

Halik Kochanski. *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*. Penguin, 2013. 734 pp. ISBN 976-1-846-14358-8 (Hardback). Price £19.87.

Halik Kochanski's *The Eagle Unbowed* is a work of panoramic scope. The author, a British military historian of Polish origin, states her aim is to 'present the most complete picture of the Poles and Poland in the Second World War to date'. She therefore goes beyond military history to tell the story of the horrors of Nazi and Soviet occupation, including the Holocaust, and the complicated relationship between Poland and its allies.

In introductory chapters she describes the rebirth of the Polish state after 1918, its internal problems with ethnic minorities and its delicate relationship with its neighbours, Germany and the Soviet Union. In response to German resurgence under Hitler, Poland discussed the possibility of preventative action, but participated in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Faced with Nazi demands from late 1938, Poland found itself in total isolation until it received the British guarantee in April 1939. Unbeknown to the Poles, this guarantee included no real commitment to the defence of Poland in the event of Nazi aggression.

Kochanski offers an excellent account of the September 1939 campaign, when the Poles fought credibly against a technologically superior opponent. Although Britain and France declared war in defence of Poland, they provided no real assistance. While the Poles were battling Nazi forces in the West, Stalin's Red Army invaded from the East. Within five weeks, Poland was defeated and divided between the two. Several chapters recount the horrors of life in the Nazi and Soviet occupation zones, including the Holocaust. Poles suffered the full bestiality of Nazi occupation, while those Poles in the Soviet-occupied zone were arrested and deported in huge numbers. By the end of the war Poland had lost nearly one-fifth of its population. Kochanski offers a fair assessment of Polish attitudes to the Holocaust, with no attempt to hide the extent of Polish anti-Semitism or cases where Poles betrayed Jews to the Nazis or even assisted in the murders. She also outlines the practical difficulties involved in protecting Jews and notes that many thousands were helped despite the risks – death was the automatic punishment for Poles even suspected of helping Jews.

Kochanski's handling of the diplomacy of the Polish Government-in-Exile in London is excellent. Poland's importance to the Western Allies was considerable until Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. As the Soviets came to play a major role in defeating the Nazis, Allied support for Polish interests waned accordingly. Poland's liberation by the Red Army brought the imposition of a Soviet-dominated regime that lasted until 1989. While 1945 brought peace and a sense of victory elsewhere, Poland became, as Kochanski notes, the 'only allied country to be abandoned behind the Iron Curtain'.

Kochanski's background in military history is evident in her excellent chapters on the performance of Polish military units fighting alongside the Western Allies and the Soviets. Polish units in the West fought with distinction in many theatres, notably the Battle of Britain and the campaigns in Italy and Normandy. She also notes the huge significance of the Polish breakthrough in decrypting German Enigma codes,

something she describes as Poland's 'greatest contribution' to the Allied victory. Her account of the Polish forces fighting alongside the Red Army fills an important gap in English-language scholarship. The tragic Warsaw Uprising, when the underground Home Army attempted to liberate the capital before the arrival of Soviet forces, is also handled deftly. Appendix I, containing an order of battle of all Polish units during World War II, will be of considerable interest to military historians.

The Eagle Unbowed uses an impressive range of primary and secondary sources in English, but relatively few sources in Polish. One surprising absence is the lack of sources in German and Russian.

The Eagle Unbowed contains little that has not been said before, but its breadth is impressive. In places it sacrifices depth to achieve this breadth, but Kochanski has written a very comprehensive work that certainly succeeds in its aim. It fills a gap in the English-language literature and it likely to remain the standard introduction for English-speaking readers for a long time to come.

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