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The Last Knights of Poland

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Dr Rafał Leśkiewicz, the editor-in-chief of the website przystanekhistoria.pl talks with prof. Krzysztof Szwagrzyk, the deputy president of the Institute of National Remembrance, about the phenomenon of the Cursed Soldiers and their presence in the contemporary social life.

Dr Rafał Leśkiewicz: We are approaching March 1st, the National Day of Remembrance of the Cursed/Indomitable Soldiers. What does that day mean to you?

PhD Krzysztof Szwagrzyk: It is a day when we can be proud of the attitude and achievements of the

heroes of the anti-Communist resistance and a day of remembrance of their sacrifice.

RL: About their name, should we call them Cursed or Indomitable?

KSz: They are commonly known as the Cursed Soldiers. This term came to existence in the Republican League in the beginning of the 90s. It was to point out that in the free Poland members of the anti-Communist uprising, which took place between 1944-1963, remained in an oblivion, banished from the Polish consciousness, cursed. The term "Cursed" became popular and is commonly identified today as a proper name. Some people, same as I, believe that the term "Cursed" describing our heroes is a contradiction in itself, opening the possibility of negative associations. Next to the term "Cursed Soldiers" they are also called "Indomitable Soldiers", members of the anti-Communist uprising or even "The Last Knights of Poland".

RL: It would seem like after thirty years from the fall of the Communist regime we should know all the soldiers of this greatest resistance in Europe after the end of the Second World War. We should know and commemorate all those who died from the hands of the Soviet-chosen authorities. Meanwhile, despite the efforts of many people and institutions, and first and foremost of the Institute of National Remembrance, we still do not know many basic facts about the soldiers of the underground. Why is that?

KSz: There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the research in this area, realised on the basis of a free access to archives, could only begin when the Institute of National Remembrance was created after the year 2000. The earlier research, although incredibly precious, was limited to a small group of historians and conducted under very difficult conditions. Secondly, the phenomenon of a mass resistance against Communism in Poland is usually mainly researched by the researchers of the Institute of National Remembrance and is still not a very popular subject for the academic communities in Poland. Another important reason is the incompleteness of the source base caused by the destruction of some archives in Poland, as well as the inaccessibility of the Soviet documents without which the full description of the anti-Communist resistance in Poland is impossible.

RL: I remember that when the Institute was created a special research project was initiated which goal was to document all the cases of repression against the soldiers of the freedom underground. Among others, lists of military victims of the regional courts, mainly the soldiers of the resistance, were created. After a few years, the project came to a halt. There were and still are published materials describing individual units or commanders. But I still feel like that is not enough. What, in your opinion, requires the most effort in the research of the history of post-war

anti-Communist troops? What should we concentrate on the most in our historical research?

KSz: When a dozen years ago the Institute of National Remembrance published *The Atlas of underground resistance*, there were voices that we were witnessing the creation of the work which would fully describe the structures, people and actions of the anti-Communist underground in Poland in the first decade of Communism. Despite the realisation of many research in this area, we are still unable to produce a single, academic monograph of the Polish resistance. For this to happen, we would need to conduct thorough regional research including the lands which Poland lost after the war, not only its post-war territories. The research should include all the branches of the resistance which varied a lot in the post-war reality. It is crucial to determine the number of people engaged in the fighting as well as the number of victims, those fallen in combat, executed on the basis of court verdicts, tortured to death in the prisons of the Security Office or killed in camps and penitentiaries.

RL: If I am not wrong, you were the first historian in Poland to take on the subject of court crimes committed in the Stalinist era on the soldiers of the anti-Communist resistance. How many judges and military prosecutors from the years 1945-1956 were punished for their actions?

KSz: The answer to that question is simple and painful at the same time: almost none. I only know one case of sentencing of a Stalinist, military judge for prison. But, even in that case, the sentence was in probation. The criminal activities and rulings of the post-war justice system were very precisely described in literature. Countless publications show that historians and researchers did everything they could to examine the scale of the judicial terror of these times, point the victims, as well as prosecutors and judges who caused many of the court crimes. Unfortunately, the free Poland at first did not know how and then was unable to punish those who committed crimes while serving in the military and justice system of the "People's Poland"/Polish People's Republic. Thirty years since the fall of Communism in Poland its crimes and their perpetrators remain unpunished.

RL: You devoted many years of your life to the search for the places of burial of the victims of the Communist regime, especially from the first decade of the post-war reality. How many places of burial did you find and which ones could still be hiding the remains of our heroes?

KSz: We found more than two hundred places in the country and abroad. Many of them have been examined. However, knowing the scale of the terror, we can safely assume that it is only the beginning of the work, searches, research, exhumations and identifications. We need to conduct those in each and every one of the regional and province facilities of the Security Office, Military Information, places of combat and pacifications, former prisons, camps, cemeteries and so on. It is a duty to be fulfilled by more than one generations of Poles.

RL: While searching for the victims of the Communist regime, many times you have met with relatives of the Cursed Soldiers murdered by the authorities of these times. Which meeting, which conversation you remembered the most?

KSz: There were many of them. I especially remember those when we informed the relatives of finding and identifying the remains of their closest ones, brothers, fathers, husbands, grandfathers. Such conversations were very emotional, moving, there were tears and sometimes shock, but there always was a sense of recognition of the value of the mission of the Institute of National Remembrance.

RL: The subject of the Cursed/Indomitable Soldiers became a recognisable subject in Polish pop culture: symbolism, individual heroes, slogans, quotes, the phenomenon of re-enactment groups. One could give a thousand examples. Does this popularisation of knowledge about these soldiers, where apart from symbolism there is not much else, make the message we try to convey about them more shallow?

KSz: The young generations of Poles have their own values where the Cursed Soldiers have an important place and they show their respect to them in their own, youthful, various and usually spontaneous way. I do not think; however, that it is making the subject shallow and without deeper understanding and reflection. We should allow the youth honour the people they recognised as heroes in their own way, not because someone told them to, but because they chose to do so with their hearts and minds.

RL: The more we talk about the Cursed/Indomitable Soldiers, the more we see how some people try to negate their achievements. Who has a problem with the memory of the Indomitable Soldiers today?

KSz: The Cursed Soldiers always have and will be a problem for people and communities who are mentally, and sometimes by family too, tied with the Communist system. For someone who sees value in Communism, those who stood against it will always remain the enemy and – using the Stalinist phrasing – “criminals”.

RL: The search and identification of the victims of the Communist regime is an initiative unprecedented on a European scale, perhaps even globally. Can the actions of the Institute be an example to follow for other countries struggling with the heritage left by the Communist totalitarianism? Are similar works being done in other countries of central-eastern Europe?

KSz: The works done by the Institute of National Remembrance were met with huge interest in countries which also experienced the Soviet enslavement. All of them, upon seeing our operations, speak with respect about the road Poland has taken to search for the unknown places of burial of the victims of Communist crimes. From our part, we always express our readiness to cooperate and possibly help out in finding the secret places of burial and identification of found remains.

RL: Several years ago, the subject of formally pardoning the Indomitable Soldiers by the Polish courts resurfaced again. Is it necessary, in your opinion, to reprove the soldiers of the underground in a court procedure, since they were almost always sentenced in violation of the most basic laws?

KSz: I personally do not think it is necessary. I think that a situation where the heroes repressed by the Communist system would have to prove in front of a court that they fought for the freedom of the Homeland and demand a legal confirmation of this, all the while their oppressors remain unpunished and peacefully live out the rest of their days, would be incredibly unfair. It is the officers and officials of the Communist state (members of the Communist party, terror apparatus, justice system) who should prove in front of a court of the Republic of Poland that they did no harm to anyone. Not their victims.

RL: Thank you for the interview.

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