

Nadbitka

*Ryszard Stemplowski*

## ENLISTMENT IN BRAZIL TO THE POLISH ARMED FORCES, 1940-1944\*

The Second World War has supplied us with very important material for studying changes in the national consciousness of Polish emigrants; the September defeat in 1939 and the horror of the Nazi occupation were a specific stimulus for the emigrants aware of the importance of the events. In other words, the situation of the Polish nation and state had an impact on the consciousness of emigrants, and the attitude taken by them to Poland's wartime struggle and the occupation can serve as evidence of their national consciousness.

It would be difficult to find a more severe criterion. The drama of the war and occupation was the "ultimate" test of the Poles' attitude, not an ordinary test for persons of Polish origin. But this criterion is very complex and must be applied carefully, for reckless use might lead to false generalizations. This is a subject which provides a gratifying field for joint efforts by sociologists and historians since it presupposes the use of different research methods and various kinds of source material.

The attitude of Polish immigrants in South America to the war and occupation in Poland is a subject waiting for an analysis. The present article has a more modest aim in view: I want to present some circumstances of a specific action, namely, the enlistment to the Polish Armed Forces in the West, in the light of documents from General Władysław Sikorski's staff archives now in possession of the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London<sup>1</sup>.

The sources used and extensively quoted here are copies and/or originals of documents included in what is known as Franciszek Arciszewski's collection, especially reports by the Commander-in-Chief's Delegate for the Enlistment Campaign. Until the middle of 1942 this function was held by Lieutenant Colonel Julian Malinowski, next by the newly appointed military attaché in Rio de Janeiro, Colonel F. Arciszewski and after his

\* A translation of an article published in "Przegląd Polonijny" No 1/1976.

<sup>1</sup> The research for this paper has been part of my studies on the history of Latin America, financed by St. Antony's College, Oxford, and the Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences. I hereby thank Mrs. Regina Oppmanowa, M. A., the manager of the Archives of the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum, and Captain Wacław Milewski, of the Archives, for their expert guidance.

departure, from January 1944 on, by Second Lieutenant Stefan Lenartowicz, who was appointed to this post when he had completed the enlistment campaign in Argentina. Other materials used in the article are reports by a journalist from a Polish newspaper in Brazil and letters from Polish consulates in Curitiba, Pôrto Alegre and São Paulo and from the Legation in Rio de Janeiro. Also a small number of occasional prints has survived as well as an incomplete correspondence book containing abstracts of letters and cables exchanged between Polish missions and military authorities in Rio de Janeiro and London. To make the paper short all the references to bibliography are being deleted.

\* \* \*

The first volunteers left Brazil to join Polish units in France soon after the September defeat, on board the S/S "Stalowa Wola". They were followed by others. In reply to General Sikorski's appeals to Poles all over the world over 360 volunteers had left Brazil by the middle of 1940.

But the need for enlists was enormous and the Polish government decided to carry out a large-scale enlistment campaign. Appeals were made to Polish patriotism. In August 1940 Polish volunteers from abroad were promised "the rights and privileges to be granted after the war, the same to them as well as to any other Polish citizens who have served in the Polish Army". The Council of Ministers promised the volunteers among other things: a) the right to land and priority in receiving land within the framework of an agrarian reform; b) priority in getting work; c) the right to extraordinary tax reductions and credit facilities.

For entire weeks both the delegate for enlistment campaign and consular officials toured Polish centres and communities, carried on enlistment propaganda, organized and ran a network of "trustees", trying to embrace all emigrants by their campaign. The enlisted volunteers went through a medical check-up in a consulate and if they were found sound, went to Rio de Janeiro where they were placed in an "assembly centre" and later, from the beginning of 1943, in the Polish Soldiers' House. The process was very slow, the travel conditions difficult, the distances enormous and transport and communications inadequate. Suffice it to say that for a cable from a consulate, if it did not get lost on the way, it could take as much as a week or two to reach the enlisted, and the journey from a settlement in the interior to the federal capital, Rio de Janeiro, took another two to four weeks. Polish communities were scattered throughout vast territories. The area under the jurisdiction of the consulate in Rio Grande do Sul compared well with the area of Poland, and in the interior the only means of transportation was a horse or a

horse-drawn cart; only in towns could one get a bus or, more rarely, a train to cover the subsequent hundreds kilometres.

On arriving in Rio de Janeiro the volunteers had to wait for a ship for many weeks, not infrequently up to four months. Ships stayed in the port for only 24 hours and nobody knew when they would call at. The British consulate, even if it knew the date beforehand, was requested to keep it a secret because agents of the Axis powers were at least as active in Brazil as Anglo-Saxon spies and the ships ran the risk of being attacked by German U-boats and planes in the Atlantic.

Transportation costs, credited by the British government, were charged to the account of the Polish state. The conditions of travel were primitive, giving the volunteers a foretaste of the war. The enlisted slept in hammocks under the deck of merchant ships adapted for carrying troops, and had their meals there too. During the journey they had gymnastic exercises, were trained in the operation of deck anti-aircraft guns, had training in the shooting range and were taught English. Sometimes they had an opportunity to establish contacts with British volunteers from Argentina, who lived in first class cabins being financed and lavishly equipped by the prosperous British community in Argentina. All that the Polish volunteers got was a ration of soap, cigarettes, etc. These differences could also be seen later on, in POW camps, where the International Red Cross somehow found it easier to reach British volunteers from South America than Poles. It must be admitted though that the rich British immigrants paid enormous sums of money for their fellow countrymen in POW camps, incomparably higher than the contributions made by the much poorer Polish immigrants.

"The absolute majority (of the volunteers) are extremely poor people who have not gained anything by emigrating to Brazil", wrote Arciszewski to London. "The majority of the volunteers arrive in Rio de Janeiro from the interior areas with but one ... suit under which they often have no underwear; their shoes are usually torn. Linen trousers, field jackets, berets, boots, underwear must be bought at once for almost all of them". Hardly ever had the volunteers their own money and the pay they received in Rio was enough to buy two packets of cigarettes a day, a deliberately small sum "to prevent them from drinking". On the other hand "expenses for cultural and educational purposes were quite high; since the volunteers wait for months in such a big city as Rio they must be kept busy if they are not to rowdy, there being no other sanction against them but removal from camp; so it is necessary to take them to the cinema quite often, to buy them sports equipment, musical instruments, bathing trunks, to organize entertainment for them, etc."

Not confining himself to patriotic appeals to Polish immigrants, Gen-

eral Sikorski urged his Delegate, Malinowski, to intensify his efforts; at the end of 1941 he sent him a cable threatening him he would be dismissed from his post; this indeed took place and Arciszewski was sent to Brazil.

The instruction for Arciszewski, signed by General Sikorski, reads, among other things: "It is your duty, Colonel, to continue and greatly to intensify the voluntary enlistment in Brazil.. In your work you should bear in mind, Colonel, that the enlistment of the greatest possible number of men from Brazil, among other countries, is absolutely indispensable for the further built-up of our Armed Forces". A few months later London sent another cable to Arciszewski: "The lack of quick and positive results in the enlisting campaign may force the Commander-in-Chief to dissolve very valuable military units". A successive cable sent in December 1942 reads: "The Navy urgently needs additional crewmen. This is the condition for our taking over the first cruiser. They are expecting efforts to quickly get additional volunteers from Brazil and Argentina".

The enlisting campaign did not fulfil the expectations of the Polish command in London; the organizers of the campaign in Brazil were disappointed too.

According to preliminary data some 400 volunteers left Brazil from the middle of 1940 up to 1943. At the end of 1943 the enlistment was in practice brought to an end, the personnel was reduced and the funds cut by 60 per cent. Not many traces of the Delegate's former activity remained. Voluntary applications became sporadic, very few in number.

The overwhelming majority of the volunteers were "people from towns and small townships". Skilled workers, artisans and lumpenproletariat predominated on the lists of volunteers.

There were few applications from the intelligentsia (middle class). An instruction for Arciszewski reads:

"Since the Polish government is of the opinion that not only should all the posts acquired by Poles overseas be kept but also that Polish presence should be expanded as far as possible, and since on the other hand there is an excessive number of intellectuals in the Polish Armed Forces in Great Britain, all the volunteering intellectuals (this applied above all to officers) who hold important posts in Brazil should be persuaded to stay in Brazil and keep up the positions they have gained. They cannot be refused admission to the Polish Armed Forces if they meet the general requirements, but everything possible should be done to persuade them to stay in Brazil".

On the other hand there is no indication that there was any special enthusiasm among the intelligentsia to go to the front.

However, what is most striking when one looks at the lists of volunteers is the small percentage of volunteers from peasant communities in

spite of the fact that the Polish immigrants in Brazil were mostly peasants. To find the reasons it is necessary to analyse, be it even briefly, the conditions of enlistment.

To begin with, the enlistment was limited to Polish citizens in the interpretation of Brazilian law, which automatically excluded persons born in Brazil (*ius soli*) even if both their parents were Polish. True, some Brazilian citizens of Polish origin were permitted to apply for admission to the army (this did not apply to Brazilian army reservists) but the procedure was slow since in each individual case it was necessary to have President Vargas's permission and in the final analysis nobody ever got it. But not many persons applied for it anyhow. (Though it is known that about a dozen young people left Brazil illegally).

The criterion of age and family status restricted the number of enlisting still further. These criteria were not stable. For most of the time only bachelors up to the age of 38 were admitted. In 1943 when it was clear that the results of the enlistment were much worse than had been expected, married men were also allowed to join in and their families were given family allowances which were quite high for the local conditions. These allowances were paid to at least 80 families. The enlistment of women, launched in 1943, brought no results. Several women applied but they encountered great difficulties because of the complicated visa procedure in such cases.

Another barrier was of a political character. It was stated in the instruction that special attention should be paid "to the volunteers' loyalty to the Polish cause. Be careful of German or Communist agents. Consequently, far-reaching precautions should be taken in dealing with national minorities: Ukrainians should only be admitted in exceptional circumstances, Byelorussians may be treated more liberally, no pressure should be exerted to induce Jews to join the army. The principle should be upheld that no transport may have more than 10 per cent of national minorities". The instruction hit especially the Ukrainians among whom there was quite a number of adversaries of the Third Reich who sympathized with the Soviet war effort, and the number of applications from Ukrainians was quite considerable. However, the instruction concerning national minorities, discriminatory though it was, made it possible to restrict the enlistment of ultra-nationalistic pro-German Ukrainians. Later on the enlistment of Ukrainians was abandoned altogether.

There are indications that the organizers of the enlistment campaign sometimes showed excessive concern for the "purity of ranks", a concern which was both tragic and comic. Some of them regarded every remark critical of the Polish regime as nothing else but "Communist propaganda". After listening to the immigrants' bitter words about the attitude to

peasants in pre-war Poland some enlistment officials began to doubt "what our emblem is, the white eagle or hammer and sickle".

The stiffly formulated regulations also prevented the enlistment of "very good Poles who before the war lived in Lithuania, East Prussia or Lower Silesia and cooperated with the World Union of Poles, and who today want to fight for Poland. Their exclusion from the Polish Army is an open injustice", wrote Arciszewski to London, "and is not good propaganda either".

The Polish settlers' attitude to the enlistment was greatly influenced by the internal political situation in Brazil.

First, the war "is arousing neither enthusiasm nor any special interest here", wrote Lenartowicz in January 1944, that is, after Brazil had joined the war. "It can be said without exaggeration that a football match between Rio and São Paulo excites and interests the Brazilians far more than the greatest victory on a battlefield".

Secondly — and this factor was much more important — the policy of the federal government prevented any effective propaganda of Polish ideas on a scale desired by the Polish authorities, and often resulted in the intimidation of volunteers.

One of the most important aims of Vargas's policy was to speed up the national integration process in that enormous, culturally heterogeneous country; Vargas wanted to cement the basis of the republican Brazilian state and to strengthen the central state authority. Within the framework of this policy the political and cultural activity of European immigrant communities had been drastically restricted in 1938: schools providing instruction in foreign languages, foreign societies and the foreign press had been closed down to promote assimilation and the spread of the Portuguese language. Although this policy was mainly directed against the Germans, about 400 Polish institutions had been closed down, among them 300 Polish schools and kindergartens, 2 daily newspapers and many periodicals.

The "nationalization" decrees, as they were called by the Brazilian Poles, had been consistently observed and this line was intensified during the war. It was only with great difficulty that the Polish Legation received Vargas's permission to carry out the enlistment. An open campaign was not started until the beginning of 1943. However, a favourable decision of the central authorities was one thing and the carrying out of the enlistment campaign in the provinces was something completely different: "the Brazilian provincial authorities state quite cynically, as they did for instance in Curitiba a few days ago (March 1943, Parana state with the largest number of Poles — R. S.), that they have been told to make use of the war first and foremost to force through the

assimilation; consequently the fanning of Polish patriotism through voluntary enlistment is inconvenient to them".

During the war the authorities manifested special zeal in combating the use of foreign languages in public places. Though formally only the use of the languages of the Axis powers and their allies was prohibited, in practice there was a ban on all foreign languages. The Brazilians did not trust Germans, they did not trust Italians, they did not trust anybody. This situation was not confined to Brazil, there was a similar atmosphere in other Latin American countries as has been depicted in a masterly way by M. Choromański in *Głównictwo, moglitwa i praktykarze*, Poznań 1971.

As far as the Poles were concerned the Brazilian authorities had a special reason (and pretext) for being distrustful. Before the war a group of Polish activists with the collaboration of certain officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, the Presidium of the Council of Ministers and the Orbis Travel Office had endeavoured to carry out a fantastic plan to set up a territorial unit under the sovereign patronage of the Polish state. To make things worse, this territory was to be in the Brazilian-Argentine frontier region. Implementing a great-power colonization idea these activists toured Parana to advertise their plan, not confining themselves to words.

"These gentlemen's correspondence with the colonists as well as letters exchanged by colonists fell into the hands of the Brazilian authorities. The correspondents wrote about platoons, companies, battalions, the issuing of orders, etc. The platoons had meetings and training drills. This evidence makes up quite a large dossier in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here and the envoy of the Polish Republic was shown it as proof of the Poles' disloyalty to Brazil. It is no use explaining that this was nothing serious and was done without the knowledge of the Legation. Everywhere, from the Minister of Foreign Affairs through the head (*interventor*) of Parana province up to provincial officials we meet with distrust and suspicion: 'the Poles organized a secession of a part of Brazil... they wanted to wrest a part of Brazil before the war and turn Parana into a Polish colony'".

Arciszewski concluded: "It is obvious that in view of all the circumstances described here it is ... extremely difficult to organize enlistment to the Polish army and obtain the support of the Brazilian authorities ..."

Many people felt embittered by the Brazilian authorities' attitude and also blamed the Polish authorities. They were losing the hope that Brazil's participation in the war would change anything. Very characteristic is the opinion expressed by "one of the most enlightened settlers" from a peasant colony on the Ivahy River (Parana): "Neither Roosevelt nor Churchill will be of any help to us here in Brazil. Only Stalin's

victory will solve our problem too and give us equal rights with the Negroes”.

It is impossible to enumerate here all the obstacles encountered in the voluntary enlistment campaign due to the situation in Brazil. Let us only mention one more difficulty, namely, the anti-Polish propaganda actively conducted by many German immigrants, who were helped with great enthusiasm by many Ukrainians. Taking advantage of anti-Sovietism they spread fantastic rumours about anti-Polish measures taken by the Allies.

\* \* \*

Was the attitude of peasant settlers influenced by the living conditions in the interior? After all, these conditions were greatly diversified.

In the archives one can find descriptions of living conditions and reports on the sentiments in the colony *Aguia Branca* (White Eagle) in *Espirito Santo* province, a colony settled in the years 1929 - 1938 by the *Warsaw Colonization Society*. The conditions there were so hard for the newcomers that out of the 361 families brought to the region only 86 remained, half of them in *Aguia Branca*. The sub-tropical climate in the lowlands — hot and humid — was conducive to the spread of malaria, which afflicted masses of people. Various insects and plant parasites caused troublesome diseases and sores. It took a two-day on horseback to reach the nearest physician. “The settlers are plagued by ants which can wipe off the earth a wooden building if it is left untended for a couple of days. Untreated syphilis kills 50 to 60 per cent of persons in every family”. For a very long period after the arrival “rice and beans seasoned with rancid fat were practically the only food . . . of the settlers”. For a long time they had neither milk, nor poultry nor butter . . . The appalling housing conditions — a roof on poles without walls — improved only after some time.

Even when the peasants already had their dairy produce, poultry and vegetables, it was quite impossible to sell them there being no roads, and to reach the nearest big city (*Victoria*) one had to travel 20 kilometres on foot or horseback, then another 74 km by lorry and another 150 km by train. “As a result of low incomes and the general poverty only 20 colonists had managed to pay off what they owed for their land”. The rest continued to pay instalments.

What was the attitude of the Polish citizens from *Aguia Branca* to the enlistment? There were 58 Poles of enlisting age, practically all of them farm hands or village artisans. A few were willing to join the army usually on condition that their families received help. The majority refused point blank and some of them carried on a violent campaign against



the "return to Poland" (the slogan of the enlistment campaign). Here are the opinions of some of them: "I don't want to go to Poland", "I want to have nothing to do with Poland", "I'll go only if they draft me, never of my own free will", "Brazil is my motherland" (three men aged 18, 27 and 35), "I won't go because I haven't finished building my house yet", "My wife is afraid to be alone in the jungle", "I have no intention of defending landlords", "I have nothing to go back to and nothing to defend", "I have no intention of defending the voivodes". A former village teacher, at that time a shop assistant and deputy administrator of the colony, told the settlers: "Poland sent you to a life of misery and ill-treatment in Brazil. Let the voivodes now look after their own defence".

Conditions in the richest colonies in Parana were completely different. In 1943 an editor from a Polish paper (closed down) visited these peasant colonies to persuade the peasants to join the army.

"When setting out for those remote localities I remembered what the situation had been like there in 1920, the first time that I had visited Ivahy, which was completely hidden in the forest at that time. The colonists were making their first steps on new soil then. They did not know the local language. Being mostly farm hands they had not brought happy memories from Poland with them, but even so they felt homesick and cried when they recalled the Old Country. The most frequent question I was asked then was 'When will the Polish government send ships to take us back?' Being convinced they would go back, the colonists were negligent in their work. Today, after a quarter of a century, the sentiments are completely different. In the basin of the Ivahy River the neighbours' conversations in houses and shops centre are on fat hogs and their prices, in Getulio Vargas settlement potatoes and cotton are the general subjects of conversation, and in Londrina interest is focused on coffee and the rapidly rising price of land. War is also a subject of conversation and so is Poland but interest is concentrated on one's own and the neighbours' farming. It must be admitted that the colonies in the forest are going through a period of prosperity caused by the war. The colonists are quite well off, better than ever before, and that is why the idea of returning to Poland belongs to the past. Now and again the subject is raised in conversation but people are more interested in learning about the possibility of moving to other colonies Poland will undoubtedly be given rather than to the territories on the Odra or the Vistula".

The same author describes his impressions from another colony, the largest compact Polish centre in Parana:

"I first came to know Cruz Machado... in 1920. The colony had been nine years old at that time. Everywhere... immigrants from the Lublin and Siedlce regions were homesick and asked if the government of reborn Poland would send ships for they would like to go back. But the idea of return was nowhere so strong as in Cruz Machado. I remember how Wawrzyniec Stadykowski's voice broke down when he was greeting the first Polish consul in Upper Cruz Machado and how tears filled the eyes of the people standing round. Stadykowski burst into tears

and the women started wailing. I reminded my interlocutors of this scene in our night talks. Quite a few remembered it. After such an introduction I asked them: 'And today would you go back if the Polish government sent ships?' An embarrassing silence followed. The young people did not reply. Among the older persons one or another man would clear his throat, stroke the hair and say: 'It wouldn't be bad to go back to beloved Poland for we often dream of our native country...' I only met a handful of people willing to return... Many asked me about colonies, whether Poland would get them and where. They would willingly go to a Polish colony, and in larger groups".

The author asked the manager of the local linen works: "How is it that the largest Polish colony in Parana has not yet supplied (October 1943 — R.S.) a single volunteer?" The reply was: "Five or six years ago Cruz Machado was capable of supplying two hundred to three hundred volunteers. The colony was poor then and the young people would have vied one with another to join the army. Today Machado is experiencing a period of prosperity; everybody is busy making money and as to civic qualms they can be eased by making a money contribution".

\*

Interesting comparative material is contained in the reports sent from Buenos Aires in 1941 and 1942 by Stefan Lenartowicz (then reserve officer cadet) and Second Lieutenant Edward Januszewicz, reports kept in Arciszewski's collection. They concern the enlistment in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile, Peru and Bolivia. A description of the campaign would require a separate study. Here I would only like to draw attention to a phenomenon frequently met in Argentina which has its analogy in Brazil. Out of the 1,000 persons who left Argentina some 80 per cent were unemployed people from urban and stockbreeding areas while the number of volunteers from among agricultural settlers, though still very difficult to ascertain, was small.

The small number of volunteers from among the agricultural settlers in Brazil and Argentina and the small inflow of volunteers from among skilled workers and the intelligentsia (but these two groups were very small numerically) would indicate that among the many factors determining voluntary enrolment the most important was the situation of the potential volunteer, i.e., the degree of his economic and vocational stability (family status played a secondary role). Let us add that the importance of such factors as health and the age structure of immigrant communities was similar in Brazil and Argentina.

It is characteristic that in Argentina the state authorities adopted a much more positive attitude to the enlistment (1941 - 1942) than in Brazil; they turned a blind eye to the campaign or adopted an attitude

of friendly neutrality. However, this did not lead to any significant increase in the number of applications from people born in Argentina of Polish parents. As in Brazil illegal departures were an exception.

\*

The main slogan used in the enlistment campaign in Brazil was the return to Poland. However, it had lost its old attractiveness. Nota bene all the volunteers who survived the war went back to Brazil and this can be only partly attributed to the dissemination among volunteers of information about the conditions in Poland in the years 1944 - 1946.

The promise of land in post-war Poland was not formulated clearly during the enlistment campaign, it was couched in vague general terms and did not play any significant part in propaganda. This did not help the enlistment of peasants who had acquired their own land, the object of their old dreams, in Brazil (even if it took years to pay for it).

The material in archives would indicate that the main factor which determined the results of the enlistment in Brazil was the peasants' attachment to their land. We must however recall here the reservation we made at the beginning about the immigrant's attitude to Poland's war-time situation. It would be unjustified to assert that the relatively small number of volunteers was proof of the loss of national consciousness among the immigrants. Voluntary enrolment in the course of an enlisting campaign which was conducted in difficult political and organizational conditions should, in my opinion, be regarded as an extreme manifestation of the feeling of national communion, assuming that the other indispensable conditions (health, age, citizenship, etc.,) were met. A comparison of the enlistment campaign in Brazil and Argentina would indicate that where national (Polish) consciousness had reached a certain level, the tendency to join the army was the stronger the less stabilized was the economic-occupational (and partly also the family) position of the potential candidate. What is more, it seems that the immigrant was the less willing to take such a step the more socially radical were his opinions. The criterion connected with voluntary enlistment makes possible to internally diversify the series of attitudes conditioned by national and social consciousness, economic situation and family conditions, etc.

The problem of volunteers classified by the organizers as Ukrainians, Byelorussians or Jews presents still greater interpretative difficulties. Some of these people considered themselves Polish (e.g., Poles of the Orthodox or Jewish religion, etc.). There could also have been some cases of national dualism. Also, to people who did not meet with success abroad the army might have appeared more or less clearly as a possibility

for vertical mobility all the more so as at the beginning of the enlistment the volunteers were to be sent for a lengthy period to Canada, and plans for moving from South America to the United States or Canada were quite widespread among the immigrants before the war. The documents show that such a treatment of enlistment must have also been present among the Poles.

The documents from the General Sikorski's staff archives permit only the first approach to be made in research on the attitude of Polish immigrants in Brazil to the fate of the Polish nation and state during the war and the occupation. To get a more complete picture it will be necessary to investigate other sources. It will also be necessary to make comparative research embracing Polish immigrants in other countries and also other immigrant communities in Brazil, especially the German and Italian communities. However, this will constitute part of future research.