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The Illusion of Freedom: Deserters from the Polish Army in Czechoslovakia and from the Czechoslovak Army in Poland before 1939 in the Light of Polish Documents

ABSTRACT

Despite the strong interest in Polish-Czechoslovakian relations between 1918–1939, the subject of desertions during this period from the Polish Army to Czechoslovakia, and vice-versa, has so far not been examined in detail by Polish historians. This article attempts to identify the similarities and differences that existed among deserters from the respective Armies. In addition to presenting the history of these deserters, this study also considers the causes and consequences of these military desertions.

For a long time, issues related to desertions in the Polish Army in 1918–1939 received little attention. However, research has intensified in recent years. In the case of the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–1920, this topic has been widely analyzed in various aspects, in two comprehensive monographs.¹ To date, no monograph has been written about desertions in the Polish Army between 1921 and 1939. In 2016–2021, however, a number of

¹ Leszek Kania, *Wyroki bez apelacji. Sądy polowe w Wojsku Polskim w czasie wojny z Rosją Sowiecką 1919–1921* (Zielona Góra: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2019); Remigiusz Kasprzycki, *Bez sławy i chwały. Dyscyplina w Wojsku Polskim w czasie wojny polsko-sowieckiej 1919–1921* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2021).

scientific articles were devoted to this phenomenon.² In Poland, however, no book or even scholarly article has been written about the desertions of Polish soldiers to Czechoslovakia and the desertions of Czech and Slovak soldiers to Poland.

The article possesses a pioneering character. My work is for the most part based on Polish military documents, most of which are located in the Central Military Archive-Military Historical Bureau (*Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe Wojskowego Biura Historycznego*) in Warsaw-Rembertów. Despite the strong interest of historians in issues of Polish-Czechoslovakian relations in the years 1918–39, Polish historians have examined neither desertions from the Polish Army to Czechoslovakia nor those from the Czechoslovak Army to Poland occurring before 1939. The fact is that the available documentation concerning the desertions of soldiers of the Polish Army to Czechoslovakia, as well as of Czechoslovakian soldiers to Poland, is very limited. It is therefore not possible to precisely determine the number of desertions, although we can argue that this phenomenon occurred on a significant scale. The objective of the article is to determine the similarities and differences between deserters serving in the Polish and the Czechoslovak armies. I am also interested in explaining the causes and consequences of desertion. I hope that my article will prove helpful for Polish, Czech, and Slovak researchers.

At the beginning of my article, I want to emphasize that especially the passages describing the desertions of soldiers from the Czechoslovak Army to Poland should be treated in the category of an excursus, of a purely

² Kasprzycki, „Dezercje i unikanie służby w Wojsku Polskim w latach 1918–1939,” *Dzieje Najnowsze* No. 3 (2016): 87–106, <https://doi.org/10.12775/DN.2016.3.05>; Kasprzycki, „Miraże czerwonego raj. Losy dezertorów z Wojska Polskiego w Związku Radzieckim w latach 1921–1939,” *Niepodległość i Pamięć* No. 1 (57) (2017): 129–153; Kasprzycki, „Dezertrzy przed sądami Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej,” *Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne* No. 2 (2018): 109–130, <https://doi.org/10.14746/cph.2018.2.3>; Kasprzycki, „Plamy na honorze. Przedwojenne dezercje oficerów Wojska Polskiego,” *Studia Historyczne* No. 3 (247) (2019): 63–75, <https://doi.org/10.12797/SH.62.2019.03.03>; Kasprzycki, „Niespełnione marzenia naiwnych. Losy dezertorów z Wojska Polskiego w Niemczech 1921–1939,” *Niepodległość i Pamięć* No. 1 (65) (2019): 139–164; Daniel Koreś, „Polski szpieg na niemieckiej służbie. Afera mjr dypl. Stanisława Kraussa i kpt. intendenty Geoges’a Froge’a (1930–1935),” in *Szpiedzy, dezertrzy, renegaci. Wykroczenia i przestępstwa żołnierzy i funkcjonariuszy służb mundurowych w latach 1918–1989*, eds. Jacek Jędrzyśiak and Krzysztof Widziński, *Studia z historii Wojska Polskiego*, t. 2 (Wrocław–Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2021), 45–71; Artur Ochał, „Wykroczenia i przestępstwa popełnione przez żołnierzy w brygadach KOP «Grodno» i «Wilno» (1929–1930),” in *Szpiedzy*, 75–128; Waldemar Rezmer, „Dezercje żołnierzy Wojska Polskiego z obszaru Dowództwa Okręgu Korpusu nr III Grodno w latach dwudziestych XX wieku,” in *Polacy na Białorusi od Powstania Styczniowego do XXI wieku. Traktat ryski i jego konsekwencje dla Polaków i Białorusinów: monografia zbiorowa*, t. 5, ed. Tadeusz Gawin (Warszawa: Studium Europy Wschodniej. Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2021), 365–394.

comparative nature. I fully realize that without a thorough search in Czech and Slovak archives drawing definitive conclusions is scientifically unauthorized.

From the beginning of the rebirth of Poland and its armed forces in 1918, it became clear that without the development of appropriate legislation, an effective fight against the phenomenon of desertion would be ineffective. To this end, therefore, several formal and legal regulations were developed in interwar Poland. Military Criminal Code of May 1920,³ orders of the Ministry of Military Affairs of April 1923,⁴ November 1927,⁵ and September 1934,⁶ the Military Criminal Code of March 1928⁷ and October 1932⁸ were directed against desertion, the legal regulations of the 1932 code were in force in Poland until the outbreak of World War II.⁹

In December 1919, however, a Confidential Order concerning the treatment of fugitive soldiers of the Czechoslovak Army was issued, which directed that: „Unless there is suspicion of espionage or unless the desertion was due to the commission of a crime, [deserters should be – R.K.] released under police supervision with the obligation to report to the security authorities at each change of residence” (transl. R.K.).¹⁰ The order issued, however, was characterized by considerable restraint and caution. It was explained, that in certain cases, even after a thorough vetting of the deserter, military intelligence can and will intervene. Particular attention was paid to the circumstances of desertion. It was written: „In cases of suspicion of any crime or offense that is likely to have been the cause of desertion, the deserter should be handed over to the nearest civilian court, which will issue a binding ruling” (transl. R.K.).¹¹ The guidelines of the above order were de facto in force in Poland until 1939. In considering interwar desertion in Poland and Czechoslovakia, it is necessary to take into

³ *Kodeks karny wojskowy tymczasowo obowiązujący*, wyd. nieurzędowe, Warszawa [1920].

⁴ Rozkaz Ministra Spraw Wojskowych z 10 IV 1924 („Dziennik Rozkazów Wojskowych” /hereafter: Dz. Roz. Wojsk./ 1923, nr 13, poz. 169).

⁵ Rozkaz Ministra Spraw Wojskowych z 22 XI 1927 (Dz. Roz. Wojsk. 1927 nr 32, poz. 387).

⁶ Rozkaz Ministra Spraw Wojskowych z 17 IX 1934 (Dz. Roz. Wojsk. 1934, nr 7, poz. 154).

⁷ Kodeks karny wojskowy z 22 III 1928 („Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej” /hereafter: Dz. U. RP/ z 1928, nr 36, poz. 328).

⁸ Kodeks karny wojskowy z 21 X 1932 (Dz. U. RP 1932, nr 91, poz. 765).

⁹ Kasprzycki, *Bez sławy*, 163; Kasprzycki, „Dezerterzy”, 110–112.

¹⁰ Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe Wojskowego Biura Historycznego (hereafter: CAW-WBH), Rozkazy Poufne Dowództwa Okręgu Generalnego w Krakowie od 2 I 1919 do 31 XII 1919, ref. no. DOK V/6, Rozkaz Poufny nr 76, Vc – O.W. 15945/Pouf. Dezerterzy czechosłowaccy, postępowanie z nimi, Kraków, 12 XII 1919, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

account the changing socio-political-military situation of both countries over the following years. In the case of Poland, it was the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–1920, the individual months of which resulted in an increase in desertions from the Polish Army also to Czechoslovakia.¹²

In the case of Czechoslovakia, this was a time of disintegration and collapse of the country, which lasted from October 1938 to mid-March 1939. This situation resulted in an increase in the scale of desertions in the Czechoslovak Army, which I will return to later in the article. In this country, the impact of the popularity of Hitler's policies among Sudeten Germans was also of great importance. The mood of Sudeten Germans translated into the results of the mobilization in the Czechoslovak Army announced in September 1938. Only 10 to 25 percent of mobilized German reservists showed up for its ranks at that time.¹³ From the perspective of the entire interwar period, however, it was the Polish Army that faced more serious national challenges.

Between 1921 and 1939 the Polish Army possessed a multinational character: in addition to Poles, nationalities serving in the Polish Army included Germans, Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians. This multi-ethnic army also included small numbers of Czechs. Czech conscripts mainly came from the Volhynia region. The first Czech colonists, 14 in number, came to this region, now part of Ukraine, on 24 May 1868. Some 449 families settled in Volhynia in 1869.¹⁴ According to the Polish census of 1921, there were 25,000 Czechs living in Volhynia.

In the nationality reports drawn up by the Polish Army before World War II, it is difficult to find any items critical of Czech recruits from Volhynia. One report from the years 1926–27 includes a list of the positive traits of these conscripts, stressing the loyalty, discipline, willingness to undergo military service, consistency, and extraordinary intelligence of the Czech soldiers who served in the Polish Army. It was also pointed out that the Czechs demonstrated openness and friendliness towards Poles and soldiers of other nationalities.¹⁵

The exemplary military service of the Czech recruits from Volhynia resulted from the fact that they were content and happy in Polish Volhynia.

¹² Kasprzycki, *Bez sławy*, 257–258.

¹³ Pavel Šrámek „Mobilizace na podzim 1938,” *Armádní technický magazín* No. 10 (2002): 40.

¹⁴ Jaroslav Vaculik, *Dějiny Volyňských Čechů, I. (1868–1914)* (Prague: Sdružení Čechů z Volyně a jejich přátel, 1997), 6.

¹⁵ CAW-WBH, Oddział II Sztabu Głównego Wojska Polskiego (hereafter: Oddz. II SG WP), ref. no. I.303.4.2561, Komunikat informacyjny na podstawie danych statystycznych, stanu narodowościowego, dezercji, samouszkodzeń i szpiegostwa w wojsku (dane z lat 1926–1937), s.l., s.d., s.p.

The Czech historian Karel Richter stated that the years 1918–39 were a time of great prosperity for the Czech diaspora living in Volhynia. Even the relatively poor political relations between Czechoslovakia and Poland prior to 1939 were not able to hinder the good Polish-Czech relations in Volhynia.¹⁶

Many Polish commanders of regiments exhibited less enthusiasm in their assessments, not only of the Czechs, but also of other minorities in the Polish Army. The commanders of the air forces in particular had a critical attitude towards nationalities other than Polish. At the beginning of March 1924, pilot Lt. Col. Jerzy Borejsza, the head of the Cracow 2nd Air Regiment, objected to anyone other than Polish recruits being directed to his regiment. Borejsza explained that even the slightest failure of private soldiers in military forces as specialised as the air forces could cause a disaster in wartime conditions.¹⁷ Commanders of infantry and cavalry regiments were also opposed to including non-Polish nationalities in the regiments. In March 1924, the commander of the Katowice 23rd Infantry Division, Brigadier General Kazimierz Horoszkiewicz, citing security reasons, suggested that his group could absorb only 20% Belarusians and Ukrainians. Due to the proximity of the Czechoslovakian and German borders, Gen. Horoszkiewicz firmly ruled out service by Czechs, Germans, and Jews. The commander was especially apprehensive about Jewish recruits, believing that Jews were very unreliable and that, due to their sympathy for Germany, they posed a strong threat to the state as well as in terms of espionage.¹⁸ As stated earlier, the Czechs also aroused suspicion, but Horoszkiewicz was mostly concerned about the Czech conscripts who came from the villages situated near the Czechoslovakian-Polish border.

Polish military authorities tried to prevent the concentration of excessively numerous ethnic groups within individual regiments. One method of preventing espionage, desertion, and diversion in the Polish Army was to place Belarusian, Ukrainian, Jewish, and German conscripts in various parts of Poland. Recruits were sent to military units far from their place of residence. Belarusians and Ukrainians were directed to central and western Poland.¹⁹ German and Polish conscripts were usually sent to Eastern Poland.

¹⁶ Karel Richter, *Historické drama volyňských Čechů* (Prague: Epoque, 2015), 8, 88–98.

¹⁷ CAW-WBH, Samodzielny Referat Informacyjny Dowództwa Okręgu Korpusu nr V (hereafter: SRI DOK V), ref. no. I.371.5/A.123, Meldunek SRI, Kraków, 5 III 1924, 217.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Podział obcych narodowości w pułkach 23 DP. Pismo SRI, Katowice, 3 III 1924, 206.

¹⁹ Lech Wyszczelski, *Oświata, propaganda, kultura w Wojsku Polskim w latach 1918–1945* (Warszawa: Neriton, 2004), 228.

It is not easy to determine to which regiments the Czech recruits were mainly sent. It is also worth noting, however, that there were relatively few of them in the Polish Army. In the years 1922–23 about 500 Czech soldiers served in the Polish Army; in the following years this number dropped significantly, to only 72 in 1924.²⁰ This number seems very small compared with the thousands of Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, and Belarusians conscripted into the Polish Army each year. It is even more difficult to make such comparisons with regard to the 1930s. Not much is known about the service of Czech soldiers in the Polish Army in the years 1930–39, and there is a similar lack of information with regard to Slovaks, whose numbers in the Polish Army before 1939 were certainly even smaller than those of Czechs.

In the years 1918–39, thousands of conscripts and soldiers serving in various regiments fled Poland and escaped abroad. These were Poles, Jews, Germans, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians. Germans and Lithuanians mainly went to their homeland. Belarusians and Jews fled mostly to the Soviet Union. Poles deserted to all neighbouring countries, including Latvia and Romania. In the multinational Polish Army there were virtually no desertions by the few Czechs and Slovaks.

At the beginning of the 1920s, desertions to Czechoslovakia were particularly common among Ukrainian nationalists, who believed that independent Ukrainian armed forces would be formed in that country and would subsequently liberate the territories occupied by the Poles and contribute to the creation of an independent Ukraine. In the years 1922–23 this problem was pointed out by Polish diplomatic missions in Czechoslovakia. In the summer of 1923, the Polish vice-consul in Košice reported with concern to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs that every day the Polish-Czechoslovakian border was being crossed by many of deserters, mainly Ukrainians, with 36 defectors being recorded in May 1923 alone. The report of the Polish vice-consul of 5 July 1923 emphasised the conscientious behaviour of the Czechoslovakian authorities who handed Ukrainian deserters from the Polish Army over to the Polish Vice-consulate in Košice. The report concluded that the significant numbers of desertions from the Polish Army had left an unfavourable impression on Czechoslovakian civil servants and the Slovak population, and had also strengthened the tendency toward emigration on the part of Ukrainian nationalists. The report warned that, in Slovakia, Ukrainian deserters from the Polish Army were disseminating false information about poor conditions in the Polish

²⁰ Tadeusz Antoni Kowalski, *Mniejszości narodowe w siłach zbrojnych Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (1918–1939)* (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 1998), 120.

Army.²¹ The situation was to be improved through additional protection of the mountain section of the Polish-Czechoslovakian border.

It soon became clear that sealing the border had failed to resolve this issue. The problem lay elsewhere. In Poland many agitators encouraged the Ukrainians to desert the army or not to show up for conscription. One of these agitators was Oleksy Szumka. In December 1922, in the villages of the Drohobycz County, Szumka urged Ukrainian youth not to appear for conscription and to escape to Czechoslovakia. In January 1923 a group of runaway conscripts being led by Szumka through the Carpathian Mountains was stopped by the Czechoslovakian gendarmerie. The Ukrainians were immediately handed over to the Polish police. It is not known whether the motivations of the defectors were solely patriotic. During questioning the captured Ukrainians explained that Szumka had promised them that they would receive 10 dollars for joining the Ukrainian national liberation army in Czechoslovakia. In the event the mobilisation failed, they had been guaranteed lucrative employment in Czechoslovakia.²²

The destination of the fleeing Ukrainian soldiers serving in the Polish Army was not accidental. Pre-war Czechoslovakia was a major centre of Ukrainian emigration.²³ The Ukrainian Military Organisation (*Ukrajinska Wjśkowa Orhanizacija*, hereafter: UWO), formed in Prague on 31 August 1920, was relocated to Berlin in 1925. The Germans provided financial support to UWO, as they were particularly interested in the development of this organisation.²⁴ With increasing frequency, Ukrainian soldiers decided to flee to Germany rather than to Czechoslovakia.

This tendency was clearly demonstrated in an analysis by the Polish military intelligence released on 20 February 1924, concerning conscripts and runaway soldiers from Poland's Stanisławów Voivodeship, bordering Czechoslovakia and Romania, where Ukrainians constituted almost 70% of the population. The report noted that 150 deserters and conscripts from this Voivodeship had fled to Germany, 103 to Czechoslovakia, 98 to the

²¹ CAW-WBH, Oddz. II SG WP, ref. no. I. 303.4.2510, Raport dot. nielegalnego przekraczania granicy, Koszyce, 5 VII 1923, s.p.

²² Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereafter: AAN), Wicekonsulat RP w Koszycach (hereafter: WKRPKO), ref. no. 76, Pismo Komendy Policji Państwowej w Przemyślu, Przemyśl, 22 III 1923, 2-4.

²³ Stepan Vidňanský, „Ukrajinská emigrácia v medzivojnovom Česko-Slovensku,” *Historický časopis* 40, No. 3 (1992): 370-385.

²⁴ Michal Šmigel, „Ukrajinský legión Romana Suška. Útok zo Slovenska na Poľsko (1939),” in *Slovensko medzi 14. marcom 1939 a salzburskými rokovaniami. Slovenská republika 1939 – 1945 očami mladých historikov VI*, eds. Martin Pekár and Richard Pavlovič (Prešov: Universitas, 2007), 281.

Soviet Union, and 50 to Romania.²⁵ In subsequent years the number of desertions of Ukrainian soldiers to Czechoslovakia decreased for other reasons as well.

The nationalist propaganda of UWO, and subsequently of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (*Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv*, hereafter: OUN), did not advise young Ukrainians to avoid serving in the Polish Army. Instead, their time of service was to be used to obtain the best possible military training and to acquire weapons and uniforms.²⁶ The knowledge and skills thus acquired were to be used in case of war or an armed uprising against Poland.

In the same vein, *Surma*, the magazine of the Ukrainian nationalists, published in Kaunas, called on young men to join the ranks of the Polish Army. In 1928, in the pages of this magazine, the leadership of UWO instructed Ukrainian soldiers taking the Polish military oath to vow in their heart of hearts that at the right time their weapons would be used against Poland. Not only did the Ukrainian nationalists advise against not showing up for the conscription,²⁷ but they forbade desertions from the Polish Army outright.

There are many indications that the overall number of desertions to Czechoslovakia, not only of Ukrainians but also of other soldiers serving in the Polish Army, clearly declined in the 1930s. In the years 1934–36 Polish border guards stopped 16 deserters attempting to escape to Czechoslovakia.²⁸ In 1936 only 23 soldiers fled to Czechoslovakia. The largest group of defectors from the Polish Army once again fled to Germany (81 cases) and to the Soviet Union (69 cases).²⁹

Polish, Jewish, and Ukrainian soldiers escaped to Czechoslovakia for various reasons. Their desertion was motivated by fear of criminal liability for crimes they had committed, by personal issues, and by failure to cope with the hardships of military service, as well as a lack of prospects following a return to civilian life. Many deserters believed that they would begin a new stage of a better and more successful life outside of Poland. Indeed,

²⁵ CAW-WBH, Oddz. II. SG WP, ref. no. I. 303.4.2674, DOK nr VI, Wykaz dezertorów pochodzących z woj. stanisławowskiego, którzy zbiegli za granicę, Lwów, 20 II 1924, s.p.

²⁶ Roman Wysocki, *Organizacja Ukraińskich Nacjonalistów w Polsce w latach 1929–1939. Geneza, struktura, program, Ideologia* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2003), 254.

²⁷ Lucyna Kulińska, *Działalność terrorystyczna i sabotażowa nacjonalistycznych organizacji ukraińskich w Polsce w latach 1922–1939* (Kraków: Fundacja Centrum Dokumentacji Czynu Niepodległościowego: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2009), 266.

²⁸ Henryk Mieczysław Kula, *Polska Straż Graniczna w latach 1928–1939* (Warszawa: Bellona, 1994), 198.

²⁹ Edward Jaroszuk, *Żandarmeria wojskowa w latach 1921–1939* (Kraków: Avalon, 2009), 271.

some deserters, such as the Polish private Adam Radwański, fared quite well. The former soldier of the Przemyśl-based 38th Infantry Regiment deserted the Polish Army in June 1920 and worked as a photographer in one of Czechoslovakia's ministries. He had stolen the photographic equipment while still in Poland.³⁰ Radwański fled to Czechoslovakia upon being delegated to a plebiscite commission in Spiš and Orava.

In most cases, however, deserters from the Polish Army were bitterly disappointed with their experiences in Czechoslovakia. Almost all deserters were arrested and subjected to detailed interrogation concerning the motivation for their escape. The runaway soldiers were questioned about all matters relating to armaments, equipment, and morale in their regiments and forced to provide detailed information about the problems of the Polish Army. The defectors had no guarantee that even previously granted asylum would not be revoked. One example of that was a Jewish rifleman Joś Rozenfeld, who, on 12 June 1930, fled to Czechoslovakia from the Cieszyn-based 4th Podhale Rifles Regiment. He was released after detention and brief questioning. From mid-June 1930 Rozenfeld worked in one of the shops in Český Těšín. However, as early as the beginning of July 1930, he moved to Bratislava, where he was helped by a local furniture factory owner named Rubinstein. Rozenfeld worked at the factory all throughout July. In early August 1930 he was again arrested by the Czechoslovakian gendarmerie for lack of documents. Pursuant to an agreement between the local authorities and the Polish consulate in Bratislava, Rozenfeld was expelled from Czechoslovakia for having crossed the border illegally. The Polish gendarmerie took over custody of him on the bridge in Cieszyn. On 25 August 1930, the deserter was transported to the District Military Court in Bielsko.³¹

However, many deserters from the Polish Army, even if they were not detained in Czechoslovakia and were allowed to function normally, were nevertheless unable to adjust to life in exile even after several years. Discouraged, disgruntled, and disappointed, they tried to return to Poland legally. Often this was no longer possible, because they had been deprived of their Polish citizenship. This was true of the Ukrainian *szwoleżer* (chevau-léger) Vasily Smereczański, who fled the 2nd Chevau-légers Regiment in 1923. In 1930 Smereczański visited the Polish Vice-consulate in Košice,

³⁰ CAW-WBH, SRI DOK V, ref. no. I. 371.5/A.175, Pismo Prokuratury przy WSO [Wyższej Szkole Oficerskiej] w Przemyślu do DOK nr V w Krakowie, Przemyśl, 20 I 1920; Pismo MSW Okręgu VII lwowskiego Ekspozytury Policynjo-Śledczej, Lwów, 21 XII 1921, 191, 194-195.

³¹ CAW-WBH, Oddz. II SG WP, ref. no. I.303.4.2510, Wyciąg meldunku w sprawie strzel. 4 psp Josia Rozenfelda, s.l., 11 IX 1930, s.p.

which refused to issue him a Polish passport, stating that the deserter had been deprived of Polish citizenship. Smereczański was so determined to return to Poland that he soon crossed the border illegally. In Poland he turned himself in at a police station³² and was immediately arrested.

The fate of runaway Polish officers in Czechoslovakia was even worse, especially if they were hiding under a false name, like Lieutenant Zygmunt Szafnicki, who deserted the Polish 58th Infantry Regiment on 1 August 1920.³³ Szafnicki fled to Germany after a two-year stay in Czechoslovakia. From there he returned illegally to Poland, where he voluntarily turned himself in to the police in 1933.

Some Polish soldiers fleeing to Czechoslovakia claimed that they were Ukrainians who were being persecuted in the Polish Army. The deserters hoped that this would enhance their chances of quickly obtaining political asylum and would be conducive to better conditions for political emigration. This was the case of the Polish privates Zechariah Zych and Stanisław Ślęczka. These soldiers, who fled the 5th Podhale Rifles Regiment on 27 February 1936, tried to convince the Czechoslovakian authorities, in the course of repeated questioning, of their Ukrainian nationality. Likely the Czechoslovakian guards did not believe them. After 3 days of detention in Medzilaborce, Zych and Ślęczka were sent to work in the local sawmill.³⁴ This was not how the deserters had imagined their new life. They quickly became disillusioned with their stay in Czechoslovakia.

After his stay in Czechoslovakia, which lasted over a year, and a short stay in Hungary, Zych returned to Poland, where he was arrested. Ślęczka not only stayed longer in Czechoslovakia and in Hungary, but also went to Romania. However, the Romanian authorities turned him over to their Polish counterparts at the end of January 1938. On 30 May 1938 the X District Military Court in Przemyśl sentenced Ślęczka to 6 years in prison. The judgment was upheld by the Supreme Military Court in Warsaw.³⁵

In the mid-1920s Czechoslovakia was also a transit country on the way to Austria for Polish, Jewish, and especially Ukrainian deserters from the Polish Army. The Polish authorities suspected that the transport of runaway soldiers to Austria was an organised operation. Between 15 and 20

³² Ibid., Meldunek dot. dezertera 2 p. szwol. Wasyla Smereczańskiego, Przemyśl, 24 II 1930, s.p.

³³ Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu, Adwokat Neusser Antoni, ref. no. 32, Odpis aktu oskarżenia prokuratury WSO nr VII w Poznaniu, Poznań, 20 VI 1933, s.p.

³⁴ CAW-WBH, Dowództwo Żandarmerii (hereafter: DŻ), ref. no. I. 300.51.225., Protokół przesłuchania Zachariasza Zycha, Przemyśl, 5 IX 1936, s.p.

³⁵ CAW-WBH, Akta Spraw Sądów i Prokurator Wojskowych, ref. no. I. 351.33.212, Wyrok Najwyższego Sądu Wojskowego w Warszawie, Warszawa, 18 VII 1938, s.p.

deserters from the Polish Army were to be transported from Bratislava to Vienna in April 1925 alone. The human trafficking network was supposedly run by a certain Samu Siegelwachs.³⁶ It is worth reminding that the Austrian capital was not merely home to a large Ukrainian diaspora; in 1929, OUN was founded there.

In the 1920s and 1930s, soldiers from the Czechoslovak Army also escaped to Poland. We cannot determine the precise scale of these desertions on the basis of the available Polish documents. It is certain that by September 1924 none of the general staffs of the Corps District Commands operating in Poland had a complete record of deserters from the armies of neighboring countries, including the number of defectors from the Czechoslovak Army.³⁷ It is known, however, that these included Czech, Jewish, Slovak, and Polish soldiers. Several deserters from the Czechoslovak Army were detained in Poland in 1924 alone. Among them were the Czech Jan Pauer and Abraham Weintraub, a Jewish soldier from Brno.³⁸ In the second half of the 1930s there was an increase in the number of desertions of Slovak soldiers to Poland. The Polish border guard noted that some Slovaks from the Czechoslovak Army repeated such attempts several times.³⁹

The progressing disintegration of Czechoslovakia, manifested e.g. in the increased aversion of national minorities to the military, was closely observed in Poland. The Polish press eagerly described the rising tide of military desertions. In September 1938 the Cracow-based newspaper *Ostatnie Wiadomości Poranne* repeatedly reported that German reservists living in the Sudetes were not showing up for conscription to Czechoslovakian military units in large numbers. The newspaper concluded that the majority of these 37,000 German refugees from Czechoslovakia were conscripts.⁴⁰ Piotr M. Majewski, a renowned Polish researcher of the Czechoslovakian military history, estimated that 100,000 reservists failed to report for duty

³⁶ AAN, WKRPKO, ref. no. 76, Odpis protokołu spisanego w Wicekonsulacie Polskim w Koszycach, Koszyce, 23 IV 1925, 7.

³⁷ Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie, Starostwo Powiatowe Lubelskie, ref. no. 1510, Spis dezerterów państw obcych, Lublin, 28 IX 1924, 3.

³⁸ CAW-WBH, SRI DOK V, ref. no. I.371.5/A.265, Pismo Ekspozytury nr IV O. II Szt. Gł. do SRI DOK nr V, Kraków, 27 I 1925, a także Wykaz dezerterów armii obcych, Katowice, 17 I 1925, 180-181.

³⁹ Archiwum Straży Granicznej, Straż Graniczna 1928-1939 Komenda Straży Granicznej, ref. no. 187/138, Komunikat Informacyjny nr 12/37 za czas od 1 do 31 XII 1937 roku, Warszawa, 16 II 1938, s.p.

⁴⁰ „Rezerwiści – Niemcy sudeccy odmawiają posłuszeństwa władzom czeskim,” *Ostatnie Wiadomości Poranne* No. 107 (1938): 5; „37 tysięcy Niemców uciekło z Czechosłowacji, znajdując schronienie w Rzeszy,” *Ostatnie Wiadomości Poranne* No. 110 (1938): 1.

during the mobilization ordered in this country in September 1938. The total number of deserters of all nationalities in Czechoslovakia at that time was 126,000.⁴¹ For many observers in Western Europe, this came as a shock. As late as late spring 1938, Robert Leurquin, a well-known French journalist and political scientist, argued for the high morale, fighting spirit and deep solidarity of Czechs and Slovaks in the face of the German threat. Leurquin, in an article that also appeared in mid-June in Poland, was certain that a repetition of a similar mass desertion in the Czechoslovak armed forces that occurred during World War I in the Austro-Hungarian army was virtually impossible.⁴²

In the opinion of the Polish press, the Czechoslovakian regiments were completely understaffed precisely because of the desertions. Polish newspapers believed that in September 1938 the Czechoslovak Army was suffering not only from huge staff shortages, but also from food deficits. The Polish press reported that the deserters were also involved in serious sabotage activities. On 29 September 1938 the daily *Tempo Dnia* wrote about the destruction caused by German conscripts called up for service in the Czechoslovak Army: „While preparing in panic to escape, they are destroying everything that they can get their hands on. In Bohumín a railway track was dismantled from both the German and Polish sides” (transl. R.K.).⁴³

Not all deserters from Czechoslovakia treated Poland as their final destination. According to the reconnaissance of the Polish Army, Poland was one of the routes for Czech communists heading to the Soviet Union. The Czech deserters Jan Matoška and František Wagner believed that the fastest route to the Soviet Union ran through Poland, which was thus supposed to be only a transit country. These defectors fled from their military regiments in Olomouc. Matoška served as a professional sergeant in the 302nd Heavy Artillery Regiment; Wagner was a private in the 27th Infantry Regiment in Olomouc. Polish investigators immediately learned that prior to their military service the Czechs had worked professionally. Matoška had been a train operator, Wagner a roofer. They both arrived in Poland in civilian clothes, with significant cash resources. Thus they were able to bribe a Czech border guard and a Polish police officer from the border station. Thanks to this, they made it through the border crossing in Piotrowice. They were not headed for the Soviet Union alone, however: when they effortlessly crossed the Polish-Czechoslovakian border on 8 August 1938

⁴¹ Piotr M. Majewski, *Zmarnowana szansa? Możliwości obrony Czechosłowacji jesienią 1938 roku* (Gdańsk: Muzeum II Wojny Światowej, 2016), 110.

⁴² Robert Leurquin, „W godzinach wielkiej próby,” *Epoka* No. 17 (1938): 12–13.

⁴³ „Pułki czeskie zdekompletowane wskutek masowej dezercji,” *Tempo Dnia* No. 268 (1938): 2.

they were accompanied by two Czech civilians. The four men, led by one of the civilians, named Majda, were headed for Soviet Kharkov, where he had convinced the runaway soldiers they would get lucrative jobs. The myth of Kharkov strongly influenced the imaginations of the deserters, who had been frustrated with their previous conditions. They complained about the low pay and the very strict discipline in the Czechoslovak Army.⁴⁴ The neat appearance and good education of the Czech deserters raised suspicions on the Polish side, where it was immediately assumed that the Czechs had come to Poland as spies. Matoška and Wagner in no way fit the stereotype of filthy, frustrated and frightened deserters. After painstaking analysis it was decided, however, that the Czechs were not military spies. In his report, General Andrzej Galica described them as idealists infatuated with Communist ideology, who had been persuaded by the civilian Majda to set out for the land of milk and honey, i.e. the Soviet Union. Galica wrote: „Both deserters have neat civilian clothing, speak Czech and German, and do not admit to the knowledge of the Russian language. Matoška and Wagner most likely fell victim to communist agitation and succumbed to the persuasion of labourer Majda, who wanted to lead them to Russia. It is unlikely that they are spies, as they do not speak Polish, do not have any documents, and crossed the border of Czechoslovakia in a group of four people” (transl. R.K.).⁴⁵ General Galica also made sure that Matoška and Wagner were not pretending to desert. The exhaustive description of the military forces of the Olomouc garrison presented by the former was considered as sufficient proof. Matoška described all of the regiments in Olomouc, estimating the total number of soldiers in the Olomouc military district at approximately 15,000. Other details proved most valuable. Polish military intelligence obtained new information on Ukrainian labourers’ units stationed in Olomouc, which was emphasised in the report.

After paying a fine, the two civilians were released and escorted to the Czechoslovakian border. Matoška and Wagner found themselves in judicial custody in Bielsko from mid-August of 1923. The local court ruled that the Czechs were not spies. It was also decided that the defectors were not entitled to political asylum. The deserters from the Olomouc regiments were to be escorted to the border. It was additionally decided that Matoška would face criminal charges for bribing a Polish police officer. These negative prospects prompted the Czech deserters to escape once again. Wagner

⁴⁴ CAW-WBH, SRI DOK V, ref. no. I.371.5/A.265, Raport gen. Andrzeja Galicy dowódcy I Dywizji Górskiej dotyczący [Jana] Matoški i [Františka] Wagnera, dezerterów z wojska czeskiego, s.l., 13 VIII 1923, 199.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

fled successfully, but Matoška was wounded and ended up in hospital in Cieszyn. The court in Bielsko sent out an arrest warrant for Wagner.⁴⁶ There was also another reason behind the sudden desire of the fugitives from Olomouc to get out of detention: Polish prosecutors had learned that the runaway soldiers had committed a number of thefts in their regiments.

Many deserters from Czechoslovakia who were repeat offenders chose Poland as an escape route. Perhaps they hoped that it would be easier for them to find refuge in a Slavic country than in countries such as Austria and Germany in which unfamiliar languages were spoken. They also believed that it would be easier to get from Poland to the Soviet Union, where they expected complete impunity.

In autumn 1921 a deserter named Ladislav Kolen was stopped in Stryj. This Czech defector, born in Pilsen, had previously been punished for forging documents. On 30 September 1921 a court in Bratislava also sentenced Kolen to two years in prison for desertion. However, on the very same day he escaped from the escort taking him to prison in Komarno. He quickly entered Poland, where he used forged identity documents. At the end of October 1921 he was arrested as Leon Korsakov; the Polish investigators initially believed he was a spy.⁴⁷ On 1 November 1921 the District Court in Stryj punished Kolen with 5 days of detention for crossing the Polish border illegally. He was then handed over to the Police Directorate Presidium in order to be expelled from Poland.

In mid-January 1928, Czech pilots [name unknown] Marek and [name unknown] Mika escaped from the military flight school in Prostějov.⁴⁸ The Czech deserters were heading to the USSR in a hijacked plane, but mistakenly landed not far from Hrubieszow, and fired gun shots at police officers trying to stop them.⁴⁹ A delegation of Czechoslovak officers, warmly welcomed by representatives of the local Military District Corps and the local Air Defense League, arrived in Lublin for the abandoned aircraft (probably an Aero A-11) on 23 January 1928. The plane quickly made its way to

⁴⁶ Ibid., Raport dowództwa I Dywizji Górskiej dot. ucieczki z aresztów sądowych Jana Matoszki i Franciszka Wagnera, Biała, 30 X 1923, 196. [In the Polish documents the surname Matoška is often written as Matoszka – R.K.].

⁴⁷ Ibid., ref. no. I.371.5./A.175, Pismo Okręgowej Komendy Policji Państwowej w Krakowie, Kraków, 8 XI 1921, 205.

⁴⁸ The transfer of the Military Aviation School from Cheb to Prostějov took place in 1925–1928, see: Pavel Minařík, „Letecké učiliště v Prostějově,” Studie a materialy, accessed July 9, 2022, <https://armada.vojenstvi.cz/povalecna/studie-a-materialy/letecke-uciliste-v-prostejove.htm>.

⁴⁹ „Niedolecieli. Nieudana ucieczka z czeskiej szkoły pilotów,” *Polska Zbrojna* No. 17 (1928): 9; „Dezserterzy czescy poza więzieniem w ojczyźnie posiadzą w więzieniu polskim,” *Głos Narodu* No. 62 [number after confiscation] (1928): 3.

Prostějov, but the Czech deserters, contrary to official newspaper reports, were not handed over to Czechoslovakia.⁵⁰ Finally, on 25 February 1928, the Lutsk District Court sentenced the Czech deserters to 4 and 2 years in prison.⁵¹ The confinement of Czech deserters in a Polish prison was the result of the firing of Polish police, as well as the detected distribution of communist magazines. The described case was not guided by the current political and military relations of Poland and Czechoslovakia, which in the second half of the 1920s were characterized by a significant rapprochement, as confirmed, among other things, by the conference of the two military headquarters, which took place from 26–29 April 1927, in Warsaw.⁵² However, the decisions of the Lutsk court were influenced by the December 1919 order in force, described earlier.

Not all of the deserters from Czechoslovakia were detained, arrested, and expelled from Poland. In some cases, they were granted asylum and treated with hospitality, and were able to find their place in Polish society. This was the case, for example, with Jan Dolak, who served in the 7th Dragoon Regiment in Kroměříž between November 1919 and June 1920. On 10 June 1920 he disappeared from his regiment. After a week he arrived in Wisła. Following a positive decision, he received permission to stay in Poland, where he settled in nicely as a forestry worker. During his residence in his new country, which lasted for over three years, he was punished only once, for trespassing on someone else's property. In spite of this incident the county police department in Cieszyn included a positive opinion of him on a so-called list of deserters. In August 1923 a Constable Pagan opined: „Apart from being a deserter, he is working and living honestly and is not involved in or suspected of any espionage” (transl. R.K.).⁵³

Deserters from foreign countries were not greeted with enthusiasm in Poland. Very few of them had information of any importance or value for military intelligence. In a country as impoverished as Poland, the presence of a large number of these particular migrants aggravated all sorts of problems and generated costs, and thus constituted a social and an economic challenge.

⁵⁰ „Skradziony samolot powraca do Czechołowacji,” *Polska Zbrojna* No. 29 (1928): 8; „Zbiegli lotnicy czescy będą wydani swoim władzom,” *Dziennik Narodowy* No. 17 (1928): 1.

⁵¹ „Sensacyjny przebieg procesu przeciw lotnikom czeskim w Łucku,” *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* No. 62 (1928): 5.

⁵² Jiří Friedl, *Na jednym froncie. Czechoślowsko-polskie stosunki wojskowe 1939–1945* (Gdańsk–Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2011), 34–36.

⁵³ CAW-WBH, SRI DOK V, ref. no. I.371.5/A.265, Wykaz dezerterów armii obcych Powiatowej Komendy Policji Województwa Śląskiego w Cieszynie z 13 VIII 1923, Cieszyn, 1, 193.

As a result, Poland unofficially entered into negotiations with neighbouring countries on restricting the flow of deserters. During secret meetings, the parties raised the issue of mutual exchanges of runaway soldiers. It was not possible, however, to conclude special agreements on the issue of deserters with Lithuania, Germany, Latvia, Romania, or Czechoslovakia. An agreement with Czechoslovakia on mutual assistance in administrative and military matters in 1928 was the most promising; however, the negative opinion of the Second Department of the Polish General Staff decided Poland's withdrawal from this agreement. Polish military intelligence concluded that cooperation with Czechoslovakia with regard to deserters or those avoiding conscription would bring more harm than benefits. As Major Ludwik Lepiarz put it: „At the same time, I would like to emphasise that, while this assistance would extend to cases of avoiding conscription and desertion from the ranks, it would be necessary to consider whether the disclosure of such facts to a foreign state within the framework of «assistance» would be advisable, especially if it occurred quite frequently, given, for example, the political considerations (desertions of Ukrainians and Jews)” (transl. R.K.).⁵⁴

Other countries, too, were unable to reach similar agreements. The dispute concerning the deportation of deserters was a very sensitive political issue between Ireland and the United Kingdom in the years 1922–1932. As Bernard Kelly stated, a veto against British pressure strengthened the independence of Ireland.⁵⁵

Czechoslovakian-Polish relations before the outbreak of World War II were difficult. The discontent of the Czechs peaked following the seizure of the Trans-Olza region by the Polish Army in October 1938. Despite this, following Germany's annexation of Czechia on 15 March 1939, former soldiers of the Czechoslovak Army fled, with increasingly frequency, to Poland. The first foreign unit of the Czechoslovak Army was formed in Cracow on 30 April 1939. From 22 May to 21 August 1939, six transports with a total of over 1200 Czechoslovakian soldiers left Poland for France.⁵⁶ It would be interesting to learn whether the volunteers joining the Czechoslovakian armed forces which were re-established in Poland also included former deserters from the Czechoslovak Army.

⁵⁴ CAW-WBH, Departament Sprawiedliwości, ref. no. I 300.58.277, Pismo dot. pomocy prawnej w sprawach wojskowych Polski i Czechosłowacji, Warszawa, 19 VII 1928, 36.

⁵⁵ Bernard Kelly, „British military deserters in the Irish State 1922–1932,” *Studia Hibernica* 38 (2012): 216.

⁵⁶ Jiří Plachý, „První jednotka čs. Vojáků nevníkala v roce 1939 lehce,” *Vojenského historického ústavu Praha*, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.vhu.cz/prvni-jednotka-cs-vojaku-nevnikala-v-roce-1939-lehce/>.

In Polish documents there is no data on the exact number of soldiers who fled from the Polish Army to Czechoslovakia or from the Czechoslovak Army to Poland. It is safe to assume that in the case of Polish citizens, the number of escaped conscripts and soldiers to Czechoslovakia oscillated between 1,000 and 2,000 fugitive conscripts and soldiers. Nearly half of these escapes happened in 1919–1920.⁵⁷ As for Czechoslovak citizens, it seems that the scale of deserters who found their way to Poland by the summer of 1938 never exceeded 300–400 cases. There are many indications that the number of escaped conscripts and soldiers from the Czechoslovak Army doubled as early as July and August 1938. One Polish newspaper reported in August 1938 that 200 soldiers from the Czechoslovak Army had crossed over to the Polish side from the Czech town of Cieszyn over the past month.⁵⁸

These gaps, however, do not prevent us from obtaining answers about the differences and similarities between Polish and Czechoslovakian deserters. The differences were much smaller and especially noticeable in the 1920s. Nationalist Ukrainians fled to Czechoslovakia while Czech communists seeking to reach the Soviet Union fled to Poland. There were significantly more similarities than differences. The deserters were often soldiers complaining about their military service and disappointed with their country; as well, they often had long criminal records. Deserters from both countries shared a Utopian belief that their fate would dramatically improve abroad. This was an illusion of freedom and happiness, which usually quickly faded in the realities of Poland and Czechoslovakia.

In Poland, until 1939, the Confidential Order of 12 December 1919 on dealing with deserters from Czechoslovakia was in force. In 1928, Poland and Czechoslovakia did not reach military agreements that would also officially regulate asylum and extradition of deserters between the two countries. However, even after the several cases described earlier, it is well apparent that many deserters never had a guarantee of safe refuge in both Poland and Czechoslovakia. Asylum was not given to those with criminal pasts. Immediate extradition to the homeland was usually prevented in such cases by the fact that the deserters had committed crimes on the territory of the country they were in, resulting in imprisonment in the country where they were found. Shelter was granted only to those cleared of espionage charges, with no criminal record, and leading an exemplary personal and professional life in their new place of residence. Nevertheless, even „flawless deserts” were still under surveillance, and military intelligence reserved the internment of such individuals at any time.

⁵⁷ Kasprzycki, *Bez sławy*, 258.

⁵⁸ „Dezerce czeskich żołnierzy,” *Polak Greko-Katolik* No. 14/15 (1938): 22.

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STRESZCZENIE

Remigiusz Kasprzycki, Iluzja wolności: Dezerterzy z Wojska Polskiego w Czechosłowacji i z Wojska Czechosłowacji w Polsce przed 1939 rokiem w świetle polskich dokumentów

W wielonarodowościowym międzywojennym Wojsku Polskim służyła niewielka liczba Czechów. Czescy poborowi pochodzili głównie z Wołynia. W meldunkach narodowościowych sporządzonych przez Wojsko Polskie przed II wojną światową trudno znaleźć zapisy krytyczne wobec czeskich rekrutów z Wołynia. W latach

1918–1939 tysiące poborowych i żołnierzy służących w różnych pułkach uciekło z Polski za granicę. W wielonarodowej armii polskiej praktycznie nie było dezercji nielicznych Czechów i jeszcze mniej licznych Słowaków. W latach dwudziestych do Czechosłowacji z armii polskiej uciekali głównie ukraińscy nacjonałiści, zazwyczaj szukając kontaktów z funkcjonującą w latach 1920–1925 w Pradze Ukraińską Organizacją Wojskową. Dezerterami do Czechosłowacji byli również Żydzi i Polacy. W międzywojniu uciekali do Polski także służący w Wojsku Czechosłowacji Czesi, Słowacy, Żydzi i Polacy. Na podstawie polskich dokumentów nie da się określić dokładnej skali tych dezercji, wiadomo jednak, że wielu czeskich zbiegów – komunistów – traktowało Polskę jedynie jako kraj tranzytowy na drodze do Związku Radzieckiego. Mimo wielu różnic dezercerów z Polski i Czechosłowacji dużo łączyło. Ucieczka do sąsiedniego kraju była często próbą uniknięcia odpowiedzialności karnej za popełnione w ojczyźnie przestępstwa. Wielu dezercerów wierzyło, że poza granicami Polski i Czechosłowacji rozpoczną nowy etap lepszego i bardziej udanego cywilnego życia. Zazwyczaj była to iluzja wolności.

Słowa kluczowe: dezercerzy, Czechosłowacja, Polska, wojsko, ucieczka

SUMMARY

Remigiusz Kasprzycki, The Illusion of Freedom: Deserters from the Polish Army in Czechoslovakia and from the Czechoslovak Army in Poland before 1939 in the light of Polish Documents

A small number of Czech conscripts served in the multinational interwar Polish Army, most of whom came from the region of Volhynia. In the national reports prepared by the Polish Army before World War II, it is difficult to find criticism of Czech recruits from Volhynia. Between 1918–1939, thousands of soldiers serving in various regiments escaped from Poland and fled abroad. Only a few Czechs deserted from the multinational Polish Army, whilst the number of Slovak deserters was even smaller. During the 1920s most deserters from the Polish Army to Czechoslovakia were Ukrainian nationalists, who were usually looking to make contact with the Ukrainian Military Organization that functioned in Prague between 1920–1925. However, Jews and Poles also deserted to Czechoslovakia. In the interwar period, Czechs, Slovaks, Jews and Poles serving in the Czechoslovak Army also fled to Poland. Based on Polish documents, it is impossible to determine the exact scale of these desertions, but it is known that many Czech deserters were communists who viewed Poland simply as a transit country on the way to the Soviet Union. Despite many differences, deserters from Poland and Czechoslovakia had a lot in common. Escaping to a neighboring country was often an attempt to avoid criminal liability for crimes committed in the home country, and many deserters believed that they could start again and build a better life outside Poland or Czechoslovakia. Usually, however, this was an illusion of freedom.

Keywords: Deserters, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Army, escape

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Remigiusz Kasprzycki, Die Illusion der Freiheit. Deserteure aus der Polnischen Armee in der Tschechoslowakei und der Tschechoslowakischen Armee in Polen vor 1939 im Lichte polnischer Dokumente

In der multinationalen polnischen Armee der Zwischenkriegszeit diente auch eine kleine Gruppe von Tschechen. Die tschechischen Wehrpflichtigen kamen hauptsächlich aus Wolhynien. Kritische Einträge über tschechische Rekruten aus Wolhynien sind in den Nationalitätenberichten, die von der polnischen Armee vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg erstellt wurden, nur schwer zu finden. Zwischen 1918 und 1939 flohen Tausende von Wehrpflichtigen und Soldaten, die in verschiedenen Regimentern dienten, aus Polen ins Ausland. In der multinationalen Polnischen Armee fanden praktisch keine Desertionen durch die wenigen Tschechen und durch Vertreter der noch kleineren Gruppe der Slowaken statt. In den 1920er Jahren waren es vor allem ukrainische Nationalisten, die aus der Polnischen Armee in die Tschechoslowakei desertierten und in der Regel Kontakte zur Ukrainischen Militärorganisation suchten, die von 1920 bis 1925 in Prag tätig war. Auch Juden und Polen desertierten in die Tschechoslowakei. In der Zwischenkriegszeit flohen auch Tschechen, Slowaken, Juden und Polen, die in der Tschechoslowakischen Armee dienten, nach Polen. Das genaue Ausmaß dieser Desertionen lässt sich anhand polnischer Dokumente nicht feststellen, doch es ist bekannt, dass viele tschechisch-kommunistische Deserteure Polen nur als Transitland auf ihrem Weg in die Sowjetunion betrachteten. Trotz ihrer vielen Unterschiede hatten die Deserteure aus Polen und der Tschechoslowakei viel gemeinsam. Die Flucht in ein Nachbarland war häufig ein Versuch, sich der strafrechtlichen Verantwortung für in der Heimat begangene Verbrechen zu entziehen. Viele Deserteure glaubten, dass sie jenseits der Grenzen Polens und der Tschechoslowakei einen neuen Abschnitt eines besseren und erfolgreicherer zivilen Lebens beginnen würden. Dies war meist eine Illusion der Freiheit.

Schlüsselwörter: Deserteure, Tschechoslowakei, Polen, Armee, Flucht