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The Accursed Soldiers - a forgotten phenomenon

The Accursed Soldiers are one of those historical phenomena which have been publicly discussed in recent years. The phrase refers not only to armed resistance as a method of struggle against the imposed regime but also to specific actions undertaken by units or decisions made by their commanders.



Accursed or Indomitable?

The “Accursed Soldiers” is a well-established term nowadays and it was coined at the beginning of the 1990s, mainly thanks to the title of an exhibition called “The Accursed Soldiers – The Anti-Communist Armed Underground after 1944” prepared in 1993 by the Republican League. Afterwards, a picture album was published with the same title. Grzegorz Wąsowski, a former activist of League reminded that:

“The phrase “the accursed soldiers” meant that after 1989, the heroes of the anti-communist underground were forgotten by the elites of the Third Republic of Poland, and not by the authorities of the Polish People’s Republic. Nowadays, the attention is paid to the fact that they were “cursed” by the communists who erased them from the National Pantheon and distorted their history. Anyway, that phrase became integral to the Polish language. Yet, in recent years, there is a group of people who call for replacing this phrase with the term “Indomitable Soldiers” (and some of them use the expression “Accursed - Indomitable”). This term – in their opinion – is a more apt description of their attitude.”

The participants in the scientific dispute are also not unanimous in their views. Some of them define them as the soldiers of the post-war underground, and some of them – of the second conspiracy or the anti-communist underground. However, each of these names has its opponents. An argument against the phrase “the soldiers of the post-war underground” is that the issue of resistance to the sovietisation of Poland also covers the struggle before the end of the Second World

War that took place after January 1944 when the Red Army crossed the pre-war borders of the Republic of Poland, and before 8 May 1945 when the Third Reich surrendered. Also the phrase “second conspiracy” arouses controversy for the biographies of the soldiers of the underground shows the continuity of their underground activities – many (the majority) of them commenced their fight for the freedom of their Homeland as early as in the period of occupation from 1939 to 1944/45, and the invasion of Poland by the Red Army, and the establishment of the communist administration constituted its continuation, a new stage. Thus, considering them as the representatives of the second conspiracy is often not true as they continued their activities from “the first” conspiracy. Likewise, calling them the soldiers of the anti-communist underground – though true to the facts – narrows the idea they were fighting for. For they did not go underground to struggle against a specific system but to fight for independence. Therefore, at first they opposed the German occupiers and then the totalitarian system enforced on Poland.

Stages of the dispute over the Accursed Soldiers

It is my conviction that the public dispute over the Accursed Soldiers has three dimensions – historical, political and substantive. I view the historical dimension as a dispute connected with the past and thus materialising the tension between the tradition of independence and post-communism. To put it the most simply, the central point of this dispute can be defined as the effort to put the history of the post-war

underground straight which were undertaken under the “second circulation” publishing in the period of the People’s Republic of Poland and in public scientific life since the 1990s. On the other hand, we observe the aspiration for maintaining the perspective relevant to the regime propaganda from the years of the People’s Poland. Those two concepts are suspended between the view of the underground as the partisans’ fight for the independence of Poland and the recognition of local armed units as groups of criminals led by local warlords. What’s interesting is that the polarisation of those clashing narrations, and sometimes of clashing memories, is not obvious. For some of the circles originating from the democratic opposition in the period of the Polish People’s Republic and its ideological successors are closer to the regime-based perspective. It seems that it is rooted in biographic causes. The people who – when young – were involved in the establishment of the communist system or sympathised with this ideology are not willing to promote the explicitly pro-independence attitudes as it undermines their life history, their evolution from the commitment to the system to its criticism. Thus, such circles will be inclined to deny the armed struggle as the praiseworthy attitude and will present – most often – the arguments of the end of the war and the necessity to stop the bloodshed.

The clashing memories are an equally interesting issue which is connected with one’s own fate or the fate of one’s ancestors and friends. In this case, the negative or obscure experience connected with the underground will contribute to the strengthening of its “black legend”, without any intention of explaining the essence of the events

from the past which were retained in family memories. On the other hand, we will deal with the phenomenon of creating a “white legend” in relation to people who became morally corrupted and whose actions being simply crimes are allegedly presented as struggle for independence. In fact, it is the most complex and complicated element of the issue of clashing memories related to the Accursed Soldiers.

The second dimension is the politicisation of the clashing attitudes towards the phenomenon of the post-war underground. This may overlap the historical dimension mentioned before (referring to the tension between the regime and the opposition) or even strengthen it. Yet, what I am thinking of at this point is the profound political polarisation which has a devastating effect on the national community. In recent years, we have been observing a new phenomenon in which the parties to the political conflict – which is deeply rotted in other spheres (cultural, social, etc.) – also adapt the historical sphere. To put it simply, we can thus say that the very involvement of the authorities in the commemoration of the National Accursed Soldiers Remembrance Day makes the opposition view this historical tribute as specific to the Law and Justice party and starts to deny it, and thus also challenges the essence of the armed resistance itself. On the other hand, we see the tendency to lend esteem also to those partisans who – having in their life histories the periods of struggle for independence – abandoned, at the same time, the ideals of the underground and committed acts for which they would have been judged before the special courts of the Polish Underground State.

On the backdrop of those disputes, the third plane has been developed in the form of the debates held by the historians who usually wrangle over the specific actions, units or commanders, as well as the scale of the phenomenon of departing from the soldiers' code, i.e. the so-called criminalisation of partisans' companies. This dimension also gives rise to many emotions, and the discussion significantly differs from the ideal of distanced consideration.

Historical phenomenon

In its essence, the anti-communist underground was the continuation of the pro-independence resistance from the war years. The decision of staying underground resulted from a simple reason – although the war was over, Poland had not regained its independence. The Red Army brought about new enslavement and the Nazi totalitarianism was replaced with the communist one. The inhabitants of the eastern areas of post-war Poland and the retaken Borderlands were already experiencing red totalitarianism for the second time, after the Soviet occupation in the years 1939-1941. The distortion of Polish history throughout fifty years of Communism and sustaining of some of those lies also after 1989 has caused that we still do not clearly see the obvious thing, that is the fact that in the years 1944-1945, we were subdued by the Soviet Union and the authorities in post-Yalta Poland were appointed by Moscow by way of usurpation. The Constitutional Polish Government-in-Exile represented the underground in the Vistula Land until the dissolution of the Polish Underground State. And from autumn 1945, it was the resistance that continued the ideas of

Sovereign Poland.

Two trends in the anti-communist underground – among a large number of different clandestine initiatives – were of national significance. The first of them originated directly from the idea of the Polish Underground State. After the dissolution of the Home Army in January 1945, the underground activities were taken over by an organisation called “*Niepodległość*” [Independence], code named “NIE” [NO, short for *Niepodległość*]. Yet, in March of the same year, it was considered as exposed before the Soviets and dissolved. Thus, the last organisation that was an armed division of the Polish Underground State transformed into the Armed Forces Delegation for the Homeland which operated from April to August 1945. However, it was dissolved in the summer together with other sections of the Polish Underground State. It was replaced by an association called Freedom and Sovereignty – originally a civilian organisation which, however, remained practically a military one, especially in East-Central Poland.

The second trend of the all-Poland resistance was the national underground. At the beginning, it was fighting in two separate structures: the National Armed Forces and the National Military Union. The National Armed Forces gathered those forces of the national underground which were not ultimately included in the Home Army during the war, while the National Military Union – at the beginning – the units of the National Military Organisation incorporated in the Home Army. Both branches of the national armed resistance merged at the end of 1946 and the beginning of 1947 when the National Armed

Forces submitted to the National Military Union.

In addition to these, there were numerous units active throughout post-Yalta Poland, and there were also organisations established on the grounds of the contacts of the Home Army which – after its dissolution and losing contact with the “organisational command” – operated locally or regionally.

In addition to the post-Home Army or national trend, there were numerous organisations defined by historians as non-affiliated, i.e. established separately from the Home-Army or national networks and companies from the war years.

The situation of the underground was changing quite dynamically. It is estimated that after the dissolution of the Home Army, there were more than 17 thousand soldiers still fighting in the partisan companies. After adding to them the civilian network, liaisons, scouts, sources, people harbouring persons hiding from the regime, etc., we can speak of several hundred thousand individuals involved – to different degrees – in the activities of or support for the underground. This is one of the reasons why the communist power was restricted to urbanised areas in the years 1944-1946. “Provincial Poland”, meaning the areas of *gminas* and – especially within the eastern and southern territories – also the areas of *poviats*, was controlled by the underground.

The situation changed after the intensification of repressions and the breakdown of public feeling connected with the falsification of the referendum held in June 1946 and the election from January 1947. We

cannot but mention the importance of the pacification operations carried out in winter 1946/1947 directed against the partisans' staff, which resulted in the death or imprisonment of numerous leaders of companies or groups.

The falsification of the election - by the tacit agreement of the free world, and the proclamation of the so-called "second amnesty" caused many partisans who had been demobilised in winter to come out of the forests since there was no place for them to return to. It is estimated that after the end of the amnesty operations in 1947, the number of fighters left in the forests and mountains hardly exceeded 1,800. The ranks of the units tormented by repeated round-ups, traps, and provocations successively shrank. With the passing of time, they transformed into the so-called survival groups - unable to fight for their ideals, focused on avoiding "unmasking" as long as possible. It is assessed that at the beginning of the 1950s, there were only about 400 soldiers of the underground in post-Yalta Poland. Only a small percentage of them were fighting in a few companies, the majority of them were hiding from being arrested and ceased to perform any activities directed against the system. Only a few partisans survived in hiding at the beginning of the 1960s.

Controversies

And so, from the historical perspective, when we look at the post-war armed underground, we see their continuation of pro-independence operations. However, some of the activities undertaken or decisions made by the leaders of the underground serve as a pretext for their

further discussion, which – when used as generalisation – contributes to the loss of people’s respect for the activities of the underground in general.

After rejecting the situations dealing with harsh lies and manipulations which are to sustain the “black legend” of the underground, we can identify several elements which add to the misunderstandings in the interpretation of partisan operations.

The units of the underground are accused of robberies. Yet, some participants in the public discourse do not understand the fact that following the example of the operations performed in the years of the Second World War, the underground held the so-called expropriation operations which were aimed at gathering the funds for military and political activities. It was assumed, in compliance with the rules effective in the structures of the Polish Underground State, that it was permitted to carry out operations against the occupier and its structures viewed as the communist administration as well as the institutions and people representing it. Thus, the so-called “eksy” [short for *ekspropriacja*] were exercised in state banks or cooperatives, and, sometimes, they involved the representatives of the regime, e.g. through imposing the tribute payment on the members of the party. Mixing the cases of common theft with the expropriation operations constitutes the grounds for charges against many partisans.

The underground also performed disciplinary actions, including the death sentences pronounced by the leaders of companies against particularly active activists of the regime imposed by Moscow on

Poland, or persons who threatened the partisans, e.g. through denouncing them to the Polish secret police (Department of Security).

The elimination or expropriation operations taken out of context of these activities and stripped of ideals are often presented as common criminal acts. While it should be remembered that the weaker the underground was and the greater the threat was to fighting units, the more decisive actions were – usually – undertaken by the leaders to reduce – to give an example – informing. A similar situation applied to the survival groups, which – most often – were not able to carry out ideological work, and their activities were often reduced to requisitions which were meant to ensure their survival. In the past, it facilitated the work of communist propagandists. Nowadays, it makes it easier to show the operations of the underground in a distorting mirror.

Such cases overlap with the operations of the underground which are difficult to defend, i.e. arbitrary requisitions serving private and not organisational purposes which were common crimes, or pacification operations against the civilian population based on the principle of collective responsibility. Moreover, the activities of the pro-independence units are often mixed – similarly as in communist propaganda – with the operations of actual criminal gangs. And the fact that the life of crime was also pursued by people who were fighting during the war and right after its end in armed units expedites the formulation of theses unfavourable to the underground.

Memory

The survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre on the Polish anti-communist underground held in 2017 resulted in interesting findings. For it turns out that as many as 45% of us have never heard of the post-war armed underground. Our beliefs about the underground are derived mainly from our own experience or from what we are told by other people – as was declared by 19% of respondents, or from the mass media – as was also declared by 19% of respondents. A significant percentage of us learn the history of armed resistance at school or from books, films or historical events – 14%.

In the social memory, the post-war partisans made an ambivalent impression. When the respondents who learned about the anti-communist underground from witnesses are asked how they remembered them – 38% of respondents state that the witnesses remember partisans as definitely positive or rather positive, while as many as 30% of respondents – rather negatively or definitely negatively. A significant share equal to 22% is of the opinion that the underground made both positive and negative impressions.

At the same time, 75% of respondents agree with the statement that the operations of the underground were a necessary signal of resistance against the sovietisation of the country and the manifestation of patriotism – 73% of respondents identify with this statement. The positive image of the underground is also evidenced by the fact that 67% of respondents agree that the conduct of the soldiers of the anti-communist underground may be an example for younger generations. 41% of respondents consider the soldiers of the

underground as heroes but this percentage increases to 75% when only those who declared some knowledge of the underground are taken into account. Only 7% of respondents are convinced that they cannot be called heroes, and 13% - if only the persons having some knowledge of post-war resistance are taken into account.

With reference to the continuing dispute concerning the name and the commemoration date and the historical phenomenon itself, it should be noted that 33% of respondents are of the opinion that the name "the Accursed Soldiers" appropriately defines the actions and situation of the people fighting after the war. Only 14% of respondents take the opposite view.

At the same time, the survey showed that this element of our history, which is so extremely important, is hardly known. Let's emphasise it - 45% of respondents have never heard of the post-war underground. When asked about specific names or pseudonyms, or the names of units, only 17% of respondents state that they can name them.

At the same time, we can assume that the commemoration of this phenomenon is expected. 40% of respondents state that it should happen, but when only those who have heard of the operations of the underground are taken into account - this percentage increases to 73%. And it is difficult to expect that commemoration is demanded by those who have never heard about the people and events to be commemorated...

Yet, the answers concerning the very day of 1 March are devastating -

in 2007, 95% of respondents did not know what was commemorated on that day.

The results of the survey held by the Public Opinion Research Centre are thus surprising as it turns out that one of the most interesting phenomena – in terms of history – of the Polish pro-independence resistance is unknown to almost half the population. There is a huge share of people who do not know that after the war, the Poles were up in arms against communism, and those who know about it often have false ideas of it. Four years ago, hardly anyone knew what was commemorated on 1 March, and it is difficult to believe that this situation has significantly improved. At the same time, this issue is an opportunity for – often fierce – public dispute. Moreover, it seems that it has been exacerbating. In a word, it is important for the elites but hardly recognised socially. This is interesting given the fact that the anti-communist underground is an important element of the pro-independence tradition – the tradition which should be the central point for free and sovereign Poland to organise the national community.

Filip Musiał, Ph.D., D.Sc.

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