

## A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE WARSAW AIRLIFT (1944)

**Pieter Lodewikus Möller**

*(School for Basic Sciences, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, Vaal Triangle Campus)*

### Opsomming

*Daar word opnuut besin oor die sienings en optrede van staatsmanne wat by die rampspoedige Poolse opstand van 1 Augustus 1944 betrek was. Uiteenlopende standpunte word geëvalueer teen die agtergrond van die gekompliseerde verhoudinge tussen die Britse Eerste Minister, Winston Churchill en die President van die Verenigde State van Amerika, Franklin Roosevelt, en tussen hulle en die Sowjet leier, Joseph Stalin.*

*Die kruis van die saak was dat beide die Britte en Amerikaners bereid was om betrokke te raak by die bevoorradingsvlugte om die geïsoleerde partysane van lewensnoodsaaklike voorrade te voorsien. Die Russe, 'n bondgenoot van die Geallieerdes sedert 1942, wou egter gladnie betrokke raak nie, en het selfs geweier dat Britse en Amerikaanse vliegtuie, na afloop van die bevoorradingsvlugte, op Russiese grondgebied land.*

*Churchill was oortuig dat die Geallieerdes geen keuse gehad het nie. Hulle kon nie die Poolse partysane in die steek laat nie en moes betrokke raak. Die Amerikaners was bereid om voorrade te lewer en betrokke te raak, maar het uiteindelik onder politieke druk van die Sowjet Unie geswig. Hulle het hulself later onttrek.*

*Die gevolge van die opstand in Warskou was nie net vernietigend vir die partysane nie, maar het ook verreikende gevolge gehad vir die ander rolspelers.*

### Introduction

The Second World War started on 3 September 1939, after the German forces had invaded Poland three days earlier without any previous declaration of war. On 17 September, Russian troops invaded Poland from the east and occupied the eastern provinces. Britain and France declared war against Germany but could not save Poland in time. This came as a bitter blow to the Polish people, who knew that once again their independence was at stake. Soon after the German occupation, Polish liberation movements were formed to co-ordinate all resistance activities against the Germans.<sup>1</sup> In January 1940, all the resistance movements were ordered to submit to the authority of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Polish people, who resisted the German occupation of Poland and who fought against the Germans, are usually referred to as partisans. In this article the term will also be used to refer to them.

Home Army, later known as the *Armia Krajowa*.<sup>2</sup> These Polish partisans were waiting for the right moment to free themselves from German occupation. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, a door was opened for co-operation between the Allies and the Soviet Union. This changed the relationship between Poland and Russia dramatically.

In 1943, Russian forces launched an extensive offensive against the Germans and were engaged in fierce battles. By July 1944, the Russian armies were approximately forty-eight kilometres from Warsaw. Since diplomatic relations were not yet restored, the Polish partisans knew that Russian liberation could have serious implications for them. It could well simply mean replacing one oppressor with another. They dreaded even a temporary or partial occupation by the Russians. Therefore, with the Russian armies on their doorstep, the *Armia Krajowa* instigated an uprising, called "Operation Burza", against the Germans in Warsaw on 1 August 1944 and occupied major sectors of the city. Two days later, the partisans controlled most of the city's south-western sector. Because the uprising had important consequences for the plans of the Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, the Russian forces were abruptly ordered to stop their advance on Warsaw.

The situation in Warsaw soon became desperate. The partisans needed armour and ammunition, as well as medical supplies. On 3 August 1944, the Commander of the Polish partisans in Warsaw, General T. Bor-Komorowski, called for urgent help from the Allies. In response to this insistent appeal, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, ordered Allied squadrons to fly from Italy to provide the necessary supplies to Warsaw. This operation became known as the "Warsaw Airlift".

These flights to Warsaw from 13 August to 22 September represented a round trip of 2 815 kilometres over enemy controlled areas. Most of the distance had to be flown at night because the aircraft flew over enemy territory. Over Warsaw most of the aircraft encountered severe anti-aircraft fire and attacks from German fighter aircraft.

The Warsaw Airlift represents an incident in the history of the Second World War that has many, often complex, facets. Some questions remain to be answered in order to come to a conclusion regarding the feasibility of the Warsaw Airlift.

At first the Allies were reluctant to participate in the flights to Warsaw. One of the first questions that arose among the Allied aircrews, upon hearing about their task, was whether this operation was militarily feasible and why the supplies could not have been

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<sup>2</sup> An official underground organisation, the Association for Armed Struggle, or *Związek Walki Zbrojnej* (ZWZ), was formed, to co-ordinate all resistance activities in Poland. General K.T. (Kazimierz) Sosnkowski, responsible for handling problems related to the Polish resistance, was appointed Supreme Commander of the ZWZ, operating from Paris and reporting directly to the Polish premier, General Władysław Sikorski. ZWZ activities were extended over both German and Russian-controlled areas in Poland. In 1942, the ZWZ's name was changed to *Armia Krajowa* (AK), the Secret Army or the Home Army.

provided by the Soviet Union. The Russians most probably did not have any supplies available since their own were already exhausted. The fact remains that Britain would have been more than willing to provide the necessary supplies, if the Soviets had been prepared to distribute the goods. Yet, despite the fact that the Russians did have the military capacity to assist the Poles, they would not even consider allowing Allied aircraft to use their airfields. But the Soviets, who maintained that part of Eastern Poland was still rightfully theirs, shared a central principle with the Germans. They also became a conqueror of Poland when they signed the non-aggression pact in Moscow on 23 August 1939.<sup>3</sup> Closer investigation also suggests they had revisionist claims concerning Polish territory. Various interpretations of the Soviet actions are possible, but it must be assumed that the Soviet Union had other plans for Poland and they certainly had a number of hidden agendas. The assessment that the Soviets had no sympathy with the Poles, later proved to be completely accurate. This was also the reason why the Soviets denied any assistance to the Polish partisans in 1944.

On the question whether this operation was politically inspired, it is clear that, because of political pressure, Churchill was persuaded to give the order for these vital supply flights to be conducted. He was aware of the fact that the Polish partisans had acted irresponsibly and that their actions represented a reckless adventure. He also knew that the partisans were partly responsible for the helpless circumstances in Warsaw. Had they communicated with the Soviets before they launched the uprising, their situation could have been different. The success achieved on 8 and 9 August 1944 by seven aircraft of Polish Special Duties Flight 1586, in successfully dropping supplies to the partisans, left Churchill with no option but to agree to further Allied support.

The British press was correct when it reported that the Warsaw operations were politically inspired. Strategic considerations, which usually determine the outcome of war, did not apply in this instance and did not play any role whatsoever. The operation turned out to be a military disaster and should have been reconsidered or cancelled. Churchill looked at it from a political angle. Therefore he believed it was imperative for the Allies to render assistance to the Polish people. By doing so, he placed the lives of many aircrews in jeopardy. The aircrews were literally thrown into a stream of dangerous and futile operations in which many were killed. Later, military strategists agreed that political considerations overruled conventional principles of military operations.

Many political considerations were involved and these initially played an important role in decision making during the war. This was the case in the Warsaw Airlift.

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<sup>3</sup> W. Schellack and S.B. Spies (eds), *Europe since 1848* (Pretoria, 1991), p. 333; L.L. Snyder, *The War: A concise history 1939-1945* (New York, 1960), p. 61; M. Kitchen, *A world in flames* (London, 1990), p. 10.

When Churchill's role is evaluated in respect of the airlift, it seems at first that he was very concerned with the position of the Polish people, but it remains difficult to determine whether he was one of the heroes of the airlift, or whether he merely gambled with human lives in order to score political mileage. Yet, when one considers the implications for the Polish people, there must be consensus that he had no alternative but to approve the operations.

### **The Stalin factor in the Warsaw affair**

The underlying antagonism in the relationship between the Soviets and Poland created a difficult situation for the Allies. Britain and the United States of America strove for a free and independent Poland, maintaining sound relations with the Soviet Union. Stalin supported this goal, but his definition of a free Polish state differed vastly from those of Britain and the USA.

Stalin had stated on several occasions that he did not recognise any of the underground resistance movements, including the *Armia Krajowa*. Thus, if Bor-Komorowski's "Operation Burza" had been a success, the Russians would have had to enter Warsaw as guests, not as liberators, since Poland would have owed its freedom to actions of its own citizens. The Soviet Union's position and rights as "liberator" would have been limited and a mutual relationship, simply an alliance, would have barred Russian domination of Poland.

A few days after the uprising on 1 August, the Soviet Union's curtailment of activities had become obvious to the partisans. Therefore, they urgently appealed to the Allied Command in London for ammunition and weapons.<sup>4</sup>

Churchill contacted Stalin on 4 August, suggesting the actions of the partisans in Warsaw were to the Soviet Union's advantage and urgently asked for supplies and assistance.<sup>5</sup>

Stalin's reply referred to the setback in the Wolomin-Radzymin area and claimed he could therefore not comply immediately. He even suggested Churchill's information regarding the true situation in Warsaw was inadequate and inaccurate.<sup>6</sup>

Stalin played for time. His answer to Churchill was intentionally vague. Pretending to be gathering additional information regarding the extent of the revolt and whether it was

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<sup>4</sup> A. Pomian, *The Warsaw rising* (London, 1945), p. 5; J. Gatlinski, *Poland, SOE and the Allies* (London, 1969), p. 187.

<sup>5</sup> W.S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Triumph and tragedy* (London, 1954), p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> J.K. Zawodny, *Nothing but honour* (Stanford, 1978), p. 197

representative of the feeling of all Poles, he neglected to inform Churchill of his previous order to Marshal Rokossowski to immediately cease all offensive actions in the direction of Warsaw. He was also careful not to refuse immediate assistance. However, his whole attitude had created deep suspicions within British government circles.<sup>7</sup>

Stalin had the power and authority to rush to the aid of the Poles but it was for the sake of hegemony and pure political expediency that he ordered his troops to halt the liberation of Warsaw, pausing literally on the burning city's doorstep. He used every possible ploy in the book to avoid action which would have enabled the embattled Polish *Armia Krajowa* to succeed with their revolt. His lieutenants frequently used threats and bullying tactics when negotiating with diplomats from the United States and Britain.

At the insistence of the Allies, the new Polish premier, Mikołajczyk, left for Moscow on 26 July 1944, for talks with the Soviet leader.<sup>8</sup> Stalin promised weapons and ammunition would be supplied by air on 9 August and falsely intimated he had ordered Marshal Rokossowski to drop a paratrooper, equipped with a radio transmitter, in Warsaw. His orders allegedly were to establish further contact between the partisans and the Soviet Forces.<sup>9</sup>

Repeated inquiries about the whereabouts of this paratrooper were later shrugged off by Stalin, suggesting he had probably been killed or captured by the Germans. However, he did not offer to send another.

Stalin claimed the defeat of the Third Armoured Corps at the hands of the Germans forced them to withdraw and regroup. The truth is, the revolt had frustrated Stalin's own plans and he had decided not to get involved in the battle.<sup>10</sup>

After an intense exchange of communications between Britain and the Soviet Union, Churchill realised that Stalin would not intervene in Warsaw. During regular subsequent contacts from 3 August, the Allies constantly requested Stalin to assist the partisans. However, on 16 August Stalin declared he had become thoroughly acquainted with the situation in Warsaw and was convinced it was not representative of the Polish nation, but had been planned by a small group of adventurers, representing a small, insignificant minority. The Soviet Supreme Command therefore felt it advisable to distance itself from this "adventure" and would not accept responsibility, directly or indirectly, for rendering any

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<sup>7</sup> Churchill, *Triumph and tragedy*, p. 117; T. Zawadzki, *The USSR and the Warsaw Rising of 1944: Facts and documents*, (Johannesburg, Pamphlet B421, Military museum), pp. 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, 5 August 1944, "Stalin receives Mikołajczyk."

<sup>9</sup> Churchill, *Triumph and tragedy*, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London, 1970), p. 583.

assistance. Stalin's passive stance was also confirmed by Air Marshall Sir John Slessor when disclosing the Russian statesman's refusal to allow even a single participating aircraft to land on Russian airfields.<sup>11</sup> Stalin reiterated his view that this situation would never have arisen had the partisans first taken counsel with the supreme command of the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

This exposed Stalin's true attitude. The partisans' cause was thus lost. They were unable to take an effective stand against the overwhelming superiority of the German armies without support from the Red Army.

Air Marshall Sir John Slessor, Officer Commanding the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces in Italy, and Keith Hayward, an historian, view the circumstances which led to the supply flights to Warsaw, as the most cynical, blatant and treacherous conduct in the history of warfare. Slessor describes the Soviet Union's behaviour towards the Polish partisans as the blackest-hearted, coldest-blooded treachery on the part of the Russians.<sup>13</sup> Hayward characterises the Soviet Union's action as the most cynical betrayal in the history of warfare.<sup>14</sup>

It has to be conceded that these remarks were often sparked by an emotional reaction. Slessor and Hayward must have been very frustrated at times with the callous behaviour of the Soviets. Nevertheless the validity of their comments is not in question.

The consequences of Stalin's conduct towards the Polish people were grave. Ultimately the Polish question became one of the most controversial problems the West had to contend with after the war. Relations between Britain and the Soviet Union became strained. Stalin's conduct was seen as blatant and treacherous. He had the power and authority to help the Poles, but it was for the sake of promoting future USSR hegemony that he ordered his troops to halt the liberation of Warsaw, pausing literally on the burning city's doorstep. He used every possible ploy in the book to avoid action which would have enabled the embattled Polish *Armia Krajowa* to succeed in their revolt. He claimed the revolt was premature and had been carried out recklessly, and argued that the Soviets could not support such an adventure. Stalin constantly used threats and bullying tactics in negotiations with British and American diplomats. He repeatedly reiterated his view that

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<sup>11</sup> The use of Soviet airstrips east of Warsaw was technically feasible, but Stalin refused to make them available for Allied aircraft.

<sup>12</sup> Zawodny, *Nothing but honour*, p. 77; J. Slessor, *The Central Blue* (London, 1956), p. 261; Zawodski, *USSR and Warsaw Rising of 1944*, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Slessor, *Central Blue*, p. 612.

<sup>14</sup> *The Star*, Johannesburg, 23 August 1969, "Stalin's cynical betrayal left Warsaw to face the German onslaught."

the situation would never have arisen had the partisans first taken counsel with the supreme command of the Soviet Union. Stalin's eventual aim was the total control of Poland and he made his intentions clear by the refusal to acknowledge the Polish government-in-exile. His intentions had become obvious to the partisans. They realised that Stalin was playing for time and therefore knew why his answers to their direct questions were intentionally vague. His whole attitude created deep suspicions. It even seemed that he considered the Poles in Warsaw were not worthy of assistance. In short, the liberation of Poland was contrary to Stalin's ultimate political objectives.

### Appeals for an airlift

On 3 August 1944, Bor-Komorowski urgently appealed to the Royal Air Force, which incorporated a special Polish squadron in April 1940, to deliver air supplies to the partisans in Warsaw. Their greatest need was for heavy machine guns, antitank guns, ammunition for antitank guns, and hand grenades.<sup>15</sup>

The Allies, unlike the Soviets, had little choice but to render some assistance to Poland. Churchill was very much for assisting the Polish people and therefore ordered Air Marshall Sir John Slessor to investigate the possibility and feasibility of supply flights from bases in Italy. Slessor was reluctant at first because he immediately recognised the inherent danger of such flights and expected heavy casualties.<sup>16</sup> These flights would take ten to twelve hours to cover the distance of 2 815 kilometres between Italy and Warsaw.<sup>17</sup>

Slessor later wrote:

It was one thing to drop supplies to pre-arranged dropping zones, marked by light signals in open country behind the lines ... it was quite another thing to bring a big aircraft down to a thousand feet, flaps and wheels down to reduce speed, over a great city, itself the scene of fires and flashes from guns and bursting shells.<sup>18</sup>

This remark by Slessor is very important because he accentuates the fact that there was quite a difference in supplying goods to partisans in the countryside to that of flying as low as 300 metres over a city protected by more than adequate anti-aircraft defences.

Aircraft flying from airfields in Great Britain had been dropping supplies to the partisans in Warsaw on a relatively small scale since September 1943, but these flights had proved

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<sup>15</sup> H.J. Martin and N.D. Orpen, *Eagles victorious* (Cape Town, 1977), p. 248.

<sup>16</sup> Slessor, *Central Blue*, p. 614.

<sup>17</sup> Martin and Orpen, *Eagles victorious*, p. 248.

<sup>18</sup> Slessor, *Central Blue*, p. 615.

territory; the limited areas which could be supplied; the efficient German defence<sup>19</sup> throughout Northern Europe, as well as generally uncertain weather conditions.

In November 1943, 1 586 Polish Special Duties Flight was moved to Sidi Amor in Tunisia to become part of 334 Wing Balkan Air Force. But, Sidi Amor was unsuitable for heavy aircraft during winter, and therefore 1586 Polish Special Duties Flight was moved to Brindisi in Southern Italy during December.

After examining every aspect of the intended operations, as requested by Bor-Komorowski on 3 August 1944, Headquarters in Italy concluded that these operations were not a fair risk of war. The involvement of other Allied Squadrons in the airlift to reinforce the Polish Squadrons would also negatively influence the activities of the squadrons in other important spheres.<sup>20</sup>

Headquarters in Italy submitted the arguments to Chiefs of Staff in London. They mooted that Soviet authorities, being close to Warsaw and possessing a more detailed knowledge of the situation, might be asked to give the required assistance. Although this request was made, nothing came of it.<sup>21</sup>

### **Churchill's effort to assist the Polish partisans**

The Allies were reluctant at first, but under political pressure Churchill decided to go ahead and order extensive flights to Warsaw. This was regardless of the fact that the operation would be extremely difficult to execute. The Allied Air Force commenced with the supply flights to Warsaw from bases in Italy on 12 August 1944.<sup>22</sup>

At the outset the British press alleged the operation was more politically inspired than militarily justifiable.<sup>23</sup> The task also differed vastly from usual military procedure when provisions were supplied to resistance movements behind enemy lines. The flight crews received vague instructions and the intensity and accuracy of the enemy's anti-aircraft defence fire was uncertain.

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<sup>19</sup> British Ministry of Defence, London, (hereafter BMD) Air Historical Branch, File 13: air supply for Warsaw, n.d.

<sup>20</sup> BMD, Air Historical Branch, File 13: air supply for Warsaw, n.d.

<sup>21</sup> BMD, Air Historical Branch, File 13: air supply for Warsaw, n.d.

<sup>22</sup> Martin and Orpen, *Eagles victorious*, p.248.

<sup>23</sup> The British Press were very concerned with the situation in Warsaw. Many newspaper reports were published in Britain on this topic from July to October 1944.



In a letter to the London *Observer*, dated 16 August 1944, Air Marshall Sir John Slessor conceded he was under political pressure to order the task flights.<sup>24</sup> Churchill admitted as much during a personal interview on 14 August 1944 with the officer commanding 205 Group Royal Air Force, Brigadier J.T. Durrant. He said militarily speaking, the whole airlift was doomed to fail. Yet, when one considered the political implications, he conceded there simply was no alternative but to continue with the dropping operations.<sup>25</sup>

Churchill's motives at this stage should be seen against the background of the very complicated relations between himself and the United States President, Franklin Roosevelt, and those between Roosevelt and Stalin.

Churchill telegraphed Roosevelt on 18 August 1944: "The refusal of the Soviets to allow the US aircraft to bring succour to the heroic insurgents in Warsaw added to their own complete neglect to fly in supplies..."<sup>26</sup>

According to Churchill, the glorious and vital victories by Britain and the United States in France, exceeded in scale anything done by the Russians on any particular occasion. Churchill added that Britain and America were nations serving high causes and that they had to give true counsel towards world peace.<sup>27</sup> Churchill wrote to his wife on 18 August:

You ... should see the various telegrams now passing about the Russian refusal, either to help or allow the Americans to help the struggling people of Warsaw, who will be massacred and liquidated very quickly if nothing can be done.<sup>28</sup>

Personally he had not given up on the Poles: "I have been very much taken up with Polish affairs, working day and night to bring help to the Poles in Warsaw, though the difficulties are great." <sup>29</sup>

However, the breach between Stalin and the Warsaw insurgents was complete. Churchill recorded on 23 August: "I see from the papers that the agony of Warsaw has been

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<sup>24</sup> *The Observer*, 16 August 1944.

<sup>25</sup> J.T. Durrant, Personal interview, Johannesburg, 14 June 1983.

<sup>26</sup> M. Gilbert, *W.S. Churchill, vol. VII, 1941-1945: Road to Victory* (London, 1986), p. 923.

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill, vol. VII*, p. 923.

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill, vol. VII*, p. 924.

<sup>29</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill, vol. VII*, p. 925.

practically suppressed. There is no need to mention the Soviet behaviour but surely the facts should be given publicity..."<sup>30</sup>

On 24 August, Churchill received an eyewitness account of the Warsaw rising, covering the five days from August 11 to August 16, and at once despatched a copy by telegram to Roosevelt. The account gave many examples of what it called "the ruthless methods of terror" employed by the Germans in Warsaw.<sup>31</sup>

Churchill continued to seek ways of asking Stalin to allow British and American aircraft, flying from Britain, to drop supplies on Warsaw and then fly on to Soviet air bases to refuel. Only in this way could they make the long flight. It had also become increasingly clear little time was left for any such help to be effective.

Churchill and Roosevelt therefore drafted a joint telegram to Stalin, requesting the Russians to allow these flights. They stated they were most anxious to send American planes from England.<sup>32</sup> Stalin failed to reply, prompting Churchill to inform Roosevelt he felt they ought to go ahead without Stalin's approval. Roosevelt would not agree. He cited two reasons. First, Stalin's unequivocal refusal to allow Soviet airfields to be used by Allied planes dropping supplies on Warsaw and second, America was engaged in negotiations with the Soviets regarding the future use of Soviet air bases elsewhere.

This destroyed Anglo-American unity over the issue of aid to Warsaw, leaving Britain by itself. On 3 September, the War Cabinet endorsed the idea that Churchill should try to persuade Roosevelt to reconsider his earlier refusal. It was also agreed to send another message to Stalin, warning him of the effect on future Anglo-Soviet relations.

Churchill's telegram to Roosevelt on 4 September reveals his desperate mood and the urgency of the plight of the Poles in Warsaw. In this telegram he claimed that the only way to bring material help to the Poles was for United States aircraft to drop supplies using Russian airfields for the purpose.<sup>33</sup>

He again urged Roosevelt to authorise his air forces to carry out the operation, using Russian airfields without their consent, if necessary. Churchill also sent Roosevelt the text of the appeal by the women of Warsaw to the Pope in which they declared: "Warsaw is in ruins. The Germans are killing the wounded in hospitals. They are making women and

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<sup>30</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill*, vol. VII, p. 926.

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill*, vol. VII, p. 927.

<sup>32</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill*, vol. VII, p. 927.

<sup>33</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill*, vol. VII, p. 929.

children march in front of them in order to protect their tanks."<sup>34</sup> He added that the Russian armies had not advanced beyond the gates of Warsaw for three weeks.

Roosevelt's reply was again negative. The problem of relief had unfortunately been solved by delay and by German action, and there appeared to be nothing he could do to assist.<sup>35</sup>

### **The role of the Americans**

The Polish government-in-exile also asked the United States to assist them with the dropping of supplies to the Poles in Warsaw. They were asked to use heavy bombers of the 8th United States Air Force to carry containers with the needed supplies.

From the outset, participation was ruled out as impracticable.<sup>36</sup> In fact, it was seen by the Americans as not operationally feasible and military personnel completely agreed that the distance to Warsaw was beyond the range of their heavy bombers.<sup>37</sup>

Also, because of the breach between Stalin and the Polish insurgents in Warsaw, the US Government did not want to jeopardise relations with the Soviet government, by pushing their demands to drop supplies on Warsaw and to use Russian bases.<sup>38</sup>

The Americans played a curious game. There was a lot of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring and endless conflicts between politicians and militarists. The actions were influenced by their fear of offending the Russian bear. At the same time they wanted to appease their Allied friends. They were calculating to the extreme in making sure they pleased both sides. Crafty manipulation by the Russian diplomats kept the Americans on their toes, careful not to offend them. This is aptly illustrated by the Molotov-Harriman exchanges.

The Soviet Foreign Office informed Avril Harriman, US ambassador to Moscow, of their opposition to any "Frantic" operations dropping supplies on Warsaw and strongly objected to any American or British aircraft using Russian airfields.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill*, vol. VII, p. 929.

<sup>35</sup> United States National Archives, Washington DC, (hereafter USNA), Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Warsaw Dropping Operations, p.1.

<sup>36</sup> USNA, Frantic 7, RG334: Memorandum, Cable USSTAF From Eaker (11355) on restudy of use of Air Force for Dropping Operations, 12 Aug. 1944.

<sup>37</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Cable USSTAF 11355.

<sup>38</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Warsaw Dropping Operations, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Cable 151525 F.

On 14 August, Harriman wrote to V.M. Molotov, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs: Our Air Force command here has received an urgent directive to clear with the Soviet Air Force a request for a flight of American four-engined bombers with a fighter escort to undertake a shuttle operation from England tomorrow morning, weather and operational conditions permitting.<sup>40</sup>

Part of the force would drop arms for the Polish resistance forces in Warsaw while the balance would attack an airfield in the vicinity and thence proceed to the bases in the Soviet Union. Harriman indicated the matter had also been taken up with Soviet Air Staff through the usual military channels, but political considerations were necessarily involved.<sup>41</sup>

Harriman also explained that the distance of the trip by British bombers based in Italy (a round trip of roughly 3 000 kilometres) made operations extremely difficult. The Anglo-American Command had therefore decided the most viable option was a daylight shuttle mission by American bombers to Soviet bases.<sup>42</sup>

Andrei Vyshinski, Assistant People's Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, replied by letter, refusing Soviet co-operation and objecting once again to American assistance of the Poles. The Soviet Government was resolute in its refusal to allow American planes to use Russian bases.<sup>43</sup>

An urgent meeting was convened in Moscow on 15 August 1944. Present were Vyshinski, Harriman, British ambassador Sir Archibald Clark-Kerr, and three secretaries.<sup>44</sup>

Clark-Kerr stressed they attended the talks as ambassadors. They were, however, also friends concerned about the *impasse*. He pointed out that the Soviet position did not tally with Stalin's undertaking to Polish Prime Minister Mikolajczyk some weeks before, when he had indicated a willingness to assist the Polish revolt in Warsaw. Supporting the Poles now was in the interest of all concerned, since these heroic actions had caught the popular imagination in the United States and Great Britain. If the Soviet government's refusal

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<sup>40</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Cable to Molotov, p. 1

<sup>41</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Cable to Molotov, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Cable to Molotov, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Cable 11753.

<sup>44</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on Dropping of Military Supplies on Warsaw p. 1.

became public knowledge, it would lead to a big outcry and give credence to the rumour that the Red Army had slowed down its offensive towards Warsaw for political reasons.<sup>45</sup>

Vyshinski agreed to look into the matter again but disagreed on the ambassadors' version of the meeting between Stalin and Mikołajczyk. He stressed the revolt was premature and had been carried out recklessly, an adventure which the Soviets could not support.<sup>46</sup> Harriman stressed he was not seeking Soviet participation. His only objective was to obtain permission to use Soviet bases during the operation. Vyshinski maintained that agreeing to the request would imply participation. The Red Army was playing the greatest role, or rather a great role, in killing Germans. The Soviet Government did not wish to encourage adventurous undertakings which would work against this. The historical record of the Soviet Union would stand for many years on the achievements of the Soviet army and people in their struggle against the Germans, he said. The question of Warsaw did not enter into this.<sup>47</sup>

Clark-Kerr still wanted to clear up one point. According to his understanding, Stalin indicated to Mikołajczyk a willingness to assist the Poles. It now seemed some change had taken place in Soviet policy; that the Poles in Warsaw were not worthy of assistance. Vyshinski denied a change in policy, merely a careful weighing of options on how to assist the Poles.<sup>48</sup> On 20 August, Churchill sent Roosevelt the text of a telegram sent from Moscow by Sir Archibald Clark-Kerr, containing a statement by Andrei Vyshinski the Soviet government could not object to English or American aircraft dropping arms in the region of Warsaw. But they objected to American or British aircraft landing on Soviet territory. The Soviet Government did not wish to associate itself with the adventure in Warsaw.<sup>49</sup>

On 9 September, the Soviet Government made a surprising move by reiterating its earlier position that members of the Polish *émigré* government in London were responsible for the Warsaw adventure, without consulting with the Russians first. This revolt had subsequently placed the Red Army's operational moves in jeopardy. The Soviets now

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<sup>45</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on Dropping of Military Supplies on Warsaw, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on Dropping of Military Supplies on Warsaw, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on Dropping of Military Supplies on Warsaw, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on Dropping of Military Supplies on Warsaw, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Gilbert, *Churchill*, vol. VII, p. 926.

suggested the appointment of an unbiased commission to investigate the matter, since had been conducted in an irregular and irresponsible way.<sup>50</sup>

Their statement insisted that nobody could accuse the Soviet government of providing inadequate aid to the Poles. To blame the Soviet government for the dreadful situation in Warsaw, was to shift the responsibility "from a sick head to a clear one."<sup>51</sup> This statement of the Soviet Government's position on the Warsaw question is apparently contrary to the spirit of Allied co-operation. But the British must also bear some share of the blame. If the British Government had taken steps in good time to warn the Soviet command of the planned uprising, the events in Warsaw would have followed a different course. This seemed to be a repetition of what transpired in April 1943 when the Polish *émigré* government accused the Soviet Union of the Katyn massacre.

Unexpectedly there was a change in Russian thinking on the matter. On 10 September the Soviet government surprised the Allies by informing the British and American governments that the Soviets were prepared, albeit reluctantly, to allow Allied aircraft to use Russian airfields.<sup>52</sup> The first American flight, "Frantic 7", was accordingly planned for 14 September but then postponed until the next day because of the weather. One hundred and eight American bombers left Britain for Warsaw on 15 September, but were recalled to their base in Britain after weather conditions had deteriorated to such an extent that they could not carry on with the mission.

On 18 September, "Frantic 7" was launched again and this time three American combat wings of the 8th U.S. Air Force, consisting of 110 B-17 bombers and 64 P-51 fighter aircraft, dropped 1 280 containers of supplies over Warsaw.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, this single daytime drop was the only military contribution the Americans made to alleviate the dilemma of Warsaw.

The performance by the US 8th Air Force raised a terrific enthusiasm among the Polish population and improved the morale of the people. This flight by the Americans was seen as a renewed effort by the Allies to assist the partisans in their struggle. The fact is that by now this was the partisans' only chance of survival. Although initial messages indicated that most of the supplies were collected, it was later realised that a lot of the supplies fell

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<sup>50</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Translation of message of the Soviet Government, Cable 16572, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Translation of message of Soviet Government, Cable 16572, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Cable 16572, p. 1.

outside the Polish lines and into enemy hands. Only 288 containers eventually reached the Polish partisans. The fact that the Russians were also not in favour of a repetition of such missions reduced this effort by the Americans to nothing more than window dressing.

On 23 September, a discussion was held on the subject of the battle for Warsaw, a meeting which conclusively proved the Russians' unwillingness to become too involved, except on their own terms. Amongst those representing the Allies were Harriman and Clark-Kerr while Stalin was assisted by Molotov.<sup>54</sup>

Stalin was not satisfied with the progress of the battle for Warsaw, stating that the Vistula had proved to be a tremendous obstacle. It had been impossible to get tanks across the river because of continual heavy German shelling and it was difficult to carry on operations without tanks. Even medium sized tanks could not be ferried across the river because of German vigilance. They could not take Warsaw by frontal assault because of the advantageous position of the Germans. The Russian plan was to encircle the city and cut off German communications so that the Nazis would find themselves in a "mousetrap."<sup>55</sup>

Harriman enquired about contact with resistance groups in Warsaw and Stalin informed the meeting that some infantry battalions had been ferried across the Vistula to support the resistance groups. He also indicated that, after taking Prague, the Russians had a clearer picture of the Warsaw situation. The insurgents were still fighting in four different isolated parts of the city, attempting to defend themselves, but with no offensive capabilities. The insurgents had beaten off some German attacks but had to remain in hiding. They had no artillery and were equipped only with rifles and pistols. The Russians had dropped mortars, Tommy guns, food and medical supplies and the Red Army was in contact with the groups both by radio and through individuals who swam across the Vistula. It was now clear, he continued, that few of the supplies dropped by the Americans and British planes from high altitudes had actually reached the Poles. Most of these supplies had been scattered by the wind, in some cases up to thirty kilometres away. Stalin explained that the Russians had used single-engine night-training planes at an altitude of 300 to 400 metres to drop supplies and receipt had been acknowledged. Harriman was quick to point out the British came through at night at 60 to 120 metres and it was thought that they had been successful.<sup>56</sup> American planes had attempted drops by day from a high altitude.

According to Soviet estimates, Stalin argued, there were only about 2 500 to 3 000 armed insurgents in the above-mentioned four areas. There were also active sympathisers who

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<sup>54</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on the Battle for Warsaw, C 26.

<sup>55</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on the Battle for Warsaw, C 26.

<sup>56</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on the Battle for Warsaw, C 27.

could not participate because they had no weapons. The insurgents also intermingled with the Germans, making bombing or shelling of German positions very difficult. Stalin then offered his theory why the insurrection started prematurely: the Germans had threatened to deport the entire male population of Warsaw as the Red Army approached Warsaw. The Poles had no option but to fight. Either option meant death. This forced the majority of the Warsaw underground to fight the Germans. The four Red Army battalions despatched into Warsaw, Stalin claimed, could not really go underground to assist the mutineers, since the insurgents were hiding themselves in drain pipes and sewers - something very difficult for soldiers in uniform to do.<sup>57</sup>

General Bor-Komorowski was also nowhere to be found, Stalin announced, and had no contact with the insurgent groups, which operated independently. He suggested he had obviously left the city, "commanding a radio station in some unknown place", probably too afraid to establish contact. The Soviets, on the other hand, maintained direct contact with the insurgents, Stalin said.<sup>58</sup>

Warsaw now resembled Prague at the time of its liberation, Stalin recalled. That was the time when the entire population was found starving. The Germans had withheld food from the inhabitants and had used police dogs to hunt out the male population to deport them to forced labour camps.<sup>59</sup>

On 28 September, the Americans announced their next planned shuttle, "Frantic 8." However, weather conditions remained unfavourable until 2 October, when the Russians withdrew their earlier permission for the use of their airfields.<sup>60</sup>

By 26 September, the position in Warsaw had deteriorated even more. Bor-Komorowski reported that the availability of food for the army and the population in Warsaw had become catastrophic. Only 60 000 kilogram of barley was left. People were eating dogs to survive. Many deaths occurred because of starvation and an alarmingly high mortality rate among children prevailed. Outbreaks of scarlet fever had also been reported. There were severe cases of exhaustion throughout Warsaw because of the lack of proper clothing for winter conditions.

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<sup>57</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on the Battle for Warsaw, C 27

<sup>58</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on the Battle for Warsaw, C 27

<sup>59</sup> USNA, Box 22, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on the Battle for Warsaw, C 28

USNA, Box 67, RG334: Memorandum, Conversation on the Battle for Warsaw, p. 54.



Without substantial relief efforts from the Allies, the partisans would not be able to hold out for more than ten days at the most.<sup>61</sup> Continued resistance was impossible due to a serious ammunition shortage. On 28 September General Bor-Komorowski informed his superiors in London he had no alternative but to surrender. After negotiations with the Germans, the rebels surrendered on 2 October 1944.<sup>62</sup> The city itself was in virtual ruins.

Three weeks later the Russian forces entered Warsaw, met by grim scenes of devastation and the decomposing bodies of partisans who had not been buried.<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusion

Looking back upon the ill-timed and doomed Warsaw uprising of 1944, it is impossible to overlook the tragedy of the episode. One is struck by the total and utter futility of the whole attempt to liberate the Polish capital from the inside with the hope and promise of outside assistance.

This revolt was one of the most disastrous in the history of modern warfare. In terms of the Allied war effort, it was not a total failure. Nearly 10 000 Germans were killed, 7 000 went missing and 7 000 were wounded.<sup>64</sup> This meant a loss of manpower, something the Germans could ill afford at that point in time.

The opening words of the last message received from Warsaw are a grim reminder of this infamous episode:

This is the stark truth. We were treated worse than Hitler's satellites, worse than Italy, Romania, Finland. May God, who is just, pass judgement on the terrible injustice suffered by the Polish nation, and may He punish accordingly all those who are guilty.<sup>65</sup>

The consequences were grave. The difficult Polish question now became the conscience of the West, and relations between Britain and the Soviet Union were irreparably damaged. As the European war entered its last phase, the shadow of Warsaw clouded

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<sup>61</sup> USNA, Box 67, RG334, Polish Embassy, No. 4, p. 48.

<sup>62</sup> Churchill, *Triumph and tragedy*, p. 128.

<sup>63</sup> Zawodny, *Nothing but honour*, p. 196.

<sup>64</sup> Churchill, *Triumph and tragedy*, p. 128.

<sup>65</sup> Ehrman, *Grand strategy*, vol. 5 (London, 1956), p. 376.

British strategic thought.<sup>66</sup> Churchill was very concerned with the position of the Polish people but he surely also had political esteem to take into consideration.

Let us consider the alternative for the Russians.

If the Russians had rushed to the aid of the Poles, as they had promised in broadcasts from Moscow, the cumbersome and dangerous flights from Italy by the Liberators would not have been necessary. Russian trucks could have delivered the necessary supplies to the city within hours if they had the infrastructural facilities to provide the service. Also, had the Russian soldiers entered the city, the German *Wehrmacht* would have had to fight the Polish underground on the one side and the well-equipped Russian Red Army on the other.

When Bor-Komorowski surrendered on 2 October 1944, the partisans had vainly tried for 63 days to liberate their capital. Of the approximately 40 000 men and women members of the underground army, roughly 15 000 died. In the process another 25 000 partisans were wounded, 6 500 of them seriously. Total civilian casualties were estimated at 180 000 people.<sup>67</sup>

When Churchill addressed the House of Commons on 5 October 1944, he paid poignant tribute to the heroic stand of the Polish people:

In the battle for Warsaw, terrible damage has been inflicted upon that noble city, and its heroic population has undergone sufferings and privations unsurpassed even among the miseries of this war.<sup>68</sup>

Twenty years later, in 1964, Lord Attlee, former leader of the British Labour Party, who served under Churchill as deputy Prime Minister, remarked:

The Warsaw Rising was one of the most heroic episodes in the last war. The insurgents fought furiously for many days, not only in the streets of Warsaw, but even in the sewers. Yet they were defeated on account of the shameful behaviour of Stalin, which must not be forgotten.<sup>69</sup>

Air Marshall Sir John Slessor accused the Russians of betraying Bor-Komorowski's army and giving rise to the "fruitless sacrifice of many airmen." He condemned the Kremlin and

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<sup>66</sup> Ehrman, *Grand strategy*, vol. 5, p. 376.

<sup>67</sup> Churchill, *Triumph and tragedy*, p. 128.

<sup>68</sup> Hansard, House of Commons, vol. 403, "Warsaw", p. 1139.

<sup>69</sup> Zawadski, *USSR and Warsaw rising of 1944*, p. 27

predicted that after this incident no responsible statesman could trust any "Russian Communist."<sup>70</sup>

Various interpretations are possible regarding the question whether the supplies to Warsaw could have been done by the Russians. The fact is, although the Russians did have the logistic ability, they most probably did not have any supplies available. The fact that the revolt by the partisans in Warsaw failed and that subsequent events showed that, in terms of the overall strategy of the war, little was accomplished by the Warsaw operations, does not belittle the efforts of the aircrews who participated.

The Warsaw operations nevertheless represent one of the most outstanding achievements of the Allied air forces of which the South African Air Force was an integral part. Every one of the flights undertaken represents an outstanding act of bravery.

As far as the Warsaw Airlift is concerned a military lesson is to be learned from this episode: Adventurous initiatives which are unlikely to work should not be undertaken for purely political motives. The flights undertaken from Italy were conducted under the most hazardous circumstances and, as was later indicated very clearly in individual flight reports, the crews were battling against overwhelming odds. Their objectives were unrealistic and militarily catastrophic. Seen from a military perspective, this operation was reckless and should never have taken place. On the other hand the Warsaw operation later resulted in a firm bond of friendship between the crew members who took part in the task flights to Warsaw and the free Polish community in South Africa.<sup>71</sup> The Warsaw Airlift will, therefore, always be important from a cultural-historical perspective.

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<sup>70</sup> Slessor, *Central Blue*, p. 612.

<sup>71</sup> *The Citizen*, January 1978.