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Jonathan Walker, *Poland Alone: Britain, SOE and the Collapse of the Polish Resistance, 1944*, The History Press, 2008 £20

The history of Poland in the Second World war is still much misunderstood. Jonathan Walker has made a very useful contribution to the literature, focusing on what aid Britain was able to give Poland in her fight against the German occupiers, particularly in 1944 as the Soviet army entered Poland.

Notwithstanding Britain's guarantee to Poland in March 1939 and the fact that the German invasion of Poland was the pretext for Britain's declaration of war on Germany, Britain actually knew very little about the country to which she was now expected to render assistance. Polish-French ties were more historic and stronger, but with France out of the equation, Britain became Poland's sole ally in Europe.

Sending aid to Poland during the war was a struggle for Britain. While France could be relatively easily supplied with arms and SOE agents through regular Lysander flights, the whole of Nazi-occupied Europe lay between Britain and Poland, requiring the use of large bombers capable of long-distance flights across either northern Denmark or Sweden. This called on the services of Bomber Command aircraft and, as Jonathan Walker shows, Bomber Command was very hostile to the idea of flights to Poland. Flights to Poland flew originally from RAF Tempsford and then, after Italy's surrender, Brindisi. Over three hundred Polish agents, trained by SOE, were parachuted into Poland along with a limited supply of armaments.

Good relations between SOE and the Polish Government-in-Exile were critical to supply of aid to Poland. Jonathan Walker shows that both Ministers of Warfare, Hugh Dalton and the Earl of Selborne, were sympathetic to the Polish cause. So was Brigadier Colin Gubbins and the director of the region including Poland, Lieutenant-Colonel Harold Perkins. Indeed, whilst the British government was prepared to make considerable concessions to Stalin at Poland's expense, SOE remained loyal to its Polish allies throughout the war

Operation Wildhorn, which began during the winter of 1943-44, created an air bridge between Britain and Poland. Agents were landed and collected, including men such as General Stanisław Tatar, who became Deputy Chief of the Polish General Staff in London, and Tomasz Arciszewski, who would become the last wartime Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-Exile. The Polish Home Army, the *Armia Krajowa*, had been monitoring the German development of the V-2 rocket and reported the progress of research at Peenemünde to London. The RAF bombing of Peenemünde drove production of the V-2 underground, but the AK could monitor and evaluate the progress of the V-2 by watching the test site at Blizna in Poland. The AK scored a real coup when on 20 May 1944 they seized a fallen rocket before the



German recovery team arrived. Parts of this rocket were then despatched to Britain via Italy on 26 July 1944.

The main part of the book concerns events in 1944. Poland's relations with Britain were complicated at the time. In April 1943 the Germans had revealed the Soviet murder of Polish prisoners of war in the neighbourhood of Katyń. Following a Polish request for an investigation by the International Red Cross, the Soviet Union broke off relations with the Polish Government-in-Exile. This left Britain with a dilemma: it owed support to the Polish Government-in-Exile yet recognised the fact that the Soviet Union was providing the bulk of the war effort against Germany. The situation was complicated by Stalin's demand that Poland's eastern frontier should be pushed westwards to a line corresponding to that drawn in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. The Poles naturally found this unacceptable. The Foreign Office, on the other hand, contained many supporters of the Soviet Union who were hostile to the Poles, notably the Assistant Under-Secretary, Oliver Harvey. SOE remained loyal to the Poles. It rejected the government's demands, made at the Soviet request, that Poland should give up their independent transmission stations and secret cypher codes.

The AK supplied Britain with valuable intelligence throughout the war, yet the British government was not always prepared to believe it. For example, there was disbelief at the reports of the mass gassing of Jews at Auschwitz, despite the fact that the AK had sent someone inside the camp to make a report on the SS activities. There was even greater reluctance on the part of the British government to accept what their Soviet allies were doing in Poland after the launch of Operation Bagration on 22 June 1944 had shattered the German Army Group Centre and swept the Soviets into Poland. The AK mounted Operation Tempest, in eastern Poland, on the orders of the Government-in-Exile, to fight the Germans in order to facilitate the Soviet advance. It quickly became apparent that the Red Army was willing to accept the cooperation of the AK until an objective, such as Lwów, was taken. Then the NKVD, the forerunner to the KGB, would move in, arresting the AK leaders and conscripting the rank and file into the Communist Polish Army.

On 1 August 1944 the AK launched the Warsaw Uprising. As early as 3 August ammunition began to run out and the AK asked SOE's Force 139 in Italy to begin air drops of supplies into Warsaw. A debate began over how the Allies could assist the Poles. Nearly two hundred flights to Poland from Italy did take place, often in bad weather, and with heavy losses in planes and aircrew. British government appeals to the Soviet Union for assistance fell on deaf ears. Marshal Rokossovsky's First Belorussian Front, which included the Communist Polish Army Corps, halted in the outskirts of Warsaw and did virtually nothing to assist the AK. Indeed, the Poles were expressly forbidden from trying to cross the Vistula to help their countrymen. Stalin refused British and American pleas to allow their planes to land on Soviet soil to refuel. Having run out of ammunition and food, the AK surrendered in the early hours of 3 October.



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Jonathan Walker concludes his book with the collapse of the Polish resistance, and Britain and America's abandonment of Poland, to the hegemony of the Soviet Union. SOE missions to Poland became more difficult because of the need to avoid Soviet air space and because of the shrinking area of German occupation. Nevertheless the British government despatched Operation Freston to report on the state of affairs in Poland. This never achieved its objective: its members were captured by the Soviets and handed over to the NKVD, who treated them not as allies but as prisoners. Soon after this, sixteen AK leaders were taken to Moscow and subjected to a show trial. At the Potsdam conference Poland's borders were redrawn, giving Stalin the frontier he wanted to his west and compensating Poland with German territory.

This is a very readable book drawing on many first-person narratives and is a worthy addition to the literature of Anglo-Polish relations during the Second World War.

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