Lecture 18

The Polish Question During World War II

Where can one find any Poles one could talk to?

Stalin to Benes, 12 December 1943

Soviet Russia genuinely favours the revival of an independent Poland, but at the same
time expects so much from the Poles in the way of exemplary behaviour that it would
require a miracle for them to live up to the standard demanded of them without complete
subservience.

Archibald Clark Kerr, British Ambassador in Moscow, 20 February 1944

1. Introduction

In Western historiography and in much of the writing since the fall of the communist
system, the communist capture of power in Poland is usually presented as the outcome of
a long-contemplated and carefully executed plan by Stalin to subject that country to his
direct control. A good example of this is the treatment of this issue in Norman Davies’s
God’s Playground. During the communist period, official Polish historiography
presented it above all as the result of internal factors – the success of the Polish Workers’
Party (PPR) in using its popular front strategy to emerge from the weakness and isolation
of communism in inter-war Poland and to group around itself the progressive and
forward-looking majority of the Polish people, effectively isolating the reactionaries and
anti-communists. The latter account is obviously self-serving and is thoroughly
discredited. Yet the ‘intentionalist’ view of the communist takeover is also deeply flawed.
Indeed, the evolution of political life in Poland between 1941 and 1948, culminating in the establishment of a regime dominated by a small elite of Moscow-trained and -influenced communists, in which the security apparatus enjoyed a wide measure of autonomy and took many of its orders direct from the USSR was, above all, the result of two failures. The first of these was the failure of Stalin to find the basis for a satisfactory *modus vivendi* with any of the politicians making up the Polish government in London, similar to the understanding reached with Paasikivi in Finland or Benes in Czechoslovakia. The second was the failure of the national front strategy of the PPR to win over more than the smallest modicum of non-communist support, so that in the end the Communists were forced to resort to the apparatus of coercion they had set up and rule against the will of the overwhelming majority of the Polish people.

2. From the Outbreak of the War to the Break in Relations (April 1943)

What I want to do in this lecture and the next is to attempt to account for these two failures. It was always relatively unlikely that a mutually satisfactory understanding would be forged between Stalin and the Polish government established first in France and then after June 1940 in London. Polish-Russian relations were burdened with a heavy legacy of mutual distrust and, indeed, hatred, which had been intensified by the establishment of an independent Polish state in 1918 and by the Bolshevik conquest of power in Russia. To the Soviets, the Poles were incorrigible counter-revolutionaries who were likely to make common cause with the enemies of Bolshevism; to the Poles, the victory of communism had merely served to give the age-old Russian expansionist drive
a new and more menacing form. These feelings were further strengthened by the Nazi-Soviet pact and the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland on 17 September 1939 at a time when the Poles were fighting desperately to withstand the Nazi onslaught.

Certainly the bitterness engendered by the two years of the Nazi-Soviet alliance cast a dark shadow on Polish-Soviet relations throughout the Second World War and beyond. In their determination to incorporate the areas they had occupied, the Soviets adopted a series of brutal and ruthless measures which considerably exacerbated the general Polish dislike of Soviet-style communism. Of these, perhaps the cruellest was the Soviet policy of mass deportation. As we have seen, during the twenty one months of Soviet rule around 350,000 Polish citizens were deported from the areas incorporated into the USSR often in extremely harsh conditions. In addition, NKVD liquidation squads murdered over 14,000 officers, NCOs and reserve officers from among those taken prisoner in 1939, a fact which quickly became apparent in Polish circles after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Poland and the USSR in July 1941, when these men failed to reappear or to benefit from the amnesty then proclaimed.

The incorporation into the USSR of the territories seized in 1939 also reopened the border question between the Poles and the Soviets which had apparently been settled, though not to Soviet satisfaction, by the Treaty of Riga in 1921. The Soviet authorities were unwilling to relinquish the overwhelming bulk of their territorial acquisitions. Western Ukraine and Western Belarus had, they claimed, freely voted to join the Soviet Union. The incorporation of almost all Ukrainian and Belarussian lands into the USSR seriously undermined the possibility that Ukrainian and Belarussian nationalism could be exploited against the Soviets, while the transfer of Vilna was the sugar which would
make the pill of annexation acceptable to the Lithuanians. Finally, the extension westwards of the Soviet boundary considerably strengthened the strategic position of the USSR. In this connection, the importance of L’viv (Lwow) as a major rail junction should be mentioned.

The Poles accepted none of these arguments. They regarded the annexations as illegal and the votes to join the Soviet Union as the product of force and fraud (as, for the most part, they were). They considered themselves, to British embarrassment, to be at war with the Soviet Union and were unwilling in public to contemplate the abandonment of the Riga line. In private, it is true, more moderate views were expressed. Yet the dependence of the exile government on an army and civil service many of whose members came from eastern Poland and among whom bitterness at Soviet behaviour was strong, meant that for a Polish leader to accept that the Riga frontier could be modified was to risk political eclipse.

Under these conditions it is not surprising that the negotiation of a Polish-Soviet agreement after the Nazi invasion of the USSR in July 1941 should have proved a long and difficult task. Its conclusion was only accomplished as a result of strong British pressure on the Poles and a reaffirmation of the British pledge that they would not recognize as valid the territorial changes which had occurred in Poland since September 1939. Yet though this enabled General Sikorski to argue that the agreement ‘does not permit even of the suggestion that the 1939 frontiers of Poland could ever be in question’.

His point of view was not shared by the Soviets, who continued to uphold their claim to these areas. Certainly the implementation of the agreement soon demonstrated how far apart the two sides were. The Soviets were slow to put into effect the amnesty
proclaimed on 12 August, while the creation of a Polish army in the USSR also quickly ran into obstacles.

It was in an attempt to resolve these problems that Sikorski paid a visit to the Soviet Union in early December 1941, and his talks did achieve a temporary improvement in relations. In the course of meetings with Stalin, Sikorski abandoned the plan agreed by the Poles with the British for withdrawing the Polish army from the USSR to Persia where it could be equipped with British materiel. Stalin in turn promised to remove all obstacles to the supply of the army, which was to be concentrated in Uzbekistan and which would now be increased to between five and seven divisions. Encouraged by what he took to be a sign of Polish desire to co-operate, Stalin now went further and even promised the Poles L’viv if the two governments reached ‘an understanding on the subject [of the frontier] in advance of the peace settlement without reference to HMG’. Sikorski rejected this approach, convinced that the USSR would be gravely weakened by the war and that the Anglo-Saxon powers would dominate the postwar world.

As a consequence Stalin now sanctioned the re-establishment of a Polish Communist Party both in order to increase his ability to put pressure on the Polish government in London and so that he would possess the basis for an alternative system of power should he find it impossible to get what he wanted from the London Poles. Stalin had dissolved the Communist Party of Poland (Komunistyczna Partia Polski — KPP) in the summer of 1938, probably because the Luxemburgist past of the majority of the KPP’s leaders and their links with many of the Old Bolsheviks had led him to see the party as incorrigibly Trotsky-ite. Certainly most of its leading figures died in Soviet
prisons or labour camps. A small number of pro-Soviet leftist underground organizations had continued to exist in Poland after 1938 and had even been able to function in the initial period of the German occupation, but their influence was severely limited. Such support as they enjoyed had been drastically undermined by Soviet behaviour in 1939, and they were almost entirely destroyed by the Gestapo after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, some Polish communists succeeded in surviving the purges. When German-Soviet relations began to deteriorate after the summer of 1940, the Soviet authorities began to take a more sympathetic view of their position. Already in autumn 1941, a number were sent to the Comintern school for political training. When the Germans invaded the USSR, they issued a declaration which failed to mention the Polish government in London, and called instead on Poles in the USSR to join a volunteer Polish corps which they hoped to see established as part of the Red Army. For the moment, Stalin, concerned to explore the possibility of an agreement with Sikorski, kept them very much on the sidelines.

By December 1941, however, he had come to the conclusion that the Polish communists should be given a larger role, and accordingly an ‘initiative group’ was set up among the trainees at the Comintern School. On the advice of the Comintern general secretary, Georgi Dimitrov, it was decided not to revive the name Communist Party of Poland (KPP). Instead the party was called the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR) in order to stress its break with the ‘anti-national’ political stance of the KPP and its role as a radical, leftist but non-communist party. Some party leaders took the new line seriously. Their views were well articulated by Władysław Gomułka, who in 1947 affirmed bluntly, ‘It would be incorrect to define the PPR as a communist party. We are not a continuation of
the former KPP. The first Congress of our Party confirmed that “the PPR is a new Party”.

Others disagreed with this approach. They believed that Polish Communism was on trial and that, in Dimitrov’s words, ‘before we can call ourselves communists we must, by our work, earn the right to this term’. The dissolution of the KPP, they felt, had shown the danger of acting independently of Stalin, whose prestige in their eyes had grown still further as a result of the war. Their boundless devotion to him was thus the result of not only opportunism but also a degree of conviction. For the moment they were prepared to accept the new line as a clever tactical manoeuvre. They remained extremely dubious about the possibility of winning widespread support and were always willing to see Soviet power as the most secure guarantee of the future of communism in Poland. Leftists and ‘sectarians’ were thus never far below the surface in the PPR.

Although for propaganda purposes it was claimed that the new party did not adhere to the Comintern, it was in fact subject to detailed Comintern control. On Dimitrov’s instructions, it was decided not to establish the party from communists in Poland but instead to parachute into that country a three-man team selected from the ‘initiative’ group. The national front line of the party was clearly articulated in the party’s first declaration, which abjured any reference to socialism, the mass struggle or revolution. Instead the need for a broad national front to defeat the Nazi invader was stressed, and the party denied any ‘intention of competing with other parties which fight wholeheartedly for the liberation of the Polish nation. On the contrary, it endeavours to co-operate with them as closely as possible and to fight together with them against the common enemy.’
The party maintained this policy through 1942 and 1943. It found recruitment an uphill task and by June 1942 was able to claim only some 4000 party members with an additional 3000 partisans organized in the People’s Guard (Gwardia Ludowa—GL). As a consequence, the party began to criticize the London government for its reactionary character and for its instructions to its underground grouping, the Home Army (Armia Krajowa—AK), to avoid all-out confrontation with the Germans and to conserve its strength until Germany’s collapse seemed imminent. Yet the PPR’s own initiative, its attempt to strengthen its own position and bypass the groups supporting the London government by creating National Committees for Struggle (Narodowe Komitety Walki) open to all groups from the communists to the right-wing nationalists, proved a complete fiasco. The party’s position was still further weakened by the assassination in November 1942 of its first secretary, Marceli Nowotko, on the instigation of another member of the leadership ‘troika’, Bolesław Mołojec, head of the military section. Mołojec, in turn, was executed by the party for treason. This episode, which has never been satisfactorily elucidated, took place against a background of Gestapo repression and the arrest of many associates of both men, and was a clear reflection of the isolation and demoralization of the party.

Under the circumstances the new leadership of Paweł Finder and Władysław Gomułka came to the conclusion that it had no alternative but to seek a compromise with the representatives of the London government. In the second half of February 1943, talks began between the PPR and the London government’s Delegatura (representative authority). The PPR now proposed a political agreement between all anti-German political parties in Poland, excluding only the representatives of the Sanacja, the
pre-1939 governing group, and the fascist National Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny). In this way an underground authority would be established which could take over from the London government after liberation. The two guerrilla groups, the London-controlled Home Army and the PPR sponsored People’s Guard, would be merged, while retaining some autonomy. The AK would also adopt a more active policy.

Throughout this period, relations between the Soviets and the Polish government deteriorated steadily. An important source of tension was the proposal for a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation, which was a central plank in Sikorski’s plan to secure Poland’s position in the post-war world. The Soviets quickly came to see that, if successful, a union of this sort would greatly limit their influence in Central Europe, and they took strong exception to what they held to be its anti-Soviet aspects, such as the proposal that Lithuania should adhere to it. Another cause of Soviet irritation was Polish opposition to the proposed Anglo-Soviet treaty. The Poles objected, both because they felt that the suggested treaty would undermine their ability to defend their claims in the east and because they claimed they had an interest in the maintenance of an independent Lithuanian state. They protested both to the British and to the Americans, who at this stage of the war were against dealing with any territorial claims. In the event, Soviet intransigence and US opposition led the British to change tack and opt rather for a simple treaty of alliance in the postwar period which would contain no territorial provisions. This was duly signed on 26 May. The Poles were greatly encouraged by what they took to be a victory for their diplomacy; but as Bogomolov, the Soviet ambassador to the Polish government, observed to Ripka, the Czechoslovak foreign minister, the Soviets
had noted how the Poles had allied themselves with ‘circles in England who are not sympathetic to the Anglo-Soviet treaty.’

One casualty of the growing Polish-Soviet rift was the Polish army in the USSR. This had become a central part of Sikorski’s political programme, resting on his assumption that Soviet-Polish brotherhood in arms would help to overcome the bitter legacy of past estrangements. Stalin for his part had only agreed to the formation of a Polish army because of the desperate plight of the USSR. Now as his suspicions grew and as the situation on the front improved, he became determined to rid himself of an embarrassment. The first troops left the Soviet Union in April and by August all the divisions created in the USSR had departed, numbering altogether 44,000 soldiers with 26,000 dependents. The Soviets also took action against the extensive network of welfare delegates which had been established to see to the welfare of Polish deportees in the USSR. In July, their offices were closed in a number of towns on the grounds that they had been guilty of spying. In October, over one hundred of the delegates were still in custody.

The Soviets now began to step up the pressure on the Poles. They started by making clear to the Czechoslovak government their hostility to the proposed confederation. Forced to choose between the Soviets and the Poles, Benes abandoned the plan, which was effectively put into cold storage in autumn 1942. Then on 16 January, in an effort to force the Poles to yield on the frontier question, the Soviets informed the Polish government that they were withdrawing the ‘privilege’ whereby people of Polish origin from eastern Poland were regarded as Polish citizens. British attempts to mediate in the dispute proved fruitless and by the end of March Alexander Cadogan, permanent
under-secretary in the British Foreign Office, was expressing fears that the Poles might break off relations with the Soviets.

In the event, it was the Soviets who broke off relations with the Poles. On 13 April the Germans announced that they had discovered the bodies of 4000 Polish officers buried in the forest of Katyn, near Smolensk, a part of the group liquidated by the NKVD in the spring of 1940. The members of the Polish government and armed forces in the West were linked by many ties of kinship and friendship with these men, and the Polish government’s reaction of appealing to the International Red Cross to investigate the truth of the German allegations, though maladroit, was entirely understandable. It was brilliantly exploited by Stalin. Indeed, there can be few cases in which such profit was derived from a heinous crime. Playing on Western unease caused by the feeling that the Poles were unnecessarily disrupting Allied solidarity, Stalin broke off relations with the Polish government. He would not re-establish relations, he affirmed, until the Polish government had been fundamentally reorganized and purged of ‘pro-Hitler elements.’ The British did attempt to put some pressure on Sikorski to modify his cabinet, but did not persevere in their efforts for fear that these would lead to the fall of the prime minister.

3. From the Breach in Relations to the Establishment of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (April 1943 – July 1944)

Indeed, the only major change in the composition of the Polish government, which occurred after the death of General Sikorski in an air crash off Gibraltar in July,
only made the resolution of the problem more difficult. Sikorski was probably the only figure among the Polish emigration with sufficient stature to persuade his compatriots to accept the hard decisions which were now clearly required on the eastern frontier. His successor as prime minister, the able and determined peasant leader Stanislaw Mikołajczyk, never possessed the authority of the general. Mikołajczyk was well aware of the weakness of his position and before accepting office tried, without much success, to curb the powers of the army and consolidate his hold over the London-controlled underground. He was also unable to prevent the appointment General Sosnkowski as Sikorski’s successor as Commander-in-Chief; Sosnkowski was anathema to the Soviets, and in terms of the 1935 constitution would succeed to the presidency in the event of the death of President Raczkiewicz, widely believed to be dying of leukaemia.

The breach in relations brought another bonus for Stalin: the adoption of a new policy on the Polish question by the Western powers which in effect conceded his demands on the Soviet western border. As early as 16 March 1943, in a conversation with Eden, President Roosevelt had argued that if the Poles were compensated in the west, they ‘would gain rather than lose by agreeing to the Curzon line’. The British were not yet ready for such a drastic policy departure, but came round to the view that it was desirable as a result of the complete failure of a joint Anglo-American initiative in the summer which aimed at persuading the Soviets to resume diplomatic relations with the Polish government. At the Quebec conference, Eden submitted a memorandum to the US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, proposing joint US-UK action to accept the Curzon Line as the Polish-Soviet frontier along with the other 1941 frontiers of the USSR. Hull did not demur, observing only that the West was making ‘considerable concessions’ and that
these should be made dependent on the Soviets ‘falling in with our ideas on the general post-war plan’.

The British were unable to persuade the Poles of the value of the new approach, and as a result no progress on the question was made at the Moscow foreign ministers’ conference in October. This led the British to step up their pressure on the Poles. While maintaining a firm public posture, some of the Poles now began in private to show a willingness to yield. Accordingly, the British decided that at the forthcoming conference in Teheran they should advocate the Curzon Line as the western frontier of Poland, with L’viv left to the Poles. Poland would be compensated by the acquisition of German territory in the west. The Soviets would re-establish relations with the London government, which would return to Poland as soon as possible.

This was not an unreasonable policy, but in fact little effort was made to carry it through at Teheran. Indeed, the performances of both Churchill and Roosevelt at the conference were weak and indecisive as both men came under the spell of Stalin’s personality. They conceded almost immediately to the Soviet leader on the Curzon Line, failing to put up any sort of fight over L’viv, whose retention would have done so much to reconcile the Poles to their decision. Nor did they object when Stalin claimed the northern half of East Prussia, a large part of the compensation on which the Poles were counting. More importantly, they failed to make it clear to Stalin that in return for these substantial concessions they expected him to re-establish relations with the Polish government. No objections were raised, for instance, when Stalin observed that ‘he was by no means sure that the Polish government-in-exile was ever likely to be the kind of government it ought to be.’ Roosevelt made even more injudicious statements in his
attempt to win over Stalin by charm. In a private conversation with the Soviet leader he explained that he could not take any major initiative on the Polish question until after the 1944 elections because of his dependence on the votes of ‘six to seven million Americans of Polish extraction’, giving Stalin the impression that his commitment to an independent Poland was only for public consumption.

The breach in relations also had a major impact on the evolution of communist politics in Poland. The talks between the PPR and the Delegatura and armed forces of the London government, which had already run into difficulty, now broke down, destroying the PPR hopes of reaching some accommodation with the forces supporting the London government. As a result, the party moved in an increasingly radical direction, calling for what it described as a ‘democratic national front’ which would effectively be dominated by the PPR. In May, the party questioned the legitimacy and democratic character of the Sikorski government, and began in July to initiate a process aimed at transforming the People’s Guard (GL) into a People’s Army (Armia Ludowa—AL) with the explicit aim of superseding the London-controlled AK. By September the party was affirming the necessity of independent political and military action by the ‘united democratic forces’. As a result, it began to seek left-wing alliances whom it persuaded to join in renouncing the authority of the London government. It concentrated its attention on a small left-wing offshoot of the pre-war socialist party, the Polish Socialist Workers Party (Robotnicza Partia Polskich Socjalistów—RPPS), and a number of groups on the left wing of the Peasant Party (Stronnictwo Ludowe—SL). However, as an internal party memorandum made clear in November, if no top-level agreement were possible, the PPR should go
over the heads of the leaders of these groups and create a representative body ‘from the grass roots upwards.’

The PPR was increasingly confident that events were moving in its direction, above all because it was now clear that Poland would be liberated by the Red Army. Its radicalization and growing willingness to take initiatives independently of Moscow was partly a consequence of changes in its leadership. It is true that the entry into the central committee in July 1943 of Bolesław Bierut, a long-standing Comintern functionary, probably constituted an attempt by Stalin to assert more control over the party. In mid-November, however, Paweł Finder, the party secretary, was arrested by the Gestapo and was succeeded by Władysław Gomułka, a man much more independent in his thinking and determined to adopt only policies he regarded as suited to Polish conditions. Already divergences could be perceived between those like Gomułka, who saw the new party line as a means to create a genuine left-wing coalition, and those like Bierut, who believed that in the absence of any significant non-communist support the PPR would have to take power on its own, masking this fact as best it could. Finder was arrested with a copy of the PPR’s code book, and this meant that for a period of six weeks contact between Moscow and the PPR was difficult if not impossible.

It was during this period that the PPR proceeded to create a representative body, which was intended to challenge the Political Representative Committee established by the London government on which were represented the four main parties of which that body was composed. The new organization was given the name National Council for the Homeland (Krajowa Rada Narodowa—KRN) in order to stress the primacy of the Polish centre in taking decisions over that of Moscow. Neither the RPPS nor the left-wing
elements in the SL could be induced to support the creation of the KRN. As a result, when the manifesto proclaiming its establishment was issued on 15 December, of the fourteen signatories only the PPR was described as a party. The rest were referred to as ‘groups’ or ‘committees’ with titles like ‘group of socialist activists’ or ‘group of independent democrats’. The manifesto described the KRN as ‘the real political representative of the Polish nation entitled to act in the name of the nation and to guide its destiny until Poland’s liberation from foreign occupation’ (italics in original).

In the Soviet Union, Polish communist politics had developed in a rather different manner. Here the strategy of the broad national front had much more success. Red Army victories had raised Soviet prestige in the eyes of the Polish refugees and deportees, to whom an accommodation with the Communists seemed the only way to guarantee their return to Poland. The success of the national front policy made Polish communists in the Soviet Union rather intolerant of the difficulties of the PPR, which they attributed to the sectarian legacy of the old Communist Party of Poland. Early in 1943, a number of the communists had asked the Soviets for permission to establish a ‘centre for Polish affairs’ in the USSR which could provide the nucleus of a future Polish government. This Stalin was not prepared to allow; but as relations with the Sikorski government reached a critical stage, he consented to the establishment in March 1943 of the characteristically named Union of Polish Patriots (Związek Patriotów Polskich—ZPP), a front organization with non-communist members but effectively controlled by the communists. The ZPP immediately declared its willingness to accept the Curzon Line and even before the breach in relations with the Sikorski government was calling for the establishment of a
Polish military force under its control recruited in the USSR. In it ideological declaration of June 1943, it strongly underlined its support for a national front strategy.

After the break in relations, Stalin also sanctioned the establishment of a Polish military force. This Kościuszko division was commanded by Colonel Zygmunt Berling, a pre-war officer captured in 1939 who had decided to cooperate with the Soviets. Its men were mostly conscripted from the Poles in the USSR, but given the NKVD murders of 1940 and the departure of Anders’s army in 1942, there was a marked shortfall of officers. This was made up by Red Army officers, in some cases of Polish descent. In January 1944, for instance, nearly three fifths of the officers of the new Polish army had previously served in the Red Army.

The Polish corps made a determined and deliberate effort to follow pre-war Polish military traditions in its uniforms, decorations and even songs. At the same time strong efforts were made to ensure its pro-Soviet character, so that it could be an effective means of buttressing a pro-Soviet government in Poland. As Berling himself put it in April 1944, ‘Today we have 100,000 soldiers but tomorrow we shall have a million, and this will be a force which will enable us to shape the future structure of Poland.’

Similar views had been put forward in October 1943 by a number of communist political officers close to Berling in the form of Theses: No. 1, which called for the establishment of an ‘organized democracy’ in which the army would play a major role [shades of General Jaruzelski]. The whole concept was attacked by other Polish communists as ‘neo-fascist’ and sanctions were taken against its main authors. Yet Theses: No. 2, put forward by the much more reliable political officers in the army, Hilary Mine and Roman Zambrowski, also failed to find favour, and it was left to the
veteran communist, Alfred Lampe to write a justification of the national front line in *Theses: No. 3*.

In order to end this extreme ideological heterogeneity it was decided in early January 1944 to establish a Central Bureau of Polish Communists (CBKP). Its aim was to supervise the communists in the army and ZPP and also to exercise some control over the PPR. The Soviets and their Polish communist proteges in the USSR were particularly worried about developments in Poland, above all the arrest of Finder and the loss of radio contact. It was also partly to reassert their control, ignorant as they were of the establishment of the KRN, that the Polish communists in the Soviet Union had proposed a new political initiative in December. This was based on Lampe's *Theses: No. 3* and took the form of a Polish National Committee (Polski Komitet Narodowy) which was to act as the democratic representation of the Polish people until a provisional government could be set up. A comparison of the KRN and the PKN programmes reveals clearly the growing divergence of the two groups of Polish communists and the greater stress the communists in the Soviet Union were placing on the national front strategy.

In early 1944 the British attempted to reconcile the Poles and the Soviets on the basis of the Teheran discussions. This proved a difficult task, both because Western indecisiveness at the conference had encouraged the Soviets to take a very intransigent position, and because Polish suspicions of the USSR had been exacerbated by the establishment of the KRN and the clear determination of the advancing Red Army, which had crossed the 1921 frontier of Poland in January 1944, to secure the Soviet claim to these areas. After substantial pressure the British were able to get the Poles to agree in mid-February to what the British took to be a de facto acceptance of the Curzon Line
(excluding L’viv) and a commitment to remodel their government and ‘include among themselves none but persons fully determined to co-operate with the Soviet Union’. The value of these concessions was somewhat undermined, however, by two Polish cabinet resolutions adopted on 15 February, of which Stalin was undoubtedly aware. The first of these had proposed a demarcation line east of Vilna and L’viv with the territory to the west administered by Poland, while the second stood out against a reconstruction of the cabinet. Under these conditions, Stalin probably doubted the preparedness of the British to impose their will on the Polish government and rejected the proposed compromise outright in late February. It was now clear that the subordinate position which he wanted them to accept would not be adopted by the Poles in London. It is in this light that his insistence on a categorical acceptance by the Poles of the Curzon Line should be understood.

The collapse of their mediation efforts left the British effectively without a policy. Exasperated, however, with what they took to be Polish intransigence, they were coming increasingly to the view that given their need for a post-war understanding with the USSR it was not in either British or Polish interests ‘to quarrel with Russia over Poland’. In the words of Frank Roberts, head of the Central Department, ‘there is nothing inconsistent in the existence of…a Poland under strong Soviet influence, provided there is some reality of independence and the Russians behave themselves in Poland.’

Mikołajczyk, for his part, continued to harbour illusions that the Americans would come to his assistance and paid a fruitless visit to the United States in mid-June 1944. He also remained convinced that the strength of the London-based underground, the AK, which now numbered nearly a quarter of a million men, would compel the Soviets to
reach an agreement with him. In early 1944 General Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, commander of the Home Army, had issued new orders in terms of which the AK would initiate large anti-German operations as the German forces began to retreat, offering its assistance to the Red Army. In this way the strength of the underground would be revealed and the Soviets persuaded they had no alternative but to cooperate in order to keep their rear secure. As Bor-Komorowski put it, ‘By giving the Soviets minimum military help we are creating political difficulties for them’

This policy, codenamed ‘Tempest’ (Burza), was born of desperation and greatly underestimated the ruthlessness of Stalin, the extent to which he would go to impose the Curzon Line on the Poles, and the inability and unwillingness of the Western powers to risk a clash with the Soviets on the Polish question. It is true that there were some hopeful signs of military co-operation between the Red Army and the AK in Volynia in April, but these did not prove lasting. A general pattern soon established itself. As the AK revealed itself to the advancing Red Army its military assistance was at first welcomed. Once the battle was over, its troops were given the alternative of incorporation into the Berling army or disarmament. Where they resisted, they were forcibly overcome and sent to Soviet camps.

Under these conditions, there prevailed in London and Washington a policy of drift which played into Stalin’s hands. The re-establishment of radio contact between Moscow and Poland led to an exchange of views between the PPR leadership and the Central Bureau of Polish Communists in which the party tried to justify the establishment of the KRN and the adoption of the ‘democratic national front’ policy. At the same time, the isolation of the part and its lack of success in building up the small socialist and
peasant groups which had adhered to the KRN, or in winning over other political forces, led to an increasingly bitter rift between the Gomułka and Bierut factions on the central committee over the extent to which the PPR policy should be modified in the hope of widening the KRN’s support.

Stalin was well aware of the weakness of the pro-communist forces in Poland. In an attempt to win support among the Polish community in the United States he even invited to the Soviet Union in April Oskar Lange, a well-known left-wing economist at the University of Chicago. Stressing his own moderation, Stalin told Lange that ‘the door to an understanding’ with the London government ‘is never closed’. He even suggested that Lange might act as an intermediary between the communist Polish camp and the Poles in London, since ‘as a private individual who speaks without obligation to anyone’, his words would carry more conviction. Stalin also made a final approach to the London government himself. On 23 May Lebedev, Soviet ambassador to the Polish government, contacted Stanisław Grabski, a close associate of Mikołajczyk and chairman of the Polish National Council, and put some rather moderate proposals to him. Mikołajczyk resumed these talks after his return from the United States. He told Lebedev that he favoured the immediate resumption of diplomatic relations, leaving frontier disputes to be settled after the end of the war. This was clearly not enough to satisfy Stalin, and three days later Lebedev broke off the discussions.

By now the Soviet leader had clearly decided to take the communist option in Poland. In mid-May, a delegation from the KRN finally reached Moscow after a two-month journey whose length may have been prolonged by Soviet obstruction. On 22 May Stalin met the delegation and told them that he would not recognize the London
government in its present form. When a KRN executive was set up he would establish
relations with it. Underlining the significance of this statement, he observed, after the
delegation had been taken to inspect the Berling army, ‘the KRN has no army and the
Polish army in the Soviet Union has no government.’ On 22 June, as he prepared for his
great summer offensive, Stalin took further steps to secure his position in Poland,
instructing the KRN representatives to ‘prepare the names and composition of a new
government’. He also for the moment ruled out a visit of Mikołajczyk to Moscow as was
being urged by President Roosevelt.

    Military events now began to play the crucial role. The summer offensive of the
Red Army proved highly successful, and by the second half of July Soviet and Polish
troops were approaching the Curzon Line. Continual discussions between the ZPP, the
KRN delegation enlarged by the arrival of a second group on 6 July, and Stalin took
place as to what sort of authority should be established in liberated Polish territory. Not
surprisingly, Stalin’s solution of a Committee of National Liberation, to which
subsequently the adjective Polish was added (Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia
Narodowego—PKWN), prevailed over the ZPP’s proposal for a Provisional Government
and the more modest suggestion of the KRN of a Delegatura similar to that which had
been set up by the London government. Stalin probably felt that a Committee of National
Liberation was the most the Western powers would swallow, while still providing an
effective administration in the liberated territories. On 21 July the committee was duly
formed under the chairmanship of the socialist Edward Osóbka-Morawski and on the
same day issued a manifesto. On 26 July it was recognized by the USSR as the
‘temporary organ of executive power in Poland’.
4. Conclusion

Situation in July 1944