

OPINION: The Polish connection

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When Air Force One touches down on May 27, US President Barack Obama will arrive in a country that shares a special bond and a long history with the United States: Poland.

Poland? Really? Ten years ago that would have been my reaction – one that I suspect would be shared by many Americans today. It wasn't until I started doing research for a novel with a World War II subplot, that I uncovered a rich vein of history that is virtually unknown in mainstream American culture.

In that research, I encountered a country that I had never met – one that fielded the fourth-largest Allied military force in the European Theatre of World War II. A country whose underground army numbered 300,000 brave men, women and even children in the face of the most brutal German occupation in Europe. A country whose ace fighter pilots had the highest number of kills among Allied fighter squadrons in the Battle of Britain, downing three times as many as the average RAF squadron with one-third the casualties, helping to save England during the most desperate days of the war.

And, despite the significance of its contribution, Poland and its heroes have gotten little recognition.

A special bond

What is the special bond shared by Poland and the United States? It's a fierce love of freedom and a willingness to fight for that freedom. The two countries are intertwined in a long, historic relationship based on that shared bond. Allow me to offer a few examples:

The first American colonists included Polish craftsmen, specifically invited by Captain John Smith to join the Jamestown Colony in Virginia in 1608 because of their skills. These craftsmen staged the first labor strike in America – not for more money or better working conditions, but for the right to vote.

Polish military leaders General Casimir Pulaski and Colonel Tadeusz Kosciuszko voluntarily served in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Their expertise and bravery proved pivotal to the colonies' victory.

The favor was returned by American fighter pilots, who volunteered to fly with the fledgling Polish Air Force in the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919-1920, defending Poland's new-found independence against attack by Soviet Russia.

Polish forces fought alongside their American allies during World War II, and most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And millions of Polish immigrants enrich the United States, comprising one of the largest ethnic ancestry groups in America today.

Highs and lows

But, like most relationships, this one has had its ups and downs.

One of the high points came in 1918, at the end of World War I, when US President Woodrow included independence for Poland, including access to the sea, in his famous “Fourteen Points” speech, thus engineering the rebirth of the Polish state after 123 years of partition and rule by Prussia, Russia and Austria.

One of the lowest points came just a generation later, at the end of World War II, when in an exercise of realpolitik US President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill consigned their Polish ally to the Soviet sphere of influence. Poland disappeared unwillingly behind the Iron Curtain for nearly 50 years.

In order to control the country, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin employed a repressive strategy of physical terror combined with a comprehensive propaganda campaign to discredit and marginalize the Poles, both within Poland and internationally, with repercussions that are still felt today.

Looking forward

More than 20 years after the fall of communism (triggered by the Polish Solidarity movement), the truth is finally re-emerging. Poland’s valiant role as one of the Allies in World War II had vanished from Western consciousness during the post-war years. But today, we’re seeing a new, growing interest in this story of one of the most heroic and tragic of the World War II Allies.

For example, acclaimed filmmaker Peter Weir’s “The Way Back,” based on the story of a Polish POW who escaped a Soviet gulag, was released earlier this year. I have also heard that the producer of “The King’s Speech” is planning to make a film based on the story of Jan Karski, a Polish Underground hero who infiltrated the Warsaw Ghetto and tried to tell the world what Hitler was doing to the Jews.

President Obama’s visit to Poland celebrates this dynamic, forward-looking nation as one of America’s staunchest allies today and hopefully signals the beginnings of a new – and lasting – high between the two countries.

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