

Institute of National Remembrance

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So many people to remember

The mission of the Institute of National Remembrance concentrates on the period of seventy-odd years – between 1917 and 1990 – and for a reason: never before had the nation bled so much and never before have we had to remember so many victims.



In Polish Christian tradition All Souls' Day, also known as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed and the Day of the Dead is preceded by All Saints' Day on 1 November. All Souls' Day is a day of prayer and remembrance for the souls of those who have died. Not only are family members and friends who passed away celebrated in this way. It is not uncommon for Poles to visit historical places commemorating our heroes and victims, and also to remember those buried in nameless graves. It is a day when we can express our pride connected with the past and our ancestors. Both the obligation to remember the dead, especially "the enormity of the number of

victims”, and to cherish the patriotic tradition and “the actions of the citizens for the sake of the independence of the Polish State and in defence of freedom and human dignity” have been inscribed in the Preamble to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance.

The seven decades that the IPN investigates in line with the said Act began towards the end of the Great War. It took the lives of up to 450,000 of 3,5 million of Polish nationals impressed into the armies of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires, which had been occupying the country for over 120 years – and that includes 3,000 men of the Polish Legions. Meanwhile, roughly the same number of civilians perished as a result of both trench warfare and offensives or counter-offensives rolling back and forth across the territories inhabited by Poles. Heavy artillery fire of attackers and scorched-earth policy routinely implemented by retreating troops caused huge loss of life and means of survival, and deportations and requisitions added to the carnage. The war brought Poland independence, but the price for it was paid in blood.

The end of the First World War did not mean peace for the reborn state, at least not straight away: from late 1918 to 1921, it had to defend its borders or very existence against the Germans, Czechs, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and Bolsheviks in four uprisings and nearly as many wars, both local and nationwide. These conflicts claimed around 100,000 men fallen on the battlefield, and tens of thousands civilian casualties. Yet, it never rains but it pours: warfare also brought or exacerbated waves of Spanish flu, typhoid fever, measles, dysentery,

cholera, malaria and a variety of other, highly infectious epidemics, which plagued the undernourished and exhausted masses until 1924, killing another 120,000.

Naturally, the aforementioned numbers are by no means exact. For once, Poles fighting in WWI had no dog tags, so their bodies often ended up in mass graves unidentified. Many, like Haller's Blue Army troops in France or youths who ran from home to defend Lviv in 1919, gave false names when signing up – to spare their families in the country from persecution, or avoid trouble with parents, respectively. Thousands of conscripts were illiterate and had no idea how their names spelled – and the occupant's draft officers couldn't care less whether a recruit's name was Dębowski or Dembowski. Lastly, countless soldiers never got registered, like the volunteer troops at Warsaw in August 1920 – who went straight to the frontline and perished – or the POWs dying in Bolshevik camps.

From 1921 to 1939, the nation mourned its dead and celebrated heroes, enjoying peace and building the future, even though the country, with ruined infrastructure and economy, the Great Depression, political turmoil and ethnic clashes, did not offer blissful existence. Still, it was peace within the safety of own borders (just off the eastern one the USSR murdered at least 111,000 of its Polish citizens in the years 1937-1938), and the society tried to make the most of it while it lasted.

In 1939, joint invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union launched the Second World War. Both aggressors subjected the Poles

to the programs of organized murder, enslavement and exploitation, albeit based them on different ideologies. The Third Reich first wiped out Polish elites, and attempted to terrorize the rest into submission, and the USSR mirrored that pattern, trying to keep up. Then, the two regimes clashed, and while the Soviets were forced to put their genocidal policy on hold, the Germans doubled their efforts: by 1945 they killed 3 million Jews and 2,4-2,6 million non-Jewish citizens of Poland (150,000 in the Warsaw Uprising alone). The Ukrainian nationalists murdered another 100,000 ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Galicia, and the communist occupation in the years 1939-1941 and 1944-1945 took 150,000 lives, which includes the 22,000 victims of the Katyn Massacre.

In that war of annihilation which targeted civilians more than combatants, the latter died en masse as well, because Polish units fought on all European fronts of WWII, from day one until the end of hostilities. Their losses are estimated to be between 123,000 and 147,000; both figures include 16,000-18,000 resistance members killed in the Warsaw Uprising, but the higher one does not count the underground soldiers who perished in guerilla warfare in the occupied country before 1 August 1944. Similarly, the quoted estimates leave out the servicemen who went missing and were never located. In all likelihood, most of these people also died in combat but were not identified; failure to identify so many of the victims is one of the main reasons why all the numbers here are nothing more than estimates.

Indeed, the WWII body count is even less accurate than 1917-1921

figures: murder of civilians was committed on a much greater scale, and since whole communities disappeared into extermination facilities, few people would or could register individuals. Secondly, perpetrators often destroyed the evidence, both paper and flesh, of their crimes. Then, there were advanced weapons and new tactics, such as carpet bombing, which often made exact body count impossible, and border shifts and voluntary or forced relocations added to the confusion, preventing post-war statisticians from drawing any exact conclusions. One thing is certain: WWI, with its 1:1 combatant to non-combatant death ratio, appears almost civilized next to WWII, which for each victim of military operations murdered more than ten civilians. In other words, casualties are less than a tenth of all victims; over 90% of deaths were a result of murder, starvation, slave labour or conditions created or chosen precisely for that purpose.

Yet, even after this bloodbath was over, the meter kept running: Poland found itself under political domination of the USSR, and from 1944 faced what could only be called the second Soviet occupation. Russian and Polish communists in power went about eliminating the opposition – quite significant, as wartime resistance organizations generally recognized only the wartime government residing in London. The obedient court system handed out 5,000-8,000 death sentences, half of which were carried out, but murders committed under the pretences of fair trial were just a fraction of all killings. Many victims of combing operations, round-ups and brutal interrogation by security services and the army simply disappeared, and the death toll mounted to tens of thousands. In mid-1950s, the intensity of terror lessened, but

since the authorities never renounced assassination, torture and pacification as means of quelling resistance, the remaining decades of their rule cost the nation yet more lives.

The mission of the Institute of National Remembrance is the answer to these seven decades of tragic loss of life: honour the heroes, commemorate the forgotten, identify the unidentified – and remember them all.

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