Poland is Not Yet Lost:

Recruitment of North Americans into the Polish Armed Force

During the Second World War

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In the aftermath of Poland’s 1939 defeat against Nazi Germany and its occupation by German and Soviet forces, the Paris based Polish government-in-exile began drawing up plans to rebuild the shattered Polish military. Initially, the Poles relied on rallying retreating soldiers and refugees who were streaming out of Poland through Hungary and Romania, as well as the sizable population of seasonal workers living abroad in France, but these sources of manpower were soon exhausted.

General Władysław Sikorski, the supreme commander of the Polish military and the Prime Minister of the Polish government-in-exile proposed that other sources of military manpower be explored. Rebuilding the military was paramount to Sikorski’s plans, as he believed that without a strong military contribution during the war, the exiled government’s role would be deemed insignificant by the other allied nations, and the Poles would be incapable of securing post-war territorial and political power as part of the victorious allies.

One of the areas proposed for finding sources of new recruits was the North American continent. The Polonia (the Polish emigrant community) was large with almost three million members in the United States and approximately one hundred seventy thousand in Canada. The Windsor-Detroit boarder region was chosen as the prime location for establishing a command headquarters for the North American recruitment effort. The region was seen as valuable because of its central location between the largest concentrations of Polish communities in the United States, while still remaining in allied Canada.

Examining the ambitious plans of the Polish government-in-exile, as well as ascertaining why their recruitment goals were not met, can help explain the changing feelings amongst North American Poles towards their fatherland and the Americanisation of Polish youth during the 1940s.

The Polonia in North America was the largest in the world. It had, since the partitions of Poland in 1772, served as one of the incubators of Polish culture. It was a source of nationalistic hope that manifested itself amongst its members as a belief that through revolt and struggle, the Polish nation could be reborn once again. The largest concentrations of Poles in the United States were in Chicago and New York City. The Polonia in the United States traced its origins back to the American Revolution, when the Polish Brigadier Generals Tadeusz Kościuszko and Casimir Pulaski served as officers in the Continental Army. Pulaski was killed during the siege of Savannah Georgia. Kościuszko, on the other hand, later returned to his native Poland, and lead the unsuccessful 1794 uprising against the Russian Empire. Both of these men served as figureheads for the American Polonia’s revolutionary spirit and zealous belief in the liberation of their homeland.

Over the century and a half of eagerly awaiting Poland’s rebirth, the American Polonia constantly supported and participated in the Polish nationalistic insurrectionist spirit. The American Polonia’s zeal peaked during the First World War, when over twenty-two thousand Americans of Polish descent traveled to Niagara-on-the-Lake between 1917 and 1918 to join the independent Polish Blue Army being formed there. The American Poles had prepared for this last great fight for many years. National organizations such as the *Polish Falcons of America*

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created a well organized and paramilitary trained fighting force within its various branches scattered around the United States, ready to join the fight against the Central Powers, which they saw as the occupiers of their homeland.\textsuperscript{6}

The Canadian government had offered secret officer training programs housed at the University of Toronto campus for the Polish Americans chosen to lead their countrymen in their war of liberation. The camp at Niagara-on-the-Lake itself was administered and commanded by the Canadian Lt. Col. Arthur LaPan.\textsuperscript{7} After receiving their training and surviving the epidemic of Spanish Flu which claimed the lives of 26 men, the Blue Army was merged with other European Polish divisions and deployed in France under the leadership of General Joseph Haller. They saw combat in Champagne and Lorraine, as well as during the Polish-Bolshevik War of the 1920s.\textsuperscript{8} The events of the First World War and those of the Blue Army made out Canada as a friend of Polish independence, and sowed the seeds of further cooperation during the Second World War.

The North American Polonia was no stranger to sacrifice in the name of Polish independence. Therefore, when Poland was once again annexed by its neighbours in 1939, the Polish government-in-exiles plans to recruit Americans into the Polish armed forces was not based on a whim, but rather on prescient. In July of 1940, General Sikorski sent Franciszek Arciszewski to Ottawa to negotiate and establish a military recruitment center and training camp


in Canada. Sikorski’s plan hinged on Polish-Americans tired of the United States stance of neutrality and eager to join the war in defence of their fatherland, to come en mass to Canada, which was already engaged in the war, and to join the Polish military units forming there.

Arciszewski laid the groundwork for the Polish military to begin its recruitment effort, but his job was not easy, and was hindered from the beginning by a lack of support and understanding from the London-based Polish government. Problems financing the recruitment crippled early efforts, as the Polish government sought to secure loans from its allies or convince the Canadian government to finance the construction of Polish military bases on its soil. The Canadians, busy with the development of their own military during this time could not justify the expense and insisted that the Poles find a way to pay for the camp themselves. The solution finally arrived when the Poles agreed to deposit two million dollars worth of gold and four hundred thousand in currencies as collateral in the Bank of Canada.

Communication problems were another issue. Transatlantic diplomatic cables were slow and the Poles were low on the priority list when it came to sending them; transatlantic flights did not become the norm until midway through the war. These delays in communication often confused the planners in North America with those supervising the project in London. In many cases telegrams with amended orders arrived weeks or months after they were dated, creating a frustrating cycle of scrapping and restarting parts of the recruitment.

The lack of communication also led to planning problems and a lack of mutual understanding of the scope and breadth of the project. In one case, Arciszewski planned for one
division to form which was to be commanded and staffed by Polish Americans: that is until new orders arrived telling him that a cadre of Polish officers would be arriving in Canada to command three divisions, ultimately scrapping his plans and breaking promises that he had made to the American Polonia about the vision of the army forming in Canada. Regardless of the difficulties, when Sikorski visited Canada in April of 1941 to finalize the financial and diplomatic side of the mission, much of the work required in setting up and advertising the recruitment effort was already underway.

Windsor was chosen to house the headquarters of the Polish recruitment effort, while Owen Sound, approximately four hundred kilometers to the North, was chosen as the site for the training camp. The size of the facilities built in Owen Sound and Windsor hint at the ambitious nature of the project. The Poles rented the recently closed American Furniture Company factory building for $450/month as their training base. The camp could accommodate up to two thousand recruits and up to five thousand more in tents during the summer months. The forests and fields surrounding the factory allowed for drills and tank operation training to be held.

The City of Windsor provided the Poles with three buildings rent-free. A large mansion on the Detroit River called the Henckel House served as the command headquarters for General Duch and his staff. The old Ford City Hall served as the main recruitment office for the entire operation. It also held offices and a medical clinic where potential recruits were screened. In order to house the recruits until they could be transported to Owen Sound, the top floor of the Burroughs Adding Machine Company was transformed into a barracks to accommodate up to

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two hundred soldiers and many more during the summer.\textsuperscript{19} It is clear through the infrastructure that was set up to accommodate thousands of recruits awaiting transport to England that the Polish government-in-exile expected a huge influx of soldiers from North America.

Windsor was chosen for its unique position as both a boarder city, and as being located in the vicinity of several large concentrations of the American Polonia. Windsor’s vicinity to Detroit which had rail connections to Hamtramck, Buffalo, New York City, Cleveland, and Chicago made it an ideal hub to attract members of the American Polonia to enlist in Canada.\textsuperscript{20}

In 1940, there were nearly one million Polish citizens living in the United States\textsuperscript{21} and triple that number having been born in what was in 1940 considered Polish territory.\textsuperscript{22} There were of course many millions of members of the Polonia who had been born in the United States that still identified themselves as Polish- Americans, and these people, the youth in particular, were prime candidates for the Polish recruitment mission in Canada. The Canadian Polonia, on the other hand, was quite young and much smaller and poorer when compared to their American counterparts, yet they were more enthusiastic with supporting the recruitment through volunteering and enlistment. Many of those that joined were not even Polish, but wanted work, adventure, or something to do.

On July 20\textsuperscript{th} 1941, General Bronislaw Duch arrived in Windsor along with a cadre of officers and NCOs that would form the core of the recruitment and training effort in North America. Upon disembarking the train, they were greeted by thousands of members from the Windsor and Detroit Polonia, as well as some soldiers that Arciszewski had already managed to

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\textsuperscript{19} Frank Kmietowicz, \textit{Polskie Siły Zbrojne W Kanadzie Podczas Dругiej Wojny Światowej}[Polish Armed Forces in Canada During the Second World War](Windsor: Komitet Windsorscykow, 1984),29.
\textsuperscript{20}F.A Arciszewski, \textit{Patrzac Krytycznie},224-225.
\textsuperscript{21} Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 – Nativity and Percentage of the White Population \textit{Country of Origin}
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 4.
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General Duch, who was bilingual, was named the new head of recruitment for North America and was well received by members of the American and Canadian Polonia wherever he traveled advertising the opportunity to enlist in the Polish military. One example where he gained massive popularity was his trip to New York City, where thousands of people gathered for the annual Polish Day parade. As he was leaving the stage, the mayor of the city Fiorello La Guardia, asked Duch “Have you a car – or may I drop you in mine?” replying that he had no car waiting for him, Fiorello deposited the general into the sidecar of one motorcycle and leaping into the sidecar of another, with sirens blowing they whizzed down Broadway.24

Officially, the recruitment effort closed in May of 1942, although the Polish military still operated a small mission in Windsor and Ottawa for a few years that focussed on the air force training.25 Publically the recruitment was triumphed as a success, having raised the spirit of the North American Polonia and encouraged Poles abroad to contribute money and supplies to the war. However, the military fell far short of its goals in terms of recruited men. Instead of the division sized waves of volunteers the Polish government expected, just over seven hundred eventually sailed for England.

Deserters undoubtedly also played a role in dissuading members of the Polonia from enlisting in the armed forces. By December 1941, there were 86 recorded desertions, with the number growing to hundreds by the time the United States joined the war and recruitment began to cease.26 One example given is of a deserter who left the camp in Owen Sound with his uniform and kit and fled to Chicago. Arriving in Chicago he pretended he was on active duty

24 *The Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, Michigan), October 8, 1941, 24.
and proceeded to raise money for the recruitment drive while pocketing the proceeds himself.\(^\text{27}\)

Another deserter, Stefan Ogrodowski, was tried and executed for the October 1942 murder of Joe Borg during a lunch counter robbery in Windsor.\(^\text{28}\) Each deserter had the opportunity to spread disinformation about the standards of the Polish military in Canada, dissuade people he knew from joining, or create a media scandal that tarnished the reputation of the Polish armed forces. This meant that one deserter could potentially have an exponentially negative effect on recruitment. The Polish military had little power to stop anyone from deserting as recruits were not required to swear an oath of allegiance or could run away to the neutral United States.\(^\text{29}\)

Further study as to why the Polish North American recruitment effort failed is required. The failures in communication and desertions are just one part of the problem. Other causes of the abandonment of North America as a source of recruits could be the opening up of the Soviet Union and the release of tens of thousands of Poles from Soviet Gulags under the command of General Anders. The United States joining the war also decreased the amount of recruits that would join the Polish military as the American military offered better prospects in terms of pay, training, and post war medical care. The mistreatment of the Americans in Haller’s Blue Army in the inter-war years also had an effect on the level of trust between the North American Polonia and the Polish recruiters.\(^\text{30}\)

Unfortunately, the topic of the Polish North American recruitment during the Second World War has been often ignored by academics in both Poland and the Polish Diaspora abroad. In the post-war years, the London based government-in-exile was replaced by the Soviet backed


\(^{28}\) “The Trap Has Been Tested: 2 Detroit Killers Will Hang Tonight in Windsor,” \textit{The Detroit Free Press} No. 111 (Detroit, Michigan), August 23, 1943, 1.


\(^{30}\) Teofil Lachowicz \textit{Polish Freedom Fighters on American Soil: Polish Veterans in America from the Revolutionary War to 1939} (Minneapolis: Two Harbors Press, 2011), 117.
Polish Peoples Republic and any study or sources of the Western Polish army was heavily censored. Documents were also lost and misplaced as they lacked well funded governmental institutions to store and catalogue them. Finally, the story of the Second World War recruitment effort is difficult to make out into a story of success, especially when compared to that of the Blue Army a generation before. The fact that it was a failure according to its own parameters makes historians in the Polonia less likely to take interest in the its history as it makes the American Polonia look as if it failed to lend its support to its homeland in its time of need.

Through the study of the Polish recruitment effort in Canada and the Untied States during the Second World War one can learn valuable lessons about maintaining healthy and respectful ties between Diasporas and their home countries. It shows that through just a few short decades of mistreatment or arrogance, a country which was founded by the revolutionary spirit of its countrymen living abroad, can lose its once strong ties to the men and women it relies on during a time of crisis.
Bibliography


The Detroit Free Press (Detroit, Michigan) October 8, 1941.


