

## Article 17

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### **Dr Grzegorz Ostasz, The Polish Government-in-Exile's Home Delegation**

During the Second World War the Polish Underground State was based on a collection of political and military organisations striving for independence. These were formed throughout Polish territories, then under German and Soviet occupation. The long tradition of struggles for independence was conducive to their creation. Already in the autumn of 1939 measures were taken to appoint an underground central administrative authority that would be a continuation of the pre-war state administration. The Statute of Service for Victory in Poland referred to the necessity of creating 'a provisional national authority on home territory'. Likewise General Wladyslaw Sikorski's cabinet endeavoured to establish a governmental executive organ in occupied Poland. At the start of 1940 it was decided that a home territories civilian commissioner would be granted ministerial prerogatives and hold the position of the Government-in-Exile's delegate (plenipotentiary).

Hope of the imminent defeat of the occupying powers and a repetition of the First World War scenario hastened the construction of a government administration ready to take over control of a liberated and 'unclaimed Polish land'. The tasks of such an organisation were to include: cooperating with the Government-in-Exile (allied to France and Great Britain) and the Union for Armed Struggle (later the Home Army); participating in the planning of a general rising; consolidating the Polish community and directing its resistance to the German-Soviet occupation.

The project of forming a home delegation came into being in France in February 1940. Two months later the Polish Underground State set about establishing its own administration of justice system. On 16 June 1940 Col. Jan Skorobahaty-Jakubowski, the Provisional Delegate of the Government-in-Exile, arrived in Warsaw. Soon afterwards a Joint Government Delegation was appointed, comprising representatives of the 'big four' political parties – the PPS (Polish Socialist Party), SN (National Movement), SL (Peasant Movement) and SP (Labour Movement) – and the Commander-in-Chief of the ZWZ (Union for the Armed Struggle). In September 1940, however, members of this Joint Government Delegation decided that 'only one representative ... should be responsible for the Government's work'.

The candidate ultimately selected for the post of the Chief Government Delegate was Cyryl Ratajski. His nomination, on 3 December 1940, marked the end of a lengthy and complicated stage in the installing of the Government Delegation. Henceforth there functioned in the Polish Underground State – alongside the military organisations as well as the understanding reached among the various political parties and movements – a home representation of the Government-in-Exile. Its existence emphasised the continuity of the government institutions of the Polish Republic as well as the aspiration to regain independence and sovereignty.

On 30 July 1942 the Polish cabinet accepted the president's decree regarding the provisional government on Polish territories. Unfortunately, soon afterwards Ratajski had to resign from his post as Chief Government Delegate for health reasons. His successor, Jan Piekalkiewicz of the SL, took up office on 17 September 1942. However, on 19 February 1943 he was arrested by the Gestapo and subsequently tortured during interrogation and killed. The next Government Plenipotentiary was Jan Stanislaw Jankowski (*Soból* – Sable) of the SP. On 9 January 1944 the

Council of National Unity (*Rada Jedności Narodowej* – RJN) was formed, which functioned as the parliament of the Polish Underground State. The declaration of the RJN's programme entitled 'What the Polish Nation is fighting for' set out the Polish Republic's main war objectives as well as its social and economic policies for the post-war period. From the spring of 1944 Government Delegate Jankowski was elevated to the position of Vice-Premier. Nominated by the Home Council of Ministers, which reconvened in the summer of that same year, were three deputies of the Government Delegate: Adam Bien (SL), Stanislaw Jasiukowicz (SN) and Antoni Pajdak (PPS).

Various departments of the Home Delegation, which had powers equivalent to those of government ministries, now functioned with increasing efficiency. The central offices of the Delegation included: the Presidential Department, the Department of Internal Affairs, Justice Department, Employment and Social Welfare Department, Agriculture Department, Treasury Department, Trade and Industry Department, Postal and Telegraph Services Department, the Department for Eliminating the Consequences of War, Transport Department, Press and Information Department, Department of Public Works and Reconstruction, Department of Education and Culture and the Department of National Defence.

The Delegation also included local offices. The Polish territories were divided into 16 regions (voivodeships), each under the charge of a *starosta* and specially appointed municipal delegates. At the start of 1944 the personnel of the Government Delegation's 'administrative network' included some 15,000 people. Most of these workers were not active in the underground military organisations because of their age. On the other hand, people's professional qualifications and work experience were also taken into account during recruitment.

The Government Delegation's more important ongoing duties included not only preparations for taking over civilian control once the occupation was ended but also protecting cultural and economic property from being looted by the enemy, propaganda and charity work. The Government Delegation's security apparatus was now also functioning efficiently. They included: the main underground police force called the State Security Corps; the Self-Government Guard, which was the underground territorial police and the Citizens' Guard. Special Commissions for the Study and Registration of the Occupant's Crimes in Poland (cryptonym 'Forget-me-nots'), founded at the start of 1944, were set the mission of gathering and examining acts of terror and crimes committed in occupied territories. The Department of Press and Information played a specific role in countering the occupying power's propaganda with truthful news and thus also providing hope and instilling the will to fight. This department also edited 'Reczpospolita Polska', the Government Delegation's official newspaper.

In matters concerning social care the Government Delegation cooperated with the Chief Care Council and an underground landowners' organisation called *Tarcza* (Shield) or *Uprawa* (Tillage). It was also very active as a patron of so-called 'valuable individuals', i.e. academics, artists and writers. On 27 September 1942 the Government Delegation called into being the Konrad Zegota Provisional Committee, whose mission was to provide comprehensive help to the Jewish population. In December this committee became the Council for the Helping of Jews. The Delegation also had its own judicial apparatus functioning in Polish territories, including Special Civil Courts and 'Underground Struggle Judicial Commissions', which made sure that underground codes of conduct were adhered to. These courts had the right to infamise as well as issue death sentences, reprimands or cautions. Around the beginning of 1944 the functioning of the various departments and regions under the Delegation's jurisdiction was considerably strengthened by the merging together of the AK's military administration – 'portfolio'. Thus the Polish Government-in-Exile's underground branch took over what were by then well disciplined teams of professionals experienced in conspiratorial work.

The real test for the Government Delegation came with operation 'Tempest' in the summer of 1944, when all the organisations within the Polish Underground state were to spring into action and come out into the open. It was assumed that once Germany was defeated, the AK

commanders, 'together with the now revealed Representative of the Administrative Authority', would take on the role of hosts to Soviet troops on Polish territory. The Government Delegation's special tasks included: controlling the political situation, activating administrative offices at all levels and reconstructing Polish social order. Soviet policy, however, forced the Polish Underground to change its agenda. At the start of July 1944 the Warsaw HQ forbade the Delegation's (local) *powiat* units to reveal themselves 'unless a Polish-Soviet agreement is reached before the arrival of Soviet troops.' All the executive branches of the Government administration, especially the police and intelligence gathering units, were to remain in hiding.

In fact the end of the German occupation turned out to be the start of a new occupation – this time by the Soviets. Despite the Delegation and AK's efforts, operation 'Tempest' could not succeed. It was foiled by Soviet terror. The functioning of the Polish Underground State was halted at the most critical moment. The decline of the Government Delegation corresponded to the mood of the Polish community in general. By the spring of 1945 the conduct of the USSR, 'our allies' ally', had led to mounting fear among the Poles. At the same time there was some hope that the restoration of a democratic state could be achieved. Sixteen underground leaders, including the Government Delegate Jan Stanislaw Jankowski and the AK Commander-in-Chief General, General Leopold Okulicki, decided to start negotiations. Sadly they were to pay the highest price for their trust. At Yalta the Allies conceded dominance of Central Europe to Soviet Union, which facilitated the destruction of the Polish Underground State. On 21 June 1945 Stalin created in Moscow a Polish puppet regime called the Provisional Government of National Unity. That same day, also in Moscow, sentences were passed in the unlawful show trial of 'the Sixteen' leaders of the Polish Underground State. Soon afterwards, on 27 June 1945, the Council of National Unity held its last session. Then on 1<sup>st</sup> July, also in Krakow, the Government Delegation was dissolved and the Polish Underground State ceased to exist.

Despite its tragic end, the Government Home Delegation was an underground state organisation of great significance. It had consolidated resistance to the occupant and influenced the stance of the Polish people. It functioned despite the terrible conditions of wartime occupation, thus earning the respect of the Poles and spreading fear among the Germans. The Chief Delegate (who was also a Vice-Premier), regional delegates (who were also underground voivodes) and *powiat* delegates (*starostas*) were all rightful representatives of the pre-war Polish Republic. Naturally, it never acquired the fame of the Polish Home Army. Its conspiratorial work was less well known, the bureaucratic nature of its mission was less appealing to the public imagination and it simply lacked the qualities that would make it as legendary as the AK. Without the Government Delegation, however, there would have been no Polish Underground State. Its existence was only possible thanks to the great effort made by all of the Delegation's departments. At central, regional and local (*powiat*) levels they carried out work that was clerical, and therefore tedious, but an essential part of the plan to restore a sovereign state. Their unremitting effort to maintain continuity in Polish statehood and regain independence bears testimony to what was for these conspirators an incontrovertible value.

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### **Sources and further Reading**

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