

The Re-education of Exiled Poles in Post-war Britain, Myth, Messianism and Martyrdom¹

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Abstract

The Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland, on 17 September 1939, saw that region subject to complex Sovietizing of the administration system. In addition, the Soviet authorities attempted to dismantle the local religious institutions and create Soviet schooling for millions of Polish, Ukrainian, Jewish, and Belorussian children. As soon as was practical, the exiled Polish authorities tried to put in place a scheme of repolarization aimed at protecting and preserving 'Polishness'.

Key Words

Nationalism, Identity

The Formation of the Polish Diaspora

Starting in February 1940 the Soviet authorities carried out four waves of punitive deportations of some 320,000 Polish citizens (men, women, and children) into the interior of the U.S.S.R. In addition, during the September invasion 80,000 Polish troops had managed to escape to France to re-form under General Sikorski. These Polish subjects became the nucleus of the Polish diaspora.

After the Fall of France in May 1940, 19,457 of the Polish military were evacuated to Britain with a ratio of 1 officer to 2.5 lower ranks. Later, as the fortunes of war turned in the Allies favour, in 1943, 88,000 Polish deserters from the German Wehrmacht started crossing the Allies lines.

By the end of 1945, fifteen thousand Polish children, who were evacuated, from Soviet Russia to the Middle East in 1942, began to return to Britain. These schools had been under the control of the Polish Second Corps and General Anders. They had been supported financially by each soldier being docked one day's pay a week. In effect, the British Ministry of Defence financed the Polish schooling in

¹ If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

Krawiec, M. (2020) *The Re-education of Exiled Poles in Post-war Britain, Myth, Messianism and Martyrdom*. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 881 - 884). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

the Middle East. This system of support stayed in place until the Polish military became the Polish Resettlement Corp in 1947.

In 1947, 105,000 Polish troops returned to occupied Poland. The majority of these were peasants returning to their land. The remaining 114,000 were enlisted in the Polish Resettlement Corp and were placed in old army camps where they waited to find work and assimilate into British society. In the late 1940s these men were joined by their dependents from Poland, numbering 33,000, 2,100 of whom entered Britain under the Distressed Relatives Scheme. By 1949, there were 157,000 ex-military men and their families living in ex-military camps. A high proportion of these were ex-officers and professional classes such as doctors, lawyers and lecturers.

Polish exiled politics during and immediately after the war were complicated but, after the death of President Raczkiewicz in June 1947, the political right held power with Zaleski as president and General Anders as Commander-in-Chief of the, now de-mobilized, Polish military which was where the real powerbase existed.

Petite-Polonia

Aware that the Soviet regime was attempting to wipe out the Polish language, culture and religion the Polish Government-in-Exile embarked on a program to preserve the language, history, culture and religion of the homeland. This was in the hope of a speedy return to Poland after the anticipated war that the Polish political Right expected to be prosecuted once its allies 'came to their senses. In 1948, 75% of Poles questioned in a Polish newspaper Polish Daily (*Dziennik Polski*) thought there would be a third World War.

Initially, school children were taught in the camps by Polish teachers with an additional two hours a week in British schools provided by the host government. As more and more Poles integrated into British society, and the camp schools closed, the Polish children progressively moved into state education. This had the effect of isolating Polish children from their language and culture and so in July 1954, Ewaryst Leopold Holdanowicz published a manifesto highlighting the problems faced by émigré children as he saw them.

He recognised that Polish children were taught in foreign schools which had 'their own social aims for their own advantage'. That Polish children had to co-operate with societies that differed in spiritual culture and religion, national character, literature, arts, law, etc. Polish children were immersed in communities that differed in: 'aims and ambitions and national-tribal character'. Also, there was a threat of dilution of the Polish culture and religious practices due to intermarriage with the host country. Some Polish mothers withdrew their children from state education afraid that an English speaker with poor Polish might be at a disadvantage back in a newly freed Poland.

Keeping Children for the Land of Their Fathers

To counter this negative effect on Polish émigré children it was decided to publish, (although with extensive rationing the report does not know how), a series of books. These books would be studied by the children at home with their parents, with the parish priest, and at Polish school on a Saturday. The publishing of these books was an attempt to 'retain the children for parents and the faith of their fathers.' These books however, did not reflect the diverse nature of Polish cultural history but, were in fact, a re-imagined history promulgated by the conservative, integral nationalist military cohort who hoped to keep alive a particularly chauvinistic, in character, vision of their past.

The titles of the proposed books give some clue to their real purpose: To Retain Children for Polishness (age 6-10), To Retain Children and Youth for Poland (age 10-15), To Work for the Glory of the Polish Name (age 15+) are just a few of the titles. The publications portrayed a populist vision of Poland and its past.

This vision portrayed a country that had been Roman Catholic for a thousand years, the country of the romantic writer Adam Mickiewicz, where the supernatural sanction of the armed forces, by the Virgin Mary, made them the saviours of Poland against the heathen hoard from the East. This imagined country did not exist in reality. As an example, in the 1931 census, only 68% of Poles spoke Polish, there were Protestant, Uniate, Orthodox, Jewish, and Islamic places of worship with vibrant communities.

It is suggested in the manifesto that this series of books, when published will be looking for the truth. It also suggests that there are many problems associated with the production of the series of books. These include funding, the mobilizing of good authors, and illustrators and most problematic, finding usable material that is not copyright in the newly Sovietized Poland.

The report goes on to say that, 'in order to keep children for Polish-ness they must be kept on a gold chain not a pauper's rope'. Polish-ness must be presented as cheerful, colourful and interesting. The child should be reminded that they are different, that their parents are different and that there are Polish priests who should be respected by native people along with doctors, engineers, lawyers, shoe makers, cooks, musicians, teachers and actors. Summing up, the report offers a suggested plan of topics for inclusion in a lesson plan for use anywhere in the world. This includes the poem 'I was born among aliens' which would suggest that those publishing the book were trying to maintain the 'otherness' of the Polish diaspora rather than aid assimilation¹.

The manifesto published by Mr Holdanowicz Minister of Religion and Education was an attempt to counter fears of ethnic cultural cleansing in Soviet Poland. In reality, it really was just a reflection of the exiled elites own prejudice. It is clear that a return to Poland was, politically, never a realistic option and had completely receded by the early 1950s and the onset of the Cold War. The hope of replanting the ideologically pure seed of Polish exile youth back into Poland also died. The

Polish exiled Right-wing, military, old guard, eventually turned from protecting the language, customs, and culture of Poland to preserving it.

ⁱ Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum Archive, Folio, A19.4/G.