

Halik Kochanski. *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 784 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-06814-8.



Reviewed by Michael Neiberg (US Army War College)

Published on H-War (April, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Poland, a Russian diplomat said in 1939, was the “bastard of Versailles.” Given indefensible frontiers, saddled with an angry German minority inside its borders, and left with poor relations with its Ukrainian neighbors, the new Poland of 1919 faced a difficult birth. With one-third of its population not ethnically Polish, a large Jewish minority whose Polish identity remained in doubt, and more than one million ethnic Poles living elsewhere, the new Poland confronted a daunting series of challenges. Miraculously, it not only survived a 1919-21 war with its Soviet neighbors, but it also emerged from that war with more territory, the respect of the British and French, and even a few great power pretensions.

By 1945, that new Poland sat shattered, with millions of its citizens (Jews and non-Jews alike) dead, millions more living across the world as refugees, and facing an occupation from Poland’s hated rival to the east, Soviet Russia. The historically Polish cities of Lwów (Lviv) and Wilno (Vilnius) now sat outside of Poland’s borders and it had lost effective control over its own political future. The great democratic powers, moreover, had largely abandoned Poland to its sad fate.

Halik Kochanski traces the history of Poland from its recreation after World War I to the Poland that the great

powers slid to the west after the traumas of World War II. She finds plenty of villains and precious few heroes. Most readers will be familiar with the impossible position of Poland in 1939, wedged precariously between an avaricious Germany to the west and a Soviet Union to the east that was all too eager to regain the western border of the tsarist empire from 1914. Few Poles, whether Jewish or gentile, saw just what the two rulers of what historian Timothy Snyder calls the “Bloodlands” had in store for a Poland they both despised (*Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* [2010]). Unsure whether the real enemy lay in Germany or Russia, Poland faced a series of Hobson’s choices that left the Poles with the option of getting nothing or whatever the great powers deigned to offer.

Those great powers come in for heavy criticism in Kochanski’s telling. Soviet leaders actively sought Poland’s humiliation, if not its destruction. Joseph Stalin, she argues, had never forgiven the Poles for stopping the Soviet drive to the west in 1921. In 1943, just when the two sides were coming to a modus vivendi against their common German enemies, the Poles uncovered the truth about the NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs) massacre of Polish officers in the Katyń forest. Notably, their British and American allies knew that the Soviets were responsible, but chose to hold onto the fiction

of German culpability in the interest of alliance unity.

As their handling of the Katyń atrocity showed, neither Britain nor France really cared about the fate of Poland. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, she argues, they failed to make even symbolic statements of support to Poland, first to avoid antagonizing Nazi Germany, and then later to avoid angering their Soviet allies. Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and especially Stalin saw Poland as a pawn to be moved around on a chessboard as they saw fit and without the consultation of Polish leaders. By 1945, the British and the Americans had had enough of the Polish problem and forced Polish leaders to accept new boundaries. More tragically, they failed to make any effort to secure democratic elections at the end of the war.

But to this familiar tale Kochanski adds a critique of Polish leaders themselves. Occasionally arrogant, often more interested in fighting each other than working together, and usually unable to see the big picture, they failed to represent Polish interests as well as they should have. Most important, they failed to secure for Poland a voice in Allied strategy in exchange for the service of Polish soldiers in theaters all over Europe. As a result, Poland fought and bled, but did not have a voice when it most mattered.

The Eagle Unbowed traces the almost unimaginable suffering of the Polish people through six years of agonizing conflict. Poles faced expulsion from their homelands, a diaspora that took them to all four corners of the globe, and destruction on an enormous scale. They also, of course, faced the full weight of the Nazi genocide. Kochanski does not shy away from the recent controversies about non-Jewish Poles and their role in the Holocaust, although in an effort to present a balanced account she does not really take a side in the ongoing debate about whether Poles were, on the whole, more perpetrator, bystander, or protector in the horrific mass murder of their country's Jewish population.

Kochanski analyzes the ambiguities and the ambivalence as well as the tragedy of Poland's Second World War. She brings together a wide variety of experiences from the diplomatic to the individual to the military. The vast majority of the sources are English, not Polish, but the research is impressive. She traces Poland's great tragedy in the 1930s and 1940s and its abandonment by its former allies on both sides. The British, for example, invited Mexico and Fiji to participate in the victory parade of 1946, but not Poland. In 1994, the Russians failed to send a representative to the commemorations of the anniversary of the Warsaw uprising, itself perhaps a fitting reminder of the difficult place of Poland in the troubled twentieth century.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Michael Neiberg. Review of Kochanski, Halik, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38400>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.