

Institute of National Remembrance

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Guardians of Foreign Interests - Karol Nawrocki, Ph.D.

This September marks the 30th anniversary of the landmark event when the post-Soviet Russian forces withdrew from Polish territory. The long period of the foreign army protecting Moscow's interests in our country came to an end. Its continued presence on our soil resulted from the enslavement that Poles associate with the outbreak of war and the Soviet invasion of 17 September 1939.



The dates of the two 1939 events – the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August and the USSR's aggression against Poland on 17 September – are grim symbols of the idea of Soviet domination in Central and Eastern Europe. However, Russian ambitions to subjugate Poland and other countries in our region have a much

older genesis. For centuries they have gone hand in hand with the evolution of Moscow's imperialism, accompanied by Russia's attempts to set up its garrisons wherever and whenever it could, literally keeping watch over its politics.

Three centuries under the Russian bayonet

The Kremlin's intention to establish a permanent military presence on Polish-Lithuanian soil dates back to the 17th century, but 1704 appears to have been the breakthrough year. Following the Treaty of Narva, amid the Third Northern War that ravaged the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Tsar Peter I established the main body of the Russian army on Polish soil. It gained notoriety for widespread pillaging. Since then, troops that followed orders from Moscow or, for a while, St. Petersburg, were present in Polish territory for nearly three centuries, except for 21 years of independence. These were, however, attained only after a life-or-death battle against Eastern invaders.

Russian soldiers' presence in Poland, which took on different territorial extent, form and scale, allowed for a gradual and consistent dismantling of our sovereignty. It ultimately led to the liquidation of our state, its partition, the strengthening of Russian domination and – especially in the final stage, the Soviet period – the intimidation of the entire society and the solidification of a world order extremely unfavourable to our position.

Trying to strip Poles of hope

The Russian or Soviet forces stationed on Polish soil negatively influenced the fate of several generations of Poles. The troops ensured political dependence, prevented us from deciding our own fate, hindered development and denied us the chance of freedom. Despite all this, Poles never reconciled themselves to such a state of affairs. Even in the most difficult times, they believed they could throw off the foreign yoke, making repeated attempts to regain their freedom. They engaged not only in armed struggle but also in passive resistance, the cultivation of Polish identity and underground activity.

The communist era and the permanent presence of several dozen (initially even three hundred) thousand Soviet soldiers in our country was the last – and therefore the most tangible today and still present in our collective consciousness – stage of the Russian drive for domination in Poland and our part of Europe.

The Soviets first occupied a portion of Poland in September 1939, when Hitler and Stalin agreed to invade Poland together. From 1944 to 1945, the Red Army seized more and more territory as they moved towards Berlin. Thus, our entire country fell under the control of the Soviet Union. For Poles, the end of the Third Reich meant neither the end of fighting nor the end of captivity. The Soviets launched a bloody crackdown on the independence underground while installing a subordinate government fully dependent on the Kremlin's instructions. Soon enough, pro-Moscow collaborators took control of the country, while Soviet troops stood guard over the system they had established.

Poland was not an isolated case. The same happened in the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe that came under Stalin's rule at Yalta.

Throughout the communist period, the presence of USSR troops in Poland had a detrimental effect: the subordination of the entire army, the plundering of the economy, the dependence of all decision-making centres on 'Big Brother', the intimidation of Poles – as in June 1956 – the use of Polish territory to implement the Brezhnev doctrine – as in August 1968 – and, finally, acting as a kind of bogeyman – as in the martial law period of 1981. Whenever the slightest possibility of a change in the post-Yalta order in Europe emerged, the troops stationed in Poland, loyal only to Moscow, made sure that the Poles and others in the region knew they had no chance to succeed.

Only a fortunate confluence of factors, especially the papacy of Polish Pope John Paul II and the rise of Solidarity in 1980, caused the Soviet empire to tremble in the late 1980s. The Poles understood that complete independence included the ability for legal and democratic authorities to determine our alliances and decide who could stay on our lands and why. The presence of foreign, unfriendly troops in the Republic's territory not only harmed our interests but posed a real threat. In August 1991, when hard-line communists in Moscow attempted to seize power in the Yanayev coup, Poland feared the orders that Soviet soldiers in our country could receive. Despite all the signs suggesting that the foreign units would finally leave Poland, the whole operation took more than two years.

The slow pace of change

What is the political history viewpoint on the process and speed of the Soviet troops' withdrawal from Poland? Many questions could be raised in this regard. The answer to most of them requires in-depth historical research, but in some cases, the assessment seems quite obvious.

On the one hand, it must be acknowledged that all the governments that have been in office since 1989 have treated the question of changing the status quo as something obvious and desirable, at least in their declarations. On the other hand, the activities of the various cabinets and the dynamics of their actions may indicate that this issue has not always been a top priority.

According to current research, Tadeusz Mazowiecki's administration initially thought that it was best to postpone the Soviet army's withdrawal and restrict it to when our western border was officially secured, a matter of the highest international significance with the German reunification process on the horizon. To base Poland's negotiating position on the foreign garrisons operating in our country not only seems to have ignored historical experience but also raises questions about the accuracy of the analysis of the situation at the time. It assumed that the Western powers would undermine the route of the Polish-German border and that the Soviets would be willing to work for Poland's exit from the Eastern Bloc. Certainly, such an approach contributed to delaying the whole process. This is shown by the examples of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, where agreements on this issue were concluded as early as possible – in February and March

1990 respectively - and with much less turbulence. In 1991, the Kremlin's readiness to make concessions and its willingness to settle the issue quickly were not the same as they had been a year earlier, a fact that should also be considered when assessing the actions of successive Polish government teams. Paradoxically, the problem of withdrawing its units from East Germany became Moscow's chief argument for stalling the whole operation.

Prime Minister Jan Olszewski showed firm resolve over the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Poland. Unfortunately, the measures put forth by his government were left unfinished. Due to the intrigues of the then president Lech Wałęsa, Olszewski was ousted as prime minister in early June 1992.

It all came to an end in September 1993. Was the period between 1989 and 1993 that led up to this moment a time of complete sovereignty or partial sovereignty? Or rather, should we view it as a time of difficult journey to full independence in which the removal of hostile foreign troops was crucial but still merely one step in a complicated process?

A farewell to the Soviets and the dictatorship

In 1989-1993, the name of the Republic of Poland was restored, the White Eagle regained its crown and the constitution was amended to remove provisions on permanent friendship with the Soviet Union and the leading role of the communist Polish United Workers' Party (which, incidentally, ceased to exist in January 1990). Local government was rebuilt, political parties and associations operated freely and new

media were established. The private property and the free market became the basis for the economy. Free presidential and parliamentary elections were held. What is more, Russian soldiers left Poland literally on the eve of the next vote, in which Poles were to re-elect the Sejm and the Senate.

However, let us look at this situation from the point of view of the 19 September 1993 elections. On that day, the post-communists took power in the country. The election was won by a party built on the assets and structures of an all-powerful dictatorship illegally subsidised by Moscow. Stalinist criminals and communist torturers not only went unpunished but enjoyed comfortable lives. Although amended, the Stalinist constitution was still in force. The judiciary was almost entirely imported from the previous system. The public was oblivious to the multitude of high-ranking agents, the media's skewed objectivity, the party's abuse of state property and the red cobweb that spun through the budding Polish economy. The country's slow emergence from communism coincided with the prolonged withdrawal of the Kremlin's soldiers, which in retrospect highlights the various mistakes and unforgivable omissions of the so-called transition.

A grim legacy

Despite the withdrawal of Russian troops, difficult transitional issues remained, including external ones. The event, while undoubtedly a breakthrough, did not solve all problems. The main and literal threat to state security was the uncontrolled sale of firearms by Russians leaving their barracks. The vast majority of the weapons used by

criminal groups in the 1990s came from this source, which contributed to the increasing brutality of the burgeoning gangs. Weapons sold by Russian soldiers were also exported abroad en masse, finding their way to mafias, terrorist organisations and warring parties in the various conflicts of the time, especially in the former Yugoslavia.

The abandoned bases were mostly destroyed – the Russians followed the principle of destroying what they couldn't take. Entire neighbourhoods were often left to decay, and it was not always possible to rebuild them quickly. For years, the main evidence of the former Soviet presence in many parts of Poland was the bleak sight of dilapidated buildings marring the landscape.

Other, perhaps more sinister remnants of foreign domination were the propaganda monuments and plaques put up in or near Soviet-occupied territory to honour the criminals who donned the Red Star. The Institute of National Remembrance that I lead handles this matter with the utmost diligence. Many such objects have already been dismantled. Of the nearly 60 that stood in public spaces in Polish towns and villages early last year, fewer than 30 remain. Soon they will all be gone.

A difficult to describe but, in my opinion, painful legacy of the presence in Poland of Soviet troops, stationed here for a strictly defined and not at all friendly purpose, is the distorted mindset of some people. Sadly, we still hear stories today about sympathetic soldiers from distant republics who were exceptionally sociable or even entertaining, or about the cultural and “commercial” advantages of being close to

Soviet units. These stories, even if sometimes true, cannot go unchallenged. There is no need to use euphemisms. Any foreign, unwelcome soldier on Polish soil guarding interests against our security and sovereignty will always be a symbol of enslavement and should always be treated as an occupier.

Historia magistra vitae

The long-awaited departure of Soviet troops from the Polish territory (although in 1993 they were, again, Russian troops) can and should be regarded as the end of Poland's painfully obvious dependence on Russia. However, despite both the real and symbolic significance of this event, it did not put an end to the idea of Moscow's control over our region, an important aspect of Russian imperialism. Though weakened and impoverished by the fall of the Evil Empire, Moscow has not stopped seeing Poland and most of our neighbours as part of its sphere of influence. In this respect, the current geopolitical visions of Putin's criminal regime hardly differ from the Red dictators' superpower assumptions in the Soviet era. As someone who firmly believes in the role of history as a teacher of life, I find this lesson particularly relevant today.

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President of the Institute of National Remembrance

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