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Stephen Bowers

Liberty University, srbowers2@liberty.edu

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The Polish Military in the Twentieth Century

by Dr Stephen R Bowers

From the battles which led to the re-birth of Poland after World War One until the brief but bloody struggle against the German invaders in 1939, the Poles developed a reputation as fearless, resolute fighters. Perhaps the best-known incident came in September 1939 when, according to Nazi propaganda, two squadrons of Polish cavalry made a futile and costly charge against German tanks. This account, still widely accepted by historians, and occasionally promoted by Poles as evidence of their bravery, is only partially correct. The two squadrons, having successfully completed an attack against a German infantry battalion, were they themselves suddenly attacked by two armoured cars. The cavalry lost several dozen men before retreating into the cover of a nearby thicket.¹

Yet, Polish military traditions reflect more than just a pride in the history of the Polish armed forces. The political and social mission of the Army has been equally significant.

Following the re-establishment of Poland in 1919, the Polish Army, representing communal and national interests, emerged as a major instrument of national unity. Transcending vested interests, it enjoyed considerable social influence and was able to resist extensive political controls. During the Pilsudski regime, the Army's formal links with the state transformed it into a device for the manipulation of the government, which eventually led the Army to adopt political objectives.

Following Pilsudski's death, military figures assumed control of the Polish state apparatus in the so-called 'Government of the Colonels'. The Army's political influence between the wars was matched by its size which grew from 266,000 men in 1923 to 350,000 by 1935.² During the upheavals of 1980-81, the military was able to draw upon this rich tradition of social and political influence and once again played a decisive role in Polish political history.

Although Poland collapsed in 1939, the Polish military did not disappear. Despite the loss of thousands of Polish servicemen, including the bulk of the officer corps in the massacre at Soviet-occupied Katyn,³ organised resistance persisted. Thousands of Poles fled to the Soviet Union, where they joined the Polish armies being built up by the Soviets. These were dominated and commanded by Russians, who

A specialist on Soviet and East European affairs, Dr Stephen R Bowers has written several articles on the Warsaw Pact military. He is presently employed as an intelligence analyst specialising in Eastern Europe. Dr Bowers' article 'The Political Evolution of Intelligence' appeared in *AQ* Vol 114 No 2 (April 1984).

held one third of the officers' commissions in these new armies. Others chose to stay in Poland and fight with the Home Army, the non-communist and largest of the anti-Nazi forces. Within the Home Army, however, there was a group of Communist partisans, known as the People's Army. Many of these partisans were veterans of the Spanish Civil War and later joined the two Soviet-organised armies which were to form the postwar Communist Polish Army. Finally, many Poles joined the British forces in the Middle East; still others distinguished themselves as pilots in the Royal Air Force. Soviet political pressures meant that most Poles who fought in the West were later denied commissions in the postwar Polish forces. Official policy was to recruit officers from the supposedly more sympathetic worker and peasant classes.⁴

The Polish forces as organised by the Soviets in 1943, formed the basis of the army of communist Poland. With the addition of the communist faction of the Home Army, the new Polish Army was, in theory, a complete departure from the precommunist Polish military model. It reflected Soviet concepts of military organisation, leadership and discipline. During and after the war, the leadership of the Polish military was screened by the Soviets, and Soviet military advisors and officers controlled the training and direction of the new army. Within several years, most of those who had served in the old Polish Army – whether as officers or as enlisted personnel – were dismissed. By 1973 only 2% of Polish officers had any pre-war military experience.⁵

Soviet domination of the Polish Army from 1945-55 was symbolised by Konstanty Rokossowski, a Polish-born Soviet citizen and former Soviet Vice-Minister of Defence. In 1949 he replaced the Polish nationalist Wladyslaw Gomulka on the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party and also became Polish Minister of Defence, a position that he held until 1956.⁶ Rokossowski's control was supplemented by hundreds of Soviet advisors to ensure that Polish military organisation, training, doctrine, tactics and even uniforms conformed to the Soviet model. Soviet officers assumed control over much of the Polish Army and the Chief of the Polish General Staff; the Commander of the Ground Forces, the heads of all service branches, and the commanders of all of Poland's military districts were all Soviets. During these years the Polish Army, once a symbol of Polish nationalism, became an extra-national force directly subordinate to Soviet High Command.⁷

The upheavals of 1956 ended this situation. With the Poznan riots of June 1956, the Polish forces demonstrated that, in the post-Stalin era, it was no longer a reliable prop for an ineffective and increasingly unpopular regime. In Poznan itself, regular army units refused to fire on

strikers. With heightened tension between Poland and the USSR, and internal divisions within the army between Polish nationalists and Soviet loyalists, the Army was completely neutralised and confined to barracks.

As Soviet pressure on the reformist Polish leadership mounted, a newly-formed Committee for the Defence of Warsaw organised Forces for combat with approaching Soviet troops. Khrushchev's retreat, viewed as a result of the Poles' willingness to fight, led to Gomulka's return to power.

The events of 1956 also gave the Polish military relative autonomy. The price of that autonomy, however, was absolute conformity to the Warsaw Pact, integrated commands, common training and equipment, and rigid political surveillance and control. Nevertheless, in November 1956, Marshal Rokossowski, who had just been denied Politburo membership, the leading Soviet military advisors and other high ranking Soviets in Poland accepted decorations for their services to Poland and quietly boarded a plane to the USSR. At the same time, Gomulka led a Polish delegation to Moscow where he secured a Soviet agreement for mutual friendship, a continued Polish-Soviet military alliance — including the stationing of Soviet troops in Poland — and, most important, complete internal sovereignty for Poland.⁸ Through this agreement and the tense confrontations of 1956, the Poles regained control not only of their political destiny but also of their military organisation.

With Gomulka's renewed emphasis on Polish nationalism it was inevitable that the military should become the focus for those determined to 'de-Sovietise' Polish public life. The removal of Rokossowski and his Soviet colleagues was followed by the appointment of 'native' communists who, like Gomulka, had suffered during the Stalinist era in Poland. General Marian Spychalski, a victim of the purges, replaced Rokossowski as defence minister. General Janusz Zarzycki, another purge victim, became chief of the Main Political Administration. Traditional uniforms and military songs were reintroduced, and Poland secured a status-of-forces agreement with the USSR that limited Soviet military activities in Poland and gave Poles the theoretical right to try Soviet soldiers in Polish courts for crimes committed while off-duty.⁹

'De-Sovietisation', however, had its limits and did not involve a rupture of Poland's ties with the Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact. West German rearmament undoubtedly reminded Poland of her ultimate dependence upon the USSR in the face of a West Germany that maintained her claim to the Oder-Neisse lands.

Despite these efforts to return to the military the role and respon-

sibilities of the pre-war years, the prestige of the Polish Army remained low as a result of Soviet domination. A 1958 survey of Warsaw youths showed that the military, once the pride of Poland, rated behind office workers and had fallen to 21st place in social status. By 1975 it has recovered much of its lost glamour, rising to eleventh place in a similar survey, but it was still rated lower in Poland than in most other nations surveyed in the same study.¹⁰ It is not surprising that enlistments had begun to decline, a problem that once again became acute in the 1980's.

The key to the post-1956 effort to restore prestige was the removal of heavy-handed Soviet control and the weakening of party control over the military. The fall of Rokossowski and the Soviet 'advisors' was only the first step in a process which included the abolition of the military's communist youth organisation, a reduction in the authority of military political officers and the removal of company-level political officers.

This reduction of petty influence within the military allowed the professional officer corps to reassert itself. The values of military professionalism, rather than ideological criteria, were re-established. The officer corps' rediscovery of its prerogatives was accompanied by the establishment in 1957 of a Military Council in the Ministry of National Defence. Here, department and service chiefs could examine their professional problems without the presence of Party representatives.¹¹

The diminution of party control did not, however, lead to a politically independent Polish Army. In fact, the party subsequently reclaimed much of what it had lost during the turbulent mid-1950's. Today, political control over the military is achieved through several chains of authority and political organisations operating from the General Staff down to company level.

The primary instrument for political surveillance has been the Main Political Administration (MPA) of the General Staff, in both the Party Secretariat and in the Ministry of National Defence. The MPA is responsible for the political officers which are assigned to all field commanders, and organises party cells in all units. Through the Military Youth Organisation, it directs the political education of enlisted personnel. Through the Administrative Department, the Party Secretariat uses the Military Security Service as a military political police force to guard against dissident activities in the armed forces.

The Soviet Union has also reclaimed much of what it had lost after 1956. Not only are certain key Polish military appointments once again reserved for Soviet officers, but various specialised security services are under direct KGB control. Furthermore, promotion above the rank of

colonel is limited to those officers who have been trained at Soviet academies.

The regeneration of political authority within the military has been supported by consistent demands for an intensification of party-ideological work in the armed forces. The tone of this effort was set at an ideological conference for leading military cadres held in 1978. The Conference theme reflected the leadership's understanding of the role of the PZPR (Polish United Workers' Party), asserting that the army would 'help to create socialist Poland . . . under the leadership of the party . . .' In sharp contrast with the independent spirit of 1956, General Włodzimierz Sawczuk, head of the MPA demanded that cadres 'increase the militancy of party-political work in the Polish armed forces' and General Jaruzelski outlined specific political-educational tasks for accomplishing that objective.

In 1984, Poland's Minister of Defence, General Florian Siwicki, further elaborated on this theme. He declared that the 'party is and always has been the leading, guiding, and vanguard force in the armed forces'. Siwicki explained that party organisations within the military deserved credit for stimulating greater performance and a higher level of combat-readiness.¹³ By the 1970's the Polish civil defence effort – discussed below – provided a model for the translation into policy of the military's commitment to an ideologically based 'intensification of cooperation' between party and military.¹⁴

Twenty years after the 'renationalisation' of the Polish Army, it became clear that the military's idea of nationalism was not that of the traditional Pole but rather an 'enlightened' Marxist-Leninist version of an 'international patriotism'. The military's expression of nationalism was found in a firm alliance with the Soviet Union and an exaltation of those events in Polish history that reflected the glories of socialism, the USSR, and Poland's struggles against Western nations.

It is not surprising that Party domination of a more genuinely professional military has continued nor that the army's status as an institution reflective of Polish pride and popular patriotism has not been regained. The leadership of the armed forces seems to have uncritically accepted Soviet military science and its own position and obligations within the Warsaw Pact. While the blatant expressions of direct Soviet manipulation have been eliminated, the military remains a reliable instrument of communist rule in Poland.

The military's political role is enhanced by an organisational structure described by Polish authorities as both logical and functional. The leadership's views on this matter were elaborated in a discussion in *Zołnierz Polski* in 1981 which stated that 'an army is a structure which is organised clearly, logically, and, above all, functionally.'¹⁵ The Polish

armed forces are therefore divided into four branches: ground forces and the navy.

The ground forces' primary mission is to prevent enemy forces from invading Poland and seizing and holding specific objectives. The regime boasts of the ground forces' great firepower, manoeuvrability, and airborne capabilities. The Ground forces consist of the following combat arms; mechanised forces, tank forces – the main striking arm – airborne assault units, missile forces – the main firepower element – artillery, anti-aircraft defence, shore defence, combat engineers, chemical troops, signal troops, transportation units and tactical air forces.¹⁶

There are approximately 220,000 men in the ground forces, 75% of whom are conscripts. They are divided into five armoured, one airborne, one assault landing and eight motorised rifle divisions. The latter are composed of three motorised rifle regiments, one tank or armoured regiment, one artillery regiment, and numerous support elements. The assault landing division is organised and equipped to cross rivers and streams under combat conditions and to conduct amphibious assaults.

The airborne division, one of Poland's elite units, is fully capable of airborne assault operations and the well-equipped artillery divisions boast a variety of howitzers, anti-tank missiles, multiple rocket launchers, and self-propelled guns. The armoured divisions use Soviet T-54/55 medium tanks armed with night-vision devices and gun stabilisers. They can therefore fire accurately on the move in day or night. The divisions facing west are at 85-90% of full strength; those facing east at no more than 30%.¹⁷

The Air and National Air Defence Forces – a combined force of 88,000 men with over 700 aircraft – is the largest Warsaw Pact air force apart from that of the Soviet Union. Established in 1944 as the Soviet Sixth Air Army, the Polish Air Force has suffered from being a Soviet creation since birth. Its first operations were conducted under Soviet command with Soviet and Polish personnel, and it continued to function as a Soviet force even after the war. It was not until 1956 that the air force – along with the army – gained some independence.¹⁸

The principal elements of the air force are the fighter air force, to provide protection for friendly forces against enemy air attacks; the attack-fighter air force, to support mechanised and airborne assault forces; the fighter-bomber air force, to strike deep inside enemy lines; the reconnaissance air force, transport air force and, finally, the auxiliary air force, providing communication, transportation for wounded, and other essential support services.¹⁹

Established in 1962, the National Air Defence Forces are one of the

youngest branches of the Polish Air Force. They are known as the 'five-minute armies' because of their quick response capabilities. Given their broad geographic responsibilities — they cover all important Polish industrial, political-administrative, and transportation centres — and their obligation to offer immediate protection for the country's most likely fixed targets, it is not surprising that the Air Defence Forces are well-armed. They presently employ ten regiments made up largely of Soviet MiG-23 *Flogger B* interceptors already used by Russia's Middle Eastern allies. Polish military spokesmen, of course, ignore the delay in their receipt of the latest equipment, insisting that the Air Defence Forces are equipped with the 'most modern pursuit planes'. There are also nine SAM regiments in fifty sites to defend important targets against enemy attack.²⁰

Three basic units are used by the National Air Defence Forces: rocket and artillery units, an air force, and radio engineers. In addition, there are several support units such as communication, chemical, supply, engineering, and other service detachments.²¹

The Polish Navy became a legal entity in July 1944 receiving its first ship, the salvaged launch 'Korsarz', in summer 1945. The military weekly *Zolnierz Polski* speaks of the difficulties of those early years when the 'Polish ships and crews who had become famous in battling the Nazi Kriegsmarine were still in the West . . .' Furthermore, according to the Journal, 'it was not easy to get them back' nor were the Western navies in which they had served, most notably Sweden and Great Britain, eager to return the ships. In fact, *Zolnierz Polski* charges, it was not until six years after the war that the submarine 'Wilk' was returned and by then it was 'fit only for scrap metal'.²²

Serious efforts to develop the Polish Navy began in March 1946, when the USSR delivered nine trawlers, 12 small submarine motor boats, and two torpedo cutters to the naval base at Gdynia. Repair bases were expanded and training of naval specialists began. Major improvements followed in the 1950's when the Polish Navy received submarines, large submarine motor boats, new destroyers and torpedo cutters. Over the next decade, rocket ships purchased from the USSR and the present generation of Polish ships were added to the country's growing navy. The Polish Navy now includes groups of surface and submarine craft, about 60 naval aircraft, various coastal units equipped with cruise missiles and about 1,000 marines, numerous engineers, technicians, hydrographic, supply, and medical specialists.²³

No Polish ship is designed for wartime operations outside the Baltic. Thus, while the navy may be an effective defensive force, it lacks the capability for major naval actions. Discussions of Polish naval missions — with the exception of Polish submarines, which are supposed to

'conduct combat operations in distant area' – generally focus on purely defensive tasks such as coastal protection, combating enemy amphibious assaults, and anti-submarine warfare.²⁴

The modern Polish Armed Forces, therefore, are a product of Soviet training and political indoctrination. They are vastly different from the patriotic, nationalistic pre-war military establishment. There is a new, internationalist version of Polish patriotism among the officer corps. An extensive network of political controls over the military discourages dissident political doctrines.

This difference is also a result of the declining popularity of the military – a condition which has become the focus of much public discussion in the Polish media – and the popular perceptions of the army as a Soviet tool. The military is therefore less attractive to traditional Polish nationalists and those inclined towards anti-Russian sentiments.

But it is the attitude of the military that has changed rather than its role, which remains that of a 'national saviour'. The Polish Army is still an institution with both military and political responsibilities. The difference is that the Army now uses Marxism-Leninism and the Warsaw Pact to save Poland from 'chaos' instead of foreign domination and the loss of national sovereignty.

FOOTNOTES

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3. Peter Gosztony, *Zur Geschichte der Europäischen Volksarmeen* (Bon: Hohwacht Verlag, 1982), 18-19.
4. A Ross Johnson, Robert W Dean and Alexander Alexiev, *East European Military Establishments: The Warsaw Pact Northern Tier* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1980), 21-22.
5. Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 362-363.
6. Nicholas Bethell, *Gomulka: His Poland, His Communism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 172-173 and 220-221.
7. Johnson, et al, 22.
8. Bethell, 230-231.
9. Johnson, et al, 23-24.
10. Adam Sarapata and Włodzimierz, 'The Evaluation of Occupations by Warsaw Inhabitants', *American Journal of Sociology* (May, 1961): 581-591 and Harold D Nelson, editor, *Poland: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983), 124.
11. Johnson, et al, 24-25.
12. Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland*, 367-369.
13. *Zolnierz Wolności*, 2-3 December 1978, p1 and *ibid*, 16 January 1984, p2.
14. *Ibid*, 2 October 1978, p5.
15. *Zolnierz Polski*, No 4, 25 April 1981, p20.
16. *Ibid*, No 5, 1 February 1981, p20.
17. William J Lewis, *The Warsaw Pact: Arms, Doctrine and Strategy*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 199-201.
18. Nelson, 316.

19. *Zolnierz Polski*, No 4, 25 April 1981, p15.
 20. Nelson, 316-317.
 21. *Zolnierz Polski*, No 48, 27 November 1983, p21.
 22. *Ibid*, No 49, 4 December 1983, p21.
 23. *Ibid*, No 6, 8 February 1981, p18.
 24. *Ibid*, p21.
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