

The Home Army is more than a "resistance movement"

The term “resistance” became popular in the West thanks to the French *resistance* and it is often extended onto the whole of Europe that was occupied by Nazi Germany during WW2. In the case of Poland, however, “resisting” does not do full justice to the nature of the movement. During the war, Poland had an Underground State which was closely linked with the government-in-exile operating first from Paris and Angers in France and then, as of 1940, from London. The structure of that state comprised clandestine civilian authorities following an agreement among four main political parties – the National Party, the Christian Democrat Labour Faction, the People’s Party and the Polish Socialist Party – as well as an underground military force developed gradually since September 1939 when the regular Polish units started succumbing to the onslaught of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army.

It has now been 80 years since the creation of the Home Army (AK), a force that combined different previous underground military organisations. On 14 February 1942, General Kazimierz Sosnowski, the London based Commander-in-Chief, issued the order to change the Union of Armed Struggle (ZWZ) that had operated since December 1939 into the Home Army. The new structure incorporated the Socialist Combat Organisation, Fighting Poland Movement, Secret Polish Army and some other military outfits. The force that remained autonomous within the AK was the Peasant Guard of the People’s Party transformed in 1942 into the Peasant Battalions. The merger was opposed by part of the nationalist movement that had previously created the strong National Military Organisation. Eventually, about half of its members joined the AK, the rest joining more radical groups to establish the National Armed Forces with a chain of command that was independent of the Home Army.

The position of AK Commander-in-Chief was entrusted to General Stefan Grot-Rowecki, who previously led the ZWZ. Rowecki was not only very experienced in field combat during the September 1939 campaign, but was also the author of a pioneering textbook on urban guerilla warfare. The whole of occupied Poland was divided into three regions: Bialystok, Lvov and West, regions were divided into sub-regions that corresponded roughly to pre-war provinces, and these were divided further into districts and branches equivalent to *poviats* and municipalities respectively. In addition to the three regions, there were also central provinces reporting directly to the High Command and its 31 staff units. Among others, the Army had departments for organisation, information and intelligence, a quartermaster’s office and a diversion directorate. Apart from professional pre-war officers and the great number of young men who joined the underground, the smooth functioning of the army was ensured to a large extent by women who served mainly as couriers.

The main objective of the AK was, of course, to fight for freedom, and more specifically to prepare a general uprising to be unleashed when the German occupation was at breaking point. There were no plans to engage in an open confrontation with the enemy before that as it was rightly believed that success was out of the question as long as the armies of the Third Reich were at the height of their power. As part of its training activities, the AK ran a school for reserve officers with a five-month-long curriculum as well as special courses in subjects such as diversion and artillery skills. The schools were attended by about 3,000 young people at any one time. Armaments gathered by the AK were taken from the stocks hidden after the September campaign, purchased, captured or made by the organization itself. It was very important to keep communication lines open so that the occupied country could stay in touch with the London-based government and the Commander-in-Chief. This was ensured by means of clandestine radio transmitters vehemently tracked by the Germans as well as a network of

couriers covering long distances with the help of underground safe houses in Budapest, Bucharest, Kaunas and Stockholm. One of the AK couriers, Elżbieta Zawacka, would travel all across occupied continental Europe to get to London. An extraordinary AK mission was carried out by Witold Pilecki who volunteered to be imprisoned in Auschwitz, ran an underground network within the camp for two and a half years and then escaped to provide a detailed account of camp realities. After the war, he was murdered by communists.

Scoring one of its biggest intelligence successes, the AK established that the location where the Germans produced the V1 missiles was Peenemünde thanks to which the Allies were able to destroy that base in March 1943. Also, three AK cryptographers built a replica of the German "Enigma" coding machine, enabling the allied intelligence to spy on secret German communications. In the summer of 1944, the AK numbered over 350,000 sworn soldiers, which made it the largest underground army in Europe in absolute terms.

AK activities came to an end with the Warsaw Uprising in August and September 1944 which implemented the plan of a general insurrection and was drowned in blood without the least assistance from the Soviet ally. The Red Army stopped at the other bank of the Vistula, watching idly the tragedy of Warsaw. Although an ally of Polish allies, the USSR was also hostile towards Poland's independence and, when its troops entered the country, a decision was made to formally disband the AK in January 1945. Even so, some of its soldiers continued opposing the new occupying power for years to come. Right from the outset, the communists had nothing but hatred for the AK, considering it to be the armed wing of independent Poland – yet another proof that Poland came out of WW2 defeated, albeit in the victors' camp.

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The text is simultaneously published in the Polish monthly "Wszystko Co Najważniejsze" as part of a project carried out with the Institute of National Remembrance.