some bread from another prisoner, he was killed. There was a death penalty. And the prisoners executed it on such persons themselves. Anything else was allowed to be stolen. If somebody had nice clothes or something else that they brought to the Gulag with them then thieves had the right to steal it. In the Gulag there were political prisoners and criminals, and criminals were ‘the elite’ of the Gulag”. His recollection of working conditions in the woods: “It was so cold that when one closed one’s eyes it was difficult to open them again. Besides, everyone watched out for each other, so when someone noticed some frostbites on one’s cheeks or nose, they then rubbed such a person with the snow to

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<sup>10</sup> Archiwum Centrum Dokumentacji Zsylek, Wypędzeń i Przesiedleń Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego w Krakowie (ACDZWIP) [The Archive of The Center for the Documentation of Deportations, Expulsion and Resettlement at the Pedagogical University in Cracow], Interview no. IV 223 with Stanisław Krauz by Katarzyna Odrzywółek and Adrian Szopa on April 10, 2013, in Bradford.

<sup>11</sup> ACDZWIP, Interview no. IV 244 with Józef Leszczyński by Alicja Śmigielska and Hubert Chudzio on April 15, 2013, in Leeds.

prevent further frostbites. But little frostbites happened all the time. Men had to be very careful about it”<sup>12</sup>.

Harsh climate, starvation, hard work, and degradation were the daily routine for the Polish deportees and inmates of the labour camps. However, their lives changed dramatically in the middle of 1941. On June 22, Germany, the former ally of Stalin, attacked the USSR. This resulted in major changes in the international arena as the Soviets approached the Western allies. Thanks to the British, on July 30, 1941, the agreement between Poland and the Soviet Union, the so-called Sikorski-Mayski agreement, was signed in London. As a result, diplomatic relations were re-established, and the creation of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR<sup>13</sup> was agreed, and that those Polish citizens who were deprived of freedom in the USSR (including women and children!) would be given “amnesty.”

General Władysław Sikorski, the Polish Prime Minister and the commander in chief of the Polish Army had to make an important decision about choosing a commander of the forming Polish Army in the USSR. General Władysław Anders was appointed for this position<sup>14</sup> (he was also promoted to the rank of “general of division”)<sup>15</sup>. This is how General Anders recollected

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<sup>12</sup> ACDZWiP, Interview no. IV 104 with Juliusz Szolin by Anna Hejczyk and Adrian Szopa on October 15, 2012 and on October 16, 2012 in Nottingham.

<sup>13</sup> See the content: *Polsko – Radziecka Umowa Wojskowa [Polish – Soviet Military Agreement]* of August 14, 1942, in: Bogusław Polak, Michał Polak, comp., *Armia Polska w ZSRS 1941 – 1942. Organizacja Armii Polskiej w ZSRS 1941 – 1942. Wybór źródeł. [Polish Army in USSR 1941 – 1942. Organisation of Polish Army in USSR 1941 – 1942. Selection of sources]*, vol. 1, (Leszno: Wydawnictwo Instytutu im. Gen. Stefana „Grota” Roweckiego, 2006), pp. 18–20.; and also: Zbigniew Wawer, *Armia generała Władysława Andersa w ZSRS. 1941 – 1942 [Army of general Władysław Anders in USSR. 1941 – 1942]*, Warsaw: Bellona, 2012), pp. 20–51.

<sup>14</sup> Władysław Anders (1892–1970) at the time of the outbreak of World War II was a “general of brigade” (since 1934). Since 1937 he was in command of the “Nowogródzka” Cavalry Brigade in Baranowicze, which was part of the Modlin army in September 1939 and fought in the area of Lidzbark Welski and Płock. Next, as a commander of the operational group under his name, Anders took part in battles in the area of Lublin and the village of Turka near Sambor. After he was wounded, he was taken prisoner by the Soviets. He was in prison in Lwów and in Moscow in the headquarters of the NKVD in Lubyanka where brutal questioning was daily routine. See: Antoni Lenkiewicz, *General Władysław Anders. 1892 – 1970* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo – Biuro Tłumaczeń, 2008), pp. 21–28.

<sup>15</sup> See: Rozkaz nr 1 Dowódcy Polskich Sił Zbrojnych w ZSRS Generała Władysława Anders [Order no. 1 of the Commander of Polish Armed Forces in USSR, general Władysław Anders] in: Bogusław Polak, Michał Polak, comp., *Armia Polska w ZSRS 1941 – 1942. Organizacja Armii Polskiej w ZSRS 1941 – 1942. Wybór źródeł. [Polish Army in USSR 1941 – 1942. Organisation of Polish*

the moment of leaving the Soviet prison: "I left the prison without my socks, only in a shirt and long johns with a stamp "internal prison N.K.V.D." But I was driven in a limousine of the NKVD chief. I got out of the building of the NKVD after 20-month imprisonment, having spent 7 months in solitary confinement. It was a miracle that I gained freedom. Only a few hours before that I was an ordinary prisoner of Lubyanka. At the present I am not only free but I am going to be commander of the Polish Army that is to be created in the USSR. I am going to fight for Poland!"<sup>16</sup> Other Polish officers were less lucky and did not have the chance to fight again for the country. On Stalin's command, they were murdered with a shot in the back of their heads, and buried together in deep pits, in forests of the western area of the USSR. For them, the Sikorski-Mayski agreement could not make a difference.

The information about the agreement sooner or later spread to Polish deportees across the Soviet Union. Men who were able to offer military service (very often young boys who claimed that they were older only to be able to join the army), went to the south of the USSR in order to join the Polish formations there. They felt it was their duty in favour of the country, and a chance to break out from the Soviet enslavement. One of those who made the trek was Jerzy Sielicki who was sent to the Gulag in 1940 near Archangelsk as a seventeen-year-old boy. After the declaration of amnesty, he reached Buzuluk<sup>17</sup> completely exhausted. He remembered that he was so exhausted that he could not even walk. Polish soldiers he met came to rub his feet with snow, and they brought him some bread and coffee. He recollected: "I felt very strange then. I could not stop crying"<sup>18</sup>. There were also civilians who were going south hoping for a rescue. Meanwhile, at the beginning of 1942, there was a dramatic deterioration of Polish–Soviet relations. The Soviets wanted to send the Polish 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division as quickly as possible to the front without waiting for the whole army to be standing. This command of Stalin was rejected by General Anders and his decision was also supported by General Sikorski. Soon after this event, the Soviet side informed them that in March there would be restrictions

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*Army in USSR 1941 – 1942. Selection of sources*, vol. 1, (Leszno: Wydawnictwo Instytutu im. Gen. Stefana „Grotą” Roweckiego, 2006), pp. 30–31.

<sup>16</sup> Anders, [*Without the Last Chapter*], p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Buzuluk – the city in European area of the Soviet Russia where the Polish Army was formed.

<sup>18</sup> ACDZWIP, Interview no. IV 31 with Jerzy Sielicki by Alicja Śmigielska and Krzysztof Kędziora on October 24, 2010 and on October 27, 2010 in Leicester.

affecting the food supply of the Polish Army. Rations would be provided for only 44,000, down from 76,000 persons.

With a view to this, on March 19, General Anders issued an order of evacuation to Iran<sup>19</sup> (staff orders were given out on March 23)<sup>20</sup>. It is interesting to note that the British at first had no idea that the evacuation would also include civilians. For this reason, at the beginning it was a great challenge to supply the arriving Polish people with clothes, food, and other necessities in Iran.

Expecting this, General Anders made a very courageous decision. This is how he remembered the moment: "Transport leaves with accuracy to one minute. The evacuation should take place within a week. Anyone who will not leave at that time is forever losing a chance to get out of Soviet Russia. I am to wait for the possible agreement of the British authorities! (...) I don't have the time for intervention and explanations. Either I rescue the civilians or leave them to their own destiny. Even if in Iran half of them is to die, here certainly they are all to be dead. I take full responsibility for that. I do not cancel any directives and orders"<sup>21</sup>. Ultimately, there were about 75,000 soldiers and also about 38,000 civilians, including a great number of children, who left the USSR during two great evacuations by sea (March to April and August to October 1942)<sup>22</sup>. Additionally, a few transports reached Iran by road (through Ashgabat and Mashhad)<sup>23</sup>. In the following months there were a few thousand Poles who got out of the USSR to Iran. But the majority of Polish deportees who stayed behind remained in Soviet Russia for the next difficult years of war. Those among them who were rescued were to come

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<sup>19</sup> It was known primarily as „Persia” until 1935 when the name „Iran” became the official international name.

<sup>20</sup> Siemaszko, *W sowieckim osaczeniu [In the Soviet Besetment]*, p. 224.

<sup>21</sup> Anders, [*Without the Last Chapter*], p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> See: Janusz Wróbel, *Uchodźcy polscy ze Związku Sowieckiego, 1942 – 1950 [Polish Deportees from the Soviet Union, 1942 – 1950]* (Łódź: The Institute of National Remembrance. Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, 2003), pp. 20; 40.

<sup>23</sup> For more details see: Piotr Szubarczyk, „Z historii dzieci polskich na „niehumannej ziemi”. Misja wicekonsula Lisieckiego” [“History of Polish Children on „inhumane land”. The Mission of vice-consul Lisiecki”], in: *Polskie dzieci na tułaczyczych szlakach 1939 – 1950 [Polish children in exile tracks 1939 – 1950]* ed. by Janusz Wróbel, Joanna Żelazko (Warsaw: The Institute of National Remembrance. Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, 2008), pp. 55–65; Siemaszko, *W sowieckim osaczeniu [In the Soviet Besetment]*, 299; Leszek Beldowski, „Przyczyny i trasy wędrówki” [„Causes and ways of excursion”], in: *Polacy w Indiach 1942-1948 w świetle dokumentów i wspomnień [Poles in India 1942 – 1948. Second World War story: based on archive documents and personal reminiscences]*, ed. by Leszek Beldowski et al. (Warsaw: Efekt, 2002), p. 15.

back to the country over the Wisła River at the end of the 1940s and in the course of the 1950s. However, many of them never returned.

In Iran the Polish deportees had to part ways. As a result of international decisions, and in order to be able to safely wait out the end of the war, civilians were sent to Africa (over 18,000 of them)<sup>24</sup>, about 5,000 went to India<sup>25</sup>, about 1,500 people to Mexico<sup>26</sup> and about 830 people (mainly Polish orphans) were sent to New Zealand<sup>27</sup>. Meanwhile, upon the evacuation from the USSR the Polish Army could join up with the Polish units which already were in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> Thus the Polish Armed Forces in the Middle East were created on September 12, 1942. Its commander was General Anders. There was an informal partition of the “Eastern Orthodox” (also called the “Buzuluks”) – that is, Polish deportees from the Soviet Union – and the “Ramseses” (the “pharaohs”), that is, the soldiers who already had been in the Middle East before them. The “Eastern Orthodox” were in the

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<sup>24</sup> Bronisław M. Pancewicz, *Harcerstwo w Afryce. 1941-1949* [*Scouting in Africa. 1941 – 1949*] (London: Harcerska Komisja Historyczna [Scouting Historical Commission], 1985), 3; Wiktor Ostrowski, *Safari przez Czarny Łą. Szkice z podróży po Kenyi, Tanganyce, Ugandzie i wyspie Zanzibar* [*Safari on the Black Land. Sketches from the journeys to Kenya, Tanganya, Uganda and the Island of Zanzibar*] (London: Gryf, 1947), p. 304. For more details about Poles' lives in African resettlement camps see: Hubert Chudzio, „Z Syberii na Czarny Łą. Polskie osiedla w Afryce Wschodniej i Południowej w latach 1942-1952” [From Siberia to Black Land. Polish Resettlement Camps in East and South Africa in 1942 – 1952] in: *Z Mrozów Syberii pod słońce Aryki. W 70. rocznicę przybycia polskich Sybiraków do Afryki Wschodniej i Południowej* [*From Frosts of Siberia to the Sun of Africa. In the 70th Anniversary of Coming Polish Siberians to East and South Africa*], ed. by Hubert Chudzio (Cracow: Oficyna Wydawnicza Text, 2012), pp. 80–113; Anna Hejczyk, *Sybiracy pod Kilimandżaro. Tengeru. Polskie osiedle w Afryce Wschodniej we wspomnieniach jego mieszkańców* [*Siberians of Kilimanjaro. Tengeru. Polish Resettlement Camp in East Africa in the Memoirs of their Residents*] (Rzeszów – Cracow: The Institute of National Remembrance. Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, the Pedagogical University of Cracow, 2013), pp. 41–132.

<sup>25</sup> For more details see: *Polacy w Indiach*, ed. by Leszek Beldowski, pp. 33–571.

<sup>26</sup> For more details see: Alfons Jacewicz, *Santa Rosa. Osiedle polskich dzieci tułaczy w Meksyku 1942 – 1946* [*Santa Rosa. A Residential Area of Polish Wandering Children in Mexico 1942 – 1946*] (Żary: Alfons Jacewicz, 1998), pp. 27–58.

<sup>27</sup> For more details see: *Dwie ojczyzny. Polskie dzieci w Nowej Zelandii. Tułacze wspomnienia* [*Two homelands. Polish Children in New Zealand. Memoirs of Wanderers*], ed. by S. Manterys (Warsaw: Rytm, 2006), pp. 31–209.

<sup>28</sup> It refers to, among others, soldiers of the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade who became famous during the Siege of Tobruk. After the Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade was joined with the 9th and 10th Infantry Divisions in May 1942 in Palestine, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Rifle Division was formed.

great majority but the “Ramseses” made up almost the whole of the officer staff. One of the “Ramseses”, Władysław Górski, remembers his colleagues from “Siberia” in the following way: “The appearance of “the Eastern Orthodox” spoke for itself. They were physically poor and mentally maltreated. They needed to be cured first, to be fed and their faith in the sense of life needed to be regained and after that we could think of turning them into soldiers. It is not surprising that these people adored General Anders, someone who shared fortunes and misfortunes with them in “the inhumane land” and then helped them to leave it behind”<sup>29</sup>. Upon a visit paid by General Anders to the cadets, one of them said: “We regained our lives thanks to you, general Anders. Now we are ready to give our lives to you, General. (...) For Poland, we will raise a monument higher than the royal pyramids and harder than granite – a monument of glory”<sup>30</sup>. As Władysław Górski recollects: “old soldiers of the Carpathian Brigade” did not sympathize with General Anders at first because of his personal style of “keeping a stiff upper lip”. Within time they started to respect him, however, after they came to see him as a good commander on the front – “his undoubted contribution was to join soldiers of the Corps and give them the spirit to fight.”<sup>31</sup>

The Polish Army was reorganized during the stay in Iraq. They fulfilled their allies’ orders of protecting shafts and oil fields in the country, and they trained intensively (although there were problems with a lack of armament and equipment). Because the army was motorized, mechanics and drivers needed also to be trained. In this field, the Women’s Auxiliary Service played an important role. Female soldiers were often drivers (the so-called “drajwerki”<sup>32</sup>) as well as they worked in the administration and the health service. The hostile climatic conditions proved unhealthy for the Polish soldiers. The situation changed after General Sikorski spoke to the British authorities. They made a decision that Polish soldiers would be transferred to Palestine

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<sup>29</sup> Roman Dziewoński, ed., *Nie wszyscy, ale dojdziemy. General Władysław Anders* [Not all of us, but some will come though. General Władysław Anders] (London : Pro-Vision Publishing, 2013), p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Norman Davies, *Szlak Nadziei. Armia Andersa. Marsz przez trzy kontynenty* [The Way of Hope. Anders Army] (Warsaw: Rosikon Press, 2015), p. 250.

<sup>31</sup> Dziewoński, *Nie wszyscy* [Not All], p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> See as an example: ACDZWiP, Interview no. IV 221 with Eugenia Jurasz by Katarzyna Odrzywólek and Hubert Chudzio on April 7, 2013 in Bradford, and also: Tadeusz Paniecki ed., *2 Korpus Polski w bitwie o Monte Cassino z perspektywy półwiecza* [The 2nd Polish Corps in the Battle of Monte Cassino from the Half – Century’s Perspective] (Warsaw: Bellona, 1994), pp. 196–206.

(small subdivisions still stayed in Iran, Iraq and Egypt) and that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps would be subsequently separated from this army under the commandment of General Anders. The new formation was established on July 21, 1943, after the tragic death of General Sikorski<sup>33</sup> and in August and September 1943 the army was transferred to Palestine<sup>34</sup>. Life conditions in Palestine were much better when taking into consideration the climate, the food, the equipment supply and even the access to cultural goods.

Thereafter, at the end of 1943 and in the beginning of 1944, the main armed forces of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps were transferred through Egypt to Italy<sup>35</sup>. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps was a part of the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army, and all the operational issues were under rules and procedures of the British command. However, all internal matters were regulated by Polish rules as the Corps was under the control of the Polish government in exile which was based in London.

The situation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps was not easy as, since April 1943, the exiled government was not recognised by one of the allies, the USSR. Diplomatic relations between the Polish and Soviet governments were cut as a result of the discovery of the mass grave of Polish officers in Katyn – a discovery made by the Germans who accused the Soviets of this massacre. The Polish government asked the International Red Cross to send a commission to Katyn in order to investigate the case and indicate who was guilty. In this situation the Soviets deceitfully accused Poles of cooperation with the Germans and broke off the diplomatic relations themselves.

On March 23, 1944, the commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, Oliver Leese, informed General Anders about planning already underway for the fourth offensive under Monte Cassino. The Polish commander recollected: “The 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps had the hardest work to do: to conquer the hills of Monte Cassino in the first stage of operation and then Piedmonte Hill. It was a great moment for me. I realized the whole difficulty of the following task for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps. General Leese also understood it and he did not hide it. The toughness of the fight taking place in the city

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<sup>33</sup> Władysław Sikorski died on July 4, 1943 in an airplane crash off Gibraltar.

<sup>34</sup> Piotr Żaroń, *Armia Andersa [Anders Army]* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 1996), p. 224.

<sup>35</sup> For more details about the struggles of the 2nd Corps in Italy see: Żaroń, *Armia Andersa [Anders Army]*, pp. 253–272.; Melchior Wańkowicz, *Bitwa o Monte Cassino [Battle of Monte Cassino]*, vol. II (Rome: Wydawnictwo Oddziału Kultury i Prasy Drugiego Polskiego Korpusu, 1945 – 1947), pp. 52–345.

of Cassino and the monastery hills was already known. Although the Monte Cassino monastery was bombed, even though the allied troops and tanks partly made their way into the neighbouring hills, and even as the city of Cassino was already in ruins, Germans maintained this point of resistance and they still kept the road to Rome closed. I realized that the Corps stood to suffer big losses. The task, however, could benefit the Polish cause given the fame Monte Cassino already had in the world. It would be the best answer to the Soviet propaganda that claimed that Poles did not want to fight the Germans. It would keep up the spirit of the resistance of a fighting country. It would bring great glory to the Polish army. I considered the risk of undertaking this battle, the inevitable losses, and also my full responsibility in case of failure. After quick thought, I said I would undertake this difficult task.”<sup>36</sup>

Poles were to achieve, as it seemed, something impossible: to take the monastery hill with a frontal attack, climbing rock by a rock, dragging their weapons and ammunition with them under the constant shelling of the enemy. The first Polish attack started during the night of May 11 to 12, 1944. The losses were huge but Poles achieved to maintain a position on the high slopes of the mountain which made the Germans feel anxious. Zygmunt Sosnowski (deported in April 1940 to Kazakhstan) was wounded during this battle. Having been shot three times in his leg, he saved his colleague’s life. “I was lying on the ground on the way to Massa Albaneta. There we were attacking from Hill 593. Sappers worked by the road during the struggle ... and they were dying in large numbers. The chaplain of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment<sup>37</sup> walked along the road to give out the last sacraments. The Germans did not shoot at him. I forgot his name ... he was a monk. Our attack was going with ‘the Snake’s Head’ down the hills. There we had great losses. In order to see anything one had to move and then they shot me. Fortunately, they failed... and shot me in my leg. I did not faint. It was me who was considered to belong to the cross of the brave ones because I saved my colleague’s life. He was shot... and he did not want to move. I crawled to him and put him on one side so that he could not be seen,”<sup>38</sup> he recollects.

Finally, when on May 18 the Germans started to retreat, Poles occupied the monastery. Casualties of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps reached 4199

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<sup>36</sup> Anders, *Bez ostatniego rozdziału* [Without the Last Chapter], pp. 231–232.

<sup>37</sup> Perhaps Zygmunt Sosnowski meant the 6th Infantry Brigade which was a part of the 5th Infantry Division.

<sup>38</sup> ACDZWIP, Interview no. IV 119 with Zygmunt Sosnowski by Anna Hejczyk and Adrian Szopa on October 6, 2012, in Nottingham.

soldiers, including 923 killed, 2931 badly wounded, and 345 missing in action.<sup>39</sup> Stanisław Jezioro (deported in 1940 to Kazakhstan) recollects these moments as follows: “I remember the day when Monte Cassino was conquered. I was there, I mean, in the artillery, a little bit further. And, all of a sudden, we heard St. Mary’s Bugle Call<sup>40</sup> and the Polish flag was raised above Cassino Hill. We saw this. We were also delegated to take part in the official march of the Polish army in Monte Cassino as they started to build a cemetery there. There one could see how many people died. The parade was small. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps was decimated, because so many were wounded and killed, only a few was left.”<sup>41</sup>

Straight after the monastery was conquered, the struggle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps still continued – for Piedmonte. In the wake of the latter, Poles took part in battles in and around Ancona and in the Emilian Alps. The Italian campaign was ended in April 1945 after conquering Bologna.<sup>42</sup> Italians greeted Poles with joy.<sup>43</sup>

In May 1945 Polish soldiers received news of the end of the war. Józef Krzyszczyk (earlier deported by the NKVD to the Gulag in the north of Magadan) together with other soldiers greatly celebrated this for three days. This celebration was not without some reflections – he recollected: “The pompous end of the war came for us but, on the other hand, while one cried with joy at that, one also cried because of the disappointment that we would not go home. I was content that I had two arms and two legs and that the war was over. When they said “the end of the war” – there was a prayer, and I was thankful that my arms and my legs were whole. That was a miracle”<sup>44</sup>. In the meantime the number of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps swelled from 56,000 to 105,000 soldiers (in July

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<sup>39</sup> Żaroń, *Armia Andersa [Anders Army]*, p. 263. Władysław Anders, on the other hand, claims that after the battles of Monte Cassino and Piedimonte losses of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps were as follows: „72 officers, 788 non-commissioned officers and privates were killed, 204 officers, and 2,618 non-commissioned officers and privates were wounded. In total, losses of the killed, wounded or missing amounted to 281 officers and 3,505 non-commissioned officers and privates”, see: Anders, *Bez ostatniego rozdziału [Without the last Chapter]*, p. 250.

<sup>40</sup> St. Mary’s Bugle Call is a traditional anthem, played every hour, on the hour, by a trumpeter from the highest tower of Saint Mary’s Church in Cracow.

<sup>41</sup> ACDZWiP, Interview no. IV 110 with Stanisław Jezioro by Anna Hejczyk and Adrian Szopa on October 12, 2012, in Nottingham.

<sup>42</sup> Żaroń, *Armia Andersa [Anders Army]*, pp. 264–272.

<sup>43</sup> Marek Świącicki, *Za siedmioma rzekami była Bolonia. Ostatnia bitwa Drugiego Korpusu we Włoszech [After seven rivers there was Bologna. The last Battle of the 2nd Corps in Italy]* (Rome: Oddział Kultury i Prasy 2 Korpusu, 1945), pp. 95–97.

<sup>44</sup> ACDZWiP, Interview no. IV 239 with Józef Krzyszczyk by Katarzyna Odrzywołek and Adrian Szopa in April 2013 in Leeds.

1945), in the wake of the ending of their military operations, taking in many Polish prisoners of war, among others.<sup>45</sup>

During World War II Poles participated in battles on many fronts – the September campaign in Poland, the battle of France, the Norwegian campaign, the battle of England, the defence of Tobruk, Operation Market Garden, the landing in Normandy, the Italian campaign, and the battle of Berlin. The aim was one – to return to an independent country at the end. Unfortunately, the majority of the soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps who were earlier deported to the USSR, could not see this goal achieved. Most of them came from the Polish Eastern Borders, areas which the Polish Republic lost in favour of the USSR due to the decisions of the “Big Three” Allied leaders at the Tehran and Yalta conferences. In Poland, there was the communist Provisional Government of National Unity formed which was imposed by Stalin. It was subsequently accepted by the governments of Great Britain and the United States in July 1945. By the end of June 1946 only over 15,000 soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps declared their willingness to leave Italy and return to Poland. The majority of the soldiers were reasonably afraid of repressions and they decided to go to Great Britain instead.

There, most of them decided to join the Polish Resettlement Corps – a British organization formed in 1946 which was to help the soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West in their transition from a military to a civilian life.

## CONCLUSION

For the soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West, of which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps was part, the victory in World War II had a bitter taste. The victory parade in London in 1946 was held without the Poles who fielded one of the greatest armies among the allies at war against Nazi Germany. At that time, the communist government in Warsaw took away the Polish

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<sup>45</sup> To the ranks of the 2nd Polish Corps were added prisoners of war – soldiers from the Polish military as of September 1939, from the National Army (the *Armija Krajowa*, i.e. the Polish underground forces), and also Poles who were deported for forced labour to Germany, and Poles who were forced to join the Wehrmacht during the war. See: Żaroń, *Armia Andersa [Anders Army]*, p. 273; Marek Ney – Krwawicz, *Na pięciu kontynentach. Polskie dzieci, młodzież i szkoły na tułaczycy szlakach 1939 – 1950 [On five continents. Polish children, the youth and schools on wandering roads 1939 – 1950]* (Warsaw: Marek Ney – Krwawicz, Muzeum Wojska Polskiego, 2014), p. 191.

citizenship of the Polish officers who were abroad<sup>46</sup>. For the heroes of Monte Cassino and other fields of glory, enforced emigration, social degradation,<sup>47</sup> and longing for their country awaited. In the first years after the war, these expatriate heroes were constantly ready for action to overthrow communism and regain independence for Poland. However, most of them died before the transition of the system that started in 1989, and their graves are in foreign land. Fortunately, in the wake of the fall of the Eastern Bloc, we can now talk openly about the deeds of these people and their great love for their homeland which was unrelenting, no matter what circumstances they found themselves in.

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<sup>46</sup> The Council of Ministers of the Provisional Government of National Unity on September 26, 1946 ruled in an act that 30 majors, 26 lieutenant colonels, 14 colonels and 6 generals, including General Anders, were deprived of Polish citizenship. See: Żaroń, *Armia Andersa [Anders Army]*, p. 280.

<sup>47</sup> General Stanisław Maczek (commander of the 1st Armoured Division which won the battle of Falaise) after the war worked as a barman in Great Britain, and General Stanisław Sosabowski (commander of the 1st Independent Paratroopers Brigade which took part in the battle of Arnhem and Driel) worked as a warehouseman.

# REVIEW ARTICLE

## THE „POLITE PEOPLE”: PRO-RUSSIAN FIGHTERS IN THE DONBASS, A DOCUMENTARY BY KAT ARGO, 2015, SELF-RELEASED

Kacper Rękawek<sup>1</sup>

In the Summer of 2014, at around and about the peak of the fighting in the Donbass, the Russian *RT* station broadcast one of its most extraordinary videos related to the conflict in Ukraine. In it, viewers saw French volunteers who decided to join the separatist Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) forces in the fighting in the Donbass region. They proudly posed for the cameras and readily explained their rationale for being present on the frontlines in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly, one could get a glimpse of European foreign fighters who were not Muslim, and were not in Syria. They would not be sharing their exploits related to combating “infidels” in the Middle East. These men were Western Europeans who came to fight in a very Eastern European war.

As a terrorism analyst at a think-tank in Central Europe, in a country neighbouring Ukraine, the author could not have disregarded such news. Throughout 2013 and 2014, many colleagues based in Western Europe devoted a significant amount of their time and research to the issue of foreign fighters in Syria, with special regard to members of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, the local Al-Qaeda affiliate. The number of these combatants continued to grow and their phenomenon was rebranded as the West’s foremost security

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<sup>2</sup> *Russia Today*, “United Continent’: European volunteers fighting Kiev troops in Eastern Ukraine,” <https://www.rt.com/news/183864-ukraine-european-volunteers-fighting/>, last accessed on 5 November 2015.

issue.<sup>3</sup> The question of what happens next if such individuals return from the battlefield was catapulted to the front of the discussions on contemporary security and counter-terrorism (CT). The author witnessed this during the course of conference engagements and field work on European counter-terrorism in Brussels – at the NATO Head-Quarters and while interviewing European Union CT officials. He was in no position to contribute with anything insightful or brand new to these discussions as his country was hardly “producing” any foreign fighters of the kind in question. The situation was not any different in other countries of Central-Eastern Europe. To some, this may seem to be a surprising state of affairs as e.g. Poland, the biggest country in the aforementioned part of Europe, has a rich and long tradition of its citizens’ involvement in foreign conflicts.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, Poland lacks a domestic jihadist or Islamist scene and the milieu which could act as a conveyor belt for its nationals to join the ranks of ISIS. Against this backdrop, the appearance of foreign fighters in the closer region was bound to spark interest and propel one to study the issue more deeply.

Researchers in Central-Eastern Europe are typically dumbfounded upon the discovery that fellow Europeans, especially Western Europeans, would bother to participate in a conflict in this part of the continent. What is more, some would also wonder as to why such “foreign fighters,” as they undoubtedly should be called,<sup>5</sup> were ready to embrace the ideals of the Eastern Ukrainian separatists. In short, the question of their motivation came to the fore, and had to be meaningfully answered to first of all. Very few secondary sources were helpful in the process of establishing the rationale behind their decision to join the fight in Ukraine. Hardly anyone wrote about this, or, let alone, deemed the issue significant enough to investigate it further. This author

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<sup>3</sup> See: the website of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation’s *Western Foreign Fighters in Syria* project, at <http://icsr.info/projects/western-foreign-fighters-syria/>, last accessed on 4 November 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Kacper Rekawek, “For Our Freedom and Yours?: The Lack of Central European Foreign Fighters in Syria,” *The Clear Banner*, <http://jihadology.net/2014/05/30/the-clear-banner-for-our-freedom-and-yours-the-lack-of-central-european-foreign-fighters-in-syria/>, last accessed on 24 October 2015.

<sup>5</sup> David Malet, the world’s most prominent expert on foreign fighters, defines them as non-citizens “of a state experiencing civil conflict who arrives from an external state to join an insurgency.” See: David Malet, “Foreign Fighter Mobilization and Persistence in a Global Context,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27 (2015), p. 459.

contacted many journalists who reported on the war in Ukraine and one of them, asking to remain anonymous, commented that “this is an interesting topic but it is hardly relevant” as in his view there were too few such fighters present on the Ukrainian battlefield. A Russian observer of the conflict confirmed this view while stating that “[he] heard about European volunteers fighting for the Militia [separatists]” but “had no opportunity to meet them either in Donetsk or at the front.”<sup>6</sup> If there had been many of such volunteers then the observer should not have had any problems interacting or in fact interviewing them.

The presence of such fighters would nevertheless be noted by insightful researchers and observers of the conflict who would discuss their arrival and functioning in the DNR “armed forces” in the context of the huge Russian foreign fighter mobilization for the war in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> The latter group of foreign fighters, very hard to distinguish from indigenous fighters, i.e. separatist-minded inhabitants of Eastern Ukraine, including Russian mercenaries and members of Russian military units deployed in Eastern Ukraine, dwarfed any other contingent of non-Ukrainians present on either side of the conflict. It is true, however, that some of the pro-Ukraine volunteer battalions were also deploying foreign fighters in their ranks.

Intrigued, the author attempted to take stock of the issue of foreign fighters present in the war in Ukraine. His background in terrorism studies and links with fellow researchers focusing on foreign fighters present in Syria provided him with the necessary toolbox and resources. In the construction of a database on the elusive fighters present in the conflict, the author looked not only at the secondary (mostly online) sources which touched upon the issue, but also took his research to social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte), and spoke to some of the fighters who either were still based in the conflict zone or had returned home from there.

This research led him to explore the world of the likes of “The Fourth Political Theory,”<sup>8</sup> and to reconsider his earlier notion of

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<sup>6</sup> Adrei Borodulin, “French volunteer fighters for DPR: ‘We want to come back to Donbass soon and start an offensive,’” SLAVYANGRAD.org, <http://slavyangrad.org/2014/11/30/french-volunteers-we-want-to-come-back-and-start-an-offensive/>, last accessed on 25 October 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See: Nikolai Mitrokhin, “Infiltration, Instruktion, Invasion Russlands Krieg in der Ukraine,” *OSTEUROPA* 64 (2015), pp. 3-16.

<sup>8</sup> A book of this title by the Russian intellectual Alexandr Dugin.

the crusades as many sources, supportive of either side of the conflict, utilized such references while attempting to explain their rationale for fighting in Ukraine. Moreover, it proved intellectually as well as emotionally challenging as the author, a Polish national, encountered his compatriots fighting in the ranks of the pro-Russian DNR separatists allegedly to avenge the ethnic cleansing of Polish citizens by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in the 1940s. He found himself discussing the 1945 siege of Breslau, or Polish Wrocław, and the “issue” of whether the Holocaust was a Jewish hoax, with Western European foreign fighters who apparently believed so. Finally, the author was forced to navigate the murky waters of “-isms,” i.e. capitalism, communism, fascism, imperialism and socialism as the fighters proved very interested in utilizing the aforementioned labels in their descriptions of the conflict. Research findings were subsequently presented in a policy paper published in March 2015 by the author.<sup>9</sup> These could be summarized as follows:

- The conflict attracted a relatively small number of foreign fighters who failed to form anything akin to “NATO’s Foreign Legion” on the pro-Ukraine side, or the “Donbass International Brigades” on the side of the separatist forces.

- Representatives of several nations joined the ranks of the DNR militias. However, the number of actually identifiable confirmed foreign fighters on the pro-Ukraine side was slightly higher. At the same time, the high estimates of the number of fighters on both sides were very similar.

- Foreign fighters joined the conflict driven by a variety of motives and one could identify adherents of the same ideologies present on both sides of the conflict, often directly fighting each other. This led in some cases to surprising alliances as e.g. “communists and Nazis” would fight alongside each other e.g. “for the liberation of Russia” [that is, territory in Eastern Ukraine].<sup>10</sup>

- The highest number of foreign fighters, present on either side of the conflict, seemed to have come from a far-right,

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<sup>9</sup> See: Kacper Rekawek, “Neither ‘NATO’s Foreign Legion’ Nor the ‘Donbass International Brigades’: (Where Are All the) Foreign Fighters in Ukraine?,” *PISM Policy Paper* No. 6 (108), 2015, [http://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=19434](http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19434), last accessed on 27 October 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Ortega Dolz, “We fought together, communists and Nazis alike, for the liberation of Russia,” *El País*, 27 February 2015, [http://elpais.com/elpais/2015/02/27/inenglish/1425051026\\_915897.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2015/02/27/inenglish/1425051026_915897.html), last accessed on 27 October 2015.

nationalistic background. This suggests the presence of a European milieu or scene that is receptive to the ideological messages emanating from participants to the conflict in Ukraine. To an extent, one could suggest that the aforementioned scene underwent a split as its members lined up to either support Ukraine (a minority of them), or opted for siding with the pro-Russian separatists (a majority of them);

- The return of such fighters could constitute a security issue for different European countries whose security sectors are focused on monitoring ISIS returnees. Some of the aforementioned fighters could act as influencers or instigators of future violent acts, be it terrorism or political violence, emanating from the extreme right. Thus the author argued for the close supervision of the returnees from the war in Ukraine.

It was in the wake of the publication of the research findings above that the author came across the work of Kat Argo, a female freelance journalist and formerly a U.S. Army soldier, now based in the Donbass.<sup>11</sup> For months, she was practically embedded with a group of foreign fighters in DNR ranks. They operated under the name of “Team Vikernes,” allegedly in tribute to Varg Vikernes, a black metal icon and the convicted killer of a fellow black metal musician – a statement meant to unsettle outsiders. The “team” consisted of a few Brazilian and French fighters who from afar may have seemed ready-made to attract a lot of media attention. Two of the French members of the group had actually been amongst the four Westerners who first posed for cameras in the Summer of 2014 in Donetsk. Later on they were to meet one of the Brazilian members who, surprisingly, had Russian roots and was able to attract a few of his countrymen to join the separatist forces. While being embedded with them, Argo worked on a film project which she released in August 2015, entitled *Polite People*.

The title of the movie itself is a pun on the description of the seemingly unknown soldiers, or the “little green men,” who effectively took over Crimea in the late winter of 2014. Argo’s foreigners are hardly impolite. One of them is currently, as the author has learnt, preparing a book entitled *The Free People*; “free” due to the fact that they are willing and able to act as foreign fighters in a distant conflict where they could truly express and operationalize their liberty and beliefs, a feat that is

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://aredrover.com/> for Argo’s personal website.

not available to their peers. This could suggest a certain degree of hubris on behalf of Argo's characters as they potentially perceive themselves as freer and more humane than the rest of humanity, especially the broader Western audience. The film, to an extent, gives the foreign fighters, or a specific group of these fighters, the chance to dwell on this real and imaginative liberty of theirs.

Unfortunately, it is not always successful in the contextualization of their activities and the questioning of their views, and at times one is left with the impression that this small group is representative of a broader trend or a bigger section of the population of the West. In reality, the film is at best a snapshot, an audio-visual summary of a tiny, inconsequential foreign fighter presence in the DNR ranks. However, it is still one of the most vivid depictions of the war in Eastern Ukraine to emerge from frontline Donbass so far. At the same time, it allows the viewers a peek into the views of individuals who travel to fight in distant wars, and thus enables the audience to literally put a human face on the frequent reports on foreign fighters. It turns out that they are not insane individuals, and some of them might not be that different from some of "us." The key difference, however, is the fact that "we" do not end up fighting somebody else's war.

Argo helps us understand or, at least, familiarize ourselves with their evolution from fairly regular individuals towards the "Polite People" that they have become. They dwell on their motivations and attempt to explain what made them go to Donbass. Their views are not, unfortunately, questioned at any stage of the movie and at the end of the day one may be left wondering if Argo herself might have become too close to the fighters. To some extent this is bound to happen. It can be presumed that she would have not been given access to "Team Vikernes," to spend months embedded with the unit, had she not had demonstrated some basic sympathy towards them. However, it is as if the director was set on providing an alternative view on foreign fighters – a group that would otherwise be presented in a negative light in most cases. What is more, most viewers would find Vikernes members' views bizarre at best, or repugnant at worst, and Argo is keen, perhaps too keen, on providing the chance to air their statements. After watching the movie one is not necessarily convinced that these foreign fighters are truly "polite." One could perhaps conclude that they are sad, misguided,

manipulated, naïve or, in some aspects, ignorant, rather. At the same time, they, the “freer” individuals they perceive themselves to be, would probably say the same thing about most of us, *Polite People’s* viewers.

The film’s biggest strength lies in depicting and documenting the bizarre travails of the Vikernes members, especially related to how they ended up in the DNR (e.g. they travelled via Ukraine and crossed the frontline to reach Donetsk), and how they were treated while in the “rebel” republic. Their frustration with the war effort of the separatists, the fact of being under-used and underappreciated is all to be found in the movie, as is their incomprehension of the local reality that in some cases comes as a culture shock to them. They candidly share their disappointment with the “rebel” leadership which does not want to fight, and is content with a stalemate. They are also explicit about the fact that the DNR successes would not have happened had it not been for the strong Russian support. They dismiss the locals as “degenerates,” and talk of a fifth column within the rebel ranks. One could develop a sense of understanding of their opinion as they are making their comments firmly from pro-Russia, pro-separatist positions. Interestingly enough, however, their motives are not purely political, and they seem to be involved in the war mostly out of a desire for the thrill and the adventure and a sense of brotherhood and camaraderie with the other participants. In short, one struggles to find their equivalent of some of the great causes animating foreign fighters bound for Syria. On camera, they do not profess commitment to a given ideology or a cause. “Vikernes” members know basically what they do not like and what directly made them join the DNR forces – they are traditionalists who despise liberal, feminist, modernist, pro-American and anti-nationalist Western societies, and this is what animates them. They thus travel to fight on the side of an “active” international force, read: Russia’s force, which in their view embodies the values they stand for. These factors play a key role given the relatively meagre pull factors: the DNR itself has very little to offer to these fighters, and it shows in the documentary.

At the same time as it honestly documents the frustration of the foreign fighters, the film avoids veering into farce, and to her credit Argo does not concentrate, against the very real possibility and temptation of anyone focusing on an issue of this kind, on the comedy-lite moments of which there must have been plenty.

Unfortunately, the director, while skilfully avoiding the trap of misinterpreting the Vikernes members' experience, fails to look at the consequences of the actions of the foreign fighters. This is not to suggest that they are guilty of human rights abuses but while being amused by the exotic story of Frenchmen and Brazilians in Eastern Ukraine, one should not forget that this is a report from a war zone in which thousands of lives have been lost, and a part of a European country was reduced to rubble. *Argo* hardly offers us this perspective and there is a danger of finding oneself laughing at the almost comical exploits of the Vikernes" members in the confines of the ruined Donetsk airport. In short, no one asks the fighters if they thought of the consequences of their actions, and how far-reaching these might have been. No one asks: Had it not been better for the civilians, on both sides of the conflict, if they simply stayed home? Of course, they could seek comfort in their low numbers and the fact that their contribution to the war was meagre, to say the least. Nonetheless, they still journeyed to Ukraine and to Russia for the purpose of joining Europe's latest conflict and have no second thoughts about this while talking to *Argo* on camera. What is more, one could conclude that the inaction of their units, and, as a result of this, their mounting frustration, perhaps provided them with a sense of detachment from the frontline reality.

The author's interviews with other fighters do not support this notion. Most of these subjects knew what was happening around them, and were aware of who was involved in the conflict, how, and many of them saw deaths of their comrades and enemies in battle. They sought a war experience, were keen on getting it, and were dismayed while sitting idly in their makeshift barracks. One almost feels sorry for them as they are reduced to observers of the murderous struggles in-between rebel factions which leave them without patrons keen on using them as a fighting force.

The film also glosses over the story of failure in relation to the foreign fighter presence in the DNR ranks. *Argo* mentions that Vikernes members originally functioned within the *Unite Continentale*, an internationalist unit led by a Frenchman, Viktor Lenta, which then effectively split and its members were dispersed across different rebel formations. The fighters have a hard time talking about this, and *Argo*, probably intent on not offending them, does not challenge their narratives, nor does she push them for comprehensive answers. Again, this could be the

result of her embedded status with “Team Vikernes” which could have terminated her co-operation with her if she veered into such challenging territory. To an extent, this mirrors the experiences of terrorism researchers who, like the current author, “talk to terrorists.” One needs trust in order to do so and it cannot be built while challenging one’s interviewees too hard, arguing with them or, which would be worse, attempting to mend their ways. Some issues are thus better left untouched and most conversations are not conclusive. What is more, Argo developed – and given the time she spent in Donbass this is hardly surprising – a friendship with some of the Vikernes members and this also hampers her ability to remain objective. This is vividly on display in the part of the movie which addresses the unfulfilled co-operation between Vikernes and another foreign, or more accurately a “partly” foreign, fighter unit of the DNR forces – the “Rusicz.” Argo does not push her interviewees to dwell on the political convictions of “Rusicz” and all seems well when a Vikernes member declares that the other unit is “an excellent team.” This, unfortunately, fails to account for the outright neo-nazi views of the “Rusicz” which are toxic to anyone seen as fraternizing with them. Of course, Argo could claim that she leaves the opinion to the viewers but they hardly are experts on the politics of miniscule foreign fighter groupings in the DNR ranks, and are thus unable to correctly contextualize this unrealised alliance between different foreign fighter factions.

## CONCLUSION

*Polite People* is clearly not a flawless documentary. We might even harbour doubts if at times it is more than a document of what the fighters wanted Argo to witness, although she was embedded with the unit for months. The film touches upon many subjects but these are sometimes quite randomly thrown into the mix and a viewer less-versed in the reality of the war will struggle to interpret some of Argo’s findings.

The film is still a valuable snapshot, albeit an imperfect one, of non-Syria-bound foreign fighters’ lives who opt to partake in a European conflict. They may not understand what was going on around them, or the implications of their actions, but neither will we be able to grasp the complexity of their motives, desires, fears and worries without films like *Polite People*. One could contend

that this is just an independent, read: amateur, take on a few lost souls who set out to fight in an exotic conflict, and that reading too much into their story is a mistake.

It is the author's view that reality is far more complicated. Beyond those shown in the documentary, many more people went to Eastern Ukraine to fight, and more of their friends might have gone had it not been for a variety of reasons. The fighters are now coming back, and some might act as influencers for other individuals, and some could potentially travel to other conflict zones, e.g. to Syria to fight against ISIS, seen as another "good fight" in their circles. Thus their story is not over and decision-makers in Europe should take time to reflect on why a few of their fellow citizens, while citing seemingly bizarre and sometimes contradictory reasons, are ready and willing to become *Polite People* of this sort.

Watching Argo's movie could be a start but will not substitute for broader reflection on the European nationalist scene, members of which, in the words of one of the Vikernes members interviewed by the author, "fight our fight there [outside the EU] because we cannot fight it in here [in the EU]." They, in their view, have no chance to turn a country like France into a new Donbass as the "system" is geared against them. In the short run, this could be comforting thought. In the long run, however, there is clearly a need to research, and to map out even some of the seemingly most inexplicable and bizarre political and social positions in the context of the foreign fighter phenomenon. This could stem the future growth of the movement of the *Polite People* – potential for which there may be.