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A difficult neighbourhood¹

Poland's geopolitical location has seldom been an advantage in modern times. Caught between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires and the expanding Prussia of the Hohenzollerns, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe entirely between 1795 and the end of World War I, courtesy of a series of partitions of its territory by its neighbours.

World War I brought about the defeat of two of those partitioners and the downfall of their ruling houses, while the third collapsed into revolution and fratricidal confusion. Polish nationalists, who had kept the flame alive with frequent bloody sacrifices, seized the moment. Supported with some misgivings by France and Britain, which wanted to weaken the central European powers, and helped by US President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points statement on the need for greater self-determination in the postwar world, an independent Poland re-emerged.

Border conflict was inevitable and occurred almost immediately. An adventurous foray by the new Polish state into Ukrainian territory in support of Ukrainian nationalists sparked an offensive by the Bolsheviks to seize back territory once held by Russia and to bring on a revolution in Europe. The Red Army reached the gates of Warsaw in August 1920, where it was defeated by Polish forces in a battle known

¹ First published as a book review of Halik Kochanski's *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* (Allen Lane, 2012) in *Inside Story*, 2 Jul. 2013, insidestory.org.au/a-difficult-neighbourhood.

to Poles as the Miracle on the Vistula. At the centre of this struggle were the disputed marchlands between Poland and Russia. The new state's western borders with Germany were contested, too, and the Poles had territorial disputes in the east and south with emergent national groups who viewed them in much the same way as they viewed Russia and Germany. Many of these border issues continued to simmer throughout the interwar period.

The new Poland was multi-ethnic, with large Ukrainian and Jewish minorities, substantial numbers of Belarusians and Germans, and other smaller groups. Successive governments had to deal with chronic, and sometimes violent, disaffection among these largely involuntary citizens. Official treatment of the minorities was often harsh, particularly under the authoritarian Sanacja regime led by Marshal Józef Piłsudski after his May 1926 coup d'état. As it struggled to unify three different legal, financial and administrative systems, the new state also had to tackle areas of severe economic backwardness, aggravated by the effects of the Great Depression, trade sanctions imposed by Weimar Germany, and Poland's own heavy budgetary outlays on defence.

These were among the factors which meant that by 1939, largely for reasons beyond its control, Poland was not well placed to respond to an invasion, much less a cataclysm. On 1 September, the German blitzkrieg machine was unleashed on Poland, which was quickly overwhelmed by the enemy's superior numbers and technology.

What happened next is a tragic and painful story, much of which has been told before in varying degrees of detail. But Halik Kochanski has done an impressive job of covering this huge and intricate subject in all its aspects.² *The Eagle Unbowed* not only deals with the military and diplomatic history of this period but also, and more comprehensively than preceding accounts in English, draws in the stories of the millions of Poles who perished in or were displaced by the successive disasters that overtook their homeland.

2 Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* (Allen Lane, 2012).

The Poles' biggest miscalculation in 1939 was the expectation that their British and French allies would do something meaningful to support them. The French made only a symbolic incursion into a pocket of undefended German territory and withdrew within a matter of weeks. The main British response was to drop leaflets over German cities.

Meanwhile, in hasty pursuit of the territorial acquisitions they'd been promised under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939, the Soviets invaded Poland from the east on 17 September, coordinating their actions with the Germans and meeting little resistance from the demoralised and isolated Poles. Unlike Germany, Moscow didn't bother faking an excuse to invade; it merely asserted that, given Poland had ceased to exist, it had to come to the aid of its East Slav brethren, the Ukrainians and Belarusians.

During the *drôle de guerre* that followed, Germany was able to prepare at relative leisure for other operations, and particularly for its attack on France, Belgium and the Netherlands in May–June 1940. The resistance of those three countries was broken in little more time than it had taken to defeat Poland. Polish forces that had reassembled in France were thrown into the fray to help delay the inevitable. As Kochanski comments:

The Polish army, so painstakingly built up in France, was squandered to facilitate the retreat of the French Army. It suffered 6000 casualties, including 1400 killed, and the majority of the troops became POWs or were interned in Switzerland. Only 19,000 soldiers and airmen were evacuated, representing under a quarter of the Polish Army in France at the start of the German invasion.³

This tended to be the pattern throughout the war: Polish forces were thrown into battles far from their homeland, with little hope that they were on the path to regaining it. Their rage at the Germans made them brave, sometimes foolhardy, fighters. Their valour and their contributions were often overlooked by their allies, however, and ultimately were to prove non-bankable. This was an experience that Polish patriots had encountered over centuries – fighting in the wars of others in the vain hope of winning back their national freedom.

³ Kochanski op. cit. p. 219.

The Nazis' plan for Poland was to make way for German settlers by decapitating the intelligentsia, destroying Polish culture and education, Germanising the racially acceptable minority, and working to death or otherwise wiping out the rest of the population. They set about the task with vigour and, in the end, only a lack of time prevented them from achieving their objectives.

In addition to military casualties and mass executions of civilians, a million or so Poles were deported to work as slave labourers in the Reich, and some tens of thousands of children judged to have suitable racial characteristics were seized to be raised by German parents. Many of the labourers died in Germany and most of the children could never be recovered by their real parents. Large numbers of Poles also died from hunger, especially in labour and concentration camps. A recent estimate puts the total number of Polish citizens who died as a result of the German occupation at 5.5 million, some 3 million of them Polish Jews.

The Soviet occupation of eastern Poland between 1939 and 1941, though grimly brutal for many social groups, especially ethnic Poles, cast a few rays of light on others. The Soviet army and secret police set about Stalinising the area as soon as they arrived, seizing and deporting hundreds of thousands of people in inhuman conditions. Many others were imprisoned or executed, including the 22,000 who were murdered at several sites but who are collectively remembered by the name of one of them, Katyn. One estimate suggests some 150,000 may have died as a result of the two-year occupation. But, for Polish Jews, the Soviet occupation seemed to represent deliverance of a kind from Nazi Germany, while for Polish Ukrainians, at least temporarily, it seemed like a chance both to get even with the Poles and to secure rapid socioeconomic and national advancement.

Kochanski notes disagreements in the scholarly literature about how many people were deported into the Soviet hinterland. The attrition rate could be very high: of some 10,000 to 12,000 sent to the remote Arctic Gulag mines of Kolyma, only 583 were still alive by 1942. At one time, the usual estimate was around 1.5 million Poles deported, of whom the majority were thought not to have survived the war. But since Soviet archives were partly opened in the 1990s, the standard estimate has fallen to half a million. Kochanski clearly has doubts about this lower figure.

Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in August 1941 made the situation even worse, particularly for the Jews. But the tide began to turn again in late 1943, and the prospect of another Soviet occupation loomed. Poland was at the heart of what Timothy Snyder has memorably termed the bloodlands, the swathe of the western Soviet Union and East-Central Europe that was subjected to three successive waves of Soviet-Nazi-Soviet murderous occupation, creating a cumulative brutalisation effect and forcing hapless populations to make repeated 180-degree turns just to try to survive.

Hobbesian conditions of lawless violence, ideological coercion and desperate poverty naturally brought out the worst in many people. Both the Nazi and Stalinist occupations created perverse incentives for their starving subjects to collaborate, and some doubtless seized the opportunity offered them with enthusiasm. Others were inspired to rise to great heights of heroism and compassion. But probably the vast majority simply kept their heads down and did whatever they thought they had to for their own and their family's survival, including unedifying or even repugnant things.

Through all this, the Polish state remained suspended. Unlike in most of occupied Europe, no significant Polish political organisations offered to collaborate with the Germans, a fact of which the Poles have always been proud. Kochanski is sceptical on this point, arguing that the Germans didn't really want to entrust anything to the Poles, but she does note that they did seek some weighty Polish collaborators, without success, in the early months of the war.

On the other hand, an underground state came into being soon after the German invasion and remained highly active throughout the war. An underground guerrilla force, the so-called Home Army (the Armia Krajowa, or AK), also quickly emerged. At its peak, the AK numbered some 400,000, the largest insurgent force in German-occupied Europe. There were also much smaller militia formations of the hard right and left that attacked the occupiers while pursuing their own agendas (anti-Semitic nationalist and pro-Soviet respectively) in defiance of the AK.

The Polish government-in-exile, a broad-based coalition, though excluding the Pilsudskiite Sanacja establishment, was based first in France and then in London. Widely recognised internationally as

the legal successor to the Sanacja Government, its authority was also accepted by the Polish armed forces abroad and by the AK and the underground in occupied Poland, with which it maintained precarious contact using overland couriers and parachutists dropped behind enemy lines.

After Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, and nudged by the British, Stalin agreed to re-establish relations with Poland. Polish deportees in the Soviet Union were amnestied from remote Gulag camps and collective farms, and the soldiers and surviving remnants of the officer corps were allowed to reconstitute a Polish army in the Soviet Union under one-time tsarist officer Władysław Anders. But Stalin was looking for collaborators among the Poles in Russia and, unlike Hitler, he found some. When Anders disappointed his expectation that the reconstituted Polish army would fight uncritically under his command, Stalin began to consider alternative solutions.

Because of growing disagreements between Stalin and the Allies about the size and use of Anders's army, Stalin grudgingly agreed that part of the army could be evacuated from the Soviet Union via Central Asia and Persia to join their comrades in other theatres. The troops were accompanied on a harrowing trek south by civilians, including women and children desperate to escape from their Soviet nightmare. Some 4,000 Jewish soldiers, including future Israeli leader Menachem Begin, either deserted or were given permission by Anders to leave their units and travel to Palestine. Meanwhile, Poles remaining in the Soviet Union were being subjected to increasing pressure and chicanery.

In April 1943, the Germans announced their discovery of the mass graves of Polish officers at Katyn and attributed the atrocity to the Soviets. To the Allies' dismay, the London Poles called for an International Red Cross inquiry into the massacre. Feigning outrage at this scandalous accusation, Stalin abruptly curtailed relations with the Polish government-in-exile. But, even before this convenient pretext presented itself, Stalin was starting to build within the Soviet Union the foundations of a future Polish government and army that were more to his taste. These shadow institutions were led by left-wing Poles who had chosen exile in Russia, and a small minority of officer POWs (headed by Zygmunt Berling) who had indicated a readiness to

collaborate with Moscow after being captured in 1939, for which they were rewarded by comfortable living conditions in the capital instead of a bullet in the back of the head.

Polish servicemen abroad saw action on various fronts, making outstanding contributions, for example, during the Battle of Britain, where Polish airmen accounted for 15 per cent of German casualties, and during the siege of Monte Cassino in May 1944, where the Polish troops took heavy casualties. They also provided valuable input to Allied intelligence.

Poland's most notable espionage achievement – first shared with Britain in 1939 – was the cracking of the German Enigma codes, which eventually enabled the Allies to read much of the Axis powers' secret communications. In the view of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, this exerted a decisive influence on the course of the war. The Polish intelligence network in occupied Poland and beyond was also extremely productive. By one estimate, 48 per cent of the reports that British intelligence received from continental Europe came from Polish sources.

The AK and other resistance formations harassed and sabotaged German military and police resources, forcing Berlin to deploy around 500,000 military and security personnel in occupied Poland for most of the war. The biggest AK action was the valiant but quixotic Warsaw Uprising of August 1944, an unequal struggle that resulted in appalling loss of life (some 200,000 dead on the Polish side), the almost total destruction of Warsaw, and the dispatch of most of the survivors to camps or slave labour in the Reich.

The uprising formed part of Operation Tempest, a broader AK campaign to clear German forces from the areas of central-eastern Poland that the Soviet forces, with their Polish protégé army, were entering. The idea was to demonstrate to everyone, especially Stalin, that the AK was fighting to liberate the country independently and that he should, therefore, recognise Poland's sovereign existence.

Stalin had no intention of doing any such thing. The Soviet army and secret police refused to cooperate with the AK units that they encountered. They occasionally invited them to meetings, held ostensibly to discuss military coordination, but often as a treacherous prelude to arrests and summary executions. Nonetheless, the AK was

encouraged by signs that Soviet forces were closing in on the suburbs of Warsaw east of the Vistula, and Soviet leaflets had been dropped over the city calling on all Polish patriots to rise up.

When they did, however, Stalin forbade his forces to support the AK until the uprising had been almost crushed; only in the late stages were units from General Zygmunt Berling's Soviet-subordinated army allowed to attempt (unsuccessfully) a crossing of the Vistula to link up with the AK. Moreover, Stalin refused to allow Allied aircraft to enter the area under Soviet control, which was essential if they were to deliver the supplies the AK desperately needed.

By this time, the leaders of the United States and Britain, acutely conscious of Stalin's growing *de facto* control of the east, were pressing the London Poles to seek an accommodation with the Soviets by accepting a massive revision of Poland's eastern border in Moscow's favour and engaging positively with Stalin's Polish allies. By now those allies were already being shoehorned by the NKVD (Soviet secret police) into administrative control of eastern parts of the proposed new Poland west of the Curzon Line. All this was anathema to the government-in-exile, though the Premier, Stanisław Mikołajczyk, sought to find ways to be flexible.

The AK leaders had a weaker sense of the emerging *Realpolitik* than did the government-in-exile. But they, too, felt that only some striking achievements on the ground could save them from being enveloped by yet another Russian occupation. The heroic Warsaw Uprising had achieved none of its objectives; on the contrary, it had done a great deal of Stalin's dirty work for him. Suppressing the ghostly remnants of the underground state and army in the capital would now be an easy task.

Stalin's gross cynicism over the uprising, the growing evidence of arrests and executions of AK soldiers, and the progressive enthroneing of a communist-dominated puppet state in Poland were making Churchill increasingly uncomfortable about pushing his Polish allies to submit to Moscow. But push them he did. Roosevelt appeared to feel less discomfort. By then, his main concern in matters Polish seems to have been not to do anything that might lose him the potentially crucial Polish vote in the 1944 US presidential elections.

The Yalta conference of the Big Three powers in February 1945 underlined the message that Britain and the United States had been trying to convey to Polish leaders for some time: the war was nearly over; Stalin was in control of Eastern Europe; and the Poles would have to swallow their bitterness and grasp whatever concessions might still be available.

The culminating humiliation for the government-in-exile was the 1946 Victory Parade in the British capital, to which the newly recognised, though unelected, Warsaw Government (still completing preparations for a Soviet-style 'election') was invited, while the London-based government was not. This led to a scandal and questions in the House of Commons. The Warsaw Poles then declined to come, whereupon hasty invitations were extended to senior military commanders of the Polish armed forces abroad. They also politely declined, so the march went ahead without any Polish representatives.

The London-based Premier, Mikołajczyk, tried to follow Churchill's often-angry advice, and returned to Soviet-controlled Warsaw after the war. Despite his enormous popularity and nominal presence in a heavily pro-Moscow 'coalition' government, which he agreed to under pressure, the emerging Polish police state progressively emasculated him and his party. In October 1947, he was forced to flee the country in fear for his life.

Some of Roosevelt's comments on the Polish dilemma in the last phases of the war now sound thunderously naïve to anyone familiar with Stalinism and the Soviet record. At times Churchill, too, sounds naïve about Moscow in his dealings with the Poles; at other times, cynical and bullying.

But without troops on the ground in numbers, there probably wasn't a great deal either leader could have done. As far as Poland's fate went, Stalin had the divisions, and he had them in the relevant places. He had no intention of making anything more than tactical concessions that could be withdrawn as soon as was convenient. Removing his proxy regime could only be done by armed force, for which no one except the Poles had the stomach once the war had ended, and they certainly could not do it on their own.

Before *The Eagle Unbowed* was published, Kochanski was best-known as a military historian, and her formidable expertise in this field has clearly stood her in good stead. Although she doesn't appear to have published any major work on Poland previously, she has obviously acquired an impressive mastery of the country's modern history. Some minor factual inaccuracies have been pointed out by reviewers, but there has also been wide recognition that this is an unusually comprehensive treatment in English of a very large and complex subject.

For Kochanski, the form of whose name points to her British upbringing as well as her Polish family background, this was evidently a labour of love as well as a dauntingly large academic undertaking. Her family is present from the dedication to her parents at the beginning and thereafter throughout much of the book. Among the numerous apt eyewitness accounts she adduces are many skilfully and touchingly drawn from her own family sources to convey the human dimensions of the terrible events she is narrating.

Like Anders's army, many of her family members came from the Kresy (roughly, the eastern parts of prewar Poland and, in some Polish views, well beyond that also). These were the (ethnic) Poles who lost everything in the war, and were afraid or could not bear to return to the Muscovite Poland that the Yalta settlement offered them. Of the 80,000 Anders evacuees, only some 300 volunteered to be repatriated to Poland.

By any calculation, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Poles from the Kresy perished in the Soviet, German and renewed Soviet occupations. Some 60,000–70,000 civilians (some estimates go as high as 100,000) were also killed in the ethnic cleansing that was carried out in parts of the Kresy in 1943–44 by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (usually known by its Ukrainian acronym UPA). This was an attempt to create geopolitical facts on the ground as well as indiscriminate and grossly disproportionate payback for the Sanacja oppression and territorial conflicts in the recent past. Despite the extent of the carnage, few general readers in the Anglo-Saxon world know much about it.

Kochanski's treatment of these under-reported massacres is understandably written from a Polish perspective. She refers, for example, to the local Ukrainians' 'disloyalty' to the Poles, without

having adequately addressed the prior question of whether, in the light of recent history, the Poles could have expected loyalty. But the tragic story of the Kresy Poles deserves to be known better in all respects, and Kochanski tells it eloquently.

There has been some related criticism that, although Kochanski has read widely, her sources, which are nearly all Polish or English, reflect a certain Polonocentrism. The bibliography and footnotes confirm that there is something to this.

But she is most likely to be criticised, like any author stepping onto this sensitive terrain, for the book's treatment of Polish–Jewish relations. She devotes a separate chapter to the Holocaust, and there are many references throughout the book, often both fascinating and detailed, to the Jewish aspects of particular events and situations. But some readers will feel that one dedicated chapter on the Holocaust in 600 pages is not enough.

Despite her efforts to be fair, Kochanski seems at times to emphasise instances of positive behaviour towards Jews among ethnic Poles, while exhibiting reticence or offering extenuation in relation to examples of the opposite behaviour. There are things that can and should be said in extenuation, and she is justified in saying them. But, perhaps overall, she doesn't quite get the balance right.

As others have pointed out, Kochanski makes only modest use of recent research, mainly from scholars in Poland, presenting evidence of previously unpublicised incidents involving callous or brutal behaviour by ethnic Poles towards Jews during or soon after the war. She deplores the degree of polarisation that this new research has unleashed on all sides, but notes that this difficult debate will and should continue.

Nothing is comparable with the Holocaust, but alongside the 3 million Polish Jews killed were roughly as many ethnic Poles. Among many other things, this fine book is a moving memorial to their suffering, much of which is still a blank page in Western historical consciousness.

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