



ARTYKUŁ

From crime to mythology

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In the propaganda of the Polish People's Republic, there was a prevalent concept, that the Soviets wanted to aid Warsaw during the Uprising of the capital in 1944, but didn't manage to do so due to objective reasons. The quick taking of Cracow in January of 1945, on the other side, was to be the proof of the Soviet sacrifice, motivated by love for our culture and monuments.

Both arguments had nothing to do with the truth.

Poles, devastated with the fall of the uprising, had no doubts about the Soviets intentions. "The shadow of the crime - which is leaving Warsaw on its own, without bringing it the help it deserved - history will one day

shine the light on and condemn” – wrote the underground “Polish Daily” already on October 3rd 1944.

Ghost town

History shone some light already. We know, that the Soviets not only held off offensive actions, but they also acted against the Uprising – both in a police and military manner. They made it much harder for the British to help the fighting Poles. Just as the Germans – they hunted and killed on their side of the front line those Home Army units which tried to break through to the struggling capital.

“Using the Germans to destroy one of the most important centres of Polish independence, Stalin turned down the possibility of creating favourable conditions for his army to march to Berlin”

-- wrote a Russian historian Nikolai Ivanov, calling Stalin’s actions a straight up “crime on the Warsaw Uprising”.

In the autumn of 1944, the Germans made use of the stalemate at the frontline. After having committed horrific war crimes on civilians during the Uprising, they went on to fulfil the orders of the systematic destruction of the Polish capital. They burned street after street, house after house. A German soldier Joe J. Heydecker recalled this from the time he was in Warsaw in November of 1944.

“But this silent city of ruins, Warsaw, I still see before my eyes with all the details. The city, which I walk across with my friend [...] is ghastly. [...] It’s actually hard to imagine, that we’re in a real, million people city, which is actually entirely in ruins and that it’s not just a surreal film scenery. [...] Graves are everywhere. On the sides of the streets, where pavements once were, there are mounds; mounds after mounds. There are hundreds of them, hundreds. [...] Most of the graves are unnamed. There’s only earth, cracked stone plate and rubble.”

Only after a few months, on January 12th 1945 the Soviets began the military offensive in Poland. They made use of the crushing advantage they had already had over the Germans in the summer of 1944. On January 17th they also took what was left of Warsaw.

The Communist propaganda knew no boundaries to its cynicism. Efficiency was all that counted. Marching in

the burned out, desolate city was nonetheless called “the liberation of the capital of Poland”. The day was immediately celebrated as a grand holiday. Then, for more than 40 years, on January 17th there were annual ceremonies, school academies and other events for the occasion. Wreaths were laid in front of the hypocritical “monuments of gratitude” for the Red Army, also in Warsaw itself.

Military parade amongst ruins

The propaganda icon of January in Warsaw was to be the military parade organised by the Soviets. The picture of parading “berlingowcy” became an almost obligatory element of the anniversary publications of the Polish People’s Republic. Soldiers marched in front of a parade stand, where stood the people appointed by Stalin to affirm his policies in the occupied country: Bolesław Bierut, Michał Żymierski, Edward Osóbka-Morawski and other officials of the Communist Temporary Government. The deputy people’s commissar of the NKVD, Ivan Serov, in the report sent to his superior Laverntiy Beria, on January 19th 1945, presented an almost blissful atmosphere of support for the authorities and gratitude for the Soviets:

“[...] people took to the streets with flags and gathered in front of the building of the National Council. A rally was organised, where BIERUT, MORAWSKI and general [Sergey] SHATILOV [the commander of the military mission of the Soviet Union in Poland]. The crowds very sincerely welcomed and greeted BIERUT and MORAWSKI; when comrade SHATILOV mentioned the Red Army they interrupted his speech with cheers for comrade Stalin.”

On a totally different note, described the same day an officer of the Home Army and a Warsaw insurgent, Jan Krok-Paszkowski, who came to the city from nearby Wołomin with a friend, on January 19th 1945. The first Soviet soldiers they met, surrounded them in a semicircle.

“They told us to stand by a wall, unbuttoned our jackets and carefully searched. <<Oruzhiya u nikh net>> [Russian for <<they don’t have weapons>>] [...]. Some young man in a corporal’s military cap showed up. [...] <<Well, you need to go the parade then [...]. Today, our first army marches into the capital>>.”

- recalled Krok-Paszkowski. A parade stand decorated in white and red cloth was placed at a square cleared of rubble.

“A dozen soldiers jumped out of an armoured vehicle. Barrels of their submachine guns pointed towards the crowd. They surrounded a regular car, from which several people in dark, civilian coats and fur caps stepped out of. The civilians went on the parade stand, the orchestra began playing the “Whirlwinds of Danger” [Polish: Warszawianka; trans. annotation] and the parade began marching from the Vistula river.”

It was difficult not to have bitter thoughts.

“I looked at this spectacle with the feeling of shock, anger, and regret. Here the victorious army marches into Warsaw – half a year too late – wrote Krok-Paszkowski. – It parades in front of the people it doesn’t know, who stand with grim faces with ruins in the background, surrounded by the Soviet escort. Soldiers in Polish uniforms, Soviet helmets and military caps with weird looking, differently shaped eagles carried the Soviet pe-pe-shas [PPSh-41 submachine guns; edit. annotation] and Soviet LMGs, stomping like farmers and waving their hands Soviet-like, to the side of the stomach. [...] I wanted to go back home and slowly started to retreat from the crowd, but suddenly I felt a heavy arm on my shoulder. A smiling officer of the NKVD stood beside me.”

Propaganda was intertwined with terror. Already on January 24th 1945, Beria reported to Stalin about sending a single regiment and several battalions of NKVD “in order to bring order”. He also added:

“We have working operative groups consisting of employees of the [Communist] Ministry of Public Security of Poland and cześci [meaning the officers of the NKVD – M. K.], to detect and arrest the General Command of the Home Army, National Armed Forces and other underground political parties”.

Some to this day call it a liberation.

Bombs on Cracow

While more and more troops subordinate to the Soviets were being sent to the ruins of Warsaw, at the 1st Ukrainian Front fighting continued over the previously barely destroyed Cracow. The main strike of the front came from the sandomierski outpost. The intended direction was Wrocław. Cracow was to be attacked from

the east by the 60th Army, which was the right wing of the front.

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Near the crucial military areas, the Germans built 240 reinforced concrete antitank traps and 50 concrete shelters. They also constructed makeshift concrete bunkers with holes for armour-piercing weapons. They had no intentions of blowing up the city. In the sandomierski belt, the German defence was broken through on January 15th. The forces advancing along the northern bank of the Vistula river reached Cracow in a matter of a few days. On January 16th, they took - nearby Cracow - towns of Miechów and Słomniki, and on January 17th - Skąpa.

Thanks to the good weather conditions, the 2nd Airforce began the bombardment of the city on January 16th. From the get go, the attack was supposed to be intense. In total, 1800 tons of bombs were dropped. The attack was supported by the artillery. On January 18th, the offensive on the city began from the north. On this day, the Soviet planes bombed, among other places, the centre of Cracow, the railway station and roads leading to the Vistula bridges. The Soviets then relatively quickly took the city centre, since the Germans had to defend other areas as well. Not having enough forces to secure both Cracow and the Upper Silesian Industrial District, they decided to focus on the latter. The German commander, general Friedrich Schulz was relieved of the duty of defending Cracow. He began retreating his troops towards Silesia, not allowing his main army to be surrounded. Hence, despite the earlier preparations, the Germans did not defend the city and fell back behind Vistula. After the last soldiers retreated, the engineers blew up the bridges, which wasn't much help anyway. The frozen river was no obstacle for the Soviet infantry.

"At noon, I had already walked across a big part of the city - noted in his journal a citizen of Cracow Edward

Kubalski, on January 19th - In what sad state was the Old Town square and the surrounding area. Many houses were bombed and destroyed (The Bracka Street, a crater in front of the house, Pierackiego Street etc., etc.). Stores, especially German stores, were robbed, rubble and glass was everywhere."

The biggest damage was done in the southern part of the city, where the Germans held their positions the longest. However, it was all incomparable to the Warsaw "sea of ruins".

Forcing gratitude

The taking of Cracow was intended to be made famous via propaganda. At first, the Communists acted typically. In the first few weeks, the propaganda cells, set to promote anything that was connected to the Communists as efficiently as possible, did not come up with the idea of the story of the mined city and the Soviet army, which changed its plans to stop the Germans from blowing up the city with a bold manoeuvre. The accomplishment of the Red Army was supposed to be simply abolishing of the German terror and "freeing the city" from occupation.

Marching in the burned out, desolate city was nonetheless called "the liberation of the capital of Poland". The day was immediately celebrated as a grand holiday. Then, for more than 40 years, on January 17th there were annual ceremonies, school academies and other events for the occasion.

Even in the beginning of March 1945, when the construction of the "Monument of gratitude for the Soviet soldier" in Cracow was ordered, no one hadn't thrown around the idea that the city was saved from being completely blown up by the Germans. Gratitude was demanded from the citizens, although the atmosphere was already against such a statue.

It didn't have to happen that way. Until the Germans were in power, the usual fear of the "Bolsheviks" was nothing compared to the hatred towards the Germanic "race of masters". Until the last days, the harsh, even

thoughtless terror of the Germans caused the city to look forward to the Russians with great impatience.

“Roundups and searching on the streets were non-stop, so the remaining citizens were mainly children, elderly – and the Germans. Shooting of hostages, in accordance with lists hanged on poles, were still conducted with a stubborn, German regularity. The scale of their crimes was unprecedented. [...]. – wrote the underground Cracow mayor, District Government Delegate, Jan Jakóbiec. – German soldiers, due to insufficient supplies, robbed food, cattle and clothes. They were joined by various criminal groups, often claiming to be part of the underground resistance, which also robbed, stole and terrorised the city. So a lot of people used to say: may the Lucifer himself come from hell, if only the Germans leave”.

He then added:

“On the other side, we heard some not so hopeful news from the other side of the front. [...]. If we objectively compare the conditions from this and the other side of the front, we won't be able to tell the difference. However, the Hitler's horror hurt the society so much, that it was often said: let it be even worse, if only it's different”.

So it was just like the Commander of the Home Army Leopold Okulicki reported on January 24th 1945: the society was overcome with “happiness from the absence of Germans connected with the common distrust towards the Soviets”. Even though, robberies and muggings were present on the daily basis (Poles were shocked, that they were committed not only by low-ranked soldiers, but also officers), but the Soviets were still generally treated friendly.

“Only those, who were good at predicting the future said: We are now going to have the Soviet occupation, instead of the German one and asked: Who will liberate us from our liberators?”

- noted Jakóbiec ironically.

To build a myth

In the classified reports, the problem was also noticed by the representatives of the Communist authorities.

“The approach of the people towards the Soviet soldiers, at first without issues and even friendly, began getting gradually worse – wrote in his report for his superiors, the Cracow mayor appointed by the Communists Adam Ostrowski, also the chairman of the committee of the construction of the <<Monument of Gratitude for the Soviet soldier>>. – The reason behind this change are the excessive requisitions and taxes, but first and foremost the bad behaviour of the Red Army soldiers. Reports of the province governors mention countless examples of causing harm to the lives and property of the citizens, muggings, robberies, raping of women and even of underage girls, murders of men standing in their defence are all part of everyday reality. [...] Bitterness, fear and the feeling of uneasiness have become so prevalent among the people, that this case must be considered one of the toughest to handle.”

However, the propaganda needs of the new power kept on rising.

“Every citizen of Cracow must take part in the construction of the monument. Each citizen must contribute even the smallest amount for this purpose. All the citizens will become the co-creators and caretakers of the monument. That way, we can pay back at least some of the debt of gratitude for the heroic soldiers of the Soviet Army.”

- wrote a local newspaper.

In the following years of Communism, the need for a legend grew. “The saving of Cracow” in the Polish People’s Republic was supposed to be the proof of the “clear conscience” of the Soviets regarding Warsaw. The story of the special Soviet manoeuvre allegedly realised to save the Polish national heritage was made into a dogma. In this tone – opposite to the undeniable facts – a myth was created, that the Soviets refrained from using the air force and artillery as they cared for the monuments. Marshall Ivan Konev, the commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front, played along this rhetoric.

“After all, for us Cracow wasn’t just a stronghold of the enemy. We looked for a way to give Poles their second capital back, this beautiful, historic city, in as untouched state as possible.”

-- he said in 1965.

To the fabricated stories of the mined Wawel castle and other most important monuments of Cracow, the legend was added of an alleged German "central cable", which was to commence the explosion. The hero who saved the city was supposedly a Soviet saboteur Yevgeniy Bereznak, who - according to the earlier version of the story - cut the cable, putting an end to the plans of blowing up the city. Even though, in 2003 Bereznak himself admitted to the Polish journalists that it was all propaganda, in the East this story is still treated seriously.

Despite the fall of the Soviet Union, the modern propaganda of the Russian Federation often looks for inspiration in the Soviet mythology - both in terms of the tragedy of Warsaw and the story of saving Cracow. Enough said, that in 2007 president Vladimir Putin gave a medal for "saving Cracow" to another Soviet saboteur from the Second World War, a former officer of the NKVD and KGB, Alexei Botian. For this he received the highest Russian decoration - the title of "the hero of Russia", even though he operated in Sądecczyzna and had nothing to do with Cracow.

Nothing is impossible for propaganda.

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