


DOCTRINE OF “TOTAL DEFENCE” IN POLISH MILITARY THOUGHT: FROM SIKORSKI TO WOJSKA OBRONY TERYTORIALNEJ (1934–2024)

Magdalena Zielińska 

Military University of Technology
Warsaw, Republic of Poland
E-mail: magdalena.zielinska@student.wat.edu.pl

Received: 02.09.2025. Approved: 21.12.2025.

Review scientific article

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65932/military-studies-2025-2-10>
UDC: 355.02:355.45(438)“1934/2024”

Abstract: The doctrine of total defence — understood as the integration of military, civilian, economic, and informational components into a unified national defence effort — has experienced a significant revival in Polish military thought after 2014, culminating in the formal establishment of the Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej (Territorial Defence Forces) in 2016/2017. This review study traces the genealogy of the Polish total-defence idea from its inter-war foundations in the work of Władysław Sikorski (*Przyszła wojna*, 1934) through the Cold War and post-1989 transition to its contemporary institutional form, and situates it within the broader Nordic-Baltic comparative context. The methodological approach combines a systematic review of post-2017 SCOPUS-indexed literature on Polish defence policy, strategic culture, and total-defence doctrine with primary-source analysis of Polish strategic documents and Sikorski’s foundational work. Results show three distinct phases of the Polish total-defence idea: (1) the inter-war strategic synthesis that integrated mass mobilisation with mechanised warfare; (2) the marginalisation of the concept under the Warsaw Pact system; and (3) the post-2014 revival driven by Russian hybrid threats, culminating in the WOT as a structural institutionalisation of the idea. The original contribution of this article consists in the longitudinal mapping of conceptual continuities and discontinuities between Sikorski’s 1934 framework and the contemporary WOT model, situated within the Nordic-Baltic total-defence revival. The study suggests that the Polish case represents a hybrid model in which Sikorski-era doctrinal heritage interacts with Nordic-style comprehensive defence and contemporary hybrid-threat response, with implications for NATO’s eastern flank deterrence architecture after 2022.

Keywords: *total defence, Polish military doctrine, Władysław Sikorski, Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, strategic culture, NATO eastern flank, hybrid threats.*

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of total defence, understood as an integration of military, civilian, economic, and informational components into a coordinated whole-of-society national

defence effort, has experienced a remarkable revival in European strategic thought after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea (Wither, 2020). Across the Nordic-Baltic region, total defence has been progressively reconfigured around the concept of

resilience and treated as the connective tissue of an emerging shared security culture (Wijnja, 2022). The Republic of Poland has become one of the most prominent cases of this revival, formally establishing the Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej in the period 2016 and 2017 as a structural institutionalisation of the total-defence idea, and subsequently expanding the force from approximately 24,000 personnel in 2019 toward a planned strength of more than 50,000 in seventeen light-infantry brigades (Fornúsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022).

What is striking, however, is that the Polish total-defence concept did not originate in the post-2014 period. Its intellectual lineage extends to the inter-war years, and in particular to the work of General Władysław Sikorski, whose 1934 monograph *Przyszła wojna: jej możliwości i charakter oraz związane z nim zagadnienia obrony kraju* articulated an integrated conception of national defence that combined mass mobilisation, mechanised warfare, civilian-industrial mobilisation, and a psychological-information dimension in a way that was, in several respects, ahead of Western inter-war military thought (Sikorski, 1934).

The contemporary Polish total-defence doctrine is therefore best understood not as a wholesale import of the Nordic-Baltic comprehensive-defence model that has shaped the Finnish, Swedish, and Estonian approaches (Wither, 2020), but as a hybrid in which the inter-war Sikorski heritage interacts with the post-Cold War Nordic-Baltic revival and with the specific operational requirements generated by Russian hybrid threats on NATO's eastern flank after 2014 (Fornúsek & Bartoszewicz, 2023; Libiseller, 2023). This hybridity is reinforced by Poland's distinctive strategic culture, shaped by its geographic position between Germany and Russia, its experience of partition and occupation, and its post-1989 commitment

to NATO and the European Union (Reeves, 2021).

Despite the centrality of the Territorial Defence Forces in Polish defence policy and their growing relevance for the NATO eastern-flank deterrence architecture, the conceptual lineage between Sikorski's 1934 framework and the contemporary institutional form has not been systematically traced in the Scopus-indexed literature. The two principal scholarly treatments of the force, by Fornúsek and Bartoszewicz (2022, 2023), focus on the policy and political context of the force's creation rather than on the *longue-durée* doctrinal continuity. Recent work on the affective and identity dimensions of the force (Bruns, 2022) reads it as a security provider through narratives of belonging but does not engage the inter-war doctrinal substrate. The comparative literature on Nordic-Baltic total defence (Wither, 2020; Wijnja, 2022) provides a useful analytical frame but does not extend its analysis to the specifically Polish case. The legal and conceptual scholarship on hybrid threats in Europe (Sanz-Caballero, 2023; Libiseller, 2023) offers vocabulary for the contemporary threat environment without engaging the doctrinal genealogy that underpins the country's distinctive approach.

The central research question of this review study is therefore how the contemporary Polish total-defence doctrine, embodied in the Territorial Defence Forces, relates to the inter-war total-defence framework articulated by Sikorski, and what this longitudinal relationship reveals about the broader logic of total defence within Polish strategic culture. The study proceeds from the hypothesis that the Polish case represents a distinctive hybrid model distinct from both the Nordic comprehensive-defence model and the Cold War Warsaw Pact territorial-defence approach, in which Sikorski's inter-war framework serves as a substantive doctrinal substrate that structures

the Polish reception and adaptation of the post-2014 total-defence revival.

The original contribution of this article consists in the longitudinal mapping of conceptual continuities and discontinuities between Sikorski's 1934 framework and the contemporary institutional form of the *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*, situated within the Nordic-Baltic total-defence revival and the NATO eastern-flank security architecture. This mapping has not been systematically demonstrated in prior Scopus literature, which has tended to treat the inter-war heritage and the contemporary institutional form as separate analytical objects.

The article is structured as follows. After this introduction, the methodology and literature review section describes the systematic-review approach, inclusion criteria, and analytical framework. The second analytical section examines the inter-war foundations of Polish total-defence thought through Sikorski's 1934 work. The third section traces the *longue-durée* development of Polish strategic culture and the marginalisation and rebirth of the total-defence idea. The fourth section analyses the creation of the *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* and its institutional architecture. The fifth section situates the Polish case in the Nordic-Baltic comparative context. The sixth section examines the post-2014 evolution under the impact of intensifying hybrid threats. The conclusion synthesises the findings and outlines implications for the NATO eastern-flank deterrence architecture.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

The post-2019 Scopus-indexed literature on Polish defence policy and territorial defence falls into four overlapping streams. The first stream, exemplified by Fornůsek

and Bartoszewicz (2022, 2023), reconstructs the historical and political context of the *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* and develops a benchmark-case methodology that contrasts units designed for external threats with units designed for internal threats. The second stream, represented by Bruns (2022), shifts the analytical lens to the affective and identity dimensions of the force, arguing that narratives of temporal and spatial belonging are constitutive of its social legitimacy. The third stream, broadly comparative, includes Wither (2020) on Nordic total-defence concepts and Wijnja (2022) on whether strategic culture matters for countering hybrid threats. The fourth stream, located at the intersection of strategic studies and security law, includes Libiseller's (2023) critical genealogy of the hybrid-warfare concept and Sanz-Caballero's (2023) analysis of the European legal framework applicable to hybrid threats.

Adjacent literatures contribute important contextual material. Reeves (2021) reconstructs Poland's contemporary strategic culture through an analysis of the 2020 National Security Strategy and identifies a layered strategic-subcultural pattern in which Atlanticist, Europeanist, and sovereigntist strands compete and combine. Gasztold and Gasztold (2022) document the Polish counterterrorism architecture as a structural component of the broader response to hybrid threats, while Lanoszka and Hunzeker (2023), evaluating the Enhanced Forward Presence after five years, situate Polish defence policy within the alliance-level deterrence reconfiguration on the eastern flank. The civil-defence dimension of the Territorial Defence Forces is examined empirically by Goniewicz, Goniewicz, and Burkle (2019), with subsequent assessment by Mazurkiewicz (2022) of force performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Foundational primary-source material remains Sikorski's (1934) monograph and the

institutional strategic documents issued by the Republic of Poland (MoND, 2020, 2022).

Research Methodology

The methodological approach combines a systematic review of post-2019 Scopus-indexed literature on Polish defence policy, strategic culture, and total defence with a primary-source analysis of Polish strategic documents and Sikorski's foundational work. Literature searching was conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science, and Taylor and Francis Online databases using combinations of keywords organised in three categories: a population or object category covering Polish military, Polish armed forces, *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*, Territorial Defence Force, *Polska*, and Sikorski; a concept category covering total defence, comprehensive defence, territorial defence, strategic culture, hybrid warfare, eastern flank, deterrence, and resilience; and a period category covering the inter-war years, the post-1989 transition, and the post-2014 reconfiguration. The temporal frame for the modern literature was 2019 to 2023, with primary sources from earlier periods admitted under the documented foundational-source exception (Sikorski, 1934).

Inclusion criteria were publication in Scopus-indexed journals (post-2019 priority), explicit treatment of Polish defence policy, total-defence doctrine, the *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*, or directly comparative Nordic-Baltic total-defence cases, full-text availability in English, and methodological rigour as assessed by the author. Studies focused exclusively on Polish-language domestic policy debates without explicit doctrinal-conceptual analysis were excluded; studies on Polish foreign policy without a substantive defence-doctrine component were also excluded. Foundational primary sources, including Sikorski's monograph

and the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, were retained as documented foundational exceptions, as required by the genealogical research design (Republic of Poland MoND, 2020).

The analytical framework distinguishes four levels at which total-defence doctrine operates: the strategic-culture level (deep cognitive structures, geopolitical self-understanding, *longue-durée* patterns), the doctrinal level (formal articulation of total-defence principles in military-theoretical works and strategic documents), the institutional level (organisational structures such as the *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*, civil-military relations, and conscription or volunteer mechanisms), and the operational level (force structure, training doctrine, integration with NATO). This four-level scheme draws on the comparative strategic-culture approach articulated by Reeves (2021) and Fornůsek and Bartoszewicz (2022) and on the comparative typology of total-defence variants developed by Wither (2020). Synthesis of findings was conducted using a narrative approach, integrating the four analytical levels across the temporal phases identified in the introduction. Due to the heterogeneity of source material, ranging from inter-war military theory to contemporary policy analysis, formal meta-analysis was neither possible nor appropriate.

Limitations of the methodological approach include the relative scarcity of English-language Scopus literature directly on the Sikorski-*Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* genealogical link, the dominance of policy-analytical rather than doctrinal-theoretical perspectives in the post-2019 Polish defence-studies literature, and the rapid evolution of the contemporary strategic environment that may render some assessments provisional. Despite these limitations, the systematic-review approach combined with primary-source genealogical analysis enables a coherent reconstruction of the Polish

total-defence doctrine across its inter-war, Cold War, and post-2014 phases.

INTER-WAR FOUNDATIONS OF POLISH TOTAL DEFENCE THOUGHT

The substantive intellectual foundation of the Polish total-defence idea was laid in the inter-war period, and most systematically in General Władysław Sikorski's 1934 monograph *Przyszła wojna: jej możliwości i charakter oraz związane z nim zagadnienia obrony kraju* (Sikorski, 1934). Drawing on his experience as commander in the 1920 Polish-Soviet war and as Prime Minister and Minister of Military Affairs in the early 1920s, Sikorski articulated an integrated conception of national defence that combined four elements rarely treated together in inter-war Western military thought: large-scale mobilisation of the citizenry, the operational employment of mechanised forces, the integration of civilian industrial capacity into the war effort, and the psychological-information dimension of national resilience.

Sikorski's framework was distinctive in two key respects relative to its inter-war Western contemporaries. First, it explicitly conceptualised the future war as a totalising societal effort that would pit the entire economic, demographic, and moral resources of one nation against another, anticipating in important ways the post-1945 conceptualisations of total war but doing so within an inter-war European framework. Second, it integrated this totalising vision with a specifically Polish geopolitical analysis, including the country's position between Germany and the Soviet Union, the length of its borders, and the absence of natural defensive features, to derive operational and institutional requirements that prefigured what would later be termed comprehensive national defence (Sikorski, 1934). Read against later typologies of total-defence strategic

logics, Sikorski's framework already articulated, *avant la lettre*, a deterrence-by-denial logic combined with mass-mobilisation participation, a logic that would much later become central to the Finnish post-Cold War model and indirectly to the contemporary Polish revival (Wither, 2020).

Contemporary Polish defence-studies scholarship situates Sikorski's framework within a *longue-durée* pattern of Polish strategic thought. Fornůsek and Bartoszewicz (2022), in their historical analysis of the Polish Territorial Defence Force, document a continuous lineage of Polish paramilitarism and territorial defence stretching from the partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century through the inter-war period to the contemporary *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*, with Sikorski's work representing the most theoretically developed inter-war articulation of this lineage. The wartime Polish Home Army and the post-war Polish Independence Underground are read in this literature as operational-political expressions of the same total-defence cultural matrix (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022). Bruns (2022), examining narratives of temporal and spatial belonging mobilised by the contemporary force, argues that this cultural matrix continues to perform real political work in the present, providing the affective infrastructure through which the force secures its social legitimacy.

The Sikorski framework was, however, only partly operationalised in the inter-war Polish armed forces. The September 1939 campaign exposed both the strengths of the Polish military, particularly the resilience of its mobilised mass infantry and the tenacity of its political-military leadership, and the gap between Sikorski's doctrinal vision and the actual material and industrial base available to the Polish state in 1939. The catastrophic 1939 defeat and the subsequent Nazi-Soviet occupation interrupted the institutional development of Polish

total-defence doctrine for almost half a century. Yet the underlying cultural matrix, what contemporary scholarship would later term Polish strategic culture, survived through the Polish Underground State, the Home Army, and the post-war independence underground (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022; Reeves, 2021).

For the purposes of the present review, the key analytical point is that Sikorski's 1934 framework establishes the doctrinal substrate against which the contemporary Polish total-defence revival should be read. The post-2014 reactivation of the total-defence idea in Polish defence policy is therefore not a pure import of the Nordic-Baltic comprehensive-defence model, but a reactivation of a long-dormant Polish doctrinal tradition that pre-dates the Nordic models by several decades.

POLISH STRATEGIC CULTURE AND THE LONGUE DURÉE OF TOTAL DEFENCE

The *longue-durée* development of Polish strategic culture provides the second analytical level at which the total-defence doctrine operates. The post-2019 Scopus literature on Polish strategic culture has documented a coherent set of cognitive structures that recur across the inter-war, Cold War, and post-1989 phases: a geopolitical self-understanding shaped by the position between Germany and Russia, a deep historical memory of partition and occupation, a tendency toward expeditionary-operational engagement when domestic resources permit, and a civil-military relationship in which the citizen-soldier nexus has been a central rather than peripheral element (Reeves, 2021).

Reeves (2021), in his Politeja analysis of Poland's 2020 National Security Strategy, argues that Polish strategic culture is best understood as layered, with at least three

identifiable subcultures (Atlanticist, Europeanist, and sovereigntist) competing for influence within the strategic community and producing sometimes dramatic shifts in security policy over time. This reading is broadly consistent with the longer-term genealogy traced by Fornůsek and Bartoszewicz (2022), who emphasise the persistence of the citizen-soldier nexus and the willingness to engage in protracted resistance as a cultural rather than narrowly institutional inheritance. The total-defence idea, in both readings, is not simply a technical response to a specific contemporary threat but a cultural expression of a long-standing self-understanding.

The Cold War period, dominated by Polish membership in the Warsaw Pact and the subordination of Polish military doctrine to Soviet operational concepts, represents an apparent discontinuity in this strategic-culture trajectory. Polish military thought during this period was substantively shaped by Soviet operational art and by the requirement to function as a forward echelon in a Warsaw-Pact offensive against NATO. The total-defence idea was effectively marginalised, although elements of civil-defence preparation and territorial-defence units were preserved within the Warsaw Pact framework. Fornůsek and Bartoszewicz (2022) document, however, that the underlying cultural matrix, the citizen-soldier nexus, the willingness to engage in protracted resistance, and the integration of civilian and military spheres in periods of crisis, survived through informal channels and was reactivated after 1989.

The post-1989 transition reoriented Polish defence policy toward NATO accession in 1999 and EU integration in 2004, and the dominant focus of military reform in the 1990s and 2000s was on professionalisation, interoperability, and expeditionary capability rather than on territorial or total defence. Polish participation in NATO operations in

the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan reflected this expeditionary orientation. The Polish counterterrorism architecture, analysed by Gasztold and Gasztold (2022), developed in this period as an instrumental tool that was, from the outset, designed to be available for response to a much wider catalogue of state and non-state hybrid threats.

The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine catalysed a reorientation of Polish defence policy from the expeditionary-NATO model back toward territorial and total defence. This reorientation, however, did not represent a simple return to the Cold War or inter-war past but a synthesis in which the long-dormant Sikorski-era doctrinal substrate was recombined with NATO interoperability requirements and with the new conceptual vocabulary of hybrid threats and resilience imported from the Nordic-Baltic and broader Western European literature (Wither, 2020; Libiseller, 2023; Wijnja, 2022).

THE BIRTH OF THE WOJSKA OBRONY TERYTORIALNEJ

The institutional crystallisation of the contemporary Polish total-defence doctrine occurred between 2015 and 2017 with the creation of the Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej. The recreation of a Territorial Defence Force was first announced in 2015 in direct reaction to the Donbas war and to Polish strategic concerns that the existing professional army, oriented toward expeditionary operations and high-end conventional combat, would be ill-equipped to confront an adversary employing a low-intensity hybrid combination of irregular forces, information operations, and conventional pressure (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2023). The formalisation followed in April 2016 with the signing by the Polish Minister of National Defence of the foundational document on the territorial-defence concept, and the force

became operational in 2017 (Republic of Poland MoND, 2020).

The institutional architecture of the force, as documented in the post-2019 Scopus-indexed literature, combines several distinctive features. First, the force is constituted primarily of part-time, all-volunteer soldiers drawn from the local population, with personnel receiving approximately thirty days of military training per year. Second, unlike the existing reserve forces, which on mobilisation are integrated into regular components of the Polish military, the territorial layer is designed to operate autonomously in home areas with personnel drawn from the local population, a structural choice that Polish military planners argue is most effective for countering hybrid warfare. Third, the force was deliberately scaled to grow from approximately 24,000 personnel in 2019 toward a planned strength of 53,000 in seventeen light-infantry brigades distributed across all Polish voivodeships (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022).

The post-2019 Scopus literature identifies two competing interpretive frames for the force's role and significance. The first frame, developed and assessed by Fornůsek and Bartoszewicz (2023), treats the Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej as a modern army for modern times, a structural innovation designed to provide Poland with a distributed, geographically rooted, and hybrid-warfare-resistant defensive layer that complements the high-end conventional operational forces. In this frame the force is understood as the contemporary operational expression of the long-standing Polish total-defence cultural matrix and of the Sikorski-era doctrinal substrate.

The second interpretive frame, which Fornůsek and Bartoszewicz (2023) document and critically assess, treats the force as a politically instrumentalised paramilitary force linked to the political objectives of the governing coalition that established it. In

this critical frame, the force is read less as a doctrinally coherent institutionalisation of total defence and more as a partisan deployment of the territorial-defence concept for domestic-political purposes. Drawing on a benchmark-case methodology that contrasts units designed for external threats with units designed for internal threats, the authors conclude that the force exhibits some characteristics of the latter alongside its primary external-threat orientation, and that the contemporary literature should hold both interpretations in tension rather than collapsing one into the other (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2023).

An additional analytical dimension is provided by post-2019 work on the affective and identity-based aspects of the force. Bruns (2022), in her analysis published in *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, develops the concept of security-through-emotions to argue that the narratives of temporal and spatial belonging the force mobilises, narratives that explicitly connect contemporary territorial defenders with the inter-war and wartime resistance traditions, represent an explicit reactivation of the Sikorski-era cultural substrate. This reactivation, Bruns suggests, is constitutive of the force's social legitimacy and its capacity to mobilise volunteers, and is not reducible to the partisan-political instrumentalisation thesis. The Polish total-defence revival, in this reading, is a genuine doctrinal-cultural phenomenon that is, however, also susceptible to political instrumentalisation, a tension that contemporary scholarship continues to track.

The civil-defence dimension of the *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*, the integration of the force with disaster response, civil emergency management, and societal resilience, is documented across the post-2019 Scopus-indexed literature. Empirical analysis of the force's role in disaster response and civil-military collaboration during states of emergency confirms that it operates at the

institutional intersection of military and civilian spheres, in line with the broader logic of total defence (Goniewicz, Goniewicz, & Burkle, 2019). Subsequent assessments of force performance during the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrate that the mixed-type structure of professional and volunteer personnel produced measurable innovation capacity in non-military crisis response, distinguishing the formation from conventional reserve components (Mazurkiewicz, 2022). Taken together, this body of work distinguishes the Polish territorial layer from purely military reserve formations and aligns it more closely with the comprehensive defence models developed in the Nordic-Baltic context.

THE NORDIC-BALTIC COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

The Polish total-defence revival cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the broader Nordic-Baltic revival of total and comprehensive defence concepts that has shaped European security thought since approximately 2014. Wither (2020), in his *Defence Studies* analysis of Nordic total-defence concepts, documents a differentiated landscape in which Finland maintained the total-defence concept consistently across the post-Cold War period, while Sweden discontinued and is now rebuilding its total-defence approach almost from the ground up. Norway, Denmark, and Estonia represent further variations within the Nordic-Baltic family. Wijnja (2022), comparing Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands, shows that strategic culture matters considerably for the design of national hybrid-threat responses, with countries differing in both the institutional architecture of security coordination and the scope of measures deployed.

The comparative literature has further differentiated the variants of total defence

operative in this region according to the role assigned to the citizenry (mass mobilisation versus volunteer-territorial), the degree of civil-military integration (institutional fusion versus functional coordination), the threat horizon (full-spectrum interstate war versus hybrid sub-threshold challenges), and the geographic scope (homeland defence versus expanded deterrence). Each of the Nordic-Baltic variants combines these dimensions differently, and the Polish case, when read against this typology, exhibits its own distinctive configuration (Wither, 2020). Sanz-Caballero (2023), examining the European legal framework for hybrid threats, notes that the conceptual indeterminacy at the European level produces space within which national variants of total defence can develop relatively autonomous doctrinal vocabularies.

Specifically, the Polish *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* model combines a volunteer-territorial citizen base, closer to the contemporary Estonian and Lithuanian models than to the Finnish conscription-based system, with a strong civil-military integration component closer to the Finnish model than to the Swedish reconstruction-from-scratch approach, a primarily hybrid-threat horizon consistent with the broader European post-2014 reorientation, and a geographic scope that combines homeland defence with the function of forward NATO eastern-flank presence (Wither, 2020; Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022). Lanoszka and Hunzeker (2023), evaluating the Enhanced Forward Presence after five years, emphasise that the eastern-flank deterrence architecture relies on a layered configuration in which national territorial-defence capabilities and alliance forward-presence components together generate credible denial.

The shared security culture that has been argued to emerge across the Nordic-Baltic total-defence space, sometimes captured under the heading of resilience

through total defence, is therefore relevant to but does not exhaust the Polish case (Wijnja, 2022). Poland brings to this emerging shared culture a distinctive doctrinal substrate inherited from the Sikorski era, a distinctive geographic position with forward exposure on NATO's eastern flank, including the longest border with Belarus and Russia after Lithuania, and a distinctive operational scale, with a planned territorial-force strength exceeding the active armed forces of several Nordic-Baltic comparator states combined.

The convergence and divergence between the Polish and Nordic-Baltic models is therefore best read as a genuine cross-fertilisation rather than as a one-way import. Polish defence planners drew explicit inspiration from Nordic-Baltic comprehensive-defence models in the design of the *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*, but reinterpreted these models through the lens of the inter-war Polish doctrinal heritage and the specific operational requirements of the eastern flank (Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2023; Wither, 2020).

POST-2014 EVOLUTION UNDER INTENSIFYING HYBRID THREATS

The Polish total-defence model has evolved substantially since 2014 under the pressure of an intensifying hybrid-threat environment. Three lines of evolution are documented in the post-2019 Scopus literature. First, Poland repositioned itself as one of the principal European actors on NATO's eastern flank through expansion of defence budgets and through substantive enlargement of the armed forces, including the territorial component (Republic of Poland MoND, 2022). Lanoszka and Hunzeker (2023), evaluating the Enhanced Forward Presence after five years, document how the Polish defence build-up interacts with the

alliance-level forward-presence architecture to generate layered deterrence on the eastern flank.

Second, the post-2014 environment has intensified the operational role of the Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej in responding to Russian and Belarusian hybrid threats, including weaponised migration across the Polish-Belarusian border, sabotage attempts, espionage, and information operations (Sanz-Caballero, 2023; Gasztold & Gasztold, 2022). Libiseller (2023), in her critical genealogy of the hybrid-warfare concept, cautions that the analytical category is theoretically underdeveloped and may absorb a heterogeneous set of phenomena under a single label; this caution is methodologically important for any assessment of Polish operational performance against so-called hybrid challenges. Sanz-Caballero (2023) further notes that the absence of a precise European legal definition produces ambiguity that adversaries can exploit and that defending states must navigate.

Third, the post-2014 environment has accelerated the integration of the Polish total-defence model with the broader NATO eastern-flank deterrence architecture, including the strengthening of the Enhanced Forward Presence, the establishment of bilateral defence-industrial cooperation with allied states, and the development of joint contingency planning. Lanoszka and Hunzeker (2023) read this integration as a milestone in the post-Cold War reconfiguration of allied deterrence in which the eastern allies have become structuring agents rather than mere recipients of alliance protection.

The intensifying hybrid-threat environment has also strained the institutional model of the Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej. The volunteer-territorial structure, designed for sustained low-intensity engagement, has had to demonstrate its operational utility against an expanded threat catalogue that includes drone incursions, infrastructure

sabotage, and weaponised-migration episodes that combine criminal, intelligence, and military components. The contemporary literature suggests that the force has performed credibly in this environment, but also that the post-2014 period has revealed the limits of any single institutional model and the need for continued adaptation (Fornůšek & Bartoszewicz, 2023; Gasztold & Gasztold, 2022).

From a doctrinal perspective, the post-2014 evolution has had the effect of pulling the Polish total-defence concept further in the direction of the comprehensive-defence model, that is, toward an even more integrated whole-of-society approach in which civilian resilience, infrastructure protection, and information-environment defence are treated as components of the same defence effort as the military instrument. In this respect the Polish trajectory converges with the Nordic-Baltic trajectory documented by Wither (2020), although the operational intensity and the scale of the Polish effort distinguish it within that converging family (Wijnja, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This review study has traced the genealogy of the Polish total-defence doctrine from its inter-war foundations in Sikorski's *Przyszła wojna* (Sikorski, 1934) through the Cold War and post-1989 transition to its contemporary institutionalisation in the Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, and has situated this trajectory within the Nordic-Baltic comparative context and the NATO eastern-flank security architecture.

The principal finding is that the Polish total-defence concept represents a distinctive hybrid model in which the inter-war Sikorski-era doctrinal substrate interacts with the post-Cold War Nordic-Baltic total-defence revival and with the specific operational requirements of NATO's eastern

flank. The *longue-durée* Polish strategic culture documented in the post-2019 Scopus literature provides the cognitive matrix within which the contemporary force model has been received and adapted, with Sikorski's 1934 framework functioning as an underlying doctrinal substrate that pre-dates the Nordic models by several decades (Reeves, 2021; Fornůsek & Bartoszewicz, 2022).

Three implications follow from this analysis. First, the Polish total-defence model should not be read as a pure import of the Nordic-Baltic comprehensive-defence approach, but as a genuine hybrid in which an indigenous doctrinal heritage structures the reception of imported models. This reading has implications for the comparative analysis of total-defence variants across NATO and for the design of alliance-level frameworks that acknowledge national doctrinal heritage rather than treating total-defence concepts as ideologically neutral technical templates (Wither, 2020; Wijnja, 2022).

Second, the *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* exhibits genuine doctrinal coherence as the contemporary institutional expression of the Polish total-defence cultural matrix, while at the same time remaining susceptible to political instrumentalisation. The post-2019 Scopus literature, particularly the studies by Fornůsek and Bartoszewicz (2022, 2023) and Bruns (2022), correctly holds both readings in tension. The post-2014 operational environment has, on balance, strengthened the doctrinal-coherence reading by demonstrating the force's capacity to respond to hybrid threats across the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Russian frontiers, but the political-instrumentalisation concern remains analytically live and merits continued scholarly attention, particularly in the light of Libiseller's (2023) caution about the conceptual overstretch of the hybrid-warfare label.

Third, the post-2014 evolution of the Polish total-defence model is moving in the direction of the comprehensive-defence variant identified in the Nordic-Baltic literature, that is, toward a more thoroughly whole-of-society approach in which civilian resilience, infrastructure protection, and information-environment defence are treated as components of the same defence effort as the military instrument. This convergence, together with the operational scale and forward geographic exposure of the Polish case, positions Poland as one of the structuring actors of the emerging European total-defence space, with implications for the NATO eastern-flank deterrence architecture that extend well beyond the Polish national context (Lanoszka & Hunzeker, 2023; Wither, 2020).

The principal original contribution of this article is the longitudinal mapping of conceptual continuities and discontinuities between Sikorski's 1934 framework and the contemporary *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* model, situated within the Nordic-Baltic total-defence revival. This mapping has not been systematically demonstrated in prior Scopus literature, which has tended to treat the inter-war heritage and the contemporary institutional form as separate analytical objects.

Limitations of the present review include the relative scarcity of English-language Scopus literature directly on the Sikorski-*Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* genealogical link, the dominance of policy-analytical rather than doctrinal-theoretical perspectives in the post-2019 Polish defence-studies literature, and the rapidly evolving strategic environment that may render some of the most recent assessments provisional. Future research should explore the Polish-language doctrinal literature systematically, develop comparative analyses of the Polish, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Finnish models, and examine the operational performance of the

Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej in responding to the full spectrum of contemporary hybrid threats. In a broader context, the Polish total-defence doctrine, read as a *longue-durée* phenomenon that integrates inter-war intellectual heritage with contemporary operational requirements, represents one of the

more theoretically interesting cases of European defence-doctrinal evolution in the post-2014 period. Its scholarly study illuminates not only Polish defence policy but the broader logic of total defence as a category of contemporary European security thought.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruns, B. (2022). Security through emotions: Narratives of temporal and spatial belongings of the Polish Territorial Defence Forces. *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 64(4), 445–467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2135357>
- Fornůsek, M., & Bartoszewicz, M. G. (2022). The study of the Polish Territorial Defense Force: Historical insights and policy considerations. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 35(1), 30–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2022.2045804>
- Fornůsek, M., & Bartoszewicz, M. G. (2023). Modern army for modern times or private paramilitary? Polish Territorial Defense Force as a benchmark case in conflict evolution. *Democracy and Security*, 20(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2023.2220108>
- Gasztold, A., & Gasztold, P. (2022). The Polish counterterrorism system and hybrid warfare threats. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34(6), 1259–1276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1777110>
- Goniewicz, K., Goniewicz, M., & Burkle, F. M., Jr. (2019). The Territorial Defence Force in disaster response in Poland: Civil-military collaboration during a state of emergency. *Sustainability*, 11(2), Article 487. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11020487>
- Lanoszka, A., & Hunzeker, M. A. (2023). Evaluating the Enhanced Forward Presence after five years. *The RUSI Journal*, 168(1–2), 88–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2023.2190352>
- Libiseller, C. (2023). 'Hybrid warfare' as an academic fashion. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 46(4), 858–880. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2177987>
- Mazurkiewicz, A. (2022). Polish Territorial Defence Forces and innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic: The assessment of the potential of a mixed-type force in non-military crisis response. *Politeja*, 19(4/79), 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.19.2022.79.11>
- Reeves, C. (2021). Discerning Poland's contemporary strategic culture: An analysis of the 2020 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland. *Politeja*, 18(6/75), 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.18.2021.75.14>
- Republic of Poland, Ministry of National Defence. (2020). *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland*. Warsaw: Ministry of National Defence.
- Republic of Poland, Ministry of National Defence. (2022). *Detailed directions of reform and technical modernisation of the Armed Forces for 2022–2035*. Warsaw: Ministry of National Defence.
- Sanz-Caballero, S. (2023). The concepts and laws applicable to hybrid threats, with a special focus on Europe. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), Article 360. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01864-y>

- Sikorski, W. (1934). *Przyszła wojna: Jej możliwości i charakter oraz związane z nim zagadnienia obrony kraju* [The future war: Its possibilities and character and associated questions of national defence]. Warsaw: Wojskowy Instytut Naukowo-Wydawniczy.
- Wijnja, K. (2022). Countering hybrid threats: Does strategic culture matter? *Defence Studies*, 22(1), 16–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2021.1945452>
- Wither, J. K. (2020). Back to the future? Nordic total defence concepts. *Defence Studies*, 20(1), 61–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2020.1718498>

DOKTRINA “TOTALNE ODBRANE” U POLJSKOJ VOJNOJ MISLI: OD SIKORSKOG DO WOJSKA OBRONY TERYTORIALNEJ (1934–2024)

Magdalena Zjelinjska

Vojna tehnička akademija
Varšava, Republika Poljska
E-mail: magdalena.zielinska@student.wat.edu.pl

Primljeno: 02.09.2025. Odobreno: 21.12.2025.

Pregledni naučni članak

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65932/military-studies-2025-2-10>

UDK: 355.02:355.45(438)“1934/2024”

Sažetak: Doktrina totalne odbrane — shvaćena kao integracija vojnih, civilnih, ekonomskih i informacijskih komponenti u jedinstven nacionalni odbrambeni napor — doživjela je značajan preporod u poljskoj vojnoj misli nakon 2014. godine, kulminirajući formalnim uspostavljanjem Vojska Obrony Terytorialnej (Snage teritorijalne odbrane) 2016/2017. Ova pregledna studija prati genealogiju poljske ideje totalne odbrane od njenih međuratnih osnova u djelu Władysława Sikorskog (Przyszła wojna, 1934) kroz Hladni rat i tranziciju nakon 1989. godine do njenog savremenog institucionalnog oblika, te je smješta u širi nordijsko-baltički komparativni kontekst. Metodološki pristup kombinuje sistematski pregled post-2017 SCOPUS-indeksirane literature o poljskoj odbrambenoj politici, strateškoj kulturi i doktrini totalne odbrane s primarnom-izvornom analizom poljskih strateških dokumenata i Sikorskog fundamentalnog djela. Rezultati pokazuju tri distinktna faze poljske ideje totalne odbrane: (1) međuratna strateška sinteza koja je integrisala masovnu mobilizaciju s mehanizovanim ratovanjem; (2) marginalizacija koncepta pod sistemom Varšavskog pakta; i (3) post-2014 preporod pokrenut ruskim hibridnim prijetnjama, kulminirajući u WOT-u kao strukturnoj institucionalizaciji ideje. Originalni doprinos ovog članka sastoji se u longitudinalnom mapiranju konceptualnih kontinuiteta i diskontinuiteta između Sikorskog okvira iz 1934. godine i savremenog WOT modela, smještenog unutar nordijsko-baltičkog preporoda totalne odbrane. Studija sugerise da poljski slučaj predstavlja hibridni model u kojem doktrinarno nasljeđe iz Sikorskog ere djeluje sa sveobuhvatnom odbranom nordijskog tipa i sa savremenim odgovorom na hibridne prijetnje, sa implikacijama za arhitekturu odvratanja na istočnom krilu NATO-a nakon 2022. godine.

Ključne riječi: *totalna odbrana, poljska vojna doktrina, Władysław Sikorski, Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej, strateška kultura, istočno krilo NATO-a, hibridne prijetnje.*