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# **“IT SURPASSES OUR COMPREHENSION”. POST-WAR POLAND IN FOREIGN PRESS OF THE 40s.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a depiction of Poland in the aftermath of the war, based on reports from foreign journalists and observers published in American, English, and Swedish newspapers and magazines<sup>1</sup>. Unlike the Polish press, foreign observers who were able to penetrate behind the Iron Curtain provided descriptions of Poland in the 1940s as it was perceived at the time. The state they revealed was far from being politically independent and free. It was ruled according to totalitarian standards that were in stark contrast to the concept of democracy as understood by the West.

**Key words:** *post-war Poland, foreign journalists, totalitarian regime in Poland, propaganda, freedom of press.*

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<sup>1</sup> Most of them was published in a collection edited by M.K. Dziewanowski and released in London in 1946. I decided to unite them in one place, to reveal and quote some of them in order to show a picture of Poland as it was seen by foreign journalists and observers just shortly after the war. At the same time Polish press was bringing their readers a very different picture of Polish reality and many topics as political prisoners and the fate of Home Army soldiers was not mentioned at all. The publisher of the book was Polish Freedom Movement “Independence and democracy”. It is also worthy to honor this book which seems to be forgotten nowadays. See more in: *Poland To-Day As Seen By Foreign Observers*, ed. by M. K. Dziewanowski, London 1946.

## **INTRODUCTION**

After World War II, Poland was left in ruins, both economically and morally devastated. The country was the first to oppose the violence of the aggressor by arms and suffered more than any other country in Europe. In September 1939, our soil was invaded from both the East and the West. The Warsaw Uprising (August-October 1944) was one of the most heroic acts of resistance and struggle for independence ever, but it ended tragically. The Polish insurgents were left isolated and forced to act in desperation. The uprising left Warsaw completely destroyed, making it impossible to rebuild in its former shape. Contemporary historians consider this act a 'romantic gesture'.

Foreign observers and journalists who came to Poland shortly after the war were astonished that the people who suffered so much and contributed so much to the final victory over the Nazis did not receive the recognition they deserved for their bravery and courage. While other allies regained their independence and sovereignty, Poland fell under the control of the Soviet empire.

## **POLAND AS SEEN THOSE DAYS BY FOREIGN PRESS**

In an article for the New York Times on October 21, 1945, Gladwin Hill Russians [New York Times, 21.10.1945] reported that while travelling in Poland as a foreign correspondent, he was frequently asked when the American Army would liberate the Polish from the Russians. Hill noted that many Poles compared the Russian occupation to the German one. Similarly, E.J. Williams, an American journalist, referred to the Russian invasion of Poland in September 1939 as 'the fourth partition of Poland' [Christian Science Monitor, 4.11.1945]. The article discusses Russia's political and economic influence over its satellite, Poland, noting the presence of thousands of Soviet troops in post-war Poland. "How many are here for other purposes, such as to influence internal affair in Poland is another question impossible to answer" – he added, noting the presence of thousands of Soviet troops in post-war Poland. Additionally, the author highlights the issue of Russian high officers in the Polish army who are unable to speak Polish, a problem that extends to many Polish government departments and institutions.

Major Tufton Beamish went to Poland in January 1946 as a member of the British parliamentary delegation. In his articles published afterwards in the "Daily Telegraph" we can read: "A visitor soon realises that we in Britain still underestimate what the Poles have lost and suffered at the hands of the Germans or how deeply the Germans are hated in consequence. (...) But the losses at the hands of the Russians are [also] very heavy" [Daily Telegraph, 25.2.1946].

In *Poland's Political Arena To-Day*, E.J. Williams emphasised that the governing Polish Workers' Party does not have significant support among the Polish people, even when combined with the Polish Socialist Party. "A great challenge to their power comes from the Mikołajczyk's Peasant Party, which still represents the solid conservative elements in the countryside, and which also may well prove the rallying-point for those sections of the urban population which opposed much of the nationalization" [Christian Science Monitor, 12.11.1945]<sup>2</sup>.

The author quoted a fragment of a speech by Władysław Gomułka, the Vice-Premier Minister in the Provisional Government of National Unity of Poland<sup>3</sup>. Gomułka's concept of democracy differed from Western standards and was more aligned with the Russian model. He stated that Stanisław Mikołajczyk's Peasant Party needed to join a 'democratic alliance' of workers and peasants, or else be considered as reactionaries 'with whom we can only speak through fighting'. E. J. Williams commented: "His interpretation of democracy means no tolerance toward anything considered as "reactionary", and under that term seems to come everything which runs contrary to the Communists' conception of necessary political and economic changes".

In a similar vein, Charles Lambert, the British correspondent of the London newspaper 'Daily Herald', stated in an article published on 4th November 1945 that Poland was ultimately controlled by the Soviet Union. "The new Poland is not a democracy in the British sense of the term. Government circles themselves defined it to me as "semi-democracy". That is not how I, as a Western European, would put it. I would call the Bierut Administration a semi-dictatorship" [Daily Herald, 4.11.1945].

Another sensational article by E.J. Williams was published in the 'Christian Science Monitor' on 15th November 1945, discussing the issue of personal freedom. He wrote about thousands of people who were arrested solely because they were: "objectionable to the present regime or at least considered as unreliable" [Christian Science Monitor, 15.11.1945]. He stated that there were still hundreds of Poles who had come from Russia among the imprisoned, and they were waiting for the promised amnesty: "Some instances came to my notice of persons who have been arrested suddenly at their homes for no good reason known to either themselves or their relatives and who have been carried off from small towns and villages to

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<sup>2</sup> Stanisław Mikołajczyk (1901–1966) was the Prime Minister of the Polish government in exile. He was the leader of the Peasant Party – the party that tried to oppose the communists.

<sup>3</sup> In 1956–1970 he was the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party.

prisons in large towns many miles away. On our way to the city of Poznań, for example, we gave a lift to an elderly woman desirous of information of her daughter who had been summarily taken from her home by the security police without any charge being preferred”.

He wrote about thousands of Poles outside the country who decided not to return to Poland to avoid political persecutions. The former Home Army soldiers<sup>4</sup> were also in this group: “Poland to-day is smaller in size than pre-1939 Poland, and has only about two-thirds of its population. Yet its so-called public security organizations are four times as large as those of August 1939. (...) Their activities certainly often extend beyond what could normally be described as the defence of state interests”. The author added that people were usually arrested without any reason and if a reason was given, it seemed to be “extremely shallow”.

Gladwin Hill reported in the New York Times on 22nd October 1945 [New York Times, 22.10.1945] that there was no guarantee of safety for critics of the regime in post-war Poland: “The official line advanced by some Government officers is that there are no more than 1000 political prisoners in Poland to-day. However, the Government officials have acknowledged to me that there were between 60 000 and 80 000. (...) The belief is widespread in Warsaw that there are 10 000 at Cracow alone, and some responsible observers think the total may be nearer 100 000”<sup>5</sup>.

Hill discussed the persecution of Home Army soldiers and the methods used by communists to eliminate official opposition. He described individuals who were arrested and imprisoned on false pretences, as well as many Poles who were suddenly shot to death. Hill's commentary raises questions about the explanation for these incidents: “The present provisional regime is going to these extremes to suppress opposition and perpetuate itself. The official attitude is that sweeping measures were necessary against the “reactionary” and “Fascist” elements at large in Poland who jeopardized national unity – an argument curiously as old as authoritarianism itself”.

Another article he published in the “New York Times” on 5<sup>th</sup> November stated: “Russia is pulling the strings of Poland’s Red Provisional Government. Even in Poland’s present dire economic straits a large amount of her industrial production is going to Russia”. All aspects of public life in Poland were controlled by the Government.

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<sup>4</sup> The Home Army (pol. Armia Krajowa – AK) was the dominant Polish resistance movement in World War II. The Soviet Union and the Polish communists viewed the underground loyal to the Polish government in exile as a force which had to be eliminated.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to add, that Charles Lambert – the correspondent of the “Daily Herald” estimated that the number of political prisoners could be approximately 20000.

“The political police are numerous. Their agents are to be found even in small villages. (...) Every item published in a newspaper, including articles on literature, and theatre and film reviews, has to be submitted to censorship” [New York Times, 5.11.1945].

On 18th December 1945, Rhona Churchill, correspondent of the British newspaper 'Daily Mail', published an article titled 'Poland Under Terror'. In the article, she interviewed Jan Berezowski, a Polish soldier who fought under the Polish General Władysław Anders and voluntarily returned to Poland. Berezowski expressed his deep disillusionment and despair upon realizing that Poland was not a free country, no freer than under the Gestapo terror. He was surprised to learn that open discussion about the situation in Poland was not possible due to censorship of the press. Additionally, war heroes were being persecuted and the wives of Polish soldiers who fought abroad were being sent to concentration camps. “Already they have told me that General Anders was a traitor and that I must forget him. I feel they regard me as a traitor too, though all I want is to help my country” [Daily Mail, 18.12.1945].

During her conversation with some Poles, Rhona Churchill was repeatedly asked if England was aware of Poland's situation. The Poles were seeking hope and waiting for help that never arrived.

In his article published on 1st October 1945 in the 'Christian Science Monitor', E. J. Williams discusses land reform and its economic consequences. “By 15<sup>th</sup> July of this year nearly 70 per cent of the total area had been parcelled out. (...) This land had been divided up among “the dispossessed”, mainly farm workers, small tenants, small farmers and landless artists and craftsmen in the countryside. The procedure adopted was the following: Nobody was allowed to hold more than 125 acres. Had this meant in practice that the former owners could have retained this amount of land with some place to live, though not necessarily the big country-houses they formerly occupied, it might have been tolerable”. However, according to Williams' report, the large landowners were entirely dispossessed and not even allowed to reside within many miles of their former homes.

The land reform had the following consequences: new peasant-owners quickly discovered that the smallholdings were generally too small to generate profits. Furthermore, the correspondent noted that Polish peasants lacked agricultural machinery. “The consequences for the future of Polish agriculture are naturally very serious since production will be far less during the coming year than in pre-war times” [Christian Science Monitor, 1.10.1945].

In an article published in the Stockholm daily 'Svenska Dagbladet', reporter Rasmus describes life in post-war Warsaw. The city had been completely destroyed. "The German crimes in Warsaw can never be pardoned or forgotten. One could imagine a few fanatics capable of such mass systematic destruction, but that thousands of men could found for such an evil task surpasses comprehension" [Svenska Dagbladet, 14.12.1945]. The article describes the living conditions of approximately 400,000 people who attempted to reside and work in the ruins of Warsaw. The transportation system was limited to a few tramlines and lorries that were converted into buses. Residents of the less damaged suburb of Praga had to spend hours commuting to the city centre via the pontoon bridge. The inhabitants of Warsaw endured harsh living conditions, including a lack of water and electricity, and suffered from the cold due to delayed and insufficient coal supplies from the government. The correspondent compared prices and found that a pair of shoes cost 6000 zloty, a pound of sugar cost 120 zloty, and a pound of butter cost 160 zloty. The monthly salary was around 2000 zloty. The correspondent believed that a financial catastrophe was inevitable.

On 5th November 1945, Charles Lambert wrote in the 'Daily Herald' about the living standards in the ruins of Warsaw. The people were living in overcrowded rooms, frequently in basements. "A two-price system operates: fixed market prices for rationed foodstuffs at five or six times pre-war prices; and the free market where prices are as high as 100 times pre-war" – he added [Daily Herald, 5.11.1945].

"Warsaw's most striking contrast is the Polonia Hotel and the former Ghetto" – cabled the B.U.P. correspondent quoted by the "Manchester Guardian" on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1945. The Polonia was the only hotel open in the city. It was reminiscent of a palace of luxury. It had running water, electricity and fancy food. "You can eat thick steaks three times a day if you have the money, and dance to the music of a seven-piece orchestra all in white jackets..." – wrote the author. Nearby, the Warsaw Ghetto presented scenes of misery. People were dying of starvation, dirty women and men lined up in the street to buy cheap soup.

Rhona Churchill wrote three articles for the London Daily Mail describing her impressions of Poland. The second article, titled '*Death Boards the Train to Utopia*', is particularly noteworthy [Daily Mail, 14.12.1945]. The images she presented were breathtaking. She wrote about thousands of Poles travelling from the East<sup>6</sup> to Western Poland<sup>7</sup>, crammed into farm wagons. Many, especially children, could not

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<sup>6</sup> The part of Poland which after the conference in Yalta became a part of the Soviet Union.

<sup>7</sup> The land that Russia handed to the Polish as compensation for the loss of Eastern Poland.

bear the frost and froze to death. "They are among the first of thousands of homeless Poles who will freeze and starve to death this winter in cattle trucks and windowless passenger carriages on the railway sidings on the territory that was Poland. They number more than a million".

According to Rhona Churchill, these people were deceived by the communists who promised them a better life. Rhona Churchill: "I talked to a young Jew (...) He said: >>My mother died three nights ago from exposure. The temperature was 18 degrees below zero, and we had no heating and no windows. I shall go on to Palestine<<. This young man, like many other Jews on these trains, had been promised that in Cracow he could get transport through to Palestine. I had not the heart to disillusion him. There is no transport to Palestine from Poland".

## **CONCLUSION**

Foreign journalists and observers who visited Poland shortly after the war provided an objective perspective on the 'transition to peace in Poland'. It is a fact that they presented a horrifying situation. They described the social, economic, and moral problems, as well as the great suffering and post-war trauma. The authors repeatedly stated that the Polish people lacked freedom and that the government in Warsaw was imposed upon Poland by Soviet Russia, and therefore did not represent the Polish people.

They also discussed political terror and the assistance provided to the Security Police by the NKVD and Russian military forces in Poland. Additionally, they wrote about the Soviet occupation of Poland and the Polish people's desire for independence. Those reports might have influenced the policies and perceptions of foreign governments in the West. However, it is clear that they did not.

Major Tufton Beamish wrote in the "Daily Telegraph" about a certain "duty" that the British had to Poland: "These deeply religious, cultured and intensely national people were our Allies from the first day of the war to the last. No nation has suffered more. It would be a tragedy that must not, that will not, happen if they should suffer still further from want of understanding, on the part of the United States and ourselves, of what is taking place" [Daily Telegraph, 25.2.1945].

It appears that the aforementioned words were merely meaningless.

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