

The Kidnapping of Polish Leaders

On 27 March 1945, the Soviet political police – the NKVD – arrested 16 leaders of the Polish Underground State, who had come to Pruszków at the invitation of Soviet commanders. They were supposed to discuss the implementation of the Yalta Conference resolutions. The NKVD arrested, among others, the Government Delegate for Poland and the Deputy Prime Minister Jan Stanisław Jankowski (de facto head of the underground government), the last Commander-in-Chief of the Home Army, General Leopold Okulicki (commander of the largest underground armed forces in Europe), and the Chairman of the Council of National Unity, Kazimierz Pużak (speaker of the underground parliament).

After the Nazi occupation, the kidnapping of Polish leaders was one of the elements of the new enslavement of Poland by another totalitarian regime – this time the Soviet regime. It left no doubt that Stalin was not planning to honour the Yalta arrangements, such as free elections in Poland. In parallel, the new authorities had already launched an extensive campaign of repression, brutally suppressing all manifestations of social independence.

Members of the Polish authorities (considered legitimate by Western countries) were transported to Moscow and, in June 1945, prosecuted during a show trial. People who had led the Polish Underground State – which was part of the anti-Hitler coalition – were accused of collaborating with the Germans, even though they had fought against them in the war. According to other charges, they had allegedly fought against the USSR; in fact, they had not, as the Soviet Union had been a member of the coalition of countries allied against the Third Reich.

The longest sentences were received by: Leopold Okulicki (10 years in prison), Jan Stanisław Jankowski (8 years) and his deputies: Adam Bień, Stanisław Jasiukowicz and Antoni Pajdak (5 years each). General Leopold Okulicki, Jan Stanisław Jankowski and Stanisław Jasiukowicz did not live to see the end of their sentences. After his return to Poland, Kazimierz Pużak was arrested again and tortured to death in a communist prison.

Background and historical context

On 23 August 1939, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Vyacheslav Molotov, on behalf of their respective governments signed a pact to jointly divide the territory of Central and Eastern Europe. Following the invasion of Poland, carried out in alliance with the Third Reich on 17 September 1939, and the seizure of the eastern part of Poland, the Soviet Union for almost two years did not recognise the Polish state and Polish authorities, who remained in exile – first in France, then in the United Kingdom. The situation changed on 22 June 1941, that is when Germany attacked the USSR, as a result of which in July of

that year the Soviet Union joined an anti-German alliance, first with England and then with its ally – Poland (Sikorski – Maisky agreement).

At that time, the Polish Underground State was already operating in Poland – a phenomenon unique on a global scale. In the conditions of conspiracy, a fully operational structure of the civil authorities was established, as well as a very strong underground army (at its greatest in 1944, there were as many as 350,000 soldiers), which harassed the Germans with diversionary activities and prepared for a general nationwide uprising. Polish Underground State, subordinated to the rightful government of the Polish Republic in exile, organised resistance against the occupiers.

The paradox of the Polish-Soviet alliance was that the Soviet Union did not recognise the eastern border of its Polish ally, claiming ownership of Polish lands seized in 1939. Following the disclosure of the Katyń Massacre (the murder of more than 20,000 Polish prisoners of war carried out by the NKVD), in April 1943, the Soviet authorities once again severed relations with the Polish government in exile. In the USSR, an alternative centre of power began to be formed, designated to replace the legitimate government; it was composed of Polish communists. Stalin intended to impose those communists on Poland by force, because, firstly, they agreed to accept his territorial claims; and secondly, they were a warranty that he would hold control over Poland. Therefore, Stalin planned not only to renounce recognition of the legitimate Polish government, but also to eliminate its civil and military structures in Poland (Polish Underground State) and all the political forces supporting it. In July 1944, the pro-communist power centre took the name of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*). The structure soon revealed its far-reaching aspirations: inspired by its Soviet superiors, it took a new name at the end of 1944 – the Provisional Government.

This move quickly led to a crisis in the Grand Coalition: the United States and the United Kingdom did not recognise such “government,” while it was almost immediately recognised by the initiator of its creation – the USSR. Under such circumstances, a conference of the “Big Three” was organised in Yalta in the Crimea. During the negotiations, Stalin was able to essentially “legalise” the Provisional Government, which – as was then established – was only to be “reorganised” by including “democratic leaders from Poland and Poles from abroad” and change the name of the Provisional Government of National Unity (*Tymczasowy Rząd Jedności Narodowej*).

The Yalta arrangements were vague and turning them into specific results was an extremely difficult process, because Moscow tried to reduce the reorganisation of the Provisional Government to a minimum, so that the new government remained controlled by members of the old one, obedient to Stalin.

Among those who the British and the Americans suggested as participants in conversations about the Provisional Government of National Unity, there were also the leaders of the Polish Underground, soon to be arrested by the Soviets. They were: Kazimierz Pużak (Chairman of the Council of National Unity, the Secretary General of the Polish Socialist Party), Adam Bień (Deputy Government Delegate for Poland, member of the National Council of Ministers), Antoni Pajdak (Deputy Government Delegate for Poland, member of the National Council of Ministers), Stanisław Jasiukowicz (Deputy Government Delegate for Poland, member of the National Council of Ministers, Deputy Chairman of the National Party), Aleksander Zwierzyński (delegate of the National Party for the Council of National Unity and the Deputy Chairman of the Council), Józef Chaciński (President of the Labour Party), Franciszek Urbański (Labour Party representative in the Council of National Unity), Eugeniusz Czarnowski (Democratic Union representative in the Council of National Unity), and Kazimierz Bagiński (Deputy Chairman of the Council of National Unity, Deputy President of the Peasant Party). These people, to their own misfortune, were staying in the part of Poland that had already been occupied by Soviet troops – in towns along the railway line between Warsaw and Grodzisk Mazowiecki. Subsequent events caused the issue of their potential participation in the proposed government to quickly become obsolete.

The Trap

In mid-February 1945, Soviet secret police (NKVD) launched an extensive provocation campaign, the purpose of which was arresting members of the Council of National Unity, the National Council of Ministers, and the Home Army Command. The operation was led by Ivan Serov, an NKVD agent at the 1st Belorussian Front. The main role was played by Colonel Pimenov, head of the Radom NKVD operational group, who was specially delegated to carry out the task. The provocation was based on an old and proven method, which involved luring the Polish side to alleged “meetings,” which invariably ended in arrests. The “combination” – to use the terminology of the Soviet security police – began with the commander of the Home Army, General Leopold Okulicki “Niedźwiadek,” who was notified through intermediaries that Marshal Georgy Zhukov, commander of the 1st Belorussian Front, was seeking contact with him. Since there was no response, Colonel Pimenov met representatives of the Home Army in order to explain the reasons for delaying the meeting with the Home Army commander. He convinced the Poles of the Soviets’ good will and of the need for talks. Finally, he asked that General Okulicki, as well as the Government Delegate for Poland and Deputy Prime Minister Jan Stanisław Jankowski, be given letters inviting them for talks with Colonel-General Ivanov, representative of the command of the 1st Belorussian Front. It was a trap, because in fact “Colonel-General Ivanov” did not exist. It was a pseudonym of the above-mentioned senior officer of the NKVD, Serov. The proposed meeting, as Pimenov wrote, signing the letter with the false title of “Colonel of the Guard,” “[...]should once and for all settle the matters, which I doubt can be resolved

in any other way.” The letter ended with a promise of safety for the participants of the meeting: “As myself,” Pimenov lied, “and as an officer in the Red Army, who has been given such an important mission, I give you a full guarantee that from the moment when your fate depends on me (when you come to us), you will be completely safe.”

The invitation to the conference, contained in the letters, was accepted. It was decided that rejection of the meeting was not an option because it created an opportunity for a peaceful settlement of the tense Polish-Soviet relations. On 21 March 1945, Deputy Prime Minister Jankowski met Pimenov. The latter suggested that they meet on 28 March in a larger group and discuss issues such as the attitude of the Underground to the USSR and the Yalta resolutions, as well as the matter of maintaining peace behind the front lines. At the planned conference, the Soviets were supposed to be represented by General Ivanov and Colonel Pimenov, and the Polish side by Jankowski and Okulicki, as well as representatives of political parties included in the Main Commission of the Council of National Unity: Pużak, Pajdak (Polish Socialist Party), Jasiukowicz, Kobylański, Stypułkowski, Zwierzyński (National Party), Urbański and Chaciński (Labour Party), Bień, Mierzwa, Bagiński (Peasant Party), Michałowski, Czarnowski (Democratic Union) and Stemler-Dąbski (secretary of the delegation). General sessions were to be preceded by a meeting in a smaller group on 27 March, with Jankowski, Pużak and Okulicki. The participants of the planned meeting with Ivanov-Serov did not anticipate any danger, with the exception of General Okulicki, who had a premonition and had only agreed to participate in the conference at the insistence of the Delegate. During negotiations with Ivanov, one of the men – Aleksander Zwierzyński – was already in the hands of the NKVD. Arrested on 8 March 1945 in Milanówek near Warsaw and held in a Soviet prison at Strzelecka Street 10 in Warsaw, he joined his companions after they shared his fate.

On 27 March, Jankowski, Okulicki and Pużak came to the arranged meeting in a smaller group, with Stemler-Dąbski as the interpreter. They were arrested and then brought by plane to Moscow, where they were taken to the Lubyanka prison. Unaware of that, the remainder of the Polish delegation arrived in Pruszków near Warsaw on March 28 to the “talks” in a wider group, which had a similar conclusion – in the Moscow prison. The arrest of sixteen leaders of the Polish Underground and the subsequent staged trial before the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR became a symbol of the cynical and ruthless methods used by the Stalinist apparatus of repression against Polish independence aspirations during the Second World War.

The trial of the sixteen was a clear violation of international law, which does not recognise judging the state leaders of one country by the courts of other states. It was given enormous publicity in the Soviet Union. The reaction of Western governments, which apart from few significant actions shortly after the arrest of the “sixteen,” did not actually do anything, was a sign that they did not intend to engage genuinely in the internal situation in Poland.

In 2003–2009, The Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation – the investigative division of the Institute of National Remembrance – conducted an investigation of the Moscow trial of the leaders of the Polish Underground State. However, the investigation was discontinued after the Main Military Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation refused the request for legal assistance in this matter.