

September 1, 1939: the most tragic moment in the history of Polish-German relations

The day Nazi Germany attacked Poland is probably the most famous date in history in today's Poland. Who knows, it may well also be the most important and tragic moment in Polish history, one that has left an indelible mark on Polish-German relations. And it is set to remain so as successive generations of Poles, who do not remember the events of 1939-1945 from their experience, are just as aware of the horrors of those years and the significance of those events.

There is hardly a Polish family that has not been affected by the consequences of German aggression. Even if they did not personally suffer the misfortunes of Nazi occupation. After all, the Poles transported from their country's eastern-most regions deep into the Soviet Union were just as affected by the German invasion of Poland. Displaced, oppressed, and murdered by the NKVD, they were indirect victims of Hitler's collusion with Stalin and of the German attack on Poland.

From day one, as military operations unfolded, German soldiers from various armed forces committed systematic atrocities. During the September campaign, members of the German minority in Poland also perpetrated mass crimes. The German occupation of Poland of 1939-1945 was among the most brutal in Europe. The occupiers unleashed terror, put in place a system of collective accountability and took to pillaging national resources. Living conditions were dramatic due to low wages and severe food shortages (rationing). In 1941, the average daily food ration of a German exceeded 2,300 calories. Poles were entitled to a mere 700 calories while only 400 calories were allotted to Jews. Some of the effects of this system were mitigated by the black market.

World War II left close to 6 million Polish citizens, including nearly 3 million Polish Jews, dead. In the early days of the war, terror was targeted mainly at Polish elites, especially the intelligentsia. Later, it spread to other social groups, with the civilian population of towns and villages particularly hard hit. From 1939 onwards, German soldiers and police officers organized massacres of the Polish population in cities and "pacified" rural areas, usually under the pretext of fighting "bandits", i.e. partisans. In early August 1944, during the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising, over 50,000 residents of only one Warsaw district of Wola, were murdered. More than 150,000 civilians lost their lives in the Warsaw Uprising.

It is unclear how many people emerged from the war with permanent health conditions, including mental illness. Many of them were victims of pseudo-medical experiments carried out in German concentration camps, especially in Auschwitz. Also to be remembered are the nearly three million Poles forced into slave labor for Germany. Over 130,000 of them



died before the war ended. A whole separate crime was that of abducting and Germanizing Polish children in a systematic program. An estimated 200,000 Polish children fell victim to this practice. Only ca. 30,000 of them managed to return to Poland after the war. Hundreds of thousands of Poles were displaced from their homes.

The war and occupation of 1939-1945 cost Poland about 38% of the national wealth, as valued prior to 1939 (in a 1947 report), including 50% of railway infrastructure, 55% of health care facilities, over 64% of the chemical industry, almost 60% of the electrical engineering industry, 53% of the food industry, 48% of the metal industry, and 55% of the textile industry. The Germans destroyed approximately 14,000 factories, 84,000 craft workshops, and more than 350,000 agricultural holdings. Hundreds of thousands of homes were devastated. Poland's losses are symbolized by the building stock of Warsaw, including historic monuments, which were systematically wrecked after the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising in the autumn of 1944. Poles lost over 40% of their cultural assets. The works of art stolen by the Germans in Poland are now estimated at many (over ten) billion zlotys. The war did not spare valuable archives and libraries. In 1947, the Polish War Reparations Bureau at the Presidium of the Council of Ministers valued Poland's material losses at thirteen times the country's domestic income of 1938. It is impossible to put a price on the lives lost and on the suffering of the survivors.

One other consequence of the war unleashed by Germany on September 1, 1939 deserves a mention. The war threw Poland into the Soviet sphere of influence where it remained for 45 years, reduced to a satellite state that was completely dependent on the Soviet Union. It became an undemocratic state ruled by communists with little popular support and an inefficient Soviet-imposed economy modeled on their own system that was centered on heavy industry and designed largely to strengthen the military capabilities of the Eastern bloc. A state forced by the Kremlin to forgo the benefits of the Marshall Plan and left to its own devices to recover from the devastation of war.

In post-war Poland, the lenient sentences meted out to war criminals by West German courts and the soft treatment of perpetrators who never stood trial came as a great disappointment. Some of the war criminals would go on to pursue successful careers in West German politics. The executioner of the Wola district of Warsaw, former *SS-Gruppenführer* Heinz Reinefarth, served in the regional parliament of Schleswig-Holstein and became a respected mayor of Westerland on the island of Sylt (where he died in his home in 1979 after he had been receiving a general's old-age pension). Poles were perturbed to find that the majority of the German public and subsequent governments of West Germany refused to recognize the Potsdam agreement of the Big Three and the handover of territories to the east of the Odra and Nysa Łużycka lines to Poland. For a long time, the revisionist approach, which was common in West Germany, and the persistent reluctance to settle accounts with the Nazi past significantly hampered Polish-German reconciliation, which some circles on both sides of the border strived to achieve. Polish communists jumped at the opportunity to use Germany's questioning of the Odra and Nysa Łużycka border to legitimize their own rule in Poland.



It was not until December 7, 1970 and the treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland concerning the basis for normalizing their mutual relations and the recognition by West Germany of the inviolability of Poland's western border signed by Chancellor Willy Brandt and Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz (in the presence of Władysław Gomułka) that a turning point was finally reached. It took West Germany another one and a half years to ratify the treaty. The inviolability of Poland's Odra-Nysa Łużycka border returned to the agenda in 1990 when, during the emotional run-up to the reunification of Germany, motivated by internal political interests, Chancellor Helmut Kohl maneuvered to avoid a definitive recognition of the frontier.

Even in the late 1980s, parts of the German public remained disinclined to make reconciliatory gestures towards Poland. A visit to Poland by President Richard von Weizsäcker on September 1, 1989, on the 50th anniversary of the German invasion of Poland, was torpedoed by eminent members of the Christian Democratic party in Germany. In a popular survey on January 1989, an astounding 56% of respondents opposed the federal president's visit to Poland that day. The popular belief was that Weizsäcker might say something that would constitute a needless admission of Germany's guilt. Also, as recently as July 2, 1989, at a meeting of the Silesian People's Association in Hanover, Minister of Finance Theo Waigel (CSU) made the following observation regarding the former eastern territories of the Reich: "One German question that remains unresolved is that of the territories across the Odra-Nysa Łużycka line. No binding instrument of international law provides for the separation of these eastern parts of the German Reich from Germany."

The late 1980s and the early 1990s brought about a dramatic pivot in relations between the two countries. Ever since that time, both nations saw and approached each other much more benevolently. Poland and Germany became allies in NATO and partners in the European Union. There was much talk in both countries about Polish-German reconciliation. In Poland (but not in West Germany), the phrase "Polish-German community of interests", coined by Krzysztof Skubiszewski, was frequently used. It is also notable that historians in the Federal Republic of Germany have for decades reliably investigated the German crimes committed during the Second World War. Many of the findings of such studies have been popularized in mass media. Unfortunately, the German crimes that specifically targeted the Polish population remain largely unknown to our western neighbor.

Subsequently, however, ever since the times of Konrad Adenauer, in addition to declarations of intent to reconcile with the Polish nation and Germany's assurances to repent for the crimes committed against Poles and remember the Polish victims, Germany has adopted a tougher stance on reparations for the crimes and losses suffered by the Polish state and the Polish nation during the occupation. The German side ruthlessly invokes Poland's relinquishment of German reparations on August 23, 1953 ignoring the fact that the submissive government of Bolesław Bierut was forced to such concessions by the Kremlin. In the treaty of October 16, 1991, Germany agreed to pay a measly 500 million marks to the Polish victims of "Nazi persecution". It was only following an extremely difficult negotiation that ended in 1999, and that involved mediation by the American government and by members of the Jewish community, that the German side handed over



ca. PLN 3.5 billion (in payments that continued until 2006) to compensate 484,000 surviving Polish victims of forced labor. These amounts are astonishingly low. In a development that was incomprehensible to the Polish public, mutual relations eroded over controversies surrounding the erection of the so-called *Polendenkmal*: a monument to the victims of German crimes against Poles committed in 1939-1945. All of the above soured the view of many Poles on Polish-German reconciliation.

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