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Soviet crimes and repressions against Polish citizens after September 17th, 1939

Several days after the German attack on Poland of September 1st, 1939, the Soviet Union fulfilled its obligation concerning Poland included in the secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 23rd, 1939. This obligation was the attack of September 17th against the eastern areas of Poland, a surprising turn of events. The fact that the authorities of the Second Polish Republic did not expect an attack from the east was among others due to the fact that both countries were bound by a non-aggression pact.



Soviet invasion

The USSR never officially declared war on Poland, only handing the ambassador in Moscow a note informing that the Polish state had ceased to exist and that the Red Army will take the Belorussians and Ukrainians living in the eastern areas of Poland under their care. The Polish authorities also did not declare war against the Soviet Union, hence, no such state came to exist between these both countries. In practice, however, in various areas of the Eastern Borderlands of Poland, the border guards, the military, even civilians resisted the incoming Bolshevik forces.

Soviets and active resistance

One of the characteristic properties of the undeclared Polish-Soviet war that was commenced on September 17th, 1939, were numerous repressions and crimes by the invaders. They were first felt by those who actively participated in defence of the country. Members of the military and civilians, who, under the influence of the enemy were ultimately forced to abandon the fight, were frequently murdered for their resistance. The most significant is the case of the fate of ca. 300 defenders of Grodno, who were shot to death for their bravery, even though there were many civilians, including teen boys, among their ranks.

The Red Army and the NKVD was brutal in their treatment of the defenders of the guard posts of the Border Protection Corps. Wherever the soldiers would strongly resist, they were frequently shot in revenge. An example of this may be the localities of Kalety and Lipiany on the Channel of Augustów, where many boarder corps soldiers were shot. Czesław Grzelak estimates that the three weeks of military actions by the Red Army in the Second Polish Republic brought about the deaths of ca. 1.5 thousand Polish citizens.

Soviet activity in September 1939 was also characterised by neglect of the documents signed earlier. The act of capitulation of Lviv stated that the defenders of the city may leave in any direction. However, 1160 officers were detained and transported to camps, where they later died. In addition, the Soviets shot a party of policemen in Zielona street, with another group murdered at the Brygidki prison.

The Soviets also allowed themselves numerous violations, plunder and beatings, frequently an expression of the lawlessness of some Red Army soldiers or NKVD personnel. To complete this picture, the information must be added that operations against the Polish Army and the Polish civilian population were conducted by sabotage groups organised by the Soviets in the eastern part of the Second Polish Republic. They lynched the Poles, broke up state police force buildings, attacked commune authorities, committed arson, plunder and rape.

Treatment of prisoners of war

In course of the military activities, as well as due to the fact of not fighting the Red Army by the units that received the order of marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły recommending the avoidance of fighting the Soviets, ca. 240,000 Polish soldiers were taken prisoner. Even in Autumn of 1939 most privates and non-commissioned officers were released, with 42,492 persons from the same category from areas occupied by the Third Reich were transferred to Germany. At the same time, the Germans transferred 13,757 POWs from USSR-occupied lands to their ally. Most prisoners of war who weren't reserve officers of the Polish Army or policemen were released. As a result of these actions, in the beginning of 1940, ca. forty thousand soldiers and officers of the Polish army as well as policemen remained detained in the USSR.

Ca. 15.5 thousand prisoners of war made their way to the „NKVD construction site no. 1”, as the camp of Rivne is usually called. It was

the largest labour camp for prisoners of war, made up of ca. 20 camp locations located along the strategic road built between Novohrad-Volynskyi and Lviv, running through Rivne and Dubno. Another group of prisoners of war, totalling over ten thousand people, was sent to iron ore and limestone mines in the Ukraine, making up the „Nikopol-Marganec” union. Three camp systems were constructed there: for Zaporizhzhia, trzy systemy obozowe: zaporoski, Kryvyi Rih as well as Yelenovka and Karakuba. In total, in Autumn of 1939 ca. 26,000 Polish prisoners of war were sent to Soviet labour camps.

In order to keep the officers of the army and other uniformed forces in prison, in the beginning of November of 1939, a network of special camps was set up. The camps of Kozelsk and Starobilsk housed ca. 4.5 and four thousand officers of the Polish Army, respectively, with the camp in Ostashkov used to keep ca. six thousand policemen, officers of the intelligence and counter-intelligence services, gendarmerie, personnel of the prison service and other uniformed forces. In total, the three indicated camps housed over 14.5 thousand prisoners of war. In the Spring of 1940 the majority were murdered as part of the Katyn Massacre.

Arrests of Polish citizens

Already in the first days of the war, the Soviets commenced arresting Polish citizens. Their most frequent prey were those, who were considered dangerous or opposed to the USSR, e. g. officers of the

army, policemen, officers of the authorities, court judges, boy scouts, etc. In total, between September 17th, 1939, and June 22nd, 1941, ca. 150,000 Polish citizens were arrested. They were kept at prisons created in the annexed lands. About half of those arrested were sent to forced labour to so-called łagry camps. At least 1200 were sentenced to death, with over 7.3 thousand murdered during the Katyn Massacre.

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