

## Polish Military Exiles - Surrey's Hidden History

After the Second World War Polish Allied Forces, having fought alongside the British, refused to return to their homeland which had been placed behind the Iron Curtain. They were allowed to settle in Britain and about 2,000 of them made their home in Surrey.



### 1) Drawing the Sword - Poland's 1939 Defence Plan

In 1939 Poland's defence plan was agreed with its allies France and Britain. Polish Forces were to hold the German offensive for two weeks until Poland's Allies (France and Britain) opened a front on the Siegfried Line in order to split the German Forces. With Germany fighting on two fronts, it was expected that the German assault on Poland could be repulsed. However, the Allies remained inactive (this period is known as the Phoney War). Consequently, no German divisions needed to be transferred from the Polish

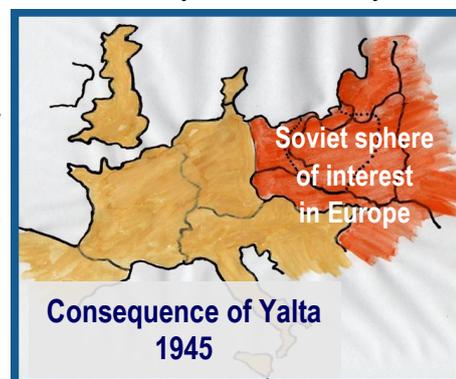
front. As soon as Moscow received news that Japan had agreed a truce over Manchuria (where Soviet Forces were in the field), it ordered an attack on Poland's eastern border, a plan secretly agreed with the German Government.

### - Poland fights on

Despite the catastrophic 'Polish Defence War' of 1939 (known as the September Campaign), when Polish Forces had collapsed within three weeks in the face of the German and Soviet invasion, the Polish Government (now in exile in France) decided to stay in the war. It went about reconstituting its forces outside of Poland and deploying them alongside Allied troops, notably the French and the British. Consequently, Polish units took part in the Battle of Britain (where one in eight RAF pilots was Polish), the Italian, French and North African campaigns, the Battle of the Atlantic, and the Normandy Landings. Polish cryptologists also worked for the Special Operations Executive (SOE). The intention of these forces was to return to a liberated Polish Republic alongside the exiled Polish Government, which by now had transferred from France to London.

### 2) No Way Home - the displaced Polish Community in Surrey

4 February 1945 is not a date well known in the annals of the Second World War, whereas in reality, it was a defining moment. With Nazi Germany on the verge of defeat, the Allies, now including the Soviet Union (which had changed sides), decided to exclude Poland and gathered to agree a peace settlement. The second of these conferences took place at Yalta in the Crimea, where the principal concern was the geo-political make-up of post war Europe. The Yalta conference addressed questions on the treatment of Germany after the war, the formation of the United Nations, the war in the Pacific, the opening of a Western Front and the Polish question. The issue of Poland, on which Britain had gone to war, received particular attention and saw the Soviet Union make demands on the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. For the Polish Government, exiled in London, the situation was clear: Moscow had no right to make any demands on the Polish Republic. Churchill, who had to be seen supporting his Polish ally, trod a very thin line and bristled when he learned that Stalin would not allow Polish diplomats to attend the meetings. Churchill was powerless to resist Stalin's demands and so Poland was placed in the Soviet 'sphere of interest'. Subsequently, the 'Curzon Line' was adopted as Poland's new eastern border, resulting in half of the country's pre-war territory being lost to the USSR and saw the installation of the Soviet sponsored Provisional Government of National Unity in Warsaw, which was a rival to the exiled Polish Allied Government in London.



### 3) Impasse

On 13 February 1945 the exiled Polish Government protested loudly against these developments and officially refused to accept them. The grounds for refusal were; a) that it was not consulted, b) that no other nation had the right to pronounce on the future of the Polish Allied Government, c) that the sovereignty of Poland's territory was an internal (Polish) matter and d) that the Polish nation had not entered the war only to be dictated to when it had ended. As far as the Polish allied authorities in London were concerned, these were irrefutable principles. Churchill returned from Yalta a discontented man and, although he was party to the conference, he too was troubled by some of the agreements adopted. The British Prime Minister, was deeply concerned by what he had seen unfolding in Central Europe - the spread of communism into the great capitals of the continent eg. Warsaw, Prague and Budapest. Having gone to war to remove one totalitarian state from dominating Europe (Nazi Germany), all that seemed to be happening was that it was being replaced by another (Soviet Russia). He was also concerned that it would soon be realised that he had completely yielded to Stalin on the question of Poland.

### 4) Exile



Exiled Polish soldiers in Britain

Once Britain had officially recognised the communist Provisional Government of National Unity in 1945, the prospects for Polish allied authorities, exiled in London, were doomed. For the men and women who had fought alongside the British in the name of the exiled Polish Government, the decision was whether to return to a Soviet dominated Poland, or seek exile. Of those who refused repatriation, most accepted resettlement in Britain. Between 1947 and 1949, approximately 150,000 men and women of the Polish Forces were brought from western theatres of war to Britain, where they joined the Polish Forces already stationed here. Their dependants, namely wives, children and parents who had originally been forcibly deported during the 1939 German/Soviet occupation of Poland, were also allowed to settle in this country, raising the number of displaced Polish people in Britain after the war to approximately 200,000. Out of these individuals, around 150,000 agreed to remain in Britain. On arrival, they were temporarily housed throughout the country in disused military camps, such as Witley and Tweedsmuir near Thursley Village. Since the Polish Forces were a foreign army, the British Government had no jurisdiction over them and so they were encouraged to enlist into a British holding unit, which had been specially prepared for them, called the Polish Resettlement Corps (PRC). Enrolment in the PRC put Polish personnel under British military law, and gave HMG authority to make decisions regarding their future. The next task was to organise their demobilisation, which would be followed by assimilation into British society. However, another difficulty soon arose concerning nationality, a matter which had repercussions for registration in Britain. Given that their Polish nationality had been revoked by the 'Warsaw regime', these individuals were technically 'stateless' and so had to be registered under the Aliens Act of 1920 pending their naturalisation. After registration, the British could then legally offer support for their exile. The Polish Resettlement Act of 1947 provided the legislative framework for this process. The help offered concerned economic independence, health and well-being and so HMG provided shelter, subsistence, education, vocational training, language classes, healthcare and employment. It also allowed Polish cultural and social organisations to establish themselves throughout the country where Polish communities would flourish.

