

OPINION

Polish Heroes

BY TERRY TEGNAZIAN

April's tragic plane crash that killed Polish President Lech Kaczynski, his wife, and 94 others, brought an important piece of the country's history to the world's attention: The Katyn massacre of 22,000 Polish officers and intelligentsia by Soviet forces 70 years ago.

The history of the country's World War II resistance against Nazi Germany fell victim to Realpolitik.

Poland is mostly absent from the popular Western vision of World War II, despite being the first Western Ally to stand up to the Nazi German war machine. Poles fought with great distinc-



The Warsaw Uprising, July 1944.

tion on every front, abroad and at home, fielding the fourth largest Allied military force in Europe. And Poland was the only Ally that was invaded and occupied by two enemies—Germans from the West and Soviets from the East.

So why are stories of Poland in World War II “missing in action”? I began to ask myself when I started researching Polish fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain for a novel I planned to write. While reading many long-out-of-print memoirs of Polish war leaders, soldiers and civilians, I found myself moved and inspired by the heroism and resilience with which the Poles faced insurmountable odds. Here was an important piece of history I'd never learned, though I

consider myself a well-educated American.

For example, when we think of the “resistance” in World War II, it's the French who come to mind. But in Nazi-occupied Poland, the entire government, both civil and military, went underground to form the “resistance.” At its height, the underground Polish army (Armia Krajowa, or AK) counted 300,000 brave men, women and even children.

There was also the secret Żegota Committee, part of the Polish underground government, whose mainly Christian members risked their own and their families' lives to save Polish Jews.

Polish fighter pilots swiftly learned English and mastered unfamiliar British flight instru-

ments to help the RAF win the Battle of Britain, downing three times the average RAF score with one-third the casualties. The Polish Air Force fought throughout the entire war, widely respected as superb pilots. But like much of Poland's World War II experience, these exploits were buried after the war. The reason was Realpolitik.

Poland, like other East European countries, was abandoned by the U.S. and the U.K. to the post-war Soviet sphere of influence. Stalin knew that the Poles hated the Communists as much as they hated the Nazis. To control the country, he employed a two-pronged strategy of physical terror and propaganda. The repercussions of his comprehensive campaign to marginalize and discredit the AK and Polish underground leaders, both within Poland and internationally, continue to reverberate today.

On my first trip to Poland in 2005, the 50-something woman I'd hired as my translator came to our first meeting with books by two former AK members that she had gotten from the library to prepare for our project. “I want to thank you for this assignment,” she told me. “I knew none of this. When I was growing up, we were taught that it was the Communist resistance that saved Poland from the Nazis, and that these AK guys were clowns.”

Here was an intelligent Polish woman who did not know her own history because of propaganda. This and other similar incidents made me realize how important it was to publish the

Polish World War II experience. I am an American of Armenian descent who doesn't speak or read Polish. But I am convinced that this history needs to be told to the world. It restores a missing piece of World War II, one of the most transformative events in modern history. It honors real-life heroism in the face of evil. Modern Western societies could do worse than study this example.

It's also a matter of justice and recognition. It is the pride in our history that makes us secure in our identity as a people. For too long Poles, both in Poland and in the diaspora, were denied that basic right.

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