**Karol Jóźwiak** (University of Lodz)

# Polish Memory of the Second World War and its Afterlife in the Early Cold War Italian Film Culture

**Abstract**

In this article I discuss production, distribution and reception contexts of Michal Waszynski's films produced in Italy in the wake of the Second World War. Particularly, I pay attention to the found-footage sequences embedded in those films. I analyze them in terms of a testimony and proofs for the war experience, which was hardly acknowledged in post-war Italy. Thus, I aim at reconstructing the wider political plan to which these films were inscribed, locating them on the backdrop of the Polish Army propaganda activity and diplomacy in Italy in the eve of the cold war. I show to what extent these films were entangled into diplomatic, political and ideological struggles between the Polish Armed Forces, the Moscow dependent Polish government, the Allies and the Italian government in the early post-war years. On a more general scale, this analysis uncovers the negotiations over boundaries of what was acceptable in the Second World War depiction in Italian film culture.

**Keywords**

Polish Army Film Unit, cinema diplomacy, Cold War culture, Michal Waszynski, memory of the Second World War

— — —

## Introduction

I am preparing this article during the first months of Russian aggression against Ukraine. It is a moment when the historical research on the cinematic representations of the war, especially relating to the controversial role of the Soviet Union, resembles the reports from the current war. Russian aggression has been justified by the very same arguments as the ones used by Stalin in the wake of the Second World War (that of Central Eastern Europe

as a buffer zone and as a part of the sphere of Russian or Soviet imperialist hegemony). The whole western world seems to sympathize with Ukraine's fight for their sovereignty and freedom. However, apart from this solidarity a critical assessment of the factors allowing Russian aggression to Ukraine seems to be equally crucial. Timothy Snyder, a prominent historian of Central Eastern Europe in 20th century, has recently pointed at one of such factors, namely a failure of memory policy in post-war Europe regarding the Second World War and Russian imperialism.[1)]

One of the Russia's attempts in the current conflict is to isolate Ukraine, to reduce this war over western principles to a question of a local conflict, to convince the West to sacrifice the Ukrainian effort for the sake of an illusory peace with Russia and for the stability in the region. In the following article I will discuss how Poland, in the wake of the Second World War, was left in such a way. Poles felt not only betrayed by western allies,[2)] but also deprived of the possibility to openly address this issue in the film, as the examples I will discuss below show. The Polish, and more generally the Central Eastern European memory of the Second World War could have been a propriate warning[3)] against Russian imperialism. Focusing on Italian film culture during the early years of the cold war I will show how unwelcomed this warning was.

## Geopolitical context

In the wake of the Second World War Italy became both a refuge for a significant number of civilian Poles and a station for soldiers of the Polish Army 2nd Corps (henceforth referred as 2nd Corps),[4)] which contributed to the liberation of Italy in 1944–1945 along with other allied armies.[5)] "One of the great obstacles to the free development of Italy is the influx to her territory of refugees and expatriated citizens from many eastern European countries" — has been noticed in 1946 newspapers[6)]. Indeed, in 1945–1946 over 100,000 Poles, as well as many other citizens of eastern European countries, hesitated to leave Ita-

1) I refer to his talk during an Online Seminar "Historians and the War: Discussion with Prof. Timothy Snyder," YouTube, 2022, accessed July 14, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp5MT4dJ1dw&t=448s, as well as to his essay, see: Timothy Snyder, "Germans have been involved in the war, chiefly on the wrong side," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2022, accessed July 14, 2022, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/juergen-habermas-and-ukraine-germans-have-been-involved-in-the-war-18131718-p5.html.
2) See: Arthur Bliss Lane, *I Saw Poland Betrayed* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1947). In a similar manner the very first period of the Second World War is described, in terms of an isolation of Poland. Norman Davies describes the diplomatic situation of Poland during the first years of the Second World War as follows: "In the era of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the political isolation and the vulnerability of the Polish Government-in-Exile was amply demonstrated", see: Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A history of Poland: 1795 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 361.
3) Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015).
4) Jakub Żak, *Nie walczyli dla siebie: Powojenna odyseja 2. Korpusu Polskiego* (Warszawa: Rytm, 2014), 7.
5) On the Polish contribution to the liberation of Italy as well as on post war presence of Poles in Italy see: Luciano Garibaldi, *Gli eroi di Montecassino: Storia dei polacchi che liberarono l'Italia* (Milano: Mondadori, 2013).
6) Elisabeth Wiskemann, "The Poles in Italy," *Spectator*, February 1, 1946, 6. The article has been recapitulated in Italian newspaper *L'Unità*, "Una testimonianza inglese", *L'Unità*, February 23, 1946, 2.

ly and return to Soviet dominated territories. The decision was politically motivated in the main. In the Polish case, aversion toward Soviet power was grounded in both the previous experience of the USSR's ruthless occupation of Poland in 1939–1941 and, on the current reports from Poland dominated by the Soviets, consisting of NKVD (Naródnyy komissariát vnútrennikh del) (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) terror, deportations to gulags and the forceful imposition of communist power in all public domains. Thus, Poles stayed in Italy as in a kind of limbo, suspended between the past horrors of war and unrealizable hopes for going back to their sovereign country.[7] As a significant political and social factor, not to mention the military force, the Polish presence in Italy was an important diplomatic issue between the western allies and the Soviet Union during the first post-war period.

On the other hand, Poles, despite having been a part of the victorious alliance and a significant contributor to the victory over Nazi Germany, could hardly feel optimistic by the new order emerging from the ashes of war — "the considerable Polish effort in the war against Hitler was not matched by any corresponding benefits relating to Poland's future destiny".[8] Poland, in the wake of the Yalta and Potsdam arrangements, lost her sovereignty and a significant part of her eastern territories to the Soviet Union. On the geopolitical level, Poland was left under Stalin's hegemony, where he was busy imposing a totalitarian, communist state and eliminating all political opposition or sovereignty with the silent consent of the western allies.

Yet, the 2nd Corps didn't give up its geopolitical agency on the territory of Italy. Since challenging the new post-Yalta European order was less and less possible by military means, other ways of fighting for the Polish case came forth. After the ceasefire in Europe, the Polish Armed Forces stationed in Italy enlarged their scope and got more involved in propaganda activities aimed at Italian and international civil society. Amongst cultural media such as the press, literature and theatre, the cinema was an important element of the activity of the 2nd Corps.[9] One of its main achievements, though arguably the least well known, consisted of its involvement in the post-war Italian film industry. As a result of this activity, two full length feature films: *The Great Way* (*Wielka droga*/*La grande strada. L'odissea di Montecassino*, Michal Waszynski, 1946/1949) and *The Unknown Man from San Marino* (*Lo sconosciuto di San Marino*, Michal Waszynski, 1948), were produced in Italy. Both, though to different extents, were cases of give-and-take between the renowned Polish film-maker Michal Waszynski, the Italian cinema industry, and the scopes of the geopolitical propaganda of the 2nd Corps, which was the financial backer of these productions. Producers of both films made use of the found footage, filmed by the Polish Armed Forces Film Units during the military actions, thus incorporating the Polish film images of the war into the Italian cinema, and arguably into the neorealist culture.[10]

7) Gaetano Guidi, *Perché i polacchi non ritornano in patria?* (Roma: Magi Spinetti, 1946); Karolina Golemo, *Obraz Polski i Polaków we Włoszech: poglądy, oceny, opinie* (Kraków: WUJ, 2010).

8) Davies, *God's Playground*, 200.

9) Stefan Pastuszka, *Życie kulturalne w Polskich Siłach Zbrojnych na zachodzie w czasie II Wojny Światowej* (Kielce and Warszawa: MHPRL, 2009).

10) Francesco Pitassio, *Neorealist Film Culture* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2019), 119–120.

Figure 1: The crew of the film *Wielka droga* during shooting in the Cinecittà studio in 1946. The central figure sitting in the first row is general Wladyslaw Anders (in the military beret), to his right (under the camera) Michal Waszynski is sitting. Author: Felicjan Maliniak. Anna Maria Anders Collection. Courtesy of National Film Archive — Audiovisual Institute

Both films can be analysed in terms of psychological warfare conducted by the 2nd Corps in Italy in the aftermath of the Second World War. This double layer of film production is best illustrated in the photograph from *The Great Way* shooting, in which the commander of the 2nd Corpse assists Waszynski and the film's crew in the Rome studio of Cinecittà, staged for Siberian location (see figure 1). In a certain sense this activity was a component of a very bold geopolitical agenda, since it was independent and opposed to the main geopolitical powers (USSR, US, and UK), and without any substantial backing from legitimate political circles, whether Polish or foreign. So, the films can be analysed as traces of a peculiar effort to challenge the post-Yalta settlement of Europe which had resulted in the division of the continent into opposing camps, and to question the Soviet Union's moral and factual legitimacy to establish a new post-war order. As such, this perspective was isolated in the diplomacy of the immediate post-war period and gained resonance only with the outbreak of the Cold War in the late 1940's.

In this article I will present those films' narrative, analyse their mode of production, the inclusion of found footage into their plots, their geopolitical significance, as well as their reception in Italy at the onset of the Cold War. On a more general scale I regard them as a case study in war over memory, the way the recent history was narrated, and examining the limits of what was acceptable in a public discourse, despite its factual status. Thus, I relate these films to issues of war and post-war diplomacy and the dynamics of early Cold War tensions.

## Polish Armed Forces

To grasp the peculiar situation of the 2nd Corps and the reason it engaged in a kind of psychological warfare in the wake of the Second World War, it is necessary to analyze it as part of a more complex structure. Under the term Polish Armed Forces active during the Second World War there existed three distinct, and to a certain extent autonomous, armies. Although each army belonged to the Allies combating the forces of the Axis, they were governed by different interests and geopolitical affiliations. Their relations with the Soviet Union were arguably the most important feature distinguishing them.

The so-called Polish Forces in the West were the oldest formation created after the collapse of the Polish state in 1939. It was directly and in the most straightforward way dependent on the London based Polish government-in-exile. This army was quite susceptible to British and American influence and geopolitical diplomacy. Hence, it presented a moderate approach to the Soviet Union, carefully avoiding any controversies in relations with the eastern ally. The soldiers were mainly recruited in France and Great Britain in 1939–1940, from the Polish diaspora in western Europe as well as from military units, which had managed to escape Poland in the wake of the September Campaign. Those forces were mainly active in the western part of the European Theatre of War, engaged in the defense of the United Kingdom, fights in Norway, the liberation of Belgium, as well as combat in North Africa and the Middle East.

The Polish Forces in the Soviet Union (later renamed the Polish Forces in the East, and subsequently into the 2nd Corps) were created following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, a result of the Sikorski-Majski Pact (the first official agreement between the Polish government-in-exile and the Soviet Union after the Soviet invasion of Poland). It was mainly recruited from Poles who had been sent to the Soviet gulags in Siberia as political prisoners during the occupation of Poland. Thus, not surprisingly, it was characterized by legitimate rancor and resentment towards the Soviets. It is worth mentioning that thanks to the stubbornness of this army's commanders, the war crimes committed by the Soviets, such as the Katyn mass killings, were investigated and brought to light.[11] The commander of the army was a charismatic general, Wladyslaw Anders, who joined the dissident, anticommunist movement in the West after the war. To join the fighting in the Italian campaign, this army had to march from the central part of the Soviet Union and through the Middle East. Its most spectacular achievement was the capture of Montecassino in 1944, as well as the liberation of the northern parts of Italy.

Finally in 1943 as a counterbalance to the army under Anders' command, the Polish Armed Forces in the Soviet Union were established under the command of Zygmunt Berling. As Stalin's protégé, he openly declared loyalty towards the Soviet Union and acknowledged plans to incorporate Poland into the Soviet Union after the war. Berling initially joined Anders' army, but with its evacuation from the Soviet Union, together with a significant number of soldiers, he deserted and stayed loyal to Stalin, laying the foundations

11) Józef Mackiewicz, *Zbrodnia Katyńska w świetle dokumentów* (London: Gryf, 1948). The book was first systematic account of the soviet crimes published with the General Wladyslaw Anders' foreword.

for the new army.[12] Henceforth, the so-called "Berlings' Army" was one of Stalin's chief instruments in imposing plans for the post-war Poland. It was this army, which as part of the Red Army, liberated Poland and captured Berlin in 1945.

Moreover, throughout the war in Nazi occupied Poland, the underground military resistance kept active as the Home Army (Armia Krajowa). Its allegiance was to the Polish government-in-exile in London and to Polish Armed Forces. It was the largest underground resistance organization in occupied Europe, numbering around 400,000 soldiers in late 1943. Its activity concluded with the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.[13] With the Soviet liberation of Poland, the soldiers of the Home Army were considered enemies of communism, and as such were persecuted by the Soviet installed puppet government of Poland. Many of them escaped communist repression and joined General Anders' troops in Italy.

Each of those armies had its own film unit, and their distinct geopolitical perspectives are clearly reflected in their film production respectively. Each of them included some of the most renowned Polish film directors and artists, crucial figures of Polish pre-war cinema and visual arts. In the first army Stefan and Franciszka Themerson, arguably the only pre-war Polish avantgarde filmmakers, who in the ranks of the Polish Army in Great Britain created two propaganda masterpieces: *Calling Mr. Smith* (1943) and *The Eye and the Ear* (1945). Michal Waszynski was the head of Anders' Army Film Unit, while Aleksander Ford, the most important figure of the immediate post-war Polish cinema, created and directed Berling's Army Film Unit.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the wide array of geopolitical stances present in their outputs, although it seems to be a quite fascinating and under researched subject. In this article I will exclusively focus my analysis on the activity of the film unit of the Polish Forces under Anders' command. Since the history of this army is the subject of the first of the films in question, I will immediately turn to it.

## Filming *The Great Way*

The history of the 2nd Corps consists of its long journey across three continents and several prominent military achievements in Italy in 1944–1945. Formed in the Soviet Union, the army moved through Central Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and into Italy, where it was engaged in the European Theatre of War, capturing Montecassino and liberating Bologna, amongst other military successes. As historian Norman Davies noticed, this:

> extraordinary odyssey, from prison camps in Siberia and Central Asia to Buzuluk on the Volga, to Tashkent, to Pahlevi in Persia, to Baghdad, Jerusalem, Cairo, Tobruk, Anzio, Rome, to the Sangrio and the Gothic Line, has never been satisfactorily recounted to western readers.[14]

12) Sławomir Cenckiewicz, *Długie ramię Moskwy: Wywiad wojskowy Polski Ludowej 1943–1991 (wprowadzenie do syntezy)* (Poznań: Zysk, 2011), 43.
13) Davies, *God's Playground*, 344.
14) Ibid., 199.

However, throughout all this period the 2nd Corps Film Unit documented the proceedings of the army. It produced some dozen documentary films, about 40 film newsreels and finally[15], after the war, made a fiction film *The Great Way*, later re-edited and distributed as an Italian production under the title *La grande strada. L'odissea di Montecassino*. The film was a combination of those previous documentaries (see figures 2–3), but with a fictional plot to provide the film with a coherent story and attract a wider audience. The film title refers to the march of some 100,000 Poles from Siberia through the Middle East to northern Italy. This is the only film showing this march as well as Polish participation in the Italian Campaign.

Figure 2: Still from *Wielka droga*. A newsreel from the attack on the Montecassino Abbey. Courtesy of The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum

The film plot spans the period from the battle of Montecassino in May 1944 to the immediate post-war period. It opens with the night attack on the German positions in the ancient abbey. Blinding flashes of artillery fire silhouette the contours of Montecassino on the top of the hill. This opening scene is composed of footage from the real battle and staged shots (see figure 2). At the same time, the infantry climbs up the hill. Then, suddenly, one soldier falls hit by an explosion and is transferred to the field hospital. He temporarily loses his sight and is transferred to the regular hospital. When he regains conscious-

15) For the recapitulation of the 2nd Corpse film unit activity see: Stanisław Ozimek, *Film polski w wojennej potrzebie* (Warszawa: PIW, 1974), 112–123; Władysław Jewsiewicki, *Polscy filmowcy na frontach drugiej wojny światowej* (Warszawa: WAiF, 1972), 153–161.

ness, he takes a nurse named Jadwiga (Jadwiga Andrzejewska) for his fiancée. In order to make him feel better, the nurse starts playing the role. She immerses herself in reading his diary to better perform the role of the soldier's fiancée better.

At this moment, a metadiegetic story from the past is narrated alongside her reading. The diary dates back to the summer of 1939. Adam Krajewski (Albin Ossowski) — the name of the soldier is introduced only at this moment — is a student in Lwów (now Lviv in Ukraine) and is in love with a dancer and actress, Irena (Irena Bogdańska). Adam attends her successful debut as a performer in the Lwów Opera House. Their happy life is interrupted by the German invasion of 1st September 1939. The original newsreels from the September Campaign illustrate the fate of Poland in the first days of the conflict. 17th September, the date of the Soviet invasion and subsequent annexation of eastern Poland, is described as "stabbing Poland in the back".[16)]

Figure 3: Still from *Wielka droga*. A newsreel from the signing of the Sikorski-Majski agreement. From left to right: General Wladyslaw Anders, commander-in-chief of the Polish Armed Forces Wladyslaw Sikorski, Joseph Stalin, Majski. Courtesy of The Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum

The Soviet occupation turns the idyllic Lwów into a fearful place, terrorized by the Red Army and the NKVD. Both Adam and Irena are caught by the NKVD and sent to gulags. After almost two years of separation, they meet again during the formation of the Polish Armed Forces in the Soviet Union. Original newsreels from the signing of the pact between Stalin, Molotov and the Polish generals Sikorski and Anders interlace the plot (see figure 3). The whole story of the march of the Polish army from the Soviet Union through Central Asia, Iran, Palestine and Egypt is narrated. The fictional plot of the main charac-

16) Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Italian and Polish are mine.

ters intertwines with the newsreels. Finally, Adam interrupts his diary right before the attack on Montecassino.

Parallel to this story, a melodramatic theme of the nurse steadily falling in love with Adam is subtly suggested by the main plot. Her expectations and emotions grow while Adam recovers and, slowly, he regains his sight. However, just before she removes the bandages, Irena arrives. Recovered, Adam is discharged from the hospital. Together with Irena, who works in the Entertainment Unit of the Polish Armed Forces as a performer, he re-joins the troops proceeding with the liberation of Italy. Finally, they marry in a demolished church (a long shot in a typical neorealist scenery) and settle down in Italy (although the city is not named, the shots unambiguously show downtown Bologna). The film closes with a scene in their house where Irena, rearranging the furniture, asks why Adam's rifle and army helmet still hang on the wall. Adam responds calmly: 'Our great way back to the liberated fatherland is not finished yet, and they might still be of use'. The final sentence, enforced by a musical crescendo, works as a punch line for the whole film. The as yet unfinished way is directed toward the total liberation of Poland, from both occupations.

## Film Production

The production of the film started in late 1945. The shooting took place during the summer of 1946 in the Rome film studios Cinecittà, while regular film production was suspended for the holidays.[17] Different documents account several important actants of the Italian film industry involved in its production, such as Titanus Film, Vincenzo Genesi (who became an executive producer of this film as well as of the later film — *The Unknown Man from San Marino*), Cinecittà studios. Among scraps of documents relating to the film production, which are stored in the 2nd Corps archive, the financial engagement is deductible. Until the end of 1946 the 2nd Corps allocated 23m. lira to produce this film, (in this sum the costs of the pre-production of the latter film were included).[18] By the end of 1946 the Polish version was finished. The termination of the film coincided with the steady dissolution of 2nd Corps in the second half of 1946. In December 1946, the Film Unit was dissolved[19] and the rights to this film, presumably together with the latter film, were acquired by an Italian company, Sirena Film.[20] The new producer aimed at making an Italian production out of it, with due tax reliefs and governmental measures for Italian films. He introduced some significant changes: he swapped the staff for Italians, changed the plot to reduce its political tone in favour of a melodramatic one and reduced the geopolitical context crucial for the Polish version. In effect, *La grande strada. L'odissea di Montecassino* al-

17) The story of the film production is recounted in a long interview with two main stars — Irena Anders and Albin Ossowski conducted over 60 years after the film production, see: Maria Dłużewska, *Trzy dni zdjęciowe z Ireną Anders i Albinem Ossowskim* (Warszawa: Trio, 2012), 67.

18) See the files of the Wellfare Department and of the Press and Propaganda Department of the 2nd Corpse of Polish Army, stored at the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London.

19) Jewsiewicki, *Polscy filmowcy*, 162.

20) Archivo Centrale dello Stato (henceforth ACS), *La grande strada* file, 1950, 1.

most became a new film, with a different director. Waszynski was replaced by Vittorio Cottafavi, whilst the main characters that had been played by Polish actors were largely eliminated from the credits and the Italian secondary characters were highlighted instead.

## Italian Version of the Film

The Italian version bears some significant changes. A short overview shows the limits of what was politically acceptable in post-war Italy. Interestingly, the distortions significantly affected the factual and documentary aspect of the film.[21)]

First of all, the geopolitical significance of the film was downplayed in the Italian version. Generally, the stress is moved from the military and geopolitical level to the melodramatic one, focusing on the two women falling in love with Adam. The Polish version continuously referred to Polish Lwów, either by the recurrent dialogue motif of coming back to "our Polish Lwów", flashbacks to pre-war times, or intradiegetic performances of the famous song *Tylko we Lwowie!* (*Only in Lwów!*). In the Italian version, the city that had been controversially annexed by the USSR is replaced by Lublin.[22)]

All references to the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland after the 17th of September 1939 invasion, as well as to the fearful atmosphere under Soviet occupation, are absent. The Polish element of the plot is located under German occupation, which creates a significant incongruence. The main characters are arrested by Gestapo officers and sent to concentration camps. Therefore, their subsequent stay in the Soviet Union is not explained by the plot.

In the Polish version, the character of General Wladyslaw Anders reappears several times, and sometimes even performs lines. The famous commander of the Polish Armed Forces, 2nd Corps was a controversial person from the Soviet point of view. After the Second World War, he didn't acknowledge the communist government installed in Poland and contributed to the creation of the Polish dissident movement in the West. In the Italian version, Anders is almost completely erased. Finally, the whole section of newsreels showing the liberation of northern Italy by Polish troops and the sequences of Italian people in Bologna celebrating their arrival was cut. The final scene, in which Adam alludes to a further military conflict and the fight for the sovereignty of Poland, has obviously been erased as well.

The hypothetical reason for these changes is political. The archival documents show the extent to which the distribution of the film was impeded. First, the producer failed at

21) Most probably the changes were introduced at the level of the preventive censorship but for the time being I have not discovered the evidence for this hypothesis. For a more detailed analysis of the production of this film see my article: 'What are we fighting for? Michal Waszynski's Italian-Polish films on the Second World War', to be published in *Journal for Italian Cinema and Media Studies* in 2023.

22) It is worth noting, that Lublin was neutral in terms of war and post-war territorial changes (it was never annexed by the Soviet Union, remained occupied by Germany throughout the whole war until the Red Army liberated it in 1944). On the symbolic level however, the city was a seat of the puppet government installed in Poland by Moscow in 1944, prior to the liberation of Warsaw (the term *Lublin Government* referred to the communist regime installed in Poland until 1948). Thus, to a certain extent, this change could be taken as legitimizing the communist government in Poland.

getting the film recognised as an Italian production, which in the realm of the Italian film distribution meant virtually its elimination from the film circulation.[23] As it results from the examination of the documents in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Giulio Andreotti himself signed the decision to not recognize the film as Italian, thus impeding the film's wide circulation. Justifying his decision, Andreotti admitted that though the film production was "of Italian origin", it could not be recognized as being of "Italian nationality".[24] A memorandum dated 12th November 1950 noticed the peculiar situation of the motion picture:

> a film produced by an Italian company, integrally shot in Italy, recognized by the Government as a film of Italian origins, is declined any governmental measures. The film is not even included in obligatory programming, which means it is treated as a foreign production, imported to Italy. Whereas, on the other hand, in order to export the film, it should undergo procedures as an Italian product.[25]

Such a peculiar situation in fact resulted in the film's exclusion from wide distribution, both in Italy and abroad. Later in the text, discerning the film's "anti-communist attitude", the anonymous author of the memorandum wonders about "the incomprehensible treatment of the film, from the political point of view", which "today is of exceptional actuality".[26] This film has never been widely distributed. It has remained "almost unknown, released imperceptibly, seen by very few".[27] The only trace of film reception is dated by 1952, in an unfavourable review.[28]

## The Unknown Man from San Marino

While still finishing the Italian edition of the film *The Great Way*, Waszynski started his new film, *The Unknown Man from San Marino*. The strategy to dedicate the whole feature film to the Polish case proved to be ineffective. This time the Polish element is reduced to a short subplot only, though it is a crucial part of the dramaturgy, introduced at the emotional climax. It consists of the episodes of the Polish 2nd Corps Entertainment Unit during their transfer, and a flashback from Warsaw during the uprising in 1944, showing the destruction of Poland and suggesting the suffering of Poles during the war. The latter epi-

23) I refer to the study of the modes of film production and distribution by Lorenzo Quaglietti, in which he described a nuanced and sophisticated method of controlling cinema, among which the administrative system played a crucial role, see Lorenzo Quaglietti, *Storia economico-politica del cinema italiano 1945–1980* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1980), 76–77.

24) ACS, *La grande strada* file.

25) Ibid., *Pro memoria*, 1950, 1. The text of the memorandum stored at Archivio Centrale dello Stato is uncomplete, the file contains only a first page and misses the subsequent. In my research I haven't found another, complete version of the text. It is significant someone in the Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo tried to fetch and distribute this film after a few previous failures, unfortunately again unsuccessfully.

26) Ibid.

27) Roberto Chitti and Roberto Poppi, eds., *Dizionario del cinema italiano: I film: vol. 2: Dal 1945 al 1959* (Roma: Gremese Editore, 2000), 179.

28) Ibid.

sode is partly found footage. Produced between 1946 and autumn 1947, the film premiered in January 1948. The script of the film bore the stamp of the most important screenwriter of the time, Cesare Zavattini, and starred some of the most important Italian actors: Anna Magnani, Vittorio De Sica, Antonio Gandusio and Irma Gramatica, among others.

The film addresses the experience of the twilight period of the Second World War in Italy. The small Republic of San Marino is faced with a massive arrival of refugees during the liberation of northern Italy in autumn 1944. Among the mass of newcomers there is a mysterious person with amnesia, who cannot recall his name, nationality or even his mother tongue. Within the community he is simply called "forestiero", the foreigner. During a medical examination, he is diagnosed with amnesia resulting from a head injury. He catches the attention of two local antagonists, a priest (Antonio Gandusio) and an atheist, vegetarian aristocrat (Vittorio De Sica). The former sees an incarnation of Catholic virtues such as simplicity, trust, peace of mind and love towards neighbours in him, whereas the latter is captivated by his stoicism, objection to the slaughter of farm animals and love of nature. Both compete for the favours of the newcomer, perceiving him as an exceptional personality. Some of the locals look at him with suspicion, but as the story unfolds, he wins the hearts of everyone as a kind of holy fool.

The foreigner is the first one to acknowledge problems of representatives of fringe social groups, overlooked by the local community, such as orphans, a prostitute, and a war refugee. He interacts with a squad of orphans by making jokes and dancing with them. This way he restores them the joy and easiness of childhood. When he encounters a prostitute (Anna Magnani), he helps her change her life. As a result, she puts an end to her previous lifestyle, starts helping orphans and restores her catholic faith. When the foreigner happens to be among the Polish 2nd Corps unit, he saves the army singer from committing suicide. A Polish singer (Irena Bogdańska), after receiving news of the death of her entire family (implicitly during the Warsaw Uprising, which took place precisely in the same period), finds consolation and endures despair only after the encounter with the foreigner.

Amidst this series of good deeds, his anxious reaction to the sign of the cross creates an enigma which will be revealed in the final episode. The announcement of the breaking of the Gothic Line reaches this community, signalling the end of the war in Italy. The entire community meets at the thanksgiving religious celebration. While attending to the pompous procession, with its religious ceremonial songs, banners and large cross, the amnesiac suddenly gets his memory back. In a flashback he sees the past, which is the found footage from Warsaw being destroyed by the Germans as a retaliation for the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. The religious Latin song of the procession is suddenly replaced by a Polish one about the tragic fate of the city of Warsaw. Upon the picturesque streets of San Marino, the images of a burning and demolished Warsaw are superimposed (see fig. 4). The large processional cross re-emerges from amongst the rubble of the city, but this time at the head of a massive Polish religious procession. The hero reappears in the uniform of an SS commander. He first orders the people to stop, but with the procession proceeding heedlessly, he orders his troops to fire on the innocent people, slaughtering them. At this point, the cross falls and hits his head (resolving the issue of his head injury and amnesia), ending the flashback and returning the plot to the San Marino procession.


Figure 4: Still from *Lo sconosciuto di San Marino*. A flashback episode, the face of the unknown man imposed on the images of Warsaw destroyed by Germans

Having regained his identity, the unknown man changes immediately from a meek and calm person to a brutal and anxious one. Simultaneously, Allied gendarmes arrive in San Marino in search of him. During his escape, he mauls a poor orphan, steals money from the prostitute and attempts to rape the wife of the aristocrat. Finally, he ends up robbing the church, where he meets the priest and the Polish singer. Confronted with their confusion, he admits he is a criminal without any hope for forgiveness. In despair he runs away and enters a minefield repeating "I am a murderer, there is no forgiveness for me". After a few steps, he disappears in an explosion.

## Film's Reception

The film's producer a decade after the release complained: "the commercial result of the film was disastrous".[29] One of the factors contributing to this failure was the harsh press campaign against the film. It was released in January 1948 and was not given any recognition for its value. Already at the level of the censorship revision, "the scarce artistic value"[30] of the film was noticed. After its release, it was condemned by the press as "a shame

29) ACS, *La grande strada* file, a typescript by Vincenzo Genesi, 1958.
30) ACS, *La grande strada* file, MS, 1947.

for Italian cinematography",[31] "a gross and useless insult to the cinema".[32] *Rivista del cinematografo*, advised the audience against the film.[33] The communist press was in unique accord with the Azione Cattolica (Catholic Action) judgement of the film, and one referred to the other to strengthen its argument. From both perspectives the film was seen as deplorable "on the artistic level, as well as the moral".[34] Segretariato generale per la Moralità (General Secretary for Morality) mentioned "the clamorous dissent of the audience" and suggested further steps to appeal to the state censor.[35] At the same time, some newspapers' accusations resembled Stalinist rhetoric, pointing at the "erroneous clerical tendency" of the film,[36] or noticing "a footprint of childish, clerical propaganda, deprived of any tact".[37] Others pointed at technical flaws: "the film is ugly and slow", "a mediocre film"[38], "tedious and illegible",[39] "pathetic and erroneous"[40], "ridiculous foolery".[41]

The most severe criticism appeared in the communist newspaper *L'Unità*. Lorenzo Quaglietti, the newspaper's main film critic at that time, wrote a whole column to "protest against so reprehensible an offence to Italian cinema, such as this *Unknown Man from San Marino*",[42] and to call on the "honourable censor" Giulio Andreotti, asking him whether he was aware of the "vulgarity present in this film". "Will the protests of the audience at least reach his ears?" — asked Quaglietti, describing the indignation during screenings: "the audience leaving the cinema before the end, comments impossible to transcribe, whistles, shouting". He concluded, "you have never seen a film so without tact, so inconclusive and stupid".[43]

Several months later, *L'Unità* once again published a note on the film, this time with a series of distortions to its title (*Lo straniero di San Marino*), director (Cottafava), and the crucial element of its plot. The mass killing in Warsaw, a crucial element of the plot and its peculiar transnational feature, was mistaken. The reviewer saw in the sequence the German massacre of Italians in Fosse Ardeatine.[44]

"The Pole who directed the film is an 'unknown' as well, and as such he will remain"[45] — an anonymous reviewer of the film severely judged Waszynski and the film he made. Similar disdain was expressed in other reviews, which addressed: "a certain Michael Waszynsky, a Polish director, as distinguished as actually unknown",[46] or "a certain Jan Waszynski,

31) Ibid.
32) Ibid.
33) "Segnalazioni cinematografiche," 1948, accessed January 4, 2022, http://users.unimi.it/cattoliciecinema.
34) From a letter of Gino Gavuzzo to mons. Albino Galetto, MS 1948, accessed January 4, 2022, http://users.unimi.it/cattoliciecinema.
35) "Notizie circa vari settori," 1948, 7, accessed January 4, 2022, http://users.unimi.it/cattoliciecinema.
36) ACS.
37) Ibid.
38) Ibid.
39) Ibid.
40) Ibid.
41) Ibid.
42) Ibid.
43) Lorenzo Quaglietti, "Le prime cinematografiche," *L'Unità*, January 22, 1948, 3.
44) ACS.
45) Ibid.
46) Ibid.

whom we ask apologies for not identifying him better".[47] These sharp phrases happened to be astonishingly accurate, not only in regard to the director, but to the film's message regarding the fate of Poland and its acknowledgment in the post-war Italy as well. The perception of Poland and of Central Eastern Europe in Italy was compromised by the acceptance of the hegemony of Stalin and the Soviet Union over that region.

## The Polish Case in Post War Italy

Both films are examples of failed attempts to expose the Polish perspective on the Second World War. Italian film culture proved to be quite resistant to a perspective opposing the paradigm of communism as a positive and an indispensable element of the victorious conclusion of the war. All Italian cinematic images of the Second World War, from *Rome Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) to *Italiani brava gente* (Giuseppe De Santis, 1964) contained a communist hero, whereas any negative image of a communist seems to be unthinkable. Post-war Italy was constructed on the consent of communism as a legitimate partner in constructing the new post-war order. Any voice questioning the positive role of Stalin, the Soviet Union or communism in efforts to restore the peace, threatened the stability of this consensus. Poland and Poles were living testimonies of injustice, violence and terror suffered from Stalin's regime.

In this regard both films should be analysed against a broader political consensus upon which post-war Italy was reconstructed. The question as to what extent the difficulties the two Waszynski's war films experienced were a result of political influence, both internal (Italian government of national unity) and external (Soviet and communist Poland's diplomacy) remains open. It should by no means be considered the only factor of the films' poor reception in Italy. Studies on the post-war Italian film industry list several elements determining Italian film market, such as: American influences, censorship, legislation, taxation, and state fundings conditioning the local film production, audience preferences influenced mainly by Hollywood and hardly controllable influx of American cinema.[48] All those factors could negatively affect Waszynski's Italian films' reception in Italy in one way or another. However, a political element, namely a philosovietic consensus on which the interrelation between film culture, politics, and diplomacy in Italy was based, is underestimated and rarely taken into consideration[49]. This factor seems to be especially relevant in the case of the discussed films.

Studies on post-war Italian, Soviet and Polish diplomacy confirm the issue of the positive image of the Soviet Union, as well as diminishing the anti-Soviet circles, such as An-

47) Ibid.

48) Barbara Corsi, *Con qualche dollaro in meno: Storia economica del cinema italiano* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2001).

49) Barbara Corsi alludes to this problem in the introduction to her book, noticing that Italian film industry studies, by means of two principal books: Libero Bizzari and Libero Scolari's *L'industria cinematografica italiana* (Firenze: Parenti, 1958), and Lorenzo Quaglietti, *Storia economico politica del cinema italiano 1945–1980* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1980) are "conditioned by the communist cultural-ideological sphere, to which the authors belonged", see: Corsi, *Con qualche dollar in meno*, 11.

ders' army in Italy, were high on the agenda during the early post-war years. Already in the famous speech at the Brancaccio Theatre on 23rd July 1944, Alcide De Gasperi, at that time one of the leaders of resistance, later foreign affairs minister, prime minister, and long-standing leader of Christian Democracy (henceforth DC), took quite an unfavourable stand regarding the Polish case. In one sentence he acknowledged the Polish contribution to the liberation of Italy, but at the same time he expressed his unconditional confidence in Stalin "the great leader of peoples", who "will reconcile the interests of the safety of his borders and the freedom and unity of Poland". Such a statement meant nothing but a legitimisation for Stalinist hegemony over Poland and its shape. On subsequent occasions, the DC leader reiterated "loyal collaboration and friendship" with the Soviet Union.[50] Pietro Quaroni, the Italian ambassador in Moscow, repeatedly expressed a need to reduce any anti-Soviet voices from the Italian press and to conduct a more philosoviet campaign in the government dependent press. At the beginning of 1946 in his report, Quaroni explicitly named the 2nd Corps and General Anders, as desirable targets for "our partisan organisations", which could engage in battles "similar to the previous battles with the Germans".[51]

Similarly, diplomatic relations between the communist government in Poland and the Italian government, prove that the issue of Anders and the 2nd Corps was amongst those of greatest importance.[52] For the Polish communist government, any authority questioning its legality was a vital threat. In this sense, the communist Polish government achieved significant success in late 1946, when the Polish troops were finally removed from Italy, and Anders left without official honours.

Giulio Andreotti, DC politician responsible at the time for film censorship, had a similar attitude towards the Soviet Union: "politically I was born at the school of De Gasperi, who (…) was convinced the Soviets objectively were defenders of the peace".[53] This conviction was contradictory to the experience of the tens of thousands of Poles living in Italy, and to the image presented in the first film. The fate of both films proves how difficult the situation of Poles in Italy in the aftermath of the Second World War was. Opposing the regime installed in their country, they didn't find necessary feedback in Italy.

50) Roberto Morozzo Della Rocca, *La politica estera italiana e L'Unione Sovietica (1944–1948)* (Roma: La Goliardica, 1985), 88.

51) Ibid., 158. On a more nuanced view on geopolitics in the early cold war Italy and its relation to two opposing superpowers see: Mario Del Pero, "The United States and 'Psychological Warfare' in Italy, 1948–1955," *The Journal of American History*, March 2001; Guido Formigoni, *Storia d'Italia nella Guerra fredda (1943–1978)*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016).

52) Maria Pasztor and Dariusz Jarosz, *Nie tylko fiat: Z dziejów stosunków polsko-włoskich 1945–1989* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2018), 38.

53) Giulio Andreotti, *L'URSS vista da vicino* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1988), 8.

## A Missing Element of Film History

*The Great Way* and *The Unknown Man from San Marino* to a certain extent were excluded from film history and have been unknown to the general audience.[54] They remained stateless films, left outside of the national canons of cinema, both in Italy and in Poland. The Italian version remained unknown until 2015, when the only known original copy was discovered in the archive of the Museum of Science and Technology in Milan. In the 1950's the museum began free of charge screenings of non-commercial cinema for the public. It is unknown whether the film was part of those screenings, and under what circumstances it ended up in the archive.[55] The Polish version of the film was not officially released in Poland until after the collapse of the communist regime, while *The Unknown Man from San Marino* to the best of my knowledge has remained unknown to the Polish audience and has only occasionally been presented to the Italian audience.

On a more general level, the case of Waszynski's films proves that the presumed politics of communist containment in the Italian cinema industry operated differently than film studies tend to describe it.[56] Italian productions, by referring to the exceptional Polish experience with the USSR, could have been a good instrument in the cultural politics of containment of communist power. However, their potential was not only ignored but also their distribution was significantly reduced, thus critically limiting their impact on Italian society.

The value of those films is beyond a pure film studies connoisseurship. Their exclusion from film history shows one of the limits of what was acceptable in public discourse and in the way the memory of the Second World War was shaped. By means of found-footage the films were not only enriched, more dense, spectacular or eloquent, but aimed at becoming a part of the collective memory of the war, they served as a testimony, as proof. This point of view on the Second World War was not welcomed by the Italian film culture, though. To a certain extent it was a result of political calculation and diplomacy, which compromised Italian approach to the Soviet Union as well as to the Central Eastern Europe. Nowadays, during the revival of the Russian colonial expansionism resulting in the war in Ukraine, the critical revaluation and assessment of the role of cultural production in legitimizing Russian hegemony violently imposed on sovereign nations, seems to be of a particular importance and actuality.

---

54) Both films are absent in the main study on the Second World War in Italian cinema, although they virtually fitted the general premises of the study, as taking place in the territory of Italy during the war, see: Sara Pesce, *Memoria e imaginario: La seconda guerra mondiale nel cinema italiano* (Genova: Le Mani, 2008). Similarly, in the monumental study Calisto Cosulich, ed., *Storia del cinema italiano: 1945–1948* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2003), the scarce references to both films and to Waszynski, show how limited interest in this subject in Italian film studies has been. As for Polish film studies the situation is by no means better, apart from studies of the problem of war cinema, conducted mainly in 1970s. (beforementioned Jewsiewicki and Ozimek), only several articles appeared, among which Anna Miller-Klejsa's "Elegijna 'Wielka droga' Michała Waszyńskiego: tekst i konteks," is worth mentioning in Anna Miller-Klejsa and Monika Woźniak, eds., *Polsko-włoskie kontakty filmowe: topika, koprodukcje, recepcja*, (Łódź: WUŁ, 2014), 17–39.

55) Simona Casonato, "Storia del ritrovamento della versione italiana," *Alias*, November 14, 2015, 4.

56) Daniela Gennari Treveri, *Post-war Italian Cinema: American Intervention, Vatican Interests* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 15. See also: Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943–91* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000).

**Funding**

This work was funded by the National Science Centre in Poland, under the research project: 'Philosovietism in Post-Fascist Italian Film Culture', no. UMO-2019/32/C/HS2/00536.

**Bibliography**

Andreotti, Giulio. *L'URSS vista da vicino* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1988).

Bizzari, Libero and Libero Scolari. *L'industria cinematografica italiana* (Firenze: Parenti, 1958).

Bliss Lane, Arthur. *I Saw Poland Betrayed* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1947).

Casonato, Simona. "Storia del ritrovamento della versione italiana," *Alias*, November 14, 2015, 4.

Cenckiewicz, Sławomir. *Długie ramię Moskwy: Wywiad wojskowy Polski Ludowej 1943–1991 (wprowadzenie do syntezy)* (Poznań: Zysk, 2011).

Chitti, Roberto and Roberto Poppi, eds. *Dizionario del cinema italiano: I film: vol. 2: Dal 1945 al 1959* (Roma: Gremese Editore, 2000).

Corsi, Barbara. *Con qualche dollaro in meno: Storia economica del cinema italiano* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2001).

Cosulich, Calisto, ed. *Storia del cinema italiano: 1945–1948* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2003).

Davies, Norman. *God's Playground: A History of Poland: 1795 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Del Pero, Mario. "The United States and 'Psychological Warfare' in Italy, 1948–1955", *The Journal of American History*, March, 2001.

Dłużewska, Maria. *Trzy dni zdjęciowe z Ireną Anders i Albinem Ossowskim* (Warszawa: Trio, 2012).

Formigoni, Guido. *Storia d'Italia nella Guerra fredda (1943–1978)* (Bologna: Mulino, 2016).

Gennari Treveri, Daniela. *Post-war Italian Cinema: American Intervention, Vatican Interests* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Golemo, Karolina. *Obraz Polski i Polaków we Włoszech: poglądy, oceny, opinie* (Kraków: WUJ, 2010).

Guidi, Giulio. *Perché i polacchi non ritornano in patria?* (Roma: Maggi Spinelli, 1946).

Gundle, Stephen. *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture*, 1943–91 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

Jewsiewicki, Wiesław. *Polscy filmowcy na frontach drugiej wojny światowej* (Warszawa: WAiF, 1972).

Mackiewicz, Józef. *Zbrodnia Katyńska w świetle dokumentów* (London: Gryf, 1948).

Miller-Klejsa, Anna. "Elegijna 'Wielka droga' Michała Waszyńskiego: tekst i konteks," in *Polsko-włoskie kontakty filmowe: topika, koprodukcje, recepcja*, eds. Anna Miller-Klejsa and Monika Woźniak (Łódź: WUŁ, 2014), 17–39.

Morozzo Della Rocca, Roberto. *La politica estera italiana e L'Unione Sovietica (1944–1948)* (Roma: La Goliardica, 1985).

Ozimek, Stanisław. *Film polski w wojennej potrzebie* (Warszawa: PIW, 1974).

Pastuszka, Stanisław. *Życie kulturalne w Polskich Siłach Zbrojnych na zachodzie w czasie II Wojny Światowej* (Kielce and Warszawa: MHPRL, 2009).

Pasztor, Maria and Darius Jarosz. *Nie tylko fiat: Z dziejów stosunków polsko-włoskich 1945–1989* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2018).

Pesce, Sara. *Memoria e imaginario: La seconda Guerra mondiale nel cinema italiano* (Genova: Le Mani, 2008).

Pitassio, Francesco. *Neorealist Film Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).
Quaglietti, Lorenzo. "Le prime cinematografiche," *L'Unità*, January 22, 1948, 3.
Quaglietti, Lorenzo. *Storia economico-politica del cinema italiano 1945–1980* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1980).
Snyder, Timothy. *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015).
Snyder, Timothy. "Germans have been involved in the war, chiefly on the wrong side," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 27, 2022, accessed July 14, 2022, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/juergen-habermas-and-ukraine-germans-have-been-involved-in-the-war-18131718-p5.html.
Wiskemann, Elisabeth. "The Poles in Italy," *Spectator*, February 1, 1946, 6.
Żak, Józef. *Nie walczyli dla siebie: Powojenna odyseja 2. Korpusu Polskiego* (Warszawa: Rytm, 2014).

**Filmography**

*The Great Way* (Wielka droga, La grande strada, L'odissea di Montecassino; Michal Waszynski, 1946/1949)
*The Unknown Man from San Marino* (Lo sconosciuto di San Marino; Michal Waszynski, 1948)

**Biography**

**Karol Jóźwiak** is Assistant Professor in the Culture Studies Department of the University of Lodz. His main research areas address different issues of European transnational functioning of art and cinema in relation to the questions of memory, writing history, identity and politics in the twentieth century. Currently, he supervises the research project entitled 'Sovietophilia in Post-Fascist Italian Film Culture', funded by the Polish National Research Center, addressing the cinematic relations between Italy and Eastern-European countries of the Soviet bloc.