

*The Fighting* MACIEJ KORCUĆ  
*Republic*  
*of Poland*  
1939–1945



INSTYTUT  
PAMIĘCI  
NARODOWEJ

Reviewers

Prof. dr hab. Marek Wierzbicki

Dr hab. Zdzisław Zblewski

Translated by IURIDICO Legal & Financial Translations Sp. z o.o.  
(employer Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Proofreading and typesetting  
Publishing House of the IPN

Cover

Elżbieta Waga-Krajewska

Graphic design

Sylwia Szafrńska

Printed by

Pasaż Sp. z o.o.

ul. Rydlówka 24, 30-363 Kraków

ISBN 978-83-8098-769-2

© Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, 2019

# SPIS TREŚCI

Foreword .....	5
<b>I.</b> The Versailles Order .....	7
<b>II.</b> 1939: A war fought alone instead of Allied pincers .....	13
<b>III.</b> A state resisting the occupations .....	33
<b>IV.</b> The terror of occupation and genocide .....	47
<b>V.</b> The Polish Underground State .....	81
<b>VI.</b> A sinister “ally” .....	93
<b>VII.</b> Freedom: not for Poles .....	105





# FOREWORD

World War II changed the course of history. Started by the Germans with the complicity of the Soviet Union, it led to unimaginable destruction and millions of deaths. Later, it brought many nations under Soviet domination for almost fifty years and left the world divided in the Cold War.

Poland fell victim to the aggression of both totalitarian systems, German national socialism and Soviet communism. The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact entered into by the Third Reich and Soviet Union on 23 August 1939 was the prelude to a global conflict, started on 1 September 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland, the first country to demonstrate actual armed resistance against the aggressor, ending the string of Berlin's peaceful conquests. Seventeen days later, on 17 September 1939, attacked from the east, Poland had to confront yet another aggressor, the Soviet Union. Crushed in a death grip, she never surrendered. She did not capitulate, or become a quisling state. From the start to the end of military conflict of 1939–1945, the Republic of Poland was firmly in the Allied camp.

What are Europe's memories of World War II? Can this course of events be forgotten or distorted? Is it obvious today who was the victim and who the oppressor? This publication, issued by the Institute of National Remembrance, recalls the outcomes of these days.

If it is true that *historia magistra vitae est*, – history is life's teacher – educating future generations and building national identity cannot be based on lies and oblivion. Such policy can only bring a new evil. Truth is the only way to build a peaceful future in Europe.

The best way to understand a country is to learn about its history. I hope that this compendium on the Republic of Poland during World War II – appearing in seven languages – will serve that purpose. The Europeans should show mutual respect and understanding for their history. I wish to thank the author and those behind this project for preparing this publication which is so greatly needed today.

Dr Jarosław Szarek President  
Institute of National Remembrance

The image features a stylized map of Europe on the left side, with Poland highlighted in a bright yellow and orange color. The rest of the map is in a light grey tone. The text is positioned to the right of the map.

## **The Second World War** began in

1939 with the aggression of two totalitarian powers against Poland. On 1 September 1939, the country was attacked by the German Reich, and on 17 September 1939 Soviet Union joined in the assault. The German–Soviet military cooperation precipitated a disaster which left deep scars on the history of Poland. The end of war brought a new time of freedom to Western Europe only, while Poland's lot was subjugation under the Soviet heel. Despite the painful experience, successive generations of Poles doggedly fought for their freedom and an independent state, a desire realized only after the downfall of Communism in 1989, fifty years after the tragedy of 1939.

Despite the passage of time, the experience of the Second World War remains an important feature of Polish identity. Yet the position of Republic of Poland during the war remains an underappreciated element of the Polish state's heritage and is also an important point of reference when discussing the history of Europe in the era of totalitarian aggression, crimes, and genocide.



# I

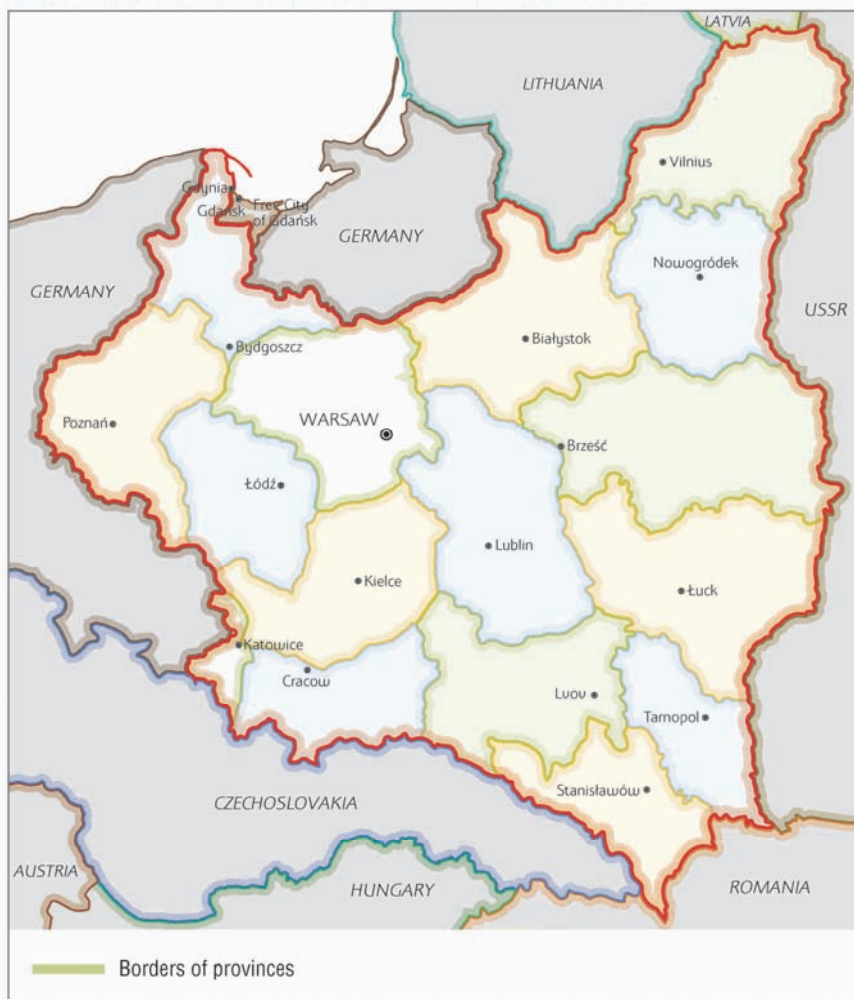
## THE VERSAILLES ORDER

### INDEPENDENCE

In 1918, after 123 years of bondage, Poland returned to the political map of Europe. The First World War and the internal turmoil resulted in the breakdown of all three states (Austria, Germany, and Russia) that had partitioned Poland's territory in the late eighteenth century. In these circumstances, it was the sustained effort of the Poles themselves, tenaciously claiming their right to freedom and sovereignty, that made it possible for an independent state to be reborn. The determination to defend the borders, and especially the great military victories over the Bolsheviks at Warsaw and on the Neman River in 1920, not only saved Poland's independence, but also spared the majority of Europe the experience of Communist domination.

In 1939, the territory of Poland exceeded 389,000 square kilometres, making it one of the larger European countries. However, Poland's territory as well as her human and economic potential were much smaller than those of neighbouring Germany and the Soviet Union, the latter being the largest state in the world. Just before the outbreak of war, Poland had a population of 35 million. According to detailed censuses, Poles accounted for 69% of the population, the largest minority being Ukrainians (14% of the population), living mostly in the south-east. The second most numerous national minority were the Jews, scattered all over the country, but

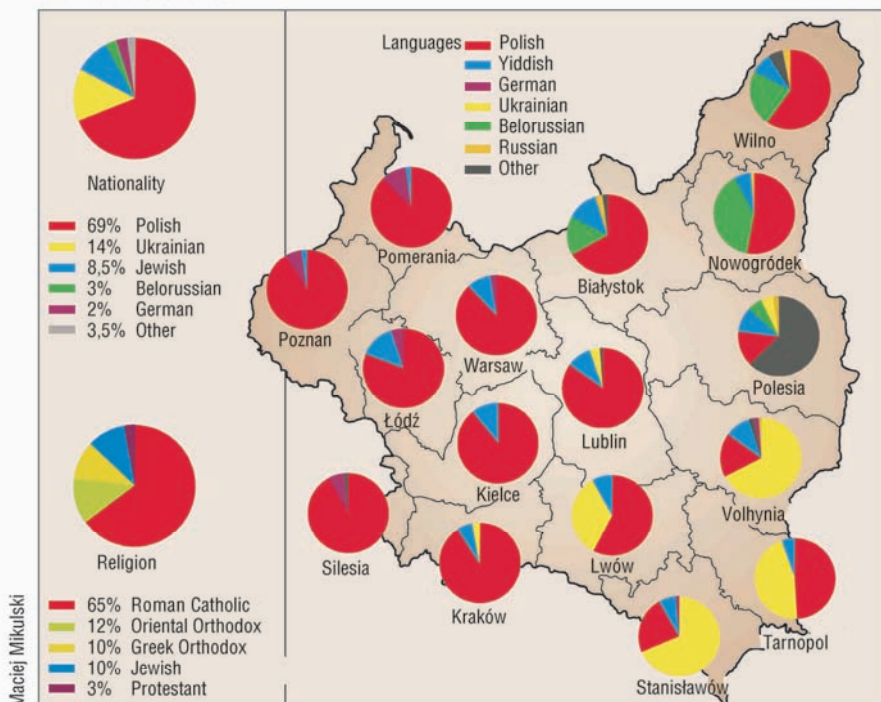
## SECOND POLISH REPUBLIC BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS



living in especially large numbers in the cities, accounting for nearly 9% of all Polish citizens. Other significant national minorities in pre-war Poland included Belarusians (slightly above 3%) and Germans (above 2%).



## SECOND POLISH REPUBLIC SOCIETY – NATIONALITIES, RELIGIONS AND LANGUAGES



Reborn after decades of foreign domination, Poland was like the other new Central and Eastern European states located between Germany and the Soviet Union, part of the so-called Versailles order. It is therefore not a coincidence that the Second Polish Republic was interested in maintaining a lasting peace in Europe by reinforcing the pillars of Versailles.

Yet both of Poland's totalitarian neighbours – the national socialist Germany and the communist Soviet Union – persistently strove to dismantle the Versailles order. Adolf Hitler considered it a strategic goal to recapture the territories lost by the German state in the wake of the First World War and also to obtain for Germans the so-called *Lebensraum* ("living space") in the east of the continent.

---

On the other hand, the Communist Party governing the Soviet Union as well as its leaders never ceased to plan the expansion of the Soviet empire by bringing the revolution to the whole of Europe and beyond. Communist ideology was to conquer the whole world, become the foundation of global Soviet power, bring down borders and contribute to a new social and political reality of a totalitarian bent.

The existence of sovereign Poland formed a speed bump on these long-term schemes for remaking the continent. The Polish people, with their pride in their recently regained independence (in 1918) and devotion to civil liberty ideals, was becoming a natural obstacle to the expansion of totalitarian states, the contemporary version of slavery.

## “LIVING SPACE”

While rebuilding the power of the Reich, Hitler was forced to tolerate the existence of the Polish state, even consenting to sign a declaration of non-violence in 1934. Yet among the narrow group of German decision-makers, he did not conceal that he treated Poland as a significant hindrance to attaining long-term German objectives. On 5 November 1937, at a council in the Chancellery of the Reich attended by the ministers of war and foreign affairs and the supreme commanders of the forces, he mentioned that the steady population increase and shortage of arable land would drive the Reich, no later than in the forties, to acquire *Lebensraum* in the east of Europe.

Hitler had actually expressed this view already in *Mein Kampf*, in which he rejected demands that Germans should obtain colonies on faraway continents. He believed establishing colonies in the vicinity of Germany, specifically to the east, to be more worthwhile: “obtaining new territories for the settlement of an increasing number of citizens [of the Reich] brings vast advantages, especially if you take into consideration the future rather than just the present moment. The only hope for the success of this territorial policy are today conquests in Europe and not, for instance, in Cameroon. The fight for our existence is a natural tendency (...) That is why the only hope of Germany for running a healthy territorial policy lies in capturing new territory in Europe.” It was only in the east of the continent that Hitler wanted to see what he described as lands lying “close to his state” and “suitable for large-scale settlement of Europeans”. In these schemes, there was no

---

room for a Polish state with 35 million people independent of Germany and catering to its own interests, a state that would stand between the Germans and their *living space*.

The existence of a free Poland was absolutely inconsistent with Hitler's idea. Moreover, every approach to Poland's coexistence with a totalitarian, empire-like, and powerful German Reich bent on implementing the *Lebensraum* utopia was a mortal danger to Poland's very being. History has proved that any concessions intended to win Hitler's friendship opened the door to total dependence and surrender to the mercy (or lack thereof) of the totalitarian juggernaut.

## “THE DAM”

The Bolshevik revolution was to become the seed of a new organisation of the global order, which was its ideological *raison d'être*. The idea that spurred Lenin and Stalin was not to establish one or several communist states, but to unleash a global revolution that would significantly change the face of the society, economy, and culture of all countries and nations. This had already been mentioned in the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels and was repeatedly brought up by the Bolsheviks. The utopia was perfectly expressed by the emblem that doubled as the symbol of the USSR: a sickle and a hammer placed against the background of the Earth and dominated by a red star. Vladimir Lenin clearly stated that armed force is necessary to achieve the task which is “the consummation of the global proletarian revolution, the establishment of a worldwide soviet republic”. Even the Constitution of the USSR of 1924 mentions “uniting the workers of all countries into the world-wide Soviet Socialist Republic”. These intentions were not abandoned, even for a moment, by the new rulers of the Kremlin between the two world wars. Joseph Stalin continued the utopian visions of his predecessor, and building communism on the territory of the former Russian Empire was no more than a stage.

The key to the continental victory of Bolshevism in the Soviet design was merging the revolution in Russia with the revolution in Germany. The lost war with Poland in 1920 was of fundamental importance for halting the revolution's progress, as it was Poland that had delimited the Soviet sphere on the European continent. The Bolsheviks never doubted that this had put a halt to their intention to liquidate the former political and social



---

order throughout Europe. After the lost battles of Warsaw and the Neman, on 2 October 1920 Lenin stated that “breaking the Polish army, we break the peace of Versailles, on which the entire system of present international relations hinges. If Poland had become Soviet (...) the peace of Versailles would have been demolished and the whole international system, set up in the wake of the victory over Germany, would crumble”. To this he added: “a few more days of the victorious offensive of the Red Army, and not only Warsaw would have been captured (which wouldn’t be that significant) but the peace of Versailles would also be demolished. That is the international significance of this Polish war.” He summarized the situation as follows: “this is where the source of our new difficulties lies. When, as you know, we were somewhat short of power to reach Warsaw (...) when after the unprecedented and exceptional heroic effort, the army found itself at the limit of its strength, the military defeat came.”

It was therefore not without reason that Stalin called Poland “a dam.” Towards the end of the 1930s, when the military and police forces that the USSR had been nurturing for years at the cost of the entire society ready to be unleashed in a European conflict, an opportune moment came. Experience teaches that the chaos caused by war fans revolutionary sentiments. The American ambassador to Moscow, William C. Bullitt, accurately commented on the measures of the Comintern of 20 August 1935: “it is a great wish of Russia to cause a general fire, in which, apart from a minor large-distance barrage, it is going to take a modest part, yet after which it will be reborn like a phoenix (...) and run a global revolution”.

The situation of Poland, wedged as she was between two aggressive, totalitarian states, was becoming dire. Both of these military powers were aimed at the destruction of the Versailles order that had developed in the wake of the First World War and at the achievement of their own long-term goals: for Germany, *living space* in the east, and for the Soviets, the global communist revolution. Standing between these intentions was independent Poland, determined to defend the status quo.



# II

## 1939: A WAR FOUGHT ALONE INSTEAD OF ALLIED PINCERS

### GERMANY MARCHES TO WAR

Poland was the first state to oppose the German Reich under Adolf Hitler with force of arms. Hitler's previous successes in swelling the army and extending the territory of Germany with impunity reinforced his self-confidence. Like the Bolsheviks, Hitler quickly began to use the opportunistic signing of international treaties and pacts to achieve short-term objectives, propaganda ones included. Then he immediately set new, ever farther-reaching goals, irrespective of the spirit or the letter of commitments made.

This was the case during the Munich Conference in 1938, when Hitler obtained the permission of Western European powers to annex the border regions of Czechoslovakia. He subsequently proclaimed himself the main guarantor of permanence and inviolability of the borders of the rump state. The Czech hopes of gaining the respect and friendship of a stronger neighbour at the cost of granting concessions and yielding their outermost territories proved futile. Even though the new authorities of the so-called Second Czechoslovak Republic tried to satisfy Berlin in various ways in both internal and foreign policy, Hitler took over the whole country just a few months later, annexing it into the Reich.

After the successful re-militarisation of the Rhineland, the Anschluss of Austria, the annexation of Bohemia and Moravia (in two stages), and the occupation of the Klaipeda

---

region in Lithuania, Hitler turned his sights to Poland. Formally, his claims concerned the Free City of Danzig and Polish Eastern Pomerania. In fact, his previous actions showed that satisfying those claims would have led to further demands until Poland was made entirely subject to the policy and purposes of the German Reich. To the Führer, this was *the Polish question* that he put to Walther von Brauchitsch, Commander in Chief of the German Army, in the following words on 25 March 1939: "Poland should be crushed to such a degree that there is no need to take it into account as a political factor in the following decades".

## POLAND AGAINST HITLER

What could Poland gain from concessions to Germany? This is a question that Poles and others were already asking at the time. The issue was not unnoticed by politicians, journalists, and ordinary people either. William Shirer, an American correspondent in Berlin, noted in his diary on 10 August 1939: "Will Germans keep their true plans hidden, for a later date? Any fool knows that they don't care about Gdańsk at all. It is only a pretext. The position of the Nazi, openly pronounced in the party circles, is that Germany cannot afford to have a strong military power behind the eastern border, which is why Poland, in its current form, must be liquidated; not only Gdańsk (...) but also the corridor, Poznań, and Upper Silesia are to be occupied. Poland is to be a rump state, a vassal of Germany".

That was the prevailing mood when the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Józef Beck, rejected German claims in his address to the Polish Parliament on 5 May 1939. He announced that they were "unilateral" and that the German "offer" granted to Poland only what is "our incontrovertible property *de jure* and *de facto*". In closing, Beck stressed that "peace is a precious and welcome thing. Our generation that has bled in the wars certainly deserves peace. Yet peace, like nearly all the matters of this world, has its price: high, but assessable. We do not know the notion of peace at any price in Poland. Only one thing is priceless in the lives of people, nations, and states. It is honour."

Expanded in the thirties, the Germany of 1939 was far bigger than Poland in terms of both population and territory. After over a century of partitioning, Poland had only been





■ „Germans, hands off Polish lands”, an anti-German demonstration in 1939 (H. Zieliński, *Historia Polski 1914–1939*, Wrocław 1982, p. 278)

rebuilding its economic potential for twenty years. Germany, in turns, thanks to decades of unhampered development, had powerful and extended industry providing the foundation for intensive armaments that returned huge profits to her economy.

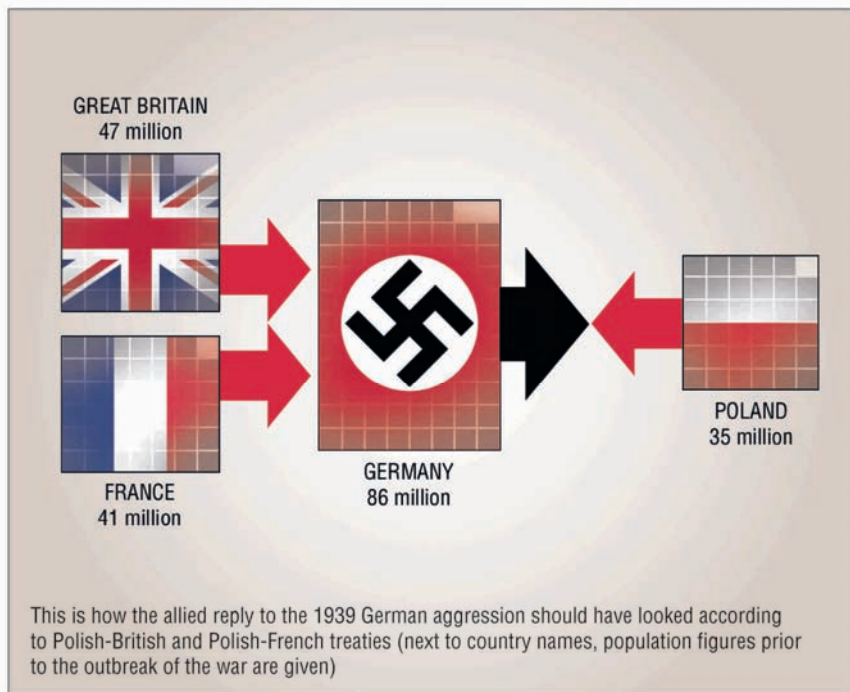
Nonetheless, Poland was ready to defend its freedom and sovereignty. The government of the Republic of Poland had the full support of an overwhelming majority of the people, aware of the Czech experiences resulting from compromise and abandoning independence.

## THE WESTERN ALLIES

Even having explicitly rejecting German territorial claims, Poland was not doomed to certain defeat. In 1939, she had alliances with France and Great Britain: the most powerful European states among those keen on maintaining the Versailles peace and order.

These were solid, specific, and mutual obligations. In the case of war, mutual understandings guaranteed military assistance and would place Hitler's state into a pincer-like grip. According to the Polish–French military convention of 1939, the French army was obliged to immediately launch an attack by air in case of German aggression against Po-

### ALLIED OBLIGATIONS IN CASE OF GERMAN AGGRESSION IN 1939



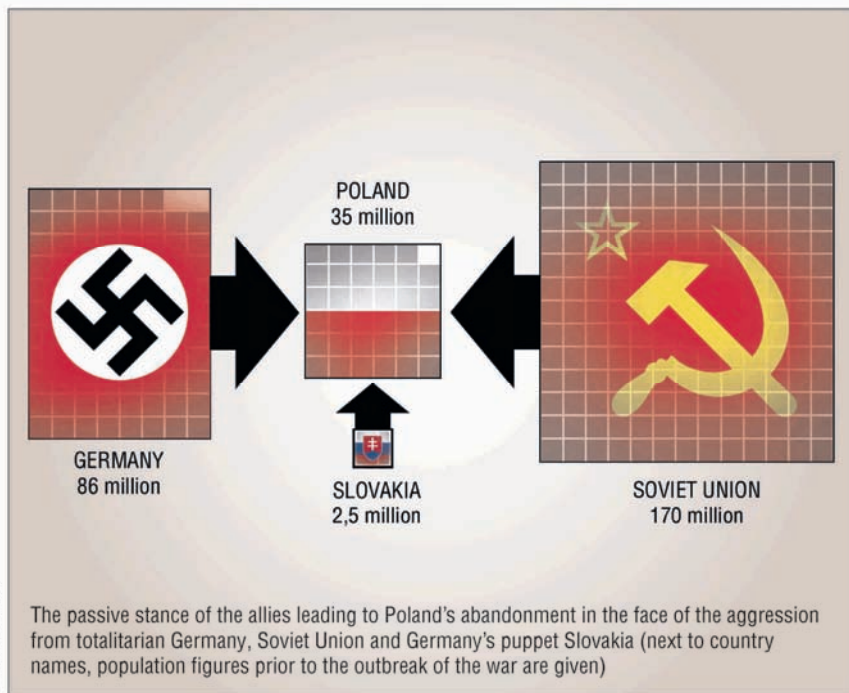
land, to begin “offensive action with limited goals” after three days, and “start an offensive against Germans with its main forces” after fifteen days.

These arrangements were mutually complementary with the clauses of the Polish–British pact of 25 August 1939. Its Article 1 clearly stated that Great Britain undertook “to grant immediately all aid and support it can provide” to attacked Poland.

On the other side, Poland decided on a proactive approach. In case of German invasion from the west, Poland was to attack Germany from the east, forcing the Germans to split their armies. And she was determined to fulfil its duties.

France and the United Kingdom were connected to Poland only by the anti-German alliance. Allied arrangements to cooperate did not, however, extend to Soviet aggression.

### THE ACTUAL SITUATION IN 1939





### **An excerpt from the French–Polish military convention (Kasprzycki-Gamelin Convention) signed on 19 May 1939.**

In the event of a German aggression against Poland or a threat to Polish vital interests in Gdańsk, which could lead to a Polish military reaction, the French Armed Forces will automatically take the following actions:

1. The French will immediately undertake air action [...].
2. As soon as part of the French forces became available (about the third day after I+ [i.e. France's general mobilisation – the author's note], France would launch a series of progressive offensives with limited objectives
3. As soon as the main German attacks come to bear on Poland, France would launch an offensive against Germany with the bulk of her forces (not earlier than on the fifteenth day I+).

[...] Correspondingly, should the main German forces attack France, especially crossing Belgium and/or Switzerland, which will entail a French military reaction, the Polish Army will make every effort to engage possibly the largest share of the German Forces, along the general lines agreed between the Military Commands.

### **An excerpt from the Agreement of Mutual Assistance between the United Kingdom and Poland of 25 August 1939**

Article I Should one of the Contracting Parties become engaged in hostilities with a European Power in consequence of aggression by the latter against that Contracting Party, the other Contracting Party will at once give the Contracting Party engaged in hostilities all the support and assistance in its power.

Sources: Protokół końcowy francusko-polskich rozmów sztabowych, przeprowadzonych w dniach 15–17 maja, Paryż, 19 maja 1939 r. (The final protocol of talks between the French and Polish army staffs concluded on 15–17 May in Paris, 19 May 1939) [in:] *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej (1939–1945). Zbiór dokumentów*, vol. 1: 1939, ed. by W.T. Kowalski, Warszawa 1989, pp. 264–265. Agreement of Mutual Assistance between the United Kingdom and Poland, London, 25 August 1939 [in:] *ibidem*, p. 470.

## **THE MOLOTOV–RIBBENTROP PACT**

Meanwhile, plans of territorial expansion brought Germany and the Soviet Union together due to a short-term shared interest against Poland and other minor countries in the region. Soon, the existence of a free Poland proved the keystone to maintaining the independence of other states between the Baltic and the Black Seas as well. For Hitler, an alliance with Stalin was an additional guarantee of success, hedging his quick victory

### **An excerpt from the Secret Additional Protocol to the Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Moscow, 23 August 1939**

In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and USSR. In this connection the interest of Lithuania in the Vilna area is recognised by each party.

In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement of the areas belonging to the Polish state, the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR shall be bounded approximately by the line of the rivers Narew, Vistula, and San.

The question of whether the interests of both parties make desirable the maintenance of an independent Polish state and how such a state should be bounded can only be definitely determined in the course of further political developments.

In any event both governments will resolve this question by means of a friendly agreement.

With regard to South-eastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its complete political disinterest in these areas.

This protocol shall be treated by both parties as strictly secret.

Moscow, August 23, 1939

For the Government of the German Reich  
v. Ribbentrop

Plenipotentiary of the Government  
of the USSR  
V. Molotov

Source: The Secret Additional Protocol to the Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Moscow, 23 August 1939 [in:] *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej (1939–1945). Zbiór dokumentów*, vol. 1: 1939, ed. by W.T. Kowalski, Warszawa 1989, p. 464.

in the war against Poland. On 23 August 1939, a German–Soviet agreement, named the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact after the heads of German and Soviet diplomacy, was concluded in Moscow. This understanding between the two totalitarian powers effectively paved the way to the outbreak of war.

The territorial benefits for both countries were described in a secret protocol appended to the “non-aggression pact” between the parties. Poland was assumed

# THE ORIGINAL PLAN TO DIVIDE EAST EUROPEAN STATES BETWEEN GERMANY AND USSR ACCORDING TO THE SECRET PROTOCOL TO THE RIBBENTROP-MOLOTOV PACT OF 23 AUGUST 1939





## THE LINE DIVIDING POLAND AND NEIGHBOURING STATES BETWEEN USSR AND GERMANY FOLLOWING THE AMENDMENT OF THE RIBBENTROP-MOLOTOV PACT OF 28 SEPTEMBER 1939



State borders in August 1939



Border of areas treated as the USSR sphere of influence



Border of areas treated as the German sphere of influence



The Ribbentrop-Molotov line following amendments made on 28 September 1939



---

to be divided along the Narew, Vistula, and San rivers and USSR and German spheres of influence in Central and Eastern Europe defined. Apart from Poland, the Soviet zone was to include Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Romanian Bessarabia. Germany was to take over the western part of Poland and Lithuania, including the Polish region of Vilnius.

After the Second World War, German leaders were accused of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes against peace before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. An attempt was made to include the secret protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact in the trial's files. The pact was cited as solid evidence for the responsibility of the German Reich for starting the war and its role as an aggressor state. For everyone familiar with the contents of the document, it was clear that it painted the Soviet Union as equally responsible for triggering the Second World War. The Soviets, officially present in Nuremberg to prosecute the defendants, quickly realised that by allowing the secret annex to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact to be leaked, they would be liable to stand trial too, so steps were taken to ensure the document was neither included in the files nor made public. Until the end of the 1980s, not only disclosing the contents of the document but even mentioning its existence was forbidden in the USSR and satellite countries (Poland, having been subjugated after the war by the Soviet Union, among them). Severe reprisals were the consequence of nonconformity in the communist regimes.

## THE GERMAN INVASION

On 1 September 1939, Germany attacked Poland from the west and north and, together with Slovakia, also from the south. The armed forces of the Reich consisted of over 1.6 million soldiers equipped with around 10,000 mortars and howitzers, over 2,700 tanks, and 1,300 aircraft.

The Polish army was relatively strong but, due to the difference in potential, decidedly smaller than the Wehrmacht. Following incomplete mobilisation, Poland managed to equip around 1 million soldiers and had 4,300 mortars and howitzers, around 880 tanks and armoured vehicles, and 400 military aircraft in stock.

## DIRECTIONS OF AGGRESSION TOWARDS POLAND IN SEPTEMBER 1939



However, the war was supposed to be fought by three allied states against the Reich. The threat of the French and British attack was to compel Hitler to fight a two-front war. Just as in the case of the Russian attack from the east in 1914, this would have dispelled German hopes for a short war (*Blitzkrieg*).



- Bombardment of the Westerplatte depot by German ships in September 1939 (NAC)

From the first moments of the war, Poland fulfilled its treaty obligations; awaiting military action from her allies, she provided strong resistance. In September 1939, Poles fought while fully aware that only a joint, coalition effort could change the strategic situation in their struggle against the Germans.

The tenacious resistance of Poland against the German aggression forced the Allies to take clear steps. After Hitler rejected the Western ultimatum, France and Great Britain officially declared war on the German Reich on 3 September 1939. Declarations from New Zealand and Australia followed. Regardless of subsequent developments, this was Hitler's first setback, as he had not managed to downsize the invasion of Poland to a local, bilateral conflict.





## ALL GERMAN HANDS TO THE EAST

The Western declaration war could certainly have alarmed Hitler, as the military potential of the three European allies was significantly greater than Germany's. Moreover, Germany sent a large majority of its forces to attack Poland, while her western borders were virtually undefended, with divisions stationed near French border being relatively small, poorly armed, and lacking heavy equipment. The German armoured divisions, artillery, and airforce were almost completely engaged in Poland.

The Polish defensive strategy relied on giving battle in the frontier zone and gradually withdrawing towards the line formed by the Narew, Vistula, and San rivers in anticipation of French and British military action that would provide relief. Large stocks of aircraft fuel and airstrips were secretly made ready for British planes supposed to attack German armies in waves while stopping in Poland to refuel. Day after day, Poland waited with hope for Paris and London to fulfil their obligations to their allies.

The Germans were fully aware of the danger an attack from the west meant for them. Therefore, their goal was to surround and destroy Polish troops as quickly as possible, exploiting the course of the Polish border, which supported German strategy, even before the Poles managed to withdraw behind the Vistula. The plan was not completely successful, yet German armoured forces broke deep into Polish territory. After hard-fought frontier battles in northern Mazovia, Pomerania, Silesia and southern Poland, Polish troops had to retreat, but the Germans did not succeed in destroying the core of enemy forces. On 8 September 1939, the long defence of the Polish capital began. A day later, two Polish armies successfully attacked the approaching Germans near the Bzura River, west of Warsaw, starting one of the Polish campaign's largest battles, lasting over several days. The Polish assault forced the Germans to revise their plans and blunted the thrust of their offensive action. A change in



▪ Warsaw defenders survey the wreck of a German plane shot down in September 1939 (photo by Julien Bryan/AIPN)





■ In September 1939, Polish cavalry units utilized horses mostly for movement. In armed confrontations, they usually dismounted and fought using anti-armour weapons, including against German tanks. Pictured: a number of destroyed tanks of the German 4th Panzer Division, successfully held off at the Mokra River by detachments of the Volhynia Cavalry Brigade (public domain)

the military situation in Poland was still possible, provided that the Germans were forced to shift some of their armies to the west.

Acting in their own interests, Poland's western allies should have fulfilled their obligations towards Poles and launched into action without delay, forcing Hitler to withdraw some German forces from the eastern front. The stalwart defence of Poland opened before France and the United Kingdom a path to a quick and victorious conclusion of the conflict with the German Reich. The course of events and German advances on the front depended on the determination and speed of military actions in the west. The war begun by the Germans in September 1939 did not necessarily have to turn into a continental and global upheaval.

## A SUICIDAL DECISION

The French and the British should have attacked the Germans as soon as possible. Yet despite declaring war on Germany, the French ground forces, much more numerous than the Germany's, remained nearly inactive. The British likewise failed to fulfil their obligations



▪ Polish Army soldiers in 1939 (NAC)

towards Poland. Although they had already declared war on Germany on 5 September, they decided that the Royal Air Force would only be kept on alert. On 12 September 1939, the Anglo-French Supreme War Council met in the French town of Abbeville for the first time, making a decision whose consequences proved disastrous. The Allies jointly agreed to abandon Poland in the fight against Hitler without any effective military assistance on their part. Instead of exploiting the opportunity, they let Germany continue military action in the east freely, making the fatal assumption that the war would be decided later – in the west.

In this way, France and Great Britain removed the million-strong Polish army from the forces of the anti-German coalition. Their myopic approach sealed not only the fate of the Republic of Poland and its citizens but to a certain extent became the reason for the not-that-distant calamity that later befell France and inadvertently also the wartime slaughter that affected almost the entire continent.

The German Chief of Operation Staff of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht and one of the men behind the plan to invade Poland, General Alfred Jodl, had no doubt: “before 1939 we were obviously able to crush Poland alone. Yet never, neither in 1938 nor in



---

1939, could we really have stood against a concentrated, joint attack of those states [i.e. Great Britain, France, and Poland]. And if we didn't experience a defeat already in 1939, this must only be ascribed to the fact that during the Polish campaign around 110 French and British divisions remained absolutely passive when faced by 23 German divisions".

## THE SOVIET INVASION

Hitler decided to go for broke. As his hopes for keeping France and Great Britain on the sidelines while Poland was overrun failed (the two countries having declared war on Germany) and he could not be one hundred percent sure that they would not start military action, he even more earnestly sought to finish Poland off quickly. The tension was increased by silence from Germany's Soviet ally. Unsure of the steps that France and Britain might take, Hitler impatiently demanded that the USSR attack Poland from the east.

Berlin breathed a sigh of relief and satisfaction on 17 September 1939, when the Red Army crossed the Polish–Soviet border along its whole length, meeting resistance only from units of the Polish Border Protection Corps (KOP), a few detachments of the Polish Army and voluntary formations due to Poland throwing the bulk of her forces against the Germans. Even the KOP battalions were reduced in strength, as some units had been dispatched to fight in the west. Over 600,000 Soviet troops, furnished with armoured vehicles and artillery and supported by the air force, moved towards the central course of the Vistula. This was the course of the new Soviet–German border, as stipulated in the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact. The left bank of Warsaw was to belong to Hitler, the right to Stalin.

In these circumstances, even the tenacious resistance of the KOP troops, individual units of the army, and civilians could not stop the Soviet invasion forces cooperating with the Germans. Some units were stopped in their tracks by orders of the Polish Supreme Commander who, wishing to save as many troops as possible, forbade engaging the Bolsheviks apart from resisting their attacks and attempts to disarm the troops. This, however, was routine wherever the Red Army operated. KOP troops fought their fiercest skirmishes with Soviet troops in the battles of Szack (29 and 30 September) and Wytoczno (1 October).

The incursion of the Red Army closed the noose around abandoned Poland from the east. The only Polish frontiers not yet under attack were the short sections of Lithu-

---

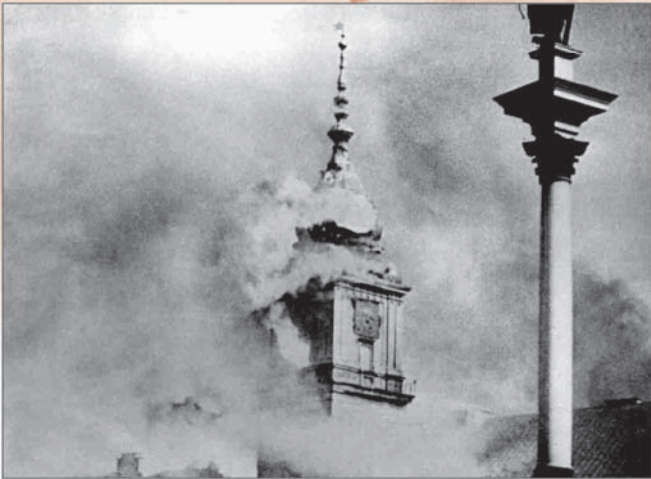
anian and Latvian borders in the north and Romanian and Hungarian (in Trans-Carpathian Ruthenia) borders in the south. Under these circumstances, neither Poland nor any other country could win such a war. No state at the time could have withstood the blows dealt to Poland in 1939.

Despite the desperate circumstances, Poles fought to the end. The Soviet attack scattered the Polish plans of regrouping all units still intact in the south-eastern part of the country. The Germans were satisfied to realise that the western front along the French border was entirely silent. While the Polish army was being wiped out by the totalitarian aggressors, all that the Allied aircraft dropped on the German cities were propaganda leaflets.

## THE FINAL CLASHES

Fighting in the western part of Poland petered out in the following days – given the circumstances, even successful operations had to end in defeat. After the initial Polish success in the battle of the Bzura, the Polish army detachments were eventually crushed. Following the clash, which ended on 22 September, only some of the units reached Warsaw, which was still fighting back. Lwów was putting up a successful defence since 12 September. Two Polish armies and individual units withdrawing from the north towards the border with allied Romania yielded to the Germans in two large battles of Tomaszów Lubelski (17–20 and 21–26 September). The Poles continued their defence at several points along the Baltic coast, in the Modlin fortress (until 29 September), and also in the capital, with considerable effort of civilians who resisted the Germans as long as until 28 September. Lwów, which repulsed all attacks by German forces, was surrendered to Soviet troops entering from the east on 22 September. The last major battle of the defensive war in Poland in which the Poles were having the upper hand (until they ran out of ammunition) raged near Kock from 2 to 5 October 1939.

Poland, whom her allies left to fend for herself in the face of aggressors, fought with determination under dire conditions for over five weeks. The losses in military equipment incurred by Germans in Poland were large enough to prevent immediate major military engagement in Western Europe. The French and the British did not exploit this opportunity either, remaining generally passive in the face of the course of events. The Germans



- Warsaw resisted German attacks until 28 September 1939. Pictured: following a German air raid, the Royal Castle in Warsaw is burning (NAC)

used the following months to hurriedly reconstruct their army, replace the losses, and reinforce their military potential (in which supplies from the USSR played a role). With the eastern border protected, in the spring of 1940 they began an invasion of western and northern Europe.

It was only the defeat of France in 1940 that provided an appropriate context for the assessment of the true dimension of Poland's defensive war in 1939. Although the French Republic had a better strategic situation against the enemy compared to Poland, much stronger armed forces, and assistance from the British, Belgian, and Dutch armies, it fought for only six and a half weeks, just a little longer than Poland, abandoned and invaded along all its borders by the totalitarian powers.

The attitude Poland demonstrated in September 1939 put an end to a succession of easy conquests that, left unpunished, bolstered Hitler's power. Although confronted by the passive stance of the Allies in 1939, the Germans had not yet tasted defeat, and the resistance put up by the Poles transformed their aggression into an international conflict. All the circumstances considered, the Polish campaign sowed the seeds of ultimate defeat of both the German Reich and her Nazi leader.





# III

## A STATE RESISTING THE OCCUPATIONS

### NO CAPITULATION

The Republic of Poland did not surrender either to the Germans or to the Soviets, the Poles being determined to carry on the fight on against both aggressors. With that conviction, the President of Poland and the government crossed the Romanian border on the night of 17/18 September 1939, already following the Soviet aggression. They counted on their Romanian ally giving them free passage to France, from where they could coordinate the nation's struggle further. Yet under the weight of events and pressure, the Romanians decided to intern the President, members of the government, and also the Supreme Commander, who had also fled there.

In these circumstances, President Ignacy Mościcki, following the provisions of the April 1935 Polish constitution, appointed his successor. On 30 September 1939, Władysław Raczkiewicz was inaugurated as the new President of Poland, the thus the legal head of the Polish state and its citizens. This did not change until the end of war, as Raczkiewicz held the presidential post until his death in 1947. The new authorities of Poland found a temporary home in allied France, and after France's defeat in 1940 moved to London. The legal continuity of the Polish state was thus maintained. On the international stage, the Republic of Poland remained the only legal warden of the territory and authorised representative

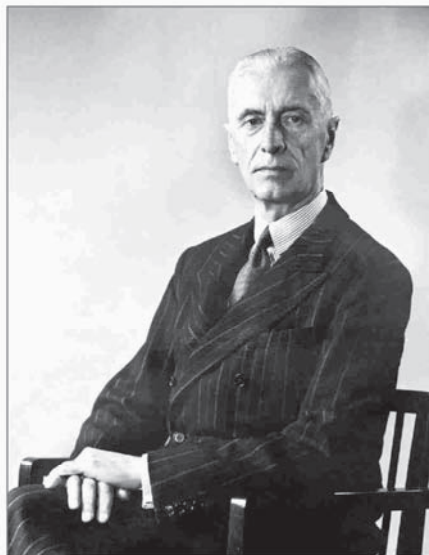
---

of the Polish citizens. As stressed by Polish historian Andrzej Ajnenkiel: “the April Constitution still provided grounds for the acts of the Republic of Poland government. It was the only legal foundation both from the point of view of Polish internal law and the international existence of Polish government and its recognition as the legal continuation of independent Poland. This was an extremely important factor in Poland’s continuity as a state”.

## A STILL EXISTING STATE

The Republic of Poland was a side in the hostilities and a member of the anti-German coalition from the first to the last days of the war. Thanks to the displacement of Polish authorities and government to allied countries, the Polish state existed without interruption, even though its territory was occupied by aggressors. The legal continuity between the institutions of the Second Republic of Poland and the institutions restored in exile was also decisive for the legitimacy of clandestine government bodies established in occupied Poland by their authority.

The head of the first government nominated by president in exile Raczkiewicz was General Władysław Sikorski. After his tragic death at Gibraltar in July 1943, the post was occupied by the leader of the Polish Peasant Party Stanisław Mikołajczyk, who in turn was replaced by a Tomasz Arciszewski from the Polish Socialist Party in November 1944. In 1939, prime minister Sikorski also assumed the function of Commander in Chief of the Polish Armed Forces. After his demise, the president entrusted the command to General Kazimierz Sosnkowski. After Sosnkowski’s resignation in September 1944, in the days of the Warsaw Uprising, the function was taken over by Tadeusz “Bór” Komorowski, previously Commander of the Home Army, who remained in the fighting Warsaw. Later, after



■ Władysław Raczkiewicz, President of the Republic of Poland from 1939 to 1947 (NAC)



---

the fall of the insurgency, while General Bór remained a German prisoner of war, it was General Władysław Anders who acted as the Supreme Commander.

The government of the Republic of Poland established in exile combined various political factions, from the left wing through the centre to the right. Efforts were made to make it a *de facto* government of national unity (a name that was repeatedly used), involving delegates of all the most important political factions and groups in Poland.

## COALITION AND SOLITUDE

The Republic of Poland retained the ability to participate in international politics and the legal capacity to sign treaties and

undertake legal commitments on behalf of the Polish people. It also remained a member of the League of Nations. A clear evidence of this fact is the participation of the Polish delegation in the Assembly of the League of Nations on 11 December 1939. Moreover, Polish embassies and legations to various countries continued to operate.

It was assumed that, as a member of the victorious coalition, the future Poland would participate in making decisions concerning the vanquished Germany, the changes of its borders, the imposed sanctions, and the new European order. "The principal task of the Polish government is the liberation of the homeland and obtaining for it its due place in the family of free nations," a subsequent programme declaration of the government reads. In spite of the lost defensive war and the losses incurred, ultimately Poland was supposed to come out of the war reinforced, both politically and territorially (thanks to the German border revisions). Significantly, that reinforcement went beyond just the moral dimension



▪ General Władysław Sikorski, Prime Minister of the government of the Republic of Poland and Supreme Commander of Armed Forces from 1939 to 1943 (IPMS/KARTA)

---

of having been the first country to take up the struggle against Hitler and fulfil all its obligations as an ally.

Poland's circumstances were however complicated, not only because of the occupation and the need of her authorities to remain in exile. From 1939 to 1941, the Republic of Poland was actually in a state of war with two totalitarian powers: Germany and the USSR. Neither of these wars was formally declared by the invaders – both were the result of unprovoked aggression.

Nonetheless, in these new conditions, when the facts of wartime collaboration between Germany and the Soviet Union were already known and the authorities of the Republic of Poland had to act in exile, the British and the French left no room for illusions. They made it clear to the Poles that while the war against Germany was their common cause, the war with the Soviets was left to Poland to prosecute. Generally speaking, both Britain and France ignored the Soviet–Polish conflict.

As a result, as stated in one of the Polish government sessions, “Poland alone [of all European states] is at war with the Soviets,” a condition that Poland felt bitterly.

Although the aggression of the USSR against Poland was the fulfilment of Moscow's duties as an ally of the Third Reich and the violation of international and bilateral treaties (including the Soviet–Polish non-aggression pact of 1932), Stalin succeeded where Hitler failed: he reduced the Soviet–Polish conflict to a bilateral dimension only.

## **POLISH ARMED FORCES IN THE WEST**

Poland remained a part of the Allied camp. Despite the position of the French and British members of the coalition in 1939, the Poles vested all their hopes in a change in their lot once the final victory of the Western powers over Germany was achieved. After September 1939, France and Great Britain, although they had wasted an opportune moment and the possibility of using the million-strong Polish army, remained confident.

Waiting for an Allied offensive, Poland did not intend to take a backseat. The Polish government in exile immediately set to reconstruct the Polish Armed Forces, which began to be formed in France using those who fought in the 1939 defensive war and arrived on French soil by different routes. In just a few months, over 85,000 subscribed.





- Soldiers of the Polish Independent Highland Brigade which was selected to participate in the Soviet-Finnish war as part of a French-British-Polish expeditionary corps sent to assist the Finns. Ultimately, it ended defending Norway against the Germans in 1940 (NAC)

In late 1939 and early 1940, an opportunity for a breakthrough in the Polish isolation versus Soviet aggression emerged. After the Soviet assault on Finland, the USSR was expelled from the League of Nations in November 1939. The world began to perceive that, pursuing their empire-like ideologies, both the German Reich and the USSR were involved in fanning a global conflict, persistently aiming not only at capturing the territories they divided between themselves in the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact but also at dominating other nations of the continent in the longer term.

The awareness that, joined by their alliance, both totalitarian states were enemies of the free world was maturing. Thus, the idea to send an international corps to aid Finland, consisting of British, French, and Polish troops, was born. Polish authorities perceived this as an opportunity to support Finland but also to highlight the issue of Soviet aggression on a wider forum. Of all Polish units, it was the Polish Independent Highland Brigade that was selected to participate in the expeditionary force. Yet the Allied powers carried with the preparations until the plan was finally scrapped when, following many months of

---

heroic resistance, Finland signed her peace in March 1940, putting an end to the war with the USSR (and also uncovering the weaknesses of the Soviet military).

Poland was again alone in the face of the Soviet aggressor.

## IN DEFENCE OF NORWAY, FRANCE, AND GREAT BRITAIN

In the spring of 1940, using among others resources supplied by the Soviets, the Germans started an offensive on the western front, with Hitler once again emerging triumphant. On 9 April 1940, the German army captured Denmark in one day and immediately invaded Norway, in whose defence Polish naval units and ground troops joined (notably in the battle of Narvik in May and June 1940).



■ Pilots from squadron No. 303, one of the Polish squadrons participating in the Battle for Britain (Imperial War Museums)

---

In June 1940, Polish soldiers fought to defend France. Scattered among various French units, they battled the Germans on the Saar River, the Marne-Rhine Canal, near Lagarde, on the Somme, in Champagne, and in sundry other locations. Polish pilots defended Belgium and northern France, protecting among others Paris. From 1939 onwards, vessels of the Polish Navy served to protect Allied convoys in the Atlantic and in Mediterranean operations. Due to the overwhelming pace of German military success, only some of the reconstructed Polish Armed Forces could be salvaged from the collapse of France and evacuated to the British Isles.

Although weakened again after the downfall of France, Poland became Great Britain's chief European ally for a number of months. President Raczkiewicz was personally welcomed in Britain by the king with great honours. As every soldier mattered, another reconstruction of the Polish Armed Forces began, and an army of over 30,000 was raised.

At that stage of the war, the efforts of over 9,000 Polish airmen in Britain were of particular importance. Polish fighter and bomber squadrons were formed and soon became highly successful in the airborne Battle of Britain, and later in the fights and air raids all over continental Europe. Polish pilots accounted for no fewer than 12% of all German planes shot down during the Battle of Britain. The defence of Britain was also supported by Polish naval and ground units.

## **EFFORTS TO ERASE POLAND FROM THE MAP**

Meanwhile, those remaining in Polish territories found themselves thrown into a vastly different world. While Poland was still fighting her defensive war, the Soviets and Germans made joint amendments to the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact's secret protocol. On 28 September 1939, the heads of the ministries of foreign affairs of the Reich and the Soviet Union met once again to amicably amend the division occupied Polish territories. The Soviet–German demarcation line was shifted from its originally agreed course along the Narew, Vistula, and San rivers eastwards to the Narew-Bug–San line. In this way, the Germans “received” eastern Mazovia and also Lublin and its environs. In return, in the protocol's new version the Soviets added the still-independent Lithuania and the Polish (albeit already in Bolshevik hands) Wilno region to their sphere of influence.



## THE OCCUPATION OF POLAND FROM 1939 TO 1941



Tomasz Ginter

Borders of Poland as of 1 September 1939

### German occupation:

Areas incorporated directly into the Reich

General Government

Soviet occupation

Wilno region granted by the USSR to Lithuania and incorporated together with it into the USSR in 1940

Slovak occupation

**The dividing line between the USSR and Germany:**

line defined in the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 23 August 1939

demarcation line defined on 28 September 1939


## THE OCCUPATION OF POLAND FROM 1941 TO 1944



Tomasz Ginter


 Borders of Poland as of 1 September 1939


**German occupation:**

 Areas incorporated directly into the Reich

 General Government

 District of Białystok

 Areas incorporated into Reich Commissariat Ukraine and Reich Commissariat Ostland

 Germany prior to 1 September 1939

 Slovak occupation

---

The military campaigns of both aggressors were symbolically crowned by the joint Soviet–German parade along the “border of friendship” in the town of Brześć.

Under such circumstances, Hitler and Stalin announced that Poland was wiped out from the map of Europe. The Germans captured the western half of the state, 188,000 square kilometres in total. The northern and western parts of Poland (the regions of Pomerania, Greater Poland, the area around Suwałki, northern and western Mazovia, Łódź and its vicinity, the Polish part of Upper Silesia, and the western reaches of Lesser Poland) were annexed to become integral parts of the Reich, and administered similarly to other German Gaue. The south-eastern part of the German occupation zone was granted a temporary status as the General Government (*Generalgouvernement*) within the borders of the so-called Greater German Reich (*Großdeutsches Reich*).

## THE SOVIET OCCUPATION

The Soviet Union annexed more than one half of Poland's territory, over 201,000 square kilometres, with the majority incorporated into the Belarusian and Ukrainian Soviet republics. The merger was “formally” announced after Moscow's sham “elections” to the so-called “People's Assemblies”. This was a large-scale propagandist staging of allegedly democratic processes run in an atmosphere of terror, whose results were fixed under the supervision of the Soviet secret police (NKVD). The whole farce was carried out in violation of elementary principles of international law.

In October 1939, Soviet authorities forced Lithuania to agree to host Red Army bases on its territory, offering the Polish Wilno region, which the Lithuanians claimed before the war despite it being inhabited by a staggering majority of Poles, in return.

The transfer of the Wilno region was no more than a tactical ploy for the USSR, one more step towards expanding the Soviet empire. Stalin realised perfectly well that after the breakdown of Poland and in the face of the arrangements with Germany, the small Baltic republics were left to his mercy or lack thereof. This is why in the spring and summer of 1940, when in the west of the continent France was about to fall, all of Lithuania (and thus the Wilno region as well), Latvia, and Estonia were overrun by the Red Army and soon swallowed into the Soviet Union as new republics.



---

## GENERAL GOVERNMENT

The General Government (GG), created at the express will of Hitler from the remaining Polish territory, existed from 1939 to 1945. The legal foundation was an internal decree of the Commander and Chancellor of the Reich of October 1939. There was no room for any, not even symbolic, form of Polish statehood. Throughout the war, there were no col-



- Polish lands incorporated into the Reich. A German family is moving into a house from which Poles have been evicted (AIPN)

---

laborating state-level Polish bodies. All administrative power in the GG belonged to the occupying authorities of the German Reich. The entire entity was subordinated to Hans Frank, who in his capacity as General Governor reported directly to Hitler. Local administration was merged into the occupant's to ensure full German control.

Already in the first months following the invasion, the Germans conducted a mass campaign of displacing Poles and Jews from Poland's western and northern areas destined for prompt unification with the Reich. The total number of expelled citizens of the Republic of Poland exceeded 900,000 at that time alone. In these areas, not only were Polish schools closed, but public use of the Polish language was also forbidden on pain of severe punishment. German also became the official language in the GG, and Polish was merely "tolerated".

The territory of the General Government was a special area of the Reich where Poles and Jews (including those evicted from fully incorporated territories) were temporarily allowed to reside. The GG was to be an agricultural and raw materials hinterland designed to provide a reserve of cheap slave labour for the rest of Germany. To this end, education for Poles was forbidden except at grade school level, while secondary and higher education was entirely closed to Poles. Any grade schools still open were only allowed to teach a highly limited curriculum. The Polish press was also suppressed, with only a number of Polish-language newspapers printed that were by and large the tools of German propaganda.

**An excerpt from a German circular on deportation of Jews and Poles from some territories included into the German Reich, issued on 12 November 1939:**

- 1) The Reichsführer of the SS and the Head of German Police acting in the capacity of the Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of German Identity has ordered the removal from former Polish territories now belonging to the Reich:
    - a) of all Jews; and
    - b) of all Poles who belong to the intelligentsia or who, for the reason of their Polish-national attitudes, are likely to endanger the introduction and strengthening of German identity. They shall be treated on a par with the criminal element.
- The purpose of the deportation shall be:
- a) to clear the new German territories and to make them secure;
  - b) to provide housing and job opportunities for incoming Volksdeutsche

The evacuation operation shall at all times be targeted at achieving these aims, totally regardless of any other interests.

2) Pursuant to a conversation held at the Governor General's office in Krakow, the deportation from Warthegau shall take place between 15 November 1939 and 28 February 1940, and it shall cover, for the time being, 200,000 Poles and 100,000 Jews.

3) The deportees from this area are to be resettled in appointed areas south of Warsaw and Lublin.

4) In the first operation all Jews resident in all the counties and no less than 2,000 Poles resident in the smallest counties each shall be deported, with correspondingly greater numbers in larger counties.

The following separate towns/cities shall provide for deportation:

Poznań: about 35,000 Poles and all of the Jews;

Łódź: about 30,000 Poles and about 30,000 Jews;

Gniezno: about 2,300 Poles and all of the Jews;

Inowrocław: 2,300 Poles and all of the Jews.

The quotas of Poles and Jews to be deported, as set for the separate towns/cities and counties, shall be transported over the period given in point 2. (...) Only after the leading cultural stratum, the entire intelligentsia, as well as all political and criminal elements have been removed, will the territory have been cleared and made secure, with all the consequences thereof. All people considering themselves Polish are also to be deported. As far as the intelligentsia are concerned, no evidence of their political or anti-German activity is needed. Moreover, all people considering themselves Polish should also be deported. As far as the intelligentsia are concerned, no fact of their political or anti-German activity are necessary. Moreover, the establishment of accommodation and jobs for the Reichs- and Volksdeutsche settlers needs to be taken into account in all the circumstances.

Source: J. Böhler, K.-M. Mallmann, J. Matthäus, *Einsatzgruppen w Polsce*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 203–204.

## A TRANSIENT SOLUTION

The decision to set up the GG did not reveal the actual intentions of the Führer towards the Polish nation or his plans for the future. It was only a step on the path to achieve the more long-term goals of remodelling the eastern part of the continent in accordance with the idea of expanding the *living space* for the German nation. Later plans, fine-tuned after the German aggression on the USSR, called for mass resettlement of nearly all non-



---

German populations to Siberia (the General Eastern Plan/*Generalplan Ost*). Carrying this out was, however postponed until Germany's ultimate military triumph. As part of the German *living space*, the area was to become purely German in future, with Jews, Poles, and other nationalities replaced with new settlers of German descent.

In the meantime, Germans lacked the manpower necessary to occupy all the administrative positions throughout the General Government, and therefore some Polish local administration staff were enlisted – by force, if need be – to execute German orders. A new administrative structure was put into place. The *starosts* became the main body of local civil authority, with the posts entrusted to Germans, mostly sent in from the Reich. The Polish pre-war local government authorities were in fact shut down in June 1940. Mayors, village heads and heads of rural subdivisions (*burmistrzowie, wójtowie, sołtysi*) were restricted to passively implementing the orders of German civil servants acting under strict supervision of the occupying authorities.

After the German attack on the USSR, German occupation was soon extended to the whole territory of Poland. The former Eastern Galicia with Lwów and the Białystok region was merged into the Greater German Reich as a new district of the General Government. The remaining eastern and north-eastern territories of the Republic of Poland were organized in the so-called Reichskommissariat Ukraine and Reichskommissariat Ostland, which also covered Belarus and the Baltic states. This arrangement lasted until 1944.

In January 1944, the Red Army, entering from the east, began to reclaim the eastern Republic of Poland territories. Although Poland belonged to the Allied forces, the Soviets forcefully annexed its territory into the Soviet Union, opening a new stage of subjugation.



# IV

## THE TERROR OF OCCUPATION AND GENOCIDE

### THE DAILY CRIMES

The worst tragedy of the state structures of the Republic of Poland, after she yielded to the invaders in an unequal fight, was the lack of efficient means to directly protect her citizens subjected to the terror of the two occupying states. Every area that found itself in the grip of the totalitarian powers was submitted to a policy of terror, which extended to nearly all nationalities and ranks of Polish society. Compared to the huge expanses of land occupied by Germany and the USSR, the territory under Slovak occupation was relatively small. This was because, as a token of recognition for participation in the German invasion, the Slovak State received the border areas of the Polish Spisz and Orawa from Hitler. There, Slovakia carried out its own anti-Polish and later also anti-Jewish policies.

From the first days of the occupation, the rights of Poles were vastly restricted and submitted to the ruthless control of German administration. Jewish citizens of Poland were in turn demoted to the very bottom of the social hierarchy and quickly deprived of any legal protection. The Germans immediately engaged in conspicuous humiliation of the Jewish population. From the first days of the war, individual and collective crime and violence directed towards Jews were a staple occurrence in the reign of terror enacted by the all-powerful German overlords.

---

From the first weeks of occupation, the Germans were particularly ruthlessly bent on annihilating members of the Polish intelligentsia. Their intention was to liquidate the Polish leading classes and turn the Poles into an eliteless nation. To achieve this purpose, various ruses were used. For example, when the professors of various Kraków universities were invited to a lecture delivered by a representative of the German authorities, they were arrested and sent to concentration camps straight from the university buildings.

In the spring and summer of 1940, Germans conducted the so-called Extraordinary Operation of Pacification, known as AB-Aktion (*Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion*) in all districts of the GG. It was a campaign of arrests and exterminations that affected around 6,500 people considered likely to engage in resistance, as well as members of the Polish intelligentsia.

Already in the autumn of 1939, the Germans committed mass murders and executions of the population, including hand-picked individuals who made major contributions to the state, political activists, academics, priests, and veterans of independence organizations.



■ Terror during the occupation. An execution of Poles staged by Germans in Bochnia in December 1939 (AIPN)



---

One of the many locations where the Germans committed mass murders from 1939 to 1941 was Palmiry, near Warsaw, where around 1,700 were murdered. The campaign to exterminate Poles and destroy Polishness in the region of Pomerania included the mass executions in Piaśnica, which claimed the lives of several thousand people from 1939 to 1940. The number of victims of more or less mass crime grew from month to month.

The conditions that prevailed in occupied Poland proved incomparably worse than those experienced by citizens of Western European states conquered by Germany. It was typical that when the French collaborationists justified the need for further concessions towards the Germans in France, they used the “occupation like in Poland” threat.

The Germans used their own racial criteria for dividing the population in occupied Poland, which was also reflected in the extent of persecution of different groups. They inflamed existing national antagonisms and used barbaric legal provisions in an attempt to fuel new divisions.

Of the national minorities who had inhabited pre-war Poland, the Germans tried to win over the Ukrainians living on the territory of the General Government with various gestures, yet these concessions fell short from the expectations of the leaders of Ukrainian nationalist groups.

## “THE MASTER RACE”

Unlike in the USSR, party membership was not used to decide who belonged to the top ranks of society in the territories occupied by Germans. German propaganda did not offer membership in the NSDAP as an incentive, since such was limited to Germans, but by and large preached the superiority of members of the German nation.

The German authorities made sure that Germans, whether those belonging to the national minority in pre-war Poland or those brought from the Reich with entire families, were given appropriate prominence and summarily declared the “master race” (*Herrenvolk*).

Special residential districts, parks, cafés, and means of transport designed and set aside for Germans were established in the General Government. As a rule, they were clearly labelled as *Nur für Deutsche* (for Germans only). In GG cities, tram cars were divided into the comfortable front compartment (marked as above) for Germans and

8



■ A streetcar bearing the sign “for German passengers only” in the occupied Kraków in 1941 (NAC)

---

a second-rate section in the back for all others. In legal instruments applicable to the GG, Germans and Germanhood were granted a special status and extraordinary protection. A peculiar detail that illustrates the essence of German practices particularly well is the way in which German legal instruments were edited and translated into Polish. Although it is a rule of the Polish language to have the names of all nationalities capitalised and adjectives written in lowercase, in translations of German orders and decrees into Polish the word *Niemiec* (German) and adjectives derived from it were spelled with a capital letter. In turn, the word *Polak* (Pole) was written in lowercase, even though it referred to a nationality. Various ordinances applicable to the Polish and Jewish population concerned, among other things, stepping aside to make way for Germans and doffing head covering in their presence. These seemingly banal everyday occurrences were strongly focused on additionally humiliating the non-German population and reinforced Germans in their conviction that because of Hitler's victories they were really becoming the privileged "master race".

## PACIFICATIONS AND EXECUTIONS

Already on 31 October 1939, Governor General Hans Frank issued an ordinance introducing the death penalty for all non-German residents of the GG engaged in any activity considered detrimental to a German national or German authorities. Nearly any show of disobedience towards the orders of German authorities or an improper attitude towards a German, their property or objects "used for the work" of German authorities was punished by death. Death was also the sentence for inciting disobedience, even against the most draconic orders of the occupying forces. The same penalty applied to those who knew about planned insubordination but did not notify the authorities.

The death penalty for a number of offences committed by "non-Germans" was also mentioned in other legal instruments of the GG, for instance in the ordinance of Hans Frank of 2 October 1943 on counteracting attempts to compromise the German Reconstruction Plan in the General Government. These served to ensure that crimes perpetrated by Germans towards citizens of the Republic of Poland in the occupied territory went virtually unpunished.





▪ An execution of Poles in Leszno on 21 October 1939 – finishing off the victims (AIPN)

For this reason, Germans routinely applied collective responsibility in Polish villages and towns, often killing innocent people only to terrorize others. Altogether, they conducted several thousand pacifications in which they also killed non-resisting, unarmed local inhabitants, many murdered for no other reason than being Poles. Hundreds of villages within the General Government were burnt down, and more than 70 totally destroyed. What happened incidentally in the Czech Republic (the massacre of Lidice inhabitants) and in France (the pacification of Oradour-sur-Glane) was the regular expression of German terror in Polish territory. For instance, in Michniów in the Kielce region, Germans murdered over 200 locals including 48 children; in Krasowo-Częstki in the Podlasie region, 250 people including 97 children; in Szczecyn in the Lublin region, 368 people including 71 children; in Skłoby, over 260 people. The examples could go on. In hundreds of such pacification actions staged in Polish villages the Germans killed hundreds of thousands of people. A large percentage of that number was children. Such operations were, as a rule, combined with the burning of villages.

Applying the principle of collective responsibility for various displays of resistance, Germans often executed hostages and random groups of prisoners. Public executions by hanging or shooting were held in many places. Announcements with lists of executed prisoners and hostages were a permanent feature in Polish streets. This campaign of terror was intended to paralyse the community and quench resistance.

---

At the time of their greatest military triumphs, the Germans began to implement plans to remove all non-German populations from selected regions. The Zamość region, where mass resettlement of the Polish population who were to be replaced by Germans moving to the area took place, was chosen as a testing ground.

## GHETTOS

The Reich authorities immediately extended the internal German anti-Jewish legal regulations to the occupied territories and quickly introduced new limitations. Although in the first years of occupation there was still no talk of total physical destruction of the Jewish community – besides crimes committed on national and local elites – since September 1939 Germans also engaged in acts of cruelty towards the Jewish people and murders of Jews. These practices were also engaged in by Wehrmacht troops invading Poland. The *Einsatzgruppen* units following on the heels of the army carried out systematic killings of Jews. These crimes accompanied by various instances of ostentatious humiliation of the Jewish people.

Germans quickly deprived the Jewish citizens of the Republic of Poland of any legal protection. That group also included Poles of the Jewish faith and Poles of other denominations who had Jewish ancestors, in accordance with the German Nuremberg Laws. Secluded districts (*jüdische Wohnbezirke*) were quickly delimited and the entire Jewish – as the Germans saw them – population crowded inside. With time, many of them were walled in and locked. The Jews were absolutely forbidden to leave the ghettos without a special permit on penalty of death. The Poles were likewise forbidden to enter these areas.

The first ghetto in the Polish territory was set up already in October 1939. The largest, inhabited by nearly 500,000 people, was the one in Warsaw. A wall was built in stages along the delimited border, completed and shut already in November 1940.

With food being rationed, the Poles, considered second-rate, had far smaller rations than Germans. In turn, the Jewish “coupon allocations” were even smaller and accounted for just 8% of the German rations. The extremely difficult life conditions prevailing in the ghetto served as a prelude to subsequent physical extermination of the Jewish population.



- A street in the German-established Jewish ghetto in Warsaw (Jewish Historical Institute)

The Germans established the so-called *Judenrats*, subsidiary bodies for managing the Jewish population, including in the ghettos. These councils were responsible to German authorities and receiving orders also from SS officers and German police.

## WHEN ASSISTANCE MEANS DEATH

A small percentage of Jews tried to survive outside the ghettos, including those who escaped their walls. Survival was difficult, as the entire country was subject to the occupant's ruthless terror. Only a fraction of those fugitives survived, as a rule only thanks to the assistance of non-Jews living outside the ghettos. Aware of this, the Germans introduced an unqualified death penalty for any appearance of aiding any holed up Jew. Already on 15 October 1941 the General Governor issued a formal regulation imposing the death penalty not only on Jews hiding outside the ghettos but also on anyone offering them any form of assistance. This ordinance was frequently reiterated in each General





▪ The family of Wiktor and Józef Ulm from the Markowa village. In 1944, the Germans discovered that the Ulms had been concealing two Jewish families at their home. The spouses, their seven children and the Jews were summarily executed (photo from a collection of Mateusz Szpytma)

Government district. Poles were threatened with death not only for hiding a Jew against the law but also for offering temporary lodging, sharing food, transporting from one place to another, and even trading anything with a Jew. Moreover, the responsibility for this “crime” extended not only by owners of the premises concerned, but also all lodgers and even informed neighbours. It is estimated that more than 1,000 Poles were killed for aiding Jews. The most conspicuous example were Józef and Wiktor Ulma, a family from the village of Markowa who, together with a flock of their children, were murdered for aiding

and illegally – from the perspective of German law – sheltering two Jewish families in the attic. Discovered Jews were as a rule executed on the spot.

In many places, similar crimes were also perpetrated by some among the “blue” policemen and officers of the volunteer Ukrainian Auxiliary Police (*Schutzmannschaftant*) in German service.

**The text of one of the German ordinances envisaging the death penalty for any form of assistance to Jews:**

#### ANNOUNCEMENT

**concerning the death penalty for supporting Jews who have crossed the border of the Jewish quarter without authorisation**

Recently, a larger number of Jews have illegally left the quarter assigned to them. They are now staying in the Warsaw district. I remind that the third ordinance of the General Governor of 15.10.1941 (VBl.GG. S. 595) envisages that not only will these Jews be sentenced to death for crossing the border of the Jewish quarter, but so will anyone who in any manner helps them to hide. I stress that help granted to a Jew is not limited to lodging and feeding them, but moving them with any means of transport, purchasing various goods from them, and so on.

I appeal to the population of the Warsaw district to report any Jew who remains beyond the bounds of the Jewish district without a permit to the nearest police or military police station.

Anyone who has aided or continues to aid a Jew and reports to the nearest police or military police station until 09.09.1942, 4 pm will be exempted from penal responsibility. Also, whoever sends goods purchased from a Jew to the address Warsaw, Niska 20 or notifies the nearest police or military police station about them by 09.09.1942, 4 pm, will likewise be exempted from penal responsibility.

Head of SS and Police for Warsaw District.

Warsaw, 5 September 1942

Source: M. Edelman, *Getto walczy*, Lublin 1993, p. 36.

# BEKANNTMACHUNG

## BEKANNTMACHUNG

**Betr.: Todesstrafe für Unterstützung von Juden, die die jüdischen Wohnbezirke unbefugt verlassen haben.**

In der letzten Zeit haben sich zahlreiche Juden aus den ihnen zugewiesenen jüdischen Wohnbezirken unbefugt entfernt. Sie halten sich z. Zt. noch im Distrikt Warschau auf.

Ich weise darauf hin, dass durch die Dritte Verordnung des Generalgouverneurs über Aufenthaltsbeschränkung im Generalgouvernement vom 15.10.1941 (VBl. GG. S. 595) nicht nur die Juden, die in dieser Weise unbefugt den ihnen zugewiesenen Wohnbezirk verlassen haben, mit dem Tode bestraft werden, sondern dass die gleiche Strafe jeden trifft, der solchen Juden wissenschaftlich Unterstützung, z. B. durch Mitnahme in Fahrzeugen aller Art, durch Ankauf jüdischer Sachwerte usw.

Ich richte hiermit an die Bevölkerung des Distrikts Warschau die Aufforderung, jeden Juden, der sich unbefugt ausserhalb eines jüdischen Wohnbezirks aufhält, sofort dem nächsten Polizeirevier oder Gendarmerieposten zu melden.

Wer einem Juden Unterstützung hat zuteil werden lassen oder z. Zt. noch zuteil werden lässt, hiervon aber bis zum 9.9.42, 16 Uhr, der nächsten polizeilichen Dienststelle Mitteilung macht, wird **STRAFRECHTLICH NICHT VERFOLGT WERDEN**.

In der gleichen Weise wird gegen denjenigen von einer Strafverfolgung Abstand genommen, der die von einem Juden erworbenen Sachwerte bis zum 9.9.42, 16 Uhr, in Warschau, Plakatz. 20, abliefern oder bei dem nächsten Polizeirevier bzw. Gendarmerieposten Meldung erstattet.

Warschau, den 5. September 1942.

**Der 44- und Polizeiführer  
im Distrikt Warschau.**

## OBWIESZCZENIE

**Dotyczy kary śmierci za wspieranie żydów, którzy przekroczyli bez uprawnienia granic dzielnic żydowskiej.**

W ostatnim czasie wieksza ilość żydów wyjechała się bez upoważnienia z obszarów przynależnej im dzielnic. Ci znajdują się dotychczas w okręgu warszawskim.

Przypominam, że trzecia rozporządzenia Generalnego Gubernatora z dnia 15.10.1941 (VBl. GG. S. 595) przewiduje, że nie tylko żydzi zostają skazani na śmierć za przekroczenie granic dzielnic żydowskiej, ale każdy, kto w jakikolwiek sposób dopomaga im w ukrywaniu się. Zauważam, że za pomoc udzieloną żydowi nie uważa się tylko przesłanie ich i wywiezienie, ale również przesłanie im jakikolwiek środków pieniężnych, kupowanie od nich różnych towarów, i t. p.

Zwracam się do ludności okręgu warszawskiego z wezwaniem, aby aresztować żydów, którzy bez upoważnienia przebywają poza granicami dzielnic żydowskiej, natychmiast zgłosić ich w najbliższym posterunku policyjnym względnie komendant.

Kto udzieli pomocy żydowi albo jeszcze dotychczas udziela, a do dnia 9.9.1942 r. godz. 16-te nie zgłosił w najbliższym posterunku policji lub gendarmerji, nie podlega odpowiedzialności karnej.

Ktoś nie podlega odpowiedzialności karnej też, kto do dnia 9.9.1942 r., godz. 16-te, odeśle rzeczy nabyte od żydów pod adresem Warszawa, Niska 20 albo zgłosił ich w tym najbliższym posterunku policji względnie komendant.

Warschau, dnia 5 września 1942 r.

**Kierownik 44- i Policji  
dla Okręgu Warszawskiego**

■ One of thousands of announcements distributed by Germans in Polish lands, pronouncing a death penalty for assisting the Jewish population in any way



---

## THE OMNIPRESENT FEAR

The psychosis of fear caused by the imminent death penalty hanging over people's heads made the majority afraid to help Jews who tried to survive outside the ghettos. When threatened with such exceedingly severe regulations of German law, any display of empathy became an act of heroism. At the same time, there were also those who complied with the occupant's orders and informed the German authorities about the fugitives. This was often born from the fear of responsibility (also collective) for not reporting. Sometimes, having a single German informer in a village was enough to paralyse the whole community for fear of responsibility. The conditions of fighting for one's survival under German occupation also led to indifference to the fate of others. However, there were also those who would look for hiding Jews: they were eager to obtain the rewards and privileges offered by the Germans, even at the cost of human life. In the cities, aberrant groups of racketeers (*szmalcownicy*) appeared. Moved by greed, they blackmailed the lying-low Jews or the Poles who aided them, threatening to report them to the occupying authorities.

A similar experience was also present among some Jews locked within the ghettos. In the daily fight for survival, with death staring in the face, indifference to the fate of others was also spreading. With everyone after their own survival, gangs that betrayed their fellows to certain death at the price of privileges and material gains also sprung up in the ghettos. There, too, the psychosis of fear was aggravated by the secret Gestapo informers among the community. The Germans also exploited some of them outside the ghettos to stamp out the willingness to help hiding Jews.

All this resulted primarily from the inhuman regulations designed and imposed by the German Reich that "legally" and actually protected and rewarded criminals while punishing elementary human reflexes driven by decency and compassion.

The scale of German crimes into which the Reich dragged the quisling regimes is proof of the value of Poland's decision to resolutely struggle against Hitler's state. Despite enormous losses, the Republic of Poland never disgraced itself with any form of collaboration with Germans.

Any citizen of the Republic of Poland who on their own decided to collaborate with the German occupant, whether against civilians or structures of the Polish Underground

---

State, therefore became branded as a traitor. and was liable to be punished with death by the Polish resistance. As far as possible, Polish secret courts pronounced death sentences and members of the underground armed forces liquidated both those serving in the occupant's uniformed forces as well as civilian informers, racketeers, and other renegades. People of that ilk were also promised (in announcements secretly printed and disseminated by the underground authorities) severe reckoning in the future after German rule was toppled.

Such oppressive penalties for hiding Jews or offering them any help were introduced nowhere else in except in Poland, Serbia, and some areas of the Soviet Union.

## THE “BLUE” POLICE

Poland's refusal to contemplate any idea of surrender and collaboration with the Germans had other consequences as well. Poland did not offer any of its police forces to the occupant. Therefore, the Germans had no quisling-like organization offering policing services at their disposal in the conquered Polish territory, as was the case in France and even in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. In countries where the continuity of the pre-war police forces was maintained they were now used, as was the entire state structure, in the new circumstances for advancing the purposes of the German Reich. In France, the police were commanded by their former French supervisors, who reported to the head of their own state, who was subordinate to the German conqueror. With time, French policemen, always remaining in the employ of the state, have by the will of their own leaders become accomplices in the German anti-Jewish policy.

It was not so in the General Government. Having no police force acting in the name of the Republic of Poland at their disposal, the Germans had to set up their own, using the nationals of the conquered state. Hence, Hans Frank instituted the so-called *Polnische Polizei im Generalgouvernement*, the Polish Police of the General Government, which however had nothing to do with the Polish state, being devised as an organisationally separate part of the German *Ordnungspolizei*. Its members were citizens of the conquered state, mostly pre-war Polish policemen who, under the threat of the most severe punishments,

---

were coerced into joining a force organized by the Germans. The PPGG was meant to act as a local-level service, without its own centralized hierarchy, entirely subordinated to the occupying forces and local German military police. Although the Germans made use of the pre-war navy blue uniform models, they refused to allow the new force to wear any state emblems.

## IN GERMAN SERVICE

The Germans made use of the police, who followed their orders, first and foremost for auxiliary and order maintenance purposes. For most officers, this was involuntary service, but this did not change its usage by the occupant. Some “blue” policemen just tried to survive, insofar as possible, and limit their activity to what resembled the duties of a regular police force, fighting ordinary crime. Some of them secretly acted against the Germans, initiating connections, concealed for obvious reasons, to the underground resistance movements. More prominent, however, were those traitors whose service and zealous compliance with German orders was calculated to win them a promotion or a career in the occupant’s service. This often meant participating in crimes against fellow Jewish and Polish citizens. For this reason Polish underground authorities circulated covert notices threatening them with severe retribution, which was sometimes meted out on a daily basis during the occupation. Many fervent collaborators who belonged to that police force were executed under sentences passed by secret courts of the Polish underground state. A large-scale post-war reckoning was also announced.

Such officers were the reason why the majority of the Polish people looked askance at wartime law enforcement. To differentiate them from the pre-war police of the independent state that safeguarded the people, they were called “blue policemen”. The term quickly gained a negative undertone in Poland, becoming a byword for servitude to the occupant. The underground resistance movement also executed those “blues” deemed too zealous in serving the German Reich.

In the ghettos, the Germans set up the Jewish Ghetto Police to serve their own needs. Its members were called “odemen” from the German name of the service, *Jüdis-*



---

*cher Ordnungsdienst*. Theoretically, they were also used for auxiliary purposes and fighting ordinary crime, yet in the ghetto environment they quickly turned into a much-hated class supporting the Germans against other Jews, with only a minority of officers trying to sabotage the occupant's orders. In turn, those who served the Germans with zeal were also targeted and executed by the Jewish resistance organisations.

The most fanatical members of both these forces took a direct and active part in German crimes, ferreting out both the Jews hiding illegally outside the ghettos and the resistance fighters. For this reason both Poles and Jews treated the behaviour of many blue policemen and odemen as proof of betrayal of the Polish state and their own nation.

To commit crimes in the General Government, Germans also used the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police; unlike the blue police, this was a force of volunteers. The Ukrainians were a national minority that was allowed to join the "blues" on a voluntary basis, although as a rule they lacked previous police experience. From 1941 onwards, the blue police ranks were also supplemented by Polish volunteers. These new officers were usually highly dedicated to the occupant.

When the Germans invaded areas previously occupied by the Soviets in 1941, they perpetrated crimes and acts of cruelty in hundreds of small towns and villages, primarily against the Jewish population. Mass executions of Jews were performed by the *Einsatzgruppen* that followed the German spearhead. Sometimes Germans organised or inspired anti-Jewish mobs whose acts were prompted by earlier connections of individual Jews to Soviet authorities. However, this was often only a pretext to apply collective responsibility towards entire Jewish communities. In some locations, Poles also participated in such crimes. Anti-Jewish activity was encouraged and supported by the Germans in captured territories, and perpetrators of these crimes not only went unpunished but were also protected by the military, forces and authorities of the Reich. Those involved in such acts soon gained the feeling of impunity. A case in point is the pogrom in Jedwabne, a village captured by Germans in the first days of the war against the USSR in 1941.

Such criminal attitudes were welcomed by the German Reich, while being clearly incompatible with the duties of citizens towards the Republic of Poland which was a member of the Allies.

---

## THE FINAL SOLUTION

In 1941, the Germans were ecstatic over their victories. The attack on the USSR, started in June, made them overlords of vast expanses of the eastern part of the continent. Even when the Moscow offensive was checked and repulsed, they remained convinced that their definite victory was assured. Accordingly, they began to implement more long-term ideological designs, certain that as conquerors they would be the ones building the new world order.

With time, the Germans decided to annihilate the European Jews. The technical arrangements were completed in 1942, and a mass-scale genocide project was launched. There were no fewer than 3 million Polish Jewish citizens of the Republic of Poland living on its territory. It was primarily concerns of a logistical nature, however, that made Hitler locate the engines of destruction of the entire Jewish population in Poland. Still in December 1941, the GG governor Hans Frank wrote absolutely openly in his diary: “the



- The main gate of the German death camp KL Auschwitz (AIPN)



■ In Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Germans were killing Jews from all over Europe. Pictured: Hungarian Jews brought into the camp, May 1944 (Yad Vashem)

Jews (...) are being such gluttons. There are an estimated 2.5 million Jews in the General Government – perhaps 3.5 million when those of mixed blood are added. These 3.5 million Jews we cannot shoot, nor can we poison them. Even so, we can take steps which in some way or another will lead to their annihilation.”

The Holocaust was not a manifestation of spontaneous murders perpetrated by individual criminals, but a huge enterprise run by the German state. Without the involvement of the entire state machinery of the German Reich, to which the military and police forces were subordinated, and without the passing of sinister laws Hitler would never have realized such an efficient genocide.

A network of German concentration camps, constructed in the Reich since the thirties, spread over the occupied Polish territory. The German complex of death camps in Auschwitz-Birkenau remains the chief symbol of genocide in the Polish territory to



## VICTIMS OF GERMAN CONCENTRATION CAMPS AND DEATH CAMPS KL AUSCHWITZ AND KL BIRKENAU



### Groups deported to KL Auschwitz and KL Birkenau from 1940 to 1945:

Nationality / category	Number
Jews	1,1 million
Poles	140 – 150 thousand
Roma	23 thousand
Soviet POWs	15 thousand
Other	25 thousand
<b>Total</b>	<b>~ 1,3 million</b>

### Groups killed in KL Auschwitz and KL Birkenau from 1940 to 1945:

Nationality / category	Number
Jews	1 million
Poles	70 – 75 thousand
Roma	21 thousand
Soviet POWs	15 thousand
Other	10 – 15 thousand
<b>Total</b>	<b>~ 1,1 million</b>

Source: <http://www.auschwitz.org/historia/liczba-ofiar/deportowani-wg-narodowosci>  
<http://www.auschwitz.org/historia/liczba-ofiar/liczba-zamordowanych>



■ German soldiers remove Jews from a building during the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, 1943 (AIPN)

this day. KL Auschwitz was set up in 1940 for political prisoners: initially Poles accounted for the majority of the inmates. Later, Germans erected KL Birkenau in the vicinity. With time, they began to transport Jews from the whole of occupied Europe there, turning the entire camp complex into a place of mass extermination of the Jewish people since 1942.

The Reich authorities designed the so-called *final solution* of the Jewish question, a byword for the decision to murder millions of people of Jewish nationality and those considered Jews by the Germans. In March 1942, as part of the so-called *Aktion Reinhardt*, the Germans embarked on the liquidation of ghettos in the Polish territory and began to send their residents to death camps. Impromptu mass executions were also carried. To improve on this system of mass crime, Germans started killing inmates with poisonous gas in specially designed gas chambers. Apart from



THE MOST IMPORTANT GERMAN CONCENTRATION CAMPS  
AND DEATH CAMPS WITHIN THE BORDERS OF THE SO-CALLED  
GREAT GERMANY FROM 1941 TO 1944

CONTEMPORARY BORDERS  
OF GERMANY AND NEIGHBOURING  
STATES PICTURED AGAINST THE "GREAT  
GERMANY" OF 1941-1944







-  German concentration camps  
Operation start year
-  German death camps  
Operation start year



- Insurgents from the Warsaw ghetto captured by the Germans (AIPN)

Auschwitz-Birkenau, the locations of German genocide of Jews included other German death camps such as those at Belżec, Treblinka, Sobibór, Majdanek, and Kulmhof. Independently of these camps, Germans perpetrated mass murders in hundreds of Polish towns and villages.

By 1945, in Auschwitz-Birkenau alone the Germans had murdered in total some 1 million Jews from all over Europe, over 70,000 Poles, 20,000 Romani, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and also several thousand inmates of other categories.

While liquidating the ghettos, the Germans met with opposition put up by the doomed Jewish population. The largest act of armed resistance was the uprising that broke out in the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943. Its participants were mostly members of the clandestine Jewish Military Organisation (ŻOB) and the Jewish Military Union (ŻZW). The Germans ruthlessly suppressed the outbreak, razing the ghetto area to the ground.



- German soldiers in 1943 during liquidation of the German-delimited Jewish quarter in Warsaw (AIPN)

## THE SOVIET TERROR

The fates of millions of citizens of the Republic of Poland remaining on the territory captured by the Red Army were likewise tragic. As inhabitants of occupied territories incorporated into the Ukrainian and Belarusian, and later also the Lithuanian, Soviet republics, they also became the victims of ruthless terror.

The first period of Soviet hegemony lasted from 1939 to 1941. The Soviet reign over the occupied territory was interrupted by the outbreak of the German-Soviet war and the withdrawal of the retreating Soviets from eastern Poland. Stalin used these two years to enact a ruthless policy of victimizing the population. The short period of Soviet terror was on par with the cruelty of German oppression, yet frequently vaster in scope.



## OCCUPANT TERROR, DEPORTATIONS AND DISPLACEMENTS IN POLISH LANDS FROM 1939 TO 1944



---

The NKVD and the Red Army committed numerous crimes in the first weeks after the invasion of Poland. Bloody reprisals affected Grodno civilians as retribution for their heroic defence of the city against Soviet tanks.

The Soviets quickly set to eradicate all signs of the existence of the Polish state. First, power was seized by revolutionary committees set up by appointed communists. Then, former state and territorial authorities were formally replaced by so-called soviets of various levels. These, however, were of far lesser importance than the hastily erected structures of the Soviet party and political police. The population of the occupied territory was forced to accept the previously unknown state administration hierarchy, in which the leading role was played by the Communist party administration and local (district and regional) structures of the NKVD. Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian, respectively, became the official languages of education. Polish schools were replaced with Soviet ones and new Soviet course-books and curricula introduced. Russian civil servants and communist teaching staff with families were brought from the east.

The breaking of the foundations of the free market economy, the introduction of new exorbitant taxes, a currency exchange which dramatically devalued the Polish zloty, and initial attempts at collectivisation of the Polish countryside resulted in a quick impoverishment of the population.

Although unlike the Germans the official Soviet propaganda did not make any legal differentiation between various nationalities, the Soviets actually made systematic attempts to stir national minorities against the "Polish bourgeoisie and landowners". The Jewish, Ukrainian, and Belarusian minorities in particular were eagerly utilized to find out anti-Bolshevik resistance and set up new local structures of power. The official propaganda also played the Polish worker and peasant classes against former elites, enticing (often efficiently) the lowest strata of society with the prospect of upward movement in the power hierarchy and grants of confiscated land. Not unlike under the German occupation, it was primarily members of patriotic intellectual elites, political groups supporting independence, landed gentry, civil servants, police officers, Polish Army officers, military settlers, and people who contributed to Polish independence who were the first to annihilated, the reprisals affecting not only them but also their close and not so close families. The ultimate aim was not just to enforce Soviet rule but remove any traces of Polishness from the conquered territories.

---

The Soviets and Germans perpetrated campaigns to liquidate Polish state elites in parallel. In achieving this, the Soviets, just like the Germans, made use of informers and traitors to a great extent. Large-scale collaboration was undertaken by Polish communists and everyone who perceived the new political and social climate as an opportunity for a political career and material benefits.

## MASS CRIMES AND DEPORTATIONS

In 1940-41, the Soviets organised four major deportation campaigns of Polish citizens to labour camps and forced settlement locations deep in the USSR. Meticulously prepared, these huge undertakings consisted in simultaneous arrests of tens of thousands of citizens and took place successively in February, April, and June 1940, and in May



■ A gold mine in Kolyma, 1938. A gulag is visible on the horizon (T. Kinzy, assisted by D. Roynette, *Gulag*, Warsaw 2015, p. 294)



---

and June 1941. Although incomplete, the Soviet sources that became accessible after the fall of the USSR document the deportation of 327,000 Polish citizens. These are only a fraction of the total number of victims, as the figures do not account for all deportees. The available data mostly cover those affected by the four major deportation campaigns described above, and even in this they are incomplete. It is known that not everyone was registered, and not all deaths were recorded. Polish estimates speak of a number several times greater.

Apart from these operations, the Soviets systematically arrested individuals, whole families and larger groups on a daily basis. In addition, in the autumn of 1939 several thousand Polish citizens were deported even deeper into the USSR as part of the so-called "cleansing of the border zone". Apart from Poles, victims of these persecutions included a considerable number of Polish Jews fleeing from areas occupied by Germany.



■ The Warsaw monument of the Fallen and Killed in the East, also a memorial to the victims of Soviet aggression in 1939 (photo Maciej Korkuć)

# MASS DEPORTATIONS OF CITIZENS OF THE REPUBLIC



## OF POLAND FROM LANDS OCCUPIED BY THE SOVIET UNION IN 1939–1941



Slave labour camps to which Polish citizens were deported in 1939–1941



Clusters of Republic of Poland citizens subjected to mass deportations organized by NKVD from 1939 to 1941.



Areas of Poland (since 1939) and Baltic states (since 1940) occupied by the USSR



---

Carried out in an inhuman setting, the deportations were the beginning of the ordeal of the eastern Poland population resettled in the USSR. The conditions during transport meant that a large percentage of displaced people never reached their destinations. Later, the compulsory and devastating work in labour camps whose inmates served as woodcutters and miners, the omnipresent terror and crime, and the forced resettlement in the steppes of Kazakhstan, the proverbial middle of nowhere, led to a high death toll among deportees.

In parallel with the deportations, a broad campaign of arrests swept throughout the occupied territory of eastern Poland in 1939–41. More than 100,000 people were imprisoned, many of them murdered in individual and mass executions.

In 1939–41, the crimes and repressions of the NKVD lasted until the very end of Soviet occupation, and ceased only when Wehrmacht forces invaded the eastern areas of the Republic of Poland in June 1941

At the same time, the Soviets practiced forced conscription of Polish citizens to the Red Army, with anywhere between 100,000 to 200,000 Poles press-ganged during the first period of Soviet occupation. After the German aggression on the USSR, thousands died in the uniforms of a foreign army.

The pinnacle of all Soviet cruelties and crimes perpetrated on the Polish people was reached in the Katyn forest near Smoleńsk.

## **THE KATYN CRIME**

The Soviets separated the officer corps from other prisoners of war captured during the aggression of 1939 and took them to POW camps, mostly in Kozelsk, Ostashkov, and Starobilsk. After several months of groundwork, following a decision of 5 March 1940, the Soviet authorities decided to launch a “special action” consisting in the ruthless murder of over ten thousand Polish officers who had been taken prisoners of war. Most of them were reserve officers, and therefore belonged to Polish intelligentsia. The action began by the victims being moved to the places of execution in Kalinin (Tver), Katyn, and Kharkiv. There, each officer was killed individually with a shot to the back of the head. Graves of murdered officers can also be found in Bykivnia near Kiev and most probably in Kurapaty near Minsk.

---

Altogether, the Katyn massacre claimed the lives of nearly 22,000 officers of the Polish Army and of the pre-war Polish state police as well as other members of Polish elites, sifted out and murdered one by one.

**Excerpt from the minutes of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) from 1940 with the text of the decision to murder Polish officers:**

**Decision of 5 March 1940**

**144. Case for the NKVD of the USSR**

1. Submit to the NKVD of the USSR:

1) The cases of 14,700 prisoners of war – former Polish officers, civil servants, landowners, policemen, intelligence agents, gendarmes, settlers and prison wardens.

2) and the cases of 11,000 persons – members of various counterrevolutionary, espionage, and saboteur organisations, former landowners, factory owners, former Polish officers, civil servants and escapees – arrested and held in prisons in the western oblasts of Ukraine and Belorussia, should be examined under special proceedings and the highest penalty – execution by shooting – carried out.

[...]

Secretary of the Central Committee J. Stalin

Source: *Katyn. Dokumenty ludobójstwa. Dokumenty i materiały archiwalne przekazane Polsce 14 października 1992 r.*, Warszawa 1992, p. 28.

## THE KATYN LIE

In deciding to murder the Poles, the Soviets were aware that their crime on selected thousands of Polish officers must never come to light. That is why all the executions were perpetrated in centres strictly controlled by the NKVD. The Katyn forest itself was out of



■ Bodies of Polish officers murdered in 1940 by the Soviet NKVD in Katyn. Photos from an exhumation staged by Germans in the Katyn forest in the spring of 1943 (AIPN)

bounds for ordinary citizens. This changed after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, when Germans captured the area and, in 1943, they revealed the Soviet atrocities. Although they were well aware of their own crimes, they knew that this truth exposed the genocidal face of the Soviet Union, one of the Allies. That is why they allowed the bodies of murdered officers to be exhumed.

The Soviet Union reacted with accusations, applying desperate measures to shift their own crime onto the Germans. After achieving victory in the Second World War, they also wanted Germans to be judged and sentenced in the light of “international law” for the Katyn massacre as well. Therefore, during the Nuremberg trials in 1946, the Soviets added it to the indictment against the leaders of the Third Reich. However, as they could not manipulate the trial fully, with only a single judge out of four, when the true circumstances of the Soviet crime began to surface during the trial, they quickly removed this embarrassing event from the files. While the Soviet Union lasted, the Katyn documents



---

that contained the order to murder the officers were one of the greatest secrets of Soviet state authorities, with access to the safe where they were kept as top-secret “package no. 1” being limited to successive leaders of the Soviet party and state. It was only in 1990 that the authorities of the USSR admitted to having committed the murders. In 1992, the President of Russia presented copies of key documents to Poland.

For decades after the Second World War, those disclosing of the truth of the Soviet crime in Katyn risked ruthless reprisals in the countries controlled by the Soviet Union. The regime imposed by Stalin on post-war communist Poland also demanded that witnesses of the exhumation and the victims’ families make false declarations that the perpetrators were Germans. Many never agreed to do so, and with time the word *Katyn* grew into a symbol and charge against Soviet criminals.

## THE ANNIHILATION OF POLES IN VOLHYNIA

The criminal efficiency of the German practice of the Holocaust proved that the destruction of entire nations was possible. The underground structures of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) likewise resorted to genocidal methods to achieve their goals. UPA’s objective was of the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state whose borders overlapped those of the Second Polish Republic. Aware that Poland was aligned with the Allies, some Ukrainian nationalists were concerned that she would be able to rebuild the Polish state with its pre-war eastern borders intact. Some, observing the post-First World War plebiscite experiences, believed that the total liquidation of the Polish population of Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, modelled on German anti-Jewish policy, would definitely seal the region as Ukrainian for the future.

In light of this, UPA leaders decided to perform hundreds of coordinated attacks at locales inhabited by Poles with the total extermination of the Polish population in mind. That is why members of the UPA systematically slaughtered Polish civilians in south-eastern Poland in 1943 and 1944. This genocide resulted in the death of over 100,000 Polish people and would have led to the complete destruction of the Polish population in these regions.

The peak moment of this operation was the so-called Bloody Sunday of 11 July 1943, when the Ukrainians launched a simultaneous attack against 99 Polish villages in Volhynia,

---

murdering whole families of defenceless civilians, leading to the eradication of most of the Polish population in the region. Only those who escaped to the safety of nearby towns or organised large self-defence groups in their villages survived. This murderous madness was to a great extent stopped by immediate Polish retaliation against Ukrainian villages, which claimed the lives of several thousand Ukrainians.

The final attempt to stamp out Polishness in Volhynia were the resettlement campaigns organised by Soviet authorities after the territory was recaptured by the Red Army.



▪ Volhynia. The remnants of a forest-overgrown cemetery, the sole remaining feature of the Ostrówki village, one of the hundreds of Polish localities whose population was murdered by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army from 1943 to 1944 (photo Maciej Korcuć)

  
V

# THE POLISH UNDERGROUND STATE

## A NATIONWIDE CONSPIRACY

Despite the blows received, Poles did not cease to hope for a final victory and regaining independence. Under the shadow of terror, state structures were restored in secret in the name of Republic of Poland authorities and with their formal authorisation. This included not only the military forces operating underground but also civilian administration representing the Polish government in exile. Faced with omnipresent terror, Poles created a truly parallel reality based on the activity of clandestine state structures.

The resistance network began to be established, authorized by the Supreme Commander, already during the Polish defensive war of 1939. Just before the surrender of Warsaw, on 27 September 1939, an envoy sent by top-ranking military arrived in the capital by a special plane, handing in the powers to develop a nationwide military organisation. For this reason, all established armed organisations were an integral part of the fighting Polish Army. The first to be set up was the Service for Poland's Victory (SZP), commanded by General Michał Karaszewicz-Tokarzewski. Later it was transformed into the Union of Armed Struggle (ZWZ), whose main commander was initially General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, and later General Stefan "Grot" Rowecki. The structures of the ZWZ were painstakingly established despite severe losses and arrests under both German and Soviet occupation.





▪ General Stefan Rowecki, commander-in-chief of the Armed Struggle Association and then commander of the Home Army (until 30 June 1943). Arrested by the gestapo, he was killed in KL Sachsenhausen (photo from a collection of Krystyna Rowecka-Trzebicka)

In 1942, the ZWZ was renamed to the Home Army (AK). After the Germans arrested General Grot, he was replaced by general Tadeusz "Bór" Komorowski. The last chief commander of the Home Army was General Leopold "Niedźwiadek" Okulicki. According to estimates, in 1944 the Home Army had a strength of approximately 350,000 soldiers active underground in all regions of Poland, with organised structures in all former voivodeships (regions) of the republic as well as abroad. Regional commands were established in each region, with lower-level inspectorates covering a number of districts that usually corresponded to pre-war counties (*powiaty*). Thus, despite the reprisals, arrests and executions of soldiers, the domestic armed forces were rebuilt throughout the



■ Soldiers of the Home Army in the Wilno region in 1944 (KARTA)

occupied state as the Home Army. Preparations for simultaneous armed action against the occupant as part of the so-called *general uprising* were staged and connections maintained via radio and couriers with the Polish government and with the Supreme Command of the Polish Army in Exile.

## THE EVERYDAY FIGHT

As part of day-to-day struggle, at the peak of German victory tide, top secret special units of the underground army conducted military and sabotage operations. The Home Army ambushed prisoner transports, raided prisons, and battled occupation forces behind the frontlines. Death sentences were carried out on traitors and secret Gestapo informers. Capital punishment in the name of the Republic of Poland was pronounced against those who acted to the detriment of their Polish and Jewish compatriots. Attempts were also made on the lives of especially prominent German officials and the big shots among oc-



■ Soldiers from a partisan detachment of the Home Army (Provincial Public Library of Lublin)

cupation authorities. One of the best-known examples of such hit-and-run actions was the successful assassination of the SS and police head for the Warsaw district Franz Kutschera, known for his brutality and cruelty, in February 1944.

A so-called merging action was launched to unify the largest possible number of armed organisations fighting for independence within the ranks of the underground army. Merger agreements were signed with military organisations operating throughout the country that belonged to the National Military Organisation (NOW) (in 1942) and Peasant Battalions (BCh) (in 1943). In May 1944, such an agreement was signed with the National Armed Forces (NSZ). This caused a rift within the NSZ, with some units joining the AK and others staying under the NSZ banner.

The Home Army's intelligence and counterintelligence cells were responsible for regularly passing information on the movements of German armies at the rear of the eastern front to the Western allies. A reconnaissance campaign was carried out concerning





▪ Captain Witold Pilecki, Home Army soldier who organized a resistance movement in KL Auschwitz and wrote reports on German crimes. In 1948 he was sentenced to death for supporting the independence movement and executed by Communist authorities (photo from a collection of Zofia Pilecka-Optułowicz)

German designs to manufacture the V-2, new rocket missiles which the Germans hoped would turn the tide of war and ensure their victory. In May 1944, Home Army soldiers performed an exceptional feat, intercepting an entire rocket, which was then disassembled into 25,000 individual components, documented, and later, as part of the Bridge III

---

action, dispatched to London (a British plane landed on an airstrip set up by the AK near Tarnów to pick up the collected resources and couriers).

Action was even taken to organize resistance within KL Auschwitz. A Home Army officer, Witold Pilecki, voluntarily arranged to be arrested in a round-up and once in Auschwitz had for many months been building a conspiratorial structure among the inmates for mutual assistance and defence. Having escaped from the camp, he wrote an extensive report on the life inside and continued the struggle in hiding.

## **CIVILIAN ADMINISTRATION**

The underground civilian administration was established under the wing of the Government Delegation for Poland set up by the Polish government in exile when Poland was occupied. The name stressed that this was not a self-standing activity but one delegated and carried out on behalf of the highest constitutional organs of the Republic of Poland. The underground administrative structures managed various areas of life, from secret courts and information activities to providing clandestine education and designing plans for future national revival. The resulting administrative network was to be ready to efficiently assume authority and assure continuity of the state structures when occupation ended.

The extension of civilian institutions of the Polish underground state continued without interruption in subsequent years of the occupation. Underground life was organised in cooperation with clandestine political parties at a scale never experienced in any other country occupied by the Germans. Besides the underground military structures, the seeds of political representation were quickly sown. At its core were groups representing the main political factions active in the underground, which included members of peasant, nationalist and social-democratic parties and representatives of smaller political bodies. The Political Consultative Committee (PKP) was constituted already in 1940, recognised by the Polish government in exile, and considered as the domestic political representative body. In 1943, the PKP was transformed into the Home Political Representation (KRP). This made it possible to appoint the underground Council of National Unity (RJN) on 9 January 1944, the clandestine surrogate of the Polish parliament. The RJN consisted primarily of large underground political parties: the Peasant Party (SL

---

“Roch”), the National Party (SN), the Polish Socialist Party (PPS-WRN: Freedom, Equality, Independence), and also the Labour Party (SP). Representatives of various smaller groupings were co-opted as well. Kazimierz Pużak, a socialist and member of the PPS, became the Council's president.

## LIFE IN THE UNDERGROUND

As the head of the underground executive powers, the Delegate of the Government for Poland became at the same time the Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Poland. In late July 1944, Jan Stanisław Jankowski (SP), then holding the post, acting in concert with the government in exile, established the National Council of Ministers. His three deputies, Adam Bień (SL), Antoni Pajdak (PPS), and Stanisław Jasiukowicz (SN) held the rank of ministers and became the Council's members.

Civilian authorities in the form of regional and county delegations of the government operated throughout the country, exercising actual supervision over the underground life of the Polish community.

Following the occupant's decision to close down Polish secondary and higher education institutions and to limit the curricula of primary schools, Poles also established a network of underground educational facilities. At the national level, this was managed by the Department of Education and Culture of the Delegation Government. Despite German prohibitions and severe punishments, these facilities catered to a large number of children and young people. Primary and secondary education in the General Government was extended to approximately 166,000 children, in addition to 25,000 children in the eastern territories and 22,000 in western regions incorporated into the Reich. Higher education institutions, including universities, were run in secret and offered clandestine courses. Scientific and cultural life functioned underground. Such a scale of educational activities was recorded nowhere else in German-occupied Europe.

Similarly, underground publications, machine printed, copied, and distributed through secret distribution networks, also had a wide circulation. Despite numerous arrests and death sentences, the network operated efficiently. The largest and most significant bul-



BŁOGOSŁAWIENI, KTÓRZY W CZASIE GROMÓW  
NIE UTRACILI RÓWNOWAGI DUCHA

Kasprowicz.



# BIULETYN

## informacyjny

Rok V

Warszawa, 28 października 1943 r.

Nr. 43 (198)

### Zawiadomienie

Organizacja pod nazwą „Komenda Zbrojnego Wyzwolenia” rozsyła ostrzeżenia i wyroki oraz organizuje akcje pseudo-wojskowe. Jest to działalność samowolna i bezprawna.

**KIEROWNICTWO WALKI PODZIEMNEJ**

21.X.1943 r.

### KOLEJNA FALA TERRORU

Przez Warszawę w bieżącym roku przeszły już dwie wielkie fale terroru: ogromne łapanki w połowie stycznia, kiedy na Pawiak ściągnięto około 15.000 ludzi, z których ponad połowę wywieziono do Majdanka oraz potworny mord masowy więźniów Pawiaka w ostatnich dniach kwietnia, gdy bestjałsko wybito granatami i wystrzelano około 800 kobiet i mężczyzn. Obecnie przewala się przez stolicę trzecia kolejna fala terroru, która jak dotąd spowodowała uwięzienie w łapankach i aresztowaniach domowych około 6000 ludzi oraz rozstrzelanie na ulicach miasta ponad 100 mężczyzn i kobiet.

Cierpienia stolicy są tylko cząstką cierpień Kraju. Wystarczy uprzytomnić sobie główne ciosy choćby z ostatniego półroczka: 1. niewysłowioną męczarnię powiatu zamojskiego i paru sąsiednich, gdzie około stu tysięcy ludzi zostało wysiedlonych, przeszło przez potworne obozy, przyczem w sposób zwierzęcy odrywano dzieci od matek. 2. spowodowane przez Niemców i Sowiety morderstwa „reżunów” ukraińskich na Wołyniu, w których potworną śmierć znalazło około

20.000 mężczyzn, kobiet i dzieci. 3. lipcowy terror w bilostoczyźnie i łomżyńskim, gdzie wymordowano w ciągu paru dni około 1.500 ludzi.

To co wylczyliśmy, to tylko główne i pozycje. I tylko z ostatniego roku. A pozycje „drobniejsze”? A lata poprzednie? I — niestety — miejmy odwagę spojrzeć prawdzie w oczy: terror październikowy nie jest ostatnim aktem naszych cierpień.

Zaiste, straszliwie doświadcza Opatrzność naród polski.

\* \* \*

Ostatnie warszawskie rozstrzeliwania uliczne prowadzone są przy akompaniamencie propagandy niemieckiej pod hasłem: „sami jesteście winni! Poco nas prowokujecie?”

Cóż za bezczelne i jakież perfidne oszustwo! Węz Niemcy nie zaczepiają tych, co na nich nie napadają? A za co wymordowali Żydów? Za co spadły na stolicę we wrześniu 1940 r. pierwsze olbrzymie łapanki do Oświęcimia, nie poprzedzone ani jednym strzałem do Niem

- During the occupation, the institutions of the Polish underground state and political groups published clandestine press titles and leaflets. Pictured: first page of the *Biuletyn Informacyjny* of 28 October 1943 (AIPN)

---

letins included *Biuletyn Informacyjny* published by the Chief Command of the Home Army (with circulation up to 50,000 copies) and *Wiadomości Polskie* with 20,000 copies. *Rzeczpospolita Polska*, with a circulation of up to 15,000 copies, was the official gazette of the Government Delegation. Political factions and military groups distributed their own titles as well.

The underground state also had its own judiciary, where special military and civilian courts passed sentences on traitors and informers. Ordinary criminals were likewise punished with death.

## OPPOSING THE HOLOCAUST

An integral part of the activity of the Polish Underground State was the establishment and operation of the clandestine Provisional Committee to Aid Jews, later transformed into the Council to Aid Jews operating under the codename *Żegota*.

The council was set up in December 1942 as an agenda of the Government Delegation for Poland and financed from state funds smuggled into the country. Members included delegates of underground political parties and those who helped Jews hide from Germans.

Despite the threat of death for assisting Jews in any manner, documents confirming “Aryan” status (more than 50,000 in total) were forged and financial and organisational assistance granted to find hideouts and provide for people in hiding. Moreover, the organisation helped to pass Jewish children to Polish families and monasteries in secret. Thanks to these efforts, despite the threat from the occupant, over 2,000 children were saved.

By 1944, the *Żegota* assistance efforts were extended to over 4,000 people who used the organisational facilities and funds of the underground state authorities.

After the Germans embarked on the mass murder of the Jewish population, Poland initiated the first international action aimed at stopping and condemning the German atrocities. The Polish Government in Exile alarmed the world with information about the German terror, concentration camps, and continuing destruction of the Jewish nation. The data were met with disbelief in the West – even among the Jews themselves. Many politi-

---

cians doubted that the Germans would run a genocidal scheme on such a scale. Some suspected that Poland was deliberately inflating the size of German atrocities against Jews on Polish territory.

To convince Western leaders that the terror-based German occupation and slaughter of the Jews was real, the Polish Underground State structures collected and used the government in exile to transmit detailed data on the Holocaust. For the same purpose, a Home Army officer Jan Karski was clandestinely smuggled into the ghetto and one of the camps in Poland, and then flown to the West, to serve as an eyewitness of German actions in ghettos and camps and provide first-hand knowledge on the German crimes. The Polish authorities also arranged for Karski an audience with the US president. His report and publications, as well as other activities of the Polish government, revealed the enormity of German crimes on the Jewish population to the world.

Thanks to these efforts, in the end of 1942 the issue of condemning the Holocaust and protect the Jewish population subjected to German terror in occupied lands was brought before the United Nations for a declaration to be made. The Allies were not keen to seek that route, afraid that blowing this matter up might increase pressure on opening a second front in Europe. In early November and again in December 1942 the Polish government, capitalizing on its still relatively strong position in the Allied camp, supplied the Allies with an extensive memorandum that detailed the ongoing destruction of the Jews in German-occupied territories, asking for joint efforts that would stop the genocide. As a result of these efforts and pressures, several Allied governments on 17 December 1942 issued a declaration officially condemning the “bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination” and stressing the determination to ensure that those responsible do not escape punishment, the first document condemning the Holocaust on the international level.

In parallel, for many months both the Polish authorities and some Polish Jews unsuccessfully appealed to the Allies for ostentatious acts of revenge on the Germans to stop the murderous policy of the Third Reich.

As a token of protest against the passive attitude of the free world towards the Holocaust of the Jews perpetrated by the Germans, a member of the National Council set up by the President of the Republic of Poland in Exile, Szmul Zygielbojm, committed suicide while in the West in May 1943.



**The text of the declaration on Jewish genocide pursued by the German Reich adopted by the Allies thanks to Polish efforts on 17 December 1942.**

**Joint Declaration Announced Simultaneously on December 17th, 1942, in London, Moscow and Washington**

The attention of the Governments of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, and Yugoslavia and of the French National Committee has been drawn to numerous reports from Europe that the German authorities, not content with denying to persons of Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended, the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft-repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe. From all the occupied countries Jews are being transported in conditions of appalling horror and brutality to Eastern Europe. In Poland, which has been made the principal Nazi slaughterhouse, the ghettos established by the German invaders are being systematically emptied of all Jews, except a few highly skilled workers required for war industries. None of those taken away are ever heard of again. The able-bodied are slowly worked to death in labor camps. The infirm are left to die of exposure and starvation or are deliberately massacred in mass executions. The number of victims of these bloody cruelties is reckoned in many hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent men, women and children.

The above-mentioned Governments and the French National Committee condemn in the strongest possible terms this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination. They declare that such events can only strengthen the resolve of all freedom-loving peoples to overthrow the barbarous Hitlerite tyranny. They reaffirm their solemn resolution to ensure that those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution, and to press on with the necessary practical measures to this end.

**Source: Republic of Poland. *The mass extermination of Jews in German occupied Poland*, London, New York, Melbourne 1942.**



## A SINISTER “ALLY”

### A TOTALITARIAN PARTNER

On 22 June 1941, German armies attacked the USSR. That marked the beginning of the war between two totalitarian occupants who had previously acted in concert. Within just a few weeks, the Germans pushed the Soviet armies out from the entire territory of Poland. The end of collaboration between two enemies of the Republic of Poland was a favourable circumstance, promising brighter prospects for regaining independence.

The disgraceful Soviet defeats and huge losses in people and equipment proved that Soviet state could be defeated and that only immediate and efficient Western assistance could save the USSR from ruin. Yet Hitler's triumph in the east would certainly have been a greater evil for London. It was clear that in such circumstances the victorious German Reich, with access to the vast Soviet natural resources, would be capable of turning its entire military potential against Great Britain, posing a realistic threat to her existence.

Therefore, while being aware of the vicious nature of Soviet dictatorship, Great Britain immediately and without any preconditions recognised the USSR as her ally. This move was obviously in the British national interest. After all, Britain was not at war with the Soviets, and the British, unlike the Poles, were not victims of Soviet totalitarianism.

As the victim of both USSR and Germany, Poland had to take a somewhat different approach to this development. The Poles considered the outbreak of German-Soviet war as the longed for moment in which the two occupying forces abandoned any pretence of





■ Signing of the Polish-Soviet treaty in London on 30 July 1941. The documents are signed by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland and Supreme Commander Gen. Władysław Sikorski (on left) and USSR ambassador to Great Britain Ivan Maisky. In the middle, behind the table, sit British Foreign Affairs Minister Anthony Eden and Prime Minister Winston Churchill (photo NAC)

solidarity and became locked in a struggle to the death. After all, it was their collusion over the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact that contributed to the loss of Polish freedom. Therefore, neither the excessive advantage nor definite victory of either totalitarian state was in the real interest of the Republic of Poland.

However, Poland also found herself in new circumstances. Its government in London could not remain indifferent to the reversal of alliances now focused on the British–Soviet cooperation, and was forced to take a position. The fact was that the Wehrmacht forced the Soviets out from Poland, and as long as the Red Army was on the defensive, Soviet totalitarianism did not threaten Poland directly as it had in 1939–41. This immediately made Germany masters over nearly the entire territory of Poland.

Mindful of these circumstances, the Polish authorities made an attempt to normalise relations with the USSR, a decision strongly supported by the British. At the same time, a potential agreement based on mutual respect for sovereignty became an opportunity

---

to rescue hundreds of thousands of citizens of the Republic of Poland, victims of Soviet repressions who had survived by then, from Soviet labour camps and areas of forced settlement. For them, this was the only chance to change their fate.

After difficult negotiations, an agreement restoring bilateral relations between Poland and the USSR was signed on 30 July 1941, followed by a military alliance. Moscow officially announced that the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact had lost its power. In a separate protocol appended to the understanding, liberation of Polish citizens imprisoned in the USSR was promised.

## **AN ARMY OF FORMER SLAVES**

Separate Polish–Soviet agreements stipulated that recruitment to Polish military units subordinated to the Republic of Poland authorities would begin among released Polish citizens. General Władysław Anders, discharged from the Moscow NKVD prison, became commander of the newly raised Polish Armed Forces in the East, and military training and formation of successive divisions began. Tens of thousands of abused civilians, who had gone through the ordeal of Soviet captivity and now sought support and a chance for survival, also reached the locations where military units were being organised.

Despite international agreements, the Soviets sabotaged the liberation of Polish citizens from labour camps and places of exile, trying to hinder the flow of national minorities, including thousands of Polish Jews, to Anders' Army. The government of the Republic of Poland undertook a diplomatic struggle to ensure that such minorities would also be offered freedom of choice. Even Poles encountered ever increasing difficulties. With time, the Soviets began to demand that individual Polish divisions be sent to the front immediately, without waiting for others to be formed fully, which would lead to their imminent annihilation, especially given the Soviet penchant for fighting battles with no regard to manpower losses. The Poles believed that Polish units should enter the struggle as uniform tactical formations.

In 1942, the issue of the Soviets reducing food provisions for the army emerged. This was all the more dangerous as military food rations also ensured the subsistence of dozens of thousands of civilians. Released from Soviet labour camps, they looked for



■ Polish children deported deep into the USSR in 1940 and released following the Polish-Soviet treaty (IPMS/KARTA)



---

a chance to survive, attaching themselves to newly formed Polish military units. To solve the problem, first some units and later all others, together with the civilians, were evacuated to Persia, then under British control. The evacuation was carried out in full understanding with Soviet authorities and caused no tension at the time. In this way, over 100,000 people left the USSR with Anders' army from the spring to the autumn of 1942. This not only allowed them to survive, but also to leave the Soviet "inhuman land" for good.

## A CHANCE FOR VICTORY

Polish authorities clung to the opportunity of continued conscription in the USSR, yet it soon turned out that the Soviets would rule this out definitely.

At the time, units of the Polish First Corps in Scotland were dressed for battle and special forces were being formed. The 1st Independent Parachute Brigade was set up



▪ Soldiers of the 1st Independent Parachute Brigade with Supreme Commander Gen. Kazimierz Sosnkowski (NAC)



- Memorial badge of the Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade which fought at Tobruk in Africa

in 1941 to be transferred to fighting Poland at the outbreak of a general uprising. The so-called *cichociemni* (literally "the silent unseen"), or elite troops trained especially for being individually parachuted to support the regular fight of the Home Army, were also formed.

At the time, Poles also participated in the fight on all fronts. The Polish Independent Carpathian Brigade fought as part of the British Army in North Africa in 1941–42, participating among others in the ferocious British-German struggle in defence of Tobruk and other military operations in the region (the battles of Gazala, Bardia and skirmishes near Alexandria). Later, Polish units fighting in Africa were merged with those evacuated from the Soviet Union in the British Middle Eastern mandate territories, thus forming the Polish Army in the East. This later grew into the Polish Second Corps (under the command of General Anders) which, transferred to Italy, took part in ejecting the Germans from the Apennine Peninsula.



■ General Władysław Anders, commander of the 2nd Polish Corps whose soldiers stormed the Monte Cassino abbey (NAC)



---

The accession of the United States to the Second World War in December 1941 was an additional source of optimism for Poles, as president Franklin D. Roosevelt repeatedly declared his admiration for the unbreakable spirit of the Polish nation. Accordingly, he reinforced hopes for unqualified support not only for the reconstruction of Poland in its pre-war borders but also for an adjustment of the western and northern borders at the expense of Germany, as their strategically disadvantageous course had greatly facilitated the aggression of the German Reich in September 1939 and the conquest of Poland.

The principles formulated by Roosevelt and Churchill on 14 April 1941, known as the Atlantic Charter, became the fundamental document which the United Nations, fighting against the Axis states, referred to in the following years. Also signed by the Soviets, the document categorically opposed the acceptance of any border changes in the territories of conquered states without the consent of their populations. This at least formally hindered the Soviets from attempting to have their 1939-1941 western borders recognised as binding under international law.

**An excerpt from the Atlantic Charter. Aboard the Prince of Wales,  
14 August 1941**

The President of the United States of America and the Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, representing His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, being met together, deem it right to make known certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world.

First, their countries seek no aggrandizement, territorial or other;

Second, they desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned;

Third, they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them;

[...]

Source: *Historia powszechna 1918–1945. (Wybór tekstów źródłowych)*, ed. by B. Łyczko-Grodzicka, M. Pułaski, Kraków 1981, p. 220.

---

## ILLUSORY HOPES

Since they became the allies of a totalitarian Soviet state, the British and the Americans decided to switch the focus of wartime propaganda so as to cover or gloss over the criminal nature of the USSR. Considerable effort was thus put into painting the Soviet Union as “a different form of democracy”. Some genuinely wanted to believe that the imperialist nature of Stalin’s state was revised under the stress of military defeats. The reinstatement of Soviet–Polish relations in itself contributed to the success of such propaganda efforts

Unfortunately, the actual nature of the Soviet state did not undergo any profound change. For Poles, the tragic experience of Soviet occupation from 1939–41 confirmed Stalin’s dictatorship as being not less oppressive than Hitler’s. Although the sinister truth of the Katyn massacre was not yet known, the Polish government received detailed reports on past deportations, crimes, and brutality of Soviet authorities towards the inhabitants of the occupied territory.

As mentioned above, one of the reasons for restarting relations with the USSR in 1941 was the willingness to put an end to the ordeal that hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens had gone through in labour camps and areas of forced settlement deep in the USSR. It was obvious that, as a former ally of Hitler, Stalin would not negate the criminal decisions that had turned the lives of millions upside down. The knowledge of the horrifying scale of Soviet repressions before 1941 was not limited to the Polish government. Questions about the fate of the “missing” thousands of officers, whom Poles would gladly see in their newly established the Polish Army units, were shrugged off by the Russians with various, at times mutually contradictory, replies suggesting that they “fled” from the USSR.

In such circumstances, it became obvious for many that both a definite victory of the totalitarian Germany or of the totalitarian USSR in the east would be a threat to Polish hopes for regaining state independence and citizen freedom.

The most advantageous eastern scenario for Poland would be a stalemate between the two totalitarian powers, bleeding each other in a deadlock far to the east of the Polish borders and weakening their military potential so that neither could implement its imperialistic plans of enslaving other nations. In addition, this would allow Western states to defeat a weakened Germany, as happened in 1918.

---

The hopes of Polish authorities were based on opening a second front in the Balkans, a plan considered in the Allied camp and supported particularly by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Such an invasion would offer Poland a chance to be liberated by the British and American armies, which also included the Polish Armed Forces in the West. Should this scenario come true, the Germans could actually be defeated in the west of Europe before the Red Army advanced towards Poland territory. This would give Poles an opportunity to rebuild the military and political potential of a free country that could safeguard its sovereignty and borders against any potential aggressive measures of the USSR.

## THE SOVIET SUBVERSION

The Polish fear of Soviet Russia was justified. Stalin's lack of excessively hostile intentions towards Poland was only temporary. Soon after signing agreements with Poland, he launched secret plots to undermine the letter and spirit of the Soviet–Polish understanding. Already in the summer of 1941, he issued an order in Moscow to reactivate the seditious communist structures subordinated to the Kremlin in Polish territory occupied by the Germans. Trained groups of communist functionaries were transferred to central Poland in successive months and assumed the name of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR). In eastern areas of the Republic of Poland, Soviet partisans and saboteurs operated without any arrangements with the Republic of Poland, frequently posing a threat to the Polish population.

At that time, Stalin tried to force the British to agree to sanction the annexation of half the territory of Poland, concluded in 1939, seeking to have the Bug River recognized as the western border of the USSR, and London, despite its obligations towards Poland, was ready to give in already in 1942. This became apparent when a new military and political treaty between Britain and the Soviets was being drafted, Moscow demanded the recognition of its 1941 borders, including the eastern lands of the Polish Republic and other annexed territories (the Baltic states, Romanian Bessarabia and Bucovina). Such extremely unfavourable arrangements would be unacceptable for the Polish authorities. Yet Poland in 1942 still had a relatively strong position in the Allied camp and



## EXTENT OF THE GERMAN EASTERN FRONT IN 1941–1942



Maciej Mikulski

-  Borders of states and territories occupied by Germany and USSR on 22 June 1941
-  German Reich, her allies and territories occupied by Germany before 22 June 1941
-  Areas captured by the Germany and her allies in 1941
-  The line of the German-Soviet front in early December 1941
-  The line of the German-Soviet front in November 1942
-  Areas recaptured by the USSR during the Moscow counteroffensive
-  Areas captured by Germany and her allies in 1942
-  Polish territory occupied by Germany

---

a major supporter in the person of the US president who strongly opposed acceding to Soviet demands, citing the Atlantic Charter principles, and also compelled Great Britain to reject Stalin's proposals. He also directly promised to Prime Minister Sikorski that Polish territory would not become the object of bargains. Poland believed this to be a diplomatic success, while Moscow, to her annoyance, had to shelve Stalin's wishes for border guarantees.

## **POLAND'S PLACE IN THE ALLIED CAMP**

Until the end of 1942 Poland continued to enjoy a relatively strong position among the Allies as a subject to be reckoned with. She could still count on active support of her US ally as regards her borders and territorial integrity, and also tried to convince the Allies to oppose the occupation of the Baltic states and Romanian territories annexed by the USSR in 1940.

At that time, Poland organized joint initiatives and efforts of European countries occupied by Germany, and also attempted to have the international community condemn the German atrocities and crimes against the Jewish nation, including by declaring an unavoidable penalty for the perpetrators. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union had to focus primarily on halting the German advance on the eastern front.

When in the end of 1942 foreshadowed Axis defeats in the main theatres of war Poland, despite painful losses, could still believe in the opportunity to see the end of the war as one of the free, sovereign, and victorious states, able to jointly decide the post-war order on the continent. It was not until the next year that these plans were set at naught by Stalin's hostile policy towards the Polish Republic, as the Soviet Union recorded a series of victories and turned the tide of war in 1943. Even worse, President Roosevelt changed his policy line, becoming more willing to act as a pawn in Stalin's game.



# VII

## FREEDOM: NOT FOR POLES

### A POLITICAL BREAKTHROUGH

A turn for the worse in the quest to rebuild independent Poland took place in 1943, when the Battle of Stalingrad decisively turned the tide on the Eastern Front. Stalin was now aware that a victorious march of the Red Army westwards was possible, allowing to realize his empire-like plans of conquering at least part of Europe. Moreover, Moscow could now begin to resume spreading the Bolshevik revolution, this time with actual approval from the Western states. This strongly increased the propaganda value of worldwide communist ideology.

Poland was the largest country standing between the USSR and Germany. Contrary to all propaganda declarations, Stalin was actually not at all interested in her friendship or cooperation. What he wanted was a free hand in drawing the borders of Poland as well as deciding its political system, state authorities and the future of its inhabitants. History not only proved that he intended to seize nearly half of the territory of the Republic of Poland but also continually planned to subjugate the remainder as well.

At the time, Poland was still politically significant, although due to its limited military potential it was not a first-rank member of the anti-German alliance. Therefore the Kremlin took a piecemeal approach, embarking on a policy of aggression against the Republic of



---

Poland, advancing new claims as soon as others were satisfied. Stalin's objective in early 1943 was to tarnish the prestige and reduce the impact of Poland among the Allies, and later to gradually displace her from the Allied camp, eventually making her no more than a pawn in the great powers game.

This design began with provocations that resulted in increased tension in Soviet–Polish relations, for instance by re-imposing Soviet citizenship on the Polish population released from Soviet labour camps and areas of exile. Immediately afterwards, Polish communists staying in the Soviet Union announced the establishment of the so-called Union of Polish Patriots in the USSR, which pretended to be a faction independent of the Republic of Poland authorities, while in fact serving as merely another tool of anti-Polish politics and Soviet propaganda. Moscow thus obdurately intended to escalate tensions in bilateral relations.

## **AGGRESSION WITHIN THE COALITION**

In the spring of 1943, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt changed his attitude towards Soviet territorial demands, abandoning the idea of defending the entirety of the territory of his Polish ally against Soviet claims, a view he expressed clearly during the visit of the British minister of foreign affairs to Washington. That meant rejecting the policy of enforcing all principles of the Atlantic Charter with respect to Poland and other small and medium-sized states of Central and Eastern Europe exposed to the Soviet empire's claims. The president also rejected the appeals of some of his administration members to start demanding that Russia respect the sovereignty of the Republic of Poland on threat of stopping mass supplies of arms and equipment.

The still unofficial news of the wavering US position concerning Soviet demands, intimated to the British, quickly reached the Kremlin. In these circumstances, Stalin realised he could escalate his demands to annex the eastern half of the Polish territory to a new level of anti-Polish action.

The Soviet dictator chiefly wanted to break the diplomatic fetters by which he was bound due to bilateral relations with Poland, and was on the lookout for a convenient pretext. Eventually, he made use of the disclosure of the Katyn massacre perpetrated by the USSR

---

and feigned indignation with the “German slander”. The Soviet authorities announced that the crime had been perpetrated by the Germans and demanded that Poland explicitly confirm Soviet untruths about the case – obviously something she would not agree to.

On 25 April 1943, Moscow severed diplomatic ties with Poland. This meant the end of any Polish representation in the USSR, which left Poles on Soviet territory bereft of any diplomatic protection. At the same time, Soviet claims concerning Poland were ramped up. Not content with seizing territory, the USSR also demanded a role in nominating members of the Polish government.

In this way the Republic of Poland became the only country among the active members of the global anti-German coalition that, while the war was still raging, became the target of aggression from another member of the coalition, the USSR. Initially, Soviet aggressive policy was primarily prosecuted through diplomacy and propaganda and later, from 1944 onwards, also with the use of the military and secret police.

Strong Soviet guerrilla groups operating in the regions around Wilno and Nowogródek, then occupied by Germany, had already received orders to eliminate Home Army troops in the region. The killings also affected the Polish population supporting the AK.

In late 1943, at the Tehran Conference, Stalin received Roosevelt’s and Churchill’s direct permission to annex the eastern half of Poland, who accepted the so-called Curzon line as the eastern border of the Republic of Poland. Under such circumstances, behind the backs of the Allies, the Kremlin intensified its efforts to establish competitive “Polish” centres of power.

## OPERATION TEMPEST

During the occupation, plans for the so-called *general uprising* were being devised in the Polish underground state. Secret military structures were being established, partisans trained and arms stockpiled so as to exploit an opportune moment and attack the Germans with the support of Polish units in the West: the air force and the parachute brigade. The insurgency was to erupt simultaneously all over the country when the German power showed signs of weakening. In this way, Poland would be liberated by the Western Allies and the Polish Armed Forces. This idea would have had a chance of succeeding if the



■ Gen. Kazimierz Sosnkowski – Supreme Commander of the Polish Armed Forces in 1943–1944 (NAC)



---

English-American Balkan invasion plan was implemented. While the Balkan second front came to naught (also under pressure from the USSR), the hopes flickered on with the success of the Allied offensive in Italy, where Sicily and the entire southern part of the Apennine Peninsula had been liberated by December 1943.

Gradually, the prospect of an invasion by the Red Army, hostile towards Polish aspirations to independence, was becoming ever more realistic. The Poles felt they had to modify their original armed resistance plans to ensure that their military and political resonance would force the USSR to respect the coalition principles contained in the Atlantic Charter towards the Republic of Poland and to recognise its sovereignty.

With this in mind, a new design of anti-German insurrectionist activity of the Home Army was developed, called Operation Tempest, which consisted in armed action conducted not simultaneously throughout the country but in individual regions just before the coming of Soviet troops. The intention was to organise local uprisings immediately behind the German line of the front and to have Polish forces liberate larger and smaller towns so as to appear before the Soviets as allies and hosts. Civilian and military structures, once revealed, were to assume the duties of Polish administration and police force, ready to fight on against the Germans at the side of the Soviets as part of the anti-German coalition. It was assumed that political and propaganda reasons along with support from the British and Americans would force the Soviets to respect Polish power bodies and their sovereignty.

Following the logic of war Poland – with no other means of pressure – counted on its military efforts sparking political and propaganda reverberations in the Allied camp.

## **A FUTILE EFFORT**

In January 1944, the Red Army crossed the eastern border of Poland for the second time during the war. On 20 January 1944, the government of the Republic of Poland issued a statement that “the Polish Nation categorically and unconditionally rejects Soviet claims to the eastern territory of the Polish State”.

The first Polish units of the Home Army that embarked on the implementation of Operation Tempest were active in Volhynia. Early in July 1944 the detachments from the



■ Home Army detachments entering the town of Szczepieszyn in the Lublin region as part of Operation Tempest, 26 July 1944 (AIPN)

regions of Wilno and Nowogródek battled with the Germans for Wilno over the course of a few days. The Red Army joined the skirmishers in the city. The Home Army also participated in the fight for Lwów and hundreds of other cities and towns.

While fighting on the front lasted, Soviet commanders made use of the aid offered by the AK and frequently officially expressed gratitude for its support in the struggle against the Germans. However, when fighting ceased, the Soviets insidiously arrested Home Army commanders, some during specially organized joint “command councils”. At the same time, they began to disarm and arrest the thousands of remaining AK soldiers. Some were incorporated into units subordinated to Moscow, others arrested and sent to labour camps deep in the USSR. Those who tried to keep their freedom and resist were ruthlessly murdered by the Soviets. Mass Soviet reprisals against Polish civilians resumed as well. The new occupation of eastern Poland became a fact.

All these actions, however, took place in territories which Stalin openly claimed for the Soviet Union. The Poles did not know how the Soviets would act west of the Bug River

- 
- Gen. Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski, commander-in-chief of the Home Army from 1943 to 1944 (NAC)



(the “Curzon line”), the territory which they officially did not deny as belonging to the Polish state. Therefore, as part of Operation Tempest, the armed forces of the Home Army also joined the fight in the environs of Lublin, Rzeszów, eastern Mazovia, around Kraków, and near Kielce, liberating hundreds of towns on their own.

However, it turned out that instead of recognising the lawful government of the Republic of Poland, Stalin went forward with his own empire-building designs in these lands as well. In Moscow, the fully accessory Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN), was set up. The USSR billed the PKWN as the only government in Poland west of the Curzon line. Bloody Soviet reprisals against thousands of Home Army soldiers and other pro-independence organisations as well as civil servants of the underground Polish state continued on both sides of the Bug. Thus the USSR, while a member of the Allied camp, attacked the armed forces of another allied state. Stalin was bent on following that path to eradicate the Polish underground state structures before dropping an entirely new administration, fully subservient to the Kremlin, onto the territory of Poland.



---

**Excerpts from the statement of the Government of Poland of 5 January 1944, issued in relation to the second crossing of the pre-war Polish–Soviet border by the Red Army:**

The Polish nation was the first to oppose the German onslaught and has incessantly fought against the power and violence for the last four years, despite unprecedented sacrifices and suffering, having moreover issued no Quisling and rejected all and any compromise and collaboration with the invader. (...) Thus, the Polish nation is fully entitled to expect full justice and redress at the moment of liberation. The condition necessary for that justice is the return of sovereign state authority over the liberated territories of the Republic of Poland, and protection of the life and property of its citizens. (...) Being the only one and legal helmsman and speaker for the Polish nation, the Government of Poland, recognised in Homeland and by Poles in Exile and the Allied and free governments (...) ascertains the inalienable rights of Poland to independence, ensconced in the principles of the Atlantic Charter, shared by all the United Nations and in the international treaties in force. (...) The Government of Poland expects that the Soviet Union (...) will respect the rights and interests of the Republic of Poland and its citizens.

*Source: We expect that the rights and interests of the Republic of Poland and its citizens will be respected. Statement of the Government of the Republic of Poland, Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza”, 6 January 1944, no. 4.*

## THE WARSAW UPRISING

The most evident instance of the struggle for the right of the Republic of Poland to be independent was the Warsaw Uprising that broke out on 1 August 1944 while Soviet troops were approaching the Vistula. The Republic of Poland structures started to reveal themselves in the capital city quarters liberated by the Home Army. Stalin did not expect an army raised in secret and consisting of alleged civilians to be capable of long-term and effective resistance against regular German units armed to their teeth.

However, rebuilding a free Republic of Poland in the capital city spoiled his plans of transferring the puppet PKWN government to Warsaw. It also denied the false claim spread by the Soviets that the Home Army was a fiction and that the only power that

# BIULETYN INFORMACYJNY

WYDANIE CODZIENNE

Rok 6

Warszawa, środa 2 sierpnia 1944 r.

Nr. 35-242

## **Dowódca Armii Krajowej dał rozkaz do walki z wrogiem**

### **ŻOŁNIERZE STOLICY**

Wydałem dziś upragniony przez Was rozkaz do [awnej] walki z odwiecznym wrogiem Polski, najeźdźcą niemieckim. Po pięciu blisko latach nieprzerwanej i twardej walki prowadzonej w podziemiach konspiracji stajecie dziś otwarcie z bronią w ręku, by Ojczyźnie przywrócić Wolność i wymierzyć zbrodniarzom niemieckim przykładową karę za terror i zbrodnie dokonane na ziemiach Polski.

Warszawa, 1.VIII-1944 r.

Dowódca Armji Krajowej  
(-) BÓR

▪ Order of the Home Army commander Gen. Bór-Komorowski to begin an open struggle against the German occupant in the occupied Warsaw (Biuletyn Informacyjny, 2 August 1944)

counted in Poland were the communists. A quick quenching of the uprising by German forces and the destruction of the stock of the underground army was what suited Moscow best.

Stalin therefore at first denied that any fight broke out in the city at all. Yet as it quickly turned out that the Germans were not capable of suppressing the uprising within a few days, the Kremlin decided to oppose the Poles. The Red Army offensive ground to a halt in front of Warsaw, abandoning its former plans of attacking the city and giving the Germans time to annihilate the Polish forces.

In the meantime, the Western Allies agreed to provide airborne relief to the insurgents in the form of weapons, ammunition, and food supplies. In mid-August 1944 they turned to the Soviets to permit supply planes to land on airfields on the Soviet side of the front, which would enable significantly larger Allied assistance to reach the city. Otherwise,



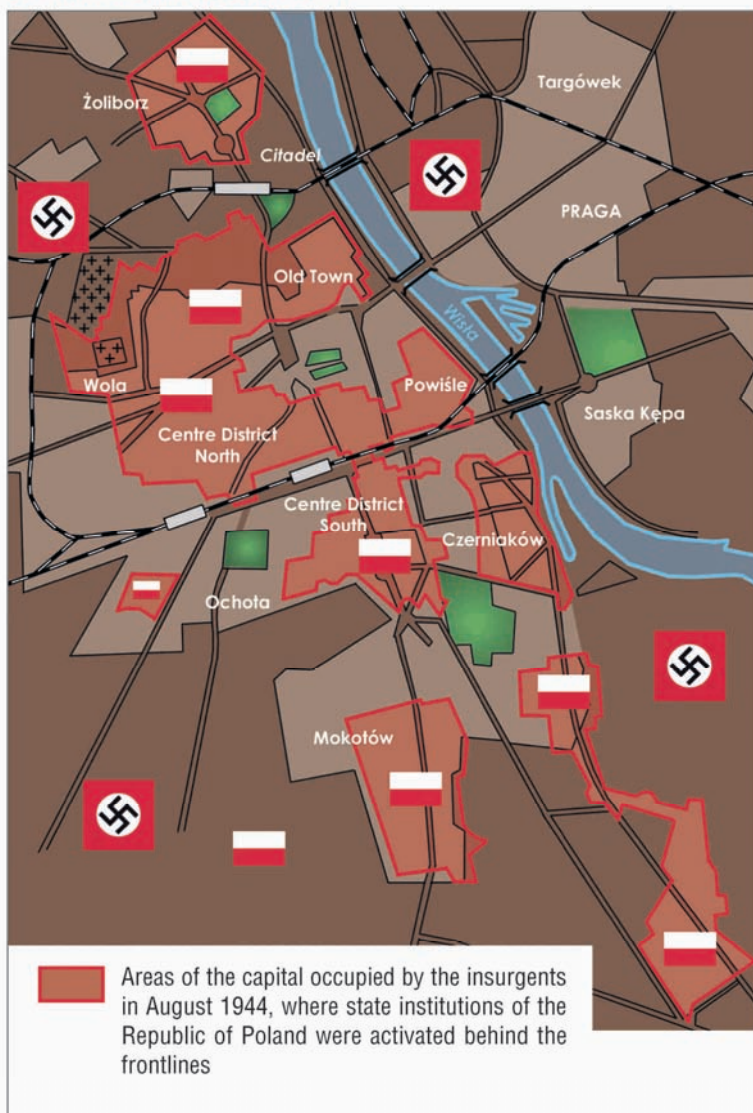
▪ A group of Warsaw insurgents in August 1944 (Wikimedia Commons)

instead of a greater volume of equipment for the insurgents, the planes had had to carry extra amounts of fuel to be able to return to airfields in Italy. As at that time the insurgents were having the upper hand, the provisions could really reach the soldiers of the Home Army. However, the Soviets openly refused permission, not wanting the fighting Poles to receive more aid. The British ambassador, summoned by the Soviet vice minister of foreign affairs, Andrey Vyshinsky, was informed in a highly telling manner that “the Soviet government cannot agree to this. The outbreak of the fights in Warsaw, into which the population of Warsaw was drawn into, is only and solely the work of troublemakers, and the Soviet government cannot contribute to this.”

In mid-August 1944, the commander in chief of the Home Army, General Tadeusz “Bór” Komorowski, summoned all well-armed AK troops to march to aid the capital city. Both the Germans and Soviets launched military activities to render increasing support for the Polish soldiers fighting in the capital city impossible. The Germans intercepted and fought the troops coming from northern and western Mazovia, from around Ra-



## THE WARSAW UPRISING DURING THE FIRST FEW WEEKS OF FIGHTING IN AUGUST 1944





■ German soldiers led out of the Warsaw PASTA building in the Centre District captured by Polish insurgents (AIPN)

## GERMAN AND SOVIET ACTIONS AGAINST POLISH TROOPS COMING TO THE AID OF THE WARSAW UPRISING IN 1944



Areas in which Home Army detachments coming to the aid of the Warsaw Uprising were attacked, dispersed in battle, disarmed or blocked by:



Germans



Soviets



The Soviet-German front line

Yellow arrow symbol representing directions of HA marches.

directions of HA marches



---

dom and Kielce, and from Little Poland. On their side of the front, the Soviets hunted, disarmed, and destroyed partisans moving to the relief of Warsaw from eastern Podlasie, Mazovia, the Lublin and Rzeszów regions, and even from around Lwów. By way of paradox, this was the last wartime proof of actual (although formally independent) Soviet-German cooperation to achieve the same military and political goals, again aimed against the Republic of Poland.

## SURRENDER

In such circumstances, the Home Army soldiers fought a heroic fight on the barricades of Warsaw against the Germans who had a huge advantage. Hitler eagerly exploited the opportunity that the stopped Soviet offensive gave him, giving German units, with plenty of ammunition and heavy equipment, an overwhelming superiority.

The Germans perpetrated mass crimes in recaptured districts of the city, killing more than 100,000 Warsaw inhabitants. Later, communist propaganda would call them “victims of the uprising” for several decades, although in fact they were victims of mass German atrocities behind the frontline.

The Soviets refused permission for British and American planes to land and refuel until the second week of September. By then they had already noticed the propaganda costs: after a few weeks of the Warsaw insurgency, articles denouncing the real intentions of Moscow and its eagerness to let Germans liquidate the uprising quickly had been published all over the world. Midway through the month, the Soviets captured the right-bank districts of the city. For propaganda purposes, in late September Soviets divisions encamped on the other side of the Vistula agreed for some units to make a crossing attempt, but by then the insurgents only held a fraction of the quarters they had previously liberated. This operation, moreover, was only to be conducted with forces limited to a single army from the whole Soviet front, a tactical division composed of Polish soldiers. Thus restricted, the move had nothing to do with the earlier, but abandoned, plans to attack the city with the combined might of multiple Soviet armies and significant ground, artillery, and air force support. Now the Vistula crossing was attempted without appropriate support, bringing no tangible military effects; in fact, it only served to increase the number

---

of casualties. Other activities that the Soviets undertook in the final period of the Warsaw Uprising were also more propaganda-oriented than practical.

In early October 1944, after 63 days of fierce battles against the prevailing enemy forces, the insurgents formally surrendered to the Germans.

Having regained control over the city, Hitler ordered Warsaw razed to the ground and all surviving civilians expelled. Exploiting further Soviet inaction, in the following months Germans burnt down and blew up whole Warsaw quarters, one house after another.

## **POLISH STOOGES IN SOVIET SERVICE**

Those Poles unable to join units answering to the Republic of Poland government due to Soviet objections went on to fight against the Germans on the Eastern Front.

In 1943, after severing relations with Poland, the USSR announced that new Polish military formations, fully dependent on the Soviets although operating under Polish names and with Polish national symbols, would be set up by the Red Army. Stalin nominated Zygmunt Berling, former lieutenant colonel of the Polish Army demoted for desertion, and secret collaborator of the NKVD, as their commander. The division he was raising was to become an important tool in the new phase of Stalin's propaganda and diplomatic game against Poland.

The majority of rank and file soldiers which ended in these units saw them an opportunity to return to their homeland. For political reasons, the Soviets sent some of the troops – still untrained recruits – to the front line near the Belarussian village of Lenino in October 1943. Soon afterwards the establishment of the Polish 1st Infantry Division, 32,000 strong in December 1943, was announced.

The units were subject to political control and indoctrination combined with reprisals for demonstrating views opposing Soviet ideology and propaganda.

After the recapture of the Polish territory in 1944, the Soviets began to systematically expand these units by forced conscription, also with former underground soldiers. The force grew to the size of two armies, which in August 1944 consisted of 107,000 soldiers in total, reaching 275,000 by the end of the year. Still, however, they were fully subordinate to the Soviet authorities and not to the government of the Republic of Poland. Their mem-

---

bers had no part in deciding how these units were used, whether for military campaigns or Stalin's political purposes. Nonetheless, wherever they were sent, they eagerly made use of the opportunity to fight against Germans.

Poles from these units participated, among others, in the struggle against the Germans to hold the Vistula bridgeheads, in the failed left-bank Warsaw landing mentioned above, and later to retain the bridgeheads captured in September 1944. Rank and file soldiers, unaware of the backstage Soviet decisions, believed these efforts to be really the beginning of efficient aid for the still-flickering uprising. The Soviets, in fact, did not launch major operations to capture Warsaw, as they were waiting for Germans to quench the insurgency.

In February and March 1945, units from one of the armies were sent into combat to break through the Pomeranian Wall. Later, Polish units subordinate to the Soviets participated in the crossing of the Odra River and the Battle of Berlin as well as in the gory fights in Lusatia as part of the Prague operation of the Red Army.

## THE ENIGMA AND THE LIBERATION OF EUROPE

In 1944–45 the Polish Army participated in the liberation of Italy, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The troops of the Polish 2nd Corps of General Władysław Anders, consisting predominantly of Poles, were successfully evacuated from the Soviet Union to Persia and the Middle East and later sent to fight in the Apennine Peninsula in late 1943 and early 1944. In May 1944, after a heroic struggle, Polish forces captured among others the Monte Cassino abbey, opening the path to Rome to Allied troops. Later, they liberated tens of Italian towns and locations from the Germans, notably Piedmont, Ancona (June–July 1944), and Bologna (April 1945).

Polish ships helped to ferry and safeguard Allied troops landing in Normandy, and Polish sailors also participated in the Battle of the Atlantic, convoys sailing to Murmansk, and naval warfare in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. After D-Day, Poles fought (among other places) in France in the Battle of Falaise (8–22 August 1944) and liberated Ypres and Ghent in Belgium and Breda in the Netherlands (28–30 October





■ Gen. Stanisław Maczek, commander of the Polish 1st Armoured Division that participated in the liberation of France, Belgium and the Netherlands (NAC)



- “For your freedom and ours” – a 1944 poster devoted to Polish soldiers who captured the Monte Cassino abbey (Imperial War Museums)



---

1944). The 1st Independent Parachute Brigade participated in Operation Market Garden (21–25 September 1944). Poles were also present in battles along the Meuse River, and in May 1945 they captured the northern regions of Germany, including the port of Wilhelmshaven.

The list of Polish achievements in the struggle against the Third Reich cannot be complete without the feats of Polish cryptologists (notably Marian Rejewski), who were not only the first to break the codes of the German Enigma cipher machine but also created twin copies of the device early in the 1930s. In the following years they improved upon them, building a so-called “bomb”: a device able to automatically decode German messages. Immediately before the outbreak of the war, the Poles passed copies of the Enigma and the entire documentation to French and British intelligence,



■ The Polish flag waving over the ruins of the Monte Cassino abbey (IPMS/KARTA)



## FORMATION AND MARCH OF THE 2ND POLISH CORPS OF GEN. ANDERS




Maciej Mikulski





 German Reich, her allies and territories occupied before 22 June 1941


 The widest extent of the German eastern front in 1941–1942

 Polish borders in 1939

 The locations in which Polish units led by Gen. Anders were formed

 Movements of Anders army units, their evacuation route from the USSR and battles of the Carpathian Brigade in Africa

 The route of the 2nd Polish Corps of Gen. Anders through Italy

 Displacement of 2nd Polish Corps soldiers to Great Britain following the end of the war



■ Marian Rejewski, a Polish mathematician and cryptologist who broke the ciphers of the Enigma, a German coding machine. Sharing these discoveries with the British allowed to intercept the most secret German military plans during the war (photo from a collection of Janina Sylwestrzak)

which allowed the Allies to continue and expand the work on decoding German messages and orders.

The breaking of the Enigma codes permitted to intercept German orders and military plans and contributed to the success of numerous Allied operations.

## A WAR WITHOUT VICTORY

From the very onset of the war, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland participated in the fight for the freedom of Norway, France, Great Britain, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands. With the German occupation ended, the liberated West European peoples could easily return to a peaceful life and start to rebuild their countries.





■ The war cemetery of Polish soldiers who died while fighting in Italy, Loreto near Ancona (photo Maciej Korcuć)

Although Poland explicitly contributed to defeating Germany in the Second World War, it had no such option due to being occupied by the Red Army and abandoned to the mercy of Stalin by the Allies. The USSR annexed nearly half of the original territory of the Republic of Poland and kept the rest in a state of in subjection, preventing the reconstruction of the independent Republic of Poland. Its lawful government, struggling for independence since 1939, was forced to remain in exile.

Domestic power was in the hands of communist authorities installed by the USSR and supported by the Soviet army and the NKVD. The Polish communists were aware of the lack of broader support among the population and the need to depend on Soviet violence to maintain power.

It was not a coincidence that breaking Polish resistance was for a long time entrusted to rifle and border divisions of the NKVD stationed in Poland, which also conducted ex-

---

tensive policing operations in territories seized from the German occupant. Together with the forces of the communist security police (UB) nurtured under Soviet supervision, they engaged in sanguine reprisals, murders, arrests and deportations to labour camps deep in the USSR. Although the terror affected the population at large, it mostly focused on those with connections to the Polish underground state, political activists, and soldiers of the Home Army and other resistance groups.

Many detainees were kept in the quickly organised NKVD camps (e.g. in Skrobów and Rembertów), yet in some cases the remains of former German concentration camps were used as well. A branch of KL Auschwitz in Jaworzno was notorious in post-war years as the site of the Central Labour Camp. New inmates were also moved to some former German Auschwitz-Birkenau buildings, where the NKVD opened camps no. 22 and no. 78. Communist camps operated by UB were set up, with Poles were imprisoned side by side with Germans.

**An excerpt from the memories of the inspector-general of the Polish forces-in-exile General Władysław Anders about the day when Germany surrendered:**

When the exchange of notes and messages concerning the representatives of the resistance movement against Germans in Poland arrested by Soviet Russia was becoming acute, and its sombre shadow eclipsed the views of peace after the war, the news arrived that military activity in Europe was concluded with the unconditional surrender of Germany, signed in Reims at 2:41 on 7 May and later in Berlin at 0:16 on 8 May. This was a great day in the history of the world, and a great relief for millions of people. Unfortunately we, the Poles, could not participate in the general enthusiasm of the moment. Even the bitterness of the lonely fight in September 1939 in Poland at the beginning of that turmoil was faint in the face of our solitude among the victorious joy of the Allies. The victory to which we contributed such a great amount of shed blood, and so many years of pain of the Polish nation, was not ours to share. The Polish V-Day had not yet arrived.

Source: W. Anders, *Bez ostatniego rozdziału. Wspomnienia z lat 1939–1946*, (no place and date of publication), p. 332.

---

## NEW CRIMES

Moreover, the Soviets erected makeshift field camps, whose inmates were kept in deep pits dug in the ground, quickly covered with a roof and fenced with barbed wire. The running of the NKVD transitory camp built in the vicinity of the headquarters of the First Ukrainian Front and the quarters of Marshall Ivan Konev in Trzebuska near Rzeszów provides a good illustration of Soviet terror. The camp operated from August to mid-November 1944 and housed anywhere from 1,700 to 2,500 inmates subject to extremely inhuman conditions. During interrogation, inmates were subjected to physical and psychological torture, with some deported to labour camps in the USSR and others taken under the cover of night to the Turza forest and summarily executed.

Another symbol of the Soviet terror in the post-war years is the so-called Augustów roundup, which took place in July 1945 in the Suwałki region and the southern reaches of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. Altogether, it was conducted by the forces



■ Remains of Home Army soldiers killed by the Soviets in Turza near Rzeszów when the Red Army reentered Poland. The photograph was made during an exhumation conducted in the 1990s (photo Maciej Korcuć)





■ A monument of victims of Soviet crimes on Home Army soldiers in the Turza forest near Rzeszów in the autumn of 1944 (photo Maciej Korkuć)

of 45,000 soldiers of the First Belarusian Front and the 62nd NKVD Division of Internal Troops, as well as units reporting to Polish communists, which combed villages in search of supporters of underground activity.

Once apprehended, the detainees were interrogated with the use of beatings and torture, with Soviet officers moving selected individuals to places of mass execution. During the Augustów roundup alone, at least 1,878 Polish citizens were arrested just on Polish territory, of which at least over 600 never saw their homes again.

The network of terror was extended by prisons and detention centres managed by the communists all over the country and used to incarcerate tens of thousands of people.

Deportations into distant regions of the USSR continued. From 1944 until the end of the decade, Soviet services arrested, interned, deported, and transported at least 45 to 50 thousands of ethnic Poles (not including other nationalities) from the territory of post-Yalta Poland to labour camps in the USSR. Brutal reprisals also affected the Polish population in the areas incorporated into the Soviet Union.

---

The Soviet arrests also had an economic dimension. After the war, the USSR lacked qualified miners, and therefore a compulsory workforce was necessary to operate its mining pits. For this reason, after the Red Army entered Upper Silesia men aged 17 to 50 were arrested and deported to slave labour camps in the USSR.

**The situation of Poles under the Red Army presented in a confidential internal report of the communist-nominated Kraków voivode (June 1945):**

The attitude of the population to Soviet soldiers, initially kind and without prejudice if not actually friendly, continues to deteriorate. The reason behind this are excessive and ubiquitous requisitions and payments, or perhaps to even greater extent the excesses of Red Army soldiers. The reports of county heads contain whole recitals of offences against the life and property of citizens: assaults, robberies, rapes of women and even teenage girls, killing of men attempting to defend them are daily occurrences. (...) Bitterness, fear, and a sense of uncertainty have gripped the population to the degree that this question must be considered extremely difficult to settle.

Source: Archiwum Państwowe w Krakowie (State Archives in Kraków), zespół Urzędu Wojewódzkiego II, sygn. 905, the June 1945 report on current developments by Adam Ostrowski, the communist-nominated voivode of Krakow, p. 22.

- The village of Giby in north-eastern Poland, with a site commemorating Poles killed by the Soviet NKVD during the Augustów Roundup in the summer of 1945 (photo Maciej Korcuć)





---

## TERROR IN THE SEIZED BORDERLANDS

Pacifications and liquidations of Polish underground troops, to whom Soviets referred as “white Poles” or “agents of the London government,” continued in the eastern territories of the Republic of Poland incorporated into the USSR. In the region of Nowogródek, in the wake of pacification campaigns against those evading the forced conscription to Soviet troops, “the population was overwhelmed by panic and terror, and people took to hiding in the forests and wherever else they could. If a man was caught hiding, he was executed on the spot, without any investigation or trial. There were also many public executions, including by hanging. Moreover, anyone who with ties to the Home Army was murdered, together with their fellow soldiers, and their farms usually burnt down. Those detained while not hiding were either incorporated into Soviet labour battalions or deported deep into Russia, with only an insignificant percentage enlisted into Berling’s army,” read the Republic of Poland government materials, drafted as an indictment against the USSR aggression and terror.

While the war was still raging, the Soviets pacified the resistance of Polish partisans and civilians in the Wilno region, now split into two by the borders of the Lithuanian and Belarusian Soviet Republics. For example, large-scale systematic operations for “eradication of bandit groups” were conducted in the spring of 1945, among others in the areas of Wilno, Troki, Grodno, Oszmiana and Mołodeczno. “The white-Polish gangs of ‘the Home Army’ were actively operating in the area of the aforesaid regions for the entire winter,” an order of the Internal Troops of the Belarusian Section of the NKVD stated in April 1945. “The liquidation of bandit and insurgent formations is conducted in successive stages, section by section from the east and west towards Oszmiana, Iwie, and Woronowo [probably Orany is meant], from the south and south-west northwards near Lida and Raduń, and the southern part of the Trakai [Troki] raion of the LSSR.” In this operation alone, 3,500 soldiers of the NKVD Internal Division were involved, “arresting or killing” 3,174 people. Similar operations continued in the following months.

After the massacres of Polish civilians perpetrated by UPA and the new resettlements of Polish people (to the west of the new border) ordered by the Soviet government, the Polish population nearly disappeared from the former Volhynian, Lwów, Tarnopol, and Stanisławów voivodeships.



## THE NEW BORDERS

In February 1945 in Yalta, behind Polish backs, the United States and Great Britain now officially greenlighted the incorporation of the eastern half of Poland into the USSR.

It was clear that being a victim of the German aggression, Poland should receive territorial gains at the cost of the aggressor state. The Potsdam Conference eventually confirmed that Poland would receive the southern part of Eastern Prussia and territory up to the line of the Oder and Lusatian Neisse rivers.







The Soviets used the above for propaganda statements of Poland's "shift" to downplay the truth about forcible Soviet annexation of eastern territories. It goes without saying that the gains in the west and north did not compensate for the territorial losses in the east. In the end, compared to the pre-war area, the territory of Poland within the new borders was reduced by 20%. Centres of Polish culture (Lwów, Wilno), the Drohobycz oilfields, and lands that had for centuries been home to millions of Poles ended up the other side of the border.

Even before the Soviet armies approached, several million Germans had either fled or were evacuated westward by German authorities. At the Potsdam Conference, the victorious powers also decided to move the German population from areas lying east of the Oder and Lusatian Neisse rivers to the Allied occupation zones. These resettlements affected another 3.5 million Germans.

- The Yalta conference in February 1945. The western Allies agreed to grant further concessions to Stalin whose objective was to annex Polish eastern lands and subjugate the remainder. Sitting from the left: British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and USSR leader Joseph Stalin (Library of Congress)



---

## DAMAGE AND LOOTING

Poland's destruction was enormous, with national wealth estimated to drop by no less than 38%. These losses could only superficially be compensated by the newly acquired territories in the west, as they were largely devastated by the war. The situation was even worse due to Soviet actions, who purposefully despoiled captured towns. This happened both in major metropolitan areas (Gdansk) and smaller urban centres (Nysa in Lower Silesia). The industrial plants in the area were looted *en masse* by the Red Army, which treated all post-German economic infrastructure as its spoils of war. The Soviets moved industrial, energy, and transportation infrastructure to the USSR by trainloads. Entire factories, production plants, and lines were dismantled, and equipment, machinery and agricultural produce looted. Moreover, Soviets also broke up and shipped away some industrial infrastructure from central Poland locales.

Throughout the war, Germans looted Polish works of art and heritage in an organised manner, and plundering was a common practice among German officials. In some instances, private buildings, palaces, and churches were systematically looted of any works of art.



■ Warsaw destroyed by the Germans (a partial view of the Old Town ruins), 1945 (NAC)



- The town of Nysa in Lower Silesia was captured by the Red Army in 1945 and burned by the Soviets when the war has already ended (public domain)

After the expulsion of the Germans, cultural objects were destroyed by Red Army soldiers in dozens of captured Polish manor houses, mansions, and palaces. Examples include the palace in Przeclaw near Mielec, in whose courtyard Red Army soldiers burnt a centuries-old library collection, and the mansion of the Szembek family in Matopolska, burnt to the ground in 1945. On Stalin's orders, the communists launched a campaign to eradicate Polish landed gentry and confiscate their property, a prelude to the social upheaval that was to affect the country.

## **A DEMOGRAPHIC DISASTER**

The military attack of Germany and its allies on Poland resulted in gigantic demographic losses, hard to make up on the historical scale. Eventually, Poland came out of the war

---

with much smaller population potential. Nearly 6 million Polish citizens lost their lives, half of them being Jews exterminated by the German Reich.

Large masses of Poles were uprooted from their homelands annexed by the USSR and resettled from the eastern territories to the post-German western and northern regions.

The true dimension of the demographic catastrophe caused by the war is illustrated by a comparison to Spain, whose population before the war was smaller by more than one third than Poland's. In 1938, Spain had 25.3 million citizens, almost 10 million less than Poland with 34.7 million. In 1945, the population of Poland was already smaller than that of Spain, which at the time had 26.8 million citizens, by nearly 3 million. Due to extermination, deportations and subjugation, the post-war population of Poland only reached 23.9 million.

Additionally, lack of independence, Soviet overlordship, communist terror, liquidation of the free market and several decades of planned economy in a totalitarian system rounded out the balance of war initiated by the authoritarian Third Reich and concluded with the victory of the totalitarian USSR. Stalin forbade Poland to participate the Marshall Plan.

## **A SUBJUGATED ALLY**

When the United Nations was established at the San Francisco Conference in April-June 1945, no one imagined that Poland, the first state to oppose the German aggression, would not be among the founding members. However, Stalin strongly vetoed Poland being represented by her lawful government still remaining in exile. In turn, the Western powers did not recognise the puppet communist government which evolved from Stalin's PKWN in the summer of 1944.

As a result, Poland was the only founding member of the UN that, paradoxically, was not at all represented at the founding conference.

In 1945, Stalin systematically carried out his design to totally eradicate the Republic of Poland state structures recreated as the Polish underground state. At the Yalta conference, the leaders of the three powers approved the annexation of eastern territories of the Republic of Poland, which the USSR had already carried out. At the same time, in violation of the provisions of the Atlantic Charter, and against the lawful government of the Republic of Poland, they announced the establishment of a new (provisional) government for the



---

Polish territory west of the Bug river – an entity to be instituted with the participation of vaguely defined “democratic leaders from Poland itself and Poles from abroad” that would conduct, as was announced, free and unconstrained parliamentary elections.

On the back of such decisions, in March 1945 the Soviet government invited the leaders of the Polish underground state, still in hiding, to come forward to negotiate the future of Poland. Despite guarantees of safety, after two days of talks they were abducted, arrested and sent to a Moscow prison.

In June 1945, the USSR organised a scripted show trial in which the entire group of Polish leaders was unlawfully indicted and prevented from participating in establishing the Yalta-based government.

Three of the Polish leaders sentenced to long-term imprisonment – the Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, Jan Stanisław Jankowski, his deputy Stanisław Jasiukowicz, and the commander in chief of the Home Army General Leopold Okulicki – never left the Soviet prison, losing their lives like numerous other victims of the Soviet regime.



▪ Gen. Leopold Okulicki, the last commander-in-chief of the Home Army. In March 1945, he was arrested by NKVD and sentenced in a show trial of the leaders of the Polish underground state. It was not until some decades later that the Soviets admitted to his “dying in prison” (Studium Polski Podziemnej/KARTA)

## THE SOVIET GARRISONS

The so-called “Yaltan” Provisional Government of National Unity (TRJN) was actually contrived in Moscow in June 1945. Despite the promises, it was only an expansion of the communist government previously manned with Stalin’s accomplices. Only a few politicians from the resistance and independence camp were admitted, like the former prime minister Stanisław Mikołajczyk. Together with their main political faction (the Polish Peasant Party, PSL), were immediately overwhelmed, and, despite being formally represented



■ Tomasz Arciszewski, Prime Minister of the government of the Republic of Poland in exile from November 1944 to July 1947 (NAC)

in the government, in fact relegated to the role of ruthlessly hounded opposition.

Although the TRJN was barely representative of Polish society, the Western Allies established diplomatic relations with it, as they had promised to do in Yalta, withdrawing their recognition of the legal government of the Republic of Poland with prime minister Tomasz Arciszewski and president Władysław Raczkiewicz. The US and Britain took this step on 5 July 1945 and several dozen other countries around the world followed suit.

Stalin, however, had no intention to allow the Yalta-guaranteed free elections, already fully aware that the Polish communist party had negligible support among the population. In this respect, the situation in Poland differed greatly from that of, for instance, the neighbouring Czechoslovakia, where the Commu-

nist Party had majority support and won the parliamentary elections conducted in 1946 without tampering with the results.

In Poland, the communists brought to power by the USSR understood that they had no chance for a significant number of votes in genuine elections, let alone a victory, therefore holding such was out of question. An election was held in 1947, but the votes actually cast into the boxes were not allowed to be counted. The official results were based on forged vote counts and carefully supervised by Stalin's underlings monitored by the communist political police (UB). In this way, communist victory was assured.

At that time and in the following decades, continued communist rule over Poland was secured by Soviet troops garrisoned all over the country. Still in May 1945, the disbanded 2nd Belarussian Front was transformed into the so-called Northern Group of Forces of the Red (since 1946 Soviet) Army, initially consisting of over 500,000 soldiers, which was to stay put in Poland.

**An excerpt from Freedom and Independence (WiN), a Polish clandestine organisation, report on the 1945 operations of the political police (UB) subordinated to communist authorities established by the USSR:**

Until recently, the NKVD treated UB as an auxiliary service. Now the latter is becoming independent. Inquiries and investigations are conducted by a NKVD off[icer] who reads all the cases. (...) The dependence of UB on NKVD is currently held in great secrecy (...). UB does not at all follow the democratic principles of civil liberties guaranteed in the constitution. Arrest takes place without the decision of a court or prosecutor, and the arrested are kept even up to 10 months without a decision of the court, in a secret prison of security [services] without any investigation. These prisons have dismal hygienic conditions, and the investigation is conducted with the use of torture and hunger. Polish citizens are surrendered to Soviet authorities who remove them to Russia and have them judged by Soviet courts in a gross violation of the principle of sovereignty. In most cases the UB executes prisoners by shooting without court sentences [...]. Nobody looks after the safety and security of life and property of the citizens. UB officers on their own and with secret armed gangs operated by the PPR – whose members come from the worst dregs of society – actively participate in robberies and conduct assassinations.

Source: Studium Polski Podziemnej, London, Archiwum Delegatury WiN, Collection 19, file 1, Ocena położenia wewnętrznego opracowana przez Józefa Maciołka ps. „Roman” na podstawie sprawozdań informacyjnych za rok 1945 (Assessment of the internal situation by Józef “Roman” Maciołek, based on information reports for 1945).

## THE RESISTANCE

Again abandoned by its western allies, the lawful government of the Republic of Poland in exile tried to scrape by for decades, believing that independence would be regained in the future.

Until 1947, the political struggle was conducted openly by the Polish Peasants Party, among others. Strong groups of partisans resisted subjugation with force of arms. In various parts of the country they clashed with NKVD pacification squads, communist formations of the UB, and the state army, noting hundreds of successful actions, raiding prisons and detention centres and inflicting severe losses on the



---

enemy. An important role in the underground was played by Freedom and Independence (WiN) and the National Armed Forces (NSZ), which extended over the whole territory of Poland.

Until 1947, resistance against communism continued in many regions, sometimes amounting to an anti-Soviet uprising. Afterwards, as hopes for a change of the geopolitical situation waned, the armed struggle lost its drive. In the late forties, only isolated partisan squads still roamed the forests, wishing just to survive. The last of these died in a communist roundup in 1963.

Just as in 1939 Poland had ended Western appeasement towards Germany, so in the late 1940s it played an important role in waking the leaders of the free world from the lethargic policy of concessions towards Moscow. The Warsaw Uprising and the Polish resistance revealed the true face of aggressive Soviet designs. George Kennan, one of the main architects of the 1947 American plan to contain communism, known as the Truman doctrine, explicitly described how the experience of Poland and the Poles, subject to Soviet empire-based policy already in 1944, opened his eyes to the essence of Stalin's designs.

The tragedy of the Polish people was that the West was not yet ready to understand the new threats and abandon the policy of concessions towards Moscow in 1944–45, when the Poles could still have been effectively helped. In 1947, Poland was already a captive country behind the Iron Curtain. Yet Polish political groups and members of the government operating in exile as well as those still engaged in underground resistance and domestic politicians kept appealing to the conscience of the leaders of the free world.

Nonetheless, the fate of Poland as an Allied country subjugated by force did effect a shift in international policy. The British historian Paul Johnson not unreasonably observed that both the Second World War and the Cold War began with Polish resistance against totalitarianism: "History made a new start, from the place where it was interrupted by the pact between Stalin and Hitler in August 1939. Now Russia manifested a new totalitarian greed on the global stage." In this way, although not free for many decades, Poland had its share in the defence of the free world from both totalitarianisms. What would have happened if Germany had not encountered resistance in 1939 but continued to exploit the policy of concessions? What would have happened if not for the Polish fight for freedom, which laid Soviet imperial designs bare? How would the history of the world have

---

unfolded if the West had not discontinued its policy of concessions towards the USSR in 1947 but only much later? These are questions that are worth asking, even if they are not going to be satisfactorily answered.

## SURVIVAL

The aftermath of the Second World War and the communist subjugation is and will continue to be felt for decades. Some of the damage caused by the German and Soviet totalitarianisms to Polish society is irreparable.

No matter the blows dealt, the Poles were a nation that rebelled in each decade of communism. Although these rebellions were drenched in blood by communist authorities supported by Moscow, Poles were always ready to fight against a system thrust on them from abroad. Major street riots in which blood was shed in the struggle for freedom occurred



■ Poland under Soviet occupation in 1945. Partisans from an pro-independence underground detachment prior to storming the Communist prison in Radom in September 1945 (AIPN)

---

on multiple occasions, for example in Poznań in 1956, in the seaside cities in 1970, and for the whole 1980s. Strikes, acts of disobedience, and protests were even more frequent. Against the hopes of communists, it was the millions of workers that formed the foundation for a nationwide revolt, their general strikes leading to the establishment of Solidarity, the first independent trade union in a communist country, in 1980.

Tales about the fight for freedom, the Polish underground state, the Warsaw Uprising and post-war resistance against communism nurtured the spirit of resistance in successive generations of Poles. On a soil like this, Solidarity immediately blossomed into a mass civil movement with 10 million members that strongly contributed to the fall of communism in the 1980s, not only in Poland (in 1989) but all over Central and Eastern Europe.

For Poles, the struggle for independence, begun in 1939 with the outbreak of war, actually lasted for 50 years. Only in 1990 were the first free and unfettered elections since the Second World War held. Also in that year Ryszard Kaczorowski, the last President of the Republic of Poland in Exile, as the last successor of the President of the Republic of Poland Władysław Raczkiewicz, officially passed the symbols of presidential power to the first President of the Third Republic of Poland, Lech Wałęsa.

Soviet (Russian) garrisons remained in Poland until 1993, exactly 54 years from the Soviet aggression of 1939 and nearly 50 years from the subjugation of Poland by the USSR in 1944–45.