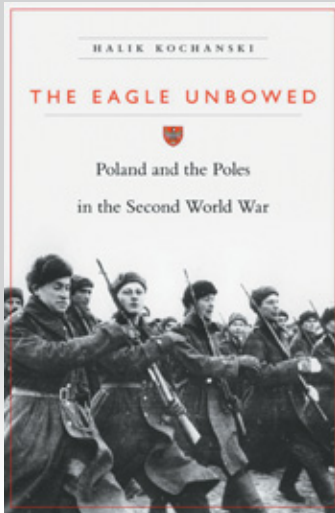


MR Review Essay



THE EAGLE UNBOWED: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War

*Halik Kochanski, 2012, Harvard University Press,
Cambridge, MA, 784 pages, \$35.00*

Daniel Paliwoda, Ph.D.

IN 1939, POLAND was between a rock and a hard place. Two corresponding totalitarian regimes flanked its territory. It did not have a choice between the lesser of two evils, as the Soviet Union and the German Third Reich equally believed that Poland should not exist, and they uniformly regarded huge portions of Polish territory as theirs.

Before the signing of the Versailles Treaty in 1919, Poland did not exist as an independent European state: the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires partitioned Poland three times (in 1772, 1793, and 1795). Tadeusz Kościuszko, a Pole and American Revolution hero, led the 1795 uprising against Russia and Prussia, but the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth disappeared from the map. For almost 124 years, Poles repeatedly rebelled against their Russian- and German-speaking oppressors. The Russian authorities executed and deported to Siberia hundreds of thousands of Poles who participated in the 1831, 1863, and 1905-1907 insurrections. Poles deported to Soviet Gulags from 1939 to 1941 encountered the graves of those freedom fighters and sometimes discovered small Polish communities there. Polish rebels living in German-controlled territories fared slightly better; after all, there was no German Siberia.

The occupiers persecuted Poles, dehumanizing them as backward and ignorant, which later helped promote and justify Nazi racial policy, or they vilified them as Slavic double crossers and admirers of the West looking away from Eastern Orthodoxy, an accusation that helped advance Soviet hegemony. Frederic Chopin, Joseph Conrad, and Marie Curie—among others—kept Polish culture alive in exile. A romanticized nationalism marks Polish history.

The brutality two imperial systems applied to their Polish subjects in the 19th century was a shadow compared to the depravity totalitarian rulers visited upon Poles during the 20th century. It took three world powers in the

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1700s to dismantle Poland, and it took two dictatorships to do it again in 1939. Poland's history may be tragic, but a doomed heroism distinguishes it.

Poland's malicious neighbors met secretly in Moscow on 23 August 1939 and signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which violated the Fourteen Points and started World War II. This treaty consisted of a nonaggression agreement between Germany and the Soviet Union, allowing Hitler to invade Poland. In return for Soviet permission to invade Poland, Hitler agreed to share half of Poland with Stalin. Hence, both leaders agreed to decapitate the "bastard of Versailles." For their part, the Nazis permitted Stalin to annex Finland, the three Baltic States, Bessarabia, Bukovina, and parts of Romania, thus ensuring peace until Hitler violated the terms in June 1941 with Operation Barbarossa.

Today's visitor to Polish World War II war monuments will see 1 September 1939 marking them along with 17 September 1939; the first date commemorates the German invasion of Poland, and the second, the Soviet invasion. (Soviet-Japanese border battles delayed the Soviets.) The almost simultaneous but acutely catastrophic dual invasions were denied for decades in communist Poland and in the Soviet Union until Poland freed itself in 1989: the communists were fighting fascists; how could they ever be allies?

It would take decades until Andrzej Wajda, in his 2007 film *Katyn*, portrayed that horrible scene of Western Poles escaping from the Nazis colliding with Eastern Poles escaping from the Soviets on a Bug River bridge, the agreed-upon boundary separating Nazi and Soviet zones in Poland. One still can view video files of joint Nazi-Soviet victory parades.

Invasions and mass killings went hand-in-hand. The atrocities committed may not have been joint operations, but as their respective fronts brought them closer together, the Germans and the Russians did share schnapps and vodka; in their wake lay thousands of dead Polish civilians and military personnel.

The Eagle Unbowed describes war crimes whose magnitude can overwhelm the reader. To make this bearable for the reader, author Halik Kochanski devotes individual chapters to singular examinations of respective German and Soviet actions. Such consideration did not occur for the Poles in real life. From September 1939 to June 1941, the masters of life and death were simultaneously both

Nazi and Soviet criminals; from 1941 to 1945 the Germans were the singular tormentors, and from 1944 to 1989 the Soviets were the oppressors. There is evidence that the two regimes' security forces, the SS Gestapo and NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) met regularly to keep each other informed of their operations to suppress the Polish population. Timothy Synder has called this part of the world at this time the "bloodlands."

During the first weeks of the war, the Luftwaffe deliberately bombed innocent Polish civilians running from the front. The Germans forcibly expelled eastward the Poles living in Western Poland. They kidnapped "Aryan-looking" Polish children and raised them as German children. Ethnic Germans living in prewar Poland, the *volksdeutsche*, were Nazi-trained fifth columnists, carrying out various anti-Polish missions. Polish girls and women were seized for sexual slavery. Operation Tannenberg involved the use of an early series of extermination actions targeting Polish intellectuals, professionals, priests, activists, and other leaders; other equally severe operations took place throughout their occupation. The Germans also plundered artwork from private collections and museums, smashed Polish national monuments, and closed down Polish schools and museums. They carried out terror campaigns and large-scale "revenge" reprisals, which consisted of indiscriminate roundups *Lapanka* and summary executions. Victims of these mass arrests were sent to prisons and labor and concentration camps.

Tadeusz Borowski, author of *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, was captured in a *Lapanka* [a military round-up of civilians] and sent to Auschwitz. Three weeks before he arrived there, the Germans changed their policy of immediately gassing non-Jewish Poles, so, among other jobs, he handled the luggage of Jewish victims on train platforms. He survived to later commit suicide.

Unlike the rest of Europe, there was no Polish Quisling or Polish Vichy. The Nazis considered Poles as only slightly above Jews as a race. In his 19 September 1939 Danzig speech, Hitler stated that Polish "leadership lacked intelligence; its organization was Polish." SS mobile-killing units murdered both Jewish and non-Jewish Poles. By the end of the war, the Nazis had murdered nearly 6 million Poles—2.9 million Polish Jews and 2.8

million ethnic Poles. Around 380,000 Polish Jews survived the Holocaust. In her poem "Starvation Camp Near Jaslo," the Nobel Prize winner Wisława Szymborska warns us of the danger of rounding off statistics because, when we do so, we erase the existence of the victims. People are not numbers.

The Polish resistance was the largest in all of Europe. Because prewar Poland was a multinational, multiethnic, and multireligious state, Polish rebel groups were by nature diverse, and these fighters often did not get along. In fact, sometimes they attacked and killed one another. Some groups refused to cooperate with the others because their ideologies conflicted. Nearly the same was true of the Polish Jewish resistance groups that fought in the ghettos and Jewish partisans that skirmished in the forests. What tends to be lost in translation, under-reported, neglected, and even forgotten in history books is that Jewish and non-Jewish insurgents did operate together; the tendency was for like-minded political groups to pair up with their Jewish or non-Jewish equivalents.

The first ghetto was established in Piotrkow Trybunalski in October 1939, and 400 more were created thereafter. Ghettos were Jewish collecting zones. Ghetto conditions were horrendous. Thousands died in them long before the camps opened. Forced labor was building the camps, and so the Jews waited. Operation Reinhard was the mission to murder via gas the almost three million Polish Jews in extermination camps: Belzec (opened March 1942) and Sobibor and Treblinka (May 1942). The reason why so few have heard about these camps is that there were virtually no survivors of these death facilities, so efficient were these murder houses. Chełmno (December 1941 to March 1943 and June-July 1944 as a death facility), Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau were multipurpose camps—labor and extermination; therefore, one could walk out of one of those places. These diversified camps also contained mixed populations: Jew/non-Jew, Soviet POWs, Roma, etc. Auschwitz also gassed hundreds of thousands of Jews from Europe; it was not exclusively a killing hub for Polish Jews.

Auschwitz is the camp most mentioned in histories about the Holocaust; however, this omits much. Prior to the implementation of Operation Reinhard, the SS Einsatzgruppen (the mobile killing units that shot their victims in forests and ravines) carried out

the Holocaust. These units began their work soon after the Wehrmacht conquered Poland; they continued to conduct the Holocaust "by bullets" when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union (June 1941). Himmler decided to switch from bullets to gas to spare his SS men from the emotional extremes of close-quarter murder; he thought it more humane (for the killers, not for those being killed).

Much has been said about the locations of the death centers being in Poland. To some, this fact seems to prove Polish acceptance of and participation in the Holocaust, and to confirm Polish anti-Semitism. The truth is Hitler did not ask for Polish permission to build the camps because he had already decapitated the Polish government. There were no Polish authorities or even a Polish government. Poland simply did not exist; the Germans called it the "General Government," and the Nazis did what they wanted there. Occupied Poland was not at all like Occupied France, Denmark, or other Nazi-controlled nations. It is true that numerous Poles did hunt down and sell out hiding Jews, but it also is true that there are over 6,000 recognized Polish Righteous among the Nations, an honor bestowed upon gentiles helping Jews survive the Holocaust. The Nazis did murder thousands of Poles if they caught them helping Jews; not only were the actual people helping Jews killed, so were their families and village neighbors. It was only in Poland that the Nazis established severe laws and the death penalty for assisting Jews. No such punishment existed elsewhere in occupied Europe.

The Nobel Prize-winning Polish (and American) poet Czesław Miłosz has chastised his fellow Poles for their apparent callousness and unconcern while the Nazis were destroying the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. In poems like "Campo dei Fiori" (1943), "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" (1943), "In Warsaw" (1945), and "Dedication" (1945), immediate, necessary, and guilt-inspiring words sought to awaken inconsiderate neighbors. To write anything in Polish and be caught meant immediate death. Simply to acknowledge that other Poles who were Jewish suffered would have satisfied Miłosz. To not be like the lotus-eaters of Nazi propaganda would have pleased him. While the Catholic Church did and said nothing about the Nazi extermination policies, individual Polish priests and nuns sheltered Jews. Many have criticized the Vatican for

its silence and inaction on Jewish mass murders; of the 22 million ethnic Poles, most of whom were Catholic, the Vatican was equally mute and passive.

The Polish Jewish film director Aleksander Ford gives a more subtle treatment of the Poles and Jews in Warsaw in his 1948 *Border Street*. There are Poles who do not care, some who help, and others who sell out Jews. The film's ending is bittersweet because even though young David is grateful for his Polish friends' help getting him out of the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto (1943), David realizes he must stay with his people, and refuses to hide outside the wall. There were all kinds of Poles.

For centuries, Poles and Jews did get along well. While the rest of Europe expelled Jews (England in 1290, Spain in 1492, etc.), in 1332 Polish King Casimir III The Great expanded previous Polish charters regarding Jews and welcomed them to live in Poland. He vowed to protect them as "people of the king." Relations soured after the third and final partition of Poland (1795). When Poland resurfaced as an independent state in 1919, there were efforts to expel, make life difficult for, or establish discriminatory laws against Jews, but there were no serious attempts to exterminate them. Poland may have become an authoritarian state in the 1930s, but it was not at all like the Third Reich or Soviet Union. Nonetheless, its behavior toward the Jews was at times negligent and coarse. Portraying this prewar anti-Semitic climate, Andrzej Wajda, in his 1961 film *Samson*, traces the life of Jakub, a Jewish university student who experiences Polish intimidation, humiliation, and violence. In an act of self-defense, he accidentally kills an ethnic Pole, and thereby serves jail time. The Polish authorities release him at the outset of the war and he finds himself behind another wall—the ghetto wall. He escapes only to find that he is conflicted about life without his Jewish people.

On 25 May 1940, Himmler wrote "Treatment of Racial Aliens in the East," saying, "We need to divide Poland's many different ethnic groups into as many parts and splinter groups as possible." One of the aims of the totalitarian state is to foment existing resentment and distort social differences. It seeks to displace familial and communal allegiances in order to subjugate and dominate. Both Nazi and Soviet political agitators provoked various types of internal Polish class warfare. Specifically, they manipulated

Polish anti-Semitism, creating propaganda that exploited mistrust, anxiety, and hostility toward the Jews. Not all Polish Jews spoke Polish, nor were they all assimilated; many spoke Yiddish and dressed differently. These distinctions accounted for many of their difficulties during the Holocaust. Communication and appearance were real barriers. Poles were sensitive about upward mobility and aspired to become more than farmers; some coveted the positions of Jewish professionals. In spite of the strong anti-communist sentiment in the country, a small minority of communists existed in prewar Poland. During the little known 1919-1920 Polish-Soviet War, Poland held back a Soviet takeover. Lenin imagined Poland to be his platform to launch worldwide revolution, but few Polish Jews found sanctuary in Marxism. Some Poles thought they saw many Jews in the Polish and Soviet communist parties. The alleged presence of Jews in communist circles led to the irrational and perverse conviction that all Jews are power-hungry communists out to get Poles. This racially charged hatred is known as *zydokomuna*, and it is anti-Semitism. Both Nazi and Soviet propagandists used *zydokomuna* to agitate the Polish masses.

Halik Kochanski writes, "The Polish administration of Kresy [eastern Poland] had been heavy-handed in the 1930s, so it is not entirely surprising that the arrival of the Red Army was seen by the non-ethnic Poles as a blessing." For some of these ethnic minorities, the Soviet forces were their liberators from Polish oppression. The Poles expected the Ukrainians and Byelorussians to embrace the Red invasion, but many were taken aback by the Jewish welcome. There were incidents of Polish pogroms, most notably in Jedwabne. It is important to note that only some Jews accepted the Soviet occupation, and even some who assisted the Communists in their takeover. In some Polish circles, this perception did dent Polish-Jewish relations. And as Kochanski points out, there were many Jews and Ukrainians who protected Poles from Soviet brutality. Neighbors did help neighbors.

Many historians have insisted that during the mutual German-Soviet reign of terror (1939 to 1941), the Soviets in fact were by far the more severe and bestial toward the Poles. The October Revolution, Civil Wars, Red Terror, and Purges trained the Soviet security forces far longer than

the relatively upstart National Socialists. By 1939, the Communists arrested, deported, starved, and murdered millions of their own people. Before World War II, they had already murdered 100,000 ethnic Poles living inside the Soviet Union. When the Red Army conquered Eastern Poland, it treated it as a part of the Soviet Union; political commissars immediately began Sovietizing the area. The Germans, too, were transforming Western Poland. However, the Communists were setting up sham elections to legitimize their takeover. Molotov said due to the collapse of Poland, the Polish government failed to protect the ethnic Ukrainians and Byelorussians living there, and therefore, the entering Red Army was carrying out humanitarian relief missions. From 17 September 1939 on, Eastern Poland became part of the Soviet Union; even today, those Polish territories remain in Belarus, Ukraine, and Lithuania.

The ethnic minorities that cheered while the Red Army marched in soon saw that the Soviets did not care about their interests. Poles who refused Soviet citizenship faced arrest, deportation, and death. The authorities repressed Polish cultural, social, and economic identity, and reeducated the masses along Marxist-Leninist lines. For the most part, the Soviet worldview portrayed Poles as bourgeoisie exploiters of poor Ukrainian and Byelorussian peasants, and the day of reckoning had come. Because so many Poles now were Soviet citizens and technically enemies of the state, the exact number of “Polish” victims is difficult to calculate. Studies vary, but conservative estimates state the Soviet Union deported at least 500,000 Polish citizens to Siberia and Kazakhstan from 1940 to 1941. For many decades, historians claimed that over one million Poles were sent eastward. Some Poles did not survive the long train rides. Although under watch, once the survivors arrived at their detention centers, they had to find jobs and dwellings on their own. Poles, too, suffered from the inhuman demands of collective farming quotas.

Once the Soviets became Allies with the British and Americans after June 1941, the Soviets also changed from enemies to alleged comrades of the London-exiled Polish government, and as perceived allies, the Soviets and Poles together now were fighting Hitler. Because of this coalition, the Soviet Union permitted hundreds of thousands of

detained Poles to leave. Many died doing so, and those who survived often were in horrible physical and psychological condition. The British were disappointed, even angry when Polish POWs arrived at British military bases to fight alongside them. Polish POWs may have been spiritually willing to fight, but their bodies were not. Moreover, the British viewed these Polish soldiers as ungrateful troublemakers. Not only did the British have to feed extra mouths that could not fight, but the Poles told inconvenient truths about Stalin’s treatment of them. The more the Poles demanded answers and retribution from the Soviets, the more the British disbelieved and mocked them. During the war the British press caricatured the Poles. After the war the British ignored them. What the British and Americans did not want to face up to was that every Pole in the Soviet zone was considered suspicious simply for being a Pole.

Many imprisoned Poles had undergone grisly torture. Halik Kochanski states, “It has been estimated that all 150,000 prisoners on 22 June 1941 were either killed on the spot or moved east and then often killed.” Tadeusz Piotrowski adds, “By the time the war was over, some one million Polish citizens—Christians and Jews alike—had died at the hands of the Soviets.” Given the extraordinary amount of suffering and death Poles endured from their tormentors, it is no wonder people know so little about Polish history. Its history almost seems too incredible, like a bad horror movie. In his book *Milosz’s Alphabet*, Czesław Miłosz describes wartime Poland as the “anus mundi.”

The Polish stories were true. However, the Red Army was fighting at the time; the Polish army was not. When the British required military support, the Poles were not in a position of strength and could only offer a symbolic gesture. When they did achieve a better military capability, it was too late. And the most lingering and festering question the Poles kept asking was, “What happened to our missing 25,000 officers who were in Soviet POW camps?”

The Katyn Massacre is one of the most infamous war crimes in history. Not only did the Soviets secretly murder 25,000 Polish officers in 1940, but when the Nazis announced to the world that they found 4,000 of them dead in 1943 and had definitive proof the Soviets killed them, Stalin insisted Hitler

ordered the killings, and Churchill and Roosevelt publicly accepted this lie.

The Soviets maintained their innocence until 1989, and not a few today in Russia still believe it was a Nazi crime. During the Cold War, it was a crime simply to utter “Katyn” in communist Poland, and officers’ relatives faced hardships because they were associated with Katyn. Some historians suggest that these massacres were Stalin’s revenge against the Polish Army for his mismanagement of Soviet forces during the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1920. By refusing to send an army group in Southeastern Poland to support the taking of Warsaw, the Soviets missed an opportunity to make Poland a Soviet republic. The Polish Army performed their “Miracle on the Vistula,” and drove the Soviets out. This little-known battle thwarted Lenin’s ambition to turn Europe Red. Many of the Polish officers who fought during the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1920 died in the Katyn Massacre. These officers were the obvious leaders to rule Poland, and Stalin needed them gone in order to fully possess Poland.

Another despicable illustration of the West’s tacit acceptance of Stalinist criminality was the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. Stalin prevented Allied support for the Polish Underground Army fighting Nazi forces, and he ordered his Red Army not to help. For 63 days, the Red Army sat and watched from the east bank of the Vistula River as 150,000 to 200,000 Poles died, and the Nazis obliterated 85 to 95 per cent of the city, shipping many of the remaining 500,000 to 600,000 people of Warsaw to concentration camps.

Yet, Poland did accomplish much during this dark period. *The Eagle Unbowed* author Halik Kochanski claims that its greatest contribution was breaking the codes for the German Enigma cipher machine. This achievement still is largely unknown, and the British at the time did not give the Poles the proper respect for doing it. Polish naval units sank many German ships and took the port of Narvik during the Norwegian campaign. Again, their role at the time went ignored. Polish spy work accounted for roughly 50 per cent of Allied intelligence. The legendary 303 Squadron (a Polish unit flying for the British) downed three times the RAF average during the Battle of Britain.

A visitor to the war cemeteries of Normandy will find Polish names. General Władysław Anders and his Polish II Corps played a huge role in taking Monte Cassino. Yad Vashem now recognizes over 6,000 Polish Righteous Gentiles. The underground courier Jan Karski snuck in both the Warsaw Ghetto and an auxiliary camp near the Bełżec death facility, and he wrote a report detailing the Nazi atrocities against the Jews. The British and Americans politely met him, but they did not believe him.

Polish Army officer, underground member, and “Auschwitz volunteer,” Witold Pilecki allowed the Germans to arrest him and send him to Auschwitz. He was there for nearly two years. He volunteered for this mission to organize a resistance movement in the camp. After escaping, he wrote a report detailing conditions in the camp. Later, because he was not part of the Communist underground, Communist Poland executed him in 1948.

An ally, both disparaged and betrayed during the war, Poland was a country where Just War theory did not apply, a nation where The Hague and Geneva Conventions were not honored. Poland ran with blood. Its wartime history is knotty and complicated, but author Halik Kochanski admirably (and deep down, enviably) has untangled Poland’s multi-layered tragedies. She showcases its unexpected and Herculean perseverance. Because the names and towns can be exotic, the recalled events and their actors unfamiliar, and the truths and consequences bitter, Kochanski ushers the reader along attentively.

In the past, the history student’s imagination focused on the Eastern Front at the expense of the equally important story of Poland. Kochanski’s book corrects this lacuna, making the necessary readjustment. She shows that Poland was not a passive backdrop for Nazi and Soviet war crimes. Her book may be hard reading for some audiences because it discloses the real cost of realpolitik, and it reveals the bluntness of Allied policy and behavior.

The temptation in writing a book like *The Eagle Unbowed* is to apotheosize Poland’s victimhood, and to whitewash its misdeeds; after all, the full history has been underreported. However, Kochanski’s book is balanced. She does not shy away from discussing Poland’s own pogroms and

the infamous Blue Police. She does not resort to nationalistic chest beating. The Nazis and Soviets are the obvious villains in this story, but how does one characterize the British and Americans? The Soviet alliance (1941 to 1945) was necessary, and Churchill and Roosevelt could not risk upsetting Stalin too much over Polish questions. The war would have lasted longer, and may have required liberating the Soviet Union. The tacit question haunting the book is this: What if Churchill and Roosevelt had really pressured Stalin on Poland? What would Stalin have done in response? We do not know. If Churchill and Roosevelt had done

so, the map of Poland might appear much differently today. In the book, Churchill emerges as conflicted, and Roosevelt comes off as indifferent over Poland. This book certainly will challenge established views about the heroism and leadership of these democratic leaders.

For Poland, the end of World War II was not May 1945, as it was for Western Europe. Poland had to wait until 1989 for the war to be over. For Poland, the collapse of the Soviet Union is the real end date of World War II. Poland's full World War II history was waiting to be written. With Halik Kochanski's book, it has been. **MR**

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