

Institute of National Remembrance

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A fifty-year span might seem to be a short period in the history of a state or a nation, but on the other hand, this might be a period when everything, including the political system, territory, and developmental pace of a state changes. The Institute of National Remembrance focuses on the fifty years of the history of the Polish nation from 1939 to 1989, which is a period unprecedented change. It encompasses the events that impacted Poland and Polish society during World War II, the German and Soviet occupations, and the history when Poland was under the Communist regime.

It must be remembered that Poland was the first country to stand against Hitler's and Stalin's invasion plans. The country had been divided between invaders, and the Polish civil population became subject to brutal repressions by both the Nazis and the Soviets. As early as in 1939, the first mass executions took place in the German occupied territory. Hitler's repressions were directed especially against Polish political, cultural, religious, social and intellectual elites. Similarly, hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens living in the territories occupied by the Soviet Union had been deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan to live in inhuman conditions. Many of those people never came back to their homeland.

The fate of the Jewish population living in the German occupied Polish territories was especially tragic. Before the outbreak of World War II, around 3 million Jews lived in the territory of the Polish state, amounting to about 10% of the population of Poland at that time. From that number, fewer than 300 thousand Jews survived. The largest concentration camps in occupied Europe were organised by the Nazis in the Polish territories (e.g. Aushwitz-Birkenau). Moreover, Poland was the place where Nazis created the death camps, the true 'death factories', where Hitler's final solution was to be carried out.

Despite being one of the victors in World War II, Poland was physically devastated. As a result of the decision of the Great Three, one half of Poland's pre-war territory was turned over to the Soviet Union, and Poland in turn gained territories in the West and North at the expense of Germany. As a result, Poland became a country with territory smaller by 20% of its pre-war size. As a result of the war, occupation, extermination of the Jews, and displacement of population caused by territorial policies, the population of Poland decreased from about 35 million to around 24 million, which is comparable to the population in the late 19th century. While such a demographic catastrophe has been called victory, it is fearsome to consider what defeated Poland could look like.

From 1944 to 1989, Poland was under the Communist rule. Despite changes during that period, Poland had no sovereignty though it enjoyed recognition in the international arena. During that forty-five year period, all key decisions regarding both Polish foreign and domestic policies were made in Moscow. At the same time, despite changes brought about by social upheaval in

1956, 1968, 1970, 1976 and 1980, Poland was under totalitarian rule. The scope and character of totalitarian repression was most intense during Stalinist times, which lasted until the mid 1950s.

Poland was not free from political repression also after 1980. Nevertheless, during the 1980s, the Solidarity movement, with its charismatic leader Lech Wałęsa, came on the political scene. The Communists were not able to hold on to their dictatorship in spite of Martial law imposed on Poland in December 1981. Thousands of Solidarity leaders were arrested. The 'disciplinary forces' brutally put down the strikes in shipyards, factories, steelworks, and coalmines. Workers were killed and wounded. This tragedy is documented by the Institute of National Remembrance.

A few years had passed and the world changed immensely. Unprecedented reforms in the Soviet Union within the Perestroika programme and the politics of the United States which gained a military and technological dominance enabled the Central and Eastern European countries to finally release themselves from the Soviet rule. Poland has long been ready to initiate radical changes which benefited the Polish nation and the whole Central and Eastern European region.

In 1989, as a result of the Round Table negotiations the historical compromise was reached. 'Solidarity' officially entered the political scene. On June 4, 1989 the first free elections to the Senate and partially free - contracted - elections to the Sejm took place. Poles voted against the old political system. Three months later the first independent government headed by Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki was created. It took three further months to change the official name of the state: People's Republic of Poland became history; a free and democratic Republic of Poland was born.