Chapter 4
The Myth of Unity (1956–59)

Memory Unbound

The Thaw in Poland has traditionally been described in terms of conflicts between opposing cliques in the corridors of power. Some authors examine the ethnic and ideological tensions between Polish Communists; others argue that the political changes were a ‘ritual drama’ played out for the consumption of the public. These approaches are countered by historian Paweł Machcewicz, who paints a picture of a mass social movement that entered the public stage and contested the existing political order. Despite appearances, however, these contrasting approaches do not contradict each other, but rather show the same phenomenon from different angles: they illuminate history either from the top-down or the bottom-up. This chapter attempts to understand the changes that resulted from a collision of interests between the state authorities and the grassroots elements of Polish society. It presents the rejection by the veterans’ and former prisoners’ groups of the ideological formulae of the Stalinist years, and the reaction of the authorities in creating a new legitimizing narrative: the myth of the unity of the resistance movement, which utilized parts of the myth of victory over fascism but also rearranged the hierarchy of wartime narratives. Unlike its Stalinist predecessor, the new myth was inclusivist, but in stipulating the unity of diverse groups and interests, it also falsified the history of the war.

De-Stalinization arrived in Poland quickly, thanks to a rapidly unfolding chain of events: the USSR’s change in direction under Nikita Khruschev, whose ‘Secret Speech’ about the crimes of Stalinism (February 1956) was widely distributed in Warsaw; the death of Bolesław Bierut (March 1956); the outbreak of the workers’ protests in Poznań (June 1956); and finally, the election of Władysław Gomułka as the First Secretary of the Party (October 1956) at a moment when the uprising in

Budapest was being observed with bated breath and trepidation. The process led to
the opening up of the public realm, where the contest for the control of the memory
of the Second World War was played out under new rules, requiring something
other than the raw violence of the preceding era. State control disappeared, as
did, to a large extent, self-censorship. What was at stake in this game for the new
party apparatus was the legitimacy of the state authorities. The ‘traditions’ of the
Stalinist era were discarded, and a re-evaluation of the system of rule was required
for the regime to maintain its grip on power. Change had to be profound enough
to satisfy the society, but also shallow enough not to result in the collapse of the
political system which had drawn its authenticity from the outcome of the Second
World War.

The year 1956 has been called a time of the ‘explosion of collective memory’
in Poland, and for good reason. Already in the early spring of that year, during
discussions of Khrushchev’s speech organized by the PZPR, the taboos of the
Stalinist narrative of history were being challenged at the highest party level,
and the post-war model of Polish-Soviet relations was being questioned. The
participants of these discussions raised issues such as the annexation of Poland’s
pre-war eastern provinces on 17 September 1939 by the Soviet Union (referred
to as an ‘attack’ and a ‘stab in the back’), the deportations of Polish citizens and
their slave labour in the Gulag, the Katyn massacre (1940), the Warsaw Uprising
(1944), the mistreatment of soldiers of the Home Army after the end of the war,
and the show trials against its leaders. Further political developments encouraged
the resurfacing of even more hitherto suppressed histories.

An amnesty was declared in April 1956 for approximately 10,000 political
prisoners (some had already been freed from prison in 1955), and many
others had their sentences commuted. The amnesty was an act of pardon
and did not automatically entail the repeal of the sentences. The process of

5 The so-called Katyn massacre (zbrodnia katyńska) has been the most vividly remembered
crime of the Soviet NKVD against Poles. In the early spring 1940 over 20,000 Polish
army and police officers, as well as other male representatives of Polish intelligentsia
were murdered in Katyn Forest (near Smolensk) and elsewhere in Soviet Union. Until 1990,
the USSR maintained that the victims had been murdered by the Nazis in 1941. See for
6 Machcewicz, Polski rok, pp. 25f.
7 Zbysław Rykowski and Wiesław Wladyka, Polska próba. Październik ’56, Kraków 1989,
p. 143.
8 At the same time, some individuals remained in prison, especially people who had been
charged with espionage. The best-known case is that of Adam Boryczka (1913–88), an
emissary of the émigré authorities, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1954; he
was freed only in 1967.
rehabilitating well-known individuals, both from the Home Army and the ranks of communists, was started. The rehabilitations were announced in the press. Transports carrying repatriated Poles from the Soviet Union started to arrive in 1955. Under Gomułka, the government began to treat the repatriations as an important device in the strengthening of their legitimacy. In March 1957, a bilateral agreement on this issue was signed with the Soviet Union. Altogether, in the years 1955–59, over 240,000 individuals returned to Poland, including political prisoners.

A resolution of the Seventh Plenum of the PZPR Central Committee (18–28 February 1956) pledged changes in the party’s attitude towards former soldiers of the Home Army and the Polish Armed Forces in the West. The plenum also revealed existing conflicts within the circles of the former partisans of the People’s Army. Mieczysław Moczar, the communist partisan leader in Łódź, Kielce and Lublin regions during the war, chief of the secret police in Łódź in the 1940s, later in political disgrace, now became Deputy Minister for Interior Affairs. He attacked the Department of the History of the Party over what he saw as their under-valuing of the efforts of the communist partisan movement; he described the party historians as ‘burned out’, and accused them of a lack of interest in the wartime history of the Polish Workers’ Party and in the commemoration of sites where the Nazis had murdered villagers and burned down whole settlements in retaliation to partisan actions: ‘you are interested in these villages as much as I am interested in last year’s snow.’ Another former AL member, General Janusz Zarzycki, who had been removed from his position in the military during the Stalinist period for so-called right-nationalist deviation, called upon the chairman of ZBoWiD Franciszek Jóźwiak to describe the role he had played as a member of the Political Bureau in ‘a pointless procedure which broke people and belittled our historical heritage.’

Censorship abated. Newspaper articles that approached previously suppressed themes became sensations, such as ‘Towards a Reconciliation with the Home Army’ by Jerzy Ambroziewicz, Walery Namiotkiewicz and Jan Olszewski (‘Na spotkanie ludziom z AK’, Po prostu, 11 March 1956) and Jerzy Piórkowski’s ‘We of the Home Army’ (‘My z AK’, Nowa Kultura, 1 April 1956). Quarrels about all-Polish infighting between nationalist and communist groups were

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11 Zaremba, p. 238.
13 Ibid., p. 187.
revived. Numerous historiographical works and memoirs were also published. Many war-related anniversaries that had hitherto been suppressed were more or less officially commemorated, including the twelfth anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. These articles sparked a heated debate in the press about the wartime conspiracy, which extended into the following year.

At party gatherings and workplace meetings, themes were discussed that had previously been unsafe even within the most intimate and trusted circles, and political topics were openly debated in cafés, private homes, churches, and cemeteries. Major Kamiński, the author of one of many reports of the Ministry of Internal Affairs concerning this situation, observed with some anxiety that ‘a whole mass’ of meetings, private consultations and ‘tea gatherings’ had taken place:

If we add to this the huge number of various congresses and meetings arranged in conjunction with anniversaries considered to be symbolic for former AK members, the pretext for the gatherings, the unveiling of signs, etc., there can be no doubt that these meetings are creating the ideal conditions for the reestablishment of contacts [between former combatants of marginalized groups] and re-consolidation [of their organizations].

In this manner, the debates of the Polish Thaw actively attacked the myth of victory over fascism, which had been built on friendship with the USSR. According to the unofficial narrative which entered the scene, wartime Soviet repressions were presented as comparable to Nazi crimes, and members of the anti-communist conspiracy who had fought Soviet domination were put forward as candidates for the status of national heroes.

**Changes**

ZBoWiD had stagnated since 1953, and the first changes occurred in late 1955. The Main Directorate convoked meetings in several counties. The formal aim of

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16 For more detail on the commemoration of the uprising and the role of the state in choreographing these ceremonies, see: Sawicki, pp. 103–116.
these sessions was to elect new local representations, whereas the actual purpose was to gauge public opinion and to mobilize veterans for participation in the National Front. After the county meetings, preparations were begun for regional meetings. The organizing process lasted until spring 1956, and coincided with the nationwide social upheaval that resulted from Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’ and the death of Bolesław Bierut. Speakers at these congresses, still expressing themselves in the party newspeak, complained about the neglectful attitude of the party and administrative authorities, the confiscation of the Union’s property, and the complete absence of social support for those in need.

In May, chairman Franciszek Jóźwiak offered something of a self-criticism, underlining the superficiality of activity to date, which had concentrated primarily on the international communist movement: ‘it is good,’ he argued, ‘that our work in FIR is advancing principally in the areas of gaining influence and developing activity in the countries of Western Europe. However, this must not cause a situation whereby our own [Resistance] Movement is pushed into the shadows and becomes of secondary importance.’ Developments snow-balled from that point on. Observers from ZBoWiD travelled to a session of the World Federation of Former Combatants (Fédération Mondiale des Anciens Combattants, FMAC) in Brussels. They even considered applying for membership of this international association, which united the former soldiers of regular armies in capitalist countries. ZBoWiD took part in the commemoration of the Warsaw Uprising and dedicated an issue of Za Wolność i Lud to the event. The Union commissioned a tidying up of the neglected Powązki military cemetery and a public collection of funds for a monument to the heroes of Warsaw. The presidium of the Main Directorate decided to publish an article by Jan Rzepecki, the former head of the anti-communist WiN, which appeared two days before the Eighth Plenum of the PZPR Central Committee. In the article, Rzepecki weighed up the tasks facing

19 ‘Protokół z posiedzenia Prezydium ZG ZBoWiD’, 12 May 1956, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 85, p. 86.
20 Ibid., p. 87. No cooperation was agreed at this time because of ‘fundamental differences in political conceptions’. Nonetheless, discussions about FMAC continued to be held regularly. After the Third Congress of ZBoWiD a working group was commissioned that looked to established relations with member associations of FMAC. At the beginning of 1967, the then-Secretary General of FMAC, Norman Acton, visited Warsaw. Likewise, a delegation from ZBoWiD took part in an international conference organized by FMAC in London on questions of social legislation for former soldiers, resistance fighters and prisoners. From that time, ZBoWiD maintained regular contact with FMAC.
21 See footnote 3 in Chapter 2.
the veterans’ organization in the altered social reality. As soon as Władysław Gomułka was elected First Secretary of the PZPR at the Eighth Plenum, a delegation appeared at the Central Committee with a petition addressed to the new leader to broaden the scope of ZBoWiD’s activities.

However, it was the gathering of the ZBoWiD Supreme Council (19–20 December 1956) that led to significant shifts in the running of the organization. More than a hundred individuals took part in the event, including many who had travelled from the regions. More than a dozen of the organization’s activists, uninvited and deprived of their mandates, arrived at their own expense from Gdańsk, Kraków, Lublin and Wrocław. Also present were former AK and AL soldiers who had been released from prison.

The session was chaired by Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz. A report on the activity of the Main Directorate in the years 1949–56 was read by Wilhelm Garncarczyk in the absence of Franciszek Jóźwiak (who had been removed from the Political Bureau). The report caused subsequent speakers to react angrily, and on the second day the Council accepted the resignation of the incumbent leadership. General Janusz Zarzycki, a left-leaning architect from an assimilated Jewish background who was a member of the communist movement during the war, became the new chairman of ZBoWiD. Since the beginning of the Thaw, he had belonged to the reform-minded wing of the PZPR. At the time he was one of the negotiators of the conditions for the removal of Soviet troops from Poland, and he embarked on a highly successful career in the political apparatus of the armed forces. His manner was later described by another supporter of social change, General Tadeusz Pióro:

People in the armed forces called him ‘the princeling’ [książątko]. Alongside the virtues that qualified him to fill the highest positions of state, he had an abrupt, not to say arrogant, way of treating those he didn’t admire, and this irked even the workers most devoted to him. He did not conceal his disregard for matters that may be trivial, but are treated by military personnel with gravity; he remained above all a politician, and did not commit to the rigours of service, which were too restrictive for his unruly nature. He had a habit of wearing a red silk scarf under his military coat, and colourful socks under his green striped trousers.

The presidium of the new Main Directorate was elected on 21 December 1956. The new deputy chairmen were: Kazimierz Banach, a former chief of staff of the Central Command of the Peasants’ Battalions; Adam Kuryłowicz, an official of the Central Council of the Trade Unions, formerly a senior figure in the

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PPS, prisoner at Auschwitz, and in the years 1948–54 a member of the PZPR Central Committee; and Franciszek Księżarczyk, leader of a Polish brigade in the Spanish civil war and member of the military staff of the AL, but discredited during the Stalinist period. Księżarczyk resigned in March 1957 after taking up a political position in the armed forces. Another proposed candidate was the aforementioned Jan Rzepecki, who, however, refused to participate in any official leadership capacity in ZBoWiD. The problem of there not being a single representative from the AK in the presidium of the Main Directorate was raised several times at plenary sessions of the Directorate, but this issue was not resolved until the organization’s Second Congress in 1959. The council also founded a new organizational unit within the structure of ZBoWiD: the Secretariat of the Main Directorate, which was to deal with the majority of everyday administrative tasks. Kazimierz Rusinek, undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Culture and Art (and left-wing journalist, activist of the PPS and PZPR, during the war a prisoner at Prenzlau PoW camp and concentration camp inmate at Stutthof and Mauthausen) became its head. Henryk Matysiak became the secretary for political affairs; he was the only member of the new leadership with a substantial history of involvement in ZBoWiD.

The session of the Supreme Council gave rise to a series of meetings of the central authorities of ZBoWiD. The plenary sessions of the Main Directorate gained a special significance, as it was here that the opinions of various memory groups were voiced. Besides those who made up the presidium, active participants of these meetings included: the writer Tadeusz Hołuj, prisoner at Auschwitz and other Nazi camps in 1942–45, who emerged as a major advocate for the circles of former prisoners; Jerzy Kirchmayer, mentioned above, high-ranking military officer before the war and co-mastermind of the Home Army’s Operation Tempest, sentenced to life-imprisonment during the Stalinist years; Mieczysław Moczar, who acted as an expert on issues related to the partisan movement; Władysław Zdunek, a partisan of the AL from Lublin region; Jerzy Ziętek, who spoke in the name of the fighters of the Silesian Uprisings; Edward Kowalski, who presented on the activities of FIR; and Maria Jaszczukowa, a former prisoner of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück and then-activist of the Women’s League, who participated ex officio and promoted the expansion of the role of women and greater understanding of youth problems. Local-level activists were also invited to these meetings – as a result, the sessions became a forum for the discussion of opinions and ideas about the ongoing functioning

of the organization. It was here that conflicts erupted between diverse groups representing various forms of memory, including disagreements concerning the very need for a monopolistic veterans’ union, the organization’s ideological formulae, and the question of which categories of people could be classified as former combatants. Reports from the provinces also showed that, from the point of view of the new leadership, the mass influx of members posed a serious difficulty for the resolution of these problems.

‘They gather almost every day and muck-rake in the past’

It was an irony of the time that an organization founded during the era of Stalinization was restored from the bottom-up at the time of de-Stalinization. The Main Directorate of ZBoWiD did not gain control over the increased activity of the ranks until the autumn of 1957. Its employees were unable to ascertain how many members the reactivated union now had. According to Henryk Matysiak, ‘tens of thousands of people’ had joined the organization, yet there was no ‘concrete ideological base at the everyday level. In this situation, they gather almost every day and muck-rake in the past, starting with [the histories of] the AK and AL.’ Kazimierz Banach spoke to the plenary gathering of the Main Directorate in March 1957 about a ‘great influx’ of people to the Union: ‘these matters are not being regulated at the central and regional levels, and as a result, they are escaping our grasp.’ Jan Szaniawski, chairman of the regional directorate in Warsaw, added that ‘the Main Directorate is unable to keep up with the development of the movement of our organization.’ A few weeks later he acknowledged that he would be afraid to convoke a congress because of the liveliness of the ranks. Sylwester Newiak, the regional secretary in Katowice, admitted in November 1956 that his domain had become ‘infected with all kinds of newly established sections and sub-sections.’

At all levels of the organization where meetings were held, ZBoWiD was criticized for the façade-like nature of its activity so far. Ignacy Narbutt, a former

26 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 27 May 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 36, p. 22.
28 Ibid., p. 12.
29 ‘Stenogram z Krajowej Narady ZBoWiD’, 29 March 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 102, p. 131.
30 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 12 November 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 34, p. 36.
partisan of the People’s Army recently released from a Stalinist prison, said: ‘there was no reaction to the harm done to our own colleagues.’ Holuj argued that: ‘it is worth cooperating with organizations abroad, and now it is possible because Poland is fashionable. But we need to take into the Union people who will get things done, rather than just sign declarations about defending peace.’ Criticism even touched upon the PZPR. A ZBoWiD official from Gdańsk named Wasilewski demanded less party involvement: ‘members of the Party who used to wear different caps are now wearing Phrygian caps and trying by various tiresome methods to halt the work of carving out a new direction.’

Settling accounts with the legacy of Stalinism was an important concern. Many speakers demanded the release of prisoners and immediate rehabilitation of individuals who had received court sentences. It was believed that the condemnation of Stalinist repressions would enable the retrieval of lost group identities: ‘besides national treasures, besides personal effects, we demand the return of the flags under which we marched for so long.’ The argument was also put forward that the persecutions of the first half of the 1950s united the Home Army and the People’s Army, groups that had been hostile to each other during the war. Both Jan Mazurkiewicz from AK and Mieczysław Moczar from AL argued this point; they would become two prominent figures in the formulation of the ideology of national communism in the 1960s, as the next chapter will show.

ZBoWiD’s neglect of sites of memory was another source of contention for the participants of the meetings. They drew attention to uncommemorated sites of atrocities, battlefields and places of burial, and an insufficient number of monuments and museums. The huge commemorative events of the Stalinist era had not been accompanied by regular maintenance of these sites. Adam Kuryłowicz said:

I have visited [the camp] recently and can say that at this moment I would be ashamed to take anyone to visit Brzezinka [Birkenau], the gas chambers, which have been levelled to the ground. That is how our most sacred symbols of memory are preserved! This place should be better kept than a church, so that people can come and see where millions of people died.

31 Ibid., p. 136.
32 Ibid.
33 ‘Stenogram z Krajowej Narady ZBoWiD’, 29 March 1957, AZGZKR PiBWP 3, 102, p. 93.
34 Ibid., p. 109.
36 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 27 May 1957, AZGZKR PiBWP 3, 36, p. 28, 29.
Holuj also voiced his disapproval at the state of the museum: ‘I have to say that what is happening at Oświęcim is worse than terrible. The situation is so bad that I don’t even want to talk about it. It often happens that foreign delegates wrap the bones of our heroes [scattered on the ground] in paper.’ Another person commented on the neglect of the concentration camp at Płaszów: ‘there is no trace of the camp other than skulls and bones piled up here and there.’³⁷ Representatives from Gdańsk repeatedly demanded the improvement of conditions and better commemoration at Stutthof concentration camp.

Demands of a material nature, however, were the most common. The social issues that were raised can be divided into a number of groups, but they all concerned poverty in the country. First, a decline in state investment and reductions in heavy industry and administration had led to increased unemployment (officially unacknowledged). Former prisoners and people who were disabled as a result of the war had significant difficulty finding and holding down work. As a result, they petitioned for the introduction of policies that would give them priority in employment procedures, as well as protect them from being laid off without consultation with ZBoWiD. Veterans and former prisoners also expected to receive help in their efforts to establish craft cooperatives and service and trade points.

The second important issue was the introduction of changes to inadequate social welfare legislation. A 1954 pensions and benefits law provided only for former inmates of concentration camps who had worked for at least five years either before or after their internment.³⁸ Examples of war victims who were unable to maintain even a minimal level of subsistence were brought up frequently at the meetings. Moreover, private farmers and artisans were not covered by the state healthcare system. They therefore demanded that membership in ZBoWiD grant the right to receive free medical treatment. They also requested easier access to specialist treatment and sanatoria, subsidies for imported medicines and the establishment of retirement homes designated exclusively for war veterans. Closely related to the absence or shortage of welfare measures was the fact that almost all of the veterans’ groups supported a return to the policy of awarding military honours for wartime service, which had been all but halted during the Stalinist years; they thereby aimed at increasing the number of so-called ‘bread medals’, i.e. honours that entitled the holder to enhanced state support.³⁹ Home Army representatives also proposed the verification of officer ranks and military

³⁷ ‘Stenogram z Krajowej Narady ZBoWiD’, 29 March 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 102, p. 76.
³⁸ ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Rady Naczelnej ZBoWiD’, 21 January 1959, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 17, p. 16.
³⁹ Two sets of military honours entitled holders to a 25 percent supplement in addition to their regular pensions: the Order Virtuti Militari (five classes) and the Order of the Cross of
honours awarded during the German occupation. This was at least partly a question of prestige, but the potential re-adjustment of pension payments was also a factor.

Third, there were various regional demands. For example, the military settlers in the west of the country expected that a 1946 decree of the Ministry of the Defence concerning tax breaks for people purchasing land or real estate in this region would be expanded. Activists from the areas of Silesia and Kaszuby also reported that difficulties had been experienced by Poles: many examples were given of individuals who had been forced to join the Wehrmacht. At the same time, benefits paid to former German soldiers were a source of local Polish discontent (according to international agreements, all former members of the military were legally entitled to certain benefits, regardless of nationality). It was argued that benefits were being paid to former soldiers of the Wehrmacht, but not to their victims.40

Finally, the fourth category of issues included various minor grievances and demands, such as discounts on urban transport and priority queuing for all members of ZBoWiD. There were also appeals for ad hoc intervention, most frequently from people experiencing problems with accommodation. All of these matters required that complex solutions be found to the social demands of memory groups by appropriate laws and reforms.

Against the monopoly of memory

Attempts to define the organizational structure of ZBoWiD comprised an important dimension of the discussions of 1956–57. Despite appearances, this was not a technical question, but a fundamental issue that concerned problems of post-war identity and determined the forms of collective life and the hierarchy of influence and power. The territorial structure of ZBoWiD to date had allowed the Main Directorate to maintain control over the provinces, and had contributed to the fracturing of group bonds formed during the war. People who had fought together or were inmates of the same camp had found themselves in different circles scattered around the country. However, after the convocation of the Supreme Council in December 1956, several memory groups demanded if not independence, then wide-ranging autonomy by means of transition to a federative structure.

Grunwald (three classes). ZBoWiD also made applications on behalf of its members for other state medals that would guarantee additional privileges. Cf. footnote 30 in Chapter 2.

Former prisoners of Nazi concentration camps were a vocal group. Their union had been a wealthy organization and had lost a great deal by joining ZBoWiD. This group applied pressure to solve specific issues which it felt ZBoWiD had not adequately dealt with in the past, such as reparations from the FRG and specialist medical treatment. During the Thaw, representatives of this collective believed they could rely on the support of Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz and successfully demand the return of property of PZbWP. Tadeusz Hołuj advocated for these interests within the Main Directorate. He proposed that ZBoWiD adopt a federal structure, with two main branches: partisans and prisoners.  

Not surprisingly, Home Army members comprised another memory group that campaigned for autonomy. The attitudes of former senior officers of the AK concerning ZBoWiD were not uniform. Some officers did not trust the changes that were taking place and preferred to remain on the sidelines. Other officers, however, decided to participate actively in ZBoWiD. These included military personnel who had reached conditional compromises with the authorities in the post-war period, such as the aforementioned Jerzy Kirchmayer, Jan Mazurkiewicz and Zygmunt Netzer. Many others, however, maintained an ambivalent attitude. They would agree to cooperate with the Union if they could be convinced that it actually represented the interests of Home Army soldiers and guaranteed a certain degree of autonomy.  

An important example of the Home Army’s involvement in ZBoWiD was a group strategy proposed by Jan Mazurkiewicz. After his release from prison in 1956, Mazurkiewicz immediately restarted the assistive activities in which he had been involved in the 1940s. A functionary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs wrote a report about Mazurkiewicz’s activities, in which he noted that: ‘he is making efforts in many different rehabilitation cases for the AK, frequently appearing as a witness ... letters are being sent to him from practically all over the country, thanking him for his help and advice.’ Of course, not everyone was grateful. Groups of ‘the unbreakable’, i.e. the hardcore faithful to the Home Army’s cause, both in Poland and in émigré circles, did not hesitate to remind Mazurkiewicz about his unsuccessful attempts to compromise with the authorities after the war. However, for many people, especially of lower military rank, Mazurkiewicz was

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43 See Chapter 2.  
an important figure: the café in Warsaw run by him and his wife became a meeting place for many individuals with a connection to the Home Army, including people seeking material support or accommodation and those who wanted to bury their relatives in a military cemetery. Mazurkiewicz encouraged them to join ZBoWiD, believing that it was the only institution capable of representing the interests of the AK.\textsuperscript{45}

At the same time, many communists felt a grave sense of uncertainty. The Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the PZPR Central Committee took note of ‘the withdrawal of leftist elements from activity in ZBoWiD’, and observed that in some areas ‘the forces of the PPR and AL are outside the Union.’\textsuperscript{46} In September 1957, Major Kamiński from the Ministry of Internal Affairs observed:

a frontal attack on the old directorates of ZBoWiD and attempts to remove members under the pretext that they were Stalinists, people compromised by their violation of law, etc. Spontaneously organized meetings turned into rallies (especially in the regions), at which openly hostile remarks aimed at socialist power, members of the Party, the AL, etc., became mass phenomena... Neither the regional authorities of ZBoWiD, nor Party representatives were able to counter it in any effective way. Meanwhile, the leadership circles of the GL and AL, who would have been capable of opposing these tendencies in an authoritative and decisive fashion, left the scene and were scattered throughout the whole country.\textsuperscript{47}

One of the key issues that was discussed repeatedly by the Main Directorate in the first months of 1957 was how to interpret the activities of the anti-communist underground after 1944. The debates were made complicated by the intertwining of the histories of the AK and WiN – substantial numbers of people who had fought in the Home Army’s wartime resistance later joined the anti-Soviet militias after 1945. Chairman Janusz Żarzycki and general secretary Kazimierz Rusinek protested against accepting former members of WiN into ZBoWiD. In March, Rusinek declared that the Main Directorate should not recognize the membership in ZBoWiD of individuals who had not been officially rehabilitated by a court.\textsuperscript{48} His statement was strongly criticized by other members of the Main Directorate. Tadeusz Hołuj stated that Rusinek was expressing his ‘private opinion’. Marian


\textsuperscript{46} ‘Notatka w sprawie ZBoWiD-u. Wydział Propagandy i Agitacji KC PZPR’, 27 November 1957, AAN, KC PZPR VIII, 368, p. 2.


Sołtysiak, during the war a leader of a Home Army group in Kielce region and later an important local figure in that area, commented: ‘Had I known that such an idea would come out of the Directorate, I would have arranged to stay in Warsaw, for now I am afraid to return to Kielce. I say this not because I want to sow panic, but because I simply want to emphasize that this sort of approach will be met with a terrible response.’

He also drew attention to the fact that he himself, like all the other members of the presidium of the regional directorate in Kielce, had not yet been rehabilitated. Even Adam Kuryłowicz, one of the deputy chairmen of the Main Directorate, disagreed with Rusinek: ‘we should demand that these people be [rehabilitated] as a matter of priority, because these are the best sons of Poland. These people reached out for their weapons at the hour of direst need and fought against our enemy.’ Kuryłowicz was rewarded with applause. Mieczysław Moczar also suggested that some members of WiN could be accepted into ZBoWiD. He focused especially on the figure of Antoni Heda, famed for his attack on a communist prison in Kielce in 1945, as follows: ‘in 1944, he did a good job fighting the Germans, but later, through our own fault, he was involved in the storming of prisons.’

Reports from the provinces showed that widespread access to ZBoWiD for members of WiN and even the NSZ had become a genuine problem for the organization’s new leadership. The absence of ideological unity in an area so important for the legitimacy of the entire political system was an indication of the scale of the crisis. The stance of the presidium of the Main Directorate was undoubtedly negative; however, the individuals taking part in the extended sessions had diverse opinions. Again, the statements of Mieczysław Moczar are illustrative. During a session of the Supreme Council in 1956 he argued that ‘members of the NSZ cannot belong [to ZBoWiD] under any guise;’ however, he is reported in the minutes of a meeting in March 1957 to have been of a different opinion: ‘on the matter of the NSZ, [Moczar] believes that not enough attention is given to this organization. It has a lot of well-minded people and a lot of sympathizers in the regions.’

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49 Ibid., p. 85.
50 Ibid., p. 33
52 See footnote 19 in Chapter 2.
ZBoWiD in the provinces: the case of Lublin region

Events in Lublin voivodeship illustrate the situation in the provinces and the difficulties faced by the central authorities of ZBoWiD as they attempted to wrest control of the organization. On 11 November 1956, the anniversary of Poland’s gaining independence in 1918, an impromptu congress of ZBoWiD in Lublin elected a new regional directorate. Colonel Jan Wyderkowski, a professional serviceman who had fought in the AL during the war, became the regional head. However, the most important figure in the new leadership, the driving force behind later developments, was the new secretary, Władysław Zdunek. Then in his fifties and a member of the PZPR, Zdunek was born into a peasant family near Lubartów, was imprisoned by the Sanacja regime several times on account of his communist activity, cooperated with the Soviet partisans in Volhynia during the war, and joined the AL in 1944. After the war, he was an active member of the PPR and worked in agricultural enterprises. Zdunek was present at the December session of the Supreme Council and was elected to the Main Directorate of ZBoWiD. In the late 1950s he willingly assigned himself a mission to unite Polish communism with the legacy of the Home Army.

At meetings of the Main Directorate, Zdunek put on the agenda the deportation of Home Army partisans to the USSR in 1944 and 1945: ‘Who will repay them now, not only for the material damages, but also the moral?’ Opening the January congress in Hrubieszów, attended by approximately 1,500 people, Zdunek asked members of the Security Service to leave and demanded the rehabilitation of the AK partisans. Representatives of the ad hoc commission went to the prosecutor’s office to check official documentation and evaluate for themselves whether the accusations against the Home Army’s members were legitimate. When the Secretariat of the Main Directorate expressed dissatisfaction at this wilfulness, Zdunek replied in writing: ‘we will not permit the discrediting of our decisions, which are correct and in the general interest, because you have no legal or moral grounds on which to do so’; ‘it is just a shame that the temporary Main Directorate, which was inspired by the spirit of October [1956, i.e. the Thaw], is beginning to alienate itself from that spirit. The road does not lead that way, colleagues!’

55 ‘Ankieta personalna, Zdunek Władysław, syn Michała’, AZGZRiBWP 3, 156/2, p. 33, 34.
56 ‘Protokół z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 1–2 March 1957, AZGZRiBWP 3, 33, p. 4.
57 ‘Notatka informacyjna dot.ycząca działalności elementów była podziemia AK WiN, NSZ, grup bandyckich i peeselowskich na bazie ZBoWiD, mjr A. Mickiewicz’, Lublin, 17 April 1957, AIPN 00231/182, 1, p. 59.
Zdunek demanded that the Secretariat disband itself and that a second ZBoWiD congress be called as soon as possible.58

The Lublin directorate quickly – in comparison to other regions – restored its field infrastructure. Rallies and elections were held across the counties in January and February 1957. Attendance at county-level congresses ranged between 200 and 2000 delegates. Most of them made the journey willingly and at their own expense.59 The congresses discussed the violation of the rule of law by the Stalinist authorities, the harmful treatment of the Home Army and Peasants’ Battalions, the necessity of providing genuine welfare for widows and orphans, and the maintenance of military burial sites. By March of that year, fourteen county-level directorates had established their own headquarters. Since there was no centralized funding available, entertainment events were organized which managed to raise significant resources, sometimes enough to hire full-time staff.60

On the whole, these initiatives remained within the limits of permissible activity. However, the central authorities were concerned about the makeup of the newly elected county directorates, which included former members of the NSZ and WiN. Security Service officials were disquieted: ‘ZBoWiD is losing its rightful character and is becoming a legal base for the running of enemy work,’ stated the deputy commander of the Civic Militia in Lublin, Major Mickiewicz, in March 1957.61 These reports indicate that bonds between WiN and the NSZ were being rekindled; former members of both organizations had been released from prison by official amnesty and were now engaging in political activity. Functionaries of the Ministry of Internal Affairs portrayed these organizations using a characteristic image of an internal enemy, and this fact makes it difficult to distinguish the different groups that participated in these local power games or to identify the strategies they used. On the one hand, the Security Service recognized that the formulaic distinction between the ‘acceptable’ AK and

58 ‘List z 25 czerwca 1957 od ZO w Lublinie do ZG ZBoWiD w Warszawie. Podpisali sekretarz Władysław Zdunek i wiceprzewodniczący Jan Jabłoński’, AZGZRPiBWP 3, 156/1, p. 172.

59 A rally in Radom in February 1957 was attended by approximately 3,000 people. At the last moment, the local transport division refused to provide cars. Yet some of the delegates arrived on foot, despite the cold. It appears that representatives of the local authorities left the scene to avoid any recriminations. The congress came in for particularly strong criticism from Kazimierz Rusinek for its insubordination. ‘Stenogram z Krajowej Narady ZBoWiD’, 29 March 1957, AZGZRPiBWP 3, 102, p. 148.


BCh and the censured WiN and NSZ was artificial. On the other hand, they demonized their opponents by attributing similar subversive statements to all of them. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that after the elections, most county directorates included individuals who had been identified as threats to the party apparatus and government.

According to the secret police, the former partisans in ZBoWiD with the greatest authority among the local population were: Stefan Kwaśniewski, the former leader of a several-dozen strong AK-WiN division in the area of Hrubieszów; Zenon Jachymek, a sabotage officer in Tomaszów Lubelski and deputy commander in the territory of Hrubieszów; and Captain Marian Gołębiewski, a paratrooper, head of the Kedyw (sabotage department) of the Zamość Inspectorate, commander of the AK in Hrubieszów, chief of staff of the Lublin region, and member of the first High Command of WiN (he was an AK leader in battles against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, but later tried to cooperate with them against communists). Gołębiewski travelled from Warsaw especially to attend ZBoWiD meetings. Kwaśniewski and Gołębiewski were elected to the ZBoWiD directorates in Hrubieszów, Jachymek in Tomaszów. Taking up positions of leadership, they all brought with them their former subordinates and sympathizers, who filled the majority of official positions in their counties. The secret police believed that in this way, ZBoWiD was being infiltrated by many individuals who had, in the 1940s, murdered soldiers of the Red Army and Polish Armed Forces, UB functionaries and PPR activists, as well as their families.

From the perspective of the party, the situation was even worse in other towns. The counties of Bychawa, Kraśnik, Biłgoraj and Janów Lubelski came under the influence of the NSZ. In Bychawa, out of fourteen members of the local directorate, eleven were recorded as having been AK members, but according to a note prepared for ZBoWiD, ‘the majority fought in divisions of the NSZ. Some of them have on their records the murders of Jews and activists of the AL and PPR.’ Former NSZ partisans dominated the directorate in Kraśnik. A Ministry of Internal Affairs report claimed that several ZBoWiD members in the Kraśnik area: ‘pretend[ed] to have been AK member[s], but [in fact used to be] in the NSZ.’ The officer who drafted the report was rather critical about them. A resident of Dzierzkowice was supposed to have murdered the leader of the local directorate of the Union of Polish Youth (Związek Młodzieży Polskiej, ZMP) and the family of a forestry worker; he was also suspected of robbery. He had not been convicted

62 Rafał Wnuk, Lubelski Okręg AK-DSZ i WiN. 1944–1947, Warszawa 2000, p. 75
63 Ibid., p. 264, 265.
65 Ibid., p. 168.
because he had been recognized as mentally ill; he then broke out of hospital. Another individual had been sentenced for ‘the murder of citizen Banasik, whom he gunned down in the market square in Zaklików, as well as for several murders of MO functionaries in Modliborzyce i Zaklików, which he carried out together with his band.’ Yet another had ‘collaborated during the occupation in the killing of four members of the AL, who were murdered in his courtyard.’

In Biłgoraj, the officer filing the report had tracked down two former NSZ partisans. One of them had supposedly been ‘in a band until 1947, then [was] interned in the Soviet Union. He killed a village administrator during the occupation and after the war murdered another one, as a result of which he was arrested, but released due to lack of evidence.’ The other had on his record ‘murders and armed assault. In 1946 he was sentenced to ten years in prison, [and] was incarcerated until 1953. Does not have a place of work, but carries out illicit trade, for which he was arrested in 1955 and spent six months in prison.’

In Janów Lubelski, only one former member of the NSZ was noted – however, it was the chairman of the local ZBoWiD chapter. As late as October 1957, statements to the effect that ‘we will soon get rid of the communists’ were still being noted.

If the reports of the secret police are to be believed, the aim of these former partisans in Lublin voivodeship was the de-communization, broadly understood, of the local power structures. They intended to fulfil this aim by removing, branding as criminals, and punishing those whom they believed to be guilty. They treated ZBoWiD as a field institution in the public realm that could be commandeered in order to bring about social justice. The former partisans frequently criticized the PZPR and doubted whether it could be reformed. The records of the local Civic Militia office in Tomaszów contain a statement that: ‘ZBoWiD has taken on a form of activity whereby it wants to bear responsibility for the fate of the county. In relation to this, opinions have been expressed repeatedly that no party or national council is currently governing, and that ZBoWiD is in charge.’ In one of the nearby villages, ‘the commander of the WiN grouping and a collaborator of the ‘Burta’ band, now a member of ZBoWiD, organized on his own initiative a civic meeting where he stated that members

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67 Ibid., p. 112.
69 ‘Notatka informacyjna dot[ycząca] działalności elementów byłego podziemia AK WiN, NSZ, grup bandyckich i peeselowskich na bazie ZBoWiD, mjr A. Mickiewicz’, Lublin, 17 April 1957, ibid., p. 63.
of the party have ruled for long enough; now we are in charge, not them.' He also demanded the expulsion of an agricultural procurement officer from his workplace on the grounds that he was ‘a Stalinist who had requisitioned grain from people for obligatory deliveries.’

At the same time, attitudes to the new country’s new leadership were ambivalent. Whereas local party cells were treated with suspicion, former combatants did harbour some hope in the national government. A myth of Władysław Gomułka as a good manager of the country gained prominence: ‘he has returned to us our rights as Poles’; ‘if the Authorities will be with the People, then the People will support the Authorities.’ Jerzy Hubenek’s speech at the January congress of ZBoWiD in Kraśnik featured a favourable evaluation of the changes that had taken place in the country. This faith, however, was not unconditional:

We trust in the new leadership of the Party and Government, but we desire that the leadership also place its trust in us ... From our side, we can assure the Party and Government that we will not allow anybody to take from us our achievements both past and future, even if that means preparing for a battle like in Hungary [in 1956]. We are certainly no less accomplished at fighting and know how to die, both for our own freedom and for that of others.

The arguments for national sovereignty and freedom coexisted with economic demands. An association of former partisans in Grabowiec demanded: ‘punishment of those guilty of breaking ribs and bones’, ‘rehabilitation of those wrongly sentenced’, and the erection of a monument to Polish partisans in Hrubieszów; in addition, they appealed for supplies of building materials, a halt to collectivization, statutory welfare benefits for those affected by Stalinism, and the organization of craft workshops. People who were skilled at dealing with such everyday issues tended to enjoy increased authority in local communities. As the author of a secret report in Hrubieszów county noted: ‘Many reactionary leaders are running manufacturing enterprises (concrete panels, bricks, lime, etc.) under the guise of the Union, which gives them significant resources and facilitates contact with grassroots members.’

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70 Ibid., p. 63.
71 ‘Informacja ze Zjazdu Powiatowego ZBoWiD w Hrubieszowie’, Lublin, 6 February 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 156/1, p. 161, 162.
72 ‘Protokół z Walnego Zjazdu ZBoWiD z 12 stycznia 1957 r. w Kraśniku w sali Domu Ludowego’, AIPN, 00231/182, 1.
73 ‘Rezolucja’, n.d., AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 156/1, p. 163.
The events of 1957 in Lublin voivodeship bore the hallmarks of a social movement. The bombastic phraseology of national consciousness was combined with political and economic demands, which had specific resonance at the local level. Anonymous denunciations and Interior Ministry files provide a crooked reflection of public life at this time, but they are the only evidence available. They feature reports about neighbours and show mutual animosities and attempts to settle local scores. A former leader of WiN left politics for a period because he was busy planning his revenge on his wife’s lovers. He could not bear the fact that ‘she, a Polish woman, [had] given herself to members of the party.’75 The files of the secret police also make it clear that politics could also be tied to alcohol: ‘after drinking a few vodkas, K. started on his political programme, he often does that – he wants everyone to listen to him, and he gets intoxicated on his own speech.’76 A restaurant manager named ‘E.M.’ regularly hosted his former commanders: ‘he was never sparing with vodka. During loud celebrations, hostile words about the Party and the Government of People’s Poland could be heard.’77

The atmosphere at such a local meeting is conveyed by an account of what took place on 13 June 1957 in Parczew. Jan Kwiatkowski, the chairman of the county directorate who had been elected only the previous winter, received a message from the local party branch a few days before a planned meeting, stating that new elections would be held on that day and that he would be ousted from his position. The formal reason given, based on anonymous denunciations, was that he had defrauded welfare funds and parcelled out the money among his friends (Kwiatkowski denied the allegation in his response to the Main Directorate).78 It appears, however, that the real reason behind these accusations was a resolution of the Parczew branch of ZBoWiD, signed by Kwiatkowski, that had been sent to the local party office only a week before the planned meeting. It featured phrases such as: ‘we are in full accord with the Eighth and Ninth Plenums of the Central Committee, but we must point out that the People’s Republic of Poland is not your fiefdom, and not only people from the PZPR have a right to it. We also have rights.’79

Upon entering that meeting in Parczew, the local chairman found many new faces, including local party officials and people who had arrived from neighbouring counties. According to the minutes, the first to speak was a certain

76 Ibid., p. 107.
77 Ibid.
79 ‘Protokół z posiedzenia rozszerzonego Prezydium ZBoWiD w Parczewie’, 7 June 1956, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 156/1, p. 165.
‘K.L.’, who ‘starts to say something about widows and orphans and that his comrades do not agree with him. He wants to articulate some inebriated thought, can’t formulate it, and sits down.’ After him, ‘E.K.’ took to the floor: ‘tries to stay on his feet, asks where the money for the widows and orphans went ... The speaker is drunk, gesticulates, loses his thread and begins to speak again.’ A number of subsequent speakers made addresses in favour of either the Home Army or the party. A demand was made for the removal of ‘German snoops’. Someone else defended the secretary of the Parczew chapter of ZBoWiD against accusations whose substance can be inferred as relating to murder or to theft of Jewish property: 80 ‘if he was guilty of anything and acted immorally during the occupation, Jews returning from the forest after the liberation would have liquidated him.’ The congregation was also interested in how one participant had amassed ‘so much gold’ during the war. Towards the end of the session, the director of a local dairy-producing cooperative arrived, ‘claiming that he hadn’t been invited to the meeting, and that they were bossing events.’ The alcohol-fuelled atmosphere conditioned a chaotic exchange of opinions. The minutes end with the words: ‘pub brawl’. 81

Towards the end of 1957, an article appeared in the newspaper Trybuna Ludu (‘The People’s Rostrum’) that sharply criticized the leadership of ZBoWiD in Lublin for not being in control of its area and allowing people from WiN into county directorates. Hrubieszów, Tomaszów Lubelski, Bychawa, Kraśnik and Lubartów were singled out as towns that had fallen into disrepute. 82 This was a clear sign that the party authorities had decided to affect changes to the existing situation. In August of that year, Władysław Zdunek was expelled from the party by a resolution of the Provincial Committee. He was accused of having ignored the guidelines of the ZBoWiD Main Directorate on verification and anti-Semitism, and of having close contacts with people who opposed socialist power ‘with weapons in hand.’ 83 The Secretariat of the Main Directorate of ZBoWiD also described Zdunek’s activity as being in contravention of the Eighth and Ninth Plenums of the PZPR Central Committee. It argued that Zdunek had built factions, encouraged county directorates to rebel, and stood on the side of former soldiers of the Home Army and Peasants’ Battalions who had not been

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80 Parczew was a site of anti-Jewish violence in February 1946, organized by a detachment of WiN.
81 ‘Protokół z posiedzenia plenarnego powiatowego zarządu ZBoWiD w Parczewie’, 13 June 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP, 3, 156/2, pp. 44–48.
rehabilitated by the courts. The Main Directorate recommended the removal of Zdunek, the reorganization of the regional directorate, and the appointment of another communist, Paweł Dąbek, the chairman of the provincial National Council, to the post of the chairman of the regional directorate. In November 1957, General Zarzycki could already state:

> How much time, energy and trouble the anarchical antics of comrade Zdunek in Lublin have cost us. How much time, how many meetings were needed to deal with this nonsense, with this political irresponsibility, with this political demagogy, which has overflowed in giant waves from the regional directorate in Lublin.

Increased intervention from the central powers coincided with a decline in interest in ZBoWiD on the part of people with connections to WiN and the NSZ. In August 1957, a Security officer reported that many participants in recent events had begun to distance themselves from the changes: two activists in Krasnystaw county, "utmost critics who have been blasting socialist power, Ch.W. from Tarnawka and A.S., now believe that it is not worth getting involved." The following year, these tendencies became more pronounced. A former officer of the Home Army in Lublin region said that he ‘didn’t see any political opposition currently, and in such a situation, in his opinion, there is no point in spitting into the wind.’

One of the most representative accounts of Lublin voivodeship in 1958 was left by a man recorded only as source ‘A’:

> The whole of society can be divided into two groups: anti-Soviet and pro-Soviet. The majority of people, from the urban intelligentsia to the peasantry, hates the USSR. People everywhere have had enough of the USSR interfering in our internal affairs and not letting us build our own socialism. After October [1956], this matter took on a different hue, because thanks to comrade Gomułka the PZPR has gained trust with most of the masses. However, in recent times this trust has heavily declined. People say that comrade Gomułka must belong to the USSR politically, because he is surrounded by old admirers of Russia like comrade [Zenon] Nowak and others, who have complete control over comrade Gomułka. This is believed not only by people from the erstwhile underground, but also party members ... I have noted that these are statements made by simple folk, who had nothing to do with the former underground, and who, by making such statements, are now trying to be seen as ‘good blokes’, as they say, by the former conspiracy activists. I have noted that they

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85 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 12 November 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 34, p. 139.

talk about such issues of their own accord. They don’t believe there will be another war, but are negatively disposed to the USSR, although they defend Khrushchev as a good politician. People understand that today war would not be in their interests, that war would mean annihilation of mankind and for this reason they have no desire for hostilities. [Former partisans] argue that the atom bomb won’t be needed, and Russia will be dismantled from within. They say that we must give up Szczecin and Wrocław, and regain Lwów and Vilnius in return. They predict that in the long term these changes will take place gradually over a number of years. For this reason, they are inclined to try to make money by all kinds of means. G. works in a cooperative which makes prefabricated products – apparently he makes 5,000 złoty a month. He is full of life and verve. He is preparing to buy gold and dollars, as he intends to escape abroad ...

In Grabowiec, I visited P.R. and his group. He is a person who sees in his work only the triumph and wellbeing of our society. He founded in Grabowiec a truly excellent co-operative (making bricks and concrete panels). This is a man who doesn’t think about the war, but only years for peace and wellbeing for all.87

In this way, ‘A’ was essentially describing the beginning of the era of ‘small stabilization’88 – the transition from the active discussion of public matters to the quiet, inward-facing realization of private goals. However, examining these events in Lublin, historian Andrzej Friszke has argued that the explosion of patriotic expectation among former combatants in October 1956 was the basis for the formation of a ‘partisan faction’ in the national leadership in the 1960s. According to him, the events of 1956 and 1957 showed that the ‘social foundations were present and that the ideological formulae were already in place.’89 To a certain extent, this hypothesis explains the evidence well. The popularity of patriotic slogans, sometimes tinged with anti-Semitism, was observable during the Thaw, as was the demand that national ideology be mixed with the theme of the war. The results of the activity of the communist Władysław Zdunek from Lublin voivodeship also show that local alliances were possible between partisan factions that had been hostile to each during the war. It is worth pointing out once more that Mieczysław Moczar, an active participant in the changes taking place at ZBoWiD in 1956 and 1957, modified his opinion several times on the issue of the NSZ. Nonetheless, the positing of a genealogical relationship between the veterans’ Thaw and the emergence in the 1960s of a nationalist movement within the PZPR and state apparatus is problematic. What happened in 1956 and 1957 was a chaotic social

88 The term ‘small stabilization’ (mała stabilizacja) comes from a play by Tadeusz Różewicz, Świadkowie albo nasza mała stabilizacja (‘Witnesses, or Our Small Stabilization’, 1962). It also serves as a sarcastic comment on the 1960s that stresses empty political rituals and boredom in public life.
movement, a series of spontaneous and undirected activities. Diverse groups of memory gained a voice, expressing different and sometimes opposing demands. Some patriotic activists did not see any way of cooperating with the communists. Other circles distanced themselves from nationalist ideas, whereas many groups were interested primarily in economic and material questions or the possibility of conducting commemorative activity, not necessarily connected to any broader ideological concept.

The Myth of Unity: Formation

The ‘family of combatants’ and criteria for verification

During the Tenth Plenum of the party Central Committee in November 1957, Roman Werfel, the editor of Nowe Drogi (‘New Routes’), the party’s main ideological journal, stated that the necessary revision of official attitudes towards the Home Army had been transformed into a dangerous apotheosis of the organization. The party writer Jerzy Putrament spoke with a similar message, protesting against ‘festivals of the AK in the press.’\(^90\) Shortly before this event, the leadership of ZBoWiD had started to gain control over the situation within the Union, and had taken two fundamental decisions of a practical character.

Firstly, they declined the demand for a restructuring of the organization as a federative one. It was thus decided that the territorial structure, with its tendency to atomize groups, would be retained. The related decision to refuse to reinstate the heraldry of the organizations that had preceded ZBoWiD added a symbolic accent. According to Rusinek: ‘It is not currently possible to sort out the matter of the return of the flags, most of which were transferred to local museums, and which all represent different organizations. We must act as a single organization under the banner of ZBoWiD.’\(^91\) At the same time, something of a compromise was offered in the form of permission to establish committees that would deal with specific issues faced by different groups within the organization. It was, however, characteristic that only four committees were founded that would work under the Main Directorate. These were committees representing minor groups: the Dąbrowski brigade, veterans of revolutionary struggles, veterans of the Wielkopolska Uprisings and veterans of the Silesian Uprisings. Committees of the wartime resistance movement and prisoners could only function under

\(^90\) Mieczysław F. Rakowski, Dzienniki polityczne. 1958–1962, p. 73.
\(^91\) ‘Protokół z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’ 1–2 March 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 33, p. 1.
regional directorates. Janusz Zarzycki explained this decision in plain terms in January 1959: ‘the creation of central commissions representing such powerful groups within the Union would effectively mean the creation of two [more] Main Directorates, which would undermine the existing Main Directorate, and so the Main Directorate does not want to agree.’ Moreover, the provincial committees of the resistance movement effectively camouflaged the wartime identities of the various groups. As Kazimierz Rusinek stressed:

> When we speak of a group commission of the resistance movement, we don’t mean to divide this movement into former soldiers of the AK and AL. We wish, comrades, to see in this movement and in this commission everyone who has the right to belong to it, irrespective of which military formation or partisan movement they belonged to during the fight against the occupier.93

As time passed, several cliché phrases went into circulation to describe ZBoWiD’s situation. On the one hand, ‘centrifugal forces’, ‘anarchy’ and ‘antics’ were the order of the day, yet on the other hand, ‘ideological unity’ was fought for and had to be ‘cemented’ in order for ‘one family of combatants’ to emerge. The Main Directorate took specific measures to create a ‘family of combatants’. One was an (unsuccessful) attempt to introduce obligatory attendance at monthly group meetings.94

Besides retaining the territorial structure of ZBoWiD, the Main Directorate made a second important decision to rationalize the criteria for belonging to the Union, thereby clarifying its attitude to WiN and the NSZ. It issued working procedures for verification in July 1957. In November, at a plenary session of the Main Directorate, Janusz Zarzycki led the creation of a Main Verification Commission and also officially announced the postponement of the next congress until verification had been completed: ‘We are a social organization made up of people who fought for freedom and democracy, and in this very fact lies the definition of ZBoWiD as a left-wing Polish organization, and we will never espouse a right-wing conception,’ he said. He added that ‘the Union is against the social right wing, against its attempts to shatter peace and draw the people into a whirlwind, against the programme to restore capitalism.’ Using harsh words, he disowned the NSZ: ‘We didn’t have a Quisling,95 but there was the NSZ, which

92 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Rady Naczelnej ZBoWiD’, 21 January 1959, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 17, p. 158.
95 References to the Norwegian politician Vidkun Quisling (1887–1945), who formed a pro-Nazi puppet government during the Second World War, were a popular figure of speech.
worked with the Gestapo, murdering patriots from other divisions, murdering Jews who had escaped from the ghetto, murdering Soviet prisoners-of-war, the NSZ which retreated together with the Germans…We will not have these people in our Union.’ ‘Those are not our traditions,’ he added, suggesting that court sentences hanging over former NSZ members should still be considered lawful. In relation to WiN, he was rather more subdued: ‘this was a conspiracy within the AK. WiN was made up of people whose anti-Sovietism and nationalism blinded them from the interests of the Polish people.’96 The chairman of ZBoWiD stated that under specific circumstances, former members of WiN could be admitted into the Union. He explained that their youth, lack of experience, and vulnerability to the influence of their leaders could be mitigating factors. He demanded, however, that former members of WiN hold a self-critical view of their past and a positive attitude to the ‘people’s regime, to socialist construction.’97

‘Let’s do patriotism’

Keeping the structure of ZBoWiD and clarifying the conditions of membership were not enough. In the changed political situation, the Union also needed a positive concept. The idea of the ‘Resistance Movement’ (often written with capital letters, Ruch Oporu) became a new unifying myth. It reprised certain aspects of the myths of the Stalinist era: for example, ZBoWiD’s new ideological formula was founded on the notion of mass resistance during the German occupation, like in the early 1950s. However, explicit revolutionary tropes were replaced by a combined socialist and patriotic rhetoric. Kazimierz Rusinek, who was prone to eruptions of pathos during Union meetings, quoted (somewhat inaccurately) the celebrated Polish Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki:98 ‘They went forth, crying “Poland, Poland” | Then God appeared from behind Moses’ bush | He looked at the people shouting and asked: “Which Poland?”’ Rusinek argued that the Union must answer firmly: ‘socialist Poland.’ He emphasized that ‘we neither think nor want to oppose the idea of Poland to the idea of Socialism because in our deepest

96 Ibid., p. 6, 7.
97 Ibid., p. 16, 17.
98 Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49) is considered one of the greatest Polish poets, alongside Adam Mickiewicz (see footnote 61 in Chapter 2). Rusinek had in mind the poem Szli krzycząc: ‘Polska! Polska!’ (‘They went forth, shouting “Poland, Poland!”’, 1848), which underscores quarrels among the Polish political emigration in the early nineteenth century.
convictions we know that these ideas are not and will not be contrasting, indeed the opposite. They define each other mutually.99 The changes that had occurred after 1944 were to form the basis of unity between diverse veterans’ groups, because socialism had led to the achievement of ‘true’ independence:

Members of our organization can have different opinions on how the world came to be, whether or not God exists, or whether Marxism-Leninism is the only correct theory. We are not a political party after all, no matter how we recognize the leading role of the PZPR. But when it comes to independence [the sovereignty of Poland after 1944], we must have a single, clear position.100

In contrast to the Stalinist myth of victory over fascism, the myth of the unity of the resistance movement was inclusive and patched over the differences in worldview and experience that had divided groups during the war. ‘In our region, there is no difference whether a man was in the AK or the BCh or the AL. Everyone was a member of the resistance’, said a representative of the directorate in Opole.101 The concept of the internal enemy and the repudiation of nationalist military groupings such as the Home Army, which had been characteristic of the totalitarian era, were replaced by an attempt to appropriate their legacy under the sign of military unity.

Colonel Jan Szaniawski, formerly a partisan in the AL, chairman of the regional directorate in Warsaw, described the situation in the capital, saying that before 1956 there were two divisions of ZBoWiD in Warsaw: one in the city centre, and one in the Praga district on the other side of the Vistula River. ‘In the centre, it was empty and nothing was happening. Just once a week, on a Thursday, our comrades, political prisoners from 1905, came to try our consciences, because I never saw anyone else at the organization except them.’ Between 1956 and 1957, things became significantly livelier, so the directorate decided to introduce a cycle of meetings divided between different groups so as to maintain order. Subsequently it attempted to bring those groups together as a united whole. For example, in the Żoliborz district, it tried to establish a new group consisting of both AL and AK partisans who participated in the Warsaw Uprising; Szaniawski gave it the politically neutral name ‘the Żoliborz Insurgents’.102 The actions taken by the regional directorate in Warsaw serve as a model example of how history was reconstructed and ideas changed, from revolutionary patriotism to national communism. Several years later, another official of this directorate, the former Dąbrowski soldier Jerzy Welker, informed

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100 Eugeniusz Kuszko, ‘Podstawowe zagadnienia ideologiczne w życiu ZBoWiD [1958]’, AZGZKR PiBWP 3, 35, p. 120.
101 ‘Stenogram z Krajowej Narady ZBoWiD’, 29 March 1957, AZGZKR PiBWP 3, 102, p. 106.
102 Ibid., p. 123, 124.
the Supreme Council that ‘a new type of ZBoWiD member has developed, a new activist’, and that members valued ‘our activists not for the group he represents within the Union, but for what actual work he does.’

Yugoslavia – one of the enemies in Stalinist times – was an important model in building the myth of unity. ZBoWiD established links with the Union of Fighters in the War of National Liberation in Yugoslavia. Kazimierz Banach described the impressions of a travelling delegation to the country as follows:

The leaders of Yugoslavia have succeeded in involving all of the patriotic elements that fought in the Second World War in the building of socialism, thanks to targeted and conscious efforts. The issue of the war is held by society to be of great importance, an issue for which one must have respect.

The Main Directorate believed that the abundance of monuments and memorial plaques in Yugoslavian cities and villages provided an excellent example for Poland to follow. Henryk Matysiak highlighted the extent to which such commemoration was missing in Poland: ‘The situation of villages is more terrible than during the occupation. No trace of celebrating their heroic deeds in any way. Secretaries of provincial committees [of the PZPR] do not even know which villages have been awarded the Grunwald Cross for heroism.’

The Union quickly became an important lobbyist for commemoration at sites of battle and loss of life. By January 1959, with the participation of ZBoWiD, 450 sites had been marked with monuments and other commemorative symbols. This was also the period in which the mass aesthetic of ubiquitous memorial sites – still visible throughout Poland today – had its origins, i.e. the usually modest symbols such as a plaque on a wall where a battle or massacre took place, or a memorial stone in the centre of a town or city that suffered persecutions. The Main Directorate of ZBoWiD described its actions as follows:

Our aim is for these places to become the object of a national cult. In spots visible to Polish tourists and foreigners, by highways and roads, there should be hundreds and thousands of memorial stones, inexpensive monuments, oak trees, and plaques on schools that bear witness to the history of our people’s liberation war and teach subsequent generations respect for our best traditions.

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105 Ibid., p. 19.
106 These memorials also drew on practices of the immediate post-war period. See: Mazur, pp. 133–157.
107 In Poland, oak trees are often considered symbols of strength, endurance and tenacity.
Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację w Sieradzu

Corocznie międzynarodowy Ruch Oporu organizuje w kwietniu obchody rocznicy wyzwolenia z hitlerowskich obozów koncentracjonalnych i zwycięstwa nad faszyzmem. Na miejscach walk i straże, rozsianych po całej Europie, zbiorą się b. uczestnicy Ruchu Oporu, b. kombatańcy, b. więźniowie hitlerzysma by uczcić pamięć milionów ofiar faszyzmu i wojny.

Zamierzają oni swą uroczystość idealom Ruchu Oporu i swą solidarność z patriotami innych narodów, którym droga jest sprawa pokoku, sprawa niepodległości i suwerenności krajów ojczystych i wolności demokratycznych.

Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację w Sieradzu

Organizuje uroczystości:

Dnia Międzynarodowej SOLIDARNOŚCI
Bojowników Ruchu Oporu

W niedzielę dnia 14 kwietnia 1957 r.

Program obchodów:

godzina 11-ta
Zbiórka ze żołnierzami i wieńcami organizacji społecznych, organizacji młodzieżowych, młodzieży szkolnej, społeczności okolicznych i miasta Sieradza na Placu Gen. Świerczewskiego.

Przemówienie.

Przemarz z wieńcami ulicą Kościuszki na cmentarz wojskowy gdzie na grobach poległych zostanie złożone wieńce.

Pozwolę złożenie wieńców nastąpi w miejscu straże na boisku sportowym, przed pomnikiem wdzięczności i cmentarzu katolickim.

Składając hołd ich pamięci zobowiązujemy się uroczyście, że oddamy wszystko swe siły, aby utrzymać odrzuconą koronkę, aby ofiar walíc o wolność i niepodległość Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej.

Zarząd Oddziału Z. B. o W. i D. w Sieradzu

Another practice that was begun on a large scale was the giving of commemorative names to institutions. The Main Directorate had, after all, demanded ‘balance and economy in the funding of monumental and costly memorials.’ It therefore suggested that commemorative activities be aligned with the building of schools and other public premises, in order to find a way of ‘paying tribute to the dead by laying plaques, naming schools after heroes of the liberation struggles, etc.’

Symbols of memory alone were not enough. It was also necessary to write the history of the Resistance Movement. An Office of the History of ZBoWiD was established (it later became the Historical Commission of ZBoWiD) and was tasked with collecting documentation, popularizing the history of the resistance, and publishing. One of its first publications was a brochure entitled ‘Writing Memoirs and Reminiscences: Guidelines for Participants of the Partisan Struggle’. Matysiak recommended unequivocally that writers should not limit themselves to the history of the People’s Army:

Concerning the creation of history, let us not repeat the mistakes of previous years, whereby when people talked about the past it was only possible to mention three names. There was the GL and AL, Krasicki, Sawicka and Nowotko, and no one else. Let us do patriotism for the living and the dead.

Not everyone was satisfied with the principal role of the Resistance Movement. A former serviceman from Koszalin protested without mincing his words: ‘I constantly hear about the resistance, the resistance, the resistance ... as if the resistance movement defeated Hitler. The resistance achieved a great deal, but how about a little about the soldiers? The honourable gentlemen from the resistance should remember that if the soldier hadn’t arrived, the resistance movement would have been moving and resisting for a long time yet.’ However, the legend of the Polish Armed Forces in the East fighting alongside the Red Army did continue to be important – moreover, it had a vital social dimension in the formerly German western provinces (where Koszalin is situated), where a policy of preferential treatment was in place for military settlers.

At the same time, soldiers who had fought in the Polish Armed Forces in the West began to be looked upon more favourably, and some of them decided to return to Poland. The legends of their battles were incorporated into the official narrative. In this way, as well as through the addition of important lieux de mémoire related to the 1939 defensive campaign, the symbolic geography of war memory was

111 Ibid., p. 57.
112 Most notably their participation in the Battle of Britain (1940) and the Battle of Monte Cassino (1944).
expanded. According to the religious metaphor employed by a communist general Eugeniusz Kuszko: ‘this soldier of Kutno, of Westerplatte,’ what moral strength he gave to the people, when the people were being tortured and mistreated, nailed to the cross!’ In 1960, Paweł Dąbek, a former Majdanek camp prisoner, one of most prominent communists in Lublin region, and the chairman of local chapter of ZBoWiD, said: ‘the issue of the 1939 campaign is immensely popular in society, as much as the resistance against occupation, and it brings our Union closer to society.’ These histories were presented together with increasing regularity, as the shared fates of Polish soldiers who were bound by ‘blood sacrifice’ for their fatherland. This was a reversal of Stalinist symbolism, for which September 1939 was the paradigmatic example of the defeat and weakness of the capitalist state. The author of an article on this subject in _Za Wolność i Lud_ wrote:

The war was started in September 1939 and ended victoriously in May 1945. The People’s Army of Poland had the privilege in this war of fighting for the liberation of its native land and entering the enemy’s capital city bearing its military banners of victory. In Poland after its rebirth, the banners of September 1939 have regained their glory and honour. They have become a valued part of the history of the September campaign, which has entered the treasure vault of the Polish Armed Forces’ glorious deeds.

Legends surrounding soldiers, however, were secondary to the myth of the unity of resistance behind enemy lines. In 1958, the authors of a report on the activities of ZBoWiD evaluated the contents of _Za Wolność i Lud_ positively, recognizing that the journal correctly ‘illustrated both problems of the past and the current policies of ZBoWiD.’ The materials examined by the report, covering nearly two years of publication, show that the largest quantity of texts (one in four) concerned the partisan movement and the resistance in Poland, with around half of these dealing with the history of the GL/AL (see Table 4.1). Fewer articles (16%) were dedicated to the traditions of the Polish Armed Forces in the West and East. A similar amount of material was written about the concentration camps, which had been so prominent in Stalinist times, and which also frequently thematized the heroism of the resistance movement and of prisoners.

113 The Battle of Westerplatte near Gdańsk (Danzig) at the beginning of September 1939 started the German invasion of Poland. Fewer than 200 Polish soldiers defended the Westerplatte peninsula for seven days, a feat that became an important symbol of heroic Polish resistance. The Bzura River battle near Kutno (9–12 September), which delayed the capitulation of Warsaw, also gained a similar symbolism.
115 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 28–29 October 1960, AZGZKZRPiBWP 3, 40, p. 73.
The Myth of Unity (1956–59)

Table 4.1 Content of articles in Za Wolność i Lud, by theme (January 1957 – September 1958)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current affairs at home and abroad</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the pre-war workers’ movement</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the pre-war peasants’ movement</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the GL and AL</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the AK</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the BCh</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of other organizations of the Resistance Movement</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditions of the Polish Armed Forces</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Polish movement abroad</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crimes of Hitlerism, the Resistance Movement in concentration camps</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current issues of ZBoWiD</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Anti-German attitudes

The myth of the unity of the resistance movement had a distinctly anti-German flavour to it. This motif had been present in previous years, but its function changed after 1956: it was designed to unite rather than divide. In the Stalinist period, false accusations of collaboration with the Nazis had provided a pretext for arrest. After the onset of the Thaw, the myth of an all-national fight against the ‘Hitlerite occupier’ allowed the verification commissions of ZBoWiD to turn a blind eye on individual histories of membership in the anti-communist underground. Anti-German attitudes also served to screen memories of the Soviet occupation, and thereby to justify the fact that Poland was in the Soviet sphere of influence. The idea that the USSR was the guarantor of Poland’s western border, which the FRG refused to recognize, was constantly voiced. Nearly every official speech by Union representatives began with the same political preface: protesting against the remilitarization of the FRG, emphasizing the urgency of preserving the border at the Oder-Neisse line, asserting the moral imperative of capturing Nazi war criminals, and appealing that crimes of genocide should not fall under the statute of limitations. These speeches sometimes included references to ‘western imperialism’ as a continuation of Nazism, but in much milder tones than
in the Stalinist epoch. Germany now became the fundamental and self-contained national enemy of Poland.

An anti-German stance was one of the Gomułka government’s most important resources in its claims for internal legitimacy because it strongly resonated with popular Polish attitudes at the time.117 Meanwhile, in the 1950s, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer oversaw a policy of ‘democratization through integration’, which was based on evasion of the problem of German responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich, avoidance of war crimes trials, pressurizing the allied countries to grant amnesties to people who had been sentenced, and tolerating the presence of former Nazis at nearly all levels of the state administration and the military.118 A communist journalist and editor, Mieczysław F. Rakowski, no doubt with sincere indignation, wrote in his diary in October 1958:

In the elections for the Landtag of the province of Schleswig-Holstein, the torturer and destroyer of Warsaw and famous general of the SS Heinz Reinefarth119 has gained a seat. For the atrocities he committed against the population of our capital, he was personally honoured with the highest of medals by Hitler, a Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves. And that’s how it is in Germany. An entire herd of unpunished Hitlerites is running around the FRG. When our press writes about the lack of justice for this scum, [they] scream that we Poles are anti-German.120

At the turn of the decade from the 1950s to the 1960s, the FRG began to change its policy regarding the Nazi past, but facts such as the creation of the Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes (Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung

118 Herf, pp. 267–333.
119 In early August 1944, during the Warsaw Uprising the units of Heinrich Reinefarth (1903–79) and Oskar Dirlewanger (1895–1945) murdered nearly 60,000 civilians of Warsaw. After the war Reinefarth became the member of the Schleswig-Holstein Landtag and the successful mayor of the town of Westerland. Despite demands, he was not extradited to Poland. In 2014, after the release of a book by Philipp Marti, Der Fall Reinefarth (Neumünster 2014), the representatives of Landtag and Westerland publicly apologized for Reinefarth’s past and expressed their sorrow for the fact he was among the Land’s authorities.
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nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen) in Ludwigsburg, or the opening of archives in Berlin for the purposes of conducting trials, were hardly mentioned in the Polish press because they contradicted the message it was trying to convey. Furthermore, the Polish government found itself in an awkward position when it tried to use ZBoWiD for the purposes of spreading anti-German sentiment. The Union was tasked with obtaining material reparations from West Germany for former concentration camp prisoners. Such reparations were among the most important issues on the international political agenda in the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, the propaganda section of ZBoWiD carried out its assigned political function: at meetings both in Poland and abroad, Union members highlighted the scale of wartime trauma suffered by camp inmates, and pointed to the FRG’s reluctance to offer compensation. ZBoWiD’s deputy chairman Adam Kuryłowicz emphasized that the Polish representative at FIR should categorically demand damages for former prisoners ‘from no one else, not from the Polish government, but from Germany. The Germans must pay, and not the Polish government. We would never request such reparations from our own citizens, and we never will.’

On the other hand, the legal context of this situation was very complex, and frequently worked against the propaganda of the Polish authorities. In 1953, the government of Poland had signed, under pressure from Moscow, a declaration in which it renounced any claims to German reparations (this declaration was intended to relate to the GDR only, but did not say so explicitly). West German law allowed for citizens of third countries to apply for damages on an individual basis, but the absence of diplomatic relations between the FRG and Poland constituted a barrier for Polish citizens. The so-called Hallstein Doctrine made it impossible for the FRG to maintain diplomatic relations with states that recognized the GDR.

It was against this background that ZBoWiD started a propaganda campaign in Poland, under which it collected applications for reparations from IG Farben Industrie on behalf of former inmates of Auschwitz-Birkenau (the campaign was treated as a pilot scheme conducted before further claims would be made on behalf of prisoners at other camps and persons deported to the Third Reich for forced labour). The organization also employed lawyers who represented the interests of victims in the FRG. This episode ended in a fiasco for the Polish side, but was used for political purposes well into the 1960s. The second group of victims represented by ZBoWiD were the victims of pseudo-medical experiments.

121 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 27 May 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 36, p. 22.
122 Jarząbek, passim; Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, Polskie zabiegi o odszkodowania, passim.
at Ravensbrück. This was the first Polish group to obtain any kind of damages from West Germany: in the late 1950s, the FRG agreed to pay compensation to these individuals, although it was described as ‘financial assistance’ rather than ‘reparation’.  

However, the use of the reparations issue for the purposes of internal legitimacy did not meet the approval of the prisoner groups themselves, who considered that excessive politicization of the matter could hinder the search for a viable solution to this very real problem. Tadeusz Holuj criticized both ZBoWiD and FIR in relation to this matter. He proposed on several occasions that ZBoWiD should join other, non-communist international victims’ organizations. He likely meant the International Free Federation of Deportees and Internes of the Resistance (FILDIR), which had a solid record of obtaining German compensation for victims of the war in Western European countries. Holuj believed that co-operation with FILDIR was in the material interests of former camp prisoners in Poland, because this organization was recognized by the government of the FRG, unlike FIR:

This perhaps a most drastic and most shameful example, because it is a question of money, but I believe that it is much easier to reach an agreement in a situation where concrete action is taken… Issues like medical treatment, scholarly work on the concentration camps, reparations, even the capture of concrete criminals of the SS can lead to greater proximity between the organizations – not declarative fighting against the Federal Republic of Germany.


125 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 27 May 1957, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 36, pp. 10f.

The fear of inciting anti-Semitic attitudes was another barrier to finding a political solution to the issue of reparations. In the West, Jewish survivors were represented by various associations (in particular, the Conference on Jewish Claims against Germany) as well as the state of Israel, which received material assistance and financial compensation in accordance with the Reparations Agreement between Israel and West Germany, signed in Luxembourg in 1953. Tadeusz Holuj argued that in Poland, publicizing the fact that Jewish organizations were receiving damages could lead to an explosion of anti-Semitism amongst non-Jewish former camp inmates. He told of how, at the International Auschwitz Committee, ‘a rumour, or an opinion, started going round the Polish delegates that the Polish side had been led into an error so that it would not hurry things before the Zionist organization put forward its claims for compensation.’ In the opinion of the presidium of the Main Directorate of ZBoWiD, the declaration by the Claims Conference that Polish citizens of Jewish extraction would be included in its reparations campaign would further aggravate attitudes among non-Jewish Poles. The issue of reparations therefore became a point of contestation in the rivalry between two martyrologies, Polish and Jewish. At the time, however, giving publicity to such conflicts was avoided – unlike during the late 1960s (see Chapter 5).

The Second ZBoWiD Congress

The second ZBoWiD Congress, held in the late summer of 1959, was the culmination of the changes that had recently taken place. By this time, the party leadership had gained control of the political situation in the country (the Third Congress of the PZPR took place in March 1959). The position of the communist authorities had also stabilized in the provinces, as it had within ZBoWiD. In January 1959, there were 375 local chapters and 595 groups. ZBoWiD had around 120,000 active members. However, according to information supplied by Janusz Zarzycki, the composition of ZBoWiD did not fully reflect the ideological primacy of the resistance movement. The most numerous group was the former concentration camp prisoners (40,000 members), with the resistance movement in second place (35,000 members). The records do not indicate how many of these were former Home Army soldiers; in all probability, this information was intentionally omitted, in order to better accent the ‘unity’ of the resistance. There

were around 22,000 soldiers from various parts of the armed forces. Others, such as the participants of the Wielkopolska and Silesia Uprisings, veterans of the 1905 revolution, and soldiers of the Dąbrowski brigades, made up the other 23,000.129

The election campaigns in the lead-up to the Congress featured local meetings of regional and county branches, with the participation of party committee representatives, activists of the Front of National Unity and officers of the Polish Armed Forces. Information provided in official reports shows that these meeting prior to the ZBoWiD Congress were conducted peacefully and without incident. Officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs noted, however, that many former Home Army fighters who had been previously active in the Union boycotted the elections.130

Elections took place firstly at the level of the county, then the voivodeship. As a result, nearly 800 delegates were chosen to attend the Congress.131 In addition to the ZBoWiD delegates, the Congress Hall of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw was filled with younger soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces, representatives of youth organizations, and delegations from 35 foreign associations of former combatants and prisoners.

Of the regional delegates, the largest contingent was made up of members of the resistance movement (42 percent), in which the AL and AK had the biggest shares (16 percent each). 25 percent of delegates were former concentration camp prisoners, 18.5 percent were soldiers, and a further 14.5 percent comprised of other groupings: insurgents of Wielkopolska and Silesia, veterans of the revolutionary struggles, Dąbrowski fighters and Polish soldiers who had fought in the Red Army. Nearly 60 percent of all delegates were members of the PZPR, and the cities of Warsaw, Katowice and Poznań were the best represented areas.132

Thus, the composition of the congress neither reflected the wartime balance of power nor the make-up of ZBoWiD at the time, where former prisoners were the most numerous group. It was however a reflection of a compromise to which the country’s leadership had agreed.

129 ‘Stenogram z posiedzenia Plenum ZG ZBoWiD’, 6 May 1959, AZGZKRPiBWP 3, 37, p. 5, 6.
132 ‘Wykaz ilościowy delegatów na II Kongres ZBoWiD według przynależności partyjnej i środowiskowej. Oprac. ppor. J. Łabęcki’, AIPN, MSW II 3854.
The Congress took place on 1–3 September 1959, similarly to the Unification Congress, i.e. on the anniversary of the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany. However, this time it was not commemorated as a defeat, but as the beginning of a successful struggle for independence. The official event poster and the iconography of the presidium contained the national symbol, the white eagle, and the words ‘the Polish people were victorious’. Three exhibitions added to the ideological packaging of the Congress. The biggest, on the main square in front of the Palace of Culture and Science, was entitled ‘Poland under Hitlerite Occupation’ and showed war crimes against the civilian population and the activities of the resistance movement. It also reminded viewers that there were still Nazi criminals at large in the FRG. ZBoWiD published an album to accompany the exhibition, bearing the title ‘We Remember’ and featuring similar material. The Museum of the Polish Armed Forces in Warsaw had a display which recounted the history of ‘the September Campaign’, whilst the International Press and Book Club ran an exhibition on the history of Warsaw in the years 1939–45. A Resistance Movement Film Week complemented the Congress, and anti-war demonstrations were held

133 The delegates elected a new leadership. Janusz Zarzycki became the chairman, Kazimierz Rusinek the general secretary, and Henryk Matysiak his deputy. The deputy chairmen positions were filled by Kazimierz Banach, Jan Izydorczyk, Włodzimierz Lechowicz and Zygmunt Netzer (an AK representative in the ZBoWiD presidium).
in all of the provincial capital cities, as well as in Gliwice, Kutno, Westerplatte, Majdanek, Radogoszcz, Oświęcim, Dobiegniewo, Rogoźnica and many towns on the East German border. Throughout the country, public readings were held on war-related themes, and the Western Institute in Poznań organized an academic conference on the ‘Hitlerite Aggression against Poland’.¹³⁴

The main slogan of the Congress was ‘unity’. The idea of ‘consolidation’, despite there having been ‘divisions in the past’, was prominent in speeches by Kazimierz Rusinek, Generals Zarzycki and Moczar and other officials, as well as in an address by Prime Minister Cyranekiewicz at a reception at the Presidium of the Council of Ministers. The Congress combined communist and nationalist themes, making them mutually complementary: ‘the national struggle against Fascism proceeded on the tracks laid by the socialist history of our country, on the mobilization of the broadest masses to fight for the freedom of the people and to decide on the form to be taken by the new Poland.’¹³⁵ The communists were presented by speakers as the originators and nucleus of the Polish resistance movement. The programme of the PPR was conceived as having been politically realistic and therefore effective, unlike the programme of the Polish government-in-exile in London and the Home Army Main Command. Nonetheless, thanks were given to all: the soldiers of the 1939 defence war, the Polish Armed Forces in the East and West, the Home Army, the People’s Army, the Peasants’ Battalions, and other partisan organizations. Meanwhile it was emphasized in all manner of ways that:

Blood shed in the African desert has the same value as blood shed on the Pomeranian Wall, in the Warsaw Uprising or in the partisan fighting in the Lipskie Forests¹³⁶...

[Nonetheless,] the heroism, courage and blood of some provided the basis for the bankrupt politicians of the bourgeoisie to carry out a senseless and fruitless policy of anti-Sovietism and social conservatism that was doomed to failure from the outset, whilst the blood and bravery of others became the foundation for the advancement of Polish democracy.¹³⁷

The Congress also outlined the basic tasks of ZBoWiD on the international stage. These included working towards world peace, reducing tensions in international relations, encouraging disarmament, campaigning to outlaw the nuclear bomb, issuing warnings about ‘attempts to revive fascism and racism’, and working to liberate nations that were yearning for freedom and resisting ‘imperialism and colonialism’. The Union would also strive for the strengthening of the new border with Germany and draw attention to the ‘rebirth of Prussian militarism’. The main

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¹³⁴ II Kongres ZBoWiD 1–3 września 1959, Warszawa 1959.
¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 53.
¹³⁶ Lipskie and Janowskie Forests (Lasy Lipskie and Lasy Janowskie), ca 80 km south of Lublin were sites of major partisan struggles with Germans in June 1944.
outcomes of the Congress were reconfirmed by a ‘Resolution on the peaceful co-existence of nations’ passed at the colloquium of the International Resistance Movement, which took place on 5 September after the conclusion of the main events of the Congress.

Importantly, the Congress did not restrict itself to ideological statements. The approved resolution included a statement that ‘providing support to members and beneficiaries of ZBoWiD is one of the most important statutory tasks of the Union.’ A series of social welfare decisions were passed, and the resolutions contained pledges that further efforts would be made to improve everyday living conditions for former combatants (the next chapter discusses some of the major consequences of this decision). The organization’s statute was changed, providing the basis for the issuance of new regulations on verification. The changes included a decision to make ZBoWiD membership available to ‘participants of the fight against reaction’ and to functionaries of the post-war security organs and police who had fought against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Polish pro-independence underground. This was an important ideological step towards weakening the position of the Home Army.

A report of the Ministry of Internal Affairs compiled opinions of former AK soldiers overheard in the corridors at the Congress. Some accepted the unifying message of the speeches. Others believed that the authorities were merely trying to use the popularity of AK in order to gain legitimacy within society. The opinion was also voiced that the speeches played down the impact of the changes the Union had undergone in recent years. The most critical delegates believed that the Congress was ‘choreographed from start to finish’ by people who could not be trusted: ‘Jews and regime sympathizers’. The majority of comments were directed at the issue of material provision for Union members and they revealed once again that the main differences in war experiences between civilian victims and fighters were not eliminated by the rhetoric of unity and heroism. One person declared his anxiety that ‘real warriors who fought against the occupier with rifles in their hands will be overwhelmed by new members who had nothing to do with the fight against the occupiers, but merely sat in the camps.’ He was also of the opinion that there would not be enough privileges for everyone. Another person believed that ‘in these conditions it will impossible to do any work. The Union will be diluted by the enormous number of members, and former members of the Resistance Movement will have no voice.’

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Unlike the myth of the victory over fascism during Stalinist times, the myth of unity of the resistance movement created a veneer of Polish togetherness both during the war and in the post-war present. Exclusion and the constant struggle against internal enemies were replaced by an ideal of community. This was a formula which envisioned an ‘imagined community’ and which altered both the image of the past and of the present by imposing an invented consensus between different groups. It employed an amalgam of communist and nationalist symbolism, by presenting a common front against the single external enemy, the Germans. Its main aim was to legitimize the regime and to stabilize the social circumstances. Patriotism supported internationalism, and the motif of blood shed by partisans in defence of the fatherland substituted the shared blood of Polish and Soviet soldiers.