



INTRODUCTION

Misconceptions about the Second World War in Europe appear to be endless; everyone, including the most advanced experts, can always learn something more and increase the precision of their understanding. One basic misconception, for example, concerns the moral framework of the war; many Westerners imagine that the war in Europe saw just one evil regime, the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler, which was opposed by a coalition of democratic allies dedicated to freedom, law and justice. In reality, the largest combatant power of the war, the Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin, despite its differences from Nazism, can only be included in the criminal, mass-murdering category. Stalin began the war in September 1939 as Hitler's partner in crime, and made no effort to restrict his evil practices when the Soviet Union had been attacked by Germany in June 1941. All the countries like Poland which lay between Germany and the Soviet Union felt the lash of both their neighbours, and at war's end they were denied any meaningful liberation. As Captain Pilecki¹ understood very well, the only valid moral stance was to oppose Nazism and Stalinism alike.

¹ The name Witold Pilecki is pronounced VEE-told pee-LETS-kee.

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Another common misconception concerns the scourge of the concentration camps. Many Westerners continue to imagine that concentration camps were somehow a monopoly of the Nazis; they equally fail to make the important distinction between concentration camps, like Dachau or Majdanek and fully fledged death camps, like Treblinka. Few of them realise that the Soviet ‘liberators of Auschwitz’ were busy running a massive network of concentration camps of their own. In reality, the Russian acronym, the GULag, stands for “State Board of Concentration Camps”. All the indications are that Soviet instruments of repression consumed more human beings than their Nazi counterparts.

Pilecki’s third Report on Auschwitz was written in 1945 at a time when his fight against German tyranny had ended and when his fight against Soviet tyranny was about to begin. It is a poignant reminder of the double threat which Europe faced in the mid-20th Century.

I myself became fully aware of the greatness of Witold Pilecki while conducting research on the Warsaw Rising of 1944. Here was a man, who almost single-handedly had held up the German panzers on one of Warsaw’s main thoroughfares for a fortnight; using the pseudonym ‘Roman’, he then disappeared into his dugout and continued the struggle until the Rising capitulated over two months later. Only then did I realise that this was the same heroic character, who four years earlier had deliberately arranged to be arrested by the SS and be transported to Auschwitz. In 1943, having engineered his escape, he wrote the first version of his Report on Auschwitz, which I had read and which had been the first of several attempts to inform the outside world of what was really happening. Pilecki was a Polish officer and Catholic who viewed his fight against his country’s oppression as synonymous with his patriotic and religious

duty. If ever there was an Allied hero who deserved to be remembered and celebrated, this was a person with few peers.

Yet Pilecki's astonishing career did not end with the declaration of peace. He was put to death by an act of judicial murder, destroyed by a Communist regime which was working for Stalin's interests and which treated all non-Communist resistance fighters as traitors and Nazi-lovers. Pilecki's name mirrors the tragic fate of millions whom the West forgot. Only when one grasps the true horror of his fate can one comprehend what the Second World War in Europe was really about.

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