

British–Polish Political Co-operation and the Beginning of Special Operations, 1939–1940¹

Jacek Tebinka, Anna Zapalec

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3000-2499, 0000-0002-4976-9537

Abstract

The fundamental objective of the guarantees given by Great Britain to Poland on 31 March 1939 was to prevent war by making Hitler realize that any potential conflict involving Germany and Poland would be not local, but international in nature. Co-operation between the countries' armed forces became a significant element of the Polish-British alliance, although the possibilities of providing Poland with tangible military assistance in the event of German aggression were limited. The handing over to the British of the Enigma code, which was broken by the Polish intelligence services, is one of the best-known results of this partnership. A somewhat more obscure aspect are the secret Polish-British discussions and bilateral meetings concerned with the exchange of information on tactics of sabotage and unconventional warfare as a method of conducting combat in the approaching conflict. This exchange of information, ideas and technical data, developing prior to the outbreak of war, laid the foundations for fuller collaboration during the period of armed struggle. The course of fighting in September 1939 was closely observed by Lt Col Colin Gubbins, the Chief of Staff of the British Military Mission to Poland. Following the German victory, the Polish government was forced to evacuate the country and move to France, where it remained until June 1940. Throughout this time, the Polish military authorities continued co-operation with the British in the field of unconventional warfare. The newly created Special Operations Executive, an organization tasked by Winston Churchill with co-ordinating the destruction of economic and industrial infrastructure in occupied Europe, acquired the majority of the British officers who had previously worked together with Polish specialists in the field. The tradition of Polish national uprisings and partisan operations was one of the key factors which convinced London to continue with the development of unconventional combat in co-operation with their Polish counterparts.

The birth of Polish-British political co-operation was strongly connected with the interest that Poland started to arouse in London in the second half of March 1939, immediately in the wake of the Third Reich's occupation of Bohemia and Moravia. This act of aggression was a blatant violation of the Munich Agreement and the promises given by Adolf Hitler to the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. From London's perspective, Poland - in spite of seemingly good relations with Germany - had become a potential ally in British attempts aimed at curbing German expansion. Whereas concepts of support for sabotage and unconventional warfare and of possible aid to future resistance movements in countries threatened with annexation by the Third Reich had appeared in British military circles already earlier (Foot, 1993, pp. 3-8).²

In April 1938, a Section D was created within the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). It was headed by Col Lawrence Grand, who until that time had worked at the War Office. The new subdivision was charged with conducting research into methods of attacking an enemy which would not entail the utilization of regular armed forces, that is sabotage and unconventional warfare, and also with organizing and supporting subversion and developing methods of disinformation. Shortly after, another similar institution - the General Staff (Research) (GS(R)) - was established, but while its objectives largely coincided with those of Section D, it was subordinated to the War Office. Its tasks included the study of methods of conducting partisan warfare and paramilitary operations. A third body, the Department of Propaganda in Enemy Countries, was also established at more or less the same time. Since its headquarters were located at Electra House, it came to be known under the acronym EH. The role of the Department consisted in organizing and implementing subversive propaganda campaigns (political warfare) against enemy states (Atkin, 2017, pp. 1-10; Stafford, 1980, pp. 19-23; Mackenzie, 2000, pp. 1-11).³

These organizations intensified their efforts after 15 March 1939, that is following the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia by the Germans. Section D and the MI(R) quickly put forward a proposal for the creation and utilization of an alternate means of defense, which would supplement regular military operations if war were to break out in Europe. Namely, it was suggested to harness British experience gained during

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2 Regarding the significance of resistance movements in the Second World War, cf. Mawdsley, 2013, pp. 14-32.

3 Regarding the activities of the GS(R) and the MI(R): Anglim, 2005, p. 634.

the combatting of partisan movements in various parts of the Empire, and also the results of studies into the methods of warfare applied by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and during the Arabian uprising in Palestine (Mackenzie, 2000, pp. 8-9; Anglim, 2005, p. 634; Seaman, 2006, p. 11).⁴ It was further considered that conclusions drawn from these analyses could be used to elaborate broader plans of unconventional warfare campaigns in Europe that would in future provide support for the military operations conducted by Great Britain and its allies (Secret War Diary of M.I.R...., 1939/1940, p. 1). On 20 March 1939, a proposal for commencing such far-reaching examinations of the issue of unconventional warfare and the intention to start preparations therefor were communicated by Col Grand to Stewart Menzies, the Acting Chief of the Secret Service (CSS). On the same day, the plan was forwarded to Gen John Noble Kennedy, the Deputy Director of Military Intelligence. Two days later, the project was the subject of discussion at a meeting attended by Lord Gort, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, while on 23 March it was analyzed at the Foreign Office, where it received initial approval from the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. In essence, it focused on fomenting uprisings in countries already annexed by the Third Reich and embarking on preparations for guerilla (partisan) warfare in those that were threatened with Nazi aggression. In the course of further work, the strategy of inciting rebellion in countries occupied by the Third Reich came to be viewed as somewhat unrealistic. However, the idea of making preparations for partisan warfare was not abandoned, and studies into techniques of sabotage and unconventional combat were continued. It was precisely for this reason that, in the early spring of 1939, Poland found itself in the center of interest of the GS(R) (Secret War Diary of M.I.R...., 1939/1940, p. 1; Summary, 1939; Scheme D, 1939; Duties of the New Branch, 1939; General Instructions, 1939; Mackenzie, 2000, pp. 8-9; Anglim, 2005, p. 634; Seaman, 2006, p. 11).

Towards the end of March 1939, Prime Minister Chamberlain came to the conclusion that, in the event of war, Poland could create a viable second front and thus threaten the Third Reich with a strategic encirclement from the east. However, London did not abandon the policy of appeasement, that is of concessions towards Hitler, although it was modified after 15 March. In accordance with this line of thinking, the fundamental objective of British plans was to avert war through the establishment of a diplomatic eastern front, and not in making actual preparations for conflict with Nazi Germany (Parker, 1993, pp. 206-215).

Poland's importance grew in light of the reports sent in by the British Military Attaché in Moscow, Col Roy Charles Firebrace, who indicated

⁴ The details of these plans may be found at The National Archives in Kew (Summary, 1939; Scheme D, 1939).

that following the Stalinist purges the Red Army would be unable to undertake offensive operations. The British Chiefs of Staff reckoned with the possibility that Poland would be defeated by the Third Reich within two to three months. They predicted, however, that German forces would incur high losses during the campaign. The military authorities in London assumed from the very beginning that, in the event of a land war, Great Britain would not be able to grant effective assistance to the Polish Army, and made its provision dependent on actions undertaken by the French. Furthermore, in the spring of 1939, British policy-makers did not take into consideration a possible threat to Poland from the Soviet Union; this sentiment was echoed in Warsaw (Firebrace's Memorandum, 1939; Conclusions (39) 16, 1939).

Chamberlain's decision to grant guarantees to Poland was preceded by the receipt of intelligence information (false, as it later turned out) about a threatened German attack on Romania, which reached London on 28 March 1939. Two days later, the British Cabinet decided to turn to Poland with a proposal whereby Chamberlain would make a declaration in the House of Commons giving the country guarantees of security. But this was not a decision taken on the spur of the moment. At the time, there was no direct threat of Romania being attacked by Germany. The British were worried, however, by the possibility of Poland concluding an agreement with the Third Reich, even though political contacts between these two countries were in crisis following Warsaw's rejection of a German proposal for the arrangement of mutual relations, which had been put forward repeatedly since the end of October 1938 (Conclusions (39) 16, 1939; *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan...*, 1971, p. 165).⁵

On 31 March 1939, having obtained Poland's consent, Prime Minister Chamberlain gave the following declaration in the House of Commons:

In order to make perfectly clear the position of His Majesty's Government in the meantime before those consultations are concluded, I now have to inform the House that during that period, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect (Jędrzejewicz, 1946, pp. 5-6).

5 Regarding these guarantees: Jackiewicz, 1980; Newman, 1976.

But the British announcement had an unintended consequence. Namely, its immediate result was Hitler's secret decision, taken already on 1 April, instructing the German Army to complete preparations for an attack on Poland by 1 September of the same year. The Third Reich ceased all peaceful efforts at turning Poland into an "ally" - in reality a satellite state. On 6 April, with neither country being aware of Hitler's order, Józef Beck, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited London and, on the same day, Great Britain and Poland signed an understanding which replaced the unilateral British guarantees with obligations of mutual assistance in the event of a German attack (Watt, 1989, p. 190; Nurek, 1983, pp. 195-196).

The British guarantees to Poland created conditions conducive to the establishment of closer contacts between military staffs and intelligence services. Great Britain engaged in information gathering on a global scale, while Poland was interested first and foremost in the threat posed by its largest neighbors: Germany and the USSR. Department II at the General Staff and the British SIS had been exchanging data, these concerning primarily the USSR and the international Communist movement, and later, following Hitler's ascent to power, also the military potential of Germany, since the 1920s.⁶

Thus, the British guarantees to Poland of 31 March 1939 marked the beginning of a rapprochement between the two countries. At the time, they were not supported by a military alliance, even though this was an issue of great importance for Poland. Nevertheless, they ushered in an era of more immediate co-operation between the respective armed forces and intelligence communities. It should be noted here that collaboration in the field of unconventional warfare and sabotage resulted in plans and arrangements of greater specificity than, for example, the discussions concerning British military aerial assistance for Poland in the event of war with the Third Reich.⁷

In the spring of 1939, London intensified preparations for commencing and thereafter providing support for unconventional operations, with a particular focus on Central Europe. This was accompanied by the conviction that the whole process must be hastened, for there was very little time left. Thus, the appropriate persons were sought out and methods developed for conducting unconventional warfare. At the GS(R), the officers responsible for implementing these activities were Lt Col John C. F. Holland, Lt Col Colin McVean Gubbins, and Maj Millis Rowland Jefferys (Secret War Diary of M.I.R...., 1939/1940, p. 1). Both Holland - Head of the GS(R) - and Gubbins had experience of combatting partisan move-

6 Regarding Polish-British intelligence contacts: Tebinka, 2001, pp. 105-107; Kołakowski, 2017, pp. 229-243.

7 Regarding negotiations on military aerial assistance on the part of Great Britain and France: Mazur, 2017.

ments in various territories of the British Empire. Simon Anglim wrote that Holland had fought against the IRA in the years 1919–1921, and that the skills which he then gained confirmed him in his belief that support for partisan movements in Central Europe would actually be the only available method of providing assistance to Great Britain's allies in the region (Anglim, 2005, pp. 634–635).

Discussions were soon initiated between British organizations engaged in special operations and military and intelligence authorities, focusing on the issue of unconventional warfare in a future conflict with the Third Reich. In April 1939, following their conclusion, the GS(R) was entrusted with the following tasks:

- a) To study guerilla methods and produce a guerilla “FSR” [Field Service Regulations], incorporating detailed tactical and technical instructions, applying to each of several countries;
- b) To evolve destructive devices for delaying and suitable for use by guerillas, and capable of production and distribution on a wide enough scale to be effective;
- c) To evolve procedure and machinery for operating guerilla activities, if it should be decided to do so subsequently (Secret War Diary of M.I.R...., 1939/1940, p. 1).⁸

The objectives of Section D and the GS(R) now included, among others, supporting and encouraging the development of Polish guerilla forces (Atkin, 2017, p. 137). In Poland, these were being expanded by Maj Edmund Charaszkiewicz, Head of Agency No. 2 of Department II at the General Staff of the Polish Army (military intelligence). Charaszkiewicz had been involved in the planning and administration of unconventional warfare from the beginning of his career in the armed forces, and he was therefore considered as one of the ablest officers in the field. Among the most important tasks of Agency No. 2 was the creation of so-called non-frontal unconventional warfare networks, which were intended to conduct information gathering, sabotage and unconventional warfare in the event of a war with Germany. Their organization was stepped up particularly from the beginning of May 1939 (Grzywacz, Kwiecień & Mazur, 2000, pp. 14, 21; Czarnecka, 2010, p. 34). At the time, the Polish intelligence services had a wealth of experience gained during operation “Łom,” an unconventional warfare campaign which was implemented in October and November 1938 in the Czechoslovak region of Carpathian Ruthenia. The primary objective of “Łom” was to create a pretext for the annexation of this territory by

8 Cf. also: Duties of the New Branch, 1939; Seaman, 2006, p. 12.

Hungary. Ultimately, in March 1939, the Polish operation ended in success (Grzywacz, Kwiecień & Mazur, 2000, pp. 20-21).⁹

Paradoxically, while Poland's participation in the destabilization of Czechoslovakia was viewed critically by the Foreign Office, it was assessed altogether differently by British specialists in the field of covert operations. Prescinding the political context, they were highly appreciative of the Polish effort and considered it an example worthy of copying in future (Note on a Meeting in Resident's Clerk's Room..., 1939).

Discussions between Polish and British staff officers took place in Warsaw in the last week of May 1939. By that time, the fact that Polish-German relations were strained was no longer a secret; that this was so was evidenced by Hitler's renouncement on 28 April of the non-aggression pact which had been concluded with Poland in 1934. The British delegation was headed by Gen Edward Clayton, and the Polish by Gen Waclaw Stachiewicz, the Chief of the General Staff. British-French staff discussions were held prior to Clayton's arrival. In their course, on 3 May, the British were informed that in the event of a German attack the French did not intend to immediately commence operations on the Western Front, but would instead organize an offensive against the Italians. This development seriously worried the British, for it called into question the concept of Hitler being threatened with a war on two fronts. However, the Western Allies did not intend to pass this information on to the Polish side. To complicate matters, during the Polish-French staff consultations which took place in Paris in mid-May, France promised to commence offensive operations against Germany 15 days after the mobilization of its land forces (Conclusions (39) 30, 1939; Prażmowska, 1987, pp. 80-84; Kowalski, 1989, pp. 264-266).

The Polish side did not have the same expectations of Great Britain as regards the land war as it had of France. Staff meetings with the British delegation confirmed that, in military terms, Chamberlain's guarantees were very much limited both as concerned realistic possibilities of actions and any actual willingness to provide assistance. Although the British officers did give assurances of possible aerial support, they were not authorized to make any binding declarations, for their primary task was to sound out Polish war plans. Those participating in the discussions did, however, confirm the necessity of establishing closer co-operation between the secret services of the two countries. As regards the conduct of covert and subversive operations, this was initiated by Lt Col Colin Gubbins from the GS(R) at the War Office. The contacts which he had established with Department II bore fruit in an exchange of experiences and technical inventions already in the summer of 1939 (H. L. Ismay to

9 Regarding the "Łom" unconventional warfare campaign: Kupliński, 1996.

O. Sargent, 1939; Report dated 12 June 1939, 1939; GS(Research) – Report for DCIGS No. 8..., 1939; Wilkinson & Astley, 1993, pp. 35–37).

From the spring of 1939, the GS(R) devoted considerable effort to research into unconventional warfare techniques, using as its basis historical analyses of the Boer War, the Sepoy Mutiny, the Irish Uprising, and other essentially partisan movements. In May, Gubbins harnessed the findings of these studies to write two short handbooks: *The Art of Guerilla Warfare* and *Partisan Leader's Handbook* (Résumé of Discussions..., 1939; Gubbins pamphlets..., n.d.; Foot, 2004, p. 6).¹⁰ In the second half of May 1939, he traveled to Poland, Romania and the Baltic states with the objective of assessing local potential for the formation and subsequent development of partisan movements. His conclusions were to be used in the elaboration of detailed plans of unconventional warfare and partisan operations. Gubbins outlined the objectives of his trip thus:

The object of this tour was to see our Military Attachés in the countries concerned, to put before them such aspects of the matter we are studying as appeared to affect the countries to which they are accredited, to obtain their views thereon in the light of their local knowledge, and, finally, on the results of the above, to draw up a plan for the progressive development of our study and preparations. The political and military situations of the countries concerned are generally so diverse, that it was clear even before the tour commenced that plans would be equally divergent (GS(Research) – Report for DCIGS No. 8..., 1939, p. 1).

On 17 May, Gubbins arrived in Warsaw, where he met the British Military Attaché, Lt Col Edward Roland Sword, and Lt Col John Shelley, officially an employee of the Passport Control Office at the British Embassy in Warsaw and actually the head of the local SIS office. On 22 May, he left for Bucharest, from where he returned to Warsaw on 24 May and attended a dinner with Gen Emilius Clayton, Cdre Henry Bernard Rawlings and Col Alexander Paul Davidson, who had traveled to Poland to participate in staff discussions concerning British military assistance in the event of war with Germany. The next day he left for Riga (Sword, 2001, pp. 41–42; Mackenzie, 2000, p. 44; Kołakowski, 2017, p. 243).

Upon his return to Great Britain, Gubbins submitted a report to the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, in which he stressed that “in Eastern Europe generally there is an excellent field and scope for guerilla warfare in all its aspects, and that considerable preparatory measures

¹⁰ Gubbins' most recent biography: Lett, 2016.

can be undertaken immediately.” In light of the strengthening of the Polish-British alliance, Gubbins viewed Poland as a country where guerilla warfare could be conducted with a fair chance of success. He also assumed that, in the event of German aggression, Polish forces would have to withdraw “until pressure of her Western allies can become effective.” Further, he informed London that the Polish side had already undertaken certain preparatory work for sabotage and unconventional warfare, and that this could facilitate the further development of such operations. Summing up his discussions in Poland, Gubbins offered the following recommendation for the future:

Military Attaché, Warsaw, to discuss with the Polish General Staff all the implications of guerilla warfare, and to offer all the assistance we can give - i.e. manuals, devices, trained officers, etc. So far, following my visit, Military Attaché has only made guarded references which were encouragingly received (Gs(Research) - Report for DCIGS No. 8..., 1939, p. 9).

But while Polish-British talks concerning co-operation on special operations proceeded favorably, the issue of providing assistance to Poland through the commencement of military operations on the Western Front became steadily more doubtful. During a Cabinet meeting held on 24 May, Chamberlain and his ministers were confronted with the political problems inherent in the planned two-front war with which they intended to threaten Hitler. Thomas Inskip, the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, made known the previously mentioned British-French staff discussions of 3 May. He stressed that, in the event of a German attack, the French intended to organize a defensive action based on the Maginot Line and at the same time prepare for an offensive along the Italian border. Regarding possible activities on the border with Germany, he declared: “French Delegation had said that, if Belgium were in war, French would probably be prepared to undertake an offensive through that country, but that, if Belgium stayed out of war, there was nothing to be done against Siegfried line.” It is not surprising, therefore, that the British Chiefs of Staff were worried “at prospect of complete inaction on part of French against Germany, and consequent failure to exploit two-front war.” In such a situation any assistance granted by the USSR to Poland in the event of a German invasion would have been very valuable, although no questions were raised as to what interest Stalin would have had in granting such aid. Furthermore, a month previous the Chiefs of Staff had come to the conclusion that “any substantial Russian military support to Poland is out of the question,” mainly for logistical reasons (Conclusions (39) 30, 1939; Military Value of Russia, 1939).

These deliberations, conducted at the highest political level, were not known to the British army and intelligence officers who discussed

the issue of special operations with their Polish counterparts. The matter of preparing for unconventional warfare was treated by London with increasing seriousness. In consequence of the development of plans for its implementation, on 27 June the GS(R) was transformed into Military Intelligence 1 (Research) [MI1(R), hereinafter MI(R)] and placed under the command of the Deputy Director of Military Intelligence, Gen John Noble Kennedy. The new institution inherited the tasks of its predecessor. Thus, it was to engage primarily in the planning of paramilitary and partisan operations in, among others, Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia. The British intended to direct aid to these countries taking into consideration the specific circumstances of each. It is nevertheless worth quoting Kennedy's opinion presented at a meeting with French staff officers on 26 April: "It would, however, only be a matter of time before Poland was eliminated from the war." At the same time, he assumed - with excessive optimism, as it turned out - that, even if conquered, Poland would tie down a considerable number of German forces. Kennedy's opinion, irrespective of Gubbins' penchant for special operations, allows us to better understand the reasons why the British engaged themselves in discussions on the topic with representatives of Department II (Record of meeting held..., 1939; AFC(J) 12th Meeting, 1939; Seaman, 2006, pp. 12-13; Mackenzie, 2000, p. 10).

The visits of Polish intelligence officers to London in the summer of 1939 clearly attested to the strengthening of Polish-British intelligence co-operation in the field of sabotage and unconventional warfare. Between 11 and 14 July, the British hosted Lt Col Stanisław Gano, the Head of the Independent Technical Office of Department II at the General Staff of the Polish Army, and engineer Mieczysław Frankowski from Agency No. 2 of Department II, a specialist in devices and communication techniques used in unconventional warfare. During these meetings the British presented selected state-of-the-art equipment intended for partisan activities and unconventional warfare. It was agreed that the Polish side would return the favor by providing specimens of Polish inventions, which the British subsequently assessed as highly interesting (Résumé of Discussions..., 1939).

In Poland there is a popular and enduring myth, created by the journalist Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz, that Great Britain intentionally used the March guarantees to push Hitler to attack Poland in order to itself gain time (Cat-Mackiewicz, 1990, pp. 20-23).¹¹ In reality, however, London was always ready to reach an agreement with Hitler in order to prevent war, although - following the experience of Czechoslovakia - not

11 Cf. also Antoni Czubiński's preface to the Polish edition of Simon Newman's book (Newman, 1981, pp. 18-19).

at any price. In the summer of 1939, the British were increasingly worried that Poland's excessive intransigence over the Free City of Danzig could lead to the outbreak of war. In July 1939, anxiety about Polish intentions prompted the British Cabinet to send the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Gen Edmund Ironside, to Warsaw in order to gain a better understanding of the views of Minister Józef Beck and the Inspector General of the Polish Armed Forces, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły. The instructions given to Ironside included the following:

If General Ironside is asked what immediate action H. M. Government would take in the event of some development precipitating Polish military reaction with their national forces, to say that H.M. Government would immediately give all possible assistance by land, sea and air, in the West, acting in close concert with the French (Memorandum dated 12 July..., 1939).

In light of the outcome of British-French talks and our knowledge of French intentions, these assurances were hollow. Ironside's discussions in Warsaw, held on 17-20 July 1939, served to calm the British Cabinet. The Polish side did not intend to provoke Germany, although Marshal Rydz-Śmigły expressed the view that war appeared inevitable due to Hitler's imperialist plans (FP (36) 55th Meeting, 1939; Memorandum dated 12 July..., 1939; Conclusions (39) 35, 1939; Conclusions (39) 37, 1939; Conclusions (39) 39, 1939; Ironside's Report..., 1939).

The conviction that war was drawing near was one of the factors which prompted Warsaw to pass on to the British and French intelligence services information about the greatest Polish achievement in the field of radio intelligence, namely the breaking of the cipher of the German Enigma machine, thanks to which the Polish Cipher Bureau had been able to read a part of German military correspondence until late autumn 1938. To this end, a tripartite cryptological conference was organized in Warsaw and Pyry (at the "Wicher" Technical Research Center of the Cipher Bureau) on 25-26 July 1939. The Polish gesture was of key importance, for it enabled British cryptographers to further crack the Enigma cipher in wartime (Ciechanowski & Tebinka, 2005, pp. 446-447; Hinsley, Thomas, Simkins & Ransom, 1988, pp. 945-955).

According to later historiography, the matter of the Enigma code temporarily stunted the progression of Polish-British co-operation in the field of special operations. A second conference of representatives of the secret services was held in London on 24-29 July. Talks with the MI(R) were continued by Maj Edmund Charaszkiwicz together with the Military Attaché in London, Wg Cdr Bogdan Józef Kwieciński. This was a direct meeting of Polish and British specialists in partisan operations, sabotage and unconventional warfare. The Polish side presented the state

of readiness for commencing unconventional warfare in the country, acquainting its British counterparts in detail with methods of recruitment, training and communication, and with the measures undertaken to secure dedicated matériel. Other issues connected with possible partisan operations in Poland were also touched upon. Finally, a demonstration was given of the Polish equipment- previously mentioned by Lt Col Gano - that was intended to be used in unconventional operations. The Polish officers met with Lt Col Holland, Lt Col Gubbins, and experts in the field of means of communication (Charaszkiwicz, 1939, pp. 60-61; *Résumé of Discussions...*, 1939). This was one of the largest conferences following the earlier Polish-British meetings concerned with the conduct of unconventional warfare in Poland in the event of war with Germany. The British were particularly interested in Polish preparations for unconventional and partisan operations "in the south-eastern, mountainous sector, and also along the Lwów-Kraków railroad" (Charaszkiwicz, 1939, p. 62).

Charaszkiwicz gave a detailed presentation of the entirety of Polish preparations for sabotage and partisan operations in the rear of German forces. During the discussions, the British "displayed a considerable tendency [to] co-operate in the organization of guerilla units." The meeting in London resulted in the Polish side receiving a number of British models of advanced technical devices intended for unconventional warfare. The British also divulged details of state-of-the-art radio equipment for special operations for their assessment by Polish specialists, at the same time awaiting the placement of orders (Charaszkiwicz, 1939, p. 63; *Note on a Meeting in Resident's Clerk's Room...*, 1939; *Résumé of Discussions...*, 1939).¹² Maj Charaszkiwicz's activities in the field of unconventional warfare were very highly viewed by his British counterparts, and in one document it was stressed that: "In general the principles he has followed and the tactical and administrative doctrines he is teaching, follow very closely those laid down in the manuals we ourselves prepared; in some aspects the similarity is remarkable" (*Résumé of Discussions...*, 1939).

On 14-16 August 1939, Gubbins once again visited Warsaw, where he met with officers of Department II at the General Staff of the Polish Army. By then, Polish-German relations were very tense, and indeed - albeit unbeknownst at the time - the Third Reich would launch its attack in a matter of weeks. The Polish-British talks focused on the exchange of information concerning the principles of organization of unconventional warfare in peacetime, partisan warfare, radio communications in unconventional operations, and the equipment that would be required by the Polish side. It was arranged that in the event of war, British officers - experts in partisan

12 Regarding the beginnings of Polish-British co-operation on special operations: Williamson, 2012.

warfare – would be delegated to the British Military Mission to Poland for the purpose of engaging in co-operation. The Polish officers informed Gubbins that the methods of conducting guerilla operations were described in detail in the existing infantry and cavalry regulations. Furthermore, the Polish side submitted a number of requests for the purchase of mines, explosives (no less than 200 tons), revolvers (1,000 pieces with ammunition), submachine guns (together with the requisite ammunition), and parts needed for the manufacture of small wireless devices. On his part, Gubbins promised to provide access to British regulations governing the provisioning of partisan groups (Protocol of conversations held..., 1939, pp. 1-3; Harrison, 2000, p. 1072; Zapalec, 2014, p. 53).

In the summer of 1939, both London and Warsaw ignored signals pointing to a possible German-Soviet rapprochement. Prime Minister Chamberlain dismissed the eventuality of any such agreement, thinking that the USSR, hostile to the West, would prefer isolation to giving support to the Third Reich. Thus, the warnings of Walter Krivitsky – a Soviet intelligence officer who had defected to the West – that it was Stalin's firm intent to conclude a pact with Hitler were not treated seriously at the Foreign Office. Only the Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the British Government, Robert Vansittart, had been worried, since the spring of 1938, by the prospect of a rapprochement between the two dictators, but his efforts to alert the Foreign Office to the impending danger were in vain (FRUS, 1956, pp. 287-288; Collier to the Embassy in Washington, 1939; L. Collier's Memorandum, 1939). In addition, the British did not expect – although they were aware of the German advantage in firepower and the weakness of Polish anti-aircraft artillery – that Poland's resistance would be so short-lived, nor that the country would also be attacked by the USSR.¹³

The German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), signed on 23 August in Moscow, created an international sensation because of the sudden turnaround in German and Soviet policy which lay at its foundation. American diplomats did obtain the text of the Secret Protocol to the Pact, however an analysis of Foreign Office documents indicates that, in spite of the rumors reaching London about the German-Soviet division of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, their British counterparts were not aware of its provisions (Bohlen, 1973, pp. 82-84; FRUS, 1956, pp. 342-343).

On 24 August, while talking with the British Military Attaché, Lt Col Sword, Gen Stachiewicz voiced his conviction that the Germans were completing the concentration of 30 divisions on the border with

¹³ Paradoxically, Poland was an exporter of Bofors anti-aircraft guns, which it manufactured under license, to Great Britain. On 29 August, the British Ambassador in Warsaw, Howard Kennard, informed the War Office that a shipment of 40 Bofors cannons (40 mm) had been suspended due to the lack of means of transport.

Poland – a clear underestimation of the scale of the planned attack. Considerably more surprising was his analysis of the situation following the conclusion of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Namely, Stachiewicz stated that the “new position” assumed by the USSR did not in any way alter Poland’s strategic position and would not impact the disposition of Polish forces (Kennard to the FO, 24 August..., 1939).¹⁴

But the newly forged understanding between Berlin and Moscow did not weaken the determination of the British to defend the status quo in Europe. On 25 August, an Anglo-Polish alliance (the Agreement of Mutual Assistance between the United Kingdom and Poland) was concluded in London. It was the crowning achievement of the political rapprochement that had been developing since the end of March 1939. However, this was not accompanied by a military convention, not to mention any arrangement concerning the co-operation of secret services. The lack of any provisions concerning armed assistance weakened the significance of its first article, in which the parties declared that:

Should one of the Contracting Parties become engaged in hostilities with a European Power in consequence of aggression by the latter against that Contracting Party, the other Contracting Party will at once give the Contracting Party engaged in hostilities all the support and assistance in its power (Polonsky, 1976, pp. 67–69).

A Secret Protocol precised that the treaty exclusively concerned an attack launched by the Third Reich. In the event of aggression initiated by another state, for example by the USSR against Poland or by Italy against Great Britain, the signatories undertook only to enter into consultations (Polonsky, 1976, pp. 67–69).

Department II and the SIS were not aware that the signing of the Agreement of Mutual Assistance between the United Kingdom and Poland delayed the German invasion of Poland – initially scheduled for 26 August – by one week. Upon being informed of its conclusion and learning of the Italians’ refusal to enter the war, Hitler at the last moment rescinded the order to attack, intending first to make an attempt at undermining the alliance between Great Britain and Poland. This development allowed the Polish side to mobilize further divisions and move them into position. However, the intervention of the Ambassadors of Great Britain and France with the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 29 August resulted in the

¹⁴ The estimates of the Polish General Staff as to the number of German divisions concentrated on the border on the evening of 31 August were considerably higher. German forces were believed to total at minimum 42 and at maximum 54 divisions (Kennard to the FO, 31 August..., 1939).

general mobilization being postponed by one day; as it turned out, this proved very costly for the Polish Army during the Polish Campaign (Watt, 1989, pp. 491-497).

On the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War, co-operation between the Polish and British secret services was mainly focused not on unconventional warfare and sabotage, but on the concentration of German armed forces along the Polish border. Department II at the General Staff submitted daily reports to the Military Attaché at the British Embassy in Warsaw on the disposition of German troops, in return receiving British intelligence on the same topic. A new impetus for co-operation was provided by the establishment on 24 August of the British Military Mission to Poland under the command of Gen Adrian Carton de Wiart, who actually lived in Poland, in the Polesie region. A veteran of the First World War, he owned an estate near the border with the USSR, where he engaged in his life's passion of hunting. The Mission comprised officers from the British Military Attachéship and the SIS - officially employees of the Passport Control Office - and was soon joined by Lt Col Gubbins and other officers specializing in sabotage and unconventional warfare. The Mission's role was to ensure co-operation and the exchange of data between the General Staffs of the two armies. Nevertheless, the British were aware that "In view of difficulties of rendering direct military support by British Armed Forces to Poles, the question of inspiring confidence is of greatest importance" (Mobilization Instructions..., 1939).¹⁵

In the early morning of 1 September 1939, the German armies invaded Poland. Two days passed, however, before Great Britain and France decided to issue Hitler an ultimatum and, on 3 September, declare war. On that day, Gubbins and the group of British officers, who had been sent on 25 August from London to the British Military Mission in Warsaw, were already in Lublin. Wearing British Army uniforms, they aroused considerable enthusiasm among the local population, which soon turned into an ultimately unfounded hope that help was on its way (Wilkinson & Astley, 1993, pp. 40-41; Mackenzie, 2000, p. 45; Harrison, 2000, p. 1072). At the same time in London, the MI(R) was enlarged and became a branch of the General Staff. Its tasks did not change - it was to continue research into and provide support for sabotage and unconventional operations, and also to co-operate with Section D in certain of these activities. The MI(R) continued to be headed by Lt Col J. C. F. Holland (War Diary - Intelligence Summary, 1939; Organisation and Duties of MI(R), 1939, pp. 1-3; Stafford, 1980, pp. 30-31).

15 Informational reports of Department II at the General Staff/Staff of the Commander-in-Chief have survived in the files of the British Military Mission: GHQ Situation Reports..., 1939; cf. also: Suchcitz, 1986; Wilkinson, 1997, pp. 71-83.

The formal declaration of war on Germany and the establishment of the British Military Mission to Poland were not, however, accompanied by any military operations on the part of Great Britain – and all the more so France – that would have forced Hitler to withdraw a part of his forces from Poland. The politicians in London were not conscious of the dependence between the stance of the Western Powers towards Germany and Stalin's approach to Poland. In the beginning of September, British diplomacy was still unaware of the provisions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Although rumors about the Secret Protocol abounded in Europe's capitals – as diplomatic telegrams decoded by the British Government Code and Cypher School clearly show – the British continued to view the USSR as a state that could provide necessary supplies to Poland in its struggle against German aggression. But doubts were starting to appear whether Berlin and Moscow had not reached an understanding concerning the division of Poland (H. Kennard to the FO, 1 September..., 1939; No. 075538, n.d.; No. 075734, n.d.; Tebinka, 1998, pp. 60–62).¹⁶

The strategy of the Western Allies, which consisted in maintaining a passive stance in the land and air war, was confirmed during a session of the Supreme War Council held in Abbeville on 12 September 1939. Deliberating with the participation of Neville Chamberlain and the French Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier, the military commanders of Great Britain and France decided to delay any major land offensive and focus on providing unspecified "assistance." Thus, Poland's fate was to depend on the final outcome of the war (Kowalski, 1989, pp. 552–556; *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan...*, 1971, p. 216).

In September 1939, the Soviet agents of the Cambridge Ring – Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, Anthony Blunt, Guy Burgess and John Cairncross – were only at the beginning of their careers in British government institutions and, with the exception of Maclean (III Secretary at the Embassy in Paris) and Burgess (who worked at Section D), had limited access to classified information. There is nothing to indicate that at the time Moscow succeeded in determining the substance of the British-French discussions taking place in Abbeville. The approach taken by the British and French delegations during the staff discussions in August, as well as the military passivity displayed by the Allies following the declaration of war on Germany were enough to convince Stalin that he would not meet with a sharp reaction on their part if he attacked Poland. Further, he was certain that Great Britain and France planned – and he was strengthened in his view by information received from Burgess and Cairncross – to

¹⁶ Regarding British-Polish relations preceding the outbreak of the Polish-German war: Nurek, 1983; Tebinka, 2013, pp. 20–32.

direct the Third Reich's aggression against the Soviet Union (Lownie, 2015, pp. 100-101; Purvis & Hulbert, 2016, pp. 112-114).

In mid-September, however, London started to worry about Moscow's intentions under the influence of military intelligence data - false, as it soon turned out - according to which Ambassador Ivan Maisky and his personnel were preparing to leave Great Britain if Chamberlain's Cabinet were to voice strong opposition to a possible invasion of Poland by the Red Army. When the USSR finally launched its attack on 17 September, the Foreign Office, preoccupied with the Wehrmacht's steady eastward advance into Poland, treated it as the lesser evil. The approach was that, while this would hasten Poland's collapse, at least the Eastern Borderlands would not fall into Hitler's hands. John Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, noted on that day that the Soviet assault was in all certainty carried out in accordance with a secret understanding reached by Moscow and Berlin (Minute dated 15 September..., 1939; Harvey, 1970, pp. 318-319; Simon Papers..., 1939). We do not know, however, whether his observation was based on any actual knowledge of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, or simply on suppositions as to the division of spheres of interest between the Third Reich and the USSR.

During the Polish Campaign, the British Military Mission, headed by Gen Carton de Wiart and with Lt Col Gubbins as its Chief of Staff, did not play any consequential role. The attached MI(R) officers were unable to fulfil their liaison tasks because of the situation on the front. The Mission followed the Staff Headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief, changing its location every few days in order to withdraw from the advancing Germans. The British officers focused their efforts on obtaining data about the war situation in Poland from the Headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief, which they then passed on to London. There was nothing else they could do to help their Polish ally (Zapalec, 2014, pp. 50-74).¹⁷

Surviving documents of the British Military Mission include telegrams, reports and accounts with conclusions from the fighting going on in Poland. Of greatest importance were observations and analyses describing the German method of conducting "lightning war" and the utilization of armored and mechanized forces and aerial power against the Polish Army, as well as information about German weapon and armament types and on sabotage and unconventional warfare (the role of the fifth column) (British Military Mission to Poland..., 1939, p. 1; Letter from Kosow, 1939; Letter from 16 IX..., 1939; Carton de Wiart, 1950, pp. 155-159). The War Office was particularly interested in whether Polish forces were demolishing objects of strategic importance, among others severing the

¹⁷ Regarding the activities of the British Military Mission: Nowak-Kielbikowa, 2001, pp. 331-338; Bines, 2018, pp. 3-15; Harrison, 2011.

Kraków-Lwów railroad to prevent its usage by the Germans, and whether they were prepared to destroy the oil wells in Eastern Galicia in order to deny them to the Nazi war effort (Cable cipher 56705..., 1939). On 16 September, Gubbins requested the War Office to send British specialists to assist in sabotaging the Galician oil wells or at least to provide instructions on how to effectively wreck the Polish oil fields (Telegram No. 41..., 1939). This proved impossible to achieve, however, for in the early morning of 17 September Poland was attacked by the Soviet Union, and the British Military Mission was withdrawn to Romania during the night from 17 to 18 September (Kopański, 1989, p. 202; Wieliczko, 2001, p. 58; British Military Mission to Poland..., 1939, p. 6).

The USSR's aggression against Poland and the evacuation of the country's highest civilian and military authorities put an end to the first stage of Polish-British co-operation in the field of special operations. Thus, the period of the Polish Campaign proved largely unsuccessful in this regard. The activities undertaken by both sides were fraught with improvisation. The lack of any tangible results, first and foremost in the field of sabotage and unconventional warfare, was due primarily to the rapidity with which Poland was defeated – a development that had not been expected by anyone before war broke out, irrespective of the military passivity of France and Great Britain. Thanks to the presence of the British Military Mission in Poland, the MI(R) was able to make numerous observations regarding the course of the first two and a half weeks of the campaign. For the MI(R), of greatest significance were accounts presenting the scale and methods of German unconventional warfare operations in the rear of the Polish Army. However, these activities did not decisively influence the speed with which the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe defeated the Polish armed forces. It was in Poland in September 1939 that Germany's novel approach to combat and tactics was first observed. From the perspective of France and Great Britain, the information passed on by the British Military Mission could have proved to be most useful. Whereas the fact that it was not properly utilized by the Western Allies in the spring of 1940 was by no means the fault of Gen Carton de Wiart and his personnel.¹⁸

In Romania, under strong German pressure, the Polish authorities were interned. The Polish President, Ignacy Mościcki, availed himself of the provisions of the April Constitution and appointed as his successor Władysław Raczkiewicz, who took over office on 30 September and started to form a government in exile in Paris. The new Polish authorities in France immediately initiated military and political co-operation

¹⁸ The MI(R) considered that, in future, special operations would play a significant role in German war strategy, and warned, among others, against the so-called fifth column as one of the methods of warfare utilized by the Third Reich. The issue has been touched upon by Simon Anglim (Anglim, 2005, p. 632).

with their British and French allies. The British were counting on the further development of co-operation on the conduct of unconventional warfare – primarily sabotage and subversion – in occupied Poland and Czechoslovakia. Between 11 and 20 October in Paris, Gubbins held discussions on the topic with Polish and Czech representatives. He also met with Gen Władysław Sikorski, who by that time was the Prime Minister of the Polish Government-in-Exile and the Minister of Military Affairs. As a result of the meeting, Gen Sikorski gave his consent for the MI(R) to exercise control over the project of support for the Polish resistance movement (Appendix II..., 1939; Chapter IV. Appendices c..., 1939, pp. 1-3; A. Cadogan to Gen H. R. Massy, 1939; Harrison, 2000, p. 1074). On 27 October, after arrangements had been made with Gen Sikorski, the Foreign Office turned to the French with a proposal for the dispatch of a few officers to Paris, where they would co-operate with the Poles and the Czechs on special operations. The French agreed, and British Military Mission No. 4 was duly established in Paris. It acted in a liaison capacity with the Polish authorities, among others to support the development of the resistance movement. Lt Col Gubbins was appointed Chief of Mission (Appendix A/8..., n.d.; Appendix II..., 1939, p. 2; Appendix III, 1939, p. 1; Chapter IV. Administrative origins..., n.d., p. 1; Mackenzie, 2000, p. 45; Wilkinson, 1997, pp. 86-88).

The first plans to make deliveries of special matériel for the Polish underground were elaborated already in the autumn of 1939. However, the Polish and British military authorities came to the conclusion that large-scale sabotage, unconventional warfare, and all the more so partisan operations should not be undertaken in Poland at that stage, and that the focus ought to be only on the limited sabotage of transport and communication routes. It was further decided that the next few months should be devoted to the reorganization of clandestine activities and the development of underground channels for the transferral of persons and matériel. First and foremost, Poland was to be supplied with guns, revolvers, hand grenades, high explosive and wireless transmitters (Harrison, 2000, p. 1074; Letter to Lieut. Colonel Holland..., 1940;¹⁹ Record of Interview with Lieut. Colonel Gano..., 1939).

In his letter of 8 January 1940 to Gen Maurice Gamelin, the Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, Gen Sikorski informed of the establishment of a clandestine Polish military organization, the Union of Armed Struggle, and also of the development of plans for covert operations. He stressed that the primary long-term goal was the preparation of a nationwide Polish uprising against the occupier. However, he made this element conditional on the provision of the requisite quantities of

19 The author of the letter has not been determined; presumably, it was Lt Col Gubbins.

arms, and emphasized that it should form part of broader Allied military operations (Harrison, 2000, p. 1074).²⁰

In the first months of 1940, the British commenced land deliveries of weapons, ammunition and assorted other materials to the Union of Armed Struggle in occupied Poland. But serious transport problems occurred along the chosen supply routes. These were experienced both by the British, who made special deliveries to secret Polish warehouses in Budapest and Bucharest, and by their Polish counterparts, who conveyed the goods from there. Edward D. R. Harrison determined that by 1 April 1940, only “four wireless transmitters, 130 revolvers, 1,000 lb of high explosives, 500 incendiary bombs, and assorted fuses” had actually been supplied. In London at the time, there was a feeling of success that “Gubbins’ mission is building up an efficient organisation for sending supplies to Poland” through Belgrade, Bucharest and Budapest (Harrison, 2000, p. 1074; *Secret War Diary of M.I.R...., 1939/1940*). In actual fact, the arms deliveries outlined above were absolutely insufficient to conduct any large-scale operations against the occupier. On 11 April 1940, two days after the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, Gen Sikorski informed Gen Ironside about the condition of the underground organization in occupied Poland and plans for its further development. He also requested to increase deliveries of matériel to the Union of Armed Struggle (Harrison, 2000, p. 1074; *Lettre le General Sikorski – Commandant en Chef...*, 1940, pp. 1-3).²¹

Co-operation between the MI(R) and its Polish counterparts on unconventional warfare, in the course of which use was made of contacts with Section D to smuggle weapons and explosives, lasted throughout 1939 and was continued in 1940. Later, it was coordinated by the Polish Section of the Special Operations Executive. In successive years of the war, this collaboration resulted in the British performing special operations of extreme difficulty and complexity – all focused on the provision of matériel to Poland – which were hampered by both parties’ lack of meaningful experience.

For the Polish side, the beginnings of Polish-British intelligence collaboration in the field of special operations were disappointing. Among the positive aspects we should mention the exchange of information on specialist equipment (which commenced already before the war) and of experience gathered during the organization of unconventional warfare.

²⁰ For more information, cf. *Lettre le General Sikorski President du Conseil...*, 1940, p. 1.

²¹ Gen Sikorski’s letter was passed on by Military Mission No. 4 to the Director of British Military Intelligence along with information about the state of deliveries to Poland organized by the Mission, and an expression of his support for increasing these deliveries (*Letter from Lieut. Colonel Gubbins to DMI...*, 1940, pp. 1-2; a copy of the letter can be found in the following archival dossier: TNS, HS 4/163).

Looking back, we can make the observation that both sides attached excessive importance to actions of this type, and on numerous occasions it became apparent that the plans which they elaborated were simply too advanced for the technical and logistical capabilities of the time.

The period of the Polish government's stay in France, which lasted until its evacuation to the British Isles in June 1940, was one of rivalry between the British and the French for the assumption of complete control over the Polish intelligence services. By April 1940, London's position had become stronger, while the French defeat paved the way for the establishment of even closer ties of co-operation between the Polish and British secret services on the conduct of special operations, especially after the creation of the Special Operations Executive in the summer of 1940 (Tebinka, 2001, pp. 110-112; Tebinka, 2005, pp. 382-383; Secret War Diary of M.I.R., 1939/1940).²²

(transl. by Maciej Zakrzewski)

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