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The Campaign of British Trade Unions to Oppose the Polish Resettlement Act of 1947

Abstract

This article examines how British trade unions organised a coordinated, albeit unsuccessful campaign to oppose both the establishment of the Polish Resettlement Corps in March 1946 and the passing of its accompanying piece of legislation, the Polish Resettlement Act, the following year. Perturbed at the influx to Britain of well over 100,000 Polish soldiers who had fought for Allied forces during the Second World War, many organised labour movements viewed these Poles as foreign competition for British homes, jobs and resources, especially during a period of post-war rationing. The fact that the vast majority of these trade unions were strongly left-wing and led by admirers of the Soviet Union made them not only highly sceptical of Polish soldiers' claims of being unable to return to Poland fearing communist persecution but also led them to promote communist propaganda by labelling the Polish 2nd Corps, led by Gen. Władysław Anders, as a quasi-fascist pro-German army and a fifth column of Polish reactionaries posing a great danger to Britain. By focusing on a selection of archival documents from 1945-1946, the article demonstrates not only how these trade unions engaged in intense lobbying of the British government to prevent Poles from settling in post-war Britain, but also how they attempted to appeal to the broader population through rhetoric based on xenophobia, Soviet propaganda and even anti-Catholicism.

KEYWORDS: Polish Resettlement Act of 1947, post-war Britain, trade unions, post-war Polish migration, communist propaganda

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Polish Resettlement Act of 1947, powojenna Wielka Brytania, związki zawodowe, powojenna emigracja Polaków, propaganda komunistyczna.

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1 | Introduction

Although 5 July 1945 is now remembered as the day of an extraordinarily consequential British general election that removed Winston Churchill from power right at the end of the Second World War, it was to prove even more disastrous for another prime minister based in London, namely the head of the Polish Government-in-Exile, Tomasz Arciszewski. Indeed, it was on this day that the British government, citing the provisions of the Yalta Conference, recognized the establishment of the Provisional Government of National Unity in Poland, a puppet entity formed by Polish communists with the support of the Soviet Union and now claiming to be Poland's rightful government. Although the immediate consequence for the Polish government administration in London was a drastic reduction in its activities due to being deprived of British financial subsidies,^[1] a more pressing issue for the British turned out to be how to deal with the very large number of Allied soldiers comprising the Polish Armed Forces in the West, many of whom had no desire to return to a communist-controlled Poland and face persecution, imprisonment and possibly death. This decision, together with earlier decisions to cede most of eastern Poland to the Soviet Union in exchange for German territories along the Baltic Sea and the River Oder, led most Poles fighting in the West to feel cheated by their allies, the very same allies who had entered the war to protect Poland's territorial integrity in the first place. Thus, instead of the United Kingdom engineering a situation it where would quickly be able to rid itself of the tens of thousands of Polish servicemen and women based in Britain, it inadvertently became a magnet for Poles serving under British command in Europe and the Middle East to look for political refuge there, not only for themselves but for their families. Now facing an unexpected but unavoidable wave of Polish mass immigration during a time when the population of Britain was still under a regime of wartime rationing, the British government had to somehow navigate not only the usual bread-and-butter concerns regarding large influxes of foreigners but also accusations based on real, imagined or contrived political concerns. As we will see, it was the British Trade Union movement that proved to be the most vocal opponent of increasing the number of Poles in Britain – especially those of the Polish

¹ This figure was reported as being £30,000,000 in the British media at the time. Murray Edwards, "An Army of 250,000 that does not know what to do", *The Daily Mail*, 30 June 1945.

2nd Corps arriving from abroad – by expressing views that were largely based on xenophobia, Soviet propaganda and even anti-Catholicism, with the aim of attracting popular support for its position.

2 | The Polish Armed Forces in the West

Fighting since 1940 as something akin to a foreign legion under British command, the Polish Armed Forces in the West achieved a deservedly distinguished reputation for courage and determination in some of the key battles in the European and North African theatres of the Second World War, too numerous to list here. At the end of the conflict, it comprised about 250,000 men and was generally divided into the 1st Polish Corps based in Britain and the 2nd Polish Corps, led by Gen. Władysław Anders, based in Italy and the Middle East.^[2] Although 105,000 of the total number of officers and men returned to Poland in line with the British government's wishes following the war, 144,000 – far more than ever anticipated – decided to remain in the West, primarily in the United Kingdom.^[3] It was this large number of Poles – many of whom had never even seen Britain, despite fighting under its command – that was to cause such significant disquiet among certain sections of British society, especially trade unions heavily influenced by left-wing or Soviet ideology.

Clear differences were to emerge regarding the possibility of moving home among the units of the Polish Armed Forces in the West. Thus, while around 86,000 members of the 1st Polish Corps (approximately 50%) decided to return, they were at least returning to homes that still lay within Poland's redrawn borders. The situation for the 2nd Polish Corps was entirely different given that most of its soldiers came from Poland's eastern borderlands that had been incorporated into the Soviet Union, thus only allowing them the possibility to return as “Soviet” not Polish citizens and guaranteeing them a place in the Gulag or imminent execution for having

² Wojciech Markert, “Polish Armed Forces in the West in 1939-1947”, <https://fundacjakurtyki.pl/en/seeds-of-history/polish-armed-forces-in-the-west-in-1939-1947/>, [accessed 10 June 2025].

³ Michael Alfred Peszke, “The Demise of the Polish Armed Forces in the West” (Review article), *The Polish Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2010), 238.

fought in a Western “imperialist” army. Indeed, a significant number of soldiers in what was to become known as Anders’ Army – including Gen. Anders himself – had already spent years in Soviet captivity, luckily avoiding being slaughtered by the NKVD alongside the 20,000 Polish officers in the forests of Katyn in 1940, the same year when over 100,000 Poles had been deported with their families into the Soviet interior. Unsurprisingly, therefore, less than 10% of the soldiers of the Polish 2nd Corps decided to place their lives in further jeopardy by returning to their native land. Given this experience, it is also unsurprising that the Polish 2nd Corps harboured the strongest anti-communist and anti-Soviet feelings in the Polish Armed Forces in the West, in contrast to the 1st Corps whose animosity would have been more focused on the Germans due to their different geographical origins within Poland where the Nazi occupation had posed the primary threat. Indeed, it was the senior officers of the Polish 2nd Corps who were convinced, or even hoped, that a war between the Soviet Union and the Western powers would shortly ensue, thus restoring Poland’s former borders and their homes. In their minds, therefore, the preservation of the Polish armed forces so as to be ready to fight this “Last Battle” was seen as essential, even if eventually forced to function indefinitely as a reserve force of Polish civilians living in a foreign land.^[4]

Although the war in Europe had officially come to an end months before, as Michael Peszke describes, the Polish Armed Forces in the West continued to function more or less as a peace-time standing army under British command, long after British soldiers had been demobilised. Not only did the Polish Navy and Air Force even recruit new personnel, but Polish army units conducting occupation duties in Germany and Italy allowed Polish prisoners of war liberated from German camps to join the Polish forces. Controversially, they also recruited Poles who had been forcibly conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* and had been captured as German POWs or had switched sides during battles, a fact that was later used by British trade unionists to claim that significant numbers in Anders’ “Fascist” Army had “fought for the Germans”. In any case, the 2nd Corps in Italy continued to grow at an enormous rate following the war causing the British government to formally order the Polish Forces to cease recruitment, although Anders found creative ways to circumvent this order.^[5]

⁴ Ibid., 234.

⁵ Peszke, “The Demise of the Polish Armed Forces in the West”, 235.

Even as the war was drawing to a conclusion, senior figures in the British government, such as Foreign Secretary Antony Eden, expressed serious concern to Prime Minister Winston Churchill in early April 1945 about the implications of maintaining a Polish army under British command – one increasing, not decreasing in size – especially regarding its increasingly fraught relations with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, a sanguine Churchill replied “We shall need them. A British Foreign Legion will be a help after the war. Anyhow let us see how things develop in the next month.”^[6] By VE Day, however, Sir Orme Sargent, deputy under-secretary at the Foreign Office, was claiming to the prime minister that General Anders was bombarding his men with anti-Russian propaganda.^[7] The end of May saw Churchill’s assistant private secretary, Jock Colville, also warn him that the Poles in Anders’ Army who had previously trained in the *Wehrmacht* “are said to be excellent fighting material but, owing to their hatred of Russia, to be dangerously pro-German in sympathy.”^[8] When the Provisional Government of National Unity was established in Poland the following month, the British government hoped that this would entice many of the Poles under British command to go home. Indeed, it hoped they would follow the example of Stanisław Mikołajczyk, a popular Polish politician who had been key figure in the London-based Polish Government-in-Exile, and who had already decided to return to his native land take up a senior position in this communist-run puppet government, although this soon turned out to be a seriously misguided act of good faith. From this point on British government figures started to accuse anti-communist Polish officers of actively obstructing the return of their men to Poland with Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Foreign Office’s most senior civil servant, writing to the prime minister warning him that “we must expect that the extremist Poles will do their best to discredit the new Government established in Poland as a result of the agreement in Moscow and to seek to influence the Polish Armed Forces against it.”^[9] On election day 1945, Cadogan wrote to Churchill again, this time advising that “pro-Warsaw” and “anti-Warsaw” Poles in

⁶ Memo to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, 3 April 1945, PREM 3/352/13, National Archives, London.

⁷ Letter from Sir Orme Sargent, Foreign Office (FO) to Prime Minister Winston Churchill, 8 May 1945, PREM 3/352/13, National Archives, London.

⁸ Memo to Prime Minister Winston Churchill from JRC (John Rupert “Jock” Colville), 30 May 1945, PREM 3/352/13, National Archives, London.

⁹ Memo to Prime Minister Winston Churchill from Sir Alexander Cadogan, 26 June 1945, PREM 3/352/13, National Archives, London.

Britain should be segregated due to the possibility of violence breaking out between the factions, as well as to minimise the latter's influence in undermining Mikołajczyk's tenuous position in Poland where he was being accused of being an agent of the anti-communist "London Poles".^[10] Thus, at a very early stage after the conclusion of the war in Europe, there was a strong lobbying of Churchill by his own ministers and civil servants to view Polish forces under British command as a serious obstacle to implementing the new post-war order agreed by the Allies.

Seemingly having forgotten the significant Polish contribution to the Allied war effort – not to mention the vital role Polish pilots had played in the Battle of Britain – the British press also started to portray the Polish Armed Forces in the West as a burden that Britain could no longer bear. For instance, on 30 June 1945 *The Daily Mail* published an article entitled "An Army of 250,000 that does not know what to do" and while it did sympathise with such a large force suddenly being left in the lurch by the British government and divested of funding, instructions and information, the popular newspaper also demanded to know who was now going to feed the 4,000 Polish-English babies produced by wartime marriages between English women and Polish servicemen.^[11] Now existing in a political limbo, the Polish Armed Forces in the West spent the rest of 1945 viewed by many in Britain as both an economic burden and a political liability, especially among figures in the new Labour government who were loath to fulfil promises given to the Poles by the previous prime minister Winston Churchill.

Matters grew even more complex when, in February 1946, Poland's communist-run "Provisional Government" in Warsaw declared that it no longer legally recognized the Polish Armed Forces in the West, claiming such forces had no right to exist in opposition to the communist-run Polish Army in Poland itself. More worryingly, it now required all Polish soldiers serving abroad to secure Polish visas before returning to Poland and face a vetting process assessing their loyalty. When it turned out that possibly hundreds of thousands of Poles might refuse to leave the British Army – viewing such a visa requirement as a communist trick – the British Government found itself in a very awkward position. This became

¹⁰ Memo to Prime Minister Winston Churchill from Sir Alexander Cadogan, 5 July 1945, PREM 3/352/13, National Archives, London.

¹¹ Murray Edwards, "An Army of 250,000 that does not know what to do", *The Daily Mail*, 30 June 1945.

even worse when – as we will see – left-wing trade unions launched an aggressive campaign towards Britain’s Labour government, not only to encourage the Poles to move on quickly but have them deported *en masse* if necessary. As historians such as Michael Peszke have previously outlined, post-war Britain was subjected to a great deal of communist propaganda in portraying anyone opposed to communist or socialist rule in Poland as “reactionary feudal fascists” even among British generals normally supportive of the Poles.^[12]

Moreover, for British trade union leaders, in particular, many of whom had strongly left-wing, even communist and pro-Soviet views, the impending arrival of such people in Britain under what would become the 1947 Polish Resettlement Act was anathema to all they believed. As we will see, to counteract this perceived threat these union leaders developed a two-pronged line of attack, hoping that the post-war government controlled by the Labour Party, one in which trade unions had powerful influence, would bow to a campaign designed to exert pressure from above and below. Firstly, they hoped that demobbed British soldiers returning home from the front would be horrified to learn that possibly hundreds of thousands of Poles would be taking their jobs, homes and the food out of their proverbial children’s mouths. Secondly and more ideologically, they attempted to portray the arrival of Anders’ Army as the importation of an implacably anti-Soviet reactionary Polish fifth column that was hell-bent on dragging the United Kingdom straight back into war, this time with a country they saw, not as an enemy at all, but as the key ally which had helped such soldiers defeat Nazism on the battlefield in the first place.

Protests about the prospect of the above-described socialist nightmare coming true found its way into the public sphere from February 1946 on, following a much-publicised debate in the House of Commons, one in which left-wing MPs sought to discredit Polish military units, especially those in Anders’ Army still continuing to expand its ranks in Italy. For instance, Labour MP Konni Zilliacus,^[13] widely regarded as a communist sympathiser even by his Labour colleagues, demanded to know from Hector McNeil, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs “whether he is satisfied that no officers or agents of General Anders are engaged in propaganda or activities, or co-operating with movements,

¹² Peszke, “The Demise of the Polish Armed Forces in the West”, 237.

¹³ For an overview of Konni Zilliacus’s life and career, see: Donald S. Birn, “Konni Zilliacus.” *Peace Research*, Vol. 16, no. 3 (1984), 28-38.

hostile to the present Polish Government” and asking him to bear in mind that “since this country is paying £2 million a month for the upkeep of these troops, we are entitled to insist that they should not embitter our relations with friendly Governments ...”^[14] Thus, we see here at the outset the two central arguments that would feature in almost all the future protests of the British Trade Union movement throughout 1946 and into 1947, namely that the Polish Armed Forces constituted both a domestic economic burden and an international political liability, particularly in Britain’s relations with the Soviet Union. Fortunately, there were figures in parliament, such as Professor Douglas Savory from Belfast, who immediately pointed out that “this attack on the Polish section of the British Army in Italy is part of the combined propaganda being carried on against the British Army everywhere, in Greece, Indonesia and Egypt ...”^[15] Indeed, Professor Savory would prove to be one of the most strident defenders of the Polish Armed Forces in the West, especially against what he felt were scurrilous and orchestrated attacks based on Soviet propaganda, stating in a debate held in the House of Commons on 20 February 1946:

Today General Anders is being attacked on the ground that he is carrying on anti-Soviet propaganda. He is an honourable man. In any conversation I have ever had with him I have always found that he spoke the truth, and I would not doubt the word of this gallant gentleman for a single moment. He has denied the charges of the Polish Provisional Government that he was supplying certain Polish clandestine organisations with arms and money, and pointed out it was ridiculous to accuse him of sending arms to Poland by air, since he has no aircraft at his disposal and as the Commander-in-Chief of the Second Corps he is under A.F.H.Q., and everything which he has is given to him by them. At the same time, he denied the accusations of anti-Semitism in the Polish Second Corps. There are over 1,000 Jews in this corps, including 180 officers, and not one of those Jews has expressed the desire to return to Poland.

¹⁴ House of Commons debate: Polish Second Corps (Political Activities), 11 February 1946, *Hansard*, Vol. 419.

¹⁵ House of Commons debate: Polish Second Corps (Political Activities), 11 February 1946, *Hansard*, Vol. 419.

Moreover, in response to the ever-growing calls for the Poles under British command to go home and rebuild their war-torn country, a call that soon would also be echoed in many trade union protests, Professor Savory explained:

I have a large number of Polish friends here in London, but so far from urging them not to go back to Poland I have said to them, "I feel that what you should do, if you possibly can, is to try to restore your country. Go back and work for your native land." They have all said to me over and over again, "That is what we want to do. Do you mean to say when we have our children there in Poland, our wives in Poland, you think we do not want to join them? All that we want is a reasonable guarantee of security."^[16]

Given that these debates in parliament were widely reported in the British press, there was an immediate reaction from concerned individuals around the country, usually those with strong left-wing views and/or trade union links, outraged at the rumour that Polish soldiers were not just going to be allowed to settle in Britain but awarded the status of British nationals. Indeed, Hector A. Stewart from Glasgow wrote to his MP, Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison, not only demanding that all Poles be repatriated within three months but claiming that "many have lived better than many Britons during the past six years and had an easy time" and raising further concerns about their "political opinions", incidentally the same two points which would later feature in protests from British trade union organisations as if written on the basis of an already-prepared template. Then, after complaining about the economic burden posed by this "alien race", Mr. Stewart stated:

We, in Scotland, are utterly sick at the sight of Poles and they are still roaming about the country. You will hear on all sides the expression "These D[amned] Poles. When are we going to kick them out". It is not that we are inhospitable, but it is simply the old question of the guest overstaying his welcome.^[17]

¹⁶ House of Commons debate: Foreign Affairs, 20 February 1946, *Hansard*, Vol. 419.

¹⁷ Letter from Hector Stewart to Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison, 21 February 1946, FO 371/56508, National Archives, London.

The same month British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin started to receive an increasing number of strongly worded letters highly critical not only of the government's intentions but portraying the Poles under British command both at home and abroad as dangerous and untrustworthy "fascists". For instance, a Royal Navy seaman and active trade union member, R. Maitland Earl, who had served alongside Polish units in Italy, informed Bevin that they were: "... little educated and unable to distinguish between propaganda and truth. They are not democratic in outlook, are very anti-Socialist and anti-Trade Unionist." More seriously, however, he claimed that Polish soldiers there were "robbers" and "brigands" involved in stealing cars from Italian civilians and petrol from the British Army, even going as far as to state that: "Frequently they interfere in Italian political affairs and break up violently left-wing meetings. Many people have been killed in these affairs – documentary evidence is available to all of this." In going on to claim that "these occupying Poles sneer at our Labour government" and should not be granted British nationality, Maitland Earl concluded by saying that: "I regret very much to say that the fundamental attitude of these poor deluded men is Fascist and I am afraid it is going to take a long time to change that attitude."^[18] Other MPs, especially those in Scotland where many Polish units had been based throughout the war, started receiving strong protests from their constituents about the impending arrival of more Poles. For instance, another ex-Royal Navy service man, Andrew Quinn from Port Glasgow, wrote to his local MP, Thomas Scollan, incensed at the prospect that the Polish soldiers could be granted British nationality and complaining that they were politically dubious and a drain on the taxpayer.^[19] When subsequently forwarded Mr. Quinn's letter, Bevin backtracked on the nationality question by stating:

I have never made any declaration to the effect that members of the Polish Forces would be granted British nationality. Nor has any other member of the British government. It may be that Mr. Quinn is thinking of the remarks Mr. Churchill made on the subject last year. Mr. Churchill then expressed

¹⁸ Letter from R. Maitland Earl to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 24 February 1946, FO 371/56508, National Archives, London.

¹⁹ Letter from Andrew Quinn to Thomas Scollan MP for West Renfrewshire, 3 March 1946, FO 371/56508, National Archives, London.

the hope that it might be possible to offer British nationality to these Poles, but he made no promise.^[20]

In fact, this statement was made just three days after Bevin met Gen. Anders during a short visit to London where the British Foreign Secretary informed him that the Polish 2nd Corps would have to be disbanded and that the main aim of the British government in this regard was to ensure the speedy return of as many Poles as possible to their home country and requesting the Polish general's cooperation in this matter. Anders was taken aback that the British government planned to distribute an official message stating the above to all Polish soldiers within days without giving him sufficient opportunity to examine or react to it. At the same time, the British promised not to compel anyone to return against their will and would "do their best to provide for their future", while warning that there "could be no guarantee that all would be able to establish themselves in British territory."^[21] Although he made a point of thanking the British government for its continued support throughout the war and understanding its desire to facilitate the return of Polish soldiers home, Anders made it clear to Bevin that the policies and behaviour of Poland's new communist-controlled government made this almost impossible, bluntly stating:

All of them, from senior officers to privates, were like himself aware of the great difficulties of His Majesty's Government. But they had hoped to return to Poland as soldiers and in common with 90% of the Polish nation they wished to keep their communications with the west. If they were disbanded now Poland would be thrown into the hands of Soviet Russia.^[22]

Anders then continued to argue that he and his men were being presented with a *fait accompli* in which the fate of their country had been decided before they had had a chance to influence its future. Bevin countered this by maintaining that the return of Anders' soldiers to Poland, as individuals rather than an army, would only aid Mikołajczyk's upcoming electoral campaign in divesting the communists of the chance to make the continued

²⁰ Letter from Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin to Thomas Scollan MP for West Renfrewshire, 18 March 1946, FO 371/56508, National Archives, London.

²¹ Minutes of meeting between Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and General Władysław Anders, 15 March 1946, PREM 8/367, National Archives, London, 1-2.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

existence of the Polish 2nd Corps abroad an electoral issue. Bevin, already feeling some political pressure from what he termed “only a few dissenting voices” in his own ranks, also informed Anders of the increasing public disquiet that Polish forces had still not been demobilised. Left with no option but to agree, Anders convinced Bevin to delay the release of the statement by several days until he first returned to Italy to inform his men of the situation. For his part, the British Foreign Secretary requested that Gen. Anders “assure his men that His Majesty’s Government would deal justly by them but that they wanted as many as possible to return to Poland.”^[23]

3 | The Polish Resettlement Corps

In line with what was agreed above with Gen. Anders, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin waited until 20 March 1946 to issue a clear declaration informing Polish Forces that they were to be disbanded with the aim of facilitating their return home, while stating:

Those who nevertheless feel compelled to remain abroad in full knowledge of the present situation will be treated as far as our resources permit with due recognition of their gallant service. In execution of the policy announced by Mr. Winston Churchill, the British Government will give, in collaboration with other Governments, such assistance as is in their power to enable those who fought with us to start a new life outside Poland with their families and dependents. But the British Government, after the most careful examination of the whole problem, are bound to make it plain that they can promise no more than this.^[24]

This assistance would soon lead to the establishment of an entity offering two-years of accommodation, food, training and then job placements called the Polish Resettlement Corps (PRC). It took another year, however, to legally formalise this arrangement with the passing of the Polish

²³ Ibid., 4-5.

²⁴ Message from the British Foreign Secretary to all members of the Polish Forces under British command, no date but probably mid-March 1946, PREM 8/367, National Archives, London, 1-2.

Resettlement Act of 1947,^[25] the first ever mass immigration legislation approved by the parliament of the United Kingdom.^[26] Although this law ostensibly offered a pathway to British nationality to over 250,000 displaced Polish troops under British command, it also aimed to provide a cheap labour force for the economic and industrial needs of post-war Britain, especially in industry, mining and agriculture. Eventually, more than 120,000 people joined the Polish Resettlement Corps.^[27] It is no surprise, therefore, that the British Trade Union movement's campaign to lobby the British Foreign Secretary against Polish immigration was launched as soon as news of the Polish Resettlement Corps was announced, and continued all through 1946 and into 1947 until the law was finally passed.

In order to fend off accusations that it was worsening Britain's acute post-war housing shortages, the British government decided that those Poles who chose to settle in the United Kingdom should be accommodated or continue to live in 265 former POW or army training camps around the country. Starting in August 1946, Polish soldiers of General Maczek's Armoured Division from Germany, the 2nd Corps from Italy, the 3rd Corps from the Middle East, as well as other smaller units of the Polish Armed Forces along with their families, were transported by ship from various parts of the world to Britain. Between 150 and 160 of the above-mentioned camps were to be placed at the disposal of the Polish 2nd Corps, with most being located in distant regions of England, Scotland and Wales.^[28] Despite later claims from trade unionists that these Poles were taking homes meant for local people and living in conditions of comparative luxury, living conditions at these camps were Spartan, to say the least. Indeed, those living there resided in military-style Nissen huts with very few windows, no running water, and heated by simple solid fuel stoves, although most had electricity.^[29]

²⁵ *Polish Resettlement Act*, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/10-11/19/contents> [accessed: 15 June 2025].

²⁶ Beata Halicka, *Borderlands Biography: Z. Anthony Kruszewski in Wartime Europe and Postwar America*, translated by Paul McNamara, (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schoningh, 2021), 117.

²⁷ Thomas Kernberg, "The Polish Community in Scotland", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Institute of Soviet and East European Studies, University of Glasgow, 1990, 152-159.

²⁸ <https://culture.pl/en/article/shelter-community-polish-post-war-resettlement-camps-in-the-united-kingdom> [accessed: 13 June 2025].

²⁹ Zosia and Jurek Biegus, *Polish Resettlement Camps in England and Wales*, Rochford: PB Software, 2013; <https://culture.pl/en/article/shelter-community-polish-post-war-resettlement-camps-in-the-united-kingdom>

Another favourite theme promoted by those opposed to the presence of Polish troops in Britain was the idea that they were receiving preferential treatment – better rations, better clothing and higher pay – allowing them to “swan about” the place. Although younger Poles did benefit from the free education and training on offer to improve their lives – something admittedly not available to demobbed British servicemen – older Polish soldiers and officers, many of whom came from Poland’s landed gentry and social elites, suddenly found that they had no marketable trades or skills. Indeed, many found themselves facing a life of poverty and squalor in Britain, often taking up menial jobs in the service and hospitality sectors – especially after the post-war Labour government decided to deny them a British Army military pension.^[30] Fortunately, such officers were exempted from labouring in British coal mines, steelworks or agriculture, unlike regular Polish ex-servicemen once their two-year limit on aid from PRC had finished.^[31] With such limited options on offer and growing – as we will see, often orchestrated – hostility towards Poles in Britain, many younger single Polish men with nothing or no-one to go home to chose to move to greener pastures in the USA and Canada where the opportunities to achieve professional and educational success were much greater.^[32]

4 | Initial reaction in Britain to the impending arrival of Anders’ Army

Although the British trade union movement was to be the driver of the campaign against the arrival of Anders’ Army in Britain, one of the earliest and most outraged objections came not from Britain at all, but from New York. This occurred when Max Steinberg, Secretary of the Trade Union Committee for Jewish Unity, sent a telegram to British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin setting the tone for future protests by making extraordinary

³⁰ Peszke, “The Demise of the Polish Armed Forces in the West”, 233.

³¹ Halicka, *Borderlands Biography*, 125-134.

³² For a very good example of one such case, see Beata Halicka’s biography of Polish Second World War veteran Zbigniew Kruszewski, *Borderlands Biography: Z. Anthony Kruszewski in Wartime Europe and Postwar America*, translated by Paul McNamara, Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schoningh, 2021.

allegations in highly emotive language, in this case accusing Anders of forcibly detaining Jewish soldiers who wished to leave his army and rejoin their families in various countries:

This monstrous situation adds insult to injury to Jewish people everywhere. The fascist anti-Semitic character of Anders' Army [is] too well known to warrant elaboration. [The] forcible detention of Jews in this army is [all] the more reprehensible because they are being made the instruments of our own destruction. This is comparable to [the] hideous practices of Nazi beasts who forced Jews to dig [their] own graves before dispatching them. In view of acknowledged financial support [the] British Labor [sic] government is giving this fascist Polish army, you bear a major responsibility for this deplorable situation. In the name of thousands of American Jewish workers, we ask you to immediately correct this grave injustice and to liberate these Jewish soldiers.^[33]

Indeed, the recurring trope that the Polish 2nd Corps was a "fascist army" would be an important feature of many of the subsequent protests of the British trade union movement. The question therefore remains as to why trade unions from opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean were simultaneously using identical arguments in attempting to discredit Anders' Army before its arrival in Britain, the only plausible explanation being that they were being supplied with the same Soviet propaganda mentioned by Professor Savory in the House of Commons the previous month – especially since Mr. Steinberg seems to have been a long-time activist for the Communist Party in the USA.^[34]

The correspondence Bevin received on this matter, however, was not all negatively disposed towards the Poles, nor were all Scots. Indeed, Mrs. Pat Washington, who ran the Polish Hostel in Edinburgh, beseeched the Foreign Secretary to use them as a Foreign Legion if nothing else, warning him

³³ Telegram from Max Steinberg, Secretary of Trade Union Committee for Jewish Unity, New York, to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 23 March 1946, FO 371/56509, National Archives, London.

³⁴ This seems to be the same Max Steinberg who had been a district organiser for the Communist Party in New York in the 1930s. See: <https://revolutionsnewsstand.com/2023/07/23/achievements-and-tasks-of-the-communist-party-new-york-district-by-max-steinberg-from-the-communist-vol-14-no-5-may-1935/> [accessed: 27 June 2025].

that “We are turning good friends and good soldiers into bitter enemies.”^[35] Moreover, Sir P.J. Dollan, chairman of the Scottish Polish Society, wrote to Bevin asking him to make a clear statement about the aid to be offered to those Poles who refused to return to a land that was soon to become a Soviet satellite country – if it had not already become one.^[36] Supporters of the Polish Forces also included Conservative MP Hugh Molson who wrote a friendly letter to Bevin reporting on his recent visit to Anders’ Army in Italy and bemoaning his decision to disband the Polish 2nd Corps. Like several of the Foreign Secretary’s previous correspondents, Molson regretted to report that Bevin’s message to Polish troops had very poorly received, especially once the Warsaw government had subsequently announced on Polish radio that it was not bound by any such British guarantees regarding returning Polish soldiers, men who now took the view that “the Polish government in giving a general invitation to them to return has so drafted the exceptions as to include every man who has at any time owed allegiance to the Polish government in London.”^[37] Further support for the Polish cause came in mid-May from the Bournemouth and District Anglo-Polish Society whose chairman was pleased to inform the Foreign Secretary that it had unanimously passed a resolution stating:

That this Meeting records its gratitude for the great services rendered to the Allied Cause by Polish soldiers ... denounces the puppets who describe these men as traitors, and in view of the exceptional political situation now existing in Poland, urges H.M. Government to allow these patriots complete freedom of choice whether they will return there, and to offer British Citizenship or the right to work within the Empire to all who feel unable to return.^[38]

³⁵ Letter from Mrs. Pat B. Washington to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 26 March 1946, FO 371/56509, National Archives, London.

³⁶ Letter from Sir PJ Dollan, secretary of the Scottish Polish Society to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 7 April 1946, FO 371/56509, National Archives, London.

³⁷ Letter from Hugh Molson, MP for High Peak, to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 8 April 1946, FO 371/56510, National Archives, London.

³⁸ Letter from TBJ Lawless, chairman of the Bournemouth and District Anglo-Polish Society to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 18 May 1946, FO 371/56511, National Archives, London.

5 | British trade unions launch their anti-Polish campaign

Late May 1946 saw the number and frequency of organised and coordinated anti-Polish protests significantly increase in the correspondence to the British Foreign Office, especially by trade unions in the form of resolutions, letters or petitions. Some of these focused solely on the potential economic impact posed by a large influx of Poles, with William Barclay, secretary of the Scottish Painters' Society in Dundee, protesting to Bevin at the presence of the Polish Army in Scotland due to high unemployment locally.^[39] Other trade unionists, however, highlighted the potential political dangers posed by the arrival of Anders' Army. For instance, A. Clarke, secretary of the Electrical Trades Union in Camden Town, London asked, "As these Poles are disowned by their own country, why bring them here to cause trouble?"^[40] while the secretary of Burntisland Burgh Labour Party in Scotland forwarded Bevin a resolution protesting against granting British nationality to "reactionary elements of the Polish Army" and warning that "this policy will lead to disturbance and anxiety right throughout British industry" – a veiled threat of strike action.^[41]

Not to be outdone, the Communist Party branch in Edinburgh also sent its own resolution to the Foreign Office stating that Anders Army "is undemocratic and pro-fascist in its character and leadership and has no place in this country", also falsely claiming their arrival would worsen the housing crisis.^[42] Indeed, Britain's only Communist Party MP in parliament, a Scotsman named Willie Gallacher, had his secretary forward to the Foreign Office a list of purported extracts of letters from British servicemen who had served with the Poles in the Middle East, claiming not

³⁹ Letter from William Barclay, secretary of the Scottish Painters' Society, Dundee branch, to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 27 May 1946, FO 371/56512, National Archives, London.

⁴⁰ Memo from A. Clarke, secretary of the Electrical Trades Union, Camden Town Branch to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 31 May 1946, FO 371/56512, National Archives, London.

⁴¹ Letter from R. Livingstone, secretary of Burntisland Burgh Labour Party to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 30 May 1946, FO 371/56512, National Archives, London.

⁴² Letter from George Boath, Area Organiser, the Communist Party, Edinburgh, to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 1 June 1946, FO 371/56512, National Archives, London.

only that were they ill-disciplined and enjoyed preferential conditions far exceeding that of the normal British soldier, but they constituted a “Fascist dominated legion”, a “renegade band, a severe threat to the democratic ideals of all peoples.” Moreover, in classic high-flown communist hyperbole, they warned as follows:

The claims made in certain circles that this step of offering asylum to these people is being made in gratitude for their fortitude etc. against the common enemy, Fascism, is exploded immediately as a myth in the light of the abusive and fantastic statements made that the alternative of their going back to their native land can be overruled by [the] impudent suggestion that their Fatherland is controlled from Moscow.

Such an accusation is hideous in its deliberation and is only advanced and clung to by those indifferent to the interests of freedom and the magnitude of the efforts made and still being made by the Soviet Union against Fascism; They fawn upon the half-wits who will wittingly or unwittingly let themselves be led into splitting unity against the common foe instead of retaining it and building it up to crush and destroy forever the last vestiges of that bestial terror Fascism and all akin to it.^[43]

The trickle of protests that had started in February 1946, before growing into a steady stream in May, suddenly turned into a torrent of letters, resolutions and petitions in June. These came mainly from trade unions and workers’ councils in Scotland, but also from London, its neighbouring towns, as well as the north of England. Foreign Office staff reading such correspondence noticed its coordinated pattern both in timing and content, often replying with letters that themselves were based on a template of the answers to the same points. Once officials produced a memo analysing the number and origin of these protests, R.M.A. Hankey of the Foreign Office added a saying note: “I have discussed this with Mr. Burleigh, H[ome] O[ffice]. They think that except in Scotland a large part of this is artificially stirred up by communist influence.”^[44]

⁴³ Letter from Gladys Jones, Secretary to William Gallacher MP for West Fife, to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 31 May 1946, FO 371/56511, National Archives, London.

⁴⁴ Foreign Office memo concerning public protests about the Polish Resettlement Corps for Hector McNeil, MP for Greenock and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 18 July 1946, FO 371/56514, National Archives, London.

Although some protests, such as those by W.P. Earsman, Secretary of Edinburgh and District Trades Council, mainly objected to the arrival of Anders' Army in Scotland on economic grounds – “It is said they are going to occupy homes not yet built, eat bread that is not yet there, and take jobs that have not yet been found”^[45] – the Amalgamated Society of Wood-Cutting Machinists in Tottenham, London, threatened to boycott Polish workers on political grounds, saying: “As this body of Polish soldiers have a reputation for [a] sympathetic attitude to Fascism, we are not prepared to accept them as fellow workers, and will oppose their employment in any factory in which we are engaged.”^[46] Another London union shop stewards committee went as far as to protest against “the establishment of a colony comprising, in the majority, Reactionary Poles.”^[47]

Such anti-Polish attitudes had evidently already spread among certain sections of the British public, with Scotsman H.V. Gale feeling angry enough to send a diatribe against the prospective Polish arrivals to Prime Minister Clement Attlee, labelling them “this motley collection of swashbuckling international gangsters, this gallant army of mercenaries and potential fascists, who would sell their services to any prepared to pay.”^[48] Even public representatives, such as David Renton, the MP for Huntingdonshire, wrote to the Foreign Office for verification of some of the serious accusations concerning Anders' Army that he had received from a constituent who claimed to have served alongside them during the war, especially the information that the Polish 2nd Corps' numbers had recently increased vastly due to the continued recruitment of soldiers of dubious background. Renton was sufficiently perturbed to include the following extract from his constituent's letter:

The outlook, methods and ideals of these Poles is alien to the British way of life. To them politics is a “knife” question. Every Pole carries a knife or

⁴⁵ Letter from WP Earsman, Secretary of Edinburgh and District Trades Council, to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 5 June 1946, FO 371/56511, National Archives, London.

⁴⁶ Letter from Marcus J. Hole, Secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Wood-Cutting Machinists, Tottenham Branch to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 5 June 1946, FO 371/56511, National Archives, London.

⁴⁷ Letter from D. Hurst, Shop Secretary, Harris Lebus Shop Stewards Committee, Finsbury to Ernest Bevin, to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 9 June 1946, FO 371/56512, National Archives, London.

⁴⁸ Letter from H.V. Gale, Glasgow to Prime Minister Clement Attlee, 5 June 1946, FO 371/56511, National Archives, London.

a weapon of some sort and does not hesitate to use it in an argument. (Those Poles who elected to go home to Poland had to be placed in protective custody. This had to be done, or they would have been murdered. Indeed, many were murdered.)^[49]

Their outlook is German and fascist German at that. In our mess in Italy, it was not uncommon to hear German marching songs from well-oiled warrant officers or senior N.C.O.s. Only the self-control of the British W.O.s and N.C.O.s prevented many incidents. These same people have the impudence to wear German and Austrian decorations on British uniforms!^[50]

Throughout June, such missives arrived thick and fast, not only from male firebrand trade unionists based in factories and heavy industry in Scotland but also from women's guilds and cooperatives based in the more genteel surroundings of the English Home Counties. For instance, the Welwyn Garden City Women's Co-operative Guild passed the following resolution forcefully protesting against the entry of Polish troops into Britain and including the new Soviet-inspired charge of the huge expansion of Anders' Army being due to recruiting wartime collaborators, along with the now standard accusation of fascism:

... this meeting strongly protests against the admission to the British Isles of the Polish Army which is now larger than when we were fighting Fascism. The growth of this army must be due to the fact that many Poles who fought on the side of the Germans against our husbands, sons and brothers in N. Africa, have since joined General Anders. If this large army consists of democratic anti-Fascists they have nothing to fear in returning to the new Poland, which is anxious to welcome back her true sons. The experience of the people of this country proves that many of these Poles are in fact anti-democratic and Fascist. We who have suffered from and fought Fascism for six years demand that they should be returned to their own country.^[51]

⁴⁹ Underlined in original text.

⁵⁰ Letter from David Renton, MP for Huntingdonshire to Hector McNeil, MP for Greenock and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 13 June 1946, FO 371/56512, National Archives, London.

⁵¹ Letter from Hannah Renwick, Hon. Secretary of Welwyn Garden City Women's Cooperative Guild to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 6 June 1946, FO 371/56513, National Archives, London.

This stance was echoed by a Women's Co-operative Guild in Falkirk, Scotland, whose resolution against Polish settlement stated: "This semi-fascist army, mainly composed of ex-prisoners of War, who fought against us and our allies can only prove a hindrance to a Democratic and Socialist Britain."^[52] However, other Scottish women, such as Mrs. Myra Grant from Midlothian, wrote to Bevin to praise him for his unpopular defence of the Polish Forces soon to arrive in Britain, by saying:

Now, Your Honour, I wish to thank you for all you have done, the only man who has spoken out for the Poles, and Poland, the one country which has lost all and has had the most to suffer, and still no light in the darkness for them. I know you will do all in your power to help them get their freedom even in another country. You are the only man next to God with whom the Poles have put their faith in, and I know with God's help you will not let them down!!^[53]

Yet another Scottish woman, L. Herd, from St. Andrews, wrote to the British Foreign Secretary to express her great upset at a series of anti-Polish public meetings held around the county of Fife, adding: "I do think something should be done to stop these ungrateful, unjust and, above all, unchristian actions against men who have lost everything and suffered so much."^[54] Indeed, the newspaper report she sent with her letter recounted how Councillor R. Sim of Inverkeithing had held a large meeting in Edinburgh, attended by 2,500 people, not only calling on the government to prevent any more Poles arriving in Scotland but "to arrange for ships to take back to Poland those already here." Having attempted to whip up the crowd with fear of an impending Polish peril threatening to take their homes, jobs and even their food, the report described his words as follows:

Many of the Poles whom it was proposed to bring to Scotland, he said, were partly or wholly [sic] responsible for the killing or injuring of thousands of our men. Many of them had fought under Field Marshal Rommel. Unless we fought this matter we would lose our rights as Scotsmen. "Are you going

⁵² Letter from Jeanie Hendry, Secretary of Falkirk No. 1 Women's Co-operative Guild to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 20 June 1946, FO 371/56513, National Archives, London.

⁵³ Letter from Ms. Myra Grant to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 17 June 1946, FO 371/56513, National Archives, London.

⁵⁴ Letter from L. Herd, St. Andrews, Fife to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 24 June 1946, FO 371/56514, National Archives, London.

to allow the Labour government and its travelling showman, Mr. Bevin, to deprive you of these rights?" he asked.^[55]

Although these might seem the words of a card-carrying communist, both Sim's own words and Ms. Herd's above-mentioned letter seem to indicate otherwise. Indeed, Ms. Herd's description of those running the meeting clearly reveals yet another little discussed aspect of the wave anti-Polish feeling sweeping post-war Britain, and especially in Scotland, namely anti-Catholicism:

As one person said one of the chief spokesmen Councillor Sim of Inverkeithing seemed to be Anti-Everything, Anti-Bevin, Anti-Churchill and was using the Polish question as a means for voicing his Anti-feeling for all humanity. The few who spoke against the Poles threw unjust, untrue accusations against them and what struck many of the British people there was the reason why these few hated the Poles was because they are mostly Roman Catholics.^[56]

Moreover, when Sim warned "we would lose our rights as Scotsmen", he was referring to Protestant civil and religious liberties, and using language then commonly employed in areas of Scotland, or even today in Northern Ireland, when there is a perceived Roman Catholic threat to a Protestant community. Indeed, this language is echoed in a resolution passed unanimously that summer by an Orange Lodge in Wallasey, Cheshire – Orange Lodges being halls used by the Orange Order, an exclusively Protestant and Unionist fraternal organisation, often criticised as being sectarian and anti-Catholic. It is therefore no surprise to read that the resolution condemns the settlement of Polish soldiers in Britain as "further step in the campaign against 'LIBERTIES OF ENGLAND AND THE PROTESTANT RELIGION' which we as Orangemen are pledged to maintain."^[57] Thus, when we re-examine Councillor Sim's diatribe against the impending arrival of Poles in Scotland, we can see that it is a curious combination of Soviet propaganda and traditional Scottish anti-Catholic rhetoric.

⁵⁵ Newspaper article, probably from *The Bulletin and Scots Pictorial*, no date but probably June 1946, FO 371/56514, National Archives, London.

⁵⁶ Letter from L. Herd, St. Andrews, Fife to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 24 June 1946, FO 371/56514, National Archives, London.

⁵⁷ Letter from JG Watt to Captain AE Marples MP for Wallasey, and forwarded to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 20 August 1946, FO 371/56518, National Archives, London.

We can also see from correspondence from private individuals that anti-Catholicism was a strong feature of their animosity towards any Polish presence in Britain. Indeed, a man called T.T. Cosgrove wrote to Bevin from his home Glasgow in June 1946 to inform him that:

We are a Protestant Nation and that is what has made our Colonies America and G[reat] Britain what they are. Not under the heel of the Pope and his satellites Spain and South America ... De Valera and Eire would have been pleased to see us defeated and for his wish to increase [the] Roman Catholic population by 160,000. Surely Scotland at least will not stand for this. Where do most of our criminal class come from [?]. RCs [Roman Catholics] as any police official can confirm. The RC Pope and Cardinals in Rome are out for world power and you sir should know what they have done in the past and would do again. Some of their persecutions are equal in cruelties to any of Hitler. Is there any tolerance given to any other religion when they are in power [?]. I am glad Russia is a strong power against the Vatican ... We want to keep Scotland Protestant and No more Poles. Let them go home or to RC countries.^[58]

6 | Conclusions

This article has attempted to investigate how British trade unions organised a coordinated campaign in 1946 to oppose the establishment of the Polish Resettlement Corps early that year, which soon led to the passing Britain's first ever immigration law, namely, the Polish Resettlement Act of 1947. We have seen how the prospect of the arrival of almost 150,000 Polish soldiers, who had fought for Allied forces during the Second World War, caused enormous disquiet within the British labour movement. By the time the Polish 2nd Corps arrived in Britain, the number of Poles living there had grown significantly. Indeed, over a period of two decades, this increased from 44,642 in 1931, peaking at 250,000 in 1949, before falling

⁵⁸ Letter from T.T. Cosgrove, Glasgow, to Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, 21 June 1946, FO 371/56514, National Archives, London.

to 162,339 in 1951 (with about 30,000 Poles resident in London).^[59] The number of Poles arriving in Britain continued to increase significantly for several years after the events described here.

However, what makes the situation described in this article particularly interesting is the fact that such protests involved far more than a “normal” xenophobic reaction of seeing the influx of Poles as foreign competition for British homes, jobs and resources, particularly when post-war rationing was still in force. Indeed, here we see that politics and religion were also involved. Firstly, the labelling of the Polish 2nd Corps as a quasi-fascist, pro-German and anti-Semitic army – as well as a fifth column of Polish reactionaries seeking to drag Britain into war against the Soviet Union – was clearly inspired by communist propaganda, which was being then spread throughout Europe, the Middle East and as far as New York. In addition, the fact that the vast majority of these trade unions were strongly left-wing and led by figures that were always prepared to give the Soviet Union the benefit of the doubt also made them play down or completely dismiss Polish soldiers’ claims of being unable to return to Poland due to fears of persecution, imprisonment or even execution by the newly installed communist-run government in Warsaw.

To sum up, although the intense lobbying of the British government by the British trade union movement to prevent Poles settling in post-war Britain ultimately failed, it did succeed in spreading anti-Polish views throughout Britain and especially in Scotland. In fact, it was here that the attempts of anti-Polish campaigners to appeal to as broad a section of the population as possible led them to employ forceful, at times hysterical rhetoric based on xenophobia, Soviet propaganda and even anti-Catholicism. Indeed, we have also seen how the public meetings organised by Councillor Sim in Fife and Edinburgh in June 1946 featured the quite bizarre situation of all three tropes being used together, such was the animosity towards Poles. One may also venture to say that while the issue of religion was never mentioned in protests sent in by British union organisations, they would have seen the exclusion of an ethnic group that considered Roman Catholicism to be a key part of its national identity as an added bonus in ridding Britain of “reactionaries”, especially among the majority of the

⁵⁹ Halicka, *Borderlands Biography* 129; <https://culture.pl/en/article/shelter-community-polish-post-war-resettlement-camps-in-the-united-kingdom>

population of Scotland where the perceived threat of “Popery” posed by Anders’ Army was not a welcome sight.^[60]

In conclusion, whether inspired by xenophobia, Soviet propaganda and anti-Catholicism, the main outcome of the anti-Polish campaign driven by British trade union movement was to poison relations between native Britons and an immigrant population which had been viewed as brave heroes fighting for a common cause just a year or two before. Soon, the war-weary members of Anders’ Army, still facing the great unknown and not yet free of their wanderings, would soon arrive in Britain to hear the muttered complaint: “The Poles are here, the Poles are there, the bloody Poles are everywhere.”^[61]

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⁶⁰ Paradoxically, Gen. Anders himself was not a Roman Catholic but a Lutheran Protestant.

⁶¹ Halicka, *Borderlands Biography*, 129.

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