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Polish Military Plans for the Defeat of Germany and the Soviet Union, 1939–41

On 17 September 1939 the Polish government decided to leave Polish territory. German military victories and the entry of Soviet troops into eastern Poland spelled the end of independent Poland. By leaving, the government hoped to continue the fight against the two enemies. At the same time, the military regime sought to ensure that no provisional authority would emerge in exile to challenge its authority.[1] When the Polish government crossed into Romania, it had not anticipated that it would be interned there. As it turned out, on 18 September the Romanian government acting on German instructions and possibly succumbing to Soviet pressure interned the Polish government and military leaders.[2] Unexpectedly, the responsibility for forming an exile government fell upon the shoulders of the Polish Ambassador in Paris, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, a well-known supporter of the Piłsudski regime. As the last battles against the German army and the incoming Soviet troops were being fought on Polish territories, the attention of the political leadership, detained against their wills in a variety of camps in Romania, was nearly entirely focused on Paris, for it was believed that the struggle to maintain the Piłsudskiites' hold on power was taking place there.[3] French concern about the profile of the future exile authority tipped the balance in favour of a pro-French grouping and against General Wieniawa Długoszowski, who had been nominated by the interned President to lead the exile government. Wieniawa Długoszowski would have represented continuity with the inter-war government.[4] By 3 October a government-in-exile was fully established with Władysław Sikorski, a French choice, as Prime Minister and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and Władysław Raczkiewicz, an eminent lawyer and

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onetime Minister of Interior, as President. Although leaders in exile of most parties supported Sikorski, the implacably hostile supporters of the pre-war government grouped around the President. Since a large proportion of military personnel who left Poland in the wake of defeat belonged to or supported the military regime, the officer corps became a hotbed of anti-Sikorski intrigues. They never accepted Sikorski's authority and while wishing to continue the fight against Poland's enemies, they had their own ideas as to how this was to be achieved.

The ideological battles of the pre-war period were continued in exile. This inevitably affected the limited choice of policies pursued by the exile government. Since the government and armed forces in France were entirely financially dependent on the French, there was not much that the Poles could do without French approval. This meant that obstructionism became a normal way of operating. Internal intrigues became rife and marked all stages of debates concerning military issues and plans for post-war reconstruction. During the inter-war period the military regime had placed officers in civilian posts and encouraged the politicization of the army. The September disaster, far from humbling the officer caste, increased their conviction that the Western allies had betrayed them. They refused to accept that their role was merely to prepare for military action and took a direct and lively interest in politics.

The French government stood to benefit from any plans which the Polish government-in-exile made for the continuation of the fight against Germany. Even before the fall of Poland, the two sides had agreed that a Polish division would be built up in France. As early as 9 September the Polish representative in Paris and the French government signed an agreement defining relations between the two during the course of the war. This was supplemented by another signed on 21 September. Further optimistic plans for the creation of a full-fledged army in France were made when a Polish government-in-exile established itself in France. Sikorski spoke of recruiting 180,000 men. Initial hopes for a flood of military men from occupied Poland who were expected to make their way to France, proved unrealistic. Subsequent plans for recruitment campaigns among Poles in North America were also unsuccessful. The United States government refused to allow the Polish government to conscript US citizens of Polish origin into their army, while recruits from

Canada were too few to allow for a build-up of the army. In any case, the cost of bringing Poles from North America to join units in France reduced the feasibility of those proposals. As a result, Polish military units in France were built up on the basis of two main sources of manpower, both comprising refugees from Poland: officers, and Polish migrant labour employed in French mines. The former represented anti-democratic and extreme nationalist ideas, while the latter, having being exposed to left-wing ideas prevalent in French mines, were hostile to the pre-war regime. Although the French government allowed the Polish government to conscript its citizens, it retained the right to veto the recruitment of those employed in vital industries. Thus the creation of Polish units in France was fraught with difficulties and created conflicts with the host.[5] In reality, by the time of the fall of France only 83,000 had been enrolled into the Polish fighting formations.[6]

Unfortunately, the Poles were not united in their plans for the use of the armed units raised in France. Agreements signed with the French guaranteed that the Polish army would be subordinated to the Polish government-in-exile but for operational purposes it would come under the command of the French military leadership. The government-in-exile's freedom to prepare its own military plans was severely limited. At best, it could only hope that French military strategy would offer the Poles an opportunity to proceed to Poland quickly and by the shortest route.

In the autumn of 1939 the French High Command was unwilling to plan for an attack on Germany, and the mentality of postponing conflict until preparations had been completed set in firmly. This meant that no serious consideration was given to proposals for assuming the initiative against Germany. Following the defeat of Poland, the French High Command led by General Maurice Gamelin, Commander-in-Chief of the French army, concentrated on assimilating lessons of the September campaign.[7] In effect, preparation for the inevitable future war took precedence over the question of whether to attack in the autumn of 1939. Both British and French military planners believed that time would favour their preparations.[8]

Plans made by the Polish government-in-exile differed radically from those pursued by the French. Sikorski had calculated that the anticipated Polish contribution to the Allied war effort would

serve a multiplicity of political purposes both in the international arena and in the forthcoming battle for power once Poland was liberated. This accentuated the already apparent deep divisions within the government and the leadership. Inevitably the French government and military leaders had their own view regarding what the Poles were expected to do while in France. Interference in the politics of the government-in-exile was constant, though never consistent.

The issue which most obviously preoccupied the Poles was the question of the degree to which it was prudent to allow newly formed Polish units to be used by the French in their plans for fighting in Europe. The French and British governments' unwillingness to declare war on the Soviet Union, which had taken military action against Poland and occupied nearly one-third of Polish territories, cast a long shadow over relations with the Poles, who always suspected that a deal might be made at their expense. Since neither Western government was willing to make an official declaration stating that the restoration of Poland to its pre-war borders was one of the Allied war aims, Sikorski's declared commitment to co-operation with France and Britain made him vulnerable to accusations made by his opponents within the Polish community in France that he was a French puppet.[9]

The Polish government reasoned that in order to be accorded the full status of a fighting ally, the Polish military contribution had to be of some consequence. This in turn, they hoped, would be rewarded by admission to the intimate circle of Allied joint consultative bodies. Thus, during the first wartime visit to London in November 1939, Sikorski told General Ironside, the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, that it was in the interests of Poland and the Allies to create a strong and numerous Polish army. Furthermore, Poland needed to be represented on the Supreme War Council and any other body created to discuss war aims.[10] The French and British suspected that the Polish request for representation was really an attempt to obtain disproportionate influence over matters relating to the course of the war and to post-war planning. This was why the Polish request was refused outright in 1939, and subsequently whenever it was made.

Within the first months of its existence the Polish government expressed views and adopted policies, which showed the extent to which it overestimated its importance in the Allied coalition.

More worrying and potentially damaging to Allied co-operation was the basing of plans for the establishment of post-war frontiers, and for securing for Poland a dominant role in Central Europe, on French and British military and political assistance.[11] Polish aspirations were presented to the British government during Sikorski's visit to London on 14 November 1939. These included the demand that France and Britain accept the need to create a strong Central European bloc dominated by Poland. As Sikorski stated, the destruction of Germany and support for Polish political aspirations would be a guarantee of European stability.[12] The destruction of Soviet power and the return to Poland of territories which had been captured by the Soviet Union in September 1939 formed a central plank of the exile government's programme. However, as Sikorski reported to his government on his return from London to Paris, pressing the Allies to declare war against the Soviet Union would not have been diplomatically prudent. He had felt that the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, shared his 'negative evaluation of the Soviet organization', nevertheless British and French efforts went in the direction of not pushing the Soviet Union into Germany's arms.[13] Sikorski concluded that, with time, the Allies would recognize the threat posed by the Red Army and would realize it had to be opposed, possibly even militarily. By then the Poles had decided not to press the British and French governments to make an official declaration to the Soviet Union of support for Polish objectives. Sikorski was sufficiently prudent to realize that such efforts would not have been successful and could even increase distrust of Polish war aims. Instead the government-in-exile concentrated on waging a propaganda campaign to discredit the Soviet Union, drawing attention to the need to restore to Poland the territories captured by the Red Army, and generally claiming to be experts on Soviet matters.[14] The Polish assessment of Soviet military preparedness for war and its potential were invariably negative and were meant to discourage excessive Western reliance on the Red Army's ability to mount an offensive against Germany in the future.

The onset of the Finnish–Soviet conflict appeared to offer the Poles an opportunity to use military co-operation as an *entrée* into the Allied political fora of debate; something they felt had been hitherto denied them. But the aims of the Finns aroused the British and French governments' anxieties about involvement in

military action which might draw them into a war with the Soviet Union on top of the one which they were supposed to be fighting with Germany. The result was that support for the Finns was lost in indecision. The Poles saw this as an opportunity which the British and French had failed to exploit. The Soviet attack on Finland on 30 November 1939 was a matter of direct concern to the Poles. Britain and France were not at war with the Soviet Union notwithstanding the latter's attack on their ally, Poland. Nor was it clear whether Poland and the Soviet Union were at war. Nevertheless Soviet occupation of Polish eastern territories meant that the Polish government was on the lookout for opportunities to participate in military action against the Soviet Union. Poland's initial response to the Soviet attack on Finland was muted, as was that of the French and British governments. It was only with time that ideas crystallized even if the situation did not necessarily become clearer. At the beginning of January 1940 the French government, while considering aid for Finland, but anxious about the implications of such a decision on French–Soviet relations, directed an enquiry to the Poles to ascertain whether they would be willing to send an expeditionary force to assist the Finns.[15] On 24 January Sikorski had formulated his ideas on the subject. The Soviet–Finnish conflict offered an opportunity to draw the British and French, who so far appeared ambivalent on the subject of the Soviet Union, into war with Poland's other enemy. By 21 February, the Poles had warmed to the project. By then the exile government's Council of Ministers had considered what they hoped would be the extensive political advantages, rather than just the localized military benefits, of aiding the Finns. As the Polish Chiefs of Staff *aide-mémoire* on the subject stated:

Polish participation in aiding Finland has a dual political meaning:

1. Polish units on Finnish territory will offer vital proof that Poland exists and is fighting as part of the Allied front.
2. The very fact of Poland taking part in Allied action will permit us to place unequivocally the issue of Poland's relations with the other two Allies externally and internally.[16]

Polish enthusiasm was misplaced. Not only were the Finns still unclear as to whether they wanted to receive help from the Poles, since this would exacerbate Finland's relations with Germany.

The British and French governments also procrastinated.[17] Both governments faced internal conflicts on the subject of aid for Finland most obviously because of the anxiety that it would result in a direct conflict with the Soviet Union. Within political and military circles hopes that German–Soviet co-operation might break down lingered. Neither Britain nor France could afford the luxury of aiding a politically and militarily insignificant country and thus destroying the likelihood of Soviet co-operation in a war against Germany. In Britain assistance for Finland was linked with the question of how to draw Norway and Sweden out of their neutrality and into declaring support for the Allied cause, which came to be seen as more important. Supplies of Swedish iron-ore, transported to Germany via the Norwegian port of Narvik, were considered crucial for the German war economy. In the winter of 1939/40 the British government still sought to devise means whereby German war potential could be constrained and weakened by economic means. If supplies of Swedish iron ore to Germany were to be stopped, Sweden's co-operation had to be secured. The Soviet–Finnish war broke out at a time when plans were being devised to prevent Germany using Swedish and Norwegian ports to transport iron ore to the Baltic. These plans were hastily adjusted because aid to Finland became a priority in Cabinet discussions.[18]

In February the Poles launched a full-scale political campaign to gain credit from their willingness to place troops at British and French disposal in Finland. This was swiftly followed by a renewed attempt to coax the British into accepting a Polish representative on the Supreme War Council. According to Sikorski, Poland's exclusion from the body was symptomatic of the absence of political preparation for the end of the war. He both pleaded and threatened that the Polish nation would fight but 'it must have an opportunity to discuss, in the company of its allies, matters which relate to it [the war]. Otherwise it [the Polish nation] will be ready to believe enemy propaganda, which claims that the rebuilding of Poland is not one of the main war aims.'[19]

Sikorski emerged early in the war as a proponent of unconditional collaboration with France and Britain. He was not willing to confront Poland's allies with demands, which he knew they would not concede and was on the whole determined to build up their trust and confidence through military co-operation. Unfortunately for him, this policy was viewed by some of his

compatriots, most notably officers associated with the old regime, as a betrayal of Polish interests. One of Sikorski's key antagonists and a public critic was the Chief of Staff Colonel Alexander Kędzior. On 14 February, he presented to Sikorski an extensive exposé dealing with the need to force Britain and France to take more decisive action against Germany. Kędzior put forward the view that Britain and France, through their inability to understand that Germany's strength lay in the advantages which were derived from collaboration with the Soviet Union, were missing the opportunity to defeat not only the Soviet Union but also Germany. His recommendation was simple: the defeat of Germany would be assured if the Allies attacked the Soviet Union.[20] In addition to attacking the port of Murmansk and destroying the Soviet North Sea Fleet, he advocated wholesale and unconditional support for Finland. Whereas action in the north was to take the form of a swift military campaign, in the south prolonged campaigns were to be launched. The key one, according to the Polish Chief of Staff, would be an attack from the south into the Caucasus, Turkestan and the Ukraine. This would cut Soviet communication routes, destroy oil production, and cause the collapse of the Soviet economy. Kędzior believed that once Germany was robbed of supplies of vital resources, which it was at present obtaining from the Soviet Union, her war effort would collapse swiftly. The conclusion was that Germany need not be confronted directly, since the destruction of the Soviet economy would secure that end.

The Western allies did not view the matter in the same light. In fact, the hope of persuading the Soviet Union to reduce its co-operation with Germany prevented both France and Britain from making open anti-Soviet statements.[21] Those Polish military leaders who advocated keeping a distance from the Western allies noted this in turn. The fact that not even a limited military campaign could be undertaken by the Poles without Allied assistance led to the realization that the defeat of Poland's enemies would be achieved only after the Western world was persuaded to take up Poland's cause. Kędzior's ideas went beyond the simple suggestion that Germany and the Soviet Union could be defeated only if action were taken immediately. In common with many Polish officers, he believed that neither France nor Britain could be trusted. He urged that, while preparing to fight Poland's two enemies, it was necessary to launch a propaganda offensive to

educate the Allies in the need to support Poland's 'historic mission in the East'. This oblique phrase was coupled with the suggestion that the Caucasus states and the Ukraine should become independent and together with Czechoslovakia form the basis of an East and Central European Federation dominated by Poland.[22] These proposals reflected only a few options from a whole range of ideas put forward by Sikorski's opponents. They nevertheless were important because Sikorski had authorized the creation of a special commission whose purpose was to enquire into the causes of the September defeat. Investigations conducted by this body were used to justify the exclusion from France of officers associated with the inter-war military regime. Sikorski's enemies within the army counter-attacked by accusing Sikorski of conducting personal vendettas rather than concentrating on preparing for the liberation of Poland.[23]

Manpower continued to be the biggest single constraint on the Polish government's plans for involvement in the war. Furthermore, any attempts to participate in fighting against Poland's enemies were frustrated by limited military co-operation between Britain and France. These problems manifested themselves during preparations for the Finnish and then the Norwegian campaigns. Anticipating action in Finland, Sikorski agreed with the French authorities to form the Independent Highland Brigade consisting of approximately 5000 men. On 12 March, after a period of intensive training, the Brigade joined French units, which were to be landed in the Norwegian port of Narvik. The northern port in Norway was chosen as much to force the neutral states of Norway and Sweden onto the Allied side as to secure a territorial route to Finland. On 13 March the Finnish and Soviet governments ended their hostilities. The Polish Brigade was sent into Norway, but with a different mission, namely to counter the German invasion of that country. Between 23 April and 14 June 1940 the Brigade took part in Allied action in the Narvik region.

The Norwegian campaign gave the Poles an opportunity to participate directly in the only military campaign of the so-called 'phoney war'. Polish naval units and soldiers fought jointly with the British and French naval and land units. The military performance of the Poles was ranked highly and their prowess during the fighting around Narvik was visible. However, the political benefits to be derived from this co-operation were not secured. Polish hopes that the Scandinavian campaign might draw the

Allies into direct conflict with the Soviet Union, were not realized. Equally unfulfilled were hopes that joint military action might in some way be translated into political co-operation. Prior to the fall of France, the Polish government-in-exile was offered two opportunities — on 23 and 27 April 1940 — to participate in the deliberations of the Supreme War Council. On both occasions this was because of the Allied use of Polish units in the Norwegian campaign. The Polish delegates, Sikorski and his Minister for Foreign Affairs August Zaleski during the first meeting, and Edward Raczyński, the Polish Ambassador to London, on the second occasion, were allowed to attend only the later part of the deliberations. Significantly, they were not present when the political and military implications of the campaign were discussed and were merely allowed to make a statement at the end when no further discussions were taking place. On 23 April, Sikorski reported on the state of the Polish army.[24] The British and French responses were polite but conspicuously non-committal. On the second occasion, Raczyński was allowed merely to hear a statement on the progress of the campaign.[25] This consisted of sentimental and bland expressions of sympathy and appreciation for Polish heroism.

The initial conviction that the opening of the Norwegian campaign and attendance at the meetings of the Supreme War Council had been useful was short-lived. The suspicion that Polish manpower was being used for purely military purposes, without any political benefits having been obtained, was discussed by the exile government's Council of Ministers' meeting on 8 May 1940. Sikorski was forced to make a humiliating admission that the French refused to make any commitment to the restoration of Poland's eastern borders. At the time when the Poles were fighting jointly with French and British units at Narvik, French censorship tried to ban the publication of Sikorski's speech in which he had made references to the town of Vilnius, at the time incorporated into the Soviet Union.[26] Minister for Foreign Affairs Zaleski took the opportunity to state that the government-in-exile should stand ready 'to destroy Russia, once the allies declare war against Russia'.[27] Notwithstanding this and similar pronouncements on the subject of the Soviet Union, the Polish government still had not found means of influencing French and British foreign relations with the Soviet Union. The Polish military and political leaders were reduced to

seeking opportunities which would allow them to force Poland's allies to defend their case more vigorously.

In all plans for the future of the Polish armed forces and its role in the forthcoming battle against Poland's enemies, the Polish leadership was inhibited by uncertainty as to whether the Allies would act against the Soviet Union. While this remained a quandary which the Poles were unable to resolve, all their discussions came to be haunted by an anxiety that the government-in-exile would squander the Polish army before it could enter Polish territories. A corollary of the assumption that the Polish government-in-exile could only secure for itself a position of equality among the Allied powers by making a direct contribution to the joint military effort, was the real threat that the Polish contribution, motivated in part by political considerations in relation to the Allies, would exhaust and deplete its troops before the liberation of Poland. Doubts were expressed as to whether the Allies could be relied upon to complete the task of not only liberating but also of restoring Poland to its pre-September 1939 borders, which the Polish exiles hoped to enlarge by the addition of at least East Prussia. This doubt further underlined the need to continue expanding the Polish military effort while simultaneously proceeding with the task of capturing and holding areas which would either become Polish spheres of influence or would be incorporated outright into Poland.

These and other problems were faced in a memorandum entitled 'Aims of the Polish army' dated 28 February 1940.[28] In it a clear statement was made that the choice of operational areas would largely be decided by the above considerations, of army recruitment and of cultivating a pro-Polish orientation in the areas surrounding Poland. The best points of entry into Poland were considered the Carpathian Mountains and Pomerania. It was hoped that Poland would be liberated by troops entering occupied territories from the west and the south. In addition, troops would move into Poland from either Finland or the Baltic States. The Balkan and the Baltic fronts were seen to have the advantage of facilitating the establishment of Polish control over non-Polish territories, which were occupied by either Germany or the Soviet Union.

On 15 April 1940, anticipating the imminent creation of the Middle Eastern and Balkan fronts, these ideas were further developed by General Bronisław Regulski, Commander of the

Polish Mechanized and Armoured units in Avignon.[29] In his opinion, the south-eastern front would give the Poles an opportunity to prepare for future Allied action south of Poland and in Russia, to participate in joint action with the Allies and finally to encourage partisan action and launch a national uprising which would assist the incoming Polish troops. According to Regulski, the defeat of the Soviet Union would be accompanied by military action and a propaganda campaign, which would destabilize the southern regions of the Soviet Union.[30] He considered that the Georgian, Cossack and Ukrainian populations were most likely to succumb to Polish propaganda efforts.

In the closing section of the memorandum, Regulski referred to one of the imponderables, which clearly preoccupied Polish military and political leaders. On the one hand, there was a temptation to allow the Allies to do the fighting and defeat the enemy, which would leave Polish troops to enter Poland and place the exile government in power. On the other hand, Allied goodwill could only be assured if the Poles were seen to be fighting partners in the war. Regulski suggested that the dilemma could be resolved by the Polish exile army assisting in the formation of units consisting of other nationalities since these 'would symbolize the Polish contribution to the allied action against the Soviet Union'. In this way, he implied, Polish units could be kept out of battle for the more important task of capturing power in liberated Poland.

The degree to which the government-in-exile was willing to co-operate with the Allied war effort was an issue which cropped up frequently in the quarrels between Sikorski and his opponents within the army and the political leadership. It nevertheless remained an unresolved dilemma. In April 1940 Sikorski was challenged openly by Colonel Kędzior, who suggested that putting the newly formed units into action carried the risk of their being depleted. Kędzior had earlier criticized the government for allowing the French to plan for the use of an inadequately trained Polish brigade in Finland.[31] He considered that the most important aim of the Polish army in exile should be the liberation of Poland and not co-operation with the Allies.[32] He accepted that the defeat of Germany undeniably had to come first, but he also maintained that the main role of the army, once it arrived in Poland, would be to create preconditions for the its own continuing build-up. Capture of power and the defence of the state

were identified by him as the main objective of the army once the Western allies had liberated Polish territory. Kędzior based his analysis on the assumption that the Allies would only be concerned with the defeat of Germany and would proceed no further. Therefore Poland alone would face the continuing fight against the Soviet Union and that task would have to be held in mind throughout the war.

To Sikorski such ideas were pure treason. He was distressed by Colonel Kędzior's statements not just because he was publicly raising doubts about the Allied commitment to Poland but also because this was done at a press conference on the eve of the Norwegian campaign, in which Polish units were scheduled to participate.[33] Claiming that similar ideas had been responsible for the September disaster, Sikorski attacked the very notion that political influence could be obtained without direct military commitments. As he put it, 'An army which avoids its duties on the front would fail to fulfil the mission which is expected of it in this historic moment . . . .'[34] In May, when Sikorski allowed Gamelin to use another inadequately trained Polish unit, Kędzior resigned.[35]

Clearly, the Polish leadership was grappling with the need to draw a clear distinction between the use of the army for, on the one hand, the liberation of Poland, and, on the other, the purpose of co-operation with the Allies. The realities of the war and the Polish conviction that political influence would only be obtained through military co-operation rather than diplomatic skill, precluded such a clear distinction from ever being made.

The Poles, while trying to anticipate the future course of the war, made plans for a Balkan front. Since that would depend on the attitude of Turkey, the Polish government took an interest in Turkish politics with a view to ascertaining whether Turkish–Polish co-operation could be established on the basis of plans for action against the Soviet Union. But the Polish Ambassador to Turkey, Michał Sokolnicki, who was very well informed of the complexities of that country's foreign policy, warned that it was not possible to think of a limited war.[36] Turkish co-operation with the Allies would only come about as a result of major initiatives and political shifts, in which case the Balkan front, so advantageous to the Poles, would most probably be the least of the Allies' concerns. Sokolnicki advised that the government should look at the direction in which Allied thinking was developing and

not view minor military theatres in separation from the whole. Sikorski did not heed this warning. Until 1943, the Poles continued to put pressure on Britain to make plans for a Balkan front. However, by then the proposal, which earlier had been briefly supported by Churchill, was abandoned.[37]

Even before the fall of France, the doctrine that 'all roads lead to Poland' had firmly taken hold. Sikorski was heard reasoning 'it is not possible to say which road to Poland will turn out to be the longest and which the shortest'.[38] Sikorski's perceived need to place Polish units in geographical locations which could serve as a springboard for the Balkan front led to his efforts to create a number of Polish units, including an air force in the Middle East. This was encouraged by General Weygand's nomination to the East Mediterranean theatre. French plans for a Levantine front raised Polish hopes of a campaign against the Soviet Union.[39] On 2 April Sikorski authorized the creation of the Carpathian Fusiliers Brigade. Commanded by Colonel Kopański, the Brigade was based near Beirut and it was hoped to expand it to 7000 men. In fact by the fall of France it numbered fewer than 3000.

The fall of France was a bitter blow to Polish hopes for a swift reversal of their earlier defeat. In spite of Churchill's private undertaking to assist in the evacuation of Polish troops, only 23.5 per cent, in effect only 27,614 men, reached the British Isles. More devastating to Polish hopes was the fact that the defeat of France marked the end of plans for a Continental war in the nearest future. It was inevitable that Britain would take a broader approach to the war, which would encompass the need to defeat Italy in East Africa, secure the Mediterranean routes and in due course establish control over the oil-producing regions of Iran and Iraq. The Polish military contribution, wherever it could be made, would be accepted, but it would not be possible for the Poles to think of an independent operational zone. Plans for action on fronts which would allow direct or at least easy routes back to Poland had to be abandoned for the near future. Nor would they be in a position to obtain political commitments from Churchill's government. The new British Prime Minister, while continuing to express ambivalent views about the Soviet Union, was clearer than his predecessor had been on the need to leave the doors open for Stalin to join the Allied war effort in due course. A confrontation with so important a potential ally was out of the

question even before the German attack on the Soviet Union.[40]

The Polish government-in-exile's main claim to independence was based on the calculation that if it could raise an army in exile, and could therefore be an active partner in the defeat of Poland's enemies, it would not be possible for the Allies to ignore their political demands. When Sikorski's government was evacuated from France, it left behind a Polish community of above 100,000 men fit for military service. Consequently, the political aspirations of the government-in-exile had to be scaled down. The other alternative was to find a new source of Polish manpower. Realistically, Sikorski identified the Soviet Union as the only area of accessible Polish manpower. Thus the Polish government-in-exile faced another dilemma. If it was to secure the recognition of its war aims and be accorded the status of a major fighting ally, it needed to make a vital military contribution to the Allied war effort. Allied assistance was the only guarantee of the Poles being able to defeat Germany and the Soviet Union and of reversing territorial changes made by the two enemies in September 1939. However, the Poles could only make an appropriately important contribution to the Western war effort if Polish manpower could be extracted from the Soviet Union. Clearly, the Soviet Union would not release Poles if it were suspected that they would be used against the Red Army or to boost the government-in-exile's political standing. Britain's sensitivity about the Soviet Union would likewise be a permanent obstacle to the Polish government-in-exile being granted equality among the main group of Allies. Even before the most important Polish contribution was made to the British war effort, it was doomed to failure.

And it was this dilemma of on the one hand needing to build up Polish fighting units in Britain, and on the other viewing the Soviet Union as the more dangerous of the two enemies, that tore apart the Polish political and military leadership. On arrival in London in June 1940 Sikorski and President Raczkiewicz came into direct conflict over a statement made by the Prime Minister to the British Foreign Secretary. Without consulting his ministers, Sikorski declared that the Polish government was willing to consider some territorial adjustments with the Soviet Union. The aim of this initiative was possibly to re-establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and through that to open access to Polish men trapped in the East.[41] Opposition to Sikorski with-

in the army increased and unleashed attacks on him. The President dismissed Sikorski. The ensuing political crisis was resolved by several of Sikorski's supporters threatening the man nominated to succeed him. Consequently, Raczkiewicz was forced to reinstate Sikorski. The battle lines were nevertheless drawn with the army, now based in Scotland, becoming a centre of opposition to Sikorski's policy of co-operation with the British and his search for accommodation with the Soviet Union.[42] Conflicts within the Polish government-in-exile and those between Sikorski and the officers whose loyalties still lay with the pre-war regime, were exacerbated by the insoluble dilemma of whether the Poles should allow the British to deal with Germany and to concentrate their attention on the need to defeat the Soviet Union. Sikorski's conviction that the Poles would only secure political influence by making a valued military contribution to the Allied war effort drew him more closely to Churchill than his opponents thought advisable. Nevertheless even they could not adequately answer the question of just how was the government-in-exile to force Britain to make commitments to the Polish cause, in particular if the Poles were suspected of holding back troops for the final entry onto Polish territory.

The expansion of Polish fighting units abroad did not proceed until the German attack on the Soviet Union. In the summer of 1941 with British assistance, Sikorski entered into direct talks with the Soviet Union. The signing of the Sikorski–Mayski agreement, which committed the Soviet authorities to forming fighting units from Poles in the Soviet Union, opened a new chapter in Polish–Soviet relations. Unfortunately for their efforts, the Soviet Union, by becoming Britain's ally in the fight against Germany, and a potential ally in the war against Japan, decreased the political impact that the Poles would in the nearest future make to the Allied war effort. Henceforth a minor and troublesome ally could not offset the advantage gained from Soviet co-operation.

Notes

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