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Poland in the Darkness of World War II

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The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War

By Halik Kochanski

(Harvard University Press, 734 pp., \$35)

The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery

By Witold Pilecki translated by Jarek Garliński

(Aquila Polonica, 460 pp., \$34.95)

ONCE, THE Allied history of the Second World War—the Anglo-American history of the Second World War, the Victors’ history of the Second World War—was the only one we thought mattered. In school, in movies, and in political speeches we learned of a war between Britain, France, and America on the one hand, and Nazi Germany and Japan on the other; of Pearl Harbor and D-Day; of Monty and Ike, Churchill and Roosevelt; of Hirohito’s surrender and the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. Good triumphed over evil in the Anglo-American version of history, because our war ended happily. Hitler killed himself, De Gaulle marched into Paris, the Holocaust was over, and justice caught up with the worst perpetrators at Nuremberg.

Yet the Anglo-American history was not the only Victors’ history—or the only Allied history—available. Certainly it was not the version studied in the Soviet Union, where the highlights of the story were always different. Instead of the Normandy landings and Guadalcanal, Soviet textbooks, movies, and speeches told (and Russian textbooks, movies, and speeches still tell) of the Battles for Stalingrad and Kursk; the liberation of Warsaw, Budapest, and Berlin; the heroism of Stalin, Zhukov, and Rokossovsky; the fortress of Brest and the Siege of Leningrad.

Despite the many differences in the narratives, the Soviet story did have one thing in common with the Anglo-American story: it, too, was a tale of how good triumphed over evil, for the war had also ended happily for the Soviet Union. Hitler killed himself, the Soviet flag was planted atop the Reichstag, the USSR acquired new European territory—the Baltic states, as well as what had been Eastern Poland—as well as new European allies. Reparations worth hundreds of millions of dollars were sent back to the Soviet Union, from trains and factories to cows and

pigs. Stalin's prestige was enhanced around the world and his cult in the Soviet Union grew stronger.

BUT ALTHOUGH we did not know much about it until recently, there is also another Allied history of the Second World War. It has some events in common with the other two, but in this version—it is the Polish version—good did not triumph over evil, for the war did not end happily in Poland. Instead of leading a triumphant march into the capital like De Gaulle, the heroes of the Polish Resistance were murdered by the Red Army and the NKVD. Instead of enjoying a slow return to prosperity, the nation remained under a new occupation. Instead of justice, the end of the war brought new forms of injustice.

In the Polish version of history, even the definition of “allies” and “enemies” becomes complicated, for the war in Poland began with two invasions, not one. First Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west, on September 1, 1939. Then the Soviet Union invaded from the east, on September 17, 1939. Though the first invasion did provoke Britain and France to declare war on Germany, neither country sent a single soldier, plane, or tank to help Poland fight back. The second invasion provoked no real international response at all. The first Polish reports from Auschwitz, smuggled at great risk to the West, provoked no special action either. Nor did Polish reports of the disappearance of more than twenty thousand of their officers who had been captured by the Red Army in the opening days of the war. All of them were subsequently murdered in the forests near Smolensk and Katyń.

The Poles have always known their version of history, of course, and they have always written about it. Indeed, some of the very best books about the war were written by Poles in the war's immediate aftermath. In 1951, Gustav Herling published *A World Apart*, a vivid, insightful memoir of his arrest and incarceration in the Soviet Gulag. In 1945, Władysław Szpilman wrote *The Pianist*, his description of his life in the Warsaw ghetto as well as the months he spent almost alone in the ruins of Warsaw after the ghetto and the city had burned. In that same year Captain Witold Pilecki wrote his extraordinary “1945 Report,” describing how he deliberately allowed himself to be arrested in order to enter Auschwitz, how he organized a resistance movement there, and how, after three years, he escaped in order to describe what he had seen to the world. Herling's literate account of life in the Gulag predated Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by a decade; Szpilman's story, which tells of Polish heroes and villains, Jewish heroes and villains, and even German heroes and villains, is one of the most moving ever written. Pilecki's depiction of life in Auschwitz and his description of opposition in Auschwitz deserves to be read alongside the accounts of Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel.

Yet until recently none of these extraordinary books were very well-known, either inside or outside Poland. *The Pianist* enjoyed brief acclaim in postwar Poland, but it appeared in poor quality bindings, on bad paper, and in a very small print run. After that Szpilman's extraordinary story of survival was forgotten, or rather ignored: within a few years of the war's end, Poland's communist authorities had grown touchier about Szpilman's flattering descriptions of the Polish Home Army—the anti-communist Polish Resistance—and Szpilman himself did not push the book. He was more interested in his music, and did not consider himself a writer. He wanted to remain in Poland and therefore wanted to make no political or literary waves of any kind.

As a book about Stalin's camps, *A World Apart* could not appear in Stalinist Poland at all. Although Herling's account was published in English in 1951—prefaced by Bertrand Russell, and admired by Camus—and although in the 1960s and 1970s it circulated in the illegal underground Polish press, *A World Apart* never won wide renown in the West. Since its author was a Pole it was considered too biased, too “anti-Soviet,” to be taken seriously. Herling himself did not return to Poland at all after the war's end. He was one of several thousand Poles allowed to leave the Gulag and join the Western allies in 1941. Under the command of General Władysław Anders, this group traveled out of the Soviet Union through Iran and across Palestine, and finally joined the Western Allies in Italy. After the war he remained in Naples.

PILECKI'S extraordinary memoir, now published in English for the first time under the title *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery*, was originally written not for publication but as a report to his military superiors. But although Pilecki was not a professional writer—he was a cavalry officer—the horror of his years in Auschwitz impelled him to write extraordinarily powerful prose. Here, for example, is how he described his first entry into the camp:

In the somewhat eerie light crawling over us from the spotlights on all sides we could see beings resembling people, but whose behavior was more like that of wild animals.... They were wearing strange striped clothes, like those one had seen in films of Sing Sing, with what in the flickering light appeared to be medals on colored ribbons, with clubs in their hands attacking our comrades with wild laughter, hitting them over the head, kicking them on the ground in the kidneys and other tender spots, jumping on their chests and stomachs with their boots, dealing death with an outlandish giggle.

When Pilecki arrived, Auschwitz was merely a brutal forced labor camp for Polish judges, doctors, priests, and soldiers, the country's political and intellectual elite. But in the two and a half years he spent there, it deteriorated into a death camp, and he records the change, one murder at a time: “The jasmine was in full bloom with a beautiful fragrance when a first-rate fellow, [Stefan Stepień] was shot.... I can still see in my mind's eye a brave man with a cheerful face.” In the months before his escape, he also witnessed the arrival of the Jews of Europe—“our Polish Jews were usually finished off at Treblinka and Majdanek”—the construction of the gas chambers at Birkenau and the beginnings of medical experiments.

But although the first draft of Pilecki's report was written in June 1943, while the war was still raging, it was hardly known outside Polish military circles. After the war, it lay for many years in the archives of the Polish Home Army in London—another version was found in the Warsaw archives—where specialists knew about it but the general public did not. And Pilecki was not only unknown but was persona non grata in communist Poland: in 1948 this extraordinarily heroic, patriotic man was arrested, tortured, and executed by the Polish communist police. His name was hardly mentioned in his country until 1989.

The fate of these three books, and the fate of the three men who wrote them, helps to explain why the Polish version of the Second World War is so alien to us, why the Poles seem so emotional and resentful when they talk about it, and why the war and the memory of the war continue to play a role in the Polish political debate even today. Their stories also help to explain the motivation of Halik Kochanski, a British scholar who has worked for many years on British

military history and has now turned to the history of Poland and the Poles in the Second World War, clearly a subject close to her heart.

OWING TO the nature of the subject, *The Eagle Unbowed* is an extraordinarily ambitious book. Kochanski sets out to pull together, for the first time in English, the many different strands of the Polish war experience. These include, among other things, the stories of the German occupation of Western Poland, the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland, the Holocaust, the Polish pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain, the Polish infantry who fought with the Allies at Monte Cassino, the Polish soldiers who fought with the Red Army, and the Polish Home Army—the military wing of the underground Resistance—which suffered extraordinary losses during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944.

By its very nature, the story is disjointed and the chronology is confusing. After all, the Poles fought both on the Eastern front and the Western front. Polish Jews were the main target of the Holocaust. Polish Catholics were the main target of a German ethnic cleansing program that expelled millions of them from their homes and sent them into forced labor in the Reich. Polish citizens of all religions were targeted for deportation to the Soviet Gulag and were caught in the crossfire of the war as the soldiers of the Red Army and the Wehrmacht and the secret policemen of the Gestapo and the nkvd marched back and forth across their country.

Between 1939 and 1945, the originally Polish city of Lwów was occupied twice by the Red Army and once by the Wehrmacht. Each power change was accompanied by violence and followed by mass arrests. By the end of the war, Lwów was no longer a city in eastern Poland. It had become (and still remains) a city in Western Ukraine. It is now called L'viv instead of Lwów, and the Poles and Jews who once lived in the city have been replaced by ethnic Ukrainians from the surrounding countryside.

Kochanski solves the problem of disjointed chronology by abandoning a strictly chronological narrative. Instead she divides her book thematically: Poles in the East, Poles in the West, the Holocaust, the Home Army, and so on. She separates the chapters on international diplomacy—the negotiations between Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt and Polish leaders over Poland's postwar fate—from her explanation of what happened to people on the ground. The plan works: the reader is never lost or confused, and there is no cutting back and forth from Moscow to Monte Cassino or between events that took place at the same time but in very different places. She also moves deftly between individual stories and wider themes. Little of what she writes is entirely fresh, and some of the sections are uneven. But the structure of the book alone is extremely valuable. Here, for the first time in English, the entire Polish experience of the war is captured in a single volume.

The result is a book far bleaker, and far more ambiguous, than anything most Americans have read about the war. Like Timothy Snyder in *Bloodlands*, a history of state-sponsored violence in the lands between Russia and Germany, Kochanski tells the story of the war from the perspective of the people who lived between the two great totalitarian powers and who suffered the most from their murderous politics. But Kochanski's book is different from Snyder's in one notable way: her story is about Poland, the Polish state, the Polish armies, the Polish population, and—inevitably—the nature of Polishness itself.

LIKE A CONSTANTLY turning kaleidoscope, our memory of the Second World War keeps shifting with the passage of time. As new archives are opened, as new memoirs are unearthed, as borders shift, and governments rise and fall, we gain new perspectives on the most all-encompassing tragedy in human history. We also learn new stories about the war.

Some of them are tragic. In 1943, Jan Karski, a courier traveling on behalf of the Home Army, came to Washington to tell the American government about the Holocaust. He met with President Roosevelt. He also arranged to see Felix Frankfurter, the great Supreme Court justice and probably the most distinguished Jewish figure in Washington. Karski and Frankfurter met at the Polish embassy on 16th Street. They sat on a hard-backed sofa that is still in the embassy today. Karski described what he, Pilecki, and others had seen at Auschwitz, in the Warsaw ghetto, and at other Nazi death camps across occupied Poland. He described the systematic elimination of the Jews of Europe by starvation, mass execution, and poison gas. Frankfurter listened to him in silence. Then he got up from the sofa, walked around the room, turned to Karski, and said: "I am unable to believe you." The Polish ambassador, who was present, protested, and said he could vouch for Karski's honesty. Frankfurter replied: "I do not say that this young man is lying. I say that I am unable to believe him."

Other stories are paradoxical. In 1939, German and Soviet troops held a joint victory parade in the city of Brest, which had been Polish until the double invasion. Soldiers of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army saluted one another and cheered. General Guderian and Brigadier Commander Krivoshein shook hands and smiled for the cameras. Two years later, the same soldiers would be shooting at one another; eventually General Guderian led the Wehrmacht into the losing battle against the Red Army at Kursk.

Still others smack of hypocrisy. In 1946, the British also held a victory parade, in London, to commemorate the anniversary of the end of the war. Troops from the Empire, the Commonwealth, and the Allied forces all marched. But although 200,000 Polish soldiers fought under British command—including some of the most successful pilots of the Battle of Britain—Poland was not represented. This was because the British invited the Soviet-backed Polish communist regime to represent the country, not the Polish wartime government-in-exile. Most of the Poles in Britain were loyal to the latter and they refused to march. The British invited a few of the pilots, but when they did so the communist Poles refused to send a delegation, and anyway the pilots would not march without the rest of Polish forces. And so Poland was not represented at all.

Poles know these stories, even if Americans and other Westerners do not. Since the fall of communism in 1989, Poles have become better acquainted with them. The works of Pilecki, Szpilman, and Herling, once unavailable in Poland, are now widely published and widely read. The shelves in Polish bookstores groan with new accounts of the Warsaw Uprising, the Polish RAF pilots, the wartime Gulag, many of which have been Polish best-sellers. In 2002, Roman Polanski made Szpilman's book into a film called *The Pianist*. In 2007, Poland's great film director Andrzej Wajda made a film about the Katyń massacre. The premiere of *Katyń* took place at the National Opera in Warsaw in the presence the Polish president and first lady, the prime minister, the Catholic primate, Lech Wałęsa, assorted historians, novelists, composers, and

victims' families, as well as film stars and movie celebrities. More than two million Poles—one in twenty—went to see *Katyń* during the first two months of its release.

Contemporary Polish interest in the war has several sources. As they re-enter Europe, join the European Union and nato, and participate again in the arguments about the fate of the continent, many simply want explanations: why are Poles poorer than West Europeans, why were they outside the mainstream for so long, why do they have so far to go to catch up? Why was Warsaw so comprehensively destroyed, even more so than Berlin and Dresden? Why were so many of the country's educated elite murdered, during and after the war? A part of the answer to these questions does indeed lie in the history of the war and the postwar Soviet occupation. The widespread effort to illuminate that past is laudable.

Equally laudable is modern Poland's search for heroes. Pilecki's improbable life story—a volunteer for Auschwitz, murdered by the communists—has made him into a kind of cult figure among young people. Karski is equally revered. The many heroes of the Warsaw Uprising and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising are also now memorialized in street names and monuments all over the city, as they should be. When Herling died in 2000, his obituaries ran on the front pages of newspapers. Irena Sendlerowa, who smuggled some 2,500 Jewish children out of the Warsaw ghetto, has been the subject of documentaries and plays. Modern Poles want their own children to know the biographies of these outstanding compatriots, and rightly so.

But not all the emotions evoked by the memory of the Second World War in Poland are quite so positive. The war also evokes anger, grief, and a sense of victimization—not to mention hatred of Germans, of Russians, and of the West Europeans who so blithely walked away from the battlefield in 1945 and declared victory. In recent years, some politicians have tried to capitalize on that hatred, channeling it into anti-German, anti-Russian, or anti-Western rhetoric. Nowadays, Polish xenophobia and nationalist paranoia is usually directed not at immigrants and minorities, as it is in much of the rest of Europe—and as it was, historically, in Poland as well—but rather at rich and powerful outsiders who are allegedly manipulating Polish politics from behind the scenes, just as they did in the 1940s, as well as at “traitors” within the system who are masquerading as loyal Poles but really work on behalf of foreign interests. At times these suspicions burst into the open, as they did following the plane crash that killed Lech Kaczynski, then the Polish president, in 2010. The president was on his way to visit the monument to the Katyń massacre. Despite numerous investigations and clear evidence that the crash was an accident, a portion of the population will always believe that this crash was planned: after all, such betrayals have happened before.

In the end, the only cure for this kind of historical paranoia is more history: history based on archives and memoirs, history that incorporates different points of view, history that seeks, as far as possible, not to impose the politics of the present onto the past. In fact, Poland is producing quite a lot of excellent works of history at the moment, and eventually these will surely drown out the conspiracy theorists. In the meantime, *The Eagle Unbowed* is one of the first books to make comprehensive use of the many new sources in English, putting a complicated story into a clear narrative. I hope it is not the last.

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