

## Article 1

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Poland was the first European state to stand up to Nazi Germany which attacked her together with Soviet Russia in September 1939. Carved up territorially and occupied throughout the entire wartime period, the Poles continued to fight until the Germans capitulated in May 1945. Polish forces fought on all fronts – in North Africa, Italy, the Second Front in northern Europe, and on the Eastern Front.

In the east, matters were complicated politically because of Russia's annexationist designs. In September 1939, Russia invaded Poland together with Germany, but in June 1941, she became an ally of Poland's ally – Britain, when she closed the list of countries invaded by the Nazis. In the west, matters were complicated by the fact that the western allies were too weak not only to hold France, Belgium and Holland in 1940, but to mount a counteroffensive from Britain before the summer of 1944. The inability of Britain and France to stand up to the Germans without American support brought about changes in the composition of the allied camp which had fatal consequences for the Poles. The truth of the situation, which spelt the subjugation of Poland by Russia in 1945 was to reveal itself gradually. Each unexpected twist of the ratchet forced the Poles to modify their plans in accordance with the capacity of their allies to wage effective war.

Britain and France failed to honour their treaty obligations with regard to Poland in September 1939. Instead of declaring war immediately, as provided by the terms of their treaties, they prevaricated for the first three days in issuing their formal declarations of war, and failed to mount an offensive with all strength available within two weeks, as provided in their treaties as well. Although the last major Polish-German battle of the September campaign occurred in mid-October, and the Polish government managed to evade capture and reconstituted itself as a Government-in-Exile, as provided by the Polish constitution, Britain and France unilaterally declared, in the middle of the campaign, on September 17, that the situation was now changed and Poland would have to wait until Germany's defeat according to a modified schedule. This schedule was never clarified, because they had no offensive plans and for nine months there was peace on the Maginot line, the French fortifications along the Franco-German border.

Germany carried the war westwards via Holland and Belgium in May 1940. France collapsed in the same space of time as Poland the year before, except that her government capitulated and reconstituted itself under German auspices. The Gaullist "Free French" that took up residence in Britain, and the underground resistance movement that emerged in France were symbolic gestures with the majority of Frenchmen accepting the collaborationist regime of Vichy France. The British were more fortunate in that their defeated troops could retreat from the beaches of Dunkirk to the haven of their island fortress. But it soon became obvious that while Hitler now scorned Britain and turned his attention on the conquest of eastern Europe, Britain herself was impotent and could offer nothing but the bluster of her Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill.

These three sets of unexpected developments – the failure of the western allies to fight in 1939, their defeat in 1940, and their inability to counterattack without American support – meant not only, that Polish military organisation and strategy had to be considerably readjusted with each of the way. Although it was the achievements of the Polish forces in the western theatres of war that

were to hog the headlines, it was the underground military and civilian resistance movement in Poland that was to be the focus of the Government-in-Exile's attention. The idea that already took shape before the defeat of France was that once the back of Germany's military might was broken in the west, the underground forces in Poland would stage a general uprising which would remove the Germans from Poland in one fell swoop.

The defeat of France put the idea of such a rising on the back burner, and it was to remain there until the Second Front was opened. The situation seemed auspicious in June 1941, when the Germans swept deep into Russia thereby also bringing the territories of Poland under one occupant only.

The inability of Britain, joined by the United States at the end of 1941, to exploit Germany's commitment in the east to open the Second Front, meant that Russia was forced to fight alone. The battle of Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/43 captured the imagination, but it was the battle of Kursk six months later, in which the Russians won without the benefit of a harsh winter, that was the turning point. Shortly thereafter the Red Army reached the pre-war eastern borders of Poland.

By that stage, the Second Front was no longer a matter of life and death for the Soviets but Stalin was adroit at exploiting Churchill's acute embarrassment at Britain's failure to open a Second Front. He used this issue to wring territorial concessions from Churchill and Roosevelt at Poland's expense. At the same time, in acknowledgement of Russia's decisive contribution to the defeat of Germany, Stalin was promised the honour of allowing the Red Army to take Berlin. Since the road to Berlin ran across Poland, Poland's fate was sealed. This left Polish strategists in a quandary. The Germans were concentrating their forces on the Eastern Front to prevent the Red Army from reaching their borders. Thus the assumed preconditions for a general uprising in Poland were never to arise. Furthermore, assuming that a general uprising could be staged, albeit at a terrible cost, the only ones to profit would have been the Russians. In fact that is what the Russians did try to provoke.

As the Russians entered Poland at the beginning of 1944, they challenged the authority of the Polish Government-in-Exile and its representatives at home who formed the Polish Underground State, by unveiling their puppet body – "the Union of Polish Patriots". In July, they transformed this body into the "the Polish Committee of National Liberation" (PKWN), which was presented as an alternative Polish government. All the while, Russian propaganda claimed that the "London Poles" were collaborating with the Germans.

In order to counter these lies, which the British seemed at times all too eager to believe in the hope of having an excuse for welching on their treaty obligations with regard to Poland, a compromise strategy was devised. This took the name Operation Storm and consisted of cooperating locally with the Red Army as it pressed westwards. It became a standard scenario for the Home Army to liaise with the Red Army in removing the Germans, and then for the NKVD to move in, arrest, kill or deport to Russia the officers, and to force the rank-and-file into their own "Polish forces".

This continued until August 1944, when the Russians reached the east bank of Warsaw on the Vistula. The Polish capital, being also the nerve centre of the Polish Underground State, rose up in arms. The Soviets offensive then stopped dead in its tracks and the insurgents were left to fight alone. In view of the disproportions in arms and the Soviet refusal to allow their airfields to be used in allied air drop operations, the outcome of the Warsaw Uprising could not be in doubt. After 63 days of heavy fighting, the insurgents capitulated. Most of the fighters were taken to prisoner of war camps in Austria and Germany. The civilian population was evacuated, and Warsaw was razed to the ground by the Germans. A skeleton underground organisation was left to keep alive the idea of a free and independent Poland, but there was no force able to offer resistance to the other enemy, the Russians, as they moved in for the kill.

In the next article is a brief resume by Dr Marek Ney Krwawicz of what the Polish Underground State of 1939-45 stood for and what it achieved. A table listing the more notable initiatives undertaken by this resistance movement is appended at the end.

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