

Polish Armed Forces Contribution into Fight with Axis Countries in the World War II

Michał Polak Humanities Department, Technical University
of Koszalin, Poland

History of Poland is full of dramatic as well as heroic cards, rich in great successes, but also a dramatic defeats. Because of its geopolitical location – between the powerful Germany and Russia – Poles often were forced to fight for the survival of their nation. They also often vanquished their opponents in great battles, thus strengthening their country and building its own sphere of influence “from the Baltic to the Black Sea”. It is because of the dramatic history of Poland in the past centuries that Poles have cultivated memory of such struggles.

Sino-Polish contacts over past centuries were mainly trade, but Poles understood Chinese People very well, hearing about Chiang Kai-shek’s troops fight against invading army of Japan. Poland regained independence in 1918 after 123 years of annexation, so there was strong feeling of understanding and support for the cause of Chinese struggle with invaders.

And then came the 1st of September 1939, and Polish nation one more time had to take up arms. The World War II gave the Poles many opportunities to show the heroism and devotion to freedom and justice. Polish Armed Forces fought on different continents – with numerous enemies – Germany, Soviet Union and symbolically even with Japan empire.

The aim of this paper is to give the general view of Poland’s contribution into fight with the Axis Countries during World War II ‘*for your freedom and ours*’, which took place on land, at sea and in the air¹. There will be pointed major areas of actions focused on regaining independence – in some ways such similar to Sino-Japanese War – the fight for freedom and justice. Col. Witold Urbanowicz’s heroic achievements in

the ‘Tiger Sharks’ over China may be assessed as symbolic connection between Polish and Chinese struggle with enemies.

1939

On the 1st of September 1939 the German army crossed the Polish border, and thus they started the Second World War, without declaring it². The Polish Army, not as numerous and well equipped as the Wehrmacht, mounted heroic resistance. But without the help promised by its Allies, France and Great Britain, it was pushed back to defense. Polish forces caused the Germans substantial losses in men and material, thus buying the Western Allies—France and Great Britain—valuable time. However, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler’s ally, fulfilled his part of Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement, and he invaded Poland from the East on September 17³.

Attacked on two fronts, decimated, the Polish Army was defeated. The last Polish units surrendered at the beginning of October, and Germany and the Soviet Union split the defeated Poland amongst themselves. The Soviet Union took the Eastern Borderlands of the Republic of Poland, including Lvov and Wilno. Both totalitarian regimes took planned actions from the very beginning. Their aim was the destruction of the Poles as a nation.

During the terribly bitter winter of 1939/1940 the Soviets launched an operation of deporting several hundred thousand Poles to the East. The deportation trains were directed to the Gulags in Kazakhstan, Siberia and to many other regions of the Soviet Union. The Polish officers, largely members of the intelligentsia and landowners, faced an even grimmer fate when in September

1939 they became Soviet prisoners of war. In the spring of 1940, on Joseph Stalin’s orders, nearly 15 thousand Polish prisoners of war, who were supposed to be protected by international treaties, were murdered along with 7 thousand civilians, policemen, and army officers arrested by the Soviets after they have taken Polish territories. Mass executions were carried out in several places, out of which Katyn near Smolensk is the one most well-known.

Poles contributed to the Allied intelligence with the presentation of decoded “Enigma” encrypting machine, which helped the Allies read German enciphered messages⁴. Two machines sent, helped the future works on decoding German higher level “Enigma” machines, which may be assessed as crucial to final victory over Nazis.

1940

After October 1939 defeat, thousands of Polish troops made every possible attempt to get to France, where Polish government in exile was formed. In just 4 months they managed to organize the army of 84, 500 men in four infantry divisions and two brigades, as well as air force with two fighter squadrons and next two in training.

In Norway a brigade of Podhalanian Rifles fought bravely with Germany in the Narvik area from the beginning of May until the middle of June 1940, but as that joint British and French campaign collapsed, the allies were evacuated and later defended Brest against Germans.

During the German Blitzkrieg in France in May 1940 the Allied defense was smashed by German armored and infantry already after two weeks which was the reason for a hasty withdrawal of the British troops and capitulation

of France. The 1st Division of Polish Grenadiers fought in the district of Metz. The 2nd Rifle Division carried on war operations in the area of Belfort. They broke through to Switzerland where they were interned. There was also armored brigade under General Maczek organized, which was evacuated to Great Britain as well as the Carpathian Rifle Brigade, formed in Syria, which later was to take part in combat with Germans in Africa⁵.

Following the surrender of France, only around 20% of Polish Army managed to escape to Great Britain. These included a Polish airmen. Most of the Army was captured by Germans or interned in Switzerland⁶.

The Polish Government-in-Exile reformed for a second time - this time in London - just in time for the Battle of Britain, which lasted from the beginning (8) of August to the end of September 1940. The 71 Polish fighter pilots of 302 and 303 Polish squadrons and the 80 Poles who flew with British squadrons shot down 203 German planes and damaged a further 36. Polish pilots, including such aces like Stanisław Skalski and Witold Urbanowicz, shot down over 10% of all German planes attacking British isles. Our airmen were the largest contingent of foreign pilots flying with the Royal Air Force⁷.

1941

In 1941 the Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade was moved to defend Tobruk in North Africa against German and Italian troops. 5,000 Poles defended the town for four months - together with British 70. Division as well as Czech and Australian battalions until it was relieved by a British offensive⁸.

Meanwhile on June 22, 1941, the Germans, Stalin's allies until that day, launched a surprise attack on the USSR. In a new political situation, the Polish-Soviet Agreement (Sikorski-Mayski Agreement) was concluded in London, by virtue of which the deported Polish citizens and former prisoners of war were to form the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, subordinated to the Government of the Republic of Poland-in-exile. Gen. Władysław Anders, until recently an NKVD prisoner, became their commander⁹.

Anders' Army was to fight as a whole after it had been formed, but Stalin wanted the newly-organised and insufficiently trained units to be sent separately to the front as soon as possible. Moreover, the Soviets deliberately made it difficult for the Polish inmates of the Soviet camps to reach the centres where the army was being formed. Additionally, contrary to the treaty's provisions, the Soviets distinguished between Poles and Polish citizens of other nationalities (Ukrainians, Belarusians and Jews), denying them the right to join the Polish army. Anders did not draw such a distinction, and despite the political pressure exerted by the Soviets and the British, he evacuated them from the Soviet Union along with the whole army¹⁰.

The co-operation between Stalin and the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR did not run smoothly, and when the British government offered to transfer the Polish troops to Iran, Stalin agreed willingly. The evacuation from the USSR to Iran lasted from February to August 1942¹¹. This is when the Polish soldiers bought a small Syrian brown bear for a few tins of food and named him Wojtek. He was adopted by Polish soldiers as a mascot and "served" as a rightful soldier in the 22

nd Artillery Supply Company¹².

1942-1945

In Iran, the troops evacuated from the USSR joined the Polish Carpathian Rifle Brigade – mentioned above, thus forming the Polish Army in the East. After training in Iraq, Palestine and Syria, the 2nd Polish Corps was formed from these units, and it was sent to fight on the Italian front. It fought at Cassino and hoisted a Polish flag on the ruins of the *Montecassino*-abbey which it captured¹³.

Special significance of Monte Cassino for Poles is related not only to the military consequences of victory and the extraordinary sacrifice of the soldiers. Monte Cassino symbolises far more than military merit. A decisive majority of the soldiers of the 2nd Corps came from Poland's Eastern Borderlands (Kresy), which on the basis of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 1939 were occupied by the Soviet Union. Before they joined the army commanded by Gen. Władysław Anders, they had gone through the hell of Soviet deportations, prisons and camps. Even during their fight with Germans they were not aware of the promise made to Stalin by Western Allies in Teheran allowing him to incorporate their homeland to Soviet Union. Most combatants of this battle never returned not only to their homes but not even to Poland in her new borders. The Battle of Monte Cassino is also a symbol of Poland's keeping its obligations as an ally¹⁴.

Later the year 1944, 2. Polish Corps took Loreto and Ancona and ended the war by liberating Bologna in April 1945.

Meanwhile, in 1944, General Maczek was given command of the Polish 1st Armoured

Division which was sent to France shortly after D-Day. It took part in the drive through Normandy, culminating in the battles of Falaise and Chambois where the Poles cut off the retreat of 60,000 Germans. The Division went on to liberate Abeville, St Omer, Ypres and Ghent. The Poles drove through France and Belgium into Holland where they liberated Breda and then into Germany where the Polish Division accepted the surrender of the port of Wilhelmshaven¹⁵.

We should look now to occupied Poland. Since 1939 Polish "Home Army" was formed which was underground movement. It was a phenomenon – the most effective resistance army during II World War. In 1944 it had 250,000 – 300,000 soldiers. It carried out diversionary and sabotage activity against German transport lines, industrial facilities and even smaller troops. Through such activity it harried German garrisons, making life for the occupying forces as difficult as possible. On the 1st of August, 1944 the Home Army started the rising in Warsaw – the 63 day struggle – as an attempt to liberate the city from withdrawing Germans and before the Soviet Red Army would enter, installing "Polish" communist provisional government. With little help from Poland's allies and with Soviet indifference – Home Army in Warsaw capitulated and the city itself was raised to the ground.

The Polish Independent Parachute Brigade under General Sosabowski had wanted to parachute into Poland to help the ill-fated rising in Warsaw that had broken out on the 1st August, 1944, but were dropped instead at Arnhem as part of operation "Market-Garden" to fight alongside the British 1st Airborne Division and to suffer the same defeat.

The Polish Air Force continued flying

throughout the war. In North Africa, Polish pilots flew with 112 “Shark” Fighter Squadron and the “Polish Fighting Team” that was commonly referred to as “Skalski’s Flying Circus” after its Commanding Officer¹⁶.

The Polish Navy, although small in 1939, was rapidly expanded by the loan of British ships to be manned by Polish crews. Polish submarines patrolled the North Sea and the Mediterranean; Polish warships served in the Atlantic and Murmansk convoys; the Polish Navy saw service in the Narvik campaign, the Dunkirk evacuation, the assault on Dieppe, hunting the battleship “Bismark”, the invasion of Sicily and the invasion of France on D-Day¹⁷.

On the East Joseph Stalin organized Polish communist government which task was to change Poland into Soviet republic. The Red Army, which had come to Poland as liberator, was to stay as conqueror with silent acceptance of London and Washington.

Under Moscow’s auspices there was Polish army organized. Its main role was to establishing a Soviet backed government. But we should emphasise, that its role in the storming of Berlin was an important, yet little known, contribution to overall victory over Germany¹⁸.

Witold Urbanowicz over China

Witold Urbanowicz is one of the most famous Polish Air Force pilots during World War II. He fought on three fronts of this war – against Germany in September 1939; in the famous Battle of Britain in 1940 and against the Japanese over China in 1943. Shoulder to shoulder with American pilots, the successors of the famous “Flying Tigers”¹⁹.

Urbanowicz was born on March 30, 1908. He was to be a teacher, but in a free Poland very quickly chose the path of military service. In the years 1925-1930 he attended the Cadet Corps No. 2, which prepared young men to the profession of officer. He graduated from the famous Aviation Cadet School in Dęblin. In the years 1932-1936 he served as an observer and co-observer in the 1st Aviation Regiment in Warsaw. In 1936 he was transferred to the Aviation Officers Training Centre in Dęblin, where he was a pilot instructor.

When German offensive started, Urbanowicz defended skies over Dęblin. Then he participated in the evacuation of 50 cadets through Romania to France to continue the fight there. In the winter of 1940 along with other Polish airmen he traveled from France to the UK. He took part in the famous Battle of Britain, initially in the British 145th Fighter Squadron of the RAF and then in the famous Polish Fighter Squadron 303 – one of the best RAF squadrons during war period. In the most critical moment of the battle Urbanowicz took over the command of the squadron.

Urbanowicz was one of the pillars of the Polish aviation and the best Polish fighter pilot of the Battle of Britain, during which he shot down 15 enemy planes in total²⁰. He ranked in the top ten best Allied pilots of the battle.

Soon, however, Urbanowicz was removed from flying. In 1941 he was a member of the Polish Mission Aviation in Canada and the US, which aimed to recruit Polish emigration volunteers to join the Polish military aviation.

In December 1942 he was sent with diplomatic mission to the US, where he met gen. Claire L. Chennault and obtained his permission to join his pilots in China. After the consent of Polish and

Chinese authorities he joined the 14th Air Force under General Claire L. Chennault. In August of 1943, he moved from the US to China. He arrived there in October 1943. Initially he joined the 26th Fighter Squadron at the airport in Kunming. On November 15, 1943 he was transferred to the famous 75th Fighter Squadron “Tiger Sharks” belonging to the 23rd Fighter Group in Hengyang. The 75th Squadron commander was Major Elmer Richardson. Along with the squadron Urbanowicz took part in the fighting over city of Changde besieged by the Japanese. He participated in attacking enemy troops, supplying dumps for defenders of the city, as well as attacks of targets on the back of the enemy lines. During such missions – over Nanchang he shot down two Japanese fighters, saving life of his commander²¹.

Urbanowicz logged 17 combat sorties with 14th Air Force, most of them in support of the Chinese ground forces on the Tung T’ing Lake front²². He claimed to have destroyed nine more Japanese aircraft on the ground. The Americans called him “the smallest army that has ever existed” and “the only Pole who actively declared war on Japan”. For participation in the Sino-Japanese war Urbanowicz was awarded by gen. Cl. Chennault with American Air Medal.

He returned to Britain in January, 1944, from where in August he took the post of US air attaché at the Polish Embassy in Washington.

Col. Witold Urbanowicz’s participation in aerial combat ended with the result of 17 enemy aircraft shot down for sure and 1 probably, giving him second place in the Polish Air Force after the famous Stanislaw Skalski. Urbanowicz has been widely recognized as exceptionally courageous and unusually skillful pilot. He was never shot

down or wounded in battle.

After the war, Urbanowicz moved to Pennsylvania where he worked in air industry but as well he wrote several books, finally returning to Poland in 1996 – few years after the fall of communist government. He was appointed honorary General of the Polish Air Force. Witold Urbanowicz died a year later. In his whole service he was decorated with different Polish and foreign medals: the *Virtuti Militari* Order, the Polish Cross of Valor, British Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal.

When the war in Europe ended in May 1945, the position of the Polish Armed Forces was unclear. Despite its long struggle alongside the Allies in the name of Poland, it seemed that Poland was far from independence. Most of Polish soldiers, which fought in different battles under Polish Armed Forces in the West, never got a chance to return to a free motherland. The provisions of the Big Three during the Yalta Conference on the question of post-war Poland clearly situated it in the Soviet sphere of influence²³. Poland – one of the victorious allied countries – in relative to the pre-war state lost over 20% of its area to Soviet Union. Just after the end of the war, the governments of the Allied countries recognized the communist provisional government of the Republic of Poland, and withdrew from their support for the rightful Polish government-in-exile. Poland had to wait for another 45 years to regain independence, what finally happened in 1989.

[Notes]

1. About Polish contribution into II Great War see f. ex.: Norman Davies, *Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland's Present*, Oxford Paperbacks 2001; Norman Davies, *Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw*, Penguin Books 2005; Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*, Harvard University Press, 2014; Kenneth K. Koskodan, *No Greater Ally: The Untold Story of Poland's Forces in World War II (General Military)*, Osprey Publishing 2011; Richard C. Lukas, *Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation 1939-1944*, University Press of Kentucky 1986; Adam Zamoyski, *Poland. A History*, Hippocrene Books, 2012.
2. P. Caddick-Adams, *Monte Cassino. Ten Armies in Hell*, London, 2012, p. 206.
3. M. Polak, *Battle of Monte Cassino*, Warsaw 2014, p. 6 [at:] http://pamiec.pl/ftp/ilustracje/ZZ-MC_EN.pdf.
4. Codes were broken by three Polish cryptologists: Marian Rejewski, Jerzy Różycki and Henryk Zygalski from Polish military intelligence.
5. Janusz Zuziak, *Wojsko Polskie we Francji 1939-1940. Organizacja i działania bojowe*, Warsaw, 2013, pp. 227-273.
6. 1400 were killed, more than 4500 were wounded. Polish fighter pilots achieved 50 confirmed and 5 probable kills of enemy aircraft. Only about 20 000 men were able to withdraw to England. The great organizational effort made since the autumn 1939 was wasted. Vide: *Polish contribution to the Allied victory in World War 2 (1939-1945)*, [at:] http://teheran.msz.gov.pl/en/c/MOBILE/bilateral_cooperation/history/teheran_ir_a_66/.
7. Vide: Jerzy B. Cynk, *The Polish Air Force at War. The Official History. Vol. 2 1943-1945*, Atglen, 1998.
8. G. Jasiński, *The Battle of Tobruk in the Context of the Polish Military Effort during the Second World War*, p. 7-26; M. Polak, *The Carpathians – Knights of the War Order of Virtuti Militari 1941-1945*, pp. 219-242 [at:] *Tobruk in the Second World War. Struggle and Remembrance*, edited: G. Jasinski and J. Zuziak, Warsaw, 2012.
9. Zbigniew Wawer, *Znów w polskim mundurze. Armia Polska w ZSRR*, Warsaw, 2001, pp. 37-71.
10. M. Polak, *Battle of Monte Cassino...*, pp. 6-7.
11. Vide: M. Polak: *An alternative view - the controversy surrounding military decisions taken by General W. Anders* [at:] *General Wladyslaw Anders: soldier and leader of the free Poles in exile*, edited: J. Pyłat, J. Ciechanowski and A. Suchcitz, London, 2007, pp. 91-112.
12. Aileen Orr, *Wojtek the Bear: Polish War Hero*, Edinburgh: Birlinn Publishers, 2012.
13. The creation of the Polish Army in the Soviet Union from the over one and a half million Poles who were deported from Poland to all parts of the Soviet Union after its 1939 invasion of Poland was the only chance for them to change their fate. The Monte Cassino hill became a key point of the German defence called Gustav Line. The Gustav Line in this region constituted a perfectly organised system of fortifications. The three subsequent battles did not bring the Allies victory. The fourth battle of Monte Cassino (Operation Diadem) was described by the Allied headquarters as a last chance operation. The most difficult assignment was given to the Polish 2nd Corps (vide: P. Caddick-Adams, *Monte Cassino...*, pp. 210-230).
14. Unfortunately, we never saw the fulfilment of those obligations by our western allies, neither in 1939 nor in 1945. There can hardly be any Pole who would not know at least the refrain of the song 'Red Poppies on Monte Cassino' (Czerwone maki

na Monte Cassino). For many years of communist dictatorship it was a token of remembrance, and right after the war also a sign of resistance. Today we sing this song as free citizens of our independent Fatherland. We know it raised out of the blood of those who died bravely at Monte Cassino. We also remember those who survived only to experience the bitter fate of an exile or repressions in the occupied homeland (M. Polak, *Battle of Monte Cassino...*, pp. 23-24.).

15. M. Ostrowski, *To Return to Poland Or not to Return – the Dilemma Facing the Polish Armed Forces at the End of the Second World War*, London, 1996, pp. 24-25 [at:] <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1349014/1/DX194948.pdf>.
16. M. Ostrowski, *To Return to Poland Or not to Return...*, p. 25. In Britain, the Poles' two fighter squadrons were increased to seven (302, 303, 306, 315, 316 & 317) and a further one was formed in Italy (318). The Poles flew a night fighter squadron, a fighter-reconnaissance squadron, two bomber squadrons and other.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 26.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 27. The Polish 1st and 2nd Armies comprised of ten full infantry divisions, with

another four in training, five artillery divisions, a cavalry brigade, an armoured corps and an air corps of fighter, bomber and ground assault aircraft. In effect the Poles made up 13% of the manpower and 25% of the independent armoured corps of Soviet General Zhukov and General Koniev's drive on Berlin. The total strength was near 400,000.

19. Vide: the biography of gen. W. Urbanowicz, published by Wojciech Krajewski: *General brygady pilot Witold A. Urbanowicz – legenda polskich skrzydeł*, Warsaw 2008; Wojciech Rodak, *Latający Tygrys. Witold Urbanowicz poluje nad Chinami*, 'Nasza Historia', v. 7-8, July-August 2015, pp. 32-35.
20. W. Krajewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-149.
21. W. Krajewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-199.
22. W. Krajewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201; Jerzy B. Cynk, *The Polish Air Force at War...*, p. 368.
23. The communist Polish authorities took away the Polish citizenship from General Anders as well as of other Polish commanders (including the former Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Armed Forces, General Kazimierz Sosnkowski), who were never considered as privileged combatants and were forced to live off manual labour.