

Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/7781,World-War-II-historical-view.html>

2022-01-28, 03:51

14.03.2021

World War II - historical view

Poland was the first country to put up armed resistance against Hitler. In May 1939 in no uncertain terms Poland rejected German territorial demands.



I. POLITICAL SITUATION IN POLAND BEFORE WW2

„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-violation 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. It was only in 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, the 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

mortal danger to Poland's very being.

(„The Fighting Republic of Poland”)

„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. 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.

(„The Fighting Republic of Poland” - with excerpts)

II. THE OUTBREAK OF WW2 AND SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN

Poland was the first country to put up armed resistance against Hitler. In May 1939 in no uncertain terms Poland rejected German territorial demands. Poland was not certain to be defeated. She had allies – France and Great Britain. Mutual agreements guaranteed that Hitler's

state would be squeezed tight. After the German invasion of Poland, French military forces were to immediately activate their air force, and after three days launch “an offensive against limited targets”, and within 15 days “in case of German invasion, launch an offensive against the Germans using [their] main military forces”. The Polish-British military alliance clearly stated that should the Germans attack, “all support and assistance” would be offered immediately.

In the meantime, Poland’s powerful and totalitarian neighbours joined forces. As early as October 1938, Stalin strove to establish diplomatic relations and then political cooperation with the Third Reich. On 23rd August 1939 the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed. It included a secret protocol that set out the plan of dividing Poland between the USSR and Germany.

By providing Germany with friendly neutrality, and de facto military aid, Stalin made it possible for Hitler attack Poland on 26 August and thus start World War II. The day before, Great Britain had signed an alliance with Poland, which temporarily held Hitler, who postponed the attack to 1 September.

(„A Guide to the History of Poland”)

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. The Polish army was relatively strong but, due to the difference in potential,

decidedly smaller than the Wehrmacht. 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. 2 weeks later, the Red Army attacked Poland from the east, while she was fighting alone against the Germans.

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

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 towards Poland. 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.

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, as stipulated in the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, and broken or disbanded units of the Polish Army were not dispatched to the west. The Soviets met resistance only from the units of the Polish Border Protection Corps (KOP), a few detachments of the Polish Army and voluntary formations. The aggression of the USSR against Poland was the violation of international and bilateral treaties, including the Soviet-Polish non-aggression pact of 1932 (extended in 1934 and was to be effective until 1945). The Soviets reasoned their invasion of Poland, as the Polish state was dissolved and its authorities were disintegrated.

President of the Republic of Poland Ignacy Mościcki condemned these actions in his speech, but decided not to declare on the USSR. It was his serious mistake that hindered the subsequent political actions of the Polish authorities in relations with the Western Allies and the Soviet Union. The Soviets captured the eastern provinces of Poland by the end of September. They committed crimes in the conquered territories, mainly against the military. Fighting in the western part of Poland petered out in the following days. After the initial Polish success in the Battle of the Bzura the Polish army detachments were eventually crushed. 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 her 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 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 used the following months to hurriedly reconstruct their army, replace the losses, and reinforce their military potential (in which the supplies from the USSR played a role). With the eastern border protected, they began an invasion of western and northern Europe in the spring of 1940. 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.

(„The Fighting Republic of Poland” - with excerpts)

III. INTERNATIONAL SITUATION OF POLAND AFTER SEPTEMBER 1939 AND POLISH ARMED FORCES IN THE WEST

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 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. Later, after 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.

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. 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.

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. 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.

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).

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.

In the years 1941–1942, Polish soldiers also fought in Africa, among others in defense of Tobruk. 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 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 passed copies of the Enigma and the entire documentation to French and British intelligence. The breaking of the Enigma codes permitted to intercept German orders and military plans and contributed to the success of numerous Allied operations.

IV. THE SITUATION IN OCCUPIED POLAND

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.

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. 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.

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 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. 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. 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 be annihilated, the reprisals affecting not only them but also their close and not so close families.

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 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. 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.

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.

The crimes and repressions of the NKVD lasted in the years 1939–41 and went on 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.

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

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).

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. 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 conditions that prevailed in occupied Poland proved incomparably worse than those experienced by citizens of Western European states conquered by Germany.

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 collaborating 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.

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.

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.

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.

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. Germans quickly deprived the Jewish citizens of the Republic of Poland of any legal protection. 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. 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 MEANT 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. 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 Wiktoría 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 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. 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. 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 FINAL SOLUTION

In 1941, the Germans were ecstatic over their victories. 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.

The Holocaust was a huge enterprise run by the German state. 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 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 Auschwitz-Birkenau, the locations of German genocide of

Jews included other German death camps such as those at Bełżec, Treblinka, Sobibór, Majdanek, and Kulmhof. Independently of these camps, Germans perpetrated mass murders in hundreds of Polish towns and villages.

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. The Germans ruthlessly suppressed the outbreak, razing the ghetto area to the ground.

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.

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.

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 politicians doubted that the Germans would run a genocidal scheme on such a scale.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

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. 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.

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. One of the first actions was carried out by scouts from the Gray Ranks. On 26 March 1943, they released their colleague Jan Bytnar "Rudy" at the Arsenal in Warsaw (he died in the following days as a result of an earlier brutal beating by the Gestapo).

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 occupation 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.

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 German designs to manufacture the V-1 and then V-2, new rocket missiles which the Germans hoped would turn the tide of war and ensure their victory. This allowed the British air force to destroy the Peenemünde center on the Baltic island of Usedom, where work on the missiles was carried out. 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. The elite among Polish soldiers were the so-called "Silent Unseen" - the best Polish soldiers who, after training in Great Britain, were parachuted to occupied Poland in order to support and train soldiers of the Home Army.

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.

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.

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. These were illusory hopes, an example of which was the Warsaw Uprising.

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.

The Soviets did everything they could so that the uprising fell. Stalin stopped the Red Army offensive near Warsaw, giving up his earlier plans to attack the city. He gave Hitler time to fully liquidate the Polish forces. When the uprising had its greatest successes, the USSR made it impossible to increase the Allied air assistance to the Home Army soldiers. The Soviets brutally liquidated the Home Army units that were going to help the uprising. The Germans did the same on their side of the front. At the beginning of October 1944, after long 63 days of fierce struggle with the overwhelming enemy forces, the insurgents surrendered to the Germans.

THE UNDERGROUND CIVILIAN ADMINISTRATION

The underground civilian administration was established in 1940 under the wing of the Government Delegation for Poland set up by the Polish government in exile when Poland was occupied. 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 first Delegate of the Government for Poland with the rank of the Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Poland was Cyprian Ratajski.

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. 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.

Underground publications, machine printed, copied, and distributed through secret distribution networks, had a wide circulation. Despite numerous arrests and death sentences, the network operated efficiently. The communication between the Home Army and the country with the Polish leadership in the West, however, was mainly ensured by a network of couriers, whose bases were located in most European countries (including Germany). The bravest emissaries and couriers of the Polish underground, secretly traveling all over Europe, were: Jan Karski, Tadeusz Chciuk-Celt, Wacław Felczak, Jan Nowak "Jeziorański", Elżbieta Zawacka "ZO" and Kazimierz Leski "Bradł".

Author of the article:

Source:

Opcje strony

- [Print this page](#)
- [Generate PDF of this page](#)
- [Notify about this page](#)

• Share this article

[Share on Facebook](#)

[Share on Twitter](#)