



17.06.1945

Trial of the Sixteen

As the Second World War was coming to an end it became necessary to establish legal authorities in Poland which would be able to take over power once the Germans had withdrawn. Stalin was pursuing a structure of power and set up the State National Council made of loyal Polish communists in January 1944. The body was headed by Bolesław Bierut, a pre-war Soviet intelligence agent. The SNC was clearly hostile to the London-based government, declaring that the latter had no mandate to hold power.

In response to Stalin's activity, the Polish government in exile decided to set up the Council of National Unity (CNU), a body replacing the parliament with representatives of the main Polish political parties (with the exception of the communists, who were entirely Moscow-dependent). The RJC issued a manifest entitled What the Polish nation fights for, where politicians presented the main goals for Poland given the political situation of the day, the main one being to regain a sovereign Polish state within its pre-war borders. In May 1944, the National Council of Ministers was appointed by the Government Delegate Jan Stanisław Jankowski, which was preparing to take power in a free state.



On 31 December 1944, the SNC appointed the Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland, a puppet government formed at Stalin's will claiming the right to take over power in Poland under the premise that the London-based government could be considered illegal as the Allied leaders would not support it anyway. The 'government' was headed by Edward Osóbka-Morawski and Stalin granted the powers of head of state to Bierut.

In February 1945, the provisional government moved from Lublin to Warsaw. Also in February, the Yalta conference of the Big Three decided that the Polish government was to be formed on the basis of the provisional government, an act ignoring the legal Polish authorities in exile which protested against the move. As the protests were ignored, the members of Poland's Council of National Unity (CNU) decided to negotiate with the Russians as there was no other way. They also concluded that they should try as much as possible to become part of the provisional government so that it was not left entirely in the hands of communists paid by Moscow.

In the circumstances, the USSR 'invited' Commander-in-Chief AK Leopold Okulicki (nom de guerre 'Niedźwiadek') to begin the talks. The CNU had been distrustful from the start and warned Okulicki before his meeting with the NKVD general Ivan Serov. At the preliminary meeting held in March 1945 the

NKVD side gave the Poles their 'word of honour' that the Polish delegation would be safe. No-one was naive enough to believe it, yet the leaders of the Polish state saw negotiations as the only chance, if true Polish representatives were to be part of the new authorities.

As things stood, sixteen representatives of Polish authorities decided to attend a meeting to be held in Pruszków near Warsaw. The following persons came to the meeting of 27 and 28 March 1945: Home Army Commander in Chief Leopold Okulicki, Government Delegate for Poland Jan Stanisław Jankowski, his deputy Adam Bień, CNU chairman Kazimierz Pużak with two deputies Kazimierz Bagiński and Aleksander Zwierzyński, Vice-Minister of the Information Department Józef Stemler-Dąbski, a representative of the Minister for Polish Affairs Antoni Pajdak, Minister for Polish Affairs Stanisław Jasiukowicz, as well as RJN members Eugeniusz Czarnowski, Józef Chaciński, Stanisław Mierzwa, Zbigniew Stypułkowski, Franciszek Urbański, Stanisław Michałowski, and Kazimierz Kobylański.

Instead of the planned talks with the NKVD, all of them were kidnapped and flown to Moscow. The Polish leaders were put in Lubyanka prison, where they were tortured as the Soviets tried to force them to 'plead guilty' in a show trial being prepared. In accordance with all international legal standards, the vocabulary applied when describing the Trial of the Sixteen does not hold up. The Poles were not subject to jurisdiction of Soviet courts at all, so the orchestrated charges of collaboration with Germany and acting against the Red Army were baseless. The entire Moscow 'trial' of the Poles was merely a theatre for western countries so that they could say that the Poles could defend themselves and as no-one was sentenced to death all the protests by the Polish authorities were unfounded. Obviously, the right to defence was pure fiction in that case as the Poles' lawyers were Russians appointed by the NKVD.

The Polish leaders were sentenced to prison, where some of them died (or were murdered): Leopold Okulicki, Jan Stanisław Jankowski and Stanisław Jasiukowicz. After his release from the Moscow prison, Kazimierz Pużak returned to Poland, where he was arrested by the Public Security Office (UB) and put in prison again where he died.

The Trial of the Sixteen was designed to break the Polish underground and discredit the Polish government in exile. At the same time, with the war ending and the Soviet terror machine taking over power on Polish territory, chances of real influence on the events was reduced to the heroic guerrilla fight of soldiers who refused to disclose themselves (i.e. to expose themselves to death or deportation to the USSR). For years to come, Home Army soldiers were ruthlessly tracked as 'bandits,' savagely tortured and killed without court verdicts, murdered in prisons and their bodies hidden from their families so that they could not be buried with dignity. Most frequently, if 'judgments' were passed at all, they were accompanied by such justifications as collaboration with Germany, espionage or state treason, which aimed to stain the memory of the Polish heroes forever. The Allied leaders remained perfectly indifferent to Stalin's unlawful operations in Poland.

Translated by Mikołaj Sekrecki, Proofread by Dr. Ian Copestake


Anna Buchner


References: