

Institute of National Remembrance

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What a year! What a season! The last...

Polish society was getting ready for war, at the same time hoping that it would not happen. On the evening of 31 August, cafes and cinemas were full. A new era was to begin in the morning...



The predictions of war, which most people had been fed up with for a long time [...], grew stronger at the end of August, but not to such an extent that the imminent outbreak of war was considered certain – noted Stefan Bolland in 1939, then a lecturer at the Cracow Academy

of Commerce. Polish society was getting ready for war, at the same time hoping that it would not happen.

A whole nation with an army

In the 1930s, the authorities of the Polish Republic, along with securing state interests by concluding international treaties and alliances, tried to strengthen the country's defences.

Due to the limited possibilities of the state budget, they appealed to the generosity of society. On 9 April, 1936, by a decree of the President of the Republic of Poland, the National Defence Fund was established, which was to collect funds for rearming the Polish army, and the majority of funds was to come from private persons and donations from various institutions.

In the face of an increasingly real threat from the outside, the generosity of the society grew – people gave money, valuable items, and metals. As in other regions of the country, in Cracow, the apogee of the fundraising came at the time of subscribing to the internal loan for air defence, announced in March 1939. At that time, the “Thermometer of Cracow's Feelings” was set up in the Main Market Square, which marked the amounts coming in daily. In a short time, the inhabitants of Cracow collected the considerable sum of about 10 million zlotys.

From 1938, equipment purchased with social funds was officially handed over to the Polish army. In Cracow, these events took place mostly in the Market Square or Błonia Meadow and gathered crowds of

thousands. For example, in May 1939, the “Polski Rzemieślnik” [Polish Artisan] tank, purchased from the contributions of artisans from the Cracow province, was donated to the army, and in June, the “Święta Urszula” [Saint Ursula] sanitary plane funded by the educational institutions of the Ursuline sisters. Small donations from children were displayed during the demonstration of Cracow elementary school students on May 12, 1939. The representative of the youth gave General Aleksander Narbutt-Łuczyński, commander of Corps District V in Cracow, a check for the amount of 20,000 zlotys collected by the children. It is worth emphasising that Cracow’s Jews joined the campaign of collecting funds and defending the country.

No button shall be given

The fundraising was given wide publicity. The campaign was accompanied by rallies, air and gas defence demonstrations, and exhibitions of military equipment. The defence of the country became a goal around which a feeling of unity and consolidation of the whole society was developed, despite the very heated ideological and political disputes in the 1930s.

The Congress of Legionnaires organised on 5–6 August, 1939, on the 25th anniversary of the departure of the First Cadre Company, was a great manifestation of unity. A young citizen of Kalisz, who came with his parents to the ceremony in Błonia Meadow in Cracow, recalled after many years: “After a long wait [...] Marshal Śmigły Rydz appeared on the stand. He was greeted with huge ovations, the mood was fantastic, it seemed that ‘we do not fear the Germans at all,’ I heard the words:

‘no button shall be given from the Republic’s mantle,’ the enthusiasm reached its maximum. [...] The parade began. [...] The enthusiasm did not cease, we kept welcoming new groups, and so it lasted for several hours. [...] I was absolutely stunned by all this. Of course, I believed that Poland was a power that would crush Hitler.”

He wasn’t the only one. The superpower and anti-German moods rose after the speech of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Józef Beck, on 5 May, 1939. German products and films were boycotted, and the Cracow branch of “Ruch” [Traffic] withdrew German-language magazines from sale.

Preparations for the war

Regardless of the optimism propagated in the radio, in the press, and at rallies, preparations were being made in Cracow in the event of war.

The city authorities ordered drills of anti-aircraft alarms, city blackouts, and in March a volunteer drafting for the city’s aircraft and gas defence services was announced. As in the whole of Europe, the greatest threat was perceived in potential bombings. The Polish Red Cross organised nursing courses for women.

In July, the population was ordered to stock up on a minimum supply of groceries, and in the last ten days of August, to prevent speculation, the City Council officially determined their prices. The families of the military and officials were given gas masks. “We were tearing them from each other’s hands, trying them on, laughing, it looked terrible,” recalls Janina Pałasińska. In the same month, the construction of air-

raid shelters was undertaken on a larger scale, which some homeowners considered a “municipal whim”.

By the end of August, it was becoming increasingly obvious that war was inevitably about to break out. Anti-aircraft ditches in the Planty, city squares, parks, and private estates were dug. Edward Kubalski noted in his journal: “Everyone is taking part in it, from the voivode and mayor of the city to the elderly, girls, and the youth.” The Curia approved work on Sunday and called the faithful to pray for peace. The City Council ordered that the houses be prepared for blackouts and that all wells in the city were put into operation.

A “carefree” summer

At the same time, it was the summer holiday period. “Convinced of the military strength of Poland, I followed the development of political events with excitement and interest, but my love for Inka was closer and more interesting,” recalled the newly minted student Jacek Stocki-Sosnowski, adding, “What a year! What a season! [...] We played, danced and flirted, forgetting about the whole world [...] I won a tanning contest. [...] It was so important at the time.”

But the atmosphere thickened. “People were asking themselves whether there would be a war or not?” recalled Eugeniusz Bielenin. Fear of German provocations appeared, some saw saboteurs everywhere. The number of weddings held in places of worship of various denominations also increased significantly.

“People are returning hurriedly from their bathing beaches to their

homes, and the less courageous or close neighbours of the western border are fleeing for the eastern part of the country. The wealthier people are taking their belongings towards Lviv,” noted Kubalski. Another inhabitant of Cracow remembered: “There was confusion. Often, carefree conversations on topics detached from our current interests were to contradict our real moods. People wanted to escape the thought of war. They were afraid, they did not want to believe in war. I listened to Hitler’s speech many times over the radio. The power of his voice, or rather his scream, was one of a kind.”

On August 30, a general mobilisation was announced in the country. “It was the first time in my life that I felt something dangerous was happening. There was a huge crowd on the train,” wrote a middle school pupil.

Soldiers and reserves who wanted to reach their units, and civilians, including returning vacationers, travelled by rail. After mobilisation was announced, the shops were overcrowded “but they’re selling every amount, by the tonne, if they have it. Billon coins are gone, dishonest calculations are starting.

Regardless, life in the city went on as usual. On the evening of 31 August, cafes and cinemas were full. A new era was to begin in the morning...

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