

## ***The Polish War dead at Brusand in Norway – Memories, trauma and the battle of memories***

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I will address the controversies about symbolism and war memorials from the perspective of Polish veterans that chose to remain in Norway after the Second World War. Having a father that was active during the war I experienced his involvement with close Polish friends that had been part of the Polish forces fighting in the west. My father's Polish friends were proud of their war effort none of them talked about post – traumatic experienced, but several were bitter about the fate of Poland after the Second World War and all of them had great distrust of the communist government in Warsaw.

*Keywords:* controversies about symbolism; war memorials; Polish veterans in Norway; Second World War

The fall of 1942 an airplane with the symbols of the British Royal Air Force (RAF) crashed north of the small coastal town of Egersund in southern Norway. Even if part of the Royal Air Force the plane and the crew were part of the independent Polish Air Force operating as part of the RAF. The plane had been operating over the occupied Poland and had planned to drop three Polish soldiers by parachute. Because the crew in the plane had been unable to contact the independent Polish

forces in Poland it was on return to England. However, the plane was way out of course, most likely due to some technical failure or navigation error.

The Norwegian terrain Egersund is mountainous and in the fall often foggy with difficult wind conditions. Making an emergency landing in such terrain and particularly when hostile forces are in command of all airports and settled areas is extremely difficult. The plane crashed and all the ten Polish soldiers aboard was killed. After localizing the plane the dead were transported by German forces to Egersund by the coast. Polish prisoners of war were commanded to bury the dead on the sandy beach of Brusand. A small memorial plaque exist on the place of the burial place by Hellenen outside of Egersund (Bratbak, 2006, p. 174–181); Bratbak, 1995).

After the war the Polish War Graves were moved to Vestre gravlund in Oslo. The moving of the war dead was controversial, but part of a nationwide campaign to centralize War graves from the whole of the country. Allied graves were in principle moved in co-operation with the diplomatic representatives of the nation of the war dead and in the case German War Graves in co-operation with the German War Grave Commission<sup>1</sup>.

The fate of Poland was one of the most controversial after the Second World War. At the Yalta conference in February 1945 it was decided that the borders of the Soviet Union could be moved further west including vast territories of eastern Poland to what was called the Curzon-line. In compensation Poland would receive former German lands in the west. Three to four million poles had to be moved as well as large groups of Germans. The decision was made without the consultation of Polish authorities and was by many regarded as a brutal betrayal of Poland. At the end of the war borders were moved even further west than originally decided and a communist government were put in command of Poland by the Soviet Union. In addition to the removal of Polish citizens about 8 million Germans were moved (Churchill, 1954, p. 264; Palmer, Colton, 1992, p. 862–865, 871, 910, 917). In Norway were Polish forces had been active combatants in Narvik and in naval operations the sympathy of the cause of Poland was great and many did not regard the communist government and the moving of the Polish/Soviet borders in the east as legitimate. Particularly that was so for those serving in armed forces abroad often fighting together with the Polish exile army, navy and air force.

Both Norway and Poland had gained their full independence in the same historical period. There were historical cultural ties between the two nations and the Polish nation had important spokespersons such as the Noble laurate in literature

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<sup>1</sup> Answer in the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) to the member of parliament Bergesen from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 12/7-1956 (Riksarkivet, 1940–1960).

the Catholic author Sigrid Undset (1882– 1949). Sigrid Undset was staunchly anti-communist and a strong believer in an independent Poland based upon Catholic values (Ørjasæter, 1993; Undset, 1982; Slapgard, 2007; Anderson, 1989).

The British Prime Minister Winston Churchill do not hide that the question of Poland was one of the most difficult facing the allies after the Second World War. Poland was betrayed and sacrificed by war tired powers not in position to face a continued war. The attempt to parachute Polish agents from the west was one of many feeble attempts to have an independent Polish presence in areas to be invaded from the east.

After the Second World War there were two Polish authorities. One was the Polish exile government in London and the other the communist government in Warsaw. The London government was based upon the pre-war Polish government and argued that a substantial part of Poland was occupied by the Soviet Union according to the Hitler – Stalin pact – the Ribbentrop – Molotov border (Hitchcock, 2008, p. 152). It regarded the communist government as marionettes for the suppressive Soviet government. The bitterness against the Soviets were great. The Soviet Union was responsible for the execution of at least 8000 Polish officers in the Katyn forest and represented in the opinion a bestiality comparable to the Nazis (Gross, Wegner, 1997, p. 63–78). However, the communists had together with the Soviets territorial control. The labor government in Norway did, like other western countries accept the Warsaw based government as the legal Polish government. However, the organization of the exile Polish government and exile organizations remained staunchly anti-communists.

In Oslo, the London government had a Polish representative. He played a key role in the case of repatriation of Soviet prisoners of war. The Nazi occupying power used Soviet prisoners of war as forced labor in Norway. Many of them lived under deplorable conditions and the mortality rate was high. Many of the prisoners of war came from the eastern occupied part of Poland and regarded themselves as Poles. The London government accepted them as Poles and thus they could stay either in Norway or other western countries. A few chose to move back to Poland. Numbers are difficult to find, most likely because the situation was embarrassing for the Soviet Union and Norway wished to maintain a good relationship to the big-power.

The Polish air crew had been in service for the London based government and the free Polish army fighting with the western allies. The Polish London representative, Count Pruszyński, had been the pre-war Polish ambassador to Norway. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry maintained contact with Count Pruszyński. However, the contact was secret and the archives from the contact is classified as confidential<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In Norwegian „Fotrolig”. Paper on Polish War Graves in Norway from DU. 2. Political Office dated 4th May 1957 by Leif Castberg (Riksarkivet, 1940–1960).

The Polish Exile Army, Navy and Air Force had fought against the German invasion in Narvik (Tamelander, Zetterling, 2008, p. 238) and the Polish submarine "Orzeł" sunk the troop transport ship "Rio de Janeiro" outside of the small town of Lillesand the 8<sup>th</sup> April (Tamelander, Zetterling, 2008, p. 67). The sinking of the troop transport ship was the first German loss of the invasion and a pre-warning of the invasion. The first German troops landed the 9<sup>th</sup> of April. Later the Polish brigade under the command of general Bohusz-Szyszko played a key role during the battle of Narvik. The Narvik campaign was an important setback for the invaders and of great symbolic importance for the allies. In Norway, the sympathy and friendship with Poland was great. Many Norwegians felt like that they had a common destiny with Poland. Even before the war the sympathy of Poland was great. Before the invasion of Norway in 1940 a book was published in Norway describing the atrocities of Nazi Germany and heroism of Poland in battling the Nazi invasion as well as the invading Soviet Army. The two totalitarian states were thought of as rather the same. The fate of Poland and the Soviet invasion of Finland illustrated that both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were aggressive totalitarian states (Christensen, 1940).

After the war, there were 146 identified Polish War graves in Norway. The number was most likely much higher as many of the soviet prisoners of war that died in Norway most likely were Polish citizens from the east conscripted by force into the Soviet Army. The registrations of the dead in Nazi prison of war camps include several names that indicate that prisoners must have been Poles. However, the main conflict between the two Polish governments was about the registration of the 10 dead that died close to Egersund. They had served in Royal Air Force and the Polish War Veteran Organization in Norway (Polske Krigsdeltakeforbundet i Norge) protested having a memorial stone with the communist Coat of Arms<sup>3</sup>. The Polish exile government in London were active correcting the listing of the names from the Embassy of the Warsaw government<sup>4</sup>.

Many of the civil servants in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officers and soldiers of the armed forces and private citizens most likely regarded the London government as the moral government and the legitimate representatives of Poland. In the Armed Forces many regarded the exile Polish forces as comrades of arms (Lindbäck Larsen, 2009; Fjærli, 1982; Ruge 1947; Ruge, 1989). They knew that many Poles regarded their country as occupied by the Soviet Union. One of those loudly expressing his skepticism of the Soviet system was

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<sup>3</sup> Answer in the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) to the member of parliament Bergesen from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 12/7-1956. (Riksarkivet, 1940–1960).

<sup>4</sup> Paper on Polish War Graves from DU. 2. Political Office dated 4. mai 1957 by Leif Castberg (Riksarkivet, 1940–1960).

the author Arnulf Øverland (1889–1968). He questioned if the Soviet Union was socialist or national socialist like Nazi Germany (Øverland, 1947, p. 99). Another was the prior mentioned Catholic author Sigrid Undset. Another was the humanitarian Odd Nansen (1901–1973)<sup>5</sup> who had been active rescuing refugees from Nazi Germany before the outbreak of the Second World War. Odd Nansen was prisoned because of his opposition to the Nazis and published his diaries just after the war. He was staunchly opposed both the Nazis, fascists and the communists. He argued that totalitarians should be fought either they were fascist in Spain or communists in the Soviet Union (Nansen, 1946, p. 297). In Norway such words were regarded as destructive by many socialists sympathizing with the Soviet Union, but his critique had many supporters as well.

In the confidential reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there are listed several meetings about the memorial stone for the dead airmen. The Polish exile representative wanted the Polish eagle with a crown and the Warsaw government wanted the Polish eagle without the crown. Even if the result was that the Warsaw government won the memorial stone continued to be used by exile Polish veterans with their kind of symbolism. As a child, I was present at several occasions where veterans came to the memorial and brought flowers with their legitimate symbolism and I even remember that one old soldier at one occasion corrected the symbolism on the stone.

For both the Warsaw authorities and the Polish London authorities the symbols of the war Graves and Memorials were important manifestations of Poland and the fight against the Nazis. The controversies about Polish memorials were heated. Another case was the Polish memorial and war graves in Monte Casino in Italy. In that case it was difficult for the Warsaw government to use the graves and they were ignored, but actively used by the exile community of Poles (Hapgood, Richardson, 1984, p. 243).

Another controversy arose around the spelling of the names of the war dead listed on the memorial. Count Pruszyński was active in the discussion and listings were sent to the Norwegian War Grave Service.

The discussion of spelling was heated. Differences in spelling signaled where in Poland the war dead came from. For the Warsaw government, it was important that the war dead came from territorial post war Poland and for the exile community that some of the war dead came from what they regarded as occupied Poland (Merridale, 2006; Davies, 2006).

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<sup>5</sup> Odd Nansen was the son of Polar explorer and humanist Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930) who was active in humanitarian work in the Soviet Union as well as with Armenian refugees. After his death Odd Nansen continued his work.

The first listing of the (People's Republic of Poland – the communist authorities in Warsaw)	The listing of Count Pruszyńskis (The London based exile Polish government)	The second listing of the (People's Republic of Poland – the communist authorities in Warsaw)
BETOMSKI	BETOMSKI	BYTOMSKI
BRANECKI	BRANECKI	BRANJECKI
KUSMIREK	KUSMIREK	KUŚMIREK
MOREN	MOREN	MOREK
ROŻYCKI	ROŻYCKI	RÓŻYCKI
SZELINSKI	SZELISKI	SZELIŃSKI
FRANCZYK	FRAMCZYK	FRANCZYK
DERO	BERO	DERO
GMITROZUK	GMITRZYK	GMITRZUK
NISZNANSKI	NISZMAŃSKI	NISZNAŃSKI
SZPAKOWICA	SZPAKOWICA	SZPAKOWICZ

Honoring the war dead and keeping the memories fresh was important for the exile community. Myself a Norwegian I felt sort of adopted into the Polish tradition and the fellowship of the old soldiers. The young generation was important to them as well as the unity of belonging to the Catholic Church. Keeping the memories alive was tying the younger generation into the fellowship of the old soldiers- the war dead being the eternal young.

Today the memorial is with the old Polish symbolism. After the collapse of communism everything changed. The present Polish community in Norway is mostly from Poland with no such ties to the past as the old exile community. The second and even third generation of the exile community has mostly mixed into the Norwegian society. Still the traditions and trauma of the past remain part of the community and those that associated with that community.

In the study of post-traumatic reactions, the symbolism and collective feelings of communities is important. We need not only to understand such reactions from the point of individuals, but also from the point of culture (Desingue, Smith-Solbakken, Weihe, 2009). It is of crucial importance to make an understanding of the other from the perspective of the other. Both from the perspective of ethics and the clinical such a perspective is important (Weihe, Smith-Solbakken, 2012; Weihe, 2008).

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