

Ilya Charniauski – handout: The Czechoslovak Legion of the Polish Army and its Fate

After the signing of the Munich Agreement and the subsequent seizure of the territories of the Czech Republic, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was created, which was under the control of Nazi Germany. Those who sought to regain the independence of Czechoslovakia had to emigrate secretly. An important role for the resistance abroad was played by the former Czechoslovak diplomatic missions, which did not accept the occupation and refused to obey the German authorities. In Poland, the embassy in Warsaw and the consulate in Krakow became such reference points. The Czechoslovak military who arrived there expected the outbreak of war, but the Polish authorities did not agree to the legalization of paramilitary groups from emigrants, so most of them left Poland in the spring and summer of 1939 to join the French Foreign Legion.

The future Legion numbered about 700 infantry under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Ludvik Svoboda. Approximately 200 pilots were included in the Czechoslovak reconnaissance squadron. By the time of the German attack on Poland, the Legion was not yet fully staffed, and only on September 3, 1939, Polish President Ignacy Moscicki officially approved it. It was the first Czechoslovak military unit established abroad. The Legion's soldiers were poorly equipped and lacked weapons. They did not have time to take part in active hostilities. Most of the Legion under the command of Ludwig Svoboda was interned on September 19, 1939 by the Red Army. Others managed to cross the border and were interned in Romania.

Although the Legion did not last long, it had a powerful moral impact on the emerging Czechoslovak resistance in exile and contributed to its international recognition. Already on October 2, 1939, the Czechoslovak Army was officially established in France.

After the leaders of Czechoslovakia in exile agreed with the Soviet government in January 1941, most of the Czechoslovak military personnel were released from internment in the USSR and joined Czechoslovak units in the Middle East and Africa. Lieutenant Colonel Ludvik Svoboda became a member of the Czechoslovak military mission to the USSR, and after the German attack in June 1941, he headed the 1st Czechoslovak separate battalion, later commanded the Czechoslovak Army Corps. General Lev Prkhala was accused by his colleagues of abandoning his troops. Among the famous members of the Legion were also future Heroes of the Soviet Union Richard Tesarzhik and Otakar Yarosh, as well as the ace pilot of the Battle of Britain Josef Frantisek.