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# History and Contemporary Politics of Poland 1939–2003

## 1. Introduction

It is impossible to describe in a detailed way more than 60 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Poland after 1939 in such a short text. Therefore the main aim of this chapter is to supply the readers with a skeleton of facts constituted with turning points of the period in question. There are main streams of events and reasons for developments that are to be presented rather than facts and figures. Still some data are indispensable to illustrate the nature of the process under consideration. They are not to be strictly remembered and are quoted to give the reader the right picture of the scale of the phenomenon in question. Another important aim of the chapter is to question some popular but false myths about Poland that are often presented in many publications on history, especially those on World War II. Since Poland is the largest country situated between Germany and the former USSR, her faith influenced that of the neighbouring countries of Central and Eastern Europe in a considerable way. Therefore, the presentation of the impact of Polish history on the faith of other countries of the region and the scale to which Poland shared her experiences with other states is one of the important goals of this text. Poland, while usually not able to shape political developments in the region in accordance to her will throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, still proved to be the country deserving

the name of “the keystone of the European roof”. That opinion, once expressed by Napoleon I, was confirmed by historical experience of the last century, which showed that to change the political system in Europe one must be powerful enough to change the faith of Poland.

## 2. “First to fight”<sup>1</sup> – the Nazi-Soviet invasion of Poland – September 1939

In the summer of 1939 Poland was faced with no other choice but war. Hitler demanded *Gdańsk* (Danzig), an extraterritorial motorway and railway from Germany’s mainland to Eastern Prussia across Polish *Pomorze* (Polish Corridor), and an anti-Soviet alliance with the Third Reich. Around the same time, Stalin tactically offered anti-Nazi co-operation to the French and the British, provided Poland would let the Red Army to enter Polish territory and that of the Baltic States. From the Polish point of view there was no basic difference between the suggested option of the Wehrmacht’s entering Poland as an anti-Soviet ally and the proposed presence of the Red Army as an anti-Nazi force on Polish soil. In spite of Franco-British-Soviet negotiations conducted at the time in Moscow, Warsaw made it clear to London and Paris that no such commitments would be ever accepted by Poland. Germans were told as well “We, in Poland, know no idea of a peace at any price”. Suicidal options of being either German or Russian satellite in a war against the other great neighbour that was planned by both to be fought on Polish soil and in which there was nothing to gain for Poland, was rejected. Poland, aware of the faith of Czechoslovakia and having had a fresh national experience of 123 years of non-existence as a state, decided to fight, even alone. Having been granted French and British security guarantees, the Polish government counted on the effective support of the Western Allies. According to the treaties of 1921 (France) and 1939 (Britain) the allies obliged themselves to launch a full-scale offensive in the second week after their mobilisation. The task of the Polish Army was therefore to engage German forces till that time.

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<sup>1</sup> “First to fight” – it the quotation form the poster released in 1941 in London by the Polish Government in Exile.

Having not been able to receive what he wanted from France and Britain, Stalin turned towards Hitler and a deal known as Ribbentrop–Molotov pact was closed on 23 August 1939 at the expense of the life and freedom of Central European peoples. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, eastern part of Poland up to the line of the rivers *Narew*, *Vistula*, *San* as well as Romanian Bessarabia (Moldova) were recognised by Germany as a “zone of Russian interests”, while Lithuania (including *Wilno*-Vilnius, a Polish region then) and western Poland were accepted by the Soviets as a German zone. Both dictators wanted a war. Hitler needed a clear situation in the East and knew that an invasion on Poland without Soviet co-operation would be impossible. German General Staff wanted to know what would be the real deepness of the planned military operation in the East in 1939 (up to the *Vistula* River, the *Bug*, to the Polish eastern border or further into Soviet territory). By signing the treaty Soviets provided Nazis with needed certainty as to the developments in the East indispensable to start the war. Hitler rightfully considered Western Powers to be unwilling to fulfil their commitments to Poland and decided to concentrate all his tanks and Majority of air forces on the Polish front. Stalin believed that a short campaign against Poland would be followed by a heavy struggle in the western front similar to that having been experienced during the World War I. Such a scenario would have lead to mutual exhaustion of France and Britain on the one hand, and Germany on the other, thus paving the way for Soviet invasion on Europe.

The official reason for war presented by German propaganda was an alleged Polish attack on the radio broadcasting station in *Gliwice* (Gliwicz) in the then German part of Upper Silesia. It was a provocation well prepared by the SS that used its soldiers disguised in Polish uniforms and left some corpses of dead concentration camps’ prisoners wearing such uniforms lying around the attacked building. Following this act, the Nazi invasion on Poland began at the dawn of 1 September 1939 with the shots fired by the training battleship *Schleswig Holstein* at Polish Military Storehouse in Westerplatte Peninsula in *Gdańsk* manned with 180 soldiers. The defence of Westerplatte, which had been expected to last 24 hours, lasted seven days and caused ca 2000 German casualties (dead or wounded). It became a part of Polish military legend. The isolated yet organised Polish resistance in the *Gdynia* region (seaside) lasted until 19 September 1939.

The entire Polish territory including cities without any military importance was subjected to heavy bombardment by overwhelming German air forces (Luftwaffe). Polish military aircraft had been deployed in war time airfields so that no plane (except those that were under repair) was bombed on the ground until mid September. The opinion that Majority of Polish aircraft were destroyed on the first day of the war by surprise German attacks on the airfields is a popular but false myth.

Polish forces were deployed along the long and indefensible border with the Reich and Slovakia that had become German satellite state since March 1939. The step was senseless from the military point of view still having had in mind the fate of Czechoslovakia; Polish government did not want to evacuate the territories that were the very subject of the dispute. It was not clear then what was the real aim of Hitler – the destruction of the Polish state with a one quick blow or in a gradual action beginning with the change of the borders. undefended territories could be occupied, then the operations would stop and a Munich-like conference “to save the peace” could be convoked with possible support of the Western Powers. Thus, for political reasons, Poland decided to defend each part of her territory. The satellisation of Slovakia put Polish forces into a position of having been over-winged from the North and from the South before the first shot was fired. The Nazi-Soviet pact completed the encirclement of Poland.

France and Great Britain pressed on Polish government not to provoke Hitler. For this reason, general mobilisation proclaimed in Poland on 29 August was cancelled the next day and re-announced again on 31 August. In result, German attack on Poland met Polish forces not fully mobilised.

Poland managed to mobilise ca. 900 000 soldiers with 2800 cannons, 181 tanks, 390 reconnaissance light armoured carriers and 400 aircrafts including only 36 modern bombers. Those forces were grouped in 37 divisions and 4 brigades of infantry, 11 brigades of cavalry on horseback plus one motorised brigade and a second one still being formed. The postponement of mobilisation resulted in a deployment of 24 infantry divisions and 4 brigades as well as 8 cavalry brigade, the rest were still in transports on 1 September. Nevertheless the enumeration presented hitherto shows that, despite another popular myth, cavalry constituted only 7% of the Polish Army forces at that time.

German forces that invaded Poland numbered ca. 1.5 million soldiers in 44 infantry divisions, 4 infantry brigades, 1 cavalry brigade on horseback, 4 motorised divisions, 4 light armoured divisions and 7 Panzer divisions (armoured) equipped with 9000 cannons, 2500 tanks and 1950 aircrafts. Wehrmacht number superiority over Polish forces was 1.6:1 in men power, 3.2:1 in artillery, 5:1 in tanks and 4.9:1 in airforces. Technical superiority in mechanisation of the army and in new types of aircrafts made the advantage even greater.

The Polish campaign can be divided into several sub-periods. 1–3.09 1939, the battle on the borders; 4–6.09, the German break through the Polish front; 7–9.09, Polish retreat to the “line of great rivers” (Vistula, *Narew*, *San*); 6–12.09, the loss of the “line of great rivers” combined with Polish counteroffensive known as the battle of *Bzura* (9–17.09); 16–20.09 and 21–27.09, battles of *Tomaszów Lubelski* and the Soviet invasion on Poland (17.09); defence of Warsaw (8–28.09); 17.09–5.10, final battles in eastern Poland against both aggressors combined with the defence of isolated besieged cities and fortresses (*Modlin* till 28.09, *Hel* Peninsula till 2.10, *Lwów* (12–22.09), all defended against Germans, and *Grodno* (20–22.09) defended by improvised local forces against Soviets) (see: the map “German – Soviet invasion on Poland 1.09–5.10.1939”).

German “Fall Weiss” (White Plan) was based on the intention to encircle Polish armies by two main attacks from the North and the South using Eastern Prussia in the North and Silesian and Slovak territories in the South as a base of the attacks. Next, Polish troops westward of the Vistula River were to be destroyed. Should that plan fail, the entire operation would be repeated eastward of the Vistula with the expected co-operation of the Soviets.

The battles of the borders were lost in three days due to the German number and technical superiority enhanced by the obvious advantage of the aggressor as to the choice of direction of the invasion and options to concentrate the overwhelming forces in selected points. Polish army was not able to defend the 1500 km border with Germany and Slovakia. German forces were stopped however in some places for one or two days and suffered heavy casualties, especially when confronted with fortified positions as in *Mława* (at Prussian border) or *Węgierska Góra* (Slovak border)

or with Polish armoured brigade (*Jordanów* in Carpathian Mountains). German armoured division was stopped as well in Mokra by Polish cavalry brigade that destroyed some dozen of the German tanks. That is an example of another popular myth, namely, that Polish cavalrymen with their swords charged German tanks on horseback. The truth was that Polish cavalrymen usually fought on foot and only marched on horseback. There were however some charges, Majority of them successful, made by Polish cavalry on horseback in September 1939 (the most famous one at *Krojanty* in Pomorze). None was a suicidal attack on tanks.

In the next stage of the campaign, German forces managed to destroy Polish Army “Łódź” in central Poland and the main reserve Army “Prusy” that had not been fully mobilised. This opened the way for German tanks to approach Warsaw. In the North, the Nazi forces cut off and destroyed part of Polish Army “Pomorze” in the corridor, thus establishing the connection between the Reich and Eastern Prussia. The rest of the “Pomorze” Army retreated to the South thus joining the “Poznań” Army that was not noticed by German reconnaissance and relocated to the East from undefended Wielkopolska (central front). German victory in southern part of the central front opened the way to Warsaw for Nazi 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Armies. The 10<sup>th</sup> Army reached the suburbs of the city on 8<sup>th</sup> September. Next day the 4<sup>th</sup> German Armoured Division tried to take Polish capital city in an improvised attack of the tanks. The assault ended in a bloody failure of the invaders and a loss of 60 tanks.

Although northern and southern Polish armies were trying to establish a new frontline based on the great rivers, they lost their race to that line with mechanised German forces. Two central armies – “Poznań” and “Pomorze” remained undetected by German reconnaissance thus threatening unprotected northern flank of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> German armies advanced far in Warsaw direction. The Poles led by general *Tadeusz Kutrzeba* took the opportunity and launched a powerful offensive striking the overextended German forces on 9<sup>th</sup> September. The biggest battle of the Polish campaign known as the battle at the *Bzura* River began. In its first stage (9–12.09) German forces suffered heavy losses and were rolled back to the south. 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of gen. Kurt von Briesen was completely destroyed and the entire 8<sup>th</sup> Army was withdrawn from Warsaw direction

and ordered to engage in defence against Polish assault. The Germans engaged soon their 4<sup>th</sup> Army, two Panzer Corpses and overwhelming Luftwaffe forces and in effect the next stage (13–15.09.) of the battle resulted in the halt to the advance of the Poles. The battle of the encircled Polish forces lasted till 17<sup>th</sup> September resulting in the destruction of the Majority of Polish troops. The remnants of the two Polish Armies managed (18–21.09) to fight their way through German lines to Warsaw.

The battle of *Bzura* is often compared to the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes Mountains in winter 1944. It was lost by the Poles, but postponed the Nazi advance towards Warsaw and caused a crisis in the German 8<sup>th</sup> Army that suffered heavy casualties.

Apart from that battle other fights that took place after 9 September had more chaotic character. They were subordinated to the two main ideas endorsed by Polish commanders: retreat to the line of great rivers and, when it failed, retreat to the so called Romanian bridgehead; i.e. South-eastern part of the prewar Poland (now western Ukraine), a borderland with Romania – the country that formed an anti-Soviet defensive alliance with Poland and was expected to maintain friendly neutrality in Polish war against Germany. The Poles hoped for the allied supplies for their forces to be delivered through Romania. Those calculations failed with the Soviet invasion that started on 17 September. Afterwards, remnants of Polish troops tried either to defend their isolated positions in the main cities and fortified regions (*Warsaw, Gdynia, Hel, Modlin, Lwów*), break through back to Warsaw to reinforce the garrison of the capital city that kept on fighting, or withdraw to Romania, Hungary and Lithuania – the neutral neighbours of Poland (Latvian border was cut off by advancing Soviet forces in the first day of invasion).

Initially the Soviets deployed 620 000 soldiers equipped with 4700 tanks and 3300 aircrafts against Poland. Eventually, due to large reinforcements, the Soviet forces numbered 2.5 million men operating in Poland at the beginning of October. At the dawn of 17<sup>th</sup> September ca. 400 000 Polish soldiers kept on fighting and the government was still on the Polish soil. The Soviet thesis that the Polish state had ceased to exist and therefore all the former pacts with Poland (including the one of 1932/1935 on non-aggression) were no longer in power was false.

There were not enough combat forces to resist the new invasion on any large scale. The units of the Polish Corps for the Protection of the Borderland (KOP) met the Soviets with fire, but no front was established in the East. The most powerful resistance was given by the KOP troops led by gen. *Wilhelm Orlik-Rückemann* who gathered dispersed Polish forces (ca. 9000 men) under his command and fought the Soviets in Polesie – the central part of eastern Poland (now Bielarus). On 28–29 September, at *Szack*, and two days later at *Wytyczno* (now in Bielarus), those forces fought the largest battles against the Soviets in the entire Polish-Soviet war of 1939. The Soviets were also engaged by the troops of general *Franciszek Kleeberg* that broke through to march in rescue of Warsaw to fight Germans. Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army – marshal *Edward Rydz-Śmigły* having seen no chance for an effective resistance against the Soviets ordered not to fight them except in self-defence. That mistaken decision cost many Polish soldiers their lives. Taken prisoners of war by the Soviets, they were executed or sent to Gulag camps in Siberia. The resistance, apart for its political and moral value, could have postponed the Soviet advance thus enabling more troops to withdraw to Hungary and Romania.

Nazi and Soviet forces met at the end of September in central Poland. The last battle of Polish regular forces (general *F. Kleeberg*) fought against Germans ended at *Kock* on 5 October. German 19<sup>th</sup> Corps of Heinz Guderian and Russian 29<sup>th</sup> armoured brigade of Siemion Krivoshein took part in a joint parade in a conquered Brest Litovsk (22.09.) thus demonstrating Nazi-Soviet brotherhood in arms, newly born in a common war against Poland. In the Soviet zone, Polish post-September guerrilla activity lasted for another few months (due to communist censorship after 1945 no wide research was made on that subject) and anti-German guerrilla of dispersed troops ended in March 1940 turning into irregular partisan warfare.

Polish campaign lasted 35 days (8 days shorter than the resistance of British, French, Belgian and the Dutch forces in 1940). Neither Poland as a state nor Polish Army Forces as a whole ever capitulated. No peace or armistice had ever been signed. All fighting armies suffered heavy losses. The Poles lost 70 000 soldiers killed in action, 133 000 were wounded and 420 000 taken prisoners of war by the Germans (10 000 of them died in prison or were murdered). The estimated casualties of fight against



the Soviets numbered 6 000 to 7 000 of men killed and ca. 250 000 taken prisoners of war (22 000 of them were then murdered in Katyn, Kharkiv and Tver massacres, an unknown number died in the Gulag). The Germans lost 16 343 killed in action, 5058 missed in action and 27 640 wounded (for comparison in French campaign ca. 27 000 German soldiers were killed). The Wehrmacht lost 674 tanks and 319 armoured cars in Poland and Luftwaffe, 330 aircrafts (ca. 230 in action). The land forces ran out of ammunition reserves. The remaining reserves would have allowed supplying the troops for another 10 days. Yet, in October 1939, the Western Allies were waiting entrenched in the maginot line. Soviet losses were lower. Although no reliable data exist, their casualties are estimated at 2500–3000 killed in action, 150 destroyed tanks and armoured cars and ca. 20 lost aircrafts.

The experience of Polish defensive war in 1939 remains still vivid in the Polish historical memory. Invaded by the two powerful totalitarian neighbours Poland had no chance to survive. The alliances with Great Britain and France failed. Both allied powers declared war on Germany on 3 September, but no large offensive was launched in the West in spite of the treaty commitments. The Franco-British conference held in Abbeville on 12 September resulted in a decision to abandon the fighting Poland. This fact is still remembered by the Poles – especially the older generation and to this day influences their perception of the credibility of the European powers and their security commitments.

### **3. Polish question during the World War II (1939–1945) and the ethnic cleansing in Central and Eastern Europe (1932–1947)**

#### **3.1. Nazi-Soviet occupation of Poland and Soviet expansion in Central-Eastern Europe**

The conquest of Poland resulted in a final partition of the country. The stipulations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 23 August 1939 were modified by a new “Agreement on Borders and Friendship” signed by the USSR and the Third Reich on 28 September 1939. Lithuania was

moved into future Soviet zone of influence and Polish territories between the Vistula River and the Bug, formerly given to the Soviets, were evacuated by the Red Army and occupied by the Germans (see: the map “The partitions of Poland during the World War II”).

The fall of Poland resulted in a quick satellisation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union. On 28 September 1939 the USSR forced Estonia to sign a pact allowing Moscow to establish Soviet military bases in that country. On 5 October similar treaty was imposed on Latvia and on 10 October, on Lithuania. The latter state was given *Wilno* (Vilnius) conquered by the Soviets. The town, although inhabited by Polish Majority at the time, used to be the historical capital city of the Great Duchy of Lithuania and had already been claimed by the Lithuanians before the war. Only Finland rejected Soviet pressure and decided to fight in defence of its integrity, freedom and, as the experience of those who capitulated showed later on, for the very life of its people. This resulted in a Russian invasion on Finland triggered by Soviet provocation in Mainila, similar to the one that the Nazi had exercised in Gliwice. The Finns, however, managed to defend their independence in the “Winter War” (*Taalvisota*) of 1939–1940.

### 3.2. Polish Government and Polish army Forces in Exile till 1941

Polish government left the country in the afternoon of 17 September 1939 and was interned in Romania. A new government was created in exile in France on 30 September in accordance with Polish Constitution of 1935. The new cabinet was headed by the Prime Minister, general *Władysław Sikorski*. The main task of that government was to recreate Polish Army and to continue the war against Germany, side by side with France and Great Britain. By May 1940 the Polish Forces in exile numbered 85 000 men in France and 4 432 in Syria under French command (Carpathian Brigade). Polish Highlander Brigade (*Brygada Podhalańska*) had been prepared to support the defence of Finland against the Soviet invasion, but it was not ready in time and was finally used in defence of Norway during German invasion in March 1940. It fought in the battle of Narvik. Other Polish divisions took part in defence of France in the battles of Champaubert and Montmirail as well as at Montbard in Champagne

and at Lagarde, Belfort, and Rennes in May and June 1940. The defeat of France by Germans in 1940 resulted in a destruction of the Majority of Polish forces there. Some 20 000 troops managed to escape to the British Islands where, together with Polish Air Forces and the Navy, they kept on fighting. Polish contingent reached the number of 27 614 in Britain in July 1940 without the already mentioned Carpathian Brigade that moved from the Vichy controlled Syria to the British Palestine and then, together with a Czechoslovak battalion, took part in the defence of Tobruk (Libya) in 1941. Thus Polish forces in exile just after the defeat of France became the second largest (after the British) army still in war against the Third Reich. Polish air pilots distinguished themselves especially during the Battle of Britain. While constituting 8% of the allied air forces they caused 11.7% of German losses in the dramatic days of the summer 1940.

### **3.3. Nazi and Soviet occupational system in Poland, further Soviet expansion and the first stage of ethnic cleansing**

The defeat of France resulted in the final completion of the stipulations of Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 that, according to the Soviet authorities, was not threatened anymore by any possibility of revision. On 26 June 1940 the USSR forced Romania to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina (the latter cession had not been agreed upon with Germany) and on 14–15 July organised “elections” in the occupied Baltic States and incorporated them at the beginning of August.

The situation in German-Soviet occupied Poland and in Soviet occupied Baltic States and Romanian territories was tragic. 52% of Polish territory with 14 million people was incorporated into the Soviet Union and then included into the Ukrainian and Bielorussian Soviet Republics. The Third Reich occupied 48% of the territory and 22 million of people. Northern and Western parts of Poland inhabited by 10 million of people were incorporated directly into the Reich while central part of the country with the population of 12 millions was turned into the so-called General Gouvenment under German military and civil administration. The German occupational system in Poland was different than the one that existed

in the Western countries. There was no Polish administration or political forces collaborating with the oppressors as in France (marshal Philippe Pétain) or Norway – (Vidkun Quisling government). The entire power was in the hands of German administration and no Polish political structures were legally allowed. The Soviet occupational system was more or less the same in all the conquered foreign countries, based on complete sovietisation combined with massive terror and totalitarian organisation of the public life. The main difference between the invaders was that the Germans did not demand their victims to prize them in public compulsory demonstration for what they were doing to the conquered people. The Soviets did. Germans granted a provisional citizenship of different levels to people of German origin (Volksdeutsche) while Russians simply declared all inhabitants of conquered territories to be Soviet citizens. The Soviets soon declared conscription and about 100–150 thousand Poles were forced to join the Soviet Army. The occupational powers co-ordinated their efforts to combat Polish conspiracy. Special services of the USSR (NKVD) and the Third Reich (Gestapo) organised a common conference on that issue in Zakopane in December 1939.

The Nazi and the Soviets alike aimed at the extermination of Polish nation and both launched a full-scale ethnic cleansing action in their respective occupational zones (see: the map “Ethnicity in Central-Eastern Europe in 1930”). The Soviets had already had experience on that issue. In 1932, Polish regions in the Soviet Ukraine and Bielarus were liquidated and thousands of people were killed or deported to Kazakhstan just because they were Polish. It was the first group ever deported due to the ethnic reasons in the USSR. From 1939 on these deportees were followed by millions of others: Poles, Ukrainians, Bielorusians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Latvians and Romanians from the newly conquered territories as well as the entire nations of Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars living in the pre-war Soviet Union. The first to be deported were civil servants of the Polish state. Then came soldiers who had avoided an imprisonment during the military operations and had come back to their families, policemen, forest guards (treated as potential guerrillas), landowners, pre-war members of non-communist parties (Polish, Ukrainian, Jewish), teachers, then their families, refugees from the western part of Poland, and finally

others. People simply disappeared into the night, kidnapped from their homes by Soviet police and local communist militia. To be a veteran of the Polish-Soviet war (1919–1920) was treated as a crime, for example. The estimation of Polish citizens deported from the eastern part of Poland till the outbreak of the German-Soviet war (22.06.1941) oscillates around 650 000 with ca. 52 000 reported dead. Tens of thousands of alleged political prisoners: Poles, Ukrainians and Bielorusians were murdered by Soviet NKVD in prisons in June 1941 when rapid German advance prevented their evacuation. The death casualties among Poles during the entire World War II attributed to the Soviets are estimated at ca. 580 000.

Nazi occupation started with massive executions of Polish elites as potential leaders and with ethnic cleansing of the territories incorporated into the Reich. By the end of the war Germans deported ca. 923 000 people to the General Gouvenment area in a very brutal way. Another 2 million people were relocated from occupied Poland to the Reich as slave labour force. Massive killings began at once. Pre-war politicians, teachers, priests, famous sportsmen, civil servants, veterans of anti-German uprisings of 1918–1921 in Silesia or *Wielkopolska*, scouts were the groups of special risk, but other people were killed as well. By the end of 1939, ca. 50 000 Poles were killed in massive executions in the occupied Poland. By mid June 1940, Germans killed 3 500 people from academic, social and political milieus. On 6<sup>th</sup> November 1939, 183 professors of the Jagiellonian University of *Kraków* were invited for meeting with new German authorities under a pretext to be informed on Nazi policy towards further academic activity. They were all arrested and sent to German concentration camps. In June 1941, just after German invasion on the USSR, the Nazi killed most professors of the University and Technical University in *Lwów* (Lviv – now Ukraine). From 1939 on, Polish political and cultural life was forbidden, schools of all levels except low primary were closed. Poland was seen as the necessary “Lebensraum” (Life Space) for the Teutonic race, so according to Nazi plans Poles were to be either exterminated, Germanised or deported to Siberia, when it was conquered. Nazi-Soviet co-operation lasting until 1941 allowed the Germans from Soviet incorporated Baltic States, *Wołyń* (Volynia) and Bukovina to be settled down in the Nazi conquered territories in Poland. An experimental action of creating German ethnic territory

in then central Poland (*Zamość* region) started in November 1942 and continued till March 1943. 110 000 people including 33 000 children were deported from that area to concentration camps or as slave labour force to Germany. Some of the blonde, blueeyed “Nordic race” children were offered to German families to be Germanised (by the end of the war ca. 200 000 children from all over Poland) while some others (ca. 50%) were murdered in *Oświęcim* (Auschwitz) and *Majdanek* death camps. Thousands died in transports. The action provoked a fierce resistance of Polish guerrilla that caused the suspension of the deportations from the region “till the final victory in the East”.

### 3.4. Holocaust in Poland

Starting September 1939, German authorities began the introduction of Nazi policy towards the Jews. In autumn 1939, ghettos were organised in all Polish large cities (Warsaw ghetto had 450 000 inhabitants and the *Łódź* one 160 000) in the General Gouvenment where the Jewish population was concentrated. Soon entire quarters of the cities were closed with walls and barbed wire to separate Jews from others. Any attempts to feed the starving Jews, to hide those who had escaped from the ghetto, or any other forms of assistance were punished with capital punishment. The sentence extended over the entire family of a “guilty” person or all inhabitants of a block of flats if the shelter was found in a multifamily building. Apart from these risks, it was very difficult to get additional food (rationed with the use of food stamps) for extra people without drawing attention of others. In such circumstances, only the most heroic and brave would venture to help the Jews.

Pre-war Jewish population in Poland numbered more than 3 million people, (2.7 million perished in the Holocaust). Most of them were orthodox religious people, poorly integrated into Polish society, easily detectable in the streets due to their habits, language and clothes. The Jews constituted a local Majority of the population in many small cities of eastern Poland. Given the fact that there was no place to escape to from the occupied country (just as 5 000 Danish Jews who found shelter in the neighbouring neutral Sweden) and that Nazi-German occupation lasted 5 years, the longest

time in the entire Europe, it was only due to the heroism of their Polish compatriots that ca.

100 000–150 000 of the Jews survived the war in Poland. The ethnic Poles constituted Majority of the victims of massive executions that took place in Poland until January 1942. Till that time Jews were dying mainly from infections and starvation in overpopulated ghettos. Massive shootings started in the autumn 1941. Since January 1942, when the decision on “*Endlösung der Judenfrage*” (final solution of the Jewish question) – i.e. Total extermination was adopted by the Nazi, massive deportations began from the ghettos to the death camps in *Chełm*, *Bełżec*, *Sobibór*, *Treblinka*, *Majdanek* and *Oświęcim* (Auschwitz). The action lasted till the end of the Third Reich and ca. 5.8 million out of 10–11 million of the total European Jewry perished in it. Poland that had had the largest Jewish population in Europe before the war was chosen by Nazi as a place of extermination due to logistic reasons, as it was easier to transport the smaller number of Jews from other countries to Poland than vice versa.

Polish underground state tried to alarm the allied governments and public opinion around the world. Captain *Witold Pilecki* (hanged by the communists in 1948) voluntarily provoked his deportation to Auschwitz, wrote a special report and escaped. In 1942, *Jan Koziński* (known as *Jan Karski*) a special emissary of the Polish Underground State travelled in conspiracy across occupied Europe to Britain and then to the United States to present to the allied leaders collected evidence on the fate of Jews. He met Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Arthur Greenwood and Franklin D. Roosevelt, but without any substantial results. On 10 December 1942, Polish Government in Exile submitted a special note to the Allied Powers appealing for counteraction. The only result was a joint protest of the governments of the U.S.A., UK and the USSR. No bombardment of German facilities used for extermination of people in the death camps was ordered.

#### 3.4.1. Aid for Jews

The Polish Underground State created three clandestine structures charged with the task of co-ordinating assistance to Jews. On 27 September 1942, the Temporary Committee of Aid to Jews came into being. Later that year, on 4 December, ŻEGOTA (cryptonym of the Council for Aid

to Jews) was founded. A special unit for Jewish Affairs in the Department of Home Affairs of the Government Representative to the Country existed in conspiracy in the years 1943–1944. The number of Jews effectively helped by ŻEGOTA is estimated at 40–50 thousand. The Catholic Church (especially nun convents) was especially active in the action of saving Jewish children who were hidden among Polish orphans in orphanages run by the nuns.

### 3.4.2. Collaboration with the nazis

#### *Polish*

There was no organised Polish collaboration with the Nazi-German authorities in extermination of the Jewish people in Poland. No action of the occupational forces could count on the support of Polish population aware of the fact that Poles are next in the queue after Jews and Gypsies. Still there were individuals who co-operated with Germans. People who blackmailed the hiding Jews for money and threatened them with denunciation to the Germans were called *Szmelcowniki*. Such acts were treated as a crime by Polish underground courts of justice and punished with capital punishment by Polish Underground State. The so-called “blue police”, organised by the Germans and manned mostly by members of the pre-war Polish police, was used twice to execute mixed groups of people (Poles and Jews). The detachment obeyed the order only once, the second time it rebelled and the Germans executed its members. Since then Polish Police had never been used again in executions. There were no Polish military, paramilitary, special or any other units in the German service, so any “information” as to their activity during Holocaust has been false.

The Jews who escaped from ghettos were usually in a hopeless situation. They could hardly rely on assistance from Poles threatened with German repression and were subjected to attacks by different criminals and bandits who took advantage of their defenceless situation. Some of the Jews especially those from the eastern part of Poland (occupied by the Soviets till 1941) during German occupation joined communist guerrilla units and thus found themselves in conflict with Polish anti-Soviet guerrilla forces



represented by the clandestine Polish Home Army in the years 1943–1945. This phenomenon should be however seen as a part of the Polish-Soviet war and must not be treated as an example of anti-Jewish activities, since the ethnic set up of communist units in the service of the USSR (Russian, Bielorusian, Jewish) was not the cause of the conflict.

### *Jewish*

German authorities allowed formation of the Jewish Councils (Jud-enrat) in Ghettos. Those self-governing collaborative administrative bodies represented different moral attitude depending on the character of their members. The head of the Łódź Ghetto Judenrat, *Mordechaj Rumkowski*, became a symbol of collaboration at any price. Similar bad fame was attributed to cruel Jewish Police led by *A. Gancwajch*. It was an auxiliary formation used by the Germans for gathering the Jews and conveying them to the transports.

#### 3.4.3. Jewish resistance

On 24 July 1942, the head of the Warsaw Ghetto Judenrat *Adam Czerniaków* committed a suicide in protest against the Nazi German policy. He not only became a symbol of heroism juxtaposed the infamous of Rumkowski, but his death weakened the influence of the older and passive minded people and enabled the Jewish youth to create the Jewish Combat Organisation (*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa – ŻOB*). That organisation, led by *Mordechaj Anielewicz*, united its forces with the Jewish Military Organisation (*Żydowska Organizacja Wojskowa – ŻOW*) created back in 1939 by former Polish Army reserve officer *Mieczysław Apfelbaum*. Their combined forces decided to fight against the Germans. On 19 April, German troops entering the Ghetto were met with gunfire from Jewish insurgents (ca 1000 men and women). The Warsaw Ghetto uprising began and lasted till 16 May 1943. It was a fight for human dignity and not for victory or even for survival. The fate of the insurgents was sealed. Polish Underground State could not support the fighters in any effective way. Any general uprising, if proclaimed in Poland in 1943, would have been smashed by still powerful Wehrmacht. Hence, the Home Army's support for the Ghetto

fighters was very limited (some supplies and help in evacuation of the survivors). The Nazi destroyed the remnants of the Ghetto killing ca. 60 000 people and reducing the entire quarter of Warsaw to ruins. From the military point of view, the Ghetto Uprising was not a great battle (German casualties numbered 49 killed and 79 wounded soldiers), but the heroic resistance of the Jewish insurgents became part of Jewish and Polish history. Among the whole European Jewry, only Polish Jews decided to fight with weapons in their hands and when starting their struggle they waved Jewish and Polish flags. Similar, although smaller Jewish uprising took place in *Białystok* Ghetto too. There were also two large escapes combined with armed clashes of the Jews imprisoned in death camps of *Treblinka* (in August 1943) and *Sobibór* (in October 1943).

On 15 May 1943, a day before annihilation of the Warsaw Ghetto, *Szumł Zygielbojm*, member of the Polish National Council (quasi Parliament in Exile in London constituted with the representatives of the main Polish pre-war parties) and representative of the Jewish Socialist Party Bund, committed suicide in protest against the lack of action from the Western Allies.

### 3.5. Polish Underground State

Since there was no collaborating government in Poland and no autonomous Polish administration under German-Nazi rule, the resistance in Poland assumed a structural shape of the underground state (the second one in Polish history – the first was in 1863). The underground Polish state comprised several civil structures (administration, educational system on a secondary and academic level, courts of justice, underground press), some military ones (intelligence, diversion, guerrilla troops in forests), and many services (production of false documents, military logistics, communication system, propaganda department, health service etc.). The first central clandestine organisation was founded by general *Michał Karaszewicz Tokarzewski* on 27 September 1939, one day before the capitulation of Warsaw. It was called SZP (Service for the Victory of Poland). In November 1939, it was reorganised and renamed into ZWZ (The Union for the Armed Fight). Having been united with numerous local organisations that had been created spontaneously all over the country it was renamed as the Home Army

(*Armia Krajowa* – AK) on 14 February 1942. That organisation together with the Polish Army in Exile (in the West) constituted the Polish Armed Forces. Polish Underground State and its military pillar – the Home Army recognised the authority of the Polish government in exile in London and obeyed its orders. The climax of the guerrilla activity in Poland was summer of 1944 when Home Army reached 350 000–400 000 men and women (100 000 in combat forces). There were two political groups, however, that did not join the Home Army and decided to act separately: National Army Forces (NSZ), a rightist nationalist organisation (ca. 70 000 men) created in September 1942, and the Communists (People's Guard – formed in March 1942 and then renamed into People's Army that in summer 1944 numbered 40 000 men and women, ca. 6000 combatants). The NSZ split up eventually and Majority of its troops subordinated to the Home Army in 1944; the People's Army was governed from Moscow and should not be treated as part of Polish national effort to regain independence.

The Poles constituted as well ca. 10% of soldiers of French Resistance since the large Polish community in pre-war France (the larger non-French ethnic group in the country of that time) provided the Polish conspiracy in exile with a substantial social base. Those people were, however, subordinated to the French organisations and not to the Polish Government.

The structures of the Polish Underground State survived the entire German occupation and were destroyed only by Soviets in the years 1944–1945. The guerrilla activity in Poland forced Germans to deploy and maintain from 600 000 to 1 million soldiers in Poland (the data vary for different periods) – the equivalent of 37–53 divisions.

### 3.6. Poland in the second stage of the World War II

On 22 June 1941 German and the Third Reich's satellite forces invaded the USSR. The oppressors of Poland began a mutual mortal combat. That resulted in a rapid evolution of the political situation of the position of the Polish Government in exile within the anti-German camp as well as in deep changes of the situation of Poland (the entire Polish territory was occupied by the Germans) and of Polish people deported to the USSR. Some 110 000 of them were released from the Gulag camps and the

Soviets recognised them back as the Polish citizens. A Polish-Soviet agreement (Sikorski-Majski Treaty) was signed on 30 July 1941. The agreement re-established diplomatic relations between Poland and the USSR (broken up in 1939) and was a legal base for the creation of the Polish Army in the USSR manned with the released prisoners and deportees – Polish citizens dispersed in all over the Soviet Union. The army under the command of general *Władysław Anders* was formed in the Volga region (Buzuluk) and then moved to Uzbekistan in Central Asia. It was supplied with war materials by the British, and with food by the Russians. The 70 000 Polish Army on the Soviet soil with 40 000 civilians (women and children released from the Soviet imprisonment and not supplied with food by Russians) constituted a powerful moral threat to Soviet propaganda and was seen as a factor of political demoralisation of Soviet citizens. Therefore, when the crisis on German-Soviet front was over at the turn of 1941–1942, the USSR wanted to get rid of the Poles from its territory. Polish soldiers and civilians, former prisoners and deportees, did not trust the new “allies” and were eager to get out of the USSR too. The British, troubled in Iraq with an attempt of pro-German coup d’etat in 1941, also preferred to have the Poles there. Consequently, in July 1942, the Polish Army in USSR and civilians who accompanied the soldiers were evacuated, first to Persia (Iran), and then to Iraq and Palestine, where they were united with the Carpathian Brigade and named the 2<sup>nd</sup> Polish Corps (the 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Corps was deployed on British Isles, Mainly in Scotland). A lot of Polish Jews took an opportunity to get out of the USSR with the Polish Army and many of them deserted in Palestine to join Jewish underground movement that fought to create an Israeli state. Monahem Begin, a future prime minister of Israel, was among the deserters. Others remain in Polish uniforms and many distinguished themselves in the battles to come. Although politically disappointed, Polish authorities led by gen. Anders decided not to persecute Jewish desertions. They considered creation of a Jewish state a natural development of that time and circumstance. Polish 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps took part in the Italian campaign and distinguished itself in the battles of Monte Cassino and Bologna. The Majority of its soldiers had never come back home since their homes were usually situated on the territories incorporated into the USSR. Having witnessed the Gulag system, those people, when they decided to return

to Poland after the war, were persecuted as potential anti-communists and their fate was often tragic. To be General Anders's soldier was considered a crime in the communist Poland.

On 13 April 1943 Germans announced they had found massive graves of Polish officers killed by Soviet NKVD in Katyn forest. Both Polish and the German governments, acting independently, applied to the International Red Cross to launch investigation on that issue. The fact that both governments acted simultaneously was used by the Soviet authorities as a pretext for accusing Polish Government in exile to have acted in agreement with the Third Reich. In result, the USSR broke off the diplomatic relations with Poland on 25/26 April 1943. It was a turning point in the Soviet policy towards Poland and a foundation on which a future communist state was built in our country. Between May and July 1943, a first unit (1<sup>st</sup> *Kościuszko* Division) of the so-called Polish People's Army was formed in the Soviet Union. Although manned with former prisoners of the Russian Gulag and deportees that had not managed to join the Anders Army, it was commanded by the communists and completely subordinated to the Soviet Union.

The communisation of Poland was prepared earlier. In 1939 the Communist Party of Poland did not exist. It had never been popular in Poland and was liquidated on orders from Moscow in 1938. The Majority of its prominent members were killed in the soviet made purification, thus there was no organised communist structures in Poland between 1939 and 1942. It was not earlier than 28 December 1941, when a group of soviet parachutists (although ethnic Poles) was dropped in Poland as a so-called initiative group charged with a task of organising a new communist party in the country. Consequently, on 5 January 1942, the so-called Polish Worker's Party (PPR) was founded. A renaming of People's Guard into People's Army followed soon. The Party recognised legality of the soviet incorporation of the 52% of Polish pre-war territory, which fact made it extremely unpopular. There was no chance for it to play a leading role in the Polish political life on its own, but it had a powerful protector. On 1 March 1943, the so-called Union of the Polish Patriots was set up in the USSR. It was created by the soviet puppets and was recognised by Russians as a political representation of Polish nation. The newly created 1<sup>st</sup> *Kościuszko* Division

of the Polish People's Army was subordinated to that body. In the night of 31 December 1943/1 January 1944 the PPR created National Council of the Country, a self-proclaimed underground parliament parallel to the structure of the Polish Underground state.

In July 1944 Red Army entered the territory westward from the Soviet-German border of 1939. The USSR recognised the so-called Curzon line of 1919 based on the Bug River and thus officially treated the areas westward from it as the Polish ones. Consequently, the Soviet state started to organise communist administration in these territories. On 21 July 1944, Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) was established in Moscow. The next day it officially proclaimed its manifesto, formally issued in Lublin, the first large Polish city west of the Bug River reached by the Soviets in 1944. The Soviet Union immediately recognised PKWN as the only legal Polish government.

Polish underground state and Polish government in exile still existed and were recognised by all allied powers except the USSR. Nonetheless, since 22 June 1941, the Soviet Union had been more important member of the anti-German coalition than Poland. Polish forces took part in numerous battles in the West: Narvik, French campaign, the Battle of Britain – 1940; Tobruk 1941, Monte Cassino, Falaise, Arnhem, Bologna 1944 – just to mention the largest ones. Polish Navy operated in Atlantic Ocean and in the mediterranean basin. Yet the 200 000 of Polish soldiers fighting side by side with the Western Allies could not politically counterbalance the Red Army. The Soviet Union, by then a Major force in the fight against the Germans, was becoming more and more politically influential in shaping the attitude of Western Allies towards Poland's integrity. Since the death of general *Władysław Sikorski*, Polish Prime Minister killed in mysterious circumstances when his plane crashed at take-off in Gibraltar, the Poles had seemed to be more and more uncomfortable allies. Their problems were spoiling the development of co-operation between Western democracies and Stalinist Soviet Union in their struggle against Nazi Germany.

There was a plan of a common uprising in Poland prepared by the Home Army. It was to be started at a moment when the German occupation collapsed, as expected (like in 1918) by the Poles or when the Soviet army entered Polish soil in its counteroffensive against German troops. The plan

was named “Burza” (A Storm) and was based on subsequent uprisings in different regions of the country in the order depended on the advance of the Soviet forces. From the military point of view it was aimed against the Germans, from the political one – against the Soviets.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the main idea of the plan was to attack the retreating Germans, liberate the territory just before the entrance of the Soviets, and establish independent Polish administration by deconsolidation of the structures of the Underground State. Polish Airborne Brigade based in Britain was planned to be dropped in the country so as to complicate the Soviet political game.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet forces crossed Polish pre-war border in the night of 3/4 January 1944 in Volynia region. However, the front had stopped for a long time and the Polish action did not start until the summer of 1944, first in the territories that had been incorporated to the USSR in 1939. The political situation was very complicated in that area. Polish population was weakened by massive Soviet deportations followed by German terror. In 1943, Ukrainian nationalists in south-eastern pre-war Polish territories (where the Majority of rural population was Ukrainian) started an action of ethnic cleansing. In result, 40 000 to 60 000 Poles (men, women and children) had been killed in a cruel way in Volynia and Eastern Galicia. In north-eastern areas, Poles clashed with Lithuanian forces collaborating with Germans as well as with Soviet guerrilla troops. Bielorusians, who constituted a Majority of the rural population in the central eastern regions of the pre-war Poland, showed mixed commitment joining either Polish or Soviet guerrilla formations.

An attempt to liberate *Wilno* (Vilnius) in July 1944 was the largest operation in that region. Although an independent Polish action failed due to the effective resistance of the powerful German garrison, the city was taken by a combined Polish-Soviet attack a week later. Soon after, the commander-in-chief of the Wilno district of the Home Army, colonel *Aleksander*

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<sup>2</sup> The Poles for military and political reasons could not afford to initiate a military struggle with the Russians. Such a step would have resulted in turning the Poles into actual nazi allies in the East, which would have been suicidal from a political point of view and psychologically impossible in the country that for five years had been suffering German atrocities.

<sup>3</sup> Russians could not simply attack such troops of the regular allied army forces.

“Wilk” *Krzyżanowski* was invited with some officers of his staff by the Soviets for talks and deceitfully arrested.<sup>4</sup> His soldiers were encircled, disarmed and sent to Gulag camps. The survivors started an anti-Soviet guerrilla in the region and then fought their way through to the central Poland.

The Warsaw uprising that began on 1 August 1944 and lasted until 2 October (63 days) was the largest battle in the entire Polish history. The Home Army decided to attack the German garrison and to liberate Warsaw at a moment when the first units of the Soviet army were approaching the capital city of Poland. Soviet forces were to be met by recreated legal Polish administration and the troops of the Home Army (part of the anti-Nazi coalition) thus preventing the Russians from establishing a Communist government in Poland. The population of Warsaw that suffered everyday hunting for people on the streets of the city, massive executions and other German atrocities during the five years of occupation was full of hate and eager to take a revenge on the Nazi oppressors. The Home Army units in Warsaw numbered ca. 40 000 men and women, but only 10% of them were armed. Though initially successful, the Poles did not manage to liberate the entire Warsaw. The Germans maintained the Majority of strategic points and soon bloody street fights started to re-conquer the city. The insurgents were treated as bandits rather than members of the Polish Army Forces, so the Nazis observed no Geneva Convention on prisoners of war. For still unknown reasons, the allied powers postponed for several weeks their declaration to proclaim the Home Army an integral part of the allied forces. The Wehrmacht in Warsaw had been accompanied by special units of the Russian Auxiliary Forces fighting on German side and the Dirlewanger Brigade manned with German criminals released from prisons and sent to Poland. Together they committed enormous atrocities on Polish civil population and prisoners of war in the city. It is estimated that 200 000–250 000 inhabitants of Warsaw were killed during the fighting and murdered in massive executions in the quarters conquered by the Germans. Nazis lost in the Warsaw street to street battle ca. 19 000 soldiers. The Russians stopped their offensive waiting till the Germans break the emerging seat of Polish independence. The main political and cultural centre of the country, Warsaw, was destroyed. Stalin

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<sup>4</sup> He died in soviet prison.



even refused the allied powers to use Soviet military airfields for landing of the allied airplanes that since September 1944 were supplying the insurgents with war materials and medicines dropped on parachutes. The distance from Western Europe to Poland was too long to fly to Warsaw and come back. Some attempts were made from the bases in Northern Italy and many allied crews were killed in those actions, but it was only in the second half of September that the Soviets agreed to co-operate. By then the insurgence was dying. The detachments of the Home Army that were marching in rescue of Warsaw uprising from other regions of the country were disarmed by the Soviets. In result, the city was destroyed and the uprising smashed by the Germans. The uprising in Paris at the same time had much more luck supported with Americans and British forces fighting Germans on the French soil.

The entire population of Warsaw was expelled from the city after the capitulation and dispersed in several transitional camps. Some were sent to the concentration ones. From the beginning of October 1944 till mid January 1945 Warsaw was a phantom city. There were no legal inhabitants, only a few survivors hidden in ruins remain there. Special German units were brought in to destroy those buildings that survive the fights. Hitler ordered to turn Warsaw into just a point on the map. In result of that action as well as of heavy fighting during the uprising, Warsaw lost ca. 80% of its buildings. Many memorials of Polish history perished forever at that time together with people and houses. As one of the Polish historians said, Warsaw uprising was not Polish Thermopile, since it was not Polish Leonidas detachment that had been destroyed, but Polish Athens. The Polish Underground State was seriously shaken by that disaster and could not effectively resist the next occupation that was to begin soon, i.e. The Soviet one. Stalin's strategy to wait till the Germans massacre the crème of the Polish youth and political elites in Warsaw proved effective. The Soviet front was frozen for half a year while Warsaw was bleeding and the Red Army waited idle.

The issue of Polish independence lowered the intensity of the Nazi-Soviet hostilities. That produced the terrible results for Poland still what would have been the fate of Europe if there had been no insurrection in Warsaw at all and the Soviets would have marched forward without that pause. Would it be the Elba River where the allied and the Soviet troops met finally in May 1945?

Soviet triumph in the World War II resulted in their domination in Central and Eastern Europe. It produced a new, but hopefully a last wave of ethnic cleansing in the region. New borders that were established in that part of the continent caused the new era of human migration. The Soviets deported or executed ca. 150 000 people from the reconquered Baltic States in the years 1944–1945, and then additional 440 000 in the years 1945–1953. About 1 800 000 Poles from the territories east of the Bug River finally incorporated back into the USSR were expelled to the new Poland. Some 400 000 thousands of Ukrainians were relocated from their homes as well from Poland to the USSR and additional 200 000 were dispersed into the territories gained by Poland from Germany. By decisions of the Potsdam conference (1945) an expulsion of 8–9 million Germans was administered from the territories gained by Poland and the USSR and of 3 million from the Czech Sudetenland. In addition, thousands of Hungarians were expelled from southern Slovakia as were Italians living in Slovenia (Istria). An estimation of death casualties among the deportees in all those events is difficult. The ethnic map of Central and Eastern Europe changed in the years 1939–1945 due to efforts of Germans and Russians. In 1945, the German resettlement action collapsed and was even reversed by the Soviets, the Poles and the Czechs wherever it was reversible. The process was continued till 1950s by the Soviets. Millions of people lost their homeland and were forced to settle down in the territories that had belonged to others. The Germans who started the ethnic cleansing in 1939 became the victims of the same policy in 1945, the Soviets who had started deportations long before the World War II (1932), as a victorious power remained unpunished. While mourning all the innocent victims from various peoples one should not forget the reasons and sources of their tragedy.

#### **4. “I saw freedom betrayed” – the establishment of communism in Poland (1944–1948)**

On 31 December 1944, the communists, acting under Russian protection, organised the so-called Temporary Government of the Republic of Poland. In January 1945, that puppet government was recognised

by the USSR. In February 1945, the conference of Yalta took place in the Crimean Peninsula, from where, 10 months earlier, the Soviets, using American-made vans donated under the “Lend and lease act”, had deported the entire Tartar population. Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill met there to decide on the future fate of Europe. The idea of a Balkan front, promoted earlier by Churchill, had been finally rejected in 1944, so the Yalta conference had nothing to do but recognise the reality based on the fact of the predominant Soviet military presence in the heart of Europe. Baltic states, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Eastern Germany had already been or were to be occupied by the Soviet Army that in heavy fighting was pushing German forces out of the region. There was one exception however – a kind of local “truce” between the Russians and the Germans, not full (local, even heavy still limited clashes were going on), unwritten, even unspoken, based on no contacts and no agreements still effective as far as the reduction of intensity of fighting was concerned – the “truce” that de facto existed along the Vistula line during Warsaw uprising. That situation was caused by the only thing that could unite the Nazi and the Soviets in the very middle of the fiercest mutual hostilities – their attitude towards the issue of the independence of Poland.

The Soviet offensive started again in January 1945 and ended finally in Berlin. The Polish Peoples Army, the one created by the Communists in the USSR in 1943, was being developed since the time the Soviets had entered Polish territory. Eventually, two Armies were created under the command of Communist officers, quite often, Soviet citizens. Those forces reached the number of 400 000 soldiers at the end of the war and took part in the battles of Lenino (1943), Vistula bridgeheads (1944), Pomeranian fortified line, the Odra River operation, *Budziszyn* (Bautzen) battle, and the assault of Berlin, (1945).

On 27 March 1945, NKVD invited to talks and then imprisoned sixteen leaders of the Polish Underground State. They were soon sent to Moscow, accused of collaboration with the Nazis, put on “trial”, and sentenced to imprisonment. Some of them, including the last commander-in-chief of the Home Army, general *Leopold “Niedźwiadek” Okulicki*, were murdered in Soviet prisons in unknown circumstances. One of the leaders of Polish

Socialist Party *Kazimierz Pużak* was sent back to Poland and died in a communist prison in Warsaw in 1950. It is worth mentioning that the man who lured the Polish leaders was Soviet gen. Ivan Sierov, who, eleven years later, in the same deceitful way, invited gen. Pál Maléter, the commander-in-chief of the Hungarian Army in 1956 uprising. Maléter was eventually imprisoned and executed by the Soviets.

In June 1945, the Temporary Government of National Unity was formed, consisting of communists and some Polish politicians who came back from London to try to save what they hoped could be saved from the remnants of the independence of Poland. Poland was at the time the only founding member of the United Nations that was not officially represented in San Francisco conference where the organisation was created. The Government in Exile was not recognised by the Soviets and the puppet government in Poland was not recognised yet by the Western Allies. *Artur Rubinstein*, a famous Polish pianist of Jewish descent, born in Łódź, was the only representative of Poland at the UN opening conference. He played Polish national anthem at the beginning of the conference to protest against the policy of victorious powers. On 5 July, the United States and Great Britain recognised the new government in Warsaw cancelling their recognition for the Polish Government in Exile that had been their ally since the first day of the war. The Government in Exile according to the Polish constitution of 1935 was the only legal one. It existed until 1990 when the last president of Poland in exile, *Ryszard Kaczorowski* returned to Warsaw to give back the symbols of the Polish state to the democratically elected new President of Poland *Lech Wałęsa*.

According to the Yalta agreement, free elections should have been conducted in Poland, but the country, effectively controlled by the Red Army, was completely dominated by Communists. Soviet terror, wartime losses among traditional elites, territorial changes and massive migrations of people, no prospects for foreign assistance finally gave the power to the Communists. They forged the referendum on borders and political system held in July 1946 while the parliamentary elections of 1947 conducted under Soviet terror (ca. 100 000 people were imprisoned) ended the main stage of Poland's Sovietisation. The anti-communist guerrilla

that numbered 80 000–100 000 men and women lasted till the end of 1947. In October 1947, *Stanisław Mikołajczyk*, leader of the Polish Peasants Party, the main opposition against communists, was forced to escape to the West. It was the end of the legal opposition in Poland until 1989. The process of communisation of public life was completed through “unification” of the Polish Workers Party with the Polish Socialist Party. The Polish United Workers Party that emerged in this way became an official communist party in Poland.

The experience of World War II is the most traumatic one in the Polish history and still shapes the perception of Polish public opinion on many contemporary political issues. The first and most important conclusion derived from that historical period is similar to that of the Baltic States. A war (active fights of armed forces) is not the worst thing a nation may witness. The worst thing is a totalitarian (Nazi or Soviet) occupation since it means an extermination of the civilian population of the country.

Thus, the Polish decision to resist the German invasion that began on 1 September 1939 is still commonly perceived as the only just one, while the infamous order of Marshal *Edward Rydz Śmigły*, a commander-in-chief of the Polish Army in 1939, not to fight the Soviet aggression (of 17.09.1939) is considered one of the biggest mistakes of that time. The capitulation did not save human lives; just the opposite, for many people it took away any chance to avoid the death in executions or in Gulag camps.

Poland never actually capitulated and Polish soldiers fought on all fronts of the World War II in Europe, in the Atlantic Ocean and in North Africa. Polish forces in exile and in the country, if taken together, supplied 600 000 soldiers in 1945, which puts them in the fourth place after the Soviet, American and British ones. Nevertheless, the losses were enormous. As a result of the World War II, Poland lost independence, 50% of her pre-war territory and ca 7 million citizens.<sup>5</sup> A dozen of million of pre-war Polish citizens remained in the territories incorporated to the USSR.

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<sup>5</sup> Taking into account territorial compensation in the West at the expense of Germany, Poland’s area was reduced by 20%. More than 6 million people, including ca. 3 millions of Polish Jews were killed by the Nazi and ca. 580 000 by the Soviets. That amounts to a loss of 22% of pre-war population (the highest relative casualty in the world).

The quality of human losses was especially painful: 57% of advocates, 39% of medical doctors, 30% of scientific workers, 21.5% of judges, 20% of teachers, 37.5% of college graduates of the years 1918–1939, 30% of high school graduates of the same period, 53.3% of artisan school graduates. Many Poles remained in exile and the Soviet rule in Poland cost additional ca. 15 000 lives until 1956 and 100 000–200 000 deportations especially in the first years of the regime. There were five main political and cultural centres of Poland before the war: Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań, Lwów, Wilno, and Lublin. Of those only *Kraków* remained intact. Warsaw was destroyed and its population dispersed. *Poznań* was destroyed too. *Lwów* and *Wilno* were lost to the Soviet Union and due to the massive killings and deportations deeply de-Polonized. New large cities (*Wrocław* – Breslau, *Szczecin* – Stettin) were gained from Germany and repopulated with the Poles expelled from the territories lost in the East or from central Poland (compare the maps: “Ethnicity in Central-Eastern Europe in 1930” and “Ethnicity in Central-Eastern Europe in 2003”). They could hardly replace the old deeply rooted communities of the pre-war Polish cities. The lack of the pre-war elites opened the way for political and social career of newcomers, unsophisticated people who wanted to make their careers in the communist state apparatus. A new era of slavery began.

## 5. Poland enslaved (1948–1989)

The fierce communist terror lasted in Poland until 1956. The newly established system was characterised by complete sovietisation of the political and public life of the country. Any legal activity had to be based on the affirmation of communism, the Soviet Union and Stalin as a leader of “the progressive world”. Catholic Church was the only legal completely independent non-communist organisation in Poland. It was subjected to severe persecutions symbolised by the internment of the Head of the Church in Poland, cardinal *Stefan Wyszyński*. The terror, the weaknesses of the decimated and dispersed pre-war elites treated as “the suspected anti-communist elements” and thus cut off from higher positions in the administration accompanied by massive advance of ill-educated people loyal to the communist

party resulted in ideologisation of science, culture, education, economy and other areas of public life. The so-called agricultural reform was introduced in 1944–1946 and resulted in the liquidation of all land estates larger than 50 ha. Landowners that had survived the war were expelled from their manors. The landowners, treated as “class enemies”, were forbidden to live in the same district where their former property was situated. Thus the influence of the former elites that so successfully promoted Polish patriotism and fair education among the ordinary people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was broken and their impact on public life in the countryside ended. Small farms, newly created for landless peasants, were economically ineffective. The Communists, however, planned full collectivisation and partition of great estates was just an element of short time propaganda conducted at the time when the power struggle was still going on. The idea of individual farming was abandoned once control over the country had been seized. The peasants were pressed to create state owned farms of a Soviet type (*kolkhoz*). All well-to-do farmers were declared kulaks, i.e. Class enemies, and heavy taxes were imposed on them. The deeply rooted rural population in the pre-war territory of central Poland usually managed to maintain its independent individual farms, but the uprooted settlers that lived in the western and northern territories gained from Germany were in a more difficult position. Hence the percentage of state owned farms in those areas was greater and so were the social and economic problems. The collectivisation of the agriculture was successfully imposed on the peasants in all the countries of the Soviet block except Poland. Overall, the relative failure of collectivisation together with the position of the Catholic Church represented two Major differences between Poland and other Soviet dominated countries.

The 1950s were as well a period of rapid ideologically motivated industrialisation of the country combined with a massive migration from the countryside to the cities. In particular, heavy industry was developed to support rapid armaments within the Soviet military block.

The period of the most orthodox, hard line communism in Poland (1948–1956) ended with workers’ strikes and demonstrations in June 1956 in *Poznań*, combined with armed clashes with the police and the army. Although these upheavals were smashed by the communists, other developments followed. The Hungarian Uprising in October and Khrushchev’s

speech at the XX<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in which he condemned the Stalin policy resulted in a short period of liberalisation of the system. It was soon hardened again, but never to the extent from before the “Polish October” of 1956.

In the entire period between 1939 and 1956 political and social structures of Poland were being meticulously destroyed by foreign powers and Polish elites were exterminated. Thus, the changes of 1956 constituted an important turning point in the history. Since then was no more massive terror and the substance of the nation could be gradually recreated. However, lack of freedom influenced the process in a negative way resulting in a poor quality of Polish post-communist elites.

The Poles were the only nation that had rebelled against the communism for several times. The first were the German workers in Berlin in 1953, then the Polish workmen of Poznań and the Hungarians in 1956, but then the Poles again in March 1968,<sup>6</sup> Czechs and Slovaks revolted in 1968, but in 1970 civil disobedience followed in all main cities of the Polish coast, where demonstration of shipyard workers were met with machine-gun fire from the communist police. In 1976 in *Radom*, the building of the local Committee of the Communist Party was burned down during workers’ protests. Finally, the Poles rebelled in 1980 when “Solidarity” movement came into being under the leadership of *Lech Wałęsa*.

The reckless policy of the first secretary of the communist party, *Edward Gierek*, who had replaced *Władysław Gomułka* responsible for the massacres of 1970, resulted in a deep financial indebtedness of the country in the West. The necessity to pay back the debt and accrued interest combined with the heavy burden of the imposed Polish participation in expenses of the Soviet imperial policy led to a profound economic crisis that started in Poland in 1976. First sugar stamps were introduced then, which fact provoked the already mentioned disturbances in Radom. The underground opposition was re-established as a permanent Polish phenomenon after the 1976 clashes in that city. There were two main dissident groups: the Committee

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<sup>6</sup> The so-called March events began when the communist censors forbade to stage the theatre play by Adam Mickiewicz, Polish romantic poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The play described the deportation of students of Wilno University to Siberia in 1820s.



for the Defence of Workers (KOR) and the movement for the Defence of Human and Civil Rights (ROPCIO). In the late 1970s, underground trade unions were formed in the coastal cities of *Szczecin* and *Gdańsk*. An independentist party, Confederation of Independent Poland, was created then as well. In 1978, cardinal *Karol Wojtyła* was elected Pope and as *Jan Paweł II* (John Paul II) expressed his will to visit Poland. The communist government, although aware of the ideological risk, did not dare to refuse. Massive masses served during the first Pope's visit in Poland in 1979 allowed the people "to count themselves". For the first time since 1939, millions of Poles could gather legally in the streets and squares of their cities not at the order of the government, but by virtue of their own will. They were able to see how many of them still questioned the official atheistic ideology of the communist state. In such circumstances the Pope's words "Do not be afraid" had the power of thunder. The following year, all dissident political forces supported a spontaneous strike that was initiated in *Gdańsk* shipyard and resulted in formation of an independent trade union "Solidarność" ("Solidarity"). Soon after, 10 million Poles joined Solidarity and became its members in autumn 1980. It was the most massive legal and peaceful anticommunist movement in Poland. Officially it was just a trade union, but it had clearly visible and articulated political objectives of liberating the country. The period of legal existence of Solidarity ended with the proclamation of martial law by general *Wojciech Jaruzelski* on 13 December 1981. That Soviet inspired act of defence of the old regime could not reverse the psychological changes that had affected the nation during the previous 15 months of relative freedom of the speech. The hitherto forbidden history of the country was publicly debated, and so were the Soviet role in the World War II; the establishment of the communism in Poland; the Hungarian and Czechoslovak revolutions of 1956 and 1968; the past Polish protests against the communist regime of 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976 and their casualties.

The Poles were relatively free to visit the West after 1970. A huge Polish diaspora in Western Germany, France and Britain as well as the largest one in the United States re-established its ties with the country. People who had visited the free world could no longer be convinced that communism was an effective system. The formation of Solidarity movement destroyed

the ideological base of communism. The working class rebelled against “Workers Party” that called up the army and the police to defend “the workers government”. The military action taken by the communists destroyed the legal structures of the Solidarity, but for the first time in the history of the Soviet block the struggle did not end. Clandestine structures were created immediately and well-known, deeply rooted traditions of Polish conspiracy revived. Underground press and books appeared, a clandestine radio began broadcasting, forbidden films became available. The alliance of intellectuals and workers resulted in the isolation of the state and party apparatus from the nation. The Polish struggle combined with realistic, i.e. Consistent and clever policy of the USA led then by President Ronald Reagan, brought in a final victory in 1989. The USSR, exhausted by the arms race with the USA, and by its own imperial over extension forced Mikhail Gorbachev to look for the way to stop the confrontation with the West that the USSR could not win.<sup>7</sup> The reforms, planned as a way of re-grouping before further competition, went out of control and the Soviet block collapsed in 1989.

## **6. The true end of the World War II – restoration of independence of Central and Eastern European countries (1989–1991)**

The peaceful (except for Romania) anti-communist revolution of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe began in Poland. The communist government confronted with Gorbachev perestroika could not count on the Soviet military intervention any more and could not blackmail the nation with it. The economic situation of the country was tragic. Most consumer goods were rationed with the use of special stamps. Communism as an ideology was completely discredited; treated by the Majority of Poles as a foreign system imposed by military means it could not survive without the support from Moscow. In such circumstances, the communist decided

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<sup>7</sup> The Soviets were present in Vietnam, Cuba, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Granada. They led a war in Afghanistan and faced problems in Poland.

to negotiate. The negotiations resulted in the first semi-free elections of June 1989 when 35% of the deputies and 100% of the senators were elected in a free democratic vote.<sup>8</sup>

“Solidarity” won all the mandates subjected to the free voting in the Sejm (lower chamber of the Parliament) and 99% in the Senate. No single communist party member was elected in that election. The Communists and their puppet parties received however 65% of the seats in the Sejm, but these seats were subjected to nomination rather than free vote. Nevertheless, this victory resulted in the formation of a new government with communist ministers in the important resorts (the army, the police) but with the first non-communist prime minister in Central Eastern Europe since 1948, *Tadeusz Mazowiecki*. An avalanche of changes followed. Polish example had broken psychological barriers and in the next few months Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks, Germans and Bulgarians rebelled against their communist dictators as well. Only the leader of Romania tried to sink the revolution in blood, but was eventually defeated and executed in December 1989. In 1990, the first free presidential elections took place in Poland and *Lech Wałęsa* became the first President of the re-born independent country chosen for this post by the will of the people. The first free parliamentary elections held in 1991 completed the process of regaining independence that had been lost in 1939. In the same year, the Soviet Union collapsed and the Baltic States regained their independence too. For all the nations enslaved since 1939 it was 1989 and not 1945 when World War II really ended.

## 7. The first decade of the Third Republic of Poland

In 1991, Poland made her choice to become again a part of the Western world. The new government created by the Majority of the first freely elected Parliament with the Prime Minister *Jan Olszewski* decided to launch an action aimed at obtaining Polish membership in NATO. Soon, the next government, led by *Hanna Suchocka*, signed an agreement on asso-

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<sup>8</sup> Polish senate, abolished in 1946, was recreated only in 1989.

ciation with the European Communities.<sup>9</sup> The first process was successfully completed in March 1999 when Poland became a member of the Atlantic Alliance together with Hungary and the Czech Republic. The second one was finalised with the accession of Poland to the European Union on 1 May 2004.

During the last three centuries since 1717 when Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became for the first time depended from Russia, the Poles enjoyed their independence for only 34 years. Poland is the only Major European nation except Ukraine that has the experience of political non-existence and therefore perceives the issue of security and stability of the region as a crucial one. Poland was the first country in the world that recognised the independence of Ukraine in 1991. The maintenance of the independence of our eastern neighbours together with Polish membership in NATO and in the EU are seen as the best guarantees of our freedom.

Five years of war followed by 45 years of communism devastated the country. It is not an easy task to rebuild a well-functioning market economy and to recreate a well-qualified political class. The rapid development of the country in the first half of 1990s was slowed down in the later period when the Poles began to face high unemployment, lack of capital for investments, and poorly qualified political class. The reconstruction of the country including the moral standards of the governing elites has not been completed yet. Since 1991 the post-Solidarity governments were at power in the years 1991–1993 and 1997–2001 while post-communist ones ruled the country in the years 1993–1997 and 2001–2005.

Although Poland was the country where people most often rebelled against communism, it was also the only one where those rebellions were fought by local communist forces without direct Soviet intervention. Many citizens were close to the former regime and their biographies as well as their preferences and material interests still link them with the former communist party comrades that over one night became the social democrats in 1989. Nowadays, the Social Democrats (former Communists) form

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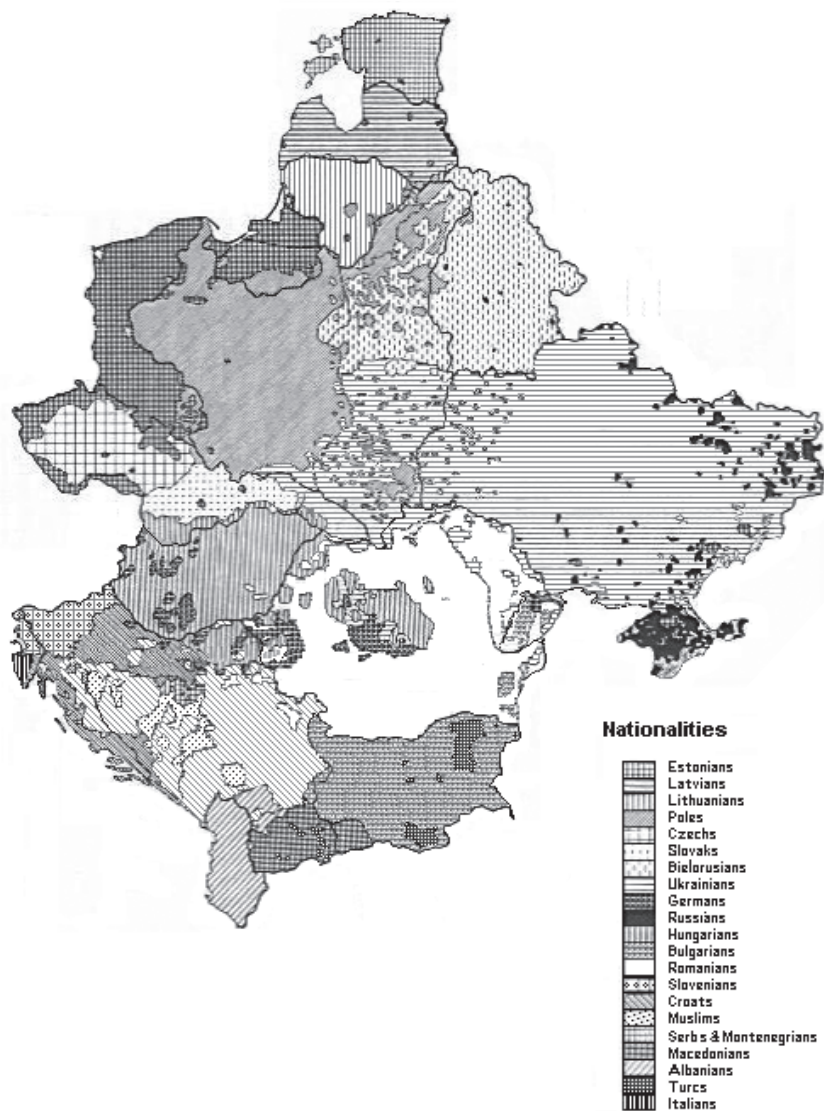
<sup>9</sup> Poland signed the association agreement, the so-called Europe agreement, with the European communities on 16 December 1991. For more details see chapter “Poland’s Integration with the European Union” in this volume.

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a party of power linked with many ties to former communist officials who turned into new capitalists. Difficult economic reforms combined with a lack of political skill among many leaders of post-Solidarity parties resulted in electoral victories of post-communists in 1993, 1995 (presidential elections) and 2001.

Poland has made her choice for the West and this one is irreversible since all the political forces of the country support it. The creation of a stable and well working internal political system capable of producing a political class skilful and honest enough to run the country successfully and to solve its problems effectively is not finished yet.

### Ethnicity in Central-Eastern Europe in 1930



**Ethnicity in Central-Eastern Europe in 2003**