

Piotr Gontarczyk  
Institute of National Remembrance

THE ORIGIN AND MILITARY ACTIVITY OF THE 'LIONS',  
A PARTISAN UNIT OF THE COMMUNIST PEOPLE'S GUARD,  
1942–43. A CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS  
IN THE PEOPLE'S GUARD AND PEOPLE'S ARMY DURING  
THE SECOND WORLD WAR, AND THE FATE OF JEWISH GHETTO  
FUGITIVES IN THE PROVINCIAL AREAS OF POLAND

The 'Lions' [*Lwy*], a partisan unit of the People's Guard [*Gwardia Ludowa*, GL], is generally considered one of the most renowned military groups supporting the Communist cause in Poland. The main reason it is so widely known abroad is its ethnic composition, which has been regularly highlighted in all kinds of academic publications<sup>1</sup> and calendars<sup>2</sup> published in Israel, as well as in the United States.<sup>3</sup> It also made its mark in Polish history itself because in the historiography of the People's Republic of Poland, the date of its disbandment, 22 July 1943, was officially recognised as the first day of the military conflict between

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<sup>1</sup> S. Krakowski, 'Żydzi w oddziałach partyzanckich Gwardii Ludowej i Armii Ludowej na Kielecczyźnie', *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* 1968, no. 65/66.

<sup>2</sup> S. Datner, 'Żydzi partyzanci w czasie II wojny światowej', *Kalendarz Żydowski 1985/1986*, 1985, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> During the mass deportations in October 1942, many Jews escaped and organised partisan units while hiding in the forest. The best known of these was the 'Lions', under the command of Izrael Ajzenman (Julian Kaniewski), which carried out several successful operations against the Nazi forces along the railway lines between Końskie and Opoczno. See N. Goldman, 'Opoczno', in *Opoczno Memorial Book*, n.p. 1989, p. 1, fn. 30; S. Krakowski, *The War of the Doomed: Jewish Armed Resistance in Poland 1942–1944*, New York 1984, pp. 103–07; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem 1971, pp. 13, 77.

Poland's underground movements, namely those who sought full independence for their country and those whose sympathies unequivocally lay with the Communists.<sup>4</sup> The complicated and multifaceted history of this group, as well as the story of its commander, reveal important information concerning the Communists' attitude towards the Jews during the Holocaust and the problems this caused for both sides. The history of this unit is also worth remembering when studying the activity of the Jewish partisan groups and their relations with local people.

The genesis of the 'Lions' is to be found in the tactics of the immediate active combat undertaken by the authorities of the Polish Workers' Party [*Polska Partia Robotnicza*, PPR] on instructions from Moscow.<sup>5</sup> This was expected to result in the outbreak of partisan fighting and possibly a large-scale armed uprising, the main aim of which would be to disrupt or at least disorganise the German supply lines to the eastern front.<sup>6</sup> In Poland, however, the Communists enjoyed very little support. Indeed, their underground activity did not begin until the third year of the occupation, with the majority of patriotic Poles already active in the ranks of the Polish pro-independence underground.<sup>7</sup> Hence, there was an acute shortage of volunteers to fight in the Communist partisan units, as well as a great dearth of weapons and trained personnel in their ranks. The earliest attempts to instil Communist partisan ideology in Poland by sending groups of agitators from Warsaw also turned out to be a failure. Somewhat more successful were the locally organised units. In the Radom region, for instance, the structures of the Communist underground were founded by Ludwik

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<sup>4</sup> *Historia Polski 1864–1945: Materiały do nauczania w klasie XI*, Warszawa 1953, pp. 472–73; J.B. Garas, *Oddziały Gwardii Ludowej i Armii Ludowej 1942–1945*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 268–69.

<sup>5</sup> In late 1941, a group of Communists were parachuted into Poland from the Soviet Union. Under the banner of the Polish Workers' Party, they began to build the structures of the Communist underground in Poland. Its military arm was the People's Guard, renamed the People's Army on 1 January 1944 (*Armia Ludowa*, AL).

<sup>6</sup> For more information concerning the idea behind the activity of the PPR, see P. Gontarczyk, *Polska Partia Robotnicza. Droga do władzy 1941–1944*, Warszawa 2006, p. 73–78.

<sup>7</sup> The structures of the Polish Underground State (including the Home Army [*Armia Krajowa*, AK], which had not yet been organised into partisan units) were strong in the poviat of Opoczno, where the 'Lions' later operated. On the one hand, they did not want to provoke the usual brutal reprisals by the Germans against the local Poles; on the other, they were busy preparing for a nationwide uprising, which was postponed until a more favourable military and political opportunity arose before the end of the Second World War. In the same area, there was also a network of national underground organisations whose structure originated in the pre-war National Party [*Stronnictwo Narodowe*, SN]. Only one of them, the National Military Organisation [*Narodowa Organizacja Wojskowa*, NOW], merged with the Home Army, while the rest operated separately under the banner of the National Armed Forces [*Narodowe Siły Zbrojne*, NSZ].

Krasiński, *nom de guerre* 'Roman'. In August 1942, he came from Radom to Warsaw, where the first organisational meeting of the PPR was to be held. The organisation of the People's Guard was the responsibility of Antoni Grabowski, also known as 'Czarny Antek', a delegate from Warsaw and a veteran of the 13th International Brigade that had fought in the Spanish Civil War. However, he appeared there only occasionally. Among the most important tasks that the Communists were faced with was the organisation of the partisan units. One of the first groups of partisans was commanded by two local Communists, the brothers Czesław and Zygmunt Banasiak, both of whom found themselves hiding out in the woods for rather unusual reasons. According to a local Communist activist, Czesław Nowakowski,

While working as drivers at the arms factory in Radom, Czesław Banasiak and his brother Zygmunt would steal petrol for their own private use until they were caught red-handed by the Germans. Interrogated by the Gestapo, they said – even without being asked – that, if released, they would be able to offer the Germans some materials that would incriminate our organisation. [...] [Once released,] they both immediately informed the party committee in Radom about what had happened. They were then instantly ordered to leave the area.<sup>8</sup>

It was probably in September 1942 that the partisan unit formed under Czesław Banasiak's leadership was first put into action. According to Nowakowski, "it was a so-called combined unit, 70 per cent of which were Jewish ghetto fugitives. Its commander was comrade Zygmunt Banasiak and the deputy commander, comrade Chytry"<sup>9</sup> The latter was none other than Izrael Ajzenman (also known as Julian Kaniewski), the future commander of the 'Lions', at that time using the *noms de guerre* 'Julek' and 'Lew' (he would not start using 'Chytry' until 1944–45). He was usually portrayed in the historiography of the Polish People's Republic as a Communist activist from Radom who had been sentenced to four years in prison, allegedly for his subversive political activities.<sup>10</sup> In reality, though, Ajzenman had

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<sup>8</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych (Central Archives of Modern Records; hereinafter: AAN), Personal files no. 4228, Account of Czesław Nowakowski, n.d., p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> K. Arciuch, 'Kaniewski (Ajzenman) Julian', in *Słownik biograficzny działaczy polskiego ruchu robotniczego* vol. 3, Warszawa 1992, pp. 83–84.

been imprisoned in Radom for entirely different reasons. During the period 1936–37, he was sentenced up to four times for ordinary crimes such as theft and burglary. Moreover, on one occasion, he and two companions were charged with armed robbery: “On 15 May 1936, at night, in the village of Wolanów, in the poviát of Radom, they used firearms, shooting at a pursuer, Antoni Jakubowski, in order to evade the chase that followed the act of theft they had committed in the shop that belonged to Antoni Śláz”.<sup>11</sup> Generally speaking, Ajzenman’s reputation in prison was bad, and he was additionally penalised for the physical abuse of a fellow inmate, among other things. In reply to his application for conditional release the warden, superintendent Wojciech Łączyński, wrote: “Because of that,<sup>12</sup> and owing to the fact that the prisoner has a bad record with the police, as well as his general lack of financial means after he has served his sentence (not to mention that Ajzenman has two other sentences to serve), I do not accede to the request”.<sup>13</sup>

At this point one may begin to wonder how it was ever possible that a man with such a criminal record could not only join the resistance movement, but also become the deputy commander of a military unit of the People’s Guard. First of all, it cannot be ruled out that, before the war, Ajzenman was already in contact with the Communists and personally knew some of the Polish Workers’ Party’s future activists. It seems more likely, though, that the local Communists, many of whom also had criminal records of their own, simply knew him either from their earlier illicit activities or directly from prison. Nevertheless, they somehow came to the decision that such a man would prove to be useful. It is worth noting here that, at least in this case, the Communists were not necessarily interested in saving any of the more prominent representatives of the Jewish community, possibly on account of the fact that they might actually be of little use in guerrilla warfare. For them, enterprising, pushy young people, sometimes even common criminals, would certainly be more useful.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Archiwum Państwowe w Radomiu (State Archives in Radom; hereinafter: AP Radom), A-36, Personal files of prisoner Izrael Ajzenman, pp. 12–13.

<sup>12</sup> Here Łączyński evidently means disciplinary penalties.

<sup>13</sup> AP Radom, A-36, Personal files of prisoner Izrael Ajzenman, p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> Such people were not only allowed to join the military forces of the Polish underground, but were also conscripted. However, unlike in the GL and the AL, they did not have any influence on the character of these military formations.

However, the unit under Banasiak's command was not active for too long. "After a week, [the group] returned completely dispirited, following numerous acts of insubordination (overall disorder in the unit, armed robbery, favouritism, drunkenness etc.). The blame for this state of affairs lay with commander Banasiak. The investigation carried out at that time revealed irrefutable evidence that he was indeed the one to blame. As a result, Comrade Banasiak was convicted by the party court and sentenced to death".<sup>15</sup> After he had been shot by 'Czarny Antek', command of the group was assumed by Ajzenman, also known as 'Lew'. At first, a few Jews from Radom were subordinated to him. They were soon joined by others from Gielniów and Przysucha, in the powiat of Opoczno. Since neither he nor anyone else from the group had had any previous military experience, they were sent to a unit commanded by Józef Rogulski, *nom de guerre* 'Wilk', that operated in the vicinity of the village of Drzewica in the same powiat. At first, both groups of partisans worked together on a regular basis. Instances of support for 'Wilk' from the local people were also reported.<sup>16</sup> Those who were subordinate to 'Lew' stayed mostly in a forest dugout, not far from the village of Zielonka, whence they mainly conducted 'supply operations' in the neighbouring area.<sup>17</sup> Rogulski, on the other hand, operated more often in the villages of the powiat of Grójec. The relations between the two commanders grew worse and worse. According to Ajzenman, in his report to the subordinates in Radom,

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<sup>15</sup> AAN, personal files no. 4228, Account of Czesław Nowakowski, n.d., p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> O. Rundke, 'Przysięgę odbierał hubalczyk', in *Gniewnie szumił las: Wspomnienia leśników polskich 1939–1945*, ed. J. Gmitruk, W. Lipko, P. Matusak, Warszawa 1982, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Naturally, all the partisan units had to acquire food and other necessities for their sustenance. However, there was a fundamental difference in the way the units of the Polish pro-independence underground and the Communists did this. The former saw themselves as representatives and genuine defenders of the Polish people, and so confiscating goods from them as well as any forms of robbery were strictly forbidden, even under threat of death. The troops' main source of sustenance was the goods confiscated from large farms under German administration, German cooperatives, outbuildings and so on. Also practised were confiscations for which receipts were issued, whereby the confiscated goods were deducted by the peasants from the quantity of compulsory supplies they were obliged to hand over to the Germans (the Germans honoured such receipts, given that the peasants could not really refuse the demands of the partisans). The Communist units acted in a completely different way. They not only confiscated goods from the Germans, but also attacked Polish manors and farm buildings (which, in their opinion, belonged to political and class 'enemies'). They were thus engaged in large-scale common banditry to the detriment of the Polish people. Such acts (euphemistically referred to as 'supply operations' in the documents of the Communist underground) became an essential component of the activities of individual units of the People's Guard.

At every opportunity, 'Wilk' made it clear to everyone that he, a Pole, did not want to cooperate with our unit, a unit in which there were Jewish bandits stealing from the rich (mainly from mills and manors). He is of the opinion that, if we are short of supplies, we always need to ask first, and take them only when the people are willing to give. As he said, he wanted to maintain a good reputation with them. In the evening, [...] we were passing by the mill in Małe Radzice. 'Wilk' claimed that he would go into the mill to dine there, but without the members of our unit, because he does not want to be seen in our company, in the company of those who are generally considered to be bandits.<sup>18</sup>

These were not idle words. The activity of the 'Lions', which was invariably characterised by great brutality, was limited for the most part to night-time attacks on mills, shops, and local landowners. In 1985, still in the days of the Polish People's Republic, and despite the censorship then in force, a local academic journal published a vivid account of their activity, written by Emilia Dąbrowska, the proprietor of the manor in Rusinów:

Their arrival in the village was announced by a volley of gunshots, followed by loud knocking at the manor's doors and windows. Some of the partisans went straight to the communal office, where they destroyed the requisition orders. From us they demanded food and clothes. They searched the entire house, not excluding the attic. Wherever they went, their guns always remained ready to be fired.<sup>19</sup>

The terrible reputation of the 'Lions' was enhanced by the murders they committed as acts of revenge, both during the robberies and for other, often utterly incomprehensible reasons. One of their first victims was Tadeusz Trznadlewski, who was shot dead on 5 November 1942 at the mill by the river Brzuśnia near Rozwad, where he had been playing poker with the owners. Prior to that, he had been accused of making fun of Jews whom the Germans had forced to perform public labour in 1940. According to those who knew Trznadlewski, such behaviour

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<sup>18</sup> AAN, GL, 191/XXIII-2, Report no. 10, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> E. Dąbrowska, 'Z dziejów Rusinowa', *Biuletyn Kwartalny Radomskiego Towarzystwa Naukowego* 1985, vol. 22, no. 1-2, p. 92.

was likely caused by his traumatic experiences in September 1939, when, having been taken prisoner by the Soviets and on the route into Soviet territory, he was pelted with rubbish, beaten and verbally abused by the Jewish inhabitants of an eastern Polish town.<sup>20</sup>

In April 1943, the unit committed another act of murder. According to an official report, “the unit [...] set off for the area beyond the Pilica river. On their way there, on 12 April, they killed Robert Gola, a teacher in the village of Jastrząb (in the region of Tomaszów)”<sup>21</sup> whom they considered to be a spy. Gola enjoyed a good reputation in the local area, and the accusations that he might have been involved in some kind of espionage were, in all likelihood, no more than just a convenient label regularly used in the documents of the Communist underground with regard to those people who were killed either for political reasons or as a result of the criminal activity of the unit.

It is even more difficult to understand the reason for the murder of the wife of Malak, a forester, an act which the ‘Lions’ committed in June 1943. The woman was on her way home when she was shot a number of times, with the last shot aimed at her head. Krystyna Stępień, who lived in the forester’s lodge at that time, later wrote in a letter to her friend: “Malak was talking to my father in the yard when three shots were fired on the bank of the Chojna River. In reply, the frightened voice of a woman could be heard: ‘What are you doing, sirs...? What are you doing...?’. Everyone rushed to the yard. Two more shots, and a moaning. [...] The whole scene is reported to have been one of horror. The woman’s head was literally blown to pieces, with that last shot they fired meant to finish her off...”<sup>22</sup>

News of the ‘Lions’ operations did reach the authorities of the Polish Underground State, albeit distorted and exaggerated. Such was the case with the ‘visit’ by the members of the People’s Guard to the Zameczek manor (in the powiat of Radom) on 27 January 1943.

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<sup>20</sup> J. Kucharski, *Zanim odejdziemy: Zapiski z konspiracji 1939–1947: NOW, NSZ, AK okręgów Radom i Łódź*, Gdańsk 1996, p. 54; Oral account of Maria Filipczyńska, an eyewitness of the murder, personally told to the author on 25 May 1996.

<sup>21</sup> AAN, GL, 191/XXIII-2, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> From the letter written by Krystyna Stępień to her friend Celina Sługocka on 18 June 1943 (a copy of the letter from the collection of Leszek Żebrowski). Celina Sługocka was a daughter of Rundtke, a forester who had previously helped the ‘Lions’.

All the while, we were not even aware of the fact that our uncle's life, in fact perhaps even all of us on the farm, was at stake. We owe the fact that, in the end, no one was harmed of the people who worked there. None of those who came to be interrogated said anything against our uncle and his family, and so the Communists could not make any accusations against them. [...] What is intriguing in this whole story is the discipline and subordination. No one was allowed to take anything without the commander's approval. It was clear that everyone was afraid of him, even those ghetto fugitives and, for the most part, common criminals. And this is the infamous band under the command of 'Lew', said to consist of 150 people and regularly, every ten days, supplied by air from Russia with arms and ammunition. [...] One can say without any reservation that, today, power is indeed [still] in the hands of such bands. How this is going to end, we have no idea...<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that such reports could have been easily imprinted on the minds of the local people and left their mark on their attitude towards Jewish partisans (either active within the structures of the People's Guard or living in loose groups of survivors), as well as those Jews who were in hiding in the countryside and in the forests. In some areas, there was great fear among the civilians of potential acts of violence committed by those hiding in the forests. In April 1943, Zygmunt Szacherski, the chairman of the Government Delegation in the District of Kielce, wrote to his superiors in Warsaw:<sup>24</sup>

There is a high per centage of Jews among the bands of Communist robbers hiding in the forests. They are a particularly dangerous element for us on account of their vindictiveness. There are also small, well-armed bands, each consisting of only a few people, all of them Jewish. They are less inclined to seek contact with the Germans, but are troublesome for the Polish population.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> AAN, The Government Delegation, anonymous account, pp. 55–56.

<sup>24</sup> The Government Delegation for Poland: the civilian structures of the Polish Underground State.

<sup>25</sup> AAN, DR, 202/XXI-1, The 'Garbarnia' Report [Government Delegation in the District of Kielce], 15 April 1943, p. 28.



At the same time ‘Lew’/’Julek’ was ruthless and violent not only in his contacts with the local people, but also his subordinates. This was likely the reason why a mutiny broke out in the unit, with the outcome that its commander was expelled and the command was taken over by an otherwise unknown man called ‘Siemion’ (also ethnically Jewish). However, ‘Julek’ did intervene with the PPR committee in Radom, where he received some support. Their eagerness to help probably stemmed from the fact that, previously, some of the loot acquired from the local people (such as gold earrings, watches, fur coats, a camera) were handed over by Ajzenman to his superiors in Radom.<sup>26</sup> In any case, the regional authorities of the People’s Guard and the Polish Workers Party nominated three comrades whose task was to offer ‘Julek’ their support in his reassumption of command over the unit hitherto led by ‘Siemion’ and the group under the command of Józef Rogulski, *nom de guerre* ‘Wilk’:

The district staff demands that, in accordance with the orders of the central staff, commander Wilk and his unit should submit unconditionally to the party and the central staff. Strict control should also be imposed on commander Wilk. Wilk will remain the commander of two units. Political commissar Julek will remain in charge of the two units, and is also politically responsible for them.<sup>27</sup>

There was no way, however, that the orders of the PPR authorities in Radom could be carried out, as neither ‘Wilk’ nor ‘Siemion’ were ever going to submit to Ajzenman, a man they both considered to be a common criminal. When ‘Siemion’ refused to obey the order, arguing that he did not know the people who had come to him with ‘Julek’, these men, feigning acceptance of the situation, decided to spend the night with the unit. After that, however, they set to work. During the shootout that followed, one member of the People’s Guard was killed, and part of the group was dispersed. Around ten people remained, with ‘Julek’ retaking command of them. ‘Siemion’ was sent to an outpost of the People’s Guard

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<sup>26</sup> AAN, GL, 192-XXII-2, Receipts, p. 108; Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe Wojskowego Biura Historycznego (Central Military Archives of the Military Historical Bureau; hereinafter: CAW WBH) III/19/201, Account of J. Kaniewski in Polish, n.d., p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> AAN, GL, 191/XXIII-3, Report no. 6, n.d., p. 6.

in the area of Chotcza (the poviats of Lipsko, another area of the People's Guard's Radom district), where he was soon murdered.<sup>28</sup>

The next step taken by the authorities of the GL-PPR in Radom was an attempt to subdue the partisan unit commanded by Józef Rogulski, *nom de guerre* 'Wilk'. However, a serious disagreement occurred during the negotiations that Ajzenman (and an envoy sent by the district staff of the People's Guard) were holding with 'Wilk' and 'Maks' (a former member of the 'Lions' who had fled from Rogulski). Following the talks, Rogulski reported that he "heard Maks quarrel with him and commissar Julek, that they tolerate this, and that the latter's activity is thoroughly thuggish. So he will not be associated with any such endeavours".<sup>29</sup> 'Wilk' refused to submit to the authorities of the People's Guard, and so they issued further instructions: "The approach to 'Wilk' and 'Maks'. If it is possible to have them disarmed, investigate the case and liquidate them. If it turns out that it is not possible to disarm them, they must be liquidated immediately. Act so as not to be surprised by the unit commanded by 'Wilk'. Keep this in absolute secrecy".<sup>30</sup> However, Rogulski remained vigilant, as he probably realised the true intentions of the PPR authorities in Radom. As they talked to Ajzenman and his comrades, Rogulski's men always held armed weapons in their hands. Soon, 'Wilk' left the area around Opoczno and moved north to the poviats of Grójec. He also severed all contact with the Communists. His unit ceased to exist in the summer of 1943.

The unit of the People's Guard which was led by Ajzenman, *nom de guerre* 'Julek', remained active in the poviats of Opoczno until the summer of 1943, having a few months earlier changed its name in honour of Ludwik Waryński, a nineteenth-century Polish socialist. Leaving aside their murders of pro-independence activists, as well as some ordinary citizens (not to mention other criminal acts), the unit carried out only one operation against the Germans during about nine months of its activity. On 1 February 1943, members of the People's Guard dismantled the tracks in the vicinity of the railway station in Białaczów.

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<sup>28</sup> Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw; hereinafter: AŻIH), 301/5816, Account of Władysław Woźniczko, n.d., p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> AAN, GL, 191/XXIII-2, Report of the partisan unit under the command of 'Wilk', n.d., p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Report no. 10, n.d., p. 24.

As a result, for a few hours, a steam engine and one car were derailed. No other major damage was recorded.<sup>31</sup> There were much more serious repercussions from another operation which the unit carried out on 22 January 1943, albeit one not aimed at German targets. On that day, at around 10 p.m., a group of fourteen people from the 'Lions' unit under the command of 'Julek' went to the town of Drzewica. Six members of the People's Guard – all of them known only by their partisan *noms de guerre*, namely 'Antek', 'Zenek', 'Józiek', 'Pietrek', 'Jasny', and 'Bac'<sup>32</sup> – were deployed to cover the others, while their commander 'Julek' entered the village in the company of seven subordinates ('Władek', 'Janek', 'Maks', 'Słowik', 'Michał', 'Wicek' – their names likewise unknown – and 'Zosia').<sup>33</sup> Their objective was to "clear the area of any fascist bands".<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, none of the sources allow us to make any credible claims as to who initiated the operation and who ordered its execution. The orders may have come from the party officials, or it may have been the partisans' own initiative. In any case, they were probably quite well aware of the political preferences of the people who lived in Drzewica.

This hit squad first headed to the home of Kazimierz Kobylański, the co-owner of the local Gerlach cutlery factory. As he was absent (at that time he was in Warsaw), they took some clothes, blankets and other trinkets. Their next target was the house of August Kobylański, a cousin of Kazimierz and the manager of Gerlach in Drzewica. Some of the men took him to the factory, while the other GL partisans systematically plundered his apartment in the presence of his wife, Maria. In the factory office, the attackers demanded that Kobylański open the cash desk, from which they took a few thousand zloty. From there, they went to the warehouse where the finished products were stored. After robbing this as well, the members of the People's Guard ordered Kobylański to give them his

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<sup>31</sup> AAN, collection Niemieckie władze okupacyjne (hereinafter: German occupation authorities), 214/III-3, 'Aktion Attila': Bandenbekämpfung im Kreise Tomaszów, Aktion am 9.02.43 im Gebiet Wywóz, Zielonka, Gozdziów, Bande 'Lew' bzw. 'Wilk', p. 5. This document is unique. During the manhunt for the 'Lions' conducted by the German gendarmerie on 9 February 1943, their diary fell into German hands. The notes were then translated into German and preserved in a copy.

<sup>32</sup> This was probably Chyl Brawerman, who had previously been the commander of another Jewish group of the People's Guard and, after the breakup of the first unit, was sent to join the 'Lions'.

<sup>33</sup> Probably Zofia Jamajka, a GL-PPR activist who was sent to join the unit from Warsaw.

<sup>34</sup> AAN, collection German occupation authorities, 214/III-3, 'Aktion Attila', p. 12.

personal belongings (his wedding ring and a gold watch), after which they killed him by shooting him in the back of the head at point blank range. Kobylański's wife found a note (with the unit's official stamp) lying on his body, informing that her husband had been punished in this manner "for his collaboration with the Germans".<sup>35</sup>

The next act of the tragedy took place in the house located at what is now 16 Armii Krajowej Street. There the members of the People's Guard found two brothers, Stanisław and Józef Suskiewicz, as well as Zdzisław Pierściński. When the neighbours arrived there, after the Communists had left Drzewica, they found three mutilated corpses of people who must have been tortured shortly before being shot in the head at close range. The next victim was the third Suskiewicz brother, Edward, who was murdered in his own house in the presence of his wife and child. Following that, the hit squad went to the local pharmacy, where the household members were awakened by the sound of broken glass. The GL partisans broke all the windows and smashed the shutters. Then a command was given: "Open up, or we'll throw a grenade in!". The pharmacist Stanisław Makomaski left the house and opened the pharmacy, following which he was immediately killed with a shot to the head. Their next victim was Józef Staszewski, whose house was not far from the market square.<sup>36</sup> Another group of attackers went to the local presbytery. Sources agree that the group was led by "a young and very aggressive Jewish woman whom everyone called 'Zosia'".<sup>37</sup> There, they came across Father Jan Orlik. However, one member of the People's Guard (apparently a local) intervened, saying: "Leave him alone. It's not this one". Then, they went to a nearby house inhabited by Father Józef Pawlik, the one they had originally been looking for. However he was not killed, as the group hastily retreated from

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<sup>35</sup> AAN, collection Narodowe Siły Zbrojne (National Armed Forces, hereinafter: NSZ), 207/20, Report of the First Department of the General Command of the NSZ, n.d., p. 22; Author's note from the oral report of Helena Faryaszewska, daughter of August Kobylański, *Więści znad Drzewiczki* 1995, no. 10–14, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Account of Krystyna Staszewska, daughter of the murder victim Józef Staszewski, 12 February 1996; account of Władysław Makomaski, son of the murder victim Stanisław Makomaski, 24 February 1996; account of Zygmunt Rakowiecki (a relative of the Kobylański family), n.d., author's private collection.

<sup>37</sup> AAN, Społeczny Komitet Antykomunistyczny (Social Anti-Communist Committee; hereinafter: SKA) 'Antyk' 228/16-2, p. 5. It seems that 'Zosia' ought to be identified with Zofia Jamajka. See E. Mark, 'Zofia Jamajka', *Pokolenia* 1964, no. 1, p. 96.

the town upon seeing an oncoming car, a vehicle which could only have belonged to the Germans.<sup>38</sup> Apart from Kazimierz Kobylański, those on the People's Guard hit-list of the who survived included Father Pawlik, Jan Klata, and the fourth Suskiewicz brother, Marian (whose three brothers died that night in Drzewica).

In Ajzenman (Kaniewski)'s post-war account, he wrote:

In February,<sup>39</sup> three of my people – 'Kuropatwa', 'Zajac' and 'Lis' – were murdered by an NSZ band.<sup>40</sup> Three days later, my unit took over the town of Drzewica, disarmed the police station,<sup>41</sup> entered the Gerlach factory, and shot seven main leaders of the National Armed Forces: Kobylański, the main inspector of the NSZ with the rank of colonel, the proprietor of the Gerlach factory, a pharmacist, a teacher, and other main leaders. A note charging collaboration with the occupier was also left there. The sentence was executed by the People's Guard unit under the command of 'Julek'.<sup>42</sup>

There is no doubt, however, that the accusations brought against those who were murdered in Drzewica on 22 January 1943, blaming them for the earlier deaths of members of the People's Guard, are groundless and were invented after the war by PPR propagandists. In reality, since the first and third of the above-named members<sup>43</sup> had already perished on 7 January 1943, there is no reason to believe that their deaths had anything to do with the operation in Drzewica. Moreover,

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<sup>38</sup> The first historian to tackle the issue of the murder in Drzewica, in the mid-1990s, was Leszek Żebrowski (L. Żebrowski, 'Mord w Drzewicy: Nieznane karty komunistycznej partyzantki', *Słowo – Dziennik Katolicki* 1–3 July 1994; id., 'PPR-owski bohater?', *Słowo – Dziennik Katolicki* 10 May 1995). For more information and a list of documents regarding the operation of the People's Guard in Drzewica, see M.J. Chodakiewicz, P. Gontarczyk, L. Żebrowski, *Tajne oblicze GL-AL i PPR: Dokumenty*, vols 2–3, Warszawa 1999, vol. 2, pp. 124–32; see also, P. Gontarczyk, 'Mord w Drzewicy (22 stycznia 1943). Przyczynek do badań nad rzeczywistym obrazem konfliktów pomiędzy polskim podziemiem niepodległościowym a komunistami', *Biuletyn Kwartalny Radomskiego Towarzystwa Naukowego* 1999, no. 3–4, pp. 89–106; Gontarczyk, *Polska*, pp. 185–86.

<sup>39</sup> The operation took place on 22 January 1943.

<sup>40</sup> That is to say, the NSZ.

<sup>41</sup> That night, the police station was vacant because the policemen had left to take part in a training course. The People's Guard member did not attack the building itself.

<sup>42</sup> CAW WBH, III/19/201, Account of J. Kaniewski in Polish, n.d., p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Piotr Białek 'Kuropatwa' and Antoni Węgorzewski 'Lis' had a bad reputation among the local people, many of whom assumed their deaths were the result of some kind of gang warfare.

the third, Maciej Wrzosek, *nom de guerre* 'Zajac', is known to have died at the hands of the Germans some months later, in June 1943.<sup>44</sup>

But who were the ones that were murdered and those who managed to survive? August Kobylański was a co-owner of the Gerlach factory, a person widely known and respected. He was also an underground conspirator of the National Military Organisation [*Narodowa Organizacja Wojskowa*, NOW] and the Home Army, and a member of the 'Uprawa', an underground organisation whose objective was to offer financial support to various resistance groups. Far better known was his first cousin, Kazimierz (aka 'Inżynier', 'Jerzy', 'Markowski'), a survivor of the Drzewica massacre. He was a veteran of the battle of Lwów in 1918–19, and had been a plebiscite activist in Upper Silesia. Kazimierz Kobylański, who was still active in the National Party at the time of the GL operation in Drzewica, was the head of the fourth branch (responsible for supplies) of the Main Headquarters of the National Military Organisation. Later on, he was also a member of the Council of National Unity [*Rada Jedności Narodowej*] on behalf of the National Party. On 19 March 1945, he was arrested by the NKVD and 'questioned' at the Trial of the Sixteen (kidnapped leaders of the Polish Underground State) in Moscow.<sup>45</sup>

Before the war, the Suskiewicz brothers were known in the town as National Party (SN) activists. They can be seen in a number of photographs documenting the pre-war ceremonies organised by the SN. During the war, one of them was a member of the Home Army and two belonged to the National Armed Forces. Such was also the case with Józef Staszewski and Jan Klata, *nom de guerre* 'Zagłoba', who were both members of the NSZ.

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<sup>44</sup> Until recently, one of the tenements in Drzewica bore a memorial plaque which read: "This place is sanctified with the blood of comrade Maciej Wrzosek, a former activist of the KPP and PPR in Drzewica, murdered by the Hitlerites on 9 June 1943. In token of our remembrance, on the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the PPR. People of the Land of Opoczno, May 1972".

<sup>45</sup> Shortly after his release in 1945, Kazimierz Kobylański was arrested by the Department of Security [*Urząd Bezpieczeństwa*, UB] under the charge of being a member of the legalisation committee of the National Party. He was released after two months in prison. Kobylański was once again arrested in 1947, and sentenced by the Military District Court to eight years in prison. He was finally released in 1954. Far more active in the political area (and thus more easily recognised) was his brother Tadeusz Kobylański, an activist of the National Party and member of the Great Council of the Camp of Great Poland [*Obóz Wielkiej Polski*], publisher of the newspapers of the National Camp, and, from 1938, a senator of the Republic of Poland. During the war, he was active in the Information and Propaganda Office of the Home Army Headquarters. Arrested in February 1943, he spent the rest of the war in German concentration camps.

Although the pharmacist Makomaski was not an active member of the underground during the war, prior to 1939 he had been a leader of the local branch of the lay Catholic organisation *Akcja Katolicka*. Not much is known about the political activity of Zdzisław Pierściński, apart from the fact that before the war, as in the case of Father Józef Pawlik, his sympathies had been with the SN. Apart from Makomaski, all of those murdered were professionally connected with the Gerlach factory. The last of the Suskiewicz brothers, Marian ('Sosna'), was a local NSZ commissioner in Opoczno powiat.

There could be no doubt that those who were killed by the 'Lions', as well as those who managed to survive, were members of the local elite, national activists, and underground conspirators. Thus, it was precisely on account of their political views that they were targeted by the Communists.<sup>46</sup> In fact, it cannot be ruled out that, at least in some instances, this action was some form of revenge for their active membership of the allegedly anti-Semitic National Party. Some members of the People's Guard came from the Jewish community of the town or its vicinity, and so they could have known their victims personally. Indeed, while Józef Staszewski was killed in the presence of his wife and daughter, the murderers had their faces covered, which suggests they might have been local people wishing to conceal their identities from the bystanders. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that the victims were selected in accordance on the basis of the political conflicts of pre-war Poland. Likewise, it is significant that those who were killed were robbed of their personal belongings (watches, wedding rings) and had their houses plundered.

The funeral of the people who died as a result of the People's Guard operation in Drzewica took place on 25 January 1943. The Mass was celebrated by Father Józef Pawlik. The funeral drew a great many people, and the whole event had the character of a sad but nonetheless patriotic and civic demonstration of the local community's feelings. On the same day, the leader of the 'Lions' handed some of the loot over to the Party officials in Radom. The secretary of the PPR, Ludwik Krasieński, aka 'Roman', signed a receipt for 3500 zloty, two fur coats (one man's

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<sup>46</sup> The Germans saw the operation of the People's Guard in Drzewica as an attempt to eliminate the local activists of the National Party (AAN, German occupation authorities, 214/III-3, 'Aktion Attila', p. 3).

and one lady's) and two gold watches. In all likelihood, most of these valuables had previously been owned by the Kobylański family.<sup>47</sup>

The news of the operation carried out by the GL partisans in Drzewica found resonance in the Polish underground; reports on the events of 22 January 1943 can be found in the archives of several organisations. According to a report by the Social Anti-Communist Committee 'Antyk':

Having taken over the public security posts,<sup>48</sup> part of the gang entered the premises of the cutlery factory run by Kobylański. Its owner, August Kobylański, was then taken to the factory and ordered to open the cash desk in order to obtain the money. After that, he was shot dead. Besides him four other clerks were also killed: three workers employed at the factory and a pharmacist. In total, as many as eleven people from the immediate vicinity were murdered.<sup>49</sup> Kobylański's residence was plundered for several hours. The gang was made up of Jews, heavily armed with grenades and machine guns, led by a Jewish woman. According to the local police, the gang is based in the vicinity of [the village of] Jedlnia and carries out its attacks from there. [...] The gang then retreated without incurring any losses.<sup>50</sup>

The murder in Drzewica was also mentioned, in an anti-Semitic context, in one of the articles of the nationalist-leaning press.<sup>51</sup>

Fear reigned in Drzewica and the surrounding area, with further attacks by the 'Lions' on mills and manors, armed robberies in the neighbouring villages, and inexplicable murders. These incidents had nothing to do with the struggle against the Germans. Indeed, they were particularly hard to deal with for the local Polish population, many of whom began to see the situation as a confirmation

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<sup>47</sup> AAN, GL, 191/XXIII-6, Receipt, n.d., p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> That night, the local police station was closed. In fact, there were no permanently stationed German policemen in the town. Some of them only occasionally came there from Radom.

<sup>49</sup> Seven people are reported to have been killed in Drzewica on 22 January 1943. Perhaps the report also takes other local acts of killing by the 'Lions' into account.

<sup>50</sup> AAN, SKA 'Antyk', 228/16-2, p. 5. See also AAN, microfilm 423, Report by 'Korweta' about the situation in 'K' [Communist organisations] for the period from 20 February until 20 March 1943, p. 330; AAN, AK, 203/XII-9, vol. 1, p. 55; AAN, NSZ, 207/20, p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> 'Organizacja narodu', *Szczerbiec*, 31 January 1944.



of the pre-war slogans of the National Party that often referred to left-leaning Jews as evidence of so-called Judeo-Bolshevism (*Żydokomuna*). As a result, the Jews who were hiding from the Germans in the forests began to be seen as a potential threat.

Two or three weeks after the murder in Drzewica, the German security troops went into action. It is not known whether the fact that the unit's whereabouts were finally tracked down had anything to do with the local people who had been severely affected by the activity of the 'Jewish gang'. In any case, it was common knowledge that the partisans were based in the forest near Gielniów, some 5 km south of the village.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, even a cursory look at the map of the area in which the 'Lions' regularly committed their acts of armed robbery (always within a radius of 5–10 km from the place they were based) evidently indicated the spot where the partisans should be found. On 9 February 1943, the German Gendarmerie started the manhunt as a result of which two hideouts of the GL members were found. According to what Ajzenman claimed about the incident, the Germans not only brought Waffen SS elite troops into action there, but also suffered large casualties:

We were [...] attacked and bottled up in an area of 50 km<sup>2</sup> by a group of German SS men destined for the frontline. [...] I had to position the machine gun at the rear, so as to protect us from the German assault. [...] The Germans continued with their offensive. Standing behind the machine gun, I let the SS men come within the distance of 30 metres and then started firing at them, while at the same time shelling their positions.<sup>53</sup>

According to a remaining German report, more than 200 gendarmes and policemen took part in the operation. None of them carried heavy weapons. There was literally no battle to speak of; many of the People's Guard members were shot as they tried to flee from their hideouts. In total, sixteen of them died and no more than ten managed to flee; not a single German soldier

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<sup>52</sup> Such had been the prevailing image of the 'Lions' since the beginning of 1943.

<sup>53</sup> J. Chytry [J. Kaniewski], 'Odwetowe akcje oddziału "Lwy" GL', *Polska Niepodległa* 1946, no. 6.

was injured.<sup>54</sup> Although at first the surviving partisans remained under the command of Ajzenman, in the spring of 1943 a new leader arrived, Stanisław Wiktorowicz, *nom de guerre* 'Stach'. The activity of this group (of which Ajzenman was the political commissar) was hardly different from that of the 'Lions'. It remained a fixed part of the banditry that was then ravaging the provincial areas of Poland. According to the Government Delegation for Poland regarding the area of Kielce,

There are more and more bands of robbers, consisting of Communists, Jews and others, afflicting the people in the countryside and the villages. When people are unwilling to render any services to the bands, they use terror and physical violence. Some people are even killed. [...] The increase in the number of crimes is reflected in the following figures. In the poviats of Iłża, for instance, in February, 48 instances of armed robbery were recorded. Three months later, in June, there were as many as 144, that is to say three times more. It should also be noted that the scale of individual crimes is far larger than it used to be.<sup>55</sup>

The activity of 'Lew's gang', as Ajzenman's unit was then called in the area (the local people did not know that it had been renamed in honour of Ludwik Waryński and that Wiktorowicz had taken over command), and the murder in Drzewica in particular, were the main subjects during the briefing by the Radom commanders of the National Armed Forces led by Captain Mieczysław Borkowski, *nom de guerre* 'Wróbel'. Present there were two commanders of the NSZ: Władysław Pacholczyk, *nom de guerre* 'Adam', and Witold Borowski, *noms de guerre* 'Witek', and 'Andrzej Brzeziński'. The poviats of Opoczno, where Drzewica lies, was represented by Second Lieutenant Marian Suskiewicz, *noms de guerre* 'Sosna', and 'Mścisław', whom the members of the People's Guard had been looking for on that memorable night of 22 January 1943, and whose three brothers had been killed at that time. In accordance with the order issued on 1 December 1942 by the commander of the National Armed Forces, Colonel Ignacy Oziewicz, *nom de guerre* 'Czesław',

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<sup>54</sup> AAN, German occupation authorities, 214/III-3, 'Aktion Attila', *passim*.

<sup>55</sup> AAN, DR 202/XXI-1, The 'Garbarnia' Report [Government Delegation in the Kielce Area], April–June 1943, p. 30.

it was decided that a permanent partisan unit should be set up, one whose purpose would be to protect its own ranks, as well as the local population.<sup>56</sup>

In July 1943, in the powiat of Opoczno, Marian Suskiewicz, *nom de guerre* 'Sosna', organised such a unit under the command of Sergeant-Major Józef Woźniak, *nom de guerre* 'Burza'. The otherwise unidentified Lieutenant/Captain 'Tom', who frequently took command of it, was appointed Commander of Special Operations (of the partisans) for the powiat.<sup>57</sup> Initially, the unit consisted of eleven soldiers, namely: Józef Woźniak, *nom de guerre* 'Burza'; Second Lieutenant Mieczysław Drabik, *nom de guerre* 'Słoń'; Officer Cadet Antoni Kozłowski, *nom de guerre* 'Pogan'; Officer Cadet Zdzisław Kacer, *nom de guerre* 'Gapek'; Officer Cadet Emilia Natkańska, *nom de guerre* 'Emilka'; Platoon Leader Waclaw Napora, *nom de guerre* 'Dan'; Platoon Leader Szczepan Kozieli, *nom de guerre* 'Tońko'; Corporal Franciszek Worach, *nom de guerre* 'Bil'; Posieczyński, *nom de guerre* 'Kanarek' (first name unknown); Stanisław Karbownik, *nom de guerre* 'Ferdek'; and Leszek Szmata, *nom de guerre* 'Tadek'.<sup>58</sup> Not long after that, the unit found itself in the vicinity of Drzewica, charged with the task of finding and liquidating 'Lew's gang'. One of the last nights the National Armed Forces soldiers spent in the house once belonging to the Suskiewicz family, they heard the details of the atrocities committed there a few months earlier. Many years later, Waclaw Napora, *nom de guerre* 'Dan', wrote: "Our host was a man who had been resettled there from beyond the River Bug, but he was well informed of what happened there during the war. Even though I had considered myself an

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<sup>56</sup> "Carry out counter-attacks in the areas where armed bands are known to operate (prisoners-of-war escaped from the Bolsheviks, Bolshevik landing parties, Jews, common criminals, and some local delinquents). Seize their weapons, ammunition, radios, etc. Members of these bands ought to be shot, as they have either been sent there by the enemy or are acting as local criminals, endangering the life and property of the Poles, the people that the occupiers do not care about" (order dated 1 December 1942, copy in the collection of L. Żebrowski). It must be noted that the word 'Jews' was not meant to mean just any Jews, but those who were armed and organised in criminal groups.

<sup>57</sup> The identity of the person known as 'Tom', sometimes identified with Hubert Jura, has provoked a number of speculations and controversies. According to some, he was in regular contact with Paul Fuchs, the head of the Gestapo in Radom. He is also believed to have participated in some internal leadership struggles within the National Armed Forces that took place towards the end of 1944. He then left Poland together with the Holy Cross Mountains Brigade (*Brygada Świętokrzyska*), ultimately withdrawing to the territories occupied by the Western Allies.

<sup>58</sup> Notes from the interview with Ryszard Kozłowski 'Pogan', 10 February 1996; Kucharski, *Zanim*, pp. 98–99.

apolitical person, after he told me everything he knew, I became rather hostile towards Communism”<sup>59</sup>

In mid-July 1943, the unit set off in the direction of the Brudzewice Forest in search of the People’s Guard unit they had been ordered to find. A few days later, the NSZ soldiers heard from one of the foresters that he had been visited by a member of the ‘Jewish gang’ who, under the threat of killing him and his family, demanded that he prepare some food products in accordance with the list that the visitor had submitted. They were to be collected the following day. Indeed, one day later, two members of the People’s Guard came, but seeing a group of armed men lying in wait, they quickly tried to withdraw. The NSZ soldiers fired at them and began a pursuit, as a result of which one of them was killed and the other, ‘Heniek’ (N/A), was captured. Captain ‘Tom’ played a trick, saying that his unit belonged to the People’s Guard and that he had come to this area on an important mission from Lublin voivodeship. The commander also scolded the captured man for insubordination and disobeying orders. ‘Tom’ then threatened him with court martial and demanded to be put in contact with his unit commander immediately. Completely disorientated, ‘Heniek’ was only released after having first committed himself to fetching his commander. ‘Tom’ then instructed the soldiers that, when the members of the People’s Guard came, they were not to ‘mix’ with them, but remain in a separate group and feign interest. Their objective was to get hold of the machine guns that belonged to the GL partisans. The most important task was assigned to ‘Burza’, the holder of a light automatic rifle, who was supposed to constantly tinker with the allegedly broken rifle and, at a convenient moment, then open fire.<sup>60</sup>

At first, a man came to meet the National Armed Forces soldiers, introducing himself as ‘Stach’ (quite possibly Stanisław Wiktorowicz), the commander of a People’s Guard unit. The situation which had happened with ‘Heniek’ repeated itself, that is, he came under threat of court martial for disobeying orders. Finally, ‘Tom’ declared that the two units would be united under his command, and demanded that the entire People’s Guard unit be brought in for the purpose of a mutual presentation and

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<sup>59</sup> Letter from Waław Napora to Jerzy Kucharski, n.d., copy in the collection of L. Żebrowski.

<sup>60</sup> Account by Antoni Kozłowski ‘Pogan’, author’s private collection.

in order to agree on the particulars of any further actions. On 22 July 1943, a group of seven partisans from the 'Waryński' unit of the People's Guard arrived at a clearing near Stefanów. The unit looked dreadful; its members were extremely dirty and neglected, without any signs of belonging to a military formation. One of them was recognised by a subordinate of 'Tom' as a Jew from Gielniów with whom the NSZ soldier had once served in the army. The GL partisans owned a Polish pre-war Mk. 1928 light machine gun; apart from that, they only had a few guns and sawn-off shotguns. The types and general condition of the weapons they had clearly demonstrated that they would be of little use in any kind of military operations against the Germans. Following a brief greeting, both groups spread out into the clearing. The GL partisans' interest was aroused by the Polish eagles and other elements of the uniforms and insignia used by the NSZ soldiers, none of which had ever been used in their ranks. 'Tom' explained that all the GL units in the Lublin region were obliged to dress in that way for political reasons. During some of the more casual conversations, various topics were discussed. The GL partisans, for instance, said that they had "dealt with the National Democrats" in Drzewica and that "they were already following [Marian] Suskiewicz around the markets and would soon kill him as well".<sup>61</sup> It also turned out that those present did not represent all the members of the unit, as some of the members had been sent to obtain some provisions and a few partisans were stationed at their headquarters. The plan that 'Tom' accepted at the beginning of the operation was carried out. When, under some pretext, Zdzisław Kacer, *nom de guerre* 'Gapek' seized the GL's light machine gun, 'Burza' stood up and cried out almost simultaneously: "Hands up!" He then opened fire at the members of the People's Guard. Most of them were killed and only two, 'Heniek' and 'Zenek', managed to flee. One of the members of the People's Guard did not manage to escape. He was captured alive, but was soon shot on 'Tom's' orders. Soon after that, 'Heniek' was also killed. 'Zenek' then left the fearful farmer on whose farm he had been hiding, and took cover in the woods, where, after about two months, he established contact with the structures of the People's Guard. It was then that he reported what had happened near Stefanów. On account of this delay,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

the leaders of the PPR had to wait until October before starting their propaganda campaign. According to the text published in their periodical *Gwardzista*,

A belated report was sent to the General Headquarters of the People's Guard, informing us of the fratricidal crimes of some reactionary thugs committed even before those near Borów. [...] Our commander, Stach, personally went to see the newcomers' unit. He believed that they were a unit of the People's Guard from Lublin voivodeship, and so the two units sat together to eat dinner. At some point, the commander of the newly arrived unit looked at his watch and said: "Now we need to devise a plan of how we should act together". This was their sign, following which they began to shoot at our men. Seven members of the People's Guard were murdered: Stach, Marian, Wyrwilas, Madej, Genek, Stary and Henryk. Only one of them, Zenek, managed to escape, as can be seen in the present report.<sup>62</sup>

From the beginning, the operation near Stefanów appears to have been overshadowed by a similar operation undertaken by the National Armed Forces, the aforementioned action that took place near Borów on 9 August 1943 (in the poviát of Kraśnik, Lublin voivodeship). There, the 'Jan Kiliński' unit of the People's Guard was liquidated by a group of NSZ soldiers under the command of the *Cichociemny* ['Silent Unseen' paratrooper unit] Major Leonard Zub-Zdanowicz, *nom de guerre* 'Ząb'.<sup>63</sup> This National Armed Forces operation soon became the subject of a heated campaign in the underground media and international press.<sup>64</sup> In response to these

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<sup>62</sup> *Gwardzista* 25 October 1943.

<sup>63</sup> *Gwardzista* 15 September 1943. The direct cause of the operation was the crimes (murders and robberies) committed by the People's Guard unit as well as activity in support of Communism and the Soviets. At first, the units remained neutral towards one another. However, being aware of the Communist agitation in his own unit by the newly arrived members of the People's Guard (and fearing the possibility of being attacked), Major 'Ząb' ordered that the partisan headquarters be surrounded and the members of the GL unit disarmed. A court martial was held, resulting in a death sentence being passed on the GL partisans for banditry and Communist activities. Almost all of them were shot, one was released, and one escaped. For more information, see in particular, M.J. Chodakiewicz, *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne: 'Ząb' przeciw dwu wrogom*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 120–24; Chodakiewicz, Gontarczyk, Żebrowski, *Tajne oblicze*, vol. 3, pp. 207–46. Perhaps the best study of these events is found in R. Drabik, 'Wydarzenia pod Borowem', *Glaukopis* 2003, no. 1, pp. 114–43.

<sup>64</sup> See, in particular, Gontarczyk, *Polska*, pp. 292–300.

events, the leaders of the PPR issued a statement condemning the National Armed Forces for their attacks on the Communist partisans:

The occupiers, so hated by the Polish nation for their monstrous crimes, have unfortunately found among some circles of Polish society those who, under the cloak of patriotic decorum, are willing to be their obedient tools, carrying out anti-Polish policies. A gang of these paid or voluntary agents of the Gestapo is prowling the areas of our ongoing conflict with the occupiers, encouraging fratricidal violence and organising bands of marauders.<sup>65</sup>

The former commander of the 'Lions', Izrael Ajzenman (Julian Kaniewski), survived because he was not present during the operation near Stefanów. A new unit was formed from the remaining members of the 'Ludwik Waryński' unit: the Stanisław Wiktorowicz unit, under the command of 'Góral' (unidentified), a fugitive from one of the nearby ghettos, with 'Julek' as its political commissar. However, for reasons that remain unknown, a conflict broke out within the unit itself, as a result of which, towards the end of 1943, Ajzenman was disarmed and sent to work in the propaganda department of one of the local outposts. He did, however, return to the unit and, on his own accord, tried to take over the command by force, probably killing the previous commander 'Góral'. According to a PPR report,

The other disgrace of Radom region is the person of 'Julek'. He is similar to the first one who, among other charges, is suspected of the murder of 'Góral' and Sergeant 'Zenek'. Together with 'Organista',<sup>66</sup> we have decided to impose the capital punishment on Julek. The unit commanded by 'Wiktorowicz' has been broken up (with only eight people remaining). The weapons were deposited in a place which, for the moment, appears to be known only to 'Julek', as we do not yet have

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<sup>65</sup> AAN, 190/I-1, Statement by the PPR concerning the issue of political murders and initiating a civil war, p. 62.

<sup>66</sup> Jan Gruszczyński ('Janek', 'Organista') was a member of the second Initiative Group of the PPR, sent to Poland in May 1943. Although at first he seemed to have remained inactive in the Communist underground, in fact he was in charge of the Soviet intelligence network in Radom. At the turn of 1944, he began to work for the PPR.

any contact with the other people. As for that matter, we are trying to secure the weapons as fast as we can, since the other GL partisans are not to be trusted.<sup>67</sup>

However, Ajzenman was not yet liquidated, due to the general personnel problems that existed in the PPR. Despite his reputation as a murderous and 'bloodthirsty person', Ajzenman remained in several partisan units of the AL until the end of the war. For some time, he was even a commander of the 'task force' of 'Chytry', which was famous for its banditry and unwarranted murders in and around the town of Końskie.<sup>68</sup> Shortly before Soviets soldiers entered the area, he became a member of an NKVD assault group with the code-name 'Nitra', led by Lieutenant Anatoly Sapronov, *nom de guerre* 'Kiriev'. By the time the Red Army arrived, and Ajzenman was briefly made an officer of the District Department of Security in Końskie, members of this group had arrested a number of Polish pro-independence activists.<sup>69</sup>

Between March 1945 and April 1946, Ajzenman served as a lieutenant in the Voivode's Department of Security in Poznań. Following his first breaches of the law in this new post, a letter was sent to the PPR's Central Committee, enquiring about Ajzenman's activity in the partisan movement. In reply, Hilary Chełchowski, a member of the Central Committee, wrote:

I first met comrade 'Chytry' (back then known as 'Julek') in 1942, in a partisan unit. He did not have a good reputation. [...] There is no exact data that could prove it, but it cannot be denied that he has on his conscience [the disappearance of] a number of comrades from his partisan unit, including the liaison officer

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<sup>67</sup> AAN, PPR, 190/I-5, Report of the Third District, p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> "To Lieutenant 'Chytry': I have looked at your reports up to and including the ninth day of the present month. I thus wish to draw your attention once again to the inadmissibility of your group executing its own sentences, except on the basis of manifestly irrefutable facts. [...] I consider the last two cases of those young men to be wrong and the motives insufficient. [...] I wish to let you know that, in the area, you have the reputation of a bloodthirsty person. From my own observation, I can see that the local people are turning against you and that there might soon be organised attempts to break up your unit" (AAN, AL, 192/XXIII-16, Letter sent on 10 January 1945 by Józef Małecki 'Sęk', 'Witek', the commander of the Third District of the People's Army, p. 56).

<sup>69</sup> J. Wroniszewski, 'Śmiertelny skok "Czeremosza"', *Konecki Wrzesień* 1996, no. 1, p. 3. After the war, Ajzenman (Kaniewski) boasted that, along with the group led by 'Kiriev', he had set up a network of agents to infiltrate the Polish underground: "our counterintelligence still operates between Końskie, Radom, Kielce and Tomaszów. For as long as I was in Końskie, I was able to detect every action undertaken by the fascist organisations" (CAW WBH, III/19/201, Account of J. Kaniewski, manuscript in Russian, n.d., p. 11).



‘Zosia’. [...] He was undisciplined, unwilling to comply with the orders of the party and the commanders of the [People’s] Army, he committed various abuses. For this and for the above, he received a death sentence. The sentence was not carried out, as it was hoped that he would improve, but until the very end, no such improvement was ever seen in him.<sup>70</sup>

Ajzenman was dismissed from service in the Department of Security for various incidents of malpractice, theft and a suspected attempt of rape of a female minor. On 17 August 1946, he was found guilty by the Military District Court in Warsaw and sentenced to three years in prison, which was conditionally suspended for two years.<sup>71</sup> After being released from prison, he was employed as a guard in a number of state institutions, including the Polish Radio, the Polish Academy of Sciences, and the Railway Security. He died on 19 December 1965, in Lublin.

After the war, the history of the ‘Lions’ underwent a considerable amount of distortion. At first, the major source of information concerning this unit was the underground press of the PPR, in which one could regularly find a great deal of incorrect material concerning the People’s Guard and the People’s Army, as well as, most importantly, the personal accounts of Ajzenman (Kaniewski) himself. For several decades after the war, all the records concerning the activity of the ‘Lions’ during the German occupation of Poland were in the possession of the PPR/PZPR, and were thus unavailable to historians. Moreover, right after the war, most of them were falsified on a massive scale.<sup>72</sup> For a long time, the documents issued by Polish underground organisations as well as the underground press were in the possession

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<sup>70</sup> L. Żebrowski, ‘Julian Kaniewski’, in *Encyklopedia białych plam*, vol. 9, Radom 2002, p. 114. For almost as long as the PPR remained in the underground, in 1942–45, Hilary Chełchowski was responsible for Radom and Kielce regions.

<sup>71</sup> Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej w Poznaniu (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, Branch in Poznań), 084/6, Report of the criminal record of Julian Ajzenman, pp. 12–13, J. Ajzenman’s petition dated 18 September 1946, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> In the Archives of the Central Committee, the reports of the PPR authorities in Radom and Kielce had to be rewritten (or even written again from scratch) in an attempt to portray the activities of Ajzenman’s unit (as well as that of other groups) as having been directed against the occupier, rather than being criminal. After the war, the report of the ‘Lions’ operation in Drzewica was also forged. In it, those murdered were accused of collaboration with the Germans, denunciation and murder. The existing document is therefore a post-war hoax (AAN, GL, 191/XXIII-5, Report of the partisan unit, n.d., p. 41). For more information concerning such forgeries in the post-war era, see Chodakiewicz, Gontarczyk, Żebrowski, *Tajne oblicze*, vol. 2, pp. 1–15.

of the Polish United Workers' Party and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Coupled with censorship, this certainly did not allow for a factual reconstruction of the true nature of the 'Lions' or the nature of the unit's operations. It is also worth mentioning that some of the measures undertaken at that time were deliberate falsifications of historical sources, in particular, emphasising the 'fact' that some of the men killed by the members of the NSZ were Jewish.<sup>73</sup>

As early as 1952, the operation near Stefanów was referred to in schoolbooks as the beginning of "a fratricidal conflict which was initiated by reactionaries".<sup>74</sup> In the Communist era, the very same view was endorsed by all the most important publications on the subject.<sup>75</sup> Security officers searched the homes of the victims' families for any photographs taken at the funeral, as well as other documents concerning the murder in Drzewica.<sup>76</sup> Any attempts to sneak in written information on this subject in the public press or academic works were suppressed by the censors. One notable exception was a brief note that could be found in a local academic journal, which published the memoirs of Emilia Dąbrowska (*née* Kobyłańska), the former owner of the Rusinów estate. According to her, "on 22 January 1943, tragic events unfolded in Drzewica, when the same 'Lew' group that had been in Rusinów four days earlier murdered seven people, local citizens and factory workers, including August Kobyłański, director and co-owner of the Gerlach factory."<sup>77</sup> At that time, however, the prevailing version of the events was the one that came to be established as 'factual' in the Communist historiography. This was

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<sup>73</sup> In the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, in the collection of Bernard Marek, remains a document signed by Ajzenman/Kaniewski entitled 'My experiences from 1939 onwards, in the struggle for social and national liberation from the Hitlerite yoke. Concerning the murder of a group of Jewish partisans in the ranks of the People's Guard (twenty people) by the NSZ' (AŻIH, Collection of Bernard Marek, 349). Not only were some of the seven members of the People's Guard not Jewish, but their total number was definitely less than twenty. Many of the document's details, including the surnames of the allegedly Jewish partisans, were simply invented.

<sup>74</sup> *Historia Polski 1864–1945: Materiały do nauczania w klasie XI*, Warszawa 1952, pp. 472–73. The chapter about the Second World War was written by Maria Turlejska.

<sup>75</sup> See, for instance, J. Garas, *Oddziały Gwardii Ludowej i Armii Ludowej 1942–1945*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 268–69; B. Hillebrandt, *Partyzantka na Kielecczyźnie 1939–1945*, Warszawa 1970, p. 132.

<sup>76</sup> The search proved to be futile. There are remaining photographs of the row of the victims' coffins, as well as those that were taken during the funeral. There among the people can be seen the figure of Marian Suskiewicz, bending over the coffins of his murdered brothers. Last but not least, there are also pre-war photographs of the victims.

<sup>77</sup> Dąbrowska, *Z dziejów*, p. 92.

sometimes supplemented by the claim that the operation of the National Armed Forces near Stefanów was primarily of an anti-Semitic character. As for the criminal character of the activity of the 'Lions' and their operation in Drzewica, there was a consensual silence.

The 'historian' who violated these unwritten rules in a rather intriguing way was Stefan Krakowski. In an article published in *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* in 1968, he wrote that "on 15 January 1943, the unit attacked a German police station in Drzewica. The partisans killed seven Hitlerites, including the chief constable [*sic*]"<sup>78</sup> Such revelations may well be set side-by-side the aforementioned biography of Izrael Ajzenman (Julian Kaniewski) in *Słownik biograficzny działaczy polskiego ruchu robotniczego*, [Biographical dictionary of the activists of the Polish labour movement] where, instead of his four years in prison for ordinary crimes in the pre-war era, Krystyna Arciuch says he was sentenced for political activity in the KPP.<sup>79</sup>

It is important to note that this version of the events, nourished by the propaganda of the Polish People's Republic, still had its die-hard advocates in the early years of the Third Polish Republic after 1989. For instance Professor Krystyna Kersten, in her analysis of the above-related issues, did not bother to rely on her own research, but rather uncritically drew on the *Biuletyn Informacyjny*<sup>80</sup> and other publications from the post-war period. In her substantial work *Narodziny systemu władzy*, [Birth of the system of power], she writes,

The increasingly real prospect of the arrival of the Red Army, which prompted the Communists to create their own structures, also led the political and

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<sup>78</sup> Krakowski, *The War*, p. 56. The date of 15 January is incorrect and comes from Ajzenman's account that Krakowski used in his research, namely, the account whose main focus is "a Polish fascist organisation". According to Ajzenman, "that fascist organisation followed my unit and denounced it to the Germans. On 15 January 1943, we encircled the town of Drzewica and executed seven fascists, including the owner of the Gerlach factory, a pharmacist and a postmaster" (CAW WBH, III/19/201, account of J. Kaniewski, manuscript in Russian, p. 3). The author of the article knew very well that the said 'fascists' were not to be identified with German policemen.

<sup>79</sup> See above, fn. 10.

<sup>80</sup> There was a statement, issued in *Biuletyn Informacyjny* 46 (201), on 8 November 1943, claiming that 'UNITS of the Armed Forces in Poland' [*ODDZIAŁY Sił Zbrojnych w Kraju*: that is to say, the Home Army] had nothing to do with the "hideous murder" of the GL unit near Borów. It is hard to say with any degree of certainty whether this attitude to the activity of the People's Guard in the Polish provinces stemmed from ignorance or sheer naivety.

military groups of the far right to intensify their activities. The National Armed Forces, not yet allied with the Home Army, initiated these fratricidal conflicts, liquidating a few units of the People's Guard. [...] On 22 July [1943], in Stefanów, in Kielce voivodeship, the entire Ludwik Waryński unit of the People's Guard was liquidated.<sup>81</sup>

Those 'historians' who, in the past, had been members of the Communist partisan groups and the security apparatus of the Polish People's Republic, and who had also falsified the history of Poland in the first few decades after the war, were also very active at that time. One of them, Ryszard Nazarewicz, a UB/SB former major writing as late as the mid-1990s, once again wrote about the liquidation of the 'Lions', trying to cast the matter in an indisputably ethnic context:

The need to supply [the Jewish units of the People's Guard] with food provoked serious conflicts in the area and accusations of banditry. They were thus hammered with particular ferocity, not only by the Hitlerites, but also members of the NSZ. The latter are in fact responsible for [...] hanging the GL partisans, most of them Jewish, in the forest near Przysucha on 22 July 1943.<sup>82</sup>

However, it seems that today, when the origin of the 'Lions', the nature of their activities and the person of their commander are so well known, it is worth taking the above facts into account when considering several important issues. One of them is the question of the genuine attitude towards the Jews in the ranks of the PPR during the Holocaust. This concerns whether the recruitment for the People's Guard in the ghettos was, as was commonly held over the years, indeed an attempt to save those who were in danger of extinction, or whether the recruitment campaign was only meant to gain more people for their own ranks.

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<sup>81</sup> K. Kersten, *Narodziny systemu władzy*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 27–28. In the light of what is known today of the activity of the 'Lions', later renamed the 'Ludwik Waryński' unit, it is difficult to take such claims seriously. Likewise, it is difficult to say in what sense the criminal Izrael Ajzenman and his people were 'brothers' to Marian Suskiewicz. After all, three of his own brothers had been murdered by the 'Lions', a People's Guard unit.

<sup>82</sup> R. Nazarewicz, 'Podziemie związane z PPR wobec tragedii i walki Żydów', in *Spółczesność polskie wobec martyrologii i walki Żydów w latach II wojny światowej: Materiały z sesji w Instytucie Historii PAN w dniu 11 III 1993 r.*, ed. K. Dunin-Wąsowicz, Warszawa 1996, p. 111.

On the other hand, it ought to be stressed that, unlike Ajzenman (Kaniewski), Jewish fugitives who could not in any way be described as social outcasts often became members of the Communist partisan groups because they had no alternative. As has been observed, in 1942, there were still no units of the Polish pro-independence underground in the field.<sup>83</sup> Hence, these fugitives had no choice but to cooperate with people (many of whom were common criminals) participating in a regime whose target was Polish society, for such, indeed, was the nature of the People's Guard and the People's Army.

The present study should, therefore, be seen as an attempt to provide a serious contribution to further studies on the subject of Jews and Jewish groups in the People's Guard and the People's Army. Another key issue that should be taken into consideration is whether (and, if so, to what extent) the confrontations with or even denunciations of armed Jewish partisan groups (and Jews in general) were the result of anti-Semitism or an element of self-defence by the local people, their fear for their property and lives, as well as their wish to avenge the robberies, rapes and murders they experienced. Moreover, was there ever a chance that some kind of consensus could ever be reached between the Jewish groups in the forests, which were in desperate need of food and clothes, and the local population who refused to provide them with such any such means? What role did this unjustified cruelty, such as rape and murder (in combination with the confiscation of food and clothing), play in the downward spiral of resentment against these Jewish groups? Last but not least, what role could the victims' pre-war political sympathies have played in the crimes committed by the 'Jewish' groups?

The above-mentioned questions should all be taken into consideration while studying the attitudes of the Polish population towards Jews in the provincial areas of Poland during the period 1942–45.

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<sup>83</sup> The Polish underground was preparing for the mobilisation of its troops which, in more favourable political as well as strategic circumstances, could have played an active part in the liberation of Poland. Active partisan units were practically non-existent until 1943 on account of the difficulties that could have arisen from any activity of larger groups. In this way, they were trying to avoid any heavy losses or acts of German retaliation. One very painful episode, for instance, was the history of the partisan unit commanded by Maj Henryk Dobrzański, *nom de guerre* 'Hubal'. While searching for them, German soldiers murdered over 700 people in the surrounding villages and burned down several hundred farms.

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## SUMMARY

The article discusses the activity of the 'Lions', a partisan unit of the Communist People's Guard, from the beginning of its formation in September 1942 until July 1943, when it was liquidated by the National Armed Forces. Its establishment was closely connected with the Communists' concept of immediate action. Like many other units of the People's Guard, the 'Lions', which were based in the Radom area, consisted mainly of Jewish fugitives from nearby ghettos. The unit was commanded by Izrael Ajzenman (Julian Kaniewski, *noms de guerre* 'Lew', 'Chytry', 'Julek'), a man who, before the war, had been convicted of ordinary crimes. From the beginning, its members only rarely carried out operations against the Germans. Instead, they often indulged in looting, murder, and other crimes against the local Polish population, including a raid on the town of Drzewica. The article also studies the relations within the unit itself and the way in which it was commanded, clearly demonstrating that the 'Lions' were perhaps more reminiscent of a gang of criminals than of a self-disciplined group of partisans whose code of conduct would be based on a set of regulations and procedures.

## KEYWORDS

People's Guard • People's Army • Polish Workers' Party • Izrael Ajzenman  
 • Julian Kaniewski • 'Lions' unit • Jewish partisans • Drzewica  
 • National Armed Forces • Tadeusz Kobylański • Stefanów • Opoczno