Chapter 2
The Communist Post-war: Organizing Life and Memory

Challenges of Demobilization

Between 1944 and 1948, a new political system was imposed on Poland. The results of a national referendum and parliamentary elections\(^1\) were falsified, and communist activists engaged in violence rather than vying for social support. However, having mainly terror at their disposal, the communists found themselves in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the whole of society was characterized by a high degree of anomie, the breakdown of social bonds, the effects of the destructive policies of two occupying powers and the wartime experience of ‘not quite living’ (\(\text{\l{}ycie na niby}\)).\(^2\) On the other hand, various groups, including the armed anti-Soviet resistance, possessed social capital gained during the course of the war and directed against the communists.\(^3\) Moreover, Ukrainians were fighting for their

---

\(^1\) In June 1946, the communists held a general referendum testing their support in Poland, campaigning for three ‘yes’ answers to the following questions: (1) Are you in favour of abolishing the Senate? (2) Are you in favour of agricultural reform and the nationalization of key industries? (3) Are you in favour of the new western border? The non-communist democratic forces encouraged voters to answer ‘no’ to the first question. The results were forged in the communists’ favour. Following the referendum, the Allies called for democratic elections, which were carried out in 1947 and also manipulated, giving the so-called democratic bloc, dominated by the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR), 80% of the vote and a majority of seats in parliament. See: Jerzy Drygalski and Jacek Kwaśniewski, ‘No-Choice Elections’, \textit{Soviet Studies} 2, 42 (1990), pp. 295–315; Krystyna Kersten, \textit{The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland, 1943–1948}, Stanford 1991; Michał Skoczylas, \textit{Wybory do Sejmu Ustawodawczego z 19 stycznia 1947 roku w świetle skarg ludności}, Warszawa 2003.


\(^3\) The Home Amy (\textit{Armia Krajowa}, AK) was the main Polish anti-German underground resistance movement during the war; it was formed in 1942 from its predecessor \textit{Związek Walki Zbrojnej} (Union of Armed Struggle, ZWZ). It kept its close ties with the Polish
independence in the south-east of the country, and the stability of Poland’s new western border was constantly being questioned. Red Army units stationed in the west and north of the country were stripping bare the formerly German territories which had just been ceded to Poland, and which were supposed to play a major role in the legitimization of the new communist government. Infrastructure destroyed by the war posed problems for large-scale forced evacuations and resettlement initiatives, and also for spontaneous migration by citizens.

In any country which has recently experienced war, the reconstruction of the political, economic and social institutions needed by peacetime society is a difficult task; the structures of war must be dismantled at the same time, which involves the enormous logistical enterprise of mass demobilization. No government wants competition, and as it strives for a monopoly over the means of violence, it understandably becomes wary of individuals and groups who are capable of wielding weapons. In Poland, demobilization was carried out under such conditions that many soldiers could not return to their homes, because those homes had either been destroyed or were now in the territory that had become part of the USSR. Partisans also had to be ‘demobilized’, a separate and more complex problem, given that they had never been subject to direct government control. Even in Western Europe, where the scale of the resistance was smaller, the post-war years witnessed conflicts between the bureaucracy of the new civil apparatus and former participants of the wartime underground; in Poland, the communists faced the task of liquidating government-in-exile in London and was often conflicted with communist forces. In January 1945, the Home Army was officially disbanded, the communist government asked its members to come out, guaranteeing their safety. Many of those who obeyed were imprisoned, executed, or deported into the Gulag. As a result, some AK members formed covert Freedom and Independence (Wołność i Niezawisłość, WiN) among other organizations. They carried out attacks on both Soviet and Polish communist institutions. In return, the communist authorities pursued mass arrests, deportations and executions. Today, post-war anti-communist resistance is known as the ‘cursed soldiers’ (żołnierze wyklęci). Their memory is controversial, as some of the groupings were engaged in the post-Holocaust anti-Jewish violence. On those and other aspects of civil war in Poland, see e.g.: Anita J. Prażmowska, Civil War in Poland 1942–1948, Basingstoke 2004.

The Polish border on the rivers of Oder (Odra) and Neisse (Nysa) was agreed at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945. The border was compensation to Poland at the expense of Germany for territories lost to the Soviet Union as a consequence of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (1939), and resulted in westward transfers of Germans, matching the Polish population transfers from the East. The border was recognized by East Germany in the Treaty of Zgorzelec in 1950, however, by West Germany only in 1970 in the Treaty of Warsaw. The feeling of uncertainty of this border was overwhelming in Poland until 1956.

the remains of the Polish Underground State,6 which was hostile to their ambitions. Thus, similarly to Yugoslavia and Greece at this time, Poland posed a specific and complex problem for those who sought to govern the country.

Employing the terminology coined by the sociologist Michael Mann, one can say that in the early post-war years in Poland the rulers primarily had recourse to ‘despotic power’, i.e. they could take decisions and exert violence without any consultation with society. However, their ‘infrastructural power’ was weak: there was a shortage of institutions and administrative structures that would enable them to control and monitor the governed.7 Regaining infrastructural power – amidst post-war chaos and the brutalization of everyday life, devastating poverty and widespread social hostility to government – was one of the most important challenges of the time.

In this light, the emergence of veterans’ organizations appears as an attempt to reconfigure the mechanism of power from a wartime to a peacetime model, by channelling and ordering a large and unwieldy mass of human potential; it was effectively a means of dismantling the war apparatus of violence. A former underground fighter who functions within the framework of a veterans’ union is predictable: he has made public his activities of the recent past, and laid down his arms. A soldier who ‘sows and ploughs’ (propaganda at this time encouraged former soldiers to settle into agricultural lifestyles) is constantly occupied; when he comes to a union meeting, he is being monitored and can be deployed for the creation of symbolic capital for the rulers.

Still, the first post-war years were not only characterized by the strengthening of the power of the Polish Workers’ Party. This was also a time of harsh everyday realities: burying the dead, attempting to provide assistance to orphaned children, the injured and sick.8 Millions had died9 and thousands had partially or completely

---

6 The Polish Underground State or Polish Secret State (Polskie Państwo Podziemne) is a catch-all term for the covert resistance organizations, both military and civilian, that were active in Poland during World War II and were faithful to the Government of the Republic of Poland in exile in London. Militarily, it relied above all on various branches of the Home Army.


8 Common ailments included neurosis, tuberculosis, heart disease, rheumatism and venereal disease.

9 The population now counted approximately 24 million, i.e. around ten million less than at the outbreak of the war. The sharp decline was a result of warfare, the Holocaust, mass murders of non-Jewish Poles, changes to the national borders, migration (including decisions by some Poles to stay in exile in the West), and forced expulsions of ethnic Germans and Ukrainians from Poland. Most of the deaths were caused by the racist policies of Nazi Germany. The number of Slavic victims was inflated by the Polish communist state. It is now generally accepted that between 5.5 and 6 million Polish citizens died as a result of the German
lost their ability to work. Polish historian Robert Traba calls this period an era of ‘live memory’ (żywa pamięć), a term that captures the proximity in time and place of the war and the emotional involvement of the society in the process of commemoration; the term also points to the fact that the state had not yet established a total monopoly over public space.\textsuperscript{10} Political parties and the Catholic Church were advancing their often disparate interpretations of recent events. The press was full of war-related themes. Nazi war criminals were put on trial. Several institutions were founded that would go on to have a profound significance for memory culture in Poland, including the Main Commission for Research into German Crimes in Poland (1945)\textsuperscript{11} and the Council for the Protection of Sites of Struggle and Martyrdom (1947).\textsuperscript{12} The first laws were passed that delimited the scope of assistance available to different segments of the population, in accordance with their specific experience of war.


\textsuperscript{11} This body was founded as the Main Commission for Research into German Crimes in Poland (Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce). In subsequent years, its name was modified in line with changes in the political agenda. In 1949 it was transformed into the Main Commission for Research into Hitlerite Crimes in Poland (1949–84), and in 1984 renamed as the Main Commission for Research into Hitlerite Crimes in Poland – Institute of National Remembrance (1984–91). It functions to this day as the Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, which is a branch of the Institute of National Remembrance.

\textsuperscript{12} Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa.
The available data on the number of the potential applicants for assistance from the state in returning to normalcy, and on the related number of people who survived the war, are only estimates. Nonetheless, they point to a large-scale social problem. As of the end of the war, there were a little over 330,000 soldiers fighting in the Polish Armed Forces in alliance with the Red Army.\(^\text{13}\) Between 1945 and 1946, approximately 200,000 of them were demobilized.\(^\text{14}\) The Polish Armed Forces in the West had nearly 230,000 soldiers in July 1945; 105,000 decided to return to Poland.\(^\text{15}\) Moreover, there were around 132,000 liberated Polish PoWs in the German territories occupied by the western Allies; it is not known how many of them decided to be repatriated to Poland.\(^\text{16}\) Establishing the number of people

---

13 Troops were chiefly recruited from those Polish prisoners in Soviet labour camps who had not managed to join the army of Władysław Anders, founded earlier as a result of the Sikorski-Mayski agreement (1941). The soldiers taken earlier by Władysław Anders to Iran had fought along the Western Allies, and the so-called Polish Armed Forces in the West were a taboo in the 1950s in communist Poland. Only the story of the so-called Zygmunt Berling’s army, therefore, could be told (without overt reference to the circumstances of its formation), and it grew into a myth of victorious battles from Lenino (1943) to Berlin (1945). Czesław Grzelak, Henryk Stańczyk and Stefan Zwoliński, Armia Berlinga i Żymierskiego. Wojsko Polskie na froncie wschodnim, Warszawa 2002, p. 97. On the Polish Armed Forces in the East see also recent oral history study: Mateusz Czapigo (ed.), Berlingowcy. Żołnierze tragiczni, Warszawa 2015.


16 Danuta Kisielewicz, Oficerowie polscy w niewoli niemieckiej w czasie II wojny światowej, Opole 1998, p. 277. Approximately 420,000 Polish soldiers entered German captivity as a result of the military operations of 1939, including around 18,000 officers. The number of soldiers captured by the Red Army in 1939 is estimated to be about 180,000, including over 15,000 officers who were later executed at Katyn and other killing fields. The majority of the regular soldiers were set free, some were exchanged for prisoners held by the Germans, and others were recruited into the Red Army. The PoWs in Germany were later joined by soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West (Polish soldiers who were captured during
who took part in the partisan movement and civilian conspiracy in Poland (within the structures of the Polish Underground State as well as independently of it) is a more difficult task: it is usually estimated that around a million people were involved, although the contribution by many individuals was minor. The Home Army numbered 250,000 to 300,000 people at the peak of its organized activity, in spring 1944; however, there was sufficient weaponry for only 30,000 fighters (the loss of life, chiefly during the Operation Tempest and Warsaw Uprising, is estimated at several tens of thousands). The Peasants’ Battalions (BCh), the right-wing National Armed Forces (NSZ), the communist People’s Guard (GL – later the People’s Army, AL) and other local organizations in most cases remained outside the command structure of the AK. As we will see, the legacy of the Home

battles with France and Britain, who were recorded as French and British PoWs), as well as by an undetermined number of soldiers captured during Hitler’s advance on the USSR and by insurgents of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. In 1940–42 many regular soldiers and sub-officers were freed – their status was however often changed to that of civilians who carried out forced labour in Germany. The mortality of the PoWs is unknown. Danuta Kisielewicz, passim.

17 Operation Tempest (Akcja Burza) was a series of anti-German uprisings by the Home Army in 1944 in Eastern and Central Poland. It was aimed at taking hold of cities and areas occupied by the Nazis while they were preparing their defences against the approaching Red Army, and at securing Polish power before the arrival of the Soviets. The Operation was largely unsuccessful; the biggest failure of this plan was the Warsaw Uprising, after whose failure the city was destroyed by the German forces.

18 The Peasants’ Battalions (Bataliony Chłopskie) were created in the mid-1940s and by 1944 were partially integrated with the Home Army. The major actions of their armed resistance took place in the rural Zamość area which was chosen for German colonization as part of Generalplan Ost.

19 The National Armed Forces (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne) were created in 1942 and fought against both the Nazi and Soviet forces. They were likewise engaged in fighting Polish communists during and after the war. In the aftermath of war they were persecuted by the communist authorities. Not until 1992 were they rehabilitated and given the official status of war veterans, receiving pensions and decorations. The polemics around their history are close to those concerning WiN members because of post-war anti-Jewish violence. (See footnote 3 of this Chapter).

20 The People’s Guard (Gwardia Ludowa, GL) was a communist resistance organization created in 1942. It was later renamed as the People’s Army (Armia Ludowa, AL). The number of soldiers was inflated by the post-war communist authorities for propaganda purposes. Ryszard Nazarewicz, the principal historian of the AL in communist times, revised his earlier figures after 1989, stating that the AL had around 54,000 members when the Red Army re-entered Polish territory, around 8,000 of whom fought in partisan formations. These figures could still contain inaccuracies. Ryszard Nazarewicz, Armia Ludowej dramaty i dylematy, Warszawa 2000, p. 250, 251. See also: Piotr Gontarczyk, Polska Partia Robotnicza. Droga do władzy 1941–1944, Warszawa 2013.
Army became the most sensitive issue in the following years and the most important reference point for the narratives of the state and other partisan groups. However, communist memory practice was peculiar in that it merged armed fighters with civilian victims. Still, establishing the number of people who survived hardships as a result of war is even more difficult. It is believed that about 350,000 Polish Jews survived the Holocaust, most of them in Soviet territory. Many of them immediately left Poland on their way to the West and to Palestine, not least because of post-war anti-Jewish violence. By 1947, only around 90,000 remained in the country.\(^{21}\) It is also estimated that several hundred thousand non-Jewish Polish citizens who were interned in Nazi camps and prisons of various types survived to tell the tale. They became one of the most active victims’ memory groups in later years. Against this background, it is good to keep in mind that more than two million citizens of the inter-war Poland were sent to Germany as various kinds of forced labourers (in camps, industry, agriculture); the amount of time spent in exile could vary from several weeks to years. It is not known how many of these labourers survived. Czesław Łuczak estimates that over 1.5 million individuals had returned to Poland by 1949 and around 350,000 had refused repatriation.\(^{22}\) However, former labourers’ memories, alongside their claims to state assistance, would be overshadowed for years by other memory issues.

**Communist Legislation and the ex-Combatants and Prisoners, 1945–48: A View From Above**

The institutionalization of the veterans’ and political prisoners’ movements in the early post-war years can be considered from two perspectives: from above and from below. The former entails understanding the priorities set by the party authorities (aimed at maintaining their recently gained power and ensuring the country’s governability as a communist state), while the latter involves the study of the expectations of individuals and groups who survived the war and now found themselves in a new socio-political reality. Indeed, the first laws regulating the rights and privileges of victims and veterans were passed at roughly the same time that the first grassroots commemorative groups and unions were formed; the two


vectors of memory were in dynamic relation to each other, with the politicians reacting to the initiative of the masses and vice versa.

Scholars tend to eschew consideration of legal regulations in their studies of communist Poland, but the introduction of laws and various attempts to adapt pre-war legal norms to the post-war situation were an essential indicator of a change in attitudes. First, there was a need to redefine the legal category of veterans. The provisions of pre-war legislation, which mainly covered soldiers of the Great War and the Polish-Soviet War (1919–21) with some additional privileges for participants of national uprisings and political prisoners of Prussia and Russia, were no longer sufficient in the new situation. Now, it was necessary to make concessions to members of the civilian conspiracy, partisans, and hundreds of thousands of victims of racial persecution. Second, new laws were also symptoms of political conflicts. The first provisions concerning the rights of partisans were passed in 1944. A December decree of the Polish Committee for National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*) introduced changes to the pre-war welfare provisions for war invalids (which, until then, had reserved privileges for regular soldiers): it expanded the categories of person eligible for monetary pensions, state benefits and state-sponsored healthcare, and established co-operatives for the participants of ‘underground and partisan anti-fascist military organizations formed after 1 September 1939.’ In 1947, the legislature made a further step towards the empowerment of communist partisans, by adding to the ranks of ex-combatants those Poles who fought in ‘military anti-fascist

---

23 The Polish term for a ‘veteran’, *kombatant*, changed in meaning precisely as a result of post-war memory politics. Before the war, it had a similar semantic scope to the French word on which it was based, *combattant*: ‘a soldier engaging in combat, a fighter’; ‘one who engages in a duel with another’. In other words, the word designated a soldier and not a veteran (Jan Karłowicz (ed.), *Słownik języka polskiego*, Warszawa 1902, p. 416). As a result of communist memory practice, the term came to mean a ‘former soldier of a regular military formation, a former member of a partisan division who actively participated in battle, a former participant of a resistance movement, a former political prisoner’ (Halina Zgółkowa (ed.), *Praktyczny słownik współczesnej polszczyzny*, Poznań 1998, p. 10).

organization in the Spanish civil war between 1936 and 1939’ and those who were part of ‘Yugoslavian partisan units under [Josip] Tito’.  

In 1945, a law was passed that regulated assistance for the family members of deceased partisans and ‘participants of the underground movement’ – this act primarily concerned their widows and children. Entitlements included a special pension, free healthcare, and additional exemptions for those who chose to settle in the formerly German borderlands. Soon after, the widows and orphans of ‘victims of the enemies of democratic Poland’ became eligible for these same benefits. This decree did not specify what was meant by the terms ‘victims’ or ‘enemies’, but it was nonetheless a clear attempt to ensure the loyalty of individuals employed in the state apparatus of power who were fighting against the anti-Communist underground at this time; similar purpose was served by a decree announced in February 1947 concerning ‘damages for officials of the Public Security Service, soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces and members of the Civic Militia (Milicja Obywatelska, MO) who, during the struggle against the enemies of Democratic Poland, have lost their ability to work.’ Other important laws that concerned former combatants included a series of decrees made in 1944 and 1945 on military decorations, as well as legislation regulating the demobilization of soldiers – these determined the payouts made to soldiers and

---

26 ‘Ustawa z 23 lipca 1945 o zasiłkach i pomocy dla osób pozostałych po uczestnikach ruchu podziemnego i partyzanckiego, poległych w walce o wyzwolenie Polski spod najazdu hitlerowskiego’, Dz.U. nr 30, poz. 180. See also: Dz.U. nr 55, poz. 434 and 442; Dz.U. nr 65, poz. 528.
27 ‘Dekret z 13 listopada 1945 o zasiłkach i pomocy dla wdów i sierot po ofiarach wrogów demokratycznego ustroju Polski’, Dz.U. nr 51, poz. 294; ‘Rozporządzenie Ministra Pracy i Opieki Społecznej z 17 stycznia 1946’, Dz.U. nr 7, poz. 61; and the full text of the decree of 23 November 1945, Dz.U. nr 28, poz. 121.
28 Milicja Obywatelska was a police institution created in 1944 by Polish Committee for National Liberation, replacing the pre-war police force. In 1990 it was renamed back into policja. Contrary to implied meaning of milicja (as a military force composed of ordinary citizens), it was a state-controlled force, often used to exert repressions on the citizens.
29 ‘Dekret z 3 lutego 1947’, Dz.U. nr 14, poz. 54.
30 ‘Dekret Polskiego Komitetu Wyzwolenia Narodowego z 22 grudnia 1944 o orderach, odznaczeniach i medalach’, Dz.U. nr 12, poz. 91. This decree approved the medal ‘Honoured for Deeds on the Field of Glory’ (Zasłużonym na Polu Chwaly), which had been introduced by the high command of the Tadeusz Kościuszkow Infantry Division that fought alongside the Red Army, as well as the ‘Grunwald Cross’ that was introduced by the commanders of the People’s Guard. Recipients of the Grunwald Cross enjoyed the same privileges as those who had earned the Virtuti Militari, the oldest military honour in Poland, established in 1792 during the Polish-Russian war. See also: Dz.U., nr 50, poz. 285 (from 26 October
also, by tying payments to the decision to become a military settler, encouraged soldiers to move to the formerly German regions.31

Meanwhile, the laws concerning former concentration camp prisoners remained modelled on the pre-war provisions, which had been developed in relation to former Polish political convicts in Tsarist Russia; thus, they pointed to a certain inertia in law-making, or rather, to an ongoing reliance on pre-war norms, despite the changes in the system of government. Like former prisoners in the pre-war period, wartime concentration camp inmates were entitled to a modest allowance and state-sponsored healthcare. These provisions were, however, outdated: the Siberian penal colonies of Tsarist times were hardly comparable to the extremities of life in German concentration camps.32

In a country ravaged and impoverished by war, all of these legal provisions could not solve the everyday problems. The decrees were short-term measures: some were set to expire a year after the cessation of hostilities, while others were temporary solutions designed to be superseded by new regulations. Thousands of eligible individuals did not apply for the benefits in the time given because they had not heard of them, whereas others did not do so because health complications caused by war were diagnosed with a delay.33 At the time, veterans’ privileges were not conferred to members of the civilian resistance (who in some cases had been tortured by the Gestapo), but only to the families of the deceased. The relatives of people who had received court sentences after 22 July 194434 were also excluded from the benefits; among these were, of course, members of anti-communist groups, many of whom had previously fought against the Germans. Needless to say, the victims of Soviet repressions were not recognized either. In later years, after the Thaw of 1956, these shortcomings would put the government under strong pressure, leading to significant changes in the scope of privileges. However, it was only in 1975 that a comprehensive package of regulations appeared that clearly defined the

---

32 ‘Dekret z 5 kwietnia 1946 o dodatku przejściowym do zaopatrzeń byłych skazańców politycznych’, Dz.U. nr 14, poz. 101. A decree issued in July of the same year established a deadline for the filing of claims: 30 June 1947. See ‘Dekret z 1 lipca 1946 o zmianie niektórych przepisów, dotyczących zaopatrzenia byłych skazańców politycznych’, Dz.U. nr 37, poz. 228. Also see: Dz.U. nr 73, poz. 397.
33 Interview with I.G., May 2005.
34 The official day of the proclamation of the Manifesto of the Polish Committee for National Liberation by the Polish communists. It declared the Polish government-in-exile in London to be illegal and proclaimed the authority of the PKWN to extend over all Polish territory.
rights of veterans and former prisoners, and debates continue to this day about the eligibility of different groups and the rightful proportions of the provisions.

In the late 1940s, however, the law offered room for ‘organizations assisting population groups that were specifically persecuted by the occupier.’ Ex-combatants’ and prisoners’ self-organization was important precisely because legal provisions were restrictive. It is difficult to compile a complete list of associations active in the years 1945–47, because, in addition to the large nationwide organizations, there were local initiatives: for example, the Circle of Former Prisoners of Treblinka, formed under the Central Committee of Polish Jews, had no more than a few dozen members. Some associations merged and others fell apart: for example, the Union of Jewish Participants of the Armed Struggle against Fascism was founded in 1947 as a result of divisions in several other Jewish organizations.

Meanwhile, from the point of view of state propaganda, the most important organization was the union that brought together the partisans who fought on German-occupied territory of Poland: the Union of Participants of the Armed Struggle for Independence and Democracy (Związek Uczestników Walki Zbrojnej o Niepodległość i Demokrację, ZUWZoNiD), which operated under the auspices of the Polish Workers’ Party. The organization was formed in 1945, but the significance of the partisan struggle against the Germans had been noted earlier, on 25 November 1944 in Lublin at the founding meeting of the ephemeral Union of Polish Partisans: here, Grzegorz Korniński, who had fought in the Spanish Civil War and was a commander of the People’s Army in Lublin region, put forward a series of arguments that would later characterize the dominant narratives of the Polish communists’ memory of the war. These included the myth of partisan heroism and unity, the liberation myth relating to the pro-communist regular army and centred around the Battle of Lenino, the motif of blood sacrifice as a symbol

36 ‘Ustawa z 6 maja 1945 o majątkach opuszczonych i porzuconych’. See also Dz.U. nr 30, poz. 179, art. 1; Dz.U. nr 17, poz. 97, art. 13.
38 Związek Żydów Uczestników Walki Zbrojnej z Faszyzmem. According to data from the Main Directorate of ZBoWiD from 1949, this association had 5,000 registered members. See August Grabski, Żydowski ruch kombatancki w Polsce w latach 1944–1949, Warszawa 2002, p. 15. On divisions within the Jewish veterans’ movement, see, ibid., pp. 19–91.
39 The Battle of Lenino (12–13 October 1943) took place north of the village of Lenino in the Mahiliou region of Belarus and was part of a larger Soviet operation against the German
of Polish-Soviet friendship, and the conflicts between soldiers and partisans, which presaged later political conflicts among Polish communists in the 1960s (see Chapter 5). Korczyński stated, for example, that:

There is an unhealthy attitude emerging, whereby partisans are treated like bandits. When partisans encounter officers of the Polish Army, there are often instances of a dismissive attitude to the partisans. This hurts. We have shed no less blood than them. We had not one Lenino, but five a week. 40

The format of ZUWZoNiD was discussed at a series of sessions of the central leadership of the PPR. 41 As early as August 1945, representatives of the Secretariat of the PPR Central Committee were working out the details of a ‘congress of participants of the underground struggle against the occupier’, which was due to take place on the anniversary of the start of the war in September 1939. It was decided that the congress would be attended by members of the People’s Army, the Peasants’ Battalions and the Home Army. The official goals of the ZUWZoNiD, which would be founded as a result of the congress, were also established; they emphasized the welfare activities of the union. Moreover, the creation of organizing committees in the regions, in which a ‘large presence of the partisan movement’ should be visible, was mooted. The task of encouraging communist partisans to take part in the congress was entrusted by the Secretariat to Colonel Józef Sęk-Malecki, a member of the command staff of the AL, who soon after became the secretary of ZUWZoNiD. 42 Two of the most prominent communists, President Bolesław Bierut and Marshal Michał Rola-Żymierski, were patrons of the congress, which took place in the Roma Theatre in central Warsaw, and the honorary committee included representatives of the main political factions who had fought in the underground movement during the war.

forces on the eastern bank of the Dnieper river. The battle was the first major operation of the Polish Armed Forces in the East (the Tadeusz Kościuszko Infantry Division), which was allied with the Red Army and formed mainly of former Gulag prisoners. It was commemorated by Polish communist propaganda as a major victory, which concealed the fact that the division suffered a high number of casualties and had to be withdrawn because of a lack of training and support, as well as its failure to cooperate with other Red Army units.

2.3 Appeal addressed to partisans, resistance members, and soldiers to join ZUWZoNiD; it offers benefits and legal assistance. National Library of Poland.
Związek Uczestników Walki Zbrojnej o Niepodległość i Demokrację w Chełmie — zwraca się z apelem do wszystkich byłych żołnierzy i oficerów, którzy walczyli o Wolność i Niepodległość Ojczyzny z okupantem niemieckim o wzięcie udziału w Zjeździe, który odbędzie się w dniu 13 lipca 1947 r. o godz. 11-iej (Gmach Główny Dyrekcji) w Chełmie.

Za poniesione walki, ofiary i trudy dla Polski w szeregach Zwycięskiej Armii Polskiej należy się Wasza zaufszone miejsce wśród społeczeństwa.

W obronie Waszych interesów — Zdemobilizowani! — winniście wziąć udział w ważnych obradach dotyczących Waszego przyszłego losu i Waszych zdobyczy.

Sekretarz: (-) J. KOWALEWSKI
Członek Zarządu: (-) kpt. JARSKI
Komendant R. K. U.

Prezes: (-) J. JARMUL
Starosta Powiatowy
The decisions taken by the Secretariat, the composition of the organizing committee, and above all, the choice of chairman of the new union – former chief of staff of the People’s Army, Franciszek Jóźwiak – explicitly attempted to bring the partisan groups to order. The Home Army was the most numerous of the formations identified as ‘the partisan forces’ at the meeting, and its high command during the war had striven to gain primacy over other armed organizations by insisting on its continuity from the pre-war armed forces; according to the new order, however, it would be designated as just one of many groupings that had taken up ‘the armed struggle against the occupier.’

After demobilization had been carried out, the government encouraged former soldiers of the regular armed forces to join the organization. This was one way of instilling the propagandistic message of ‘unity’ among those who had fought during the war. The next significant step was the merger of ZUWZoNiD with the large and strategically important union that operated in the formerly German regions, the Union of Military Settlers in the Recovered Territories (Związek Osadników Wojskowych na Ziemiach Odzyskanych, ZOW), in September 1948. ZOW was an association that brought together demobilized soldiers who had settled in these areas. With the exception of the Union of War Invalids, it was the only combatants’ association for regular soldiers. After the merger, the joint organization was renamed the Union of Fighters against Fascism and Hitlerite Aggression for Independence and Democracy (Związek Bojowników z Faszyzmem i Najazdem Hitlerowskim o Niepodległość i Demokrację), and it claimed to represent the interests of all groups that had fought against Nazi Germany.

However, the numerically largest and materially wealthiest organization was not a union of former fighters, but the association of former camp and prison internees: the Polish Union of Former Political Prisoners (Polski Związek Byłych Więźniów Politycznych, PZbWP). It was formed in February 1946 as a result of putting together a number of grassroots formations. The chairman of its Main Directorate was Józef Cyrankiewicz, a socialist who two years later agreed to a

---

43 According to data from the Ministry of Public Safety (Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego), ZUWZoNiD had around 32,000 members in 1947, among whom the best-represented groups were the People’s Army (8,400), followed by the Home Army (7,300) and the Peasants’ Battalions (7,100); the remainder was made up of former members of militias of the Polish Socialist Party (1,200), soldiers (3,300) and others (6,200). ‘Tabela statystyczna członków’, 10 May 1947, AIPN, MSW II, 3854, p. 69.


45 According to official data from the spring of 1947, PZbWP had approximately 177,000 members and 260,000 people in its care (widows and orphans). The activity of the organization is discussed at greater length by Zofia Wójcicka: Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland 1944–1950, Frankfurt am Main, 2014, pp. 19–116.
merger between a faction of the Polish Socialist Party (*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*, PPS) and the communist Polish Workers’ Party, forming in 1948 the Polish United Workers’ Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*, PZPR), which would rule Poland for the next four decades. Cyrankiewicz himself served as prime minister of Poland until 1970. He had spent three years in Auschwitz as a Polish political prisoner, a fact that was often underlined by the state propaganda. According to its own declarations, PZbWP brought together individuals who had been persecuted by the Germans in prisons and camps as punishment for their conspiratorial activity within the (broadly defined) civil resistance movement. However, the regulations of its verification commission provided for the possible eligibility of people who had been interned on the racist grounds because of their Jewish or Slavic ethnicity; in other words, PZbWP *de facto* aimed to unite the majority of victims of Nazi occupation policy, with the exception of criminal offenders.46

To complete this overview of major associations active after the war, mention must be made of the unions of Veterans of the Silesian Uprisings (*Związek Weteranów Powstań Śląskich*, ZWPŚ) and the Wielkopolska Insurgents of 1918–19 (*Związek Powstańców Wielkopolskich*, ZPW). These organizations were exceptional in that they were not in any way connected to the memory of the Second World War, nor did they have roots in communist ideology: they united the participants of the largely successful borderlands conflicts with Germans in the aftermath of the Great War. After the Second World War, their activity was not only permitted, but actively supported for ideological reasons: both associations promoted the idea of the ‘age-old Polishness’ of the western regions. In other words, they were utilized for the legitimization of the system, through their appeal to patriotic and anti-German sentiment. Although ZWPŚ was not formally a direct heir of the pre-war Union of Silesian Insurgents, it counted some of the latter’s activists among its members.47

Finally, there were also a number of communist organizations that brought together veterans from pre-war times; these were relatively small. The Union of Participants in the Fight for the Freedom of Spain in 1936–39, informally known as the Union of Dąbrowski Soldiers (*Związek Dąbrowszczaków*) because the Polish battalion (later, brigade) that fought among the international brigades on the republican side bore the name of the Polish left-wing military leader Jarosław Dąbrowski (1836–1871), was founded in November 1945 and in 1949 had 1200 members, of whom 402 lived abroad, chiefly in France.48 Its significant

characteristics included a strong solidarity among its members and the participation of several of its leaders in the state power apparatus. The Union of Veterans of the Revolutionary Struggles of 1905–18, created in Łódź in August 1945, brought together individuals who had been repressed before the Second World War for their involvement in the communist movement.

All of the unions kept registers of their members; the largest unions, ZOW, PZbWP and ZUWZoNiD, claimed to have nearly 100,000 people registered in each association. Nonetheless, in a country ravaged by war, it was impossible to maintain accurate records. The available quantitative data do not allow us to establish how involved the members actually were; many may have been inactive enough so as to be later deprived of their membership. Moreover, organizations that operated on some state subsidies would have been motivated to artificially inflate their numbers. Finally, information concerning wartime activities may also be unreliable: members of the Home Army and of other non-communist formations sometimes concealed their past. One veteran I interviewed was a member of a nationalist organization during the war, but also served a short time in 1945 as a soldier of the Polish Armed Forces in the East; it was the latter that provided the pretext for his membership in ZUWZoNiD. He preferred to keep his involvement in the wartime underground secret, because, in his words, ‘what good would have come from my explaining?’

**Memory Groups: A View from Below**

**Commemoration: ‘I can still smell that putrid stench’**

When the state was consolidating its powers, Poles lived in a state of ‘live memory’: searching for loved ones, digging up corpses and arranging their funerals. Let us have a look at two examples: the Polish capital and the sites of former extermination camps. In Warsaw in the immediate aftermath of the war, human remains, piles of rubble, burned houses and the stench of death defined everyday reality; the living led their lives next to stinking and decaying corpses, families looked for the bodies of those dear to them, children played with bones, temporary graves were robbed, and arguments flared up as to who could be buried where. The experience of corpse became the most poignant epilogue to the war.

49 Interview with P.B., July 2004.


For people returning to Warsaw, the sight of lifeless bodies became something familiar – as quotidian as the sight of ruins or the necessity of finding the means for survival in a destroyed city. Hundreds of descriptions of Warsaw are available in the documentary collections of the Polish Red Cross for 1945, e.g.:52 ‘a grave without a cross, a leg protruding, unidentified. A grave by the stadium covered only by a net, three unburied persons in a pile of tomatoes’ (Myśliwiecka Street, March 1945); ‘site of execution of 28 people. In the vestibule of a stairwell leading from a courtyard, charred bones and the remains of a person, supposedly a man called Stefan, who lived on the fourth floor of this building, tall, broad-shouldered, a fruit-seller ... In a shop on the corner, covered in rubble, unidentified corpses. In the shop in the courtyard, two corpses, one of them had a prosthesis (stolen)’ (17 Grójecka Street); ‘the university gardens, left of the gate, the remains of a woman in full decomposition’ (7 Browarna Street); ‘in the watchman’s apartment, the charred remains of a newborn infant lie on the window sill’ (5 Skolimowska

Street). These sketches, so terrible in their brevity, relate to practically the whole of left-bank Warsaw.

The collective of survivors faced a dilemma. Should they remove the corpses as quickly as possible or wait to give them proper burials? The city was under the threat of an epidemic. The then-head of the city administration’s health and social department recalled: ‘every day at dawn, I held in my shivering hand the epidemic report ... and every evening, in the company of my colleagues, we looked back at the bygone day with a sense of relief that another day had passed, that we had managed.’53 Some in the administration advocated immediate incineration of all the corpses. However, this project was considered too barbaric. Notices such as this one, observed by staff of the Polish Red Cross at the cemetery on Miodowa Street, were not rare: ‘Please do not dig up these remains for the time being. Parents are on their way to Poland, they will bury them.’54

However, there was a shortage of space in the cemeteries. The city authorities accepted a proposal from the Polish Red Cross to place human remains in temporary graves, and to transfer them to cemeteries once plots had been prepared. Left-bank Warsaw was divided into sectors, in which two-person teams from the Polish Red Cross, mostly comprised of women, tried to reach burned-down buildings and gardens in order to collect information about corpses before their transfer to mass graves.

Corpses were a source of conflict: they had political significance. In the first quarter of 1945, former insurgents of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising received a secret order to contribute to the work of the Polish Red Cross in locating the bodies of Home Army participants of the Warsaw Uprising, as well as to advise semi-formal families’ committees (also called cemetery committees) on where to bury their loved ones. Officials of the AK wanted as many bodies as possible to be identified and transferred to Powązki military cemetery, Poland’s main military burial ground, where they would be symbolically united with the graves of soldiers who had died in the Soviet-Polish war of 1920 and in the 1939 defensive war, as well as with young partisans of the so-called Storm Groups of the Grey Ranks of the Home Army who had been clandestinely buried there during the Nazi occupation of Warsaw.

Meanwhile, the city authorities insisted on burying unidentified bodies in Wola cemetery, which was less central and prestigious, and in a number of smaller burial grounds on the outskirts of Warsaw. The identity of those who were buried in this way was concealed under the anonymous formulation ‘the heroic people of Warsaw’. It was in August 1946 that the largest burial operation under this

54 Bielecki, p. 18.
heading was carried out: open-top trucks transported 117 giant coffins containing over eight tonnes of human ash to Wola cemetery.\textsuperscript{55}

As time passed, the party and the government grew increasingly hostile to the burial of AK soldiers in Powązki military cemetery. The army was in charge of overseeing the cemetery, and it commissioned ZUWZoNiD to take decisions on military burials. Partly following orders from above and partly through its own organizational inertia, the union refused burial to participants of the Warsaw Uprising. In the spring of 1947, former Home Army colonel Jan Mazurkiewicz wrote to Józef Cyrankiewicz to request intervention: there were many coffins in the cemetery chapel that had remained unburied since the autumn. The situation in Wola was even worse: exhumed corpses had not been put into coffins at all, and were lying in a shed. During a particularly wet spring, ‘water and rain flooded the remains of the bodies, mixing them up, and families [were] deprived of the remains they held dear.’\textsuperscript{56} Finally, numerous Home Army soldiers were buried at the military cemetery, but the names of many remain unknown and their graves are marked only by the identification numbers provided by the Polish Red Cross.

The situation in Warsaw was bleak, but there did exist norms of military commemoration that had become cemented as usual practice in the pre-war period, and these were what the Home Army circles aspired to and quarrelled about with the new authorities. The question of how to treat the ashes was much more complicated with regard to the victims of genocide throughout the country. There were no inherited pre-war models for the commemoration of mass atrocities.\textsuperscript{57}

The largest cemeteries in Poland were the sites of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps, and the debates started with questions about the identity of victims buried there. Who were the murdered: people who had been targeted randomly or the participants of the resistance movement who had died ‘for a cause’? If the latter, for what cause did they give up their lives: for the ‘freedom of the nation’ or for ‘the progress of humanity’? Was the meaning of their suffering to be found in their Polishness, Jewishness, belief in God, or belief in communism? In the post-war years, what was sought was the heroization of mass death.\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{56} A letter from Jan Mazurkiewicz to prime minister Józef Cyrankiewicz, Warsaw, 19 April 1947. I am grateful to Stanisław Mazurkiewicz for sharing with me this and other documents.


\textsuperscript{58} Maria Janion, “‘Nie-boska komedia’ – skażone arcydzieło”, \textit{Gazeta Wyborcza}, 29 March 2008.
Historian Zofia Wóycicka has analysed personal reminiscences, newspapers and magazines, and memoranda issued by a number of organizations, concluding that public debate was dominated by a narrative of Polish martyrdom. Wóycicka’s study refutes, however, the common assertion that the specific character of the Holocaust was ignored in the early post-war years; it shows that commentators did see the difference between the wartime fate of Jewish and non-Jewish victims. Nonetheless, non-Jewish authors focused on the ‘Polish’ experience, generally remaining indifferent to genocide in the extermination camps. Jewish memory developed in isolation; narratives of Jewish suffering were confined to publications by Polish Jews and did not reach a wider readership. Moreover, this discourse also remained under the influence of the idea of heroic death, and thus it sometimes ascribed a greater significance to the resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto than to the mass extermination of the death camps.59

Pieter Lagrou, who noticed similar tendencies in post-war Western Europe, draws an analogy with the early Christian understanding of martyrdom: martyrs are not ordinary or random victims of persecution, but are specifically targeted because of their religion, and their suffering acts as the strongest evidence of their faith; suffering is a realization and embodiment of providence. According to Lagrou, modern nationalism has secularized the Christian vision of martyrdom and in consequence enabled the interpretation of mass death in the camps as a heroic offering to the national cause.60 In Poland, such a vision of the camps was especially powerful, as a result of the traditions of Polish Romanticism and Catholic culture, where religious and patriotic sentiment are closely entangled. The idea of Poland as a ‘Christ of Nations’61 had grown out of the nineteenth-century history of Poland’s existence under partition, was present in national education in the inter-war period, and had therefore survived into post-war conceptions of Polish identity. Initially, even party-sponsored victims’ associations were not immune to the influence of Catholic messianism.

The dominant interpretations of the camps were maintained through selective commemoration of physical sites. The Nazi concentration camps

60 Lagrou, p. 211, 212.
61 The concept has its roots in days of Ottoman expansion and the wars waged by Polish kings against the Muslim Turks. In the nineteenth century it was revived by authors such as Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), a romantic poet who spent much of his creative life in exile. In such messianic and revolutionary visions, the partitions of Poland between Austria, Prussia and Russia at the end of the eighteenth century came to be seen as a Polish sacrifice for other nations. The suffering of the Poles was to bring salvation to Europe, just as the death of Christ brought redemption to mankind. See, for instance: Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-century Poland*, Oxford 2000.
at Stutthof and Gross-Rosen and extermination camps at Treblinka, Bełżec, Sobibór and Chelmno were for at least a decade neglected by the state, and plundered by looters. One of many ‘treasure hunters’ at Treblinka justifies his own activity with the phrase ‘everyone did it’. A man who was accused in court of stealing a diamond stated in his defence that: ‘I did not know that looking for gold and other valuables in the territory of the former camp at Treblinka was forbidden; Soviet soldiers were in there with us, also searching.’

On the other hand, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau were given the status of national monuments. The editors of PZbWP’s magazine *Wolni Ludzie* (‘Free People’) argued in a series of articles that the creation of a museum at Auschwitz should be a particular priority. In response to questions and protests from individuals who had been interned at other camps, they justified their choice by appealing to the scale of the crimes. Auschwitz was intended to become a metonymic symbol for all of the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

The memorialization of Auschwitz was nonetheless given an air of authenticity by the fact that the museum’s first roll of staff – from the director down to the custodian, artists and security personnel – was composed of former inmates. The first exhibition, created in the summer of 1945, was housed in two barracks on the territory of Auschwitz-I. An illuminated cross dominated the exhibition, which included objects that had been left behind by the victims, encircled by barbed wire; this gave the narrative of suffering a Christian martyrological meaning. The museum’s opening ceremony took place in 1947, on the seventh anniversary of the arrival of the first transport of Polish prisoners at the camp. The exhibition was expanded into several more buildings – and prepared in consultation with the central organs of state power and PZbWP – but only one block was dedicated to the fate of the Jews. Birkenau, the site of immediate mass death where the majority of the camp’s victims were killed, was neglected; the emphasis was consistently on the site of Auschwitz-I.

All in all, in the whole of Poland, despite communists consolidating their power, the rituals for commemorating the dead were predominantly Catholic: the funerals, memorial events, and unveilings of monuments and plaques were almost always accompanied by a religious service. At the same time, a martyrological interpretation of the Second World War was emerging: published obituaries sang the praises of war’s martyrs; union newspapers issued lists of the dead and missing;

65 Huener, p. 71.
veterans and former political prisoners’ associations ran competitions for war stories and personal memoirs. In this way, a narrative of heroic wartime suffering was constructed that involved both specific groups and society as a whole.

**Assistive activities and group interests**

Sub-colonel Edward Brandstetter reported to his superiors in July 1946:

> The Main Political-Educational Directorate of the Polish Armed Forces is visited every day by entire phalanxes of invalids, demobilized soldiers, and military settlers bearing complaints about the absence of any kind of material support whatsoever from the civil authorities. Thus, the issue of maintaining the livelihoods of demobilized and disabled soldiers will be a burning problem for a long time to come, and requires a radical solution.

The problem of physical disability and illness did not only affect former soldiers. Archival materials from all of the veterans’ and victims’ associations that were in existence at this time indicate that they were trying to secure maintenance benefits for the disabled and sick. Alina Tetmajer, who was responsible for social welfare at the Union of Former Political Prisoners, divided the organization’s members into three groups: ‘unable to work’, ‘requiring long-term or permanent assistance’ and those who would need help in ‘getting back on their feet’. Other defenceless groups in the harsh realities of post-war life included people who had lost the only breadwinner in the family: elderly parents, widows and orphans, abandoned spouses, and those who were malnourished and susceptible to illness, especially tuberculosis. All of the larger unions had plans to set up nurseries for the orphaned children of ‘deceased comrades’, as well as schools, scholarships, children’s colonies and feeding stations. Several orphanages, preventoria and medical centres for children were operated by the associations; clothes and food were distributed by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).

---


Union activists strove to obtain favourable legal reforms and lobbied for statutory solutions. The larger associations earned a portion of their income through concessions they had gained for the sale of spirits. At the same time, they established numerous commercial enterprises, mostly co-operatives, whose main purpose (other than any expected profit) was to create places of work for veterans and former prisoners, in particular those who would face difficulties finding employment because of physical or mental incapacitation. As one activist emphasized, ‘We can create workshops with no profitability whatsoever, indeed they may even be loss-making; but they will be fulfilling a useful purpose by employing our members and associates.’

Because of their economic activity and patronage, some of the veterans’ and victims’ unions became large institutions. For example, in Olsztyn, PZbWP ran a club called ‘Casino’, six grocery and textiles shops, a tailor’s shop and a coal- and coke-trading enterprise. Countrywide, PZbWP owned 26 manufacturing and handiwork co-operatives, seven agricultural holdings, the Central Retail Trading group (Centrala Handlu Detalicznego – comprising around 300 clothing shops throughout Poland), eighteen relaxation resorts and sanatoria, three orphanages and one foster care home. By December 1947, ZOW had created approximately 300 co-operatives of various types in the west and north of the country, including bakeries, butcher’s shops, dairy shops, hotels, relaxation resorts, and eateries.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which these patronage and commercial activities fulfilled the needs of the associations’ rank-and-file. Numerous diverse documents contain complaints about the abuse of this system and incompetence in managing communal property. These voices of displeasure are however hard to separate from the general circumstances of the time: the material poverty of a society in which clothes delivered by UNRRA were a source of envy, the dominance of the new ideology, as well as sheer nepotism. The staff of the shops operating under the overall framework of the Central Retail Trading group, which distributed clothes at set non-market prices, were accused of theft and profiteering. An informer of the Public Security reported that children from orphanages managed by ZUWZoNiD were clothed in rags, and that moths had eaten entire bundles of clothes.

69 ‘Sprawozdanie Głównej Komisji Rewizyjnej PZbWP’, 18 March 1947, AZGZKRPiBWP 8, 2, n.pag.
72 Ogrodowczyk, p. 213, 214.
clothes in the storehouses.\textsuperscript{74}\ The wife of Jerzy Kirchmayer, the deputy chairman of ZUWZoNiD, recalled some years later that her husband had one day returned in a state of agitation from an inspection of one of the organization’s nurseries. The centre’s director had been feeding his own large family with supplies intended for the nursery children, and the children of party functionaries were enjoying special privileges, including better food.\textsuperscript{75}

In addition to the basic functions that were largely the same among various associations, such as commemorating the dead and assisting the living, the unions also had specific interests that were characteristic of the groups they represented. To an extent, the various associations were based on the fundamentally contrasting wartime experiences of their members (regular soldiers, partisans, and camp prisoners). However, from the very beginning, authentic and spontaneous attempts at self-organization were hindered by orders issued by the party. Most notably, the state did not allow the creation of ex-combatants’ groups that brought veterans together according to their political views (i.e. those who were not in agreement with the party); in contrast, in Western Europe, as shown in the previous chapter, political motives often provided the basis for the creation of diverse associations of members of the resistance movement.\textsuperscript{76}

The clearest example of state interference was the treatment of former members of the Home Army who decided to come out of the clandestine underground and enter the public sphere. The failure of plans drawn up by aforementioned Jan Mazurkiewicz is an excellent illustration. Mazurkiewicz began his career as a private who fought for Poland’s independence in the Great War, and was a professional serviceman (and for some time an intelligence officer) in the inter-war period; during the Second World War he led the Sabotage Division (\textit{Kedyw}) of the Home Army and was one of the most celebrated leaders of the Warsaw Uprising, about whose personal bravery legends were told. However, he did not enter the anti-communist underground. After a short arrest in August 1945, Mazurkiewicz decided to withdraw his subordinates from the conspiracy movement, and to work in the official structures of the Home Army liquidation commission. Working in the liquidation commission and carrying out exhumations gave Mazurkiewicz an idea of the scale of destruction that had affected Poland by the end of the war. He concluded that fighting had lost its meaning.\textsuperscript{77} He let himself be led by a feeling of duty to the living and the dead, to the soldiers who were under his command

\textsuperscript{74}\ ‘Charakterystyka ZUWZoNiD’, 1 July 1947, AIPN 00231/176, 6, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{75}\ Wanda Kirchmayer, \textit{Z Jerzym na dobre i złe}, Warszawa 1992, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{76}\ Lagrou, pp. 42–47.
– or at least that is what he claimed several years later during an interrogation in Stalinist prison. He contributed to the erection of the ‘Gloria Victis’ monument in Powązki Cemetery in Warsaw (see figure 2.6), and the establishment of nurseries for the orphaned children of participants of the Warsaw Uprising. Mazurkiewicz also petitioned various state institutions with diverse requests: to free imprisoned AK soldiers, to verify officer ranks, to provide for widows and orphans, to award scholarships to students, and to organize work for the unemployed.79

2.6 Unveiling of the ‘Gloria Victis’ Memorial dedicated to the Home Army, the second anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising, Powązki Military Cemetery, Warsaw, 1 August 1946. Photo by Jerzy Baranowski, Polish Press Agency.

He acted to protect the group interests of Home Army circles. Initially, he wanted to establish a union of former soldiers of the AK. He even believed that a political party could result.80 His efforts were quickly quashed by the authorities, who tolerated the presence of the Home Army exclusively within the framework of ZUWZoNiD, founded in 1945. Mazurkiewicz therefore modified his strategy: he encouraged Home Army members to join the official veterans’ union, the armed forces and other

78 ‘Protokół przesłuchania podejrzanego’, 1 December 1950, AIPN 765/335, p. 213.
79 Ibid., p. 212.
institutions of the new Polish state. Mazurkiewicz himself stated: ‘I promoted the usefulness of us joining the union as a group, as this would give us the opportunity to obtain a corresponding number of seats in regional directorates [of ZUWZoNiD], and therefore a way of protecting our interests within the framework of a union.’ However, his activity did not go unnoticed in the corridors of power. The Political Bureau of the PPR Central Committee decided to act, as the following statement shows: ‘In view of [Mazurkiewicz’s] move to join the Union of Participants of the Armed Struggle, it has been decided that he must not be allowed to take any position of power within this combatants’ union, and he should be informed of this in plain terms.’ The fiasco of these attempts to function legally within the structures of the new state was made public several years later: some of the individuals involved were arrested, and in 1949 Mazurkiewicz himself was imprisoned once more.

It was not only the Home Army veterans that had special interests forming the basis for their group solidarity. The genocidal war in which Jewish partisans and soldiers had participated had resulted in the murder of most of their relatives. According to historian August Grabski, it was for this reason that for many Jewish veterans, former comrades-in-arms were the only people with whom they could maintain close ties, which led to the strengthening of group solidarity. Grabski argues that the Jewish veterans support for the new political order was the result of both their wartime suffering and the prevalence of anti-Semitism in post-war Poland. A resolution approved at the first meeting of the Union of Jewish Partisans declared full support for the Polish Committee of National Liberation and the State National Council and also stated that ‘the Polish reactionary forces operating under the signs of the NSZ and AK throughout the occupation period murdered Jews in hiding with no scruples whatsoever.’

The Union of Veterans of the Silesian Uprisings was another organization with a noteworthy identity. From a propaganda perspective, it was supposed to exemplify the striving of Poles to regain the ‘historically Polish’ territories that had been ‘occupied’ by Germans for centuries. Speaking at a congress of Silesian insurgents in 1946 in Bytom, Colonel Jerzy Ziętek argued for the significance of the pivotal and historically inevitable victory of socialism:

For us Insurgents, the main result of the Second World War was the end of the struggle to return all of the Silesian lands, ancient Polish territories, to the bosom of its common

81 Interview with C.Z., November 2004.
Fatherland. The fight against Germanization has ended for us. Now nothing endangers our beautiful, old Polish customs, which we have preserved despite many centuries of oppression. Today they have become a valuable contribution to the great cultural treasure trove of the Polish people.\footnote{Colonel Jerzy Ziętek, ‘Na front pracy! Z okazji Zjazdu Powstańczego w Bytomiu dnia 6.X.1946’, Ogniwa, 2, 6 October 1946.}

However, behind this rhetoric was a hidden agenda – most importantly, the ‘forgetting’ of the \textit{Volksliste}, which local people had signed either willingly or under duress during the war. Under the new Polish regime, the presence of one’s name on the list could be a cause for punishment. Former soldiers of the Wehrmacht\footnote{On Poles in Wehrmacht see Ryszard Kaczmarek, \textit{Polacy w Wehrmachcie}, Kraków 2010.} who were conscripted by force were, however, eligible to apply for membership in this union, as were former concentration camp inmates. Members of ZWPŚ worked on rehabilitation and verification commissions, sometimes even intervening to prevent forced deportation of Silesian Poles to the USSR or Western Germany,\footnote{Henryk Rechowicz, \textit{Związek Weteranów Powstań Śląskich. 1945–1949}, Katowice 1966, p. 43.} but also assisting in the ‘liqudiation of ambiguities in matters of nationality and the removal of the traces of Germanness.’\footnote{Ibid., p. 41. See also Rechowicz, \textit{Powstańcy śląscy}, pp. 97–106.} ZWPŚ therefore became both an instrument in the Polonization of Silesia and also an institution that protected local people from arbitrary decisions taken during the verification of nationality and the transfer of the German population.

Finally, soldiers who had fought in the Polish Armed Forces in the East formed a large group of people adapting to life in the newly acquired territories. The formerly German lands were populated by new residents: those who had previously lived in the eastern territories of pre-war Poland (ceded to the Belarusian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics), settlers from central Poland who moved in search of better opportunities, surviving Jews who were planning to emigrate to Palestine, Polish returnees from France, and Ukrainians and Lemkos transferred by force.\footnote{In 1947 Ukrainians, Boykos and Lemkos living in south-eastern Poland were forcibly resettled to formerly German territories. The action targeted at civilians was carried out with the aim of removing support to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army’s (UPA) operations. Parallel deportations were undertaken by NKVD in Soviet Ukraine.} Recruits of the Polish Armed Forces in the East (created in large part from former prisoners of Soviet labour camps, who had been residents of the Polish lands annexed by the USSR in September 1939) were promised new houses in the aftermath of victory in the territories that Poland would gain from Germany.\footnote{Krystyna Kersten, ‘Osadnictwo wojskowe w 1945 roku. Próba charakterystyki’, \textit{Przegląd Historyczny} 4, 55 (1964), p. 641, 642.} As the army marched west...
through the territory of Poland, the promise of land rewards was extended to soldiers of the underground resistance forces.92

The terms of resettlement in the western regions were made more precise in May and June 1945. Military personnel and demobilized soldiers would create a ‘border-zone cordon’ to ensure security, contribute to the deportation of Germans and help new military settlers in the settlement process. The initiative’s promotional materials emphasized that ‘settlements radiating [our] strength and national spirit’ would be established along the border at the Oder-Neisse line.93 Initially, plans were put in place for men to settle exclusively in that narrow strip, but it soon transpired that this area would not suffice, especially once part of the promised land was taken by civilians. As a result, all of the newly acquired territory in the north and west of the country was made available to military settlers. According to available estimates, in the first three years after the end of the war, soldier settlers and their families constituted around 12 percent of all new arrivals in the formerly German territories (i.e. around 500,000 people).94

In communist propaganda, the military settler embodied strategic protection of the Oder-Neisse border, ownership and successful management of the land, and the struggle for national and class emancipation.95 One general proclaimed in April 1946:

Today on the western border of Poland, a rampart of Polishness has been built and fortified – the military settler movement. The bodies of the deceased testify to our right to a border at the Oder, the Neisse, and the Baltic Sea better than any border posts do. And the work of the Polish peasant and worker also testify to this right. Already for the second time in a single year, the military settler is ploughing and sowing in the Recovered Territories. Thousands of chimneys are being filled with smoke in previously abandoned and destroyed factories, and it is the Polish worker, engineer, and civil servant who is working there.96

93 The order to settle there was given by the Commander-in-chief of the Polish Armed Forces on 3 June 1945. Kersten, Osadnictwo wojskowe w 1945 roku, p. 645.
94 Ogrodowczyk, p. 170.
96 Żołnierz-Osadnik, 14 April 1946.
Such propagandistic narratives employed explicit references to medieval legends and knights’ tales – the military settler was represented as an old-style hero with a sumptuous Polish moustache and a stern but honest Slavic countenance, a gritty warrior who never gives in to the forces of circumstance. According to one story reported on the pages of the newspaper Żołnierz-Osadnik (‘Soldier-Settler’), the residents of a village decided to replace an out-of-favour chairman of the local chapter of ZOW, and found an ideal candidate: the sergeant they recruited had the surname Piast, the name of Poland’s first royal dynasty.97

Available military documents such as internal communications show that the enthusiasm and ability that official propaganda ascribed to military settlers were greatly exaggerated. Propaganda was a tool of social engineering, but it also reflected a yearning for a prosperous, safe world inhabited by courageous and resourceful individuals. Meanwhile, many registration forms and reports gathered by the military indicate that the settlers were more concerned about the families they had lost in the east than about the ‘revival’ of the ‘Recovered Territories’ after their ‘civilizational decline’ under German rule.98

In the first years, a feeling of temporariness was characteristic among the majority of the western territories’ new residents. Military settlers were no exception. They doubted the stability of the state border at the Oder-Neisse Line, applied themselves half-heartedly to their agricultural work, and wanted to return to their former homes.99 The situation was worsened by plunder and theft being carried out by the Red Army units stationed there: a large portion of estates had been emptied of equipment and livestock. Soviet soldiers stole mainly from Germans, but also targeted Polish settlers.100 ‘Crops have been destroyed, cows and horses are being kept indoors because people are afraid they will be stolen,

97 Żołnierz-Osadnik, 1–15 December 1946. The mythology referring to Piast dynasty had been already in use in the nineteenth century and was later recycled by the communists. The so-called Piast concept (vs Jagiellonian concept) meant that the re-born Polish state should be based on its initial territories in the West because the country in the Middle Ages was believed to be ethnic Polish, democratic and strong. According to some legends, the forefather of the medieval dynasty, Piast was a modest and wise peasant.


and loitering soldiers go around demanding vodka,’ stated one report directed at
the military authorities.101

The day-to-day conditions experienced by military settlers were chaotic
and unpredictable – far removed from any popular ideal of military efficiency.
Soldiers had to deal with a variety of officials representing different and
often competing institutions: the military authorities, civil administration and
party.102 The situation was rendered more complicated by over-population, the
absence of regulations on private property, and the eagerness of different social
groups to take matters into their own hands. Military circles complained about
civilian settlers, who had arrived earlier and taken better, less ruined plots of
land.103 Settlers from central Poland were treated with particular distrust; it
was widely believed that they had arrived with the principal aim of looting
and taking the spoils back to central Poland.104 At the same time, soldiers
drew attention to Germans who had not yet been resettled. The nuances of
the new state’s nationality policy were not clear to many military settlers; a
part of the population had gained recognition as ethnic Silesians with local
roots. A question that concerned the settlers was whether ‘verified Germans’
(i.e. officially recognized Silesians) had a right to return to the farmsteads that
arriving Poles had already occupied.105

The soldiers’ fears were not groundless. For example, in 1946 several
thousand military settlers who had moved to the region of Opole and Kluczbork
were forced to leave their new homes, because their original owners had been
classified by the Polish authorities as Silesians and were permitted to repossess
their land. Some of these soldiers moved to the nearby counties of Lwówek,
Lubań and Zgorzelec. Here, however, the land had already been occupied,
partly by civilian settlers. In order to find themselves a place to live, the soldiers
travelled from village to village in search of civilians and attempted to enforce
their eviction, relying on the ‘evidence’ provided by neighbours who claimed
that these families already owned land in central Poland.106 Nonetheless, military
and civilian settlers, alongside Germans who remained, were frequently forced
to share single farmsteads. Numerous quarrels took place over nearly everything:
houses, land, seeds for sowing, livestock, food, furniture and even cooking

102 CAW IV 502.1.587, p. 200; CAW IV 502.1.592, p. 42; CAW IV 502.1.593, pp. 7–9, 14,
15, 19, 20; CAW IV 502.1.590, pp. 468, 470, 473–475, 368; CAW IV 502.1.13, p. 160,161,
163.
103 Kersten, Osadnictwo wojskowe w 1945 roku, p. 657.
105 CAW IV 502.1.593, p. 17.
106 Dinwebel, p. 39.
utensils. Difficult compromises were only sometimes reached: ‘in the morning, the civilian Baran collects milk from the cow, the military settler milks her in the afternoon, and the German family in the evening,’ reported one satisfied representative of ZOW.\footnote{\textit{ZOW Okręgu Dolnośląskiego do Wojewody Wrocławskiego, 3 sierpnia 1946’}, CAW IV 502.1.590, p. 473.}

Furthermore, a past in the Polish Armed Forces in the East was not a source of social prestige among Poles. According to a popular saying at the time, ‘a patch here, a patch there, that’s what commie soldiers wear’ (‘\textit{z przodu lata, z tyłu lata, to jest żołnierz demokrata}’).\footnote{Interview with P.B., July 2004.} Reports show that a soldier settler who complained about material conditions could expect from his neighbors responses such as: ‘go to the people who told you to fight!’\footnote{\textit{Protokół z pierwszego Zjazdu Przewodniczących Wojewódzkich i Powiatowych ZOW, 21 lipca 1946 r.’}, CAW IV 502.1.593, p. 24.} or ‘grab your machine gun and go to the forest!’\footnote{\textit{Sprawozdanie ze Zjazdu Osadników Wojskowych Ziemi Lubuskiej, 23 października 1946’}, CAW IV 502.1.13, p. 163.} A soldier decorated with the Cross of Valour complained that ‘the mayor [\textit{wójt}] and village elder [\textit{soltys}] call him a Bolshevik Ukrainian.’ Another soldier was told by his local mayor that ‘your property is in the East, you are just a worker.’\footnote{\textit{ZOW Okręgu Dolnośląskiego do Wojewody Wrocławskiego, 3 sierpnia 1946’}, CAW IV 502.1.590, p. 473.} Yet another settler with military honours had one cow and a family of seven to feed. Sharing a farmstead with a civilian settler, he complained that:

\begin{quote}
… the drunkard and plunderer [i.e. the civilian] allows him no share of the farm, doesn’t let him bake bread, doesn’t work in the field and persecutes his family – he even hit his daughter. He sold the grain and one ox that had been left by the Germans, and bought five pigs and a horse with the money, claiming that they were all his own. His wife said, ‘if you served in the Jewish army, let the Jews give you some animals.’\footnote{Ibid.}
\end{quote}

In such situations, the activity of the Union of Military Settlers was not restricted to propagandistic encouragement of expressing support for the socialist regime (by e.g. participating in referendums and elections). It was also important that the organization provide help in settling into farmsteads, establishing agricultural co-operatives, distributing livestock and crop seeds, finding work in towns and cities, and alerting the civil and military authorities to any difficulties faced by military settlers.
2.7 Propaganda picture of a former soldier of a female brigade of Polish Armed Forces ploughing the post-German territories, Platerowo, 1946. Photo by Dąbrowiecki, National Digital Archives/Polish Press Agency.
Both in the western regions and elsewhere in Poland, former communist partisans were more fortunate. Unlike Home Army fighters, concentration camp prisoners, Silesian insurgents and soldier settlers, they were integrated into the official structures of the nascent socialist state. For most of them, membership in a veterans’ association was a background activity, or part of a broader mission to build a new social reality. Former soldiers of the Dąbrowski Brigade were among the most relied-upon groups in the new state: many were employed in the security organs and police, at various levels of the state administration, in the party apparatus, and the armed forces. An official of the Union of Dąbrowski Soldiers in Gdańsk justified his neglect of his administrative duties by appealing to the ‘mountain of work’ he had to do at the Department of Public Security. Out of 23 members of this union in Kraków voivodeship, 18 were gainfully employed in 1949: of those 18, ten worked in the state power structures or party administration, four at the regional department for security, one was a policeman, two worked at a local prison, and one was an official of the regional party committee; in addition, of the five individuals without a permanent place of work, two worked in some unspecified capacity along the ‘party line’. Moreover, communist ex-combatants not only had their ‘own’ associations, including the Union of Dąbrowski Soldiers and the Union of Veterans of the Revolutionary Struggles, but also were encouraged by the party to join other organizations. Thus, especially after 1947, the activity of many communist partisans in all of the veterans’ unions was directed at confrontation with other ‘reactionary’ groups.

‘The Soil Has Been Tilled’: Towards the Forced Unification of Memory Groups

The circles of former concentration camp prisoners quickly became the object of jealous attention from the authorities of the Polish Workers’ Party, chiefly because they were an important section of the political clientele of the still existing Polish Socialist Party. ‘This organization is not valued here’, underlined the Secretariat of the PPR in January 1946. The party Secretariat thereafter sent ‘strong comrades’ who had experienced the Nazi camps (Jerzy Albrecht, Jan Izydorczyk and Pelagia

114 ‘Dla komisji likwidacyjnej Zw. Dąbrowszczaków w W-wie’, 17 March 1950, AAN, Grupa Akt ZBoWiD, 2, p. 68.
115 AAN, Grupa Akt ZBoWiD, 2, p. 90, 91.
Lewińska) to represent the PPR at chief conferences and events organized by PZbWP.  

The communist party’s desire to involve itself with the prisoners’ union was the result of several pragmatic and ideological concerns. Firstly, the PPR’s authorities had a vested interest in ensuring the eligibility of former prisoners of the pre-war Polish regime to join the union; they wanted the suffering of inter-war communists and the broad spectrum of wartime prisoners to have equal value. The Secretariat of the Central Committee decreed that ‘the transformation of [PZbWP] into an organization for all political prisoners must become a tendency in the union’s development.’ Putting the political inmates of the Polish prison at Bereza Kartuska (1934–39) and those of the Nazi concentration camps on an equal footing was one of many ways in which the pre-war Sanacja regime was delegitimized and the new communist government justified. Secondly, the treatment of PZbWP was consistent with the overall propaganda guidelines concerning the memory of the camps. The authorities recognized that the ‘theme of wartime suffering’ would absorb an undesirably large portion of society’s attention, and that contemplation of the ‘difficult and protracted days of the occupation’ would result in unrest. The ideological guidelines for working with former camp prisoners therefore demanded that stories of hardship be ‘reduced to a minimum’, and the more positive fact of victory over Germany be emphasized. This was the origin of a narrative of the camps that came to dominate, in a more developed form, from the early 1950s onwards; according to this vision of the past, the camp prisoner was a hero who triumphed in fighting for a good cause. Thirdly, PZbWP was one of the main actors on the foreign policy scene – the organization was integrated into the structures of the international left-wing ex-combatants’ movement, which in the 1940s was channelled through the International Federation of Former Political Prisoners (Fédération Internationale des Anciens Prisonniers Polítiques, FIAPP; the federation had been founded at the same time as PZbWP, had its headquarters in Warsaw, and Józef Cyrankiewicz was a member of its governing body).

---

117 Ibid.
118 A prison in Polesie province (today Belarus), founded to detain political opponents including many communists, who were viewed by the Polish state as a threat to security and social order. Internees were kept without formal charges for three months (with the possibility of prolonging the detention indefinitely). They performed penal labour under harsh conditions, which caused deaths among prisoners.
119 Sanacja (sanation) was an authoritarian political movement that came to power after the coup d’état (1926) by Józef Piłsudski.
FIAPP had affiliates in Western Europe and had both welfare goals (e.g. applying pressure to governments to recognize special privileges for former prisoners) and political ones (such as the condemnation of penal methods used against prisoners in Western Europe, especially Spain and Greece). The PPR could not remain indifferent to this prominent role played independently by PZbWP. Finally, the prisoners’ union was one of the key institutions that built ties between the regime and the Catholic priesthood. PZbWP had a number of clergymen in its ranks: priests who had been interned in concentration camps, especially Dachau. Priests initially joined the organization, in small numbers, because they were attracted by the material assistance offered to their families and the church. In time, the union began to create a more consolidated group of loyal clergy who were taken in by official pro-Soviet, anti-German, anti-American and anti-Vatican propaganda; since 1949 they had been called patriot-priests.

The striving to subordinate former prisoners by uniting them with veterans’ associations gained momentum around 1948, at the same time that public life began to undergo totalitarianization. The communist party decided to merge all the unions into a single body, and also to subject them to strict ideological and economic control. After an intensive and highly politicized wave of verifications of associations’ members in 1947 (which ensured that regional directorates were fully under the control of the party), the merger of unions began in 1948 with the decision to liquidate the Union of Military Settlers. At a congress on 25–27 September, ZOW was united with ZUWZoNiD; as already mentioned, the new organization was named the Union of Fighters against Fascism and the Hitlerite Invasion for Independence and Democracy. This act was badly received by both the military settlers, who were deprived of an institution that defended their interests, and the Home Army soldiers who sensed a threat to their (already weak) position. Indeed, ‘verification’ was carried on also in the new union – in effect, politically undesirable groups were removed.

All of the other associations were brought under the strict control of the PPR; directorates were changed and lustration was carried out. The general atmosphere of this period is conveyed by the minutes of meetings in early 1949. People spoke of ‘screws being tightened’, of being ‘under the magnifying glass’; they discussed the ‘removal of the speculating and reactionary elements’ and being ‘covered by the direct patronage’ of the party.

123 ‘Protokół nr 16 z posiedzenia Biura Politycznego, 6 maja 1948’ in Kochański (ed.), Protokoły z posiedzeń Biura Politycznego, p. 207.
2.8 Announcements of meetings of ZUWZoNiD concerning the planned merger of veteran organizations, 1947/1948. National Library of Poland.
In March 1949, the party cells within the PZbWP ordered the liquidation of local-level groupings (koła) and demanded that hereafter meetings should be held exclusively at the county (powiat) level and above. The party activists campaigned for the hastening of measures to accept communist prisoners of Tsarism and Sanacja into the organization, and argued that the union should absorb other prisoners’ association that were ‘wandering in the wilderness’ – in other words, smaller autonomous organizations such as the Association for the Preservation of Majdanek were to be brought under control. The party cells also announced the liquidation of the PZbWP’s Council for Social Support; the union’s material assistance initiatives were to be curtailed. Henryk Matysiak, a former political prisoner, member of the Main Directorate and office director of PZbWP (and over the course of the next twenty years, one of the key figures of ZBoWiD – he would become a full-time member responsible for propaganda), summarized these decisions as follows:

It is said that the soil has been tilled and resistance has been broken, and that now our main task is to assist the efforts of the party members within our union. Issues surrounding the commemoration of martyrs have become a secondary concern. A straightening of the political line has been put into effect.124

In June 1949, after the political merger of PPR and PPS that resulted in the United Polish Workers’ Party (PZPR), the Political Bureau of the PZPR Central Committee took a final decision to merge all of the remaining associations into a single organization.125 Various names for the new organization were mooted, such as the ‘Anti-fascist Union of Combatants’, the ‘Polish Union of Combatants’, and the ‘Union of Participants of the Struggle for Freedom and Democracy’. The words ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ were eventually identified as key terms, and the name ‘Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy’ (ZBoWiD) was settled upon.126

Publications from communist times declare that eleven former associations were brought together to form ZBoWiD – these unions were named at the Unification Congress in September 1949 as the apparent founders of the new organization. However, the most substantial archival document on the theme of the ‘consolidation of brotherly organizations’, indicated that other organizations were simply banned; it stated for instance the need ‘on the margins of this process, to liquidate and remove from the register a number of local organizations’, alongside ‘a range of similar organizations that either carry

126 ‘Brudnopis uchwały Biura Politycznego KC PZPR w sprawach organizacji społecznych z 23 czerwca 1949’, AAN, KC PZPR/XXVI, 6, p. 8.
out no actual activity, or were founded as fronts for anti-democratic activity.”

This document, forwarded in May 1949 to Stanisław Matuszewski of the PZPR Central Committee (who, at the time, was responsible for the practical aspects of the centralization of social life), also stated that ‘the political influence of the Party’ was ‘relatively good’ in six of the most important organizations thanks to the process of ‘verification, as a result of which the class enemy and parasitic elements have been removed’. The only ideologically unsafe organization, according to this report, was the Union of Wielkopolska Insurgents, who ‘before the war were a hotbed of political conservatism, and some of those nationalist conservatives remain members of this union to this day.’ It was also suggested that only a third of the members of ZOW had decided to apply for membership of the newly consolidated Union, the rest were conspicuous in their ‘tendency to remain faithful to the traditions and customs of exclusively defending the interests of the military settlers, in the worst meaning of this word, such that they even openly speak out against the government’s [collective farming] policies in the countryside.’

This document appears to avoid drawing even the most basic distinctions between different memory groups; it states merely that ‘they have a common social base’. Preparations for the Unification Congress involved, above all, mobilizing party activists and compelling the (already compliant) directorates of associations to declare their co-operation in the merger, discontinue their economic activity and announce the impending changes to their members throughout the country. The actual dissolution of the organizations’ regional structures was initiated after the Unification Congress, in 1950.

All in all, in the first two years after the war, the activity of veterans and former political prisoners was concentrated on commemoration and social assistance, but it was nonetheless both substantial and pluralistic. The limits of institutional autonomy had not yet been precisely defined, and that made it possible to articulate diverse group interests and identities. However, the largest associations avoided organizational affiliation with specific wartime formations, claiming instead to represent ‘all’ partisans, soldiers or prisoners. In the years 1948–49, the state authorities began to suppress independent social initiatives. Centralization implied a denial of the need for different associations and imposed

---

127 ‘Załącznik nr 21 do Memoriału w sprawie uregulowania masowych organizacji społecznych i innych stowarzyszeń wraz z naświetleniem aktualnej sytuacji na tym odcinku z 27 maja 1949’, AAN, KC PZPR/XXVI, 6, p. 40.
128 ‘Uchwała Biura Politycznego KC PZPR w sprawach organizacji społecznych’, 23 June 1946, AAN, KC PZPR/XXVI, 6, p. 1, 2.
129 Ibid., p. 41.
130 Ibid.
a monolithic interpretation of recent history. These processes intensified in the following years within the monopolistic union, ZBoWiD; the creation of this organization was an essential policy aim of the communist authorities that had broad and long-term consequences, both for the politics of memory and for the expression of veterans’ and ex-prisoners’ interests.