The Archive of the Documentation Office of the II Corps: Tasks and Challenges

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Abstract

The article discusses the mission and character of the Documentation Office of the II Corps and the subsequent fates of its legacy. The Office was tasked with recording and archival-research works, as well as political propaganda toward convincing the Anglophone public opinion that the Soviet Russia was a totalitarian regime. The founders of the Office hoped that this would affect the Western allies' stance toward the issue of Poland's eastern border to be discussed at a future peace conference. The surveying campaign carried out by the Office was its most significant completed project. The questionnaires and surveys allowed for systematic collection of accounts given by POWs, internees, labor camps prisoners, and persons deported after 17 September 1939 who joined Anders' Army. The outcome of the project is more than 30,000 reports of different kinds, which are kept at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, USA. They are a compelling record of the fates of Polish citizens confronted with the reality of Soviet occupation and the USSR.

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The fates of the Polish citizens who after 17 September 1939 found themselves in the Soviet occupation zone are an incredibly important aspect of the Polish history during the Second World War. Under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty, more than a half of the Polish Second Republic was directly controlled by the USSR. The annexation of these areas, which was formally validated by the results of the rigged plebiscite of October 1939, marked the beginning of the period of brutal Sovietization and Stalinization.

On 17 September, Vladimir Potemkin, the USSR's deputy people's commissar for foreign affairs, read out the diplomatic note addressed to the Polish government to the Polish ambassador in Moscow. However, Wacław Grzybowski, the incumbent ambassador, refused to accept it. The president, the government, and the Commander-in-Chief of the army had not left the country yet, and the Polish military was still defying the Germans. When the Soviet troops crossed the Riga border, the Polish authorities were caught unawares. In light of conflicting intelligence received by the headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły issued the famous order "not to resist the Soviets." Still, the units stationed along the eastern border adopted different stances toward the Red Army troops, ranging from fierce resistance to unconditional surrender. The military intervention of the Soviet Union, which basically delivered on the provisions of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, significantly expedited Polish defeat in the September campaign. Almost 240,000 soldiers were brought into Soviet captivity (Materski et al., 1995, p. 18). Their fates are mostly known through the prism of the 5 March 1940 decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), under which the party and state hierarchy agreed to Lavrentiy Beria's proposed solution of the issue of 14,700 POWs and more than 11,000 detainees, who were to be handed "the maximum penalty" (Beria's note to Stalin of 5 March 1940, pp. 469–475). In the nomenclature of the Soviet special services, this meant the murder, with a shot in the back of the head, of at least 21,857 Polish citizens: the officers and members of uniformed services from the Kozelsk, Ostashkov, and Starobelsk camps, and prisoners from other locations in the USSR.

Another group facing repressions was the civilians living in the Eastern Borderlands. The four mass deportations inside the USSR were an attempt to purge the incorporated lands of those referred to as the "socially hazardous element," including military settlers, foresters, state officials, and railmen, all of whom were displaced together with their entire families. The first deportation, carried out on the night between 9 and 10 February 1940, in the freezing cold of below minus 30 degrees Celsius, affected around 140,000 people, who were mostly moved to northern oblasts of the Soviet Union. As part of the following three deportations, Polish citizens – chiefly Poles, but also Jews, Belarussians, and Ukrainians – were sent to labor to locations scattered around the entire USSR:

from the northern taiga to the steppes of Central Asia. Whole families deported to forced settlements worked their fingers to the bone, clearing forests or doing field jobs in sovkhozes. Although they were formally free under the law, the totalitarian Stalinist regime exerted strict control over them through the agency of the NKVD. Grueling toil, insufficient alimentation, and lack of housing and sanitary infrastructure were now the everyday reality of the Polish deportees up until August 1941.

The outbreak of the Soviet-German war and the blistering progress of the Wehrmacht under operation "Barbarossa" made the Soviet authorities look for allies in the West. The 12 July 1941 treaty with Great Britain paved the way for the Sikorski–Mayski Agreement of 30 July, which restored the diplomatic relations between the Polish government in exile and the Soviet authorities. An important provision thereinunder was sanctioning the formation of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, which were to be composed of Polish citizens who were in the Soviet Union at the time. As a result, on 12 August 1941, the Supreme Soviet declared the so-called amnesty, which was a historic turning point for hundreds of thousands of people facing Stalinist repressions, including POWs, deportees, and prisoners. Appointed commander-in-chief of the new military formation was General Władysław Anders, who had been released from the Moscow Lubyanka prison and went on to become the symbol of the Polish Armed Forces in the East.

The liberation of such a number of Polish citizens, who had gone through virtually all manner of Soviet persecutions, was unprecedented. Although the NKVD would deliberately hamper their efforts to join up with Anders' Army, scores of Poles were heading toward the troops' rendezvous points or the field offices of the Polish Embassy in Kuybyshev. Victims and witnesses of Stalinist terror, these people knew what the communist regime stood for, and had been through a lot since 17 September 1939. The collective memory of Polish deportees was an invaluable historical and propaganda material.

The Historical Office and the Documentation Office

A group of the Gryazovets camp POWs, who joined Anders' Army as early as August 1941, pointed to the necessity of systematic collection of documents and historical memorabilia. To that end, it was suggested that a unit be established at the Army's command that would be modeled on the prewar Military Bureau of History.[1] The proposal was approved by

1 The Military Bureau of History was a Polish military historical institute operating in Warsaw between 1927 and 1939. The Bureau was under the jurisdiction of General Inspector of the Armed Forces. Its mission was to conduct research on Polish

General Anders, who ordered the formation of the Independent Historical Office of the Command of the Polish Armed Forces in the Soviet Union (henceforth Historical Office). Appointed head of the Office was Lieutenant Doctor Walerian Charkiewicz,[2] and its purview and organizational structure were outlined in Anders' order of 17 December 1941 (Rozkaz nr 13 z 17 grudnia 1941 roku, quoted after Roman, 2016, p. 57). The Office was tasked with running the chronicle and the archive of the Polish Armed Forces in the East and keep the record of persons volunteering for the army. Most individuals released from POW camps, labor camps, prisons, or forced settlements did not have identification documents issued prior to September 1939. Consequently, a priority for the civilian and military authorities was to obtain basic information about the new recruits or the people who applied for the embassy's help. The amnestied Poles arriving at the army rendezvous points also had information about larger groups of other Polish citizens who had not yet been released despite the amnesty decree. Just like any formation of its kind, the Polish Armed Forces had its intelligence and counterintelligence services, whose operations in the USSR represented a challenge in light of the far-reaching infiltration by the Soviets. Therefore, any information about the people openly sympathizing or cooperating with the Soviets was invaluable, but at the same time very difficult to collect. It was precisely such needs that underlay the process of gathering reports and depositions of Polish citizens which related their experiences in the Soviet Union. However, an opportunity for effective action only presented itself after the Army was evacuated from the USSR to Iran in spring and summer 1942. In September 1942, the Polish Army in the Middle East and the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR merged into an operational unit referred to as the Polish Army in the East. Before that, when it was still in the USSR, the Historical Office would receive written accounts compiled spontaneously by the people or depositions obtained via the official channel in the form of reports and letters. As a result of a dynamic international situation and the gradual deterioration of the Polish-Soviet relations on the one hand, and the progress of the Red Army on the German front on the other, the necessity for systematizing the accounts of the Polish citizens in the USSR became more and more pressing.

Pursuant to General Anders' 15 April 1943 order (L.dz. 1219/I/tj./43), the Documentation Office was formed at the command, and the Historical

and general military history of both the First World War and earlier conflicts. The Bureau directorate coordinated the Military Archive.

2 Walerian Charkiewicz (1890–1950) was a historian and journalist. He graduated from the Stefan Batory University in Wilno. He was a member of Wilno conservative circles. He published articles in Wilno daily "Słowo." He was interned in Latvia, in the Palanga camp. In June 1940, he was transferred to Kozelsk, and then to Gryazovets, where he joined the Polish Armed Forces. After the war, he remained in Great Britain.

Office was now one of its departments. The Documentation Office was to be a specialized unit responsible for documenting "the full extent of the Bolsheviks' actions in the occupied part of Poland, the fates and experiences of Polish citizens both home and after they were deported inside Russia, the life and the state of affairs in the Soviet Union" (Projekt organizacyjny Biura Dokumentów, 1943). Appointed head of the Office was certified Lieutenant Colonel Kazimierz Ryziński.[3] Drawing upon the activities commenced by the Historical Office, the Documentation Office engaged in efforts toward planning and carrying out a comprehensive operation of collecting accounts of soldiers and civilians, its goal being to show the world what the Soviet Russia really stood for. In his proposal, Ryziński, who had determined the Office's purview, defined the spheres which should be of interest to the unit. The plan was to first document the USSR's shared responsibility for the outbreak of the Second World War on grounds of their political, military, and economic cooperation with the Third Reich between 1939–1941, and, second, to describe the Soviet extortion-based economic system, complex oppressive apparatus, and lack of respect for human dignity. The third aim was to document the Soviet nationality policies and the position of Great Russian nationalism and imperialism in the Bolshevik ideology and practice. Undoubtedly, the Office was to adopt a hard anti-Soviet course, and propaganda-wise, its task was to show the West the "true face" of the USSR. The plans included not just academic or popular-scientific publications, but also press articles, novellas, or even sensational novels. An important part of the enterprise was a proposed translation of the materials, particularly into English. Each of the Office's independent clerks was to focus on developing a particular local issue. These included occupation policies in the Polish lands, the Soviet penal and labor camp system, the fates of women and children, the fates of the Jews,[4] social-systemic issues, and policies toward national minorities. By the time the Documentation Office was dissolved, several scholarly publications had been ready for print or nearly finished. Most of them were never published, and the completed or near-completed manuscripts and typescripts are on file at the Hoover Institution, where the archive of the Documentation Office was sent after the Second World War.

3 Kazimierz Ryziński (1889–1970) was a soldier of General Haller's "Blue Army" and a veteran of the Polish-Bolshevik war. In the interwar period, he was in active military service at the Ministry of Military Affairs. In November 1938, he became editor-in-chief of the "Bellona" periodical. He fought in the September Campaign and the Battle of Lwów. In 1939, he made it to the West, first to France, and then to Great Britain. In 1941, he was assigned to Anders' Army.

4 The office for Jewish affairs was headed by Doctor Menachem Buchwajc, a law graduate at the Jagiellonian University and a prewar Zionist activist. After leaving the USSR, he remained in Palestine and fought for the independence of Israel. He went on to become a university teacher and a judge (Zamorski, 1990, pp. 51–89).

The surveying campaign

The most significant project of the Historical Office, and then of the Documentation Office, was, without a doubt, collecting the accounts and depositions of the POWs, internees, labor camps prisoners, and deportees who managed to join Anders' Army. This was a multi-stage enterprise, but in the documents from the period it is most often collectively referred to as the "surveying campaign." Recording the accounts of first-hand witnesses was to help with gathering representative and relatively impartial evidence on the Soviet Russia. Only such first-hand materials could have evidential value to these sections of the Western public opinion which sympathized with the USSR. However, it was feared that giving complete creative freedom to the authors of the accounts could result in an unfocused narrative, riddled with digressions and descriptions of extraneous details. For that reason, questionnaires were compiled, with questions which were not necessarily loaded, but ensured a uniform organization of various responses. Given the scale of the scheme, this aspect was crucial for its success. To be sure, this does not mean that the organizers demanded that the instructions included in the forms be unconditionally followed. Each survey specifically explained that the questionnaire was intended to further aid the process and should by no means curb the expression of personal experiences and observations.[5]

The surveying campaign began in spring 1942, already after the Army left for Iran. One of the first to share their memories were the former POWs and labor camps prisoners who were joining the Polish Army. The operation was sanctioned by General Anders' order of 19 December 1942 and gained momentum toward the beginning of 1943. Different templates of surveys and questionnaires were prepared. The most widespread was "the questionnaire of a former POW – internee – prisoner – labor camp prisoner – deportee in the USSR," but significant importance was also attached to the "plebiscite survey," whose focus was on gathering information pertaining to the course of the rigged plebiscites of October 1939 in the territories seized by the Red Army. The Office hoped that the material gathered would have a bearing on the status of the Polish cause at a future peace conference, especially with regard to the issue of the eastern border.[6]

Aside from those aforementioned, also theme-specific surveys were prepared, covering topics such as the Jews, the gold, or the Kolyma

5 Some examples of survey instructions are found in, among others, the Anders Collection, boxes 76, 77.

6 Still before the end of the Second World War, all materials from the plebiscite survey were transferred to the Ministry of Information and Documentation (its legacy is on file at the Archive of the Hoover Institution).

labor camps, but the basic questions remained unchanged and concerned the name, surname, age, occupation, marital status, and the circumstances surrounding the arrest/deportation. What typically followed was a number of questions about the camp, prison, or other place of internment, including its name, location, physical description, and such aspects of its functioning as daily routine, alimentation, workloads, NKVD conduct, healthcare, possibilities to stay in touch with the homeland and families, as well as the circumstances of release. Very often, the respondents provided answers directly on the questionnaires, only naming the place of internment, e.g. "the Ukhta labor camp, "Sevpechlag," "a kolkhoz in Kazakhstan." On numerous occasions, however, the survey was just a pretext for a longer written account entitled "Biography," "On my time in Russia," "My life in Russia," etc. Many of them represent high literary and journalistic value (Gralicki, 2018). Only some of the surveys have been so far released in print, mostly by Irena and Tomasz Gross (Gross & Grudzińska-Gross, 2008) and in a collection edited by Maciej Siekierski and Feliks Tych (Siekierski & Tych, 2006).

An interesting research problem is the respondents' approach to giving accounts. We are looking at primary sources which were collected deliberately and for the purposes specified above. Consequently, a question arises as to the extent to which the responses are characterized by self-creation, conforming to the expectations of superiors, and reproducing the socially acceptable attitudes toward the Soviet regime. All these appear to play a part, but that, in my opinion, does not invalidate the material in general. Once you have read a considerable number of accounts, it becomes apparent that certain motives and tropes recur, but it stands to reason that the picture does not result from environment pressure but the actual community of fates and experiences among Poles. The respondents were aware of this community: they knew that their brothers in arms of today and fellow inmates of yesterday had gone through roughly the same. This is why it was possible to slightly exaggerate one's experience and leave out the parts which upset the narrative, but this is just a single aspect, which does not impinge on the cognitive value of the entire collection composed of close to 30,000 accounts of different sorts, provided by people who had been sucked into the machinery of the Soviet apparatus of oppression.[7] It is worth adding that for many of them, describing their experience was therapeutic, and a way of dealing with the trauma of a head-on collision with the Soviet totalitarian experiment.

7 The number quoted after Wieliczko, 2006, p. 199.

What needs to be expanded on is the problem of the Documentation Office's role as a unit processing accounts concerning the character of the Soviet Union which were targeted at the Western audience. As already mentioned, the main goal of the Office was to engage in activities which could influence the Anglophone public and its attitude toward the USSR. How this goal would be pursued remained an open issue. In this context, it is interesting to take a closer look at a memo dated 8 May 1943 (Notatka służbowa z 8 maja 1943 roku, 1943), that is, coming from the early days of the Office. The document, compiled by Adam Telmany,[8] shows that the character of this institution and its mode of operating were being debated.

Telmany criticizes the incorporation of the Historical Office in the organizational structure of the Documentation Office. He believes that it resulted in people from the Historical Office "automatically" filling in particular posts, which meant that "there is not enough personnel to develop the topics planned." Additionally, Telmany uses sharp and radical rhetoric – which at the same time is testimony to his political acumen – to argue that the Office "has since the beginning been run as a typical political venture." In his opinion, Walerian Charkiewicz, head of the Historical Office, is trying to turn the entire Documentation Office into a strictly historical-research institution. This is reflected in, among other things, treating the material collected as documents requiring close archival and editorial processing, as well as in the tedious and laborious rewriting of all manuscripts on a typewriter without any preliminary selection, which, according to Telmany, "reduces the Office to the status of yet another unnecessary group of five tents, in which the incoming material would be slowly, pointlessly, and mindlessly copied." Telmany suggests greater operationalization of the process of using the materials. He notices that excessive precision and the pedantic processing of the source material is a two-edged sword:

> as a result [...], our own material, which we ourselves provide, would become an instrument for refuting our own arguments and hypotheses, since there is not a single account, paragraph, or sentence that would not have antisemitic or anti-Ukrainian undertones, or that would not describe how

8 Adam Telmany was one of the Documentation Office clerks. Between September 1939 and 29 September 1940, he was a member of the underground Union of Armed Struggle in Lwów. He was arrested by the NKVD and interned in the Lefortovo prison. He was given a death sentence, which in 1941 was commuted to 10 years in labor camps (in Ustyluh and Syktykvar in the Komi Republic). He was released on 4 December 1941. He joined the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR. In 1943, he started work at the Documentation Office.

> some of our people took the Soviet side in October 1939. The only viable solution is political censorship and the elimination of the voices that could hurt us (Notatka służbowa..., 1943).

There is no written record of any response by Walerian Charkiewicz, head of the Historical Office. However, in all likelihood, he treated recording the available materials and those that kept arriving as a key aspect of his job, not just on account of respecting good academic practices, but also due to political considerations. Charkiewicz rightly pointed out that "the criteria of political censorship are fleeting and dynamic," and that "what we get rid of today may actually prove useful in six months." He feared that an international committee could be formed that would "verify the publications." While the prospect of the establishment of an international body comparing the raw sources with the Polish publications on the USSR always seemed unlikely, some of Charkiewicz's doubts are well-founded. An unduly quick and superficial selection of the materials, without proper attention to solid archival and recording work, could adversely affect the value of the publications based thereon, and, in the long run, result in challenging the veracity of the latter.

Appearing interesting in this context is Telmany's remark that the Bolsheviks have been successfully staging organized propaganda in the West for 25 years, whereas "we have hardly gotten down to work, and we are already picturing ourselves having fingers pointed at us for laying bare the Soviet material lies" (Notatka służbowa..., 1943). In addition, the author emphasizes that his propositions are not intended to distort the "material historical truth" of the accounts collected, but merely to make the most of them political-wise.

These considerations are important, because they illustrate that there were two different visions of how the Documentation Office should operate: in one, the unit would carry out recording, archival, and historical tasks in academic terms, while in the other, it would be an institution catering for political needs and serving as "an instrument of political expediency of the Army's Commander-in-Chief [i.e. General Anders – author's note]," to use an apt phrasing of Kazimierz Zamorski (Zamorski, 1990, p. 26). This tension between the archival-research and political-propagandist character of the Office was visible throughout its lifespan. In spring 1944, already in Italy, in order to resolve this internal contradiction, the Studies Office was founded, which was supposed to be the Documentation Office's vanguard openly addressing current political needs.[9]

9 For more on the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Studies Office and its mission, see Zamorski, 1990, pp. 199–219.

There was a number of units involved in collecting accounts. First, it was the Historical Office, which from 1943 was formally a part of the Documentation Office. The latter initially operated in the structures of the Polish Army in the East, but in time came under the jurisdiction of the commandant of the III Corps, and from March 1945 (already in Italy), it was part of the Culture and Press Division of the II Corps. Consequently, for the sake of avoiding terminological ambiguity, I suggest using the name "the Documentation Office of the II Corps" as an umbrella term for all units involved in the collection and processing of accounts and surveys coming from Polish citizens in the USSR. Formally, this was the final incarnation of the Documentation Office before it was dissolved.

Presently, by far the largest collection of the surveys, questionnaires, and accounts is kept in the Archive of the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California. Toward the end of the Second World War, it was already evident that the comprehensive historical material, which was provisionally catalogued and ordered, had only been processed to an extremely limited degree. Additionally, the archive of the Documentation Office represented a political problem. After Great Britain and the USA revoked international recognition of the Polish government in exile, it was feared that the Polish Armed Forces would lose autonomy. Had the archival materials been intercepted by the communists or organizations sympathizing with them, the respondents and their families could have faced repressions. Bohdan Podolski, the then head of the Office, said,

> The materials in the custody of the Documentation Office are not just of historical and propaganda value. They can also be used by the enemy, who knows no mercy and will stop at nothing to exert revenge on hundreds of people for exposing his true nature. These people, hundreds of soldiers, have placed their trust in their General and Commander-in-Chief [General Anders – author's note], so the military bodies must make every effort not to abuse it (Raport sprawozdawczy z 28 sierpnia 1945 roku).

Chosen as the custodian was the Hoover Institution, which, as an organization friendly to Poland and, first and foremost, a private entity, was free from direct political pressure. Based on General Anders' correspondence with the Institution's hierarchy, the materials were sent to the USA in two batches: toward the end of 1946, directly from Italy, and then in November 1947, already from Great Britain. In order to provide an additional layer of protection against unwanted invigilation, Anders was declared the "sole proprietor" of the entire collection, which thus became

a private deposit. For that reason, the entire archive of the Documentation Office in Stanford has been labeled *Anders Collection*.

In 1951, around 9,000 accounts were loaned to the Library of Congress, where they were analyzed by the CIA, which used them to gather intelligence on the Soviet network of forced labor camps. Little is known concerning the outcome of this research, but given the contemporary political needs and the emerging Cold War, it may be ventured that the CIA found the material useful. The Polish accounts allowed for locating camps, forced labor sites, and centers of significant investments where the slave labor of prisoners was used. They were also instructive of the structure and mode of operating of Soviet security services.

In 1993, pursuant to an agreement between the Head Office of State Archives and the Hoover Institution, the microfilmed versions of the documents were sent to the Archive of Modern Records. In 2009, they were additionally digitalized and published by the National Digital Archive at szukajciewarchiwach.pl. On 25 January 2017, the Hoover Institution, the National Digital Archive, the Archive of Modern Records, and the Witold Pilecki Center for Totalitarian Studies signed an agreement based on which the Center received digital copies of the accounts. Work is underway to order the contents of the collection, prepare transcriptions, and translate the documents into English. The project's added value is an interactive map showing the location of individual POW camps, labor camps, forced settlements, and other places which together formed the trail toward freedom for those who survived the Soviet terror. The results of the first stage of the project were published by the Center on 17 September 2017, and the collection has been since expanding.

(transl. by Maciej Grabski)

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