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Closely watched soldiers. Repatriation of soldiers of the Polish 2nd Corps via Czechoslovakia in 1945

Słowa kluczowe: repatriacja, Polska, Czechosłowacja, II Korpus Polski we Włoszech

Keywords: repatriation, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the 2nd Polish Corps in Italy

Abstract: The article deals with the repatriation of Polish soldiers from Italy to Poland and is based on Czech archival documents which have not been researched before. It reveals the Czechoslovak authorities' attitude towards the repatriation of the soldiers.

Repatriation of soldiers from the Polish 2nd Corps via Czechoslovakia in 1945¹

The fate of the Polish Armed Forces in the West (Polskie Siły Zbrojne – PSZ) after the end of WWII posed a vexing problem not only in the relations between the

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Polish and British exile governments but also in international politics. In 1945, the developments in Poland where the Soviets helped to establish a communist regime after driving out the German occupiers, led to a co-existence of two governments. The government in Warsaw immediately recognised the Soviet territorial acquisitions from September 1939 and agreed with the new Western borders along the Oder-Neisse line and with the annexation of a part of Eastern Prussia. Of course this also entailed mass migration of the Polish population. Although the legitimate exile government continued diplomatic relations with the Western powers, it was only able to helplessly stand by and watch the events take place in Poland. With other countries gradually establishing contacts with the government in Warsaw (in late January 1945, Czechoslovakia followed suit)² the international isolation of the exile government deepened only to peak on 5 VII 1945 when the United States and Great Britain recognized the Warsaw government. From their perspective, the condition set out at the Yalta conference (that representatives of the London exile government join the Warsaw government) had been fulfilled. But nothing changed the fact that it had only been the former Prime Minister Stanisław Mikołajczyk and his collaborators who decided to do so. In hindsight, his struggle to preserve freedom and democracy in Poland was doomed to failure from the start.

As a result of these events, the position of the PSZ changed fundamentally³. The British, to whose operational leadership the Polish units were subordinated, ceased to recognize the Polish President Władysław Raczkiewicz and the authority of General Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski as the highest commander of the army. From the British point of view, the Polish-British military agreement from 5 VIII 1940 had also expired. The Polish General Staff headquarters (Sztab Naczelnego Wodza) was transformed into headquarters with General Stanisław Kopański in the lead who was subordinated to the British command⁴.

² More details in I. Štoviček, *Diplomatické uznání polské lublinské vlády (Dokumenty)*, Sborník archivních prací 43 (1993), pp. 3–57; J. Němeček, *Od spojení k roztržce. Vztahy československé a polské exilové reprezentace 1939–1945*, Prague 2003.

³ On the question of the PSZ after the war, see especially M. Nurek, *Gorycz zwycięstwa. Losy Polskich Sił Zbrojnych na Zachodzie po drugiej wojnie światowej 1945–1949*, Gdańsk 2011; J.A. Radomski, *Demobilizacja Polskich Sił Zbrojnych na Zachodzie w latach 1945–1951*, Krakow 2009; J. Żak, *Nie walczyli dla siebie. Powojenna odyseja 2. Korpusu Polskiego*, Warsaw 2014.

⁴ S. Artymowski, *Repatriacja żołnierzy Polskich Sił Zbrojnych z Europy Zachodniej do Polski w latach 1945–1948*, Poznań 2012, p. 24.

The further fate of the PSZ was a very sensitive problem because the Polish contribution to the war efforts against Nazi Germany was incontestable; however, it was in a sharp contrast to the reality in Poland where the new totalitarian regime gradually came to power. On the one hand, the British wanted to complete demobilization as quickly as possible and encourage most of the soldiers to return to Poland. On the other hand, they knew that if they took rash or injudicious steps, in a worst case scenario it would even lead to an uprising. Given the large size of the Polish army, this situation could have been very dangerous, not to mention the damage it could have inflicted on Great Britain's image in the eyes of the world. London was well aware of this and therefore could not force the Polish soldiers – come hell or high water – to return home. The British, who were shouldering the main burden for tackling the issues relating to the PSZ, faced two difficult tasks: providing for the repatriation of those willing to return, and finding a satisfactory solution for the future of the others⁵.

For a great majority of Poles who had found themselves far away from home due to the war (the soldiers, people forced to deployment, POWs, prisoners from concentration camps), of importance was the question whether to return to Poland or not. Should they wait until Poland would be liberated from the communist regime during a war between the West and the USSR (something the Polish émigré community believed in), or should they return home? The natural longing to return home, and the misgivings over the prospect of facing more uncertainties in emigration contended with fears of communist repressions. Therefore, many Poles wavered in repatriation in 1945. It was no different for members of the PSZ, who also had to decide how to secure the livelihood outside the army. For young soldiers who had often practised civilian professions, making their way back into the labor market or, in some cases, acquiring requalification training was not so difficult. However, because of their age and physical condition, older career officers faced poorer prospects and were at a disadvantage. Understandably, these men were most liable to cherish hope that a new war would soon break out between the West and the USSR, owing to which Poland would topple the communist regime. The PSZ recruitment effort that was underway even after the war, proves the fact that this idea did not seem outlandish even to the top rank officers, despite the British prohibitions and protests of the government in Warsaw. Between May and August 1945, the ranks of the PSZ grew by fifty thousand. The Polish displaced individuals supplied the

⁵ M. Nurek, *Gorycz zwycięstwa*, p. 212.

newcomers so the attempt at developing the army's military potential were combined with care for it. A paradox ensued: while the armies of the other allies were demobilizing and reducing their manpower, the PSZ was growing⁶.

At the same time, even the Polish command was unable to turn a blind eye to the desire expressed by some of its soldiers to return to Poland. On the day when London recognized the Warsaw government, General Kopański distributed a letter to the other top officers in which he expressed the position of the Polish exile representation towards repatriation. Although the soldiers should not have been presented with obstacles to return home, the commanders were supposed to inform them of "what might await them there", and that "return[ing] home before the elections in Poland would truly damage both the Polish cause and the Poles back in the country"⁷. Several days later, the general appealed in another letter to understand the decision made by some of the soldiers to be demobilized and repatriated: "We mustn't leave as enemies but like brothers. Another approach would help our enemies to divide those who return and those who stay"⁸.

More precise data on the numbers of the PSZ soldiers requesting return to Poland were provided by a plebiscite organised by the British on 21 September. On that date, 23,000 soldiers from the 1st Corps in Great Britain and about 14,000 from the 2nd Corps in Italy registered for repatriation which represented 15% of manpower. Their decision stemmed from family reasons rather than political ones (often they came from regions annexed during the war to the Reich and forced to serve in the Wehrmacht). They were supposed to be gradually detached from their units, transferred to special camps (for fear of arguments with opponents of repatriation) and then sent off to Poland in special transports. The remaining soldiers had an opportunity for repatriation in the future⁹.

The British immediately undertook preparations for the repatriation; the soldiers from the 2nd Corps were to return home via Czechoslovakia. However, two months passed before they were able to set out on their journey. Why did they have to wait so long, and what traces did their passage through Czechoslovakia leave in the Czech archives? This study offers the answers to these questions¹⁰.

⁶ S. Artymowski, *Repatriacja żołnierzy*, pp. 58–62.

⁷ Cited by: *ibidem*, p. 49.

⁸ Cited by: *ibidem*, p. 50.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 109; M. Nurek, *Gorycz zwycięstwa*, p. 231.

¹⁰ Even though M. Nurek mentions extension of the repatriation of the 2nd Corps in the fall

Polish Repatriation Operations in Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia was an important transit country for Polish repatriates from Western Europe. The first large transports were already on their way across the Czechoslovak territory in the summer. Many Poles attempted to reach Poland through Czechoslovakia on their own, either individually or in small groups. From the beginning, the Polish repatriation operations in Czechoslovakia caused a myriad of problems. Above all, there were shortages of qualified personnel to take care of the repatriates and organize their transport to Poland. So initially, the Poles had to rely mainly upon themselves. Later on the Polish embassy also made feeble attempts to assist them. In Prague, a Polish repatriation commission was established with several branches (especially in Western and Northern Bohemia, regions hosting important transportation routes with larger groups of displaced Polish individuals). Even though a part of this network consisted of employees paid by the embassy, the main burden of this work fell upon volunteers. However, good intentions and willingness to help could not have replaced a professional repatriation organization¹¹. At the same time, the problem was not as much with the repatriation of Poles directly from Czechoslovakia (their number was fairly small, several tens of thousand) as with the organisation of their transit. In particular, hundreds of thousands of Polish DPs found themselves in the American occupation zones in Germany and Austria. The Americans were understandably very interested in repatriating the Poles as quickly as possible¹².

Transit via Czechoslovakia which enjoyed a fairly functional railway system after the war, was the fastest way to move the Polish repatriates from the Western occupation zones to Poland. They also had a well-developed system of care of the repatriates¹³ frequently used by the Poles. Josef Hejret, a Czechoslovak delegate in Warsaw, covered it in one of his reports:

of 1945, he fails to suggest the causes and merely states that Czechoslovakia had agreed to the transit only in late October. Ibidem, p. 260.

¹¹ More on the beginnings of the Polish repatriation operations in Czechoslovakia in J. Friedl, *Počátky spolupráce Československa a Polska při repatriaci svých občanů po druhé světové válce (do uzavření repatriační smlouvy)*, Slovanský Přehled 99 (2013) 3–4, pp. 297–321.

¹² More on the course of the negotiations of the agreement: ibidem, pp. 314–318.

¹³ More details in J. Kasíková, *At' mohou přijeti. Organizace poválečné repatriace a návratů 1942–1947*, Prague 2017, p. 203 and the following pages.

I am further reporting that with reference to the care for the repatriated, Czechoslovakia has the best reputation everywhere in Poland. The newspapers have repeatedly covered the great care provided to Polish repatriates. They come every day to give their thanks [...]. Also, Italians, Southern Slavs, Belgians and the French; all of them want to return via Czechoslovakia, and no one wants to take the northern route through Berlin. I think that good organization of repatriation, transport etc. for all the foreigners who travel through the Czechoslovak territory is a display of our country's great organizational skills. I am aware of the related difficulties and sacrifices¹⁴.

124,462 Poles returned home via Czechoslovakia in organized transports in the short period between 1 July and 15 September 1945¹⁵.

The signatures of Minister Jan Masaryk and delegate Stefan Wierbłowski on the repatriation agreement from 21 IX 1945 marked the peak of the negotiations of co-operation between the two states in the repatriation of their citizens. For Poland, the starting date of military hostilities was established as 1 IX 1939, and for Czechoslovakia it was 17 IX 1938. The agreement stipulated that both parties would appoint repatriation missions (commissions) that would help to organize people's return to their home countries, and they would search for "scattered, missing, and sick repatriates, for vanished children, [and] for records, archives, and other written materials that relate to the repatriates". The mission members were to guarantee free movement in both states and the right to visit collection camps and repatriation centers. When necessary, the mission workers could also take a look at the official records (particularly prison and court documents), have summaries or duplicates made, "compile lists of the deceased, search for individual and mass graves, and for those who were captured and abducted by their people". Both of the contractual parties committed themselves to providing assistance necessary to provide for the mission's activities as well as all the essential care of the repatriates. The expenses should only be tallied after the return of "the majority of repatriates to their states". The agreement was valid for six months after signing thereof and it could always be extended for another three

¹⁴ Národní archiv Prague (NA), Ministry of Labor and Social Care – Repatriation (Ministerstvo práce a sociální péče – repatriace – MPSP-R), Inv. No. 560, box 409, file "Německo", report by J. Hejret from 5 IX 1945.

¹⁵ Archiwum Akt Nowych Warsaw (AAN), General Government Proxy for Repatriation (GPR), file. 186, excerpt from a report by M. Wierna from 21 IX 1945, p. 157.

months, as long as it was not terminated by one of the parties one month “before the expiration of any of these periods”¹⁶.

Interestingly, during the debates on the text of the agreement, the Czechoslovak authorities attempted to covertly include provisions that would enable them to repatriate some of the Poles from Cieszyn Silesia. Funnily enough, the Czechoslovak negotiators suggested that the agreement established the beginning of wartime events for Poland as 28 IX 1938; that would imply that Czechoslovakia could legally include all the Poles who came to Cieszyn Silesia after this date (the so-called “Polish occupiers”) into the repatriation process¹⁷. What is more, the Czechoslovak proposal of the wording did not define repatriates, so the agreement could have been applied to any citizens of either state. Consequently, Poles who had a permanent residency status in Czechoslovakia since 28 IX 1938, were automatically considered repatriates and forced to leave the Republic. Again, this mainly applied to the so-called Polish occupants in Cieszyn Silesia¹⁸. After the Polish Embassy’s intervention, necessary amendments were made to the agreement, in particular, the date of the initiation of acts of war was changed to 1 IX 1939 for Poland¹⁹.

In order to understand the above-mentioned Czechoslovak attempt at covertly editing the bilateral agreement, I need to cover briefly the Czechoslovak-Polish relations of that time as they also impacted the repatriation of Polish soldiers from Italy. Following the end of the war, territorial conflicts flared up again with Cieszyn Silesia as a bone of contention: the Polish government wanted a new border that would take into account the ethnic situation. However, this was at odds with the position of the Czechoslovak government which strongly insisted on keeping the borders from before 30 IX 1938. At the same time, the relationships between the local Czechs and Poles deteriorated because some of the Czechs who had been forced to leave in the fall of 1938 (when Czechoslovakia surrendered the territory after the previous Polish ultimatum) returned to Cieszyn Silesia. The Czechs who perceived the Poles as traitors and a fifth column, often wanted to settle the score. However, it was not

¹⁶ *Dokumenty a materiály k dějinám československo-polských vztahů v letech 1944–1948*, eds. W. Balcerak et al., Prague 1985, document No. 38, pp. 74–77.

¹⁷ More details in J. Friedl, *K pokusům o odsun tzv. polských okupantů z Těšínska po druhé světové válce*, [in:] I. Pejčoch, J. Plachý et al., *Okupace, kolaborace, retribuce*, Praha 2010, pp. 264–270.

¹⁸ Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw (AMSZ), Repatriation Bureau (BSR), Volume (v.) 2, file (f.) 36, report by S. Wierbłowski from 13 VIII 1945, pp. 1–3.

¹⁹ J. Friedl, *Počátky spolupráce*, p. 314.

possible to deal with Poles, a victorious nation which suffered significant material and human losses in the process, in the same way as the defeated Germans. The Poles from Cieszyn Silesia also found out that the Polish government was willing to support them. Soon after the war ended, the atmosphere between the two states was so strained that in June the respective armies even made preparations for an armed conflict over Cieszyn Silesia²⁰. This was only prevented by the Soviet Union which forced both quarreling parties to come together and negotiate. Notably, Czechoslovakia and Poland wrangled over more locations than Cieszyn Silesia. After the war, Prague laid claim to the territories which previously belonged to German Silesia (regions of Kłodzko, Głubczyce and Racibórz), assigned to Polish governance at the Potsdam Conference²¹.

In this rather hostile atmosphere, the negotiations continued over the further development of Polish repatriation operations in Czechoslovakia. Hundreds of thousands of Polish displaced persons were still waiting in the Western occupation zones, and the Americans were keen on completing the repatriation as swiftly as possible. In September, the transit of the repatriates via Czechoslovakia was negotiated in the American delegates' presence²². While Prague agreed on the transit, it was on the condition that Poland would supply coal for the locomotives. When signing the repatriation agreement, Jan Masaryk, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, emphasized Czechoslovakia's limited transportation capabilities and the significant overloading of its rail tracks: "At that time it will be absolutely essential that the Polish side follows through with all the measures so that the trains carrying the repatriates will be immediately emptied and returned at the collection stations; i.e. in Chudoba, Mezilesí in the Kłodzko region, and Zebrzydowice"²³. Thus the Minister of Foreign

²⁰ J. Bílek, *Vojenské aspekty čs.-polského sporu o Těšínsko v roce 1945 (Vyhrocení situace v červnu 1945)*, *Historie a vojenství* 48 (1999) 2, pp. 325–353.

²¹ On Czechoslovak-Polish relations of the time in M.K. Kamiński, *Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki polityczne 1945–1948*, Warsaw 1990; A. Kastory, *Rewanż za Monachium. Z dziejów czechosłowackiej polityki wobec sąsiadów w latach 1945–1947*, Krakow 1996, pp. 85–124; J. Friedl, *Vztahy mezi Československem a Polskem v letech 1945–1949*, [in:] J. Friedl, Z. Jirásek, *Rozpačité spojení. Československo-polské vztahy v letech 1945–1949*, Prague 2008, pp. 11–339.

²² K. Kersten, *Repatriacja ludności polskiej po II wojnie światowej (Studium historyczne)*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk 1974, p. 111; J. Friedl, *Počátky spolupráce*, pp. 317–318; Cf. M.K. Kamiński, *Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki*, pp. 145–146.

²³ AMSZ, Political Department (DP), v. 11, f. 161 letter from J. Masaryk from 21 IX 1945, p. 53. Cf. M.K. Kamiński, *Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki*, p. 146.

Affairs clearly wanted to protect his country from Polish criticisms in case Czechoslovakia were unable to provide problem-free transit²⁴.

However, difficulties with transit arose in October 1945. Czechoslovakia complained about Poland's failure to fulfil its commitment to deliver coal for the locomotives. Finally, in the last week of the month, Czechs significantly restricted the movement of the repatriation transports²⁵. Quite possibly, the above mentioned poor relations with the northern neighbour had something to do with Czechoslovakia's uncompromising position. Moreover, a protocol of the Czechoslovak government indicates an oppressive atmosphere; during a session held on 19 X 1945, the ministers pondered suspending the repatriation transports. In the discussion, the repatriation operations intertwined with the territorial conflicts. Josef David, deputy chairman of the government, even referred to Czechoslovak repatriates being robbed and beaten in Poland. Vladimír Clementis, the State Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was equally critical: "[...] We are trying to accommodate the Poles in every way in the repatriation process, [and] we are charged for transport of repatriates in our own state territory to which they are laying claims [clearly referring to Cieszyn Silesia – J.F.]"²⁶. Nevertheless, it does not seem that Czechoslovakia would have wanted to deliberately slow down the repatriation for the above stated reasons. By virtue of his position, Józef Wiśniewski – an official in charge of repatriation in the Polish legation, was in close contact with officials in the Ministry of Transport and was very much aware of the situation. Not only did he confirm the shortage of coal in Czechoslovakia; he also stressed that if the responsible authorities approved the appropriation of coal for the repatriation trains from quotas intended for civilians, they would be held responsible for it²⁷.

²⁴ For example, in October 1945 the transports stopped running from Prague via Náchod to Kudowa due to the limited load-bearing capacity of the bridge across the Metuje. The repairs took several weeks. AAN, GPR, inscription 186, report by Captain Wojtkowski from 1 XI 1945, p. 137.

²⁵ A summary of the transports in October 1945 shows that the transit was not completely shut down, as literature on the subject presents it (M.K. Kamiński, *Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki*, p. 162). Rather, it was significantly restricted. AAN, GPR, f. 185, summaries of transports for October 1945. Councilman Staniewicz from the delegation said openly to Karel Dvořáček, chairman of the political division of the MZV, in a conversation held on 31 X 1945 that the state of the transit of repatriates "was so chaotic that they did not know whether it was entirely shut down or restricted". AMSZ, DP, v. 8, f. 133, report by Roman Staniewicz from 31 X 1945, p. 28.

²⁶ NA, Collection 83, f. 71, transcript from a government session held on 19 III 1945.

²⁷ AMSZ, DP, v. 9, f. 144, a letter from Roman Staniewicz dated 24 X 1945, p. 27.

This crisis of the Polish repatriation operation in Czechoslovakia coincided with preparations for repatriation of the soldiers from the Polish 2nd Corps in Italy who had expressed their wish to return to Poland in September 1945.

Passage of the Demobilized Soldiers from the 2nd Corps via Czechoslovakia

As soon as the results of the September survey were known, the British took steps to repatriate soldiers from Anders' Army. As early as on 24 IX 1945, negotiations with representatives of the Soviet occupation zone in Austria took place. However, much to the chagrin of the British, no significant progress was made at the conference. Colonel Kazimierz Sidor, a representative of the Warsaw government and a military attaché in Rome, failed to arrive. Moreover, the Soviets considered these talks merely informative and the delegated officers were not fully-invested proxies²⁸. What is more, Moscow did not agree on trains passing through the Soviet zone, and suggested the Linz – České Budějovice line. This would have also been more agreeable for the Western allies as well as for Poland, because in this scenario the transports would have to pass through Prague where the Polish repatriation mission was operating. The Soviets had nothing at all against movement through Czechoslovakia which, owing to the Soviet presence, also involved them. They did, however, remark that the transit ought to be resolved between the Czechoslovak and Polish governments by means of a special agreement²⁹.

It seems that the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs took advantage of this remark which was referred to in a note delivered to the British Embassy: "So far, the Czechoslovak government has not been requested by the Polish government to permit transit of the mentioned Polish soldiers through the territory", reads the document in which the MZV also expressed its concern that Czechoslovakia would have to provide trains and supplies for the transports³⁰. The Czechoslovak army headquarters added their request to transport the possible weapons in a special sealed wagon³¹.

²⁸ M. Nurek, *Gorycz zwycięstwa*, pp. 231–232.

²⁹ Vojenský ústřední archiv – Vojenský historický archiv Praha (VÚA-VHA), Ministerstvo národní obrany (MNO) 1945, Inv. No. 4026, box 70, čj. 14697, a telegram from the Foreign Office to the military attaché in Prague from 25 IX 1945; *ibidem*, Inv. No. 3770, box 66, čj. 180, letter by Lt. Col. Roman Kokrda to the British military attaché from 16 X 1945.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, Inv. No. 4026, box 70, čj. 14697, text of a Czechoslovak note, undated.

³¹ *Ibidem*, letter by Chief of Staff General Emil Boček to the chief of staff of the central group of the Soviet forces, undated.

The original plan which accounted for the departure of the first transport on 16 X 1945 fell to the ground. Roman Staniewicz, the Polish chargé d'affaires, surmised that Czechoslovakia was going to pose obstacles. Indeed, during a meeting with Vladimír Clementis, the state secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Staniewicz was informed that the transports required a special treaty. According to Clementis, the trains with the demobilized soldiers had to be recognised as armed military transports that did not fall under the repatriation agreement³².

Staniewicz heard the same story from Arnošt Heidrich, General Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He, too, insisted on concluding a special treaty and said that according to Philip Nichols, the British ambassador, "it is a transport of armed troops". "I argued", Staniewicz added, "but I am aware that this is a systematic act of posing obstacles in keeping with their current policy"³³. The Polish diplomat's statement seems to be truthful. When V. Clementis informed at a government session held on 19 X 1945 about the British request to allow transit of several transports of demobilized Polish soldiers from Italy, not a word was mentioned that this matter would not be covered by the repatriation agreement³⁴. Even the British were convinced that it was an act of deliberate obstruction on the part of Prague due to its poor relationships with the northern neighbour:

The relationships between Czechoslovakia and Poland were so unsatisfactory that His Majesty's Government had to intervene in October and November to secure permission from the Czechoslovak Government for repatriated Polish soldiers to return from Italy via Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak Government were obstructing the passage of these Polish soldiers on the ground that the Polish Government were not facilitating the transport of Swedish iron ore to Czechoslovakia by rail via Danzig³⁵.

Consequently, the British Embassy to Prague sent an explanatory memorandum on 26 X 1945 to the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It reflected the hope of Ernest Bevin, Minister of Foreign Affairs, "that other questions which concern only the Czechoslovak and Polish Governments will not be allowed to prevent the early implementation of this project, to which His Majesty's Government attach

³² AMSZ, DP, v. 8, f. 133, pp. 9–10, report by Roman Staniewicz from 20 X 1945.

³³ Ibidem, v. 9, f. 144, pp. 18–19, report by Roman Staniewicz from 20 X 1945.

³⁴ NA, Collection 83, f. 71, transcript from a government session held on 19 X 1945.

³⁵ *Raporty roczne Ambasady Brytyjskiej w Warszawie 1945–1970*, ed. M. Nurek, Warszawa 2003, p. 38.

considerable importance". The British made it very clear that they intended to complete the repatriation as quickly as possible, and they committed to providing the demobilized Polish soldiers with food rations for fifteen days³⁶.

The Czechoslovak government found itself in a deplorable situation as the only party hindering the return of the demobilized Polish soldiers thus exposing itself to a threat that the international public would see it as a troublemaker. Consequently, Prague would raise the ire of the British in particular as they were so keen on completing the repatriation. Clearly, this was also the reason why Czechoslovakia ultimately decided to agree on the transit of the soldiers from Italy, and made other concessions. In early November, a transport departed from France with members of the formation *Zgrupowania Piechoty Polskiej* [Polish Infantry Grouping]. It was a unit formed in the autumn of 1944 by the Polish Committee of National Liberation in Paris. It was a leftist organisation which identified itself with the programme of its equivalent group in Lublin. Its soldiers, auxiliaries in the rear of the first wave of French soldiers and later in the French occupation zone, had nothing against the return³⁷.

Because the Americans had no objections to the transport crossing their zone, Czechoslovakia could not create more difficulties. Nevertheless, the formalities were not completed in time, so the first transport had to wait for a long time at the demarcation line in Holoubkov and the second transport had to pause in Beroun near Prague. The first transport traveled through Prague on 8 November, followed by the second one three days later. Both transports were greeted at the Prague train station by delegate Wierbłowski. Due to the tensions in Cieszyn Silesia, instead of heading to Petrovice, the trains went to Lichkov where they crossed the border and continued to Mezilesí (Międzylesie). In total, there were 1,418 soldiers on their way back to Poland. Weapons and munitions were transported, too, locked up in a special wagon³⁸.

Due to Czechoslovakia's obstruction, the preparations for dispatching the first transport from Italy took longer than expected. It was only after Prague's definite

³⁶ VÚA-VHA, MNO 1945, Inv. No. 4026, box 70, čj. 14697, British memorandum from 26 X 1945. Cf. AMSZ, Zespół Depesz (ZD), v. 1, f. 10, ciphertext No. 400 from Warsaw to Prague from 3 XI 1945.

³⁷ T. Wróbel, *Na rozdrożu historii. Repatriacja obywateli polskich z Zachodu w latach 1945–1949*, Łódź 2009, pp. 279–280.

³⁸ AMSZ, ZD, v. 1, f. 10, ciphertext No. 402 from Warsaw to Prague from 3 XI 1945; AAN, GPR, inscription 185, report of transports for November 1945, pp. 66 and 73.

approval in late October 1945³⁹ that the British were able to start negotiations with the Soviets. Even though the trains were not supposed to cross through the Soviet occupation zone in Austria, there were still Soviet units remaining in Czechoslovakia so an agreement was required. Beside Czechoslovak and Polish representatives, officers of the Allied Command in Italy also took part in the talks that began on 12 XI 1945 in Vienna. Two days later, an agreement was signed, stipulating the conditions for transporting the demobilized Polish soldiers, and it was assumed that this would commence on 28 XI 1945. Each transport departing from Cervinara, where the repatriates were gathered, was supposed to carry around one thousand persons, and one train was supposed to be leaving every other day. Each transport should also have included an infirmary wagon and medical service. All of the repatriates had to submit to a medical examination in České Budějovice. If any of the Poles was diagnosed with a contagious disease, the British and American commands had to transfer the sick individuals and treat them in their own hospitals. The British committed to supply a sufficient amount of foodstuffs. During the transit through Czechoslovakia, the provision of hot food at selected stations was also anticipated. Each train was guarded by a unit made up of eleven or twelve British soldiers led by an officer, and in České Budějovice they were to be joined by Czechoslovak, Polish, and Soviet officers⁴⁰.

The established transit route ran from České Budějovice via Prague and Moravská Ostrava to Dziedzice. However, on the very day of signing the agreement, the Czechoslovak Ministry of Transport informed the British embassy of a change. "For operational-technical reasons", the trains from Ústí nad Orlicí were to be diverted to Lichkov and cross the border from there on its way to Mezilesí (Międzylesie) in Poland. One can thus surmise that these "operational-technical reasons" were actually a smoke to conceal the authorities' apprehension over the effect that the passage of the demobilized Polish soldiers might have in Cieszyn Silesia where the atmosphere following the Czechoslovak-Polish territorial conflict remained tense. Moreover, members of the Zgrupowania Piechoty Polskiej already returned from France several days before, having covered the same route. At the same time, the shortage of coal again became an issue because the ministry requested a delivery of 700 tons "to some Czechoslovak station by 19 November this year". "With regards

³⁹ M. Nurek, *Gorycz zwycięstwa*, p. 260.

⁴⁰ VÚA-VHA, MNO 1946, Inv. No. 3773, box 81, čj. 10094, Czech translation of the agreement from 14 XI 1945.

to the catastrophic situation in coal resource management, we could not otherwise accomplish the transport of Polish soldiers at all", the ministry stated⁴¹. However, the delivery of coal was delayed, so on 20 November the transport authorities were still short of 250 tons which the Polish side promised to deliver within a week⁴².

Czechoslovakia devoted a great deal of attention to security measures. For the period of the trains' operation, a railway authority was established in Dolní Dvořiště where every transport was to be joined by a Czechoslovak military escort made up of one officer and twelve men (and of these, two were armed with improvised fire-arms). At the stations where the transports stopped, special SNB guard units were tasked with preventing civilians from approaching the trains. The repatriates were required to always remain close to the trains⁴³.

The answer to the question why the Czechoslovak security units took these measures lies in the general approach of the Czechoslovak decision-makers towards the Polish exile government in the West. Even during the war, the relationships between the Czechoslovak and Polish exile representations had deteriorated for various reasons, including dramatically different views on certain matters, specifically their relationships with the Soviet Union. With the exception of the representatives of the anti-Beneš opposition, the exiled Czechoslovaks and Poles definitively differed in their opinions after the discovery of the graves in Katyń. The Czechoslovak exile government, represented by President Edvard Beneš, generally perceived Katyń as the brainchild of the Nazi anti-Soviet propaganda. The world had already known about the Nazi atrocities and the lies spread in German propaganda, hence the well-founded reluctance to believe German reports. One of the Polish officers, staying in Great Britain for a short-term assignment with a Czechoslovak brigade, wrote in his report that their soldiers "consider the slaughter of Polish officers and the imprisonment of Polish citizens in the USSR pure anti-Soviet propaganda"⁴⁴. The State Council (President Beneš's advisory board) criticized the position of the Polish exile government on the USSR, and the Czechoslovak-Polish negotiations of a confed-

⁴¹ VÚA-VHA, MNO 1945, Inv. No. 4089, box 71, čj. 17206, letter by the Minister of Transport from 14 XI 1945.

⁴² Ibidem, transcript of the meeting from 20 XI 1945.

⁴³ VÚA-VHA, Vojenská oblast (VO) 2, box 9, directive from Lieutenant Colonel Jan Koller from 23 XI 1945; ibidem, MNO 1945, Inv. No. 4089, box 71, čj. 17206, a concept of a letter by the front office of the OBZ.

⁴⁴ Instytut Polski i Muzeum im. Generała Sikorskiego Londyn, Biuro Ministra Obrony Narodowej, f. A.XII.3/36, report by Lieutenant Colonel Orłowski from 13 VII 1943.

eration had anyway been stalled for some time, due to several reasons including the Soviet veto, doomed to failure⁴⁵. This sort of characterization of the Polish military circles in the West, included in an analysis of the Ministry of the Interior from the time shortly before the end of WWII, could have been easily used in propaganda films from the late 1940s and the early 1950s when Czechoslovakia was sunk in deep bloom of Stalinism:

It is a fact that the strongest Polish emigrant group (by numbers and politically) is a political and propaganda clearing house for all the dark elements from Eastern and Central Europe. All the anti-Soviet operations are directed from this centre and it is becoming a permanent hotbed of international machinations aimed against the USSR. For this reason, it is necessary to consider the military group of Polish emigrants as a significant player; or rather, vermin⁴⁶.

The issue of Cieszyn Silesia also remained of some importance. Even during the war, it had negatively influenced the Czechoslovak-Polish relations for a variety of reasons, including an argument between Czechoslovakia and Poland over the Wehrmacht captives from the disputed territory (both governments considered them their citizens) when both armies needed to cover their losses suffered in battles. Anders' Army would have ceased to exist after the battle of Monte Cassino because of the reinforcements from the sources, which also testifies that the Poles were more successful in enlisting new soldiers from their POWs⁴⁷. Major Václav Podhora from the Czechoslovak military mission in Italy blamed the Polish officers for keeping the existence of the Czechoslovak army a secret from the prisoners in the camps⁴⁸. A great many squabbles and disputes arose, which, along with their

⁴⁵ *Czechoslovak-Polish Negotiations of the Establishment of Confederation and Alliance 1939–1944*, eds. I. Štoviček, J. Valenta, Praha 1995, document No. 181, pp. 335–337.

⁴⁶ Archiv bezpečnostních složek Praha (ABS), Sbírka různých písemností, file S-170-10, a study *Polsko. Díl III. Svazek druhý. Jmenný seznam veřejně činných osob v osvobozeném Polsku a zahraničních stoupenců* Lublina, London, May 1945. This study is a part of a several-volume report on the conditions in Poland and its exiles during the Second World War, which presents an interesting insight into the opinions and positions of the Czechoslovak émigré community which gathered around President Edvard Beneš.

⁴⁷ For more details see: J. Friedl, "Slezané, bratři od Ostravice a Olzy!" – spory o zajatce z Těšínska mezi ČSR a Polskem 1943–1945, *Slezský sborník* 101 (2003) 2, pp. 94–127.

⁴⁸ J. Friedl, *Na jedné frontě. Vztahy československé a polské armády (Polskie Siły Zbrojne) za druhé světové války*, Prague 2005, p. 339 and the following pages; J. Plachý, *Návrat nechtěných spojenců (Problém repatriace vojáků polské zahraniční armády do ČSR)*, *Východočeské listy historické* 26 (2009) 9, p. 32.

openly anti-Soviet position, distanced General Anders and the soldiers of the 2nd Corps from the ideological world of the Czechoslovaks. These Poles, especially after the conclusion of the agreement with the USSR in December 1943, essentially saw them as agents of Moscow.

Therefore, according to members of the 2nd Corps, the Czechoslovak security forces posed a risk. They knew of the interest of the intelligence division of the Corps' headquarters in Czechoslovakia and of the existence of courier routes through the Czechoslovak territory. They were also knowledgeable about the Polish intelligence agents who maintained contacts with anti-communist groups in Poland. What is more, there was concern that hostile networks made up of the former Corps members would be formed in Cieszyn Silesia⁴⁹.

And yet, the decision of the Czechoslovak security agencies to carefully guard all the transports from Italy nearly caused a tragic incident. When the first transport of Polish soldiers arrived in České Budějovice on 30 XI 1945, the Soviet major sharply protested against the presence of the Czechoslovak escort. He also did not like the train's onward route (the document reads that he "energetically protested against further re-routing"). He threatened to shoot the station master and requested that the transport be further accompanied by only one Czechoslovak officer and that the Poles be issued their food at the Budějovice train station. A heated debate over a teleprinter between the command center of the 2nd Military Region in Tábor and the headquarters in Prague ultimately indicated significant shortcomings in the organization and communication mistakes. It seems that the Czechoslovak side, clearly motivated by concerns over the former Polish soldiers moving through their territory, focused on guarding the transport while other things of fundamental importance escaped them. The Soviet major was right to bring up on 14 November an agreement in Vienna, which stated explicitly that beside the British escorts, the transport was to be accompanied only by Polish, Soviet, and Czechoslovak officers. The request for the provision of hot food at České Budějovice was also justified⁵⁰.

The documentation does not clarify the issue of changing the route which nettled the Soviet officer. Possibly, it was not until České Budějovice when he found out that the train would be turning to Lichkov instead of heading for Petrovice in Ústí nad Orlicí (according to the agreement, the trains were to go through Bohumín

⁴⁹ Ibidem, pp. 32, 36.

⁵⁰ VÚA-VHA, VO 2, box 9, čj. 8992, record of teleprinter communication; ibidem, MNO 1946, Inv. No. 3773, box 81, čj. 10094, text of the agreement from 14 XI 1945.

to Dziedzice). Or was there also another change of route in the cards? We do not know that. The unclear phrasing of General Josef Janáček, the commander of the Military Region 2 (Vojenská oblast 2) is of no use; he informed the headquarters by a teleprinter that he had let “withdraw the Czechoslovak guards and dispatch the transport in the direction ordered”. However, it is not clear whether the “direction” was ordered by the Czechoslovak authorities or by the Soviet officer. There is no doubt, however, that the transport arrived on 2 December in Lichkov where it crossed the border with Poland. By order of General Janáček, the Poles received hot coffee and bread during their stop in Tábor⁵¹.

Therefore, the Czechoslovak escort only accompanied the transports between Horní Dvořiště and České Budějovice where the Soviet officer boarded the train. In total, thirteen trains were to pass through Czechoslovakia, each carrying about one thousand men. Weapons and munition were transported in a sealed wagon. The first train arrived in Horní Dvořiště on 30 XI 1945 just after six in the morning. The Polish commander expressed a wish that the Czechoslovak and Polish soldiers in České Budějovice exchange state flags as a sign of friendship but it was a fiasco. “I telephoned the station master in České Budějovice about the arrangements. In Budějovice, the flag was not ready which created an awkward situation for the Polish commander who had asked for the flag in a very friendly manner”, Second Lieutenant Karel Wolf (who had been designated as the train’s escort) described the unpleasant situation⁵².

The transports arrived in very short intervals, one after another; for instance, the third transport arrived on 4 XII at 14h45 in Lichkov but the fifth transport had already arrived in Czechoslovakia. Still, the transit through Czechoslovakia often took a very long time. For example, the seventh transport to Horní Dvořiště arrived on the morning of 11 December and it reached the Czechoslovak-Polish border two days later in the afternoon. The specific causes of the slowdown included a shortage of locomotives, delays in shunting and shortages of or poor quality coal. As a result, the trains often had to stop at various stations for several hours. The rail workers were also to blame: “In many cases the uselessness of the transport personnel is evident and it creates a very negative picture of our rail transport in the eyes of

⁵¹ Ibidem, VO 2, box 9, čj. 8992, record of teleprinter communication; ibidem, MNO 1946, Inv. No. 3888, box 82, čj. 12287, report from the railway headquarters in Hradec Králové from 28 I 1946.

⁵² VÚA-VHA, VO 2, box 66, čj. 10001, report by Second Lieutenant Karel Wolf from 2 XII 1945.

foreigners. What is more, in a very tactless manner the rail personnel request cigarettes and food from the foreigners”⁵³. Another report reads: “During the transport, the Czechoslovak officer is forced to ride in a service wagon along with the rail employees. Their behaviour towards the foreign officers is not congruous with the impression the Czechoslovak nation must leave”⁵⁴.

The long travelling time did nothing to enhance the comfort of the repatriating soldiers. The damp wagons were not heated, and instead of berths, the Poles had straw to sleep on. In the case of the eighth transport, which arrived on 13 December, the British commander of the escort was put on full alert. Reproaches for the inadequate transport amenities were also included in the delivery protocol. However, the officer defended the Czech authorities claiming that it had not been possible to acquire better wagons in Italy, or any wood that could have been used to make berths⁵⁵. In the prevailing sub-freezing temperatures, it is fortunate that these conditions did not contribute to a higher sickness rate among the Poles. Their state of health was good, even though most of the repatriates were older persons. It was only in the case of the fifth transport, during its stop in Prague-Malešice, that two sick soldiers were reported, and a subsequent examination revealed a sexually-transmitted disease. They had to be excluded from the transport and transferred to a hospital⁵⁶. On 10 December in České Budějovice, one Pole (from the sixth transport) slashed his wrists in a suicide attempt and was subjected to a medical examination⁵⁷.

Otherwise, the transit of the transports through the ČSR was entirely trouble-free. “The Polish soldiers [...] behaved in a friendly manner,” reads one report, “in the course of dispensing of meals and waiting in the stations, they were very disciplined. The English officers made it clear that they esteemed the Czechoslovak nation, and considered our state highly cultured and integrated”⁵⁸.

The entire time, all the transports were under careful supervision of the military intelligence. However, no serious problems were identified. As for Cieszyn Silesia, the Poles were said to have opined something along the lines of “it should remain a part of Czechoslovakia”. Otherwise, however, they considered the formerly-Ger-

⁵³ Ibidem, report by Second Lieutenant Karel Wolf from 15 XII 1945.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, report by Second Lieutenant Karel Wolf from 8 XII 1945.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, report by First Lieutenant Ota Kolonicz from 18 XII 1945.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, report by Second Lieutenant Burda from 13 XII 1945.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, report by First Lieutenant František Růžek from 13 XII 1945.

⁵⁸ Ibidem, report by Second Lieutenant Karel Wolf from 2 XII 1945.

man part of Silesia Polish, and thought that Polish administration should be established as quickly as possible. Only those who identified themselves with Silesia wished for their region to be annexed to the ČSR, “because Poland considered them half Czech and half German”⁵⁹.

Originally, fourteen transports were supposed to leave Italy but, as one of the repatriated Polish officers mentioned, the 2nd Corps was exposed to a “major propaganda [campaign] about World War III that was soon to break out, and the soldiers were persuaded not to register to return to their homeland. For this reason, some of them decided to return to their homeland by foot but perhaps they were captured by ruse or by force abroad. Therefore, there was no one in Cervinara for the 14th transport”⁶⁰. This situation was also reflected in the size of the last, thirteenth transport, in which only 510 persons traveled. The train left Czechoslovakia on Christmas Eve 1945. According to Czech sources, eventually 12,332 former members of Anders’ Army returned to Poland through Czechoslovakia⁶¹.

The last transport partly consisted of eleven wagons carrying 268 men hailing from Cieszyn Silesia. These wagons were detached in Ústí nad Orlicí and continued onward into Cieszyn Silesia. However, they were not the only returnees who had decided to leave the PSZ and return to Cieszyn Silesia: in the months to come, more individuals followed either individually or in small groups. The Czechoslovak security forces perceived them as dangerous and turned their attention towards the “Andersovci”, as they collectively referred to all the demobilized PSZ soldiers from Cieszyn Silesia: “All of them are soldiers with significant wartime experience, very well trained, and those among them who are anti-Czech pose a certain risk for the consolidation of the relations in Cieszyn Silesia”⁶². The returnees were subjected to interrogations immediately upon their arrival, and by 31 XII 1947, the State Security in Cieszyn Silesia had found evidence against 1,517 of them⁶³. However, the concern that the former soldiers could be a source of unrest and hostile activity in Cieszyn Silesia proved unfounded⁶⁴. During the war, a great majority of them were forced to

⁵⁹ Ibidem, summary report by Captain Ota Kolonicz from 3 I 1946.

⁶⁰ Ibidem, report by Second Lieutenant Karel Wolf from 24 XII 1945.

⁶¹ Ibidem, summary report by Captain Ota Kolonicz from 3 I 1946; report by Lieutenant Josef Mašek from 28 XII 1945. The Polish literature on the subject provides a lower figure of 12,305. J. Żak, *Nie walczyli dla*, p. 96; J.A. Radomski, *Demobilizacja Polskich*, p. 62.

⁶² Cited by J. Plachý, *Návrat nechtěných*, p. 36.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 39.

⁶⁴ For more detail, see the above cited study by J. Plachý.

sign the Volksliste (German People's List) and do the compulsory military service. They were not interested in political events; after so many fateful events in their lives and the disgraceful service in the Wehrmacht, they all longed for a quiet life. Lack of experience with the Soviet regime and their fairly brief service in the PSZ necessarily contributed to their lukewarm interest in the discourse around the relations with the USSR and the communist regime in Poland.

Conclusions

The poor Czechoslovak-Polish relations caused by the territorial conflicts as well as the difficulties with delivering coal for the Polish transit repatriation transports caused delays in the preparation and implementation of the repatriation of some of the soldiers from the Polish 2nd Corps in Italy. Even the security measures considered by Czechoslovakia proved unnecessary; they were proof of the exaggerated concern of the Czechoslovak security forces about anything that, in their opinion, could possibly stir up agitation in Cieszyn Silesia. This indicates the extremely sensitive nature of the issue of Cieszyn Silesia in Czechoslovakia. The distrust of anything related to the Polish exile community in the West was also of significance. In my opinion, it was not due to the influence of the communist security forces. As it was mentioned, distinct standoffishness was also typical in the circles of President Edvard Beneš. Perhaps, as a result of the positive experience with the transports of Polish soldiers from Italy in December 1945, the Czechoslovak security forces became more pragmatic and relaxed control of the later transports. We do not know their number but it is possible that further research into this subject will yield new findings. The documents included a mention of a transport with 42 wagons that passed Brno on 2 IV 1946 and continued to Česká Třebová and Lichkov⁶⁵. This must have been one of the last transports because in the following month Ernest Bevin, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced the transfer of the Corps to Great Britain⁶⁶.

⁶⁵ ABS, Odbor politického zpravodajství Ministerstva vnitra, file 2M/13385, p. 95, teleprinter text from the Land Command of the SNB (National Security Corps) in Brno from 3 IV 1946. In the Polish literature an opinion prevails that several transports were organized in April 1946, and some of them were routed to Poland along the sea through Great Britain. However, more specific details are needed. J. Żak, *Nie walczyli dla*, p. 98. In the following months the demobilized PSZ soldiers also arrived in Cieszyn Silesia. J. Plachý, *Návrat nechtěných*, p. 37.

⁶⁶ J. Żak, *Nie walczyli dla*, p. 304.

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Summary

The future of the Polish Armed Forces in the West was a sensitive issue that the British government had to decide upon after World War II. Understandably, the British were interested in having the biggest possible number of Polish soldiers return to their homeland. On the other hand, they could not have been forced because the communists had been in power in Poland since 1944. Even the Polish exile government was not unified in its position on the repatriation to Poland. In the autumn of 1945, approximately fourteen thousand members of the Polish 2nd Corps, who had concluded their military sojourn in Italy, decided to return to Poland. Their transports were supposed to pass through Czechoslovakia which planned to play a very important role as a transit country in the repatriation of Poles from Western Europe. A repatriation agreement concluded between Czechoslovakia and Poland in September 1945 also helped to facilitate Polish repatriation in Czechoslovakia. However, the country initially requested signing a special treaty on the transport of the demobilized soldiers. It is also evident that the poor Czechoslovak-Polish relations affected the position of the Czechoslovak government. It only dropped the demands under the British pressure. According to Czech sources, from late November to 24 XII 1945, 12,332 former soldiers from the Polish 2nd Corps returned home via Czechoslovakia.

Translated by: Ewa Dratwa