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‘Setting Europe Ablaze’, or Just Lighting a Match. Britain and the Polish Underground in 1940

„Podpalenie Europy” czy pełgający płomień zapałki? Wielka Brytania i polski ruch oporu w 1940 r.

1940 — WOJNA ZAPOMNIANA

POLAND
BRITAIN
THE SECOND WORLD WAR
RESISTANCE

POLSKA
WIELKA BRYTANIA
II WOJNA ŚWIATOWA
OPÓR

Abstract

This article by Jonathan Walker looks at the origins of English–Polish co-operation during the early months of the war and to what extent it benefited, or failed, the fledgling Polish Underground. After the outbreak of hostilities, Britain's support for Poland was negligible despite the valuable contribution of Polish analysts towards the breaking of the German Enigma codes. The author examines the 1939 British Military Mission, which proved to be a fiasco, and he looks at the weak supply lines between the two countries, which were further disrupted the following year by the Nazi occupation of France and the Low Countries. Churchill's attempt to support resistance in occupied Europe was then crystalized by the formation of the Special Operations Executive, but those charged with running the organization had conflicting views about its mission. The problems of early air bridges between Britain and Poland are explored, together with the difficulties of logistics and technical limitations. All this is set against the background of the evolving aims and strategy of the Polish Underground. When Churchill struck a match for resistance in 1940, did it just flicker in Poland, or did it burst into flame?

Abstrakt

Artykuł dotyczy początków współpracy angielsko-polskiej w pierwszych miesiącach wojny oraz tego, do jakiego stopnia przyniosła ona korzyści lub zawiodła oczekiwania polskiego podziemia. Po wybuchu wojny poparcie Wielkiej Brytanii dla Polski było znikome – pomimo cennego wkładu polskich analityków w łamanie niemieckich szyfrów Enigmy. Autor bada brytyjską misję wojskową z 1939 r., która okazała się fiaskiem, i przygląda się słabo rozwiniętym liniom zaopatrzeniowym między oboma krajami, zakłóconym dodatkowo w następnym roku przez niemiecką nazistowską okupację Francji, Belgii, Holandii i Luksemburga. Próba Churchilla wspierania ruchu oporu w okupowanej Europie wykrystalizowała się jako Special Operations Executive, ale osoby odpowiedzialne za kierowanie tą strukturą miały sprzeczne poglądy na temat jej misji. Autor bada problem funkcjonowania wczesnych mostów powietrznych między Wielką Brytanią a okupowaną Polską, a także trudności logistyczne i ograniczenia techniczne. Wszystko to na tle ewoluujących celów i strategii polskiego podziemia. Czy kiedy Churchill zapalił zapałkę dla ruchu oporu w Europie w 1940 r., to w Polsce ona po prostu migotała czy stała się zarzewiem ognia?

When the British and Polish governments signed an Agreement of Mutual Assistance on 25 August 1939, the British were woefully under equipped to provide any sort of military response in the event of aggression against Poland by a 'European Power'[1]. When the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, set up the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in July 1940, to assist resistance groups to 'set occupied Europe ablaze', was Britain any better placed to carry out her undertaking to the Polish people?

In this article, British author and historian Jonathan Walker examines the resources available to the fledgling SOE and whether its initial scope was realistic in providing material support for Poland's underground resistance in 1940.

[1] Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, London, 1288/XIVa/44, PRM.132a, Agreement of Mutual Assistance, 25 August 1939. In a secret protocol attached to the agreement, it was understood that 'European Power' meant Germany. However, the possibility that the Soviet Union was about to invade Poland from the east does not appear to have been contemplated. One quarter of Soviet territory already lay in 'Europe', so in theory the Soviet Union could also have been classified loosely as a 'European Power'.

On 15 August, as German forces were preparing to invade Poland, the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, cabled the British Ambassador in Warsaw, declaring 'I have the impression that Herr Hitler is still undecided, and anxious to avoid war'. Despite Halifax's unfounded optimism, the signing of the Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union nine days later, removed any doubt about Hitler's intentions towards Poland. The pact was enough to convince the British government to speed up the conversion of Neville Chamberlain's verbal 'temporary assurance' to Poland into a formal written agreement, which was signed on 25 August[2].

When Germany invaded Poland a week later, Britain's declaration of war on 3 September offered the Poles some assurance that they were not alone in facing the fierce onslaught. But if the Poles were hoping for immediate military assistance from Britain, or for pressure to be relieved by a French offensive on Germany's western front, they would be disappointed. Mobilization in Britain, and particularly in France, was certainly slow. Also, Britain had a shortage of weapons and supplies, and she could not even equip all her own soldiers and those from her empire, let alone resistance fighters in occupied Europe. US aid to Britain, in the shape of lend-lease, would not be available for another eighteen months, and thus in 1939, help from this quarter could not be guaranteed[3].

On the same day as Britain declared war, she promptly lost her first ship, the SS *Athenia*, which was sunk by a German U-Boat. The Royal Air Force (RAF) launched several attacks on the German surface fleet, suffering the loss of seven out of 29 aircraft in 24 hours, without inflicting any damage on the enemy. These were losses that the RAF could ill afford, for at the outbreak of war, RAF Bomber Command could only muster some 500 operational aircraft, consisting of Blenheim IVs, Wellingtons, Whitleys and Hampdens. Among these, the Whitley Mark III and Mark IV had the longest range, although it was the slowest bomber and was therefore restricted to night flying. For the remaining months of 1939, this bomber force was limited to light strikes on enemy shipping as well as reconnaissance, but at all times aircrews were ordered to desist from dropping bombs in port

[2] The British Prime Minister had given the temporary assurance in a statement to the House of Commons on 31 March 1939 that in the event of a threat to Poland's independence, 'His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. *Documents Concerning German–Polish Relations,* HMSO, London 1939, Statement by the Prime Minister, no. 17.

[3] For an analysis of British mobilization in WWII, see S. Broadberry, P. Howlett, *Blood, Sweat, and Tears: British Mobilization for World War II* [in:] *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction 1939–1945*, eds R. Chickering, S. Förster, B. Greiner, Cambridge 2005.

areas, if there was the slightest risk to civilians. It was in stark contrast to the German Luftwaffe attacks on Poland.

There was a saying, heard everywhere at the time, that as 'Poland bled and burned, the British were bombarding the Germans with nothing more lethal than copies of Mr. Chamberlain's latest broadcast'[4]. The dropping of leaflets by Whitley bombers took place at night and can only be defended by the value of these missions as reconnaissance operations. By February 1940, their night-time missions extended as far as Berlin and Munich, and a month later, some aircraft reached Polish airspace to drop leaflets near Warsaw. These apparently futile missions did have some useful benefits for Bomber Command in that lessons were learned about the performance, at high altitudes, of both aircraft and personnel. Without fighter support these were, indeed, risky operations, but that was little compensation for Polish soldiers and civilians on the ground hoping for some offensive help from the Allies in the west.

As Professor Anita Prażmowska has pointed out, 'in Britain, from the very beginning, the war was not seen as a struggle to liberate Poland but as one to defeat Germany'. And during the tense months prior to the German attack on Poland, both the British and French military staffs had discussed their intended response to this event. They concluded that due to geographical constraints, and blocked supply routes, they would not be able to offer Poland material military assistance[5]. So, given these limitations, what were the areas of co-operation between the two countries that might lead to help for Poland in the near future?

One crucial area of co-operation was in the breaking of high-level encrypted enemy communications, which later became known as 'ULTRA'. As early as 1932, and with aid from the French, Polish cryptanalysts managed to begin reconstituting the German Enigma machine[6]. During the 1930s, they were able to regularly adapt their copied machine to the constantly changing German Army settings, as well as those from the German *Kriegsmarine* and *Luftwaffe*. However, during this period, British intelligence exhibited a baffling indifference to these critical developments, and it was not until January 1939 that they met with Polish and French intelligence representatives to discuss collaboration

[4] D. Richards, *Royal Air Force 1939–1945*, vol. 1: *The Fight at Odds*, London 1953, p. 49.

[5] A. Prażmowska, *Britain and Poland 1939–1943. The Betrayed Ally*, Cambridge 1995, p. 33. If the Baltic Sea were blocked, it was anticipated that supply could only be carried out via the Mediterranean Sea, and then through Romania. In the event, the speed of the occupation of Poland rendered this plan unworkable.

[6] The French provided regular documents, including early German Enigma manuals, as well as lists of daily settings, obtained by an employee of the army cypher branch.

on the cypher project. With war clouds gathering, a further secret meeting was held outside Warsaw in July, when the Poles agreed to supply the British and French with replica Enigma machines. This vital intelligence then enabled the British cryptanalysts to develop their own electro-mechanical devices (known as 'Bombes') designed to determine the changing daily keys, and this de-cyphered intelligence certainly shortened the war. It is often seen as one of British intelligence's great successes, but it is important to remember that without the Polish contribution, the British project would have taken much longer to develop, at a critical early point in the war. Unfortunately, in 1940 the benefits of this co-operation had not yet matured enough to help Poland.

Credit can be given to the cyber agency within British intelligence, but it was not a victory for conventional espionage, as operated by Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). This service had few triumphs during the war, largely due to its failure to run sufficient networks or agents within the German Reich or in occupied countries, including Poland[7]. One reason for Britain's poor record of intelligence in Western Europe was the recent disaster that befell the intelligence centre at The Hague, just as war broke out. The German *Abwehr* managed to infiltrate the British station, which became known as the 'Venlo Incident'. Meanwhile, although the British had established links before the war with the French *Deuxième Bureau*, many of these contacts had not survived the German occupation in the north of the country. British SIS had to rely heavily on Polish intelligence circuits, which shared all their information. In return for this intelligence, the British allowed the Poles to transmit and receive data in Britain, using their own secret ciphers.

Consequently, SIS had to rely on intelligence coming out of Poland, carried by brave couriers such as Jan Karski, and passed on via the Polish *Deuxième Bureau*. In the case of outbound intelligence, secret radio contact between the two countries was not established until December 1940, so Britain had limited means of communicating with the Polish underground. But even if the technology had been available in the early months of the war, there remained the problem that Poland's 'underground' was not yet the cohesive civil and military organization that it later became. As the Germans and Soviets invaded in 1939, numerous resistance cells came alive in Poland, their members aligned across four very different political creeds. And although the concept

[7] Unfortunately, the full scope of British–Polish intelligence co-operation may never be known, due to the destruction by SIS of the document archive after WWII. The reasons for this action are unknown, but it must be surmised that SIS did not attach any importance to retaining these documents after the events had passed.

for this underground state was in place before the outbreak of war, it took time to create unified channels of communication.

Another channel for gathering intelligence about the latest events inside Poland came via the No. 4 British Military Mission, which was dispatched to Warsaw on 22 August 1939, just ten days before the Nazi invasion of the country. The Mission was headed by a charismatic military adventurer, Brigadier-General Adrian Carton de Wiart, a much-decorated British soldier of Belgian extraction. Carton de Wiart's bravery had come at a cost; wounded in the stomach and groin during the Anglo-Boer War, he then lost an eye and part of his ear in the Somaliland campaign. For many soldiers, that would have been enough, but during his service in the First World War, he was wounded seven more times, including the loss of part of his hand – when the surgeon refused to amputate two of his fingers, he tore off the dangling digits himself. He often omitted to say that he was also awarded Britain's highest award for bravery, the Victoria Cross. His initial contact with Poland was made in 1920, when he was appointed leader of the first British Military Mission to Poland to assist the new Second Polish Republic. His friendship with the Chief of State, General Piłsudski, further cemented his relationship with the newly independent country, and during the 1920s, he returned to Poland to enjoy her hospitality[8].

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With his useful Polish contacts, Carton de Wiart was an obvious choice to lead the next Military Mission to Poland in August 1939. The British War Office had already sent Colonel Colin Gubbins over to Poland, twice before, to liaise with the Polish General Staff (PGS) about the possibility of them receiving a British Military Mission. Bizarrely, the Mission was only to appear in Poland if Polish forces were mobilized, by which time it would probably be too late to be useful. The object of the Mission was to monitor, first-hand, events in Poland, but it also aimed to observe German strategy and then report its findings to the British War Office, in the hope that lessons could be learned. Sensing that time was evaporating, Carton de Wiart went into Poland ahead of the main team, in order to establish contact with the Polish Government and to help implement a most sensitive plan. He liaised with the Polish Navy over a scheme devised by Rear Admiral Józef Unrug called Operation 'Peking', to save elements of the Polish

[8] Carton de Wiart's colourful life and relationship with Poland is recalled in his autobiography, *Happy Odyssey*, Barnsley 2020.

fleet. The daring plan, which called for the speedy evacuation from the Baltic Sea of three of Poland's most modern Destroyers, was enacted on 29 August, just as Germany prepared to attack Poland. Consequently, the ships escaped almost certain destruction and reached Britain, where they were able to carry on the fight against the enemy.

The main body of the British Mission team then prepared to join Carton de Wiart in Warsaw, but it would be a tortuous journey. This group was headed by Colonel Gubbins, who was seconded from a research department of the British War Office, known as MI(R). He was joined by a 20-strong group of Service Attachés, translators and Polish residents, including Captain Harold Perkins, Captain Peter Wilkinson and Major Mike Pickles[9]. Gubbins and his party left Britain on 25 August to travel via Marseilles, Malta, Alexandria and from there by flying boat to Athens. They then took a flight to Romania and finally, by using Polish-chartered taxis, they reached the Polish frontier[10]. They arrived in Lwów on 3 September, just as Britain declared war on Germany and moved on the same day to Warsaw to link up with Carton de Wiart at the British Embassy. But with the city subject to enemy bombing and with the Germans closing in, and exit bridges being blown, time was running out. Carton de Wiart and Gubbins had little comfort to give the PGS in Warsaw, for the speed of the German advance had rendered useless any British promises of re-supply. Furthermore, no British air support could be promised to hinder the relentless bombing of Polish cities.

By 5 September there were fewer Poles with whom to liaise and those who remained only wished to question why Britain and France had not acted against Germany. The PGS soon had to leave the capital and headed eastwards to Brest-Litovsk, and the staff of the British Embassy and the Military Mission were not far behind. Catching up with the PGS, Gubbins learned that a third of the Polish Army was cut-off in the Danzig corridor, while Marshal Śmigły-Rydz had ordered the Polish divisions in front of Warsaw to stand and fight. The divisions behind were to withdraw to the River Vistula[11].

On 17 September, as Soviet forces invaded from the east, the British Military Mission escaped amongst columns of refugees. A dejected Gubbins remarked as they left for Romania, 'What are we doing here? What help have we given the Poles'[12]. Indeed, it appears that the

[9] H.B. Perkins had served in the Merchant Navy and had then started a business in Galicia. His knowledge of Poland was extensive, which he put to good use in his later employment in SOE.

[10] This intrepid journey is described in some detail in P. Wilkinson, *Foreign Fields*, London 1997, pp. 67–83.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 78.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 83.

only benefits gained by the Mission were their reports, gleaned from interviews, of von Rundstedt's double encirclement strategy against the Polish Army – information that was to be largely ignored by the War Office in London[13].

While opposition to Nazi aggression in Europe was widespread in Britain, curiously the reaction to Soviet aggression was somewhat muted. There was little talk in London, in the winter of 1939, of help to liberate eastern Poland, the Baltic states, Bessarabia or northern Moldovia from Stalin's clutches. Indeed, even British help to the Finns fighting their Winter War (November 1939–March 1940) against Stalin was limited – the prospect of a combined British–French expeditionary force soon collapsed due to the ending of hostilities. It is true that Stalin and his communist regime had enjoyed some support from left-wing and literary circles in pre-war Britain, and Soviet support for the beleaguered Republicans during the Spanish Civil War had earned Stalin some credits. Others saw Bolshevism as a bulwark against the rising power of fascism. Strict Soviet censorship had also ensured that the worst of Stalin's atrocities lay hidden from the British public. However, as far as the British government was concerned, the priority in 1939–1940 was to avoid clashes with Stalin. Churchill's pressing concern was the threat of a Nazi invasion of Britain, and he had no desire to take on another enemy, however distasteful that might be[14].

Following the fall of Poland, representatives of both the PGS and a reconstructed British No.4 Military Mission, established themselves in Paris[15]. In November 1939, Colin Gubbins, still acting for the Mission, was charged with liaising with Czech and Polish resistance forces, and in the case of Poland, he contacted his friend, Lieutenant-Colonel Stanisław Gano, Chief of the Polish *Deuxième Bureau*. Gano confirmed that the Polish resistance were desperately in need of revolvers and radio transmitters. However, British supply lines to Poland, which could only be accessed via Budapest and Bucharest, were weak and interrupted, and the Poles were only promised a small supply of unsuitable .38 revolvers and just two transmitters – a response they could barely believe[16]. Even these fragile supply lines across Europe were further threatened by the lightening German invasion of France in May 1940.

[13] 'Carton de Wiart's Second Military Mission to Poland and the German Invasion of 1939', E.D.R. Harrison, 'European History Quarterly', November 2011. Even though German Panzer units had been effective against Polish defences, it seemed unimaginable that they could then breach the solid French Maginot Line.

[14] There was also some reluctance within the British Foreign Office to make a stand over Poland's eastern borders.

[15] The Mission's main operative in Paris was Richard Truszkowski, also attached to MI(R). He went on to become an invaluable member of SOE's Polish Section.

[16] P. Wilkinson, J.B. Astley, *Gubbins and SOE*, Barnsley 1993, p. 47.

With this imminent threat to Paris, the PGS had to evacuate on 10 June and head towards the west coast of France. Meanwhile, Peter Wilkinson had returned to England to organize a relief flight that would evacuate the PGS from France. Wilkinson duly landed in a seaplane in the L'Etang de Bicarosse, an inland sea near Bordeaux, and rowed ashore. The next day the PGS party, including General Sikorski and General Sosnkowski, were rowed out to the waiting seaplane, and within hours, the 15-strong Polish party were on their way to London, to set up a new HQ, from where they would co-ordinate the continuing struggle[17].

Apart from hosting the PGS, Britain's most promising support for Poland in these opening years of WWII was the creation of an organization that aimed to directly assist underground resistance in occupied Europe. Prior to WWII, British military strategy had envisaged that in a war against Germany, Britain would rely mainly on its navy and air force to implement economic pressure by bombing industrial centres and blockading ports, in order to defeat the enemy. Surprisingly, massive land battles were not envisaged and there was a belief that Germany would eventually collapse from within. Its Home Front was its 'Achilles Heel', which would weaken once vital raw materials, such as iron ore and oil, were withheld. Then, it was argued, the dual weapons of British propaganda and diplomatic pressure could be applied to the German people to hasten the collapse of the state. Such wishful thinking permeated British political and military thinking under the Chamberlain government, well into the early spring of 1940[18]. When Winston Churchill came to power as Prime Minister of a coalition government on 10 May 1940, he promised overt action and an iron will to take on Hitler. But despite Churchill's vision of the bigger picture, both he and Chamberlain placed the same hope in the role of subversion as a tool in generating the collapse of Germany – a tool that seemed even more important after the collapse of France.

The seed for this idea of a new organization was really sown by the British Chiefs of Staff. In late May 1940, when the Low Countries had fallen and the situation in France was critical, Churchill requested that his Chiefs of Staff submit a memorandum about the prospects of Britain holding out alone against Hitler. They concluded that it was feasible, as long as subversion was organised in occupied countries, allowing Hitler's power to crumble from within. This concept was

[17] Although the PGS had left occupied France, Colonel Wincenty Zarembski, who had been attached to the Paris Embassy, remained behind to organize the evacuation of some remaining Poles to Spain.

[18] D. Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance 1940–1945*, London 1980, pp. 10–14.

close to government thinking, for it was widely believed at the time that the speed of Hitler's conquest of much of Europe was due to the work of Nazi agents, known as 'fifth-columnists', operating behind the lines in these occupied countries. Indeed, such was the misplaced neurosis about fifth-columnists operating in Britain in the Spring of 1940 that a new agency, the Home Defence Security Executive, was established, in part to root out those of German or Italian extraction and intern them.

The whole premise surrounding SOE's creation in 1940 was built on this notion of 'collapse from within' and it was thought that resistance movements just needed the help and direction of the British to achieve this. Except for the Poles and Czechs, this was largely a fallacy. The people in most of the oppressed countries were still reeling from the swiftness of German conquests and resistance was splintered and divided. Even if these groups had been more organized, strong British supply routes to support them had yet to be established[19]. Furthermore, some commentators suggested that Hitler had spread his conquests too far and that German resources could not support his new empire. Optimists saw the dramatic recovery of allied troops from Dunkirk at the end of May as a sign that 'Britain was back in business' and ready to assist European resistance movements[20]. It was during this atmosphere that Churchill moved to establish the SOE as a 'fourth arm', independent of the Armed Forces.

In many published histories of SOE, Churchill is often credited with being the main driving force of the new organization, with his exhortation to 'set Europe ablaze'. Certainly, Churchill had developed an innate understanding of the desire of subjugated people to take back their freedom, and this understanding had largely evolved from his own personal experiences. As a young subaltern before the outbreak of the Anglo–Boer War, he demanded that 'Imperial troops must curb the insolence of the Boers – there must be no half measures'. Nevertheless, by the end of the war, he came to realise that resistance fighters, such as the Boers, were a formidable force, and when imbued with an iron spirit and belief in their cause of independence, they were a difficult foe to suppress[21]. His appreciation of the strength of resistance movements was reinforced by his wide reading of historical examples, such as the Spanish guerrillas' actions against Napoleon's troops during the Peninsular War. These early examples convinced him of the value of asymmetric warfare, though he

[19] The National Archives (TNA), HS 4/194, Report on lines of communication with Poland, 17 July 1940.

[20] D. Stafford, *Britain*..., pp. 16–19.

[21] R.S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 1, p. 449.

appreciated that popular risings against a foreign occupier often came at a terrible cost[22].

But establishing SOE was just one of Churchill's priorities amongst a host of immediate considerations for his new wartime premiership. He was keen to install a fellow conservative, Lord Swinton, as chairman of the organisation. However, he did not bargain on the persistent lobbying by a certain Labour MP and politician whom he had recently appointed Minister for Economic Warfare in his coalition cabinet. Hugh Dalton was a Fabian socialist to his fingertips and believed that the Nazis would be defeated by spontaneous left-wing uprisings across occupied Europe. Furthermore, he had also been anti-appeaser before the war and was determined to extend his influence outside his government brief. He lobbied Clement Attlee, Lord Halifax and Sir Alexander Cadogan to push Churchill to appoint him as the first chairman of SOE, arguing that the post should be held by a socialist for, 'who else would understand how to manipulate labour agitation, strikes and fomenting revolt'[23]. However, if Dalton originally envisaged mass uprisings across Europe, it would take an organization much bigger than SOE to organize this. While such thinking was extremely optimistic, it also displayed a lack of understanding as to how absolute Nazi domination had become in occupied countries. Even in a country such as Poland, where collaboration was minimal, it was fanciful that in 1940, widespread organized strikes and revolution could be secretly organized and resourced by SOE from over 1,000 miles away. It was also fanciful to believe that, as a left-winger, he was ideally suited to liaise with underground forces resisting not only Nazi occupation but also Communist domination in the east of the country.

Nevertheless, with one eye on keeping the Labour Party placated, Churchill invited Dalton to become chairman of SOE, urging him, 'now set Europe ablaze'[24].

Dalton's appointment was confirmed on 19 July 1940 by Neville Chamberlain who had surprisingly resurfaced after his recent removal as Prime Minister, to present SOE's original charter[25]. In this founding document, Chamberlain, in his role as Lord President of the Privy Council, confirmed that Dalton would oversee the consolidation of three separate government agencies. Chamberlain's charter clearly shows how SOE

[22] Churchill was appalled by Colonel Younghusband's action in Tibet in 1904, when British forces slaughtered over 600 Tibetan protestors. However, Churchill's later attitudes to Indian self-government in the 1930s were at odds with his admiration for the stoicism of resistance groups.

[23] B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton,* London 1985, p. 296.

[24] H. Dalton, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931–1945*, London 1957, p. 370.

[25] TNA, CAB 66/10/1, London War Cabinet: Home Defence Security: Special Operations Executive. Memorandum by the Lord President of the Council, WP (40) 271, 19 July 1940.

was initially put together, incorporating firstly, Section D of the SIS, the brief of which was to explore methods of sabotage that did not depend on the use of conventional military forces. Secondly, it incorporated a research department of the War Office, known as MI(R), which was developing techniques of irregular warfare, and finally, the 'black' propaganda department, known from its London address as 'Electra House'.

To amalgamate these, often, competing bodies together, Dalton would have the assistance of two of Churchill's allies, Sir Robert Vansittart and Lord Swinton. The former was a career diplomat, capable operator and proven anti-appeaser before the war, though he was not without some dubious connections[26]. The latter was Lord Swinton, an ex-government minister who had earned Churchill's respect by demanding an increase in Britain's pitiful pre-war aircraft production. During the Czech crisis in May 1938, Swinton had resigned his post as Secretary of State for Air, having failed to win his arguments for increased spending[27].

In the summer of 1940, SOE was initially split into two groups. SO1 dealt with propaganda and was headed by Gladwyn Jebb from the Foreign Office, while SO2 dealt with sabotage and operated out of 64 Baker Street, London, under the control of Sir Frank Nelson. The autocratic Nelson was an ex-MP and lately Consul in Basel, Switzerland, and was conversant with espionage work. His assistant was Major Tommy Davies, who had been a member of the recent Polish Military Mission and was in charge of training and supplies. However, by the autumn of 1940, Dalton realized that SO2 would need a military man as Director of Training and Operations and he turned to the recently promoted Brigadier Colin Gubbins, whom he had first met at a Polish Embassy dinner in November 1939. Gubbins, of course, had recently returned from Poland with the Military Mission and had also impressed Dalton with his verbal attacks on the British Treasury for failing to fund the supply of Hurricane aircraft to the beleaguered Poles. But Gubbins had more to offer than just verbal support for Poland, and his knowledge of clandestine warfare would prove invaluable. He was a decorated veteran of the First World War, who continued his military service with spells fighting in Russia during the Allied War of Intervention and then in Ireland, where Britain was battling Sinn Fein revolutionaries. Consequently, he had experienced irregular warfare, first-hand,

[26] He maintained a close friendship with Konrad Henlein, leader of the German Sudeten Party, and effective controller of the German 'fifth column' in Czechoslovakia.

[27] Churchill had experienced a similar event when he had resigned from the Admiralty during WWI. In 1943, he re-instated Lord Swinton to a new cabinet post, as Minister of Civil Aviation.

against a largely unseen enemy and learned the tactics employed by small cells of determined and well-trained fighters. Latterly, he had been attached to MI(R), the War Office department tasked with researching how irregular forces could assist resistance groups in occupied countries, particularly their weapons requirements[28]. Within SOE, each enemy-occupied country had its own devoted section, and the Polish Section was particularly fortunate in the calibre of its officers. The officer responsible for overall control of the section was Major Harold Perkins, who had been assigned from MI(R) and was a member of the recent Military Mission to Poland. The section was also well-served by a number of other ex-MI(R) men, such as Major Richard Truszkowski and Captain Peter Wilkinson, which further cemented the Polish-SOE ties[29]. But SOE's attempts to help the Poles did not just entail support for the Polish Underground inside their homeland. There was also an SOE section devoted to helping Polish resistance fighters, who found themselves operating in other countries. The European Polish Minorities Section (EU/P) aimed to assist the Poles, particularly in the important mining areas in north-east France, with sabotage and intelligence gathering.

It soon became obvious at the time of SOE's creation that the only meaningful channel for supporting Poland was by air. But, with the fall of Norway and Denmark, then the Low Countries and France, flight routes to Poland were severely compromised, and Italy's entry into the war in June 1940 cut-off any hopes of routes to Poland from the south. Even if extended air routes could somehow be achieved, where was SOE going to find the aircraft, capable of such an arduous journey in 1940? Technology, or the lack of it, hindered their quest, for there were few aircraft to choose from.

From the beginning of the year, the RAF had been gradually replacing the outdated Fairey Battle bomber aircraft with Bristol Blenheim IVs for anti-shipping and day-time operations, though even these new versions were inadequate against the fast, more maneuverable Luftwaffe aircraft, resulting in 17% losses in early missions. The other problem was duration, for a Blenheim, as a medium bomber, could only fly for five hours with a range of 1,400 miles – inadequate for a round-trip to Poland. The only other bombers available to Bomber Command were the heavier Hampdens, Whitleys and Wellingtons, most of which were saved for night operations, though they continued

[28] Gubbins helped prepare the first field regulations for the War Office in 1939, titled 'The Art of Guerilla Warfare' and 'How to use High Explosives'. The tactics and techniques in these manuals subsequently became commonplace.

[29] *The Report of the Anglo-Polish Historical Committee*, vol. 1, London 2005, p. 152.

to suffer heavy losses[30]. As France buckled under the *blitzkrieg* in May, there was also increasing pressure on the RAF to send squadrons of these 'heavies' to assist the French. However, there were some Whitley bombers, which offered some possibilities for SOE. After all, several of these aircraft had reached Poland in the spring of 1940, though admittedly, that was before Germany had conquered most of Europe and severely restricted its airspace. When war was declared, this twin-engine bomber was already obsolete and therefore was about the only large aircraft the RAF would release for 'special duties'. Extra fuel tanks were fitted, and a hatch was cut in the bottom of the fuselage for parachutists, but the weight of the additional fuel restricted the number of passengers that could be carried. With no fighter escort, the Whitley had to rely on one forward single-gun turret and one four-gun rear turret, but at least the turrets were motorised and the aircraft would be flying at night. It was planned that the aircrews for these missions would be drawn from British RAF squadrons, as Polish bomber aircrews were in the process of being formed into four Polish bomber squadrons during the summer of 1940, and only one (No. 301) was operational that year.

At the time of SOE's creation in July 1940, finding the necessary aircraft to supply agents and weapons was clearly a problem, but should this be solved, how organized was the Polish Resistance to receive any help? Inside occupied Poland, the search for suitable drop-zones and landing sites only began in the Spring of 1940 as the Polish underground state was becoming established, with a civilian 'Home Government' (*Delegatura Rządu*) as well as a military organization known as the Union for Armed Struggle or ZWZ (*Związek Walki Zbrojnej*)[31]. Although SOE promoted ZWZ as a model for irregular warfare, this forerunner of the Polish Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) was run very much on the military disciplines of 'hierarchy, obedience and discipline'. It was designated an integral part of the Polish Army and was commanded in the German-occupied zone by General Stefan Rowecki ('Grot'), who was ultimately subordinate to the Commander-in-Chief of all the Polish Armed Forces, General Sikorski[32]. SOE did

[30] At the start of 1940, the RAF could only muster 212 Hampdens, 196 Whitleys and 175 Wellingtons.

[31] The first underground military group was known as the 'Service for the Victory of Poland' (SZP) and on the orders of General Sikorski, it was integrated into the Union for Armed Struggle in December 1939. The ZWZ was consolidated and renamed The Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) on 14 February 1942.

[32] J. Walker, *Poland Alone. Britain, SOE and the Collapse of the Polish Resistance 1944*, Stroud 2008, p. 57. The ZWZ in the Soviet-occupied zone was briefly under the command of General Michal Tokarzewski-Karaszewicz, before he was captured by a Red Army patrol in March 1940.

not co-ordinate with ZWZ directly but operated through the channels of the new Polish Sixth Bureau, part of Polish Government-in-exile in London. ZWZ continued to keep up small scale sabotage operations, but the collapse of France in June 1940, barely a month before the creation of SOE, necessitated a startling order from the PGS in London. 'Instruction no. 5' compelled ZWZ to cease all armed operations, including sabotage, in the hope that the Germans and the Soviets would reduce their harsh reprisals against the civilian population. It was vital to maintain civilian support for the underground state, but it was also important to preserve resistance cells and stop Gestapo or Soviet secret police (NKVD) penetration of the organization[33]. With direct ZWZ action now ruled out until the end of the year, the pressure was off the British to supply large quantities of supplies and explosives to the underground. So, ZWZ planners concentrated on preparing plans for a national uprising. It was an elaborate, not to say optimistic, 'Operational Plan No. 54' that called for a countrywide revolt that was to be ignited after the landing of the Polish Parachute Brigade and simultaneous amphibious assaults along the Baltic coast[34]. Though incredibly detailed, the plan largely ignored the fact that Polish regular forces outside of the homeland were under Allied control and their release for such a venture was extremely unlikely. It was also vague about the Red Army's reaction to such an attack on German forces in the west – but as they showed in 1944, the Soviets were never shy about moving in to fill a power vacuum. However, despite its shortcomings, the plan laid down a blueprint for the future and, after all, a national uprising was the ultimate objective of the ZWZ[35].

It must have been very frustrating for Polish aircrews to see that while their fighter pilots had played their part in the defeat of the Luftwaffe during The Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, the RAF, for their part, had made little headway in supplying and equipping aircraft to help Poland.

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In the autumn of 1940, SOE had begun training Polish agents at Inverlochy Castle, near Fort William in Scotland, while sites were sourced for secret airfields in the east of England that would be suitable for heavy bombers to take off and land. The racecourse at

[33] M. Ney-Krwawicz, *The Polish Resistance. Home Army 1939–1945*, London 2001, pp. 37–38.

[34] TNA, HS 4/268, 'Intelligence Service and Operational Methods of the Polish Resistance', 14 May 1943. Also, J. Garlinski, *Poland, SOE and the Allies*, London 1969, pp. 50–53.

[35] Plan no. 54 was finally circulated in February 1941 but was soon overtaken by Operation Barbarossa in June 1941.

Newmarket was chosen for early missions and after many false starts, the first successful round-trip flight to Poland took place in February 1941. Operation 'Adolphus' successfully dropped Flight-Lieutenant Stanislaw Krzymowski, Lieutenant Józef Zabielski and Czeslaw Raczkowski, who parachuted into southern Poland, while the RAF crew safely returned home after the 12-hour trip[36]. It heralded the most effective strategy of air-bridges between Britain and Poland that was to deliver over 350 *cichociemni* agents to their targets in their homeland, as well as 'spectaculars' such as the recovery of V-2 rockets parts. Allied intelligence agencies benefited hugely from this relationship, as Polish couriers and agents brought back vital information on the strength and deployment of German units, as well as details gleaned from industrial espionage that gave insights into Germany's mighty manufacturing industries.

Rather than always dropping agents by parachute, aircraft would eventually land in Poland, disembark agents or couriers and collect new passengers. But these missions were fraught with danger, for apart from the risk in the air, landing an aircraft in often soft terrain, and on an untried and secret landing zone, called for great skill – the aircraft would be unusually heavy when it landed, since it still carried sufficient fuel for the return flight. Missions would gradually increase, especially after the Allied advance into Italy in 1943, when airfields such as Brindisi provided a more direct flight path to Poland. Nevertheless, despite the lobbying of senior Polish commanders and, at a lower level, SOE's Polish Section, the Home Army became militarily less important to the Allies. The German invasion of the Soviet Union, and the latter's entry into the war, had changed perceptions and allegiances in the West. The United States' entry into the war appeared to offer hope, but General Sikorski's tragic and untimely death in 1943, deprived the Polish lobby of an articulate and powerful voice. As the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff increasingly turned their attention and resources towards the opening of a new front in north-west Europe, support for Poland's cause further receded. Polish regular forces continued to make a tremendous contribution to Allied military advances, but that counted for little. Nevertheless, Churchill's promotion of the Polish interest, though sometimes dimmed by political expediency with Stalin, remained important. But as Roosevelt and Stalin began to eclipse Churchill's influence on the international stage, Poland and its Home Army slid further down the political and military agenda. These events, combined with the

[36] J. Cynk, *The Polish Air Force at War. The Official History*, vol. 2: *1943–1945*, Atglen 1998, pp. 453–454. For a detailed account of this mission, see also J. Garlinski, *Poland...*, pp. 47–49.

danger and difficulty of reaching Poland, meant that large arms and supply drops to the Polish Underground would never materialise[37].

It was a supreme irony that in 1940, Britain had the will but not the resources to help Poland. In the later years of the war, Britain with her allies, the United States and the Soviet Union certainly had more resources, but the will to help Poland had diminished.

[37] The Poles received 666 tons of weapons, a paltry sum when compared to other resistance groups in occupied Europe. The French received 10,000 tons, while the Yugoslav partisans collected nearly 19,000 tons. 'British Air Operations to Occupied Countries', HS 7/183, TNA.

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