

SUMMARY

The Pyrenees – A Gateway to Freedom. Polish Military Evacuation Through Spain and Andorra in 1940–1944

In June 1940, as a result of the defeat of France, only some 24,000 of the 84,500 soldiers of the Polish Army managed to evacuate to the British Isles. Eventually, about 15,000 servicemen found themselves in the French free zone, whom the Polish authorities in exile intended to transfer to Great Britain to join the Polish Armed Forces being reconstituted there. The main clandestine evacuation routes ran from southern France through Spain, sometimes also Andorra, and Portugal to the British Isles (sometimes via Gibraltar), as well as through North Africa. Two of France's neighbours played a particular role, although Spain was inherently of incomparably greater importance in this regard. The transfers were organised by military Evacuation Posts in France, Madrid and Lisbon, under the command of the Polish military authorities in London. Thousands of soldiers – known as “Sikorski's tourists” – travelled these routes on their way to the army as part of organised expeditions, but also expeditions undertaken on their own. Some 8,000 to 8,500 servicemen made their way to the British Islands via Spain in this manner, with some interned at the Miranda de Ebro camp between 1940 and 1943. The evacuation continued until the Allied landings in Normandy in June 1944. While the greatest difficulties in organising the transfers occurred in Spain between 1940 and 1942, there were also obstacles in France between 1943 and 1944. Barcelona, through which the main route of the evacuation passed, played a key role in the Polish evacuation effort. This was primarily owed to the clerk of the Polish Honorary Consulate, Wanda Tozer, née Morbitzer, and the address of the Polish mission in the Catalan capital, 10 Fontanella Street, became for many soldiers a symbol of devotion and care on the part of the official representation of the Polish Republic. The second figure of great merit in the evacuation was Cpl Józef Węgrzyn, co-creator of the “evacuation chain” from France via Andorra to Barcelona in the years 1943–1944. Both were among the most effective organisers of the crossings of the Iberian Peninsula, highly regarded by the Polish authorities and the British allies. Their attitude is an example of how much an outstanding individual can achieve in an hour of trial.