



ARTYKUŁ

## **Under the Red boot**

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It wasn't an "ordinary" attack, because even assuming that every aggression is unique on its own, it's hard not to notice some unprecedented aspects of the soviet invasion of Poland on September 17th, 1939. For the first time ever, one country invaded another claiming that the invaded one... didn't exist.

### **Narrative abolishing of a country**

This was the soviet stance on Poland on the 17<sup>th</sup> day of the German occupation, in an infamous note handed to Waław Grzybowski, the Polish ambassador in the Soviet Union, on September 17<sup>th</sup> 1939. The note said, that Warsaw was no longer the capital of Poland and that the Polish government was disbanded. All this was

supposed to mean that the Polish state “factually” ceased to exist.

The Soviets went even further in creating an excuse for their aggression, claiming in a shocking document, that Poland left for itself was a place where different kinds of initiatives that could be a threat to the Soviet Union could sprout from. The “final nail in the coffin” were the note’s closing words stating that the Soviet government, unable to remain indifferent to the situation of the defenceless, “brotherly” Ukrainian and Belarusian people, ordered the Red Army to cross the Polish border and take these people under its protection.

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Why did Kremlin portray itself in the document as a party which wasn’t involved in the war? After all, it didn’t make a pact with Germany on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, 1939 to then remain neutral in the face of the German occupation of Poland. On the contrary, the very essence of that pact was the division of Poland’s territory between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union (on the line of Narew, Vistula and San rivers), which couldn’t have been done peacefully. War was the only way to achieve that. Hence, the Kremlin authorities decided to “have a cake and eat it too”, meaning they decided to invade Poland and take the lands given to them in the August pact and at the same time avoid accusations of an armed aggression. To achieve this goal, they perpetrated a propagandist thesis, that the taken territory was no man’s land, since the Polish state was allegedly non-existent at the time.

### **Foreign reactions to the occupant’s lie**

Did anyone believe, that on September 17<sup>th</sup> 1939 the Polish state ceased to exist, so the Red Army had to march into the eastern territory of the Republic of Poland to protect the local population? The majority of the soviet society did for sure. Citizens of the USSR, when talking about the invasion of Poland, usually repeated the official, propagandist message – that it was a good thing, that the Ukrainians and Belarusians were taken under care, and that the two nations were finally joined as one. Some even regretted that the Red Army hadn’t “liberated” Belarusians and Ukrainians sooner and expressed hope that it would “liberate” other

capitalistic nations.

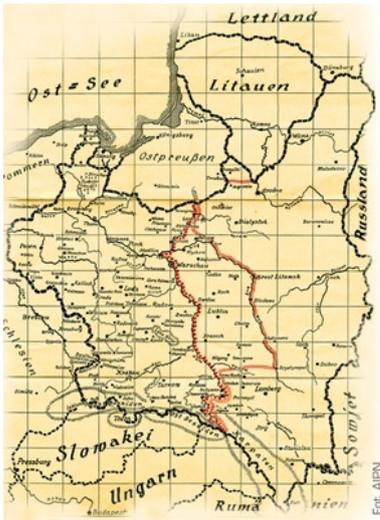
However, there were some in the USSR who had highly “disloyal” views and called out the soviet lies. They said, that the Soviet Union committed an act of aggression and begun the war itself, even though the soviet government kept repeating, that it led an anti-war policy. These people are worth remembering, since they probably paid with years of imprisonment in gulags for their bravery.

How did Great Britain and France, our western allies, react to the soviet aggression? To be accurate, we need to admit that there were no defence agreements concerning the soviet threat tying Poland and the western countries. Nonetheless, the indifference and restraint of the western allies when it comes to the treacherous soviet attack definitely went too far. Kremlin didn’t even receive any protesting note. The British government decided that it would be too much and went with a short message in “The Times” newspaper, in which it rejected the Soviet argumentation of the attack on Poland. On October 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, Winston Churchill, the First Lord Admiral of England at the time, “absolved” the Soviets of the September 17<sup>th</sup> aggression stating that the Red Army entered Poland to prevent the Germans from attacking the Soviet Union (!) and that this strategy prevented Hitler from taking over the Balkans. It seems the British politician saw “everything” except for Poland. In September of 1939, France “managed to” send a request to Moscow asking for argumentation of the aggression on Poland – if it were to make any difference. It was met with a humiliating response, since the Kremlin answered, that it doesn’t need to explain to anyone what the reasons behind its foreign policies are.



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**Commander of the 19th Army  
Corps gen. Heinz Guderian (first  
on the right) discusses the  
demarcation line between the  
German and Soviet forces with  
political commissioner  
Borovensky, September 22nd  
1939 (AIPN)**



**A German map of the “former Polish territory” with the marked, temporary demarcation line and the future border between the Third Reich and the USSR (AIPN)**

### **Bolshevik way of dealing with Polishness**

What was the policy of the soviet occupant at the taken, Polish territory?

Mass arrests, death sentences, deportations – this was the everyday life in the first months of soviet occupation. It was a policy of “sovietisation”, which goal was to bring the soviet order at the occupied territories.

As a result, the primary objective of the soviet authorities in the “first stage” at the Kresy region of Poland, was radical abolishing of the Polish national identity and targeting people, who represented it the most. The state institutions ceased to exist; bigger factories and banks were nationalised; the Polish currency was abolished; private trade and craftsmanship were banned, as well as private schools etc. – since all this wasn’t fitting for the new, soviet reality.

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Anti-Polish actions were not solely administrative though. People known for cultivating the Polish national traditions were first and foremost dealt with using police methods. The infamous political law enforcement – NKVD – already since September 17<sup>th</sup> 1939 had been conducting mass arrests of the state officials, police officers, army officers, landowners and members of such political movements as The Polish Socialist Party or the National Party. Famous Polish figures were thrown into jail, like former prime ministers Leopold Skulski and Leon Kozłowski; former ministers of religions and public enlightenment; parliamentarians and great scholars: Stanisław Głąbiński and Stanisław Grabski; and generals: Władysław Anders, Mariusz Zaruski, Władysław Jędrzejowski, Marian Żegota-Januszajtis and Mieczysław Boruta-Spiechowicz.

The fate of the arrested was tragic, soviet investigations were usually based on beating up the prisoners, until they gave a “guilty” plea. They were also kept awake for a long time and put into solitary confinement. Usually, there were no court cases. Sentences were given ahead of time, not giving any chance for a defence. Most of the time, Poles were sentenced to work in the so-called gulags. These labour camps, generally located in the desolate areas of northern Russia, gave little hope of survival. Piercing cold, hard work – predominantly logging – with very little food provided, killed thousands of prisoners.

Those who ended up in labour camps at least had a chance for survival. Those, who were sentenced to death, had none. On March 5<sup>th</sup> 1940, the Political Bureau of the Bolshevik party made a decision to shoot 11 thousand prisoners held in NKVD jails in the occupied areas of Poland (it was decided at the same time to shoot prisoners in camps in Kozielsk, Starobielsk and Ostaszkowo). In these prisons there were 18 thousand inmates in total during that time. In the end, 7305 Poles were sentenced to death. To carry out the sentence, they were transported to Minsk in Belarus, and to Kiev, Kherson and Kharkiv in Ukraine. The soviet political police, “experienced” in murdering people, did the job in a perfect, Bolshevik way. Thousands of people were killed with a shot in the back of the head and buried in absolute secrecy, hence the truth about the horrific crime saw the light of day only half a century later, and even then it wasn’t the whole truth. For we know, where the murdered in Kiev lie – in the forests near the Bykovnia village (today this area is a part of Kiev), but we don’t know where the prisoners killed in other places are buried. Some evidence points to the fact, that

the ones shot in Minsk were buried at the nearby sacred site Kuropaty, but it hasn't been proven yet.

### **Mass deportations to the east**

The arrests were usually of individual nature, although they were typically conducted on a certain kind of people. Deportation operations were done on a much bigger scale. Their goal was to "remove" thousands of Polish citizens, that were considered a threat to the soviet authorities, from the occupied areas. These people couldn't have been arrested and sentenced, since even by the soviet penal code they hadn't committed any "crime". It was then decided to repress them by a series of administrative decisions, taken by the soviet government and the Political Bureau.

Mass deportations were a very effective instrument of the repressive policy. It was so not only because of the scale, but also the time it took: every operation was done in almost a single day.

In February 1940, around 140 thousand Polish army settlers and foresters who got their lands in the east after the First World War, got deported along with their families deep into the Soviet Union. It was decided, that due to their attachment to the "bourgeois" Poland they couldn't stay where they lived (in the NKVD documents the settlers were called "the military-police agents of the Polish government"). The barbarity of the deportation can be exemplified by the fact that around 50 thousand children were sent away with their families as well. It was them, who died the most during the tough journey and at their destination too - the so-called special settlements.

In April, the same year the same fate met around 61 thousand family members of the officers, policemen and other prisoners held in camps in Kozielsk, Ostaszkowo and Starobielsk. The repressive policy, although mainly pointed towards Poles, was also used against other nationalities. Nonetheless, until the German invasion of France (June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1940) the Polish nation was the one oppressed by the Soviets the most. To give an example, in 1939 around 10,5 thousand of them were arrested, which was 55 percent of all the people imprisoned at the Polish lands occupied by the USSR. Also during the two deportations mentioned earlier Poles were the absolute majority (during the first one there were 82 percent of them).



**The plan of Poland's partition realised: soldiers of the Wehrmacht and the Red Army (in a forage cap) shook hands on Polish land, September 1939 (AIPN)**



**The Red Army soldiers take down Polish antitank fortifications at the Polish-Soviet border in Polesie (AIPN)**

Repressions on the lands occupied by the Soviets were orchestrated by two people, whose names became forever tied with Poland's history: Lavrentiy Tsanava, the head of the NKVD in Belarus, and his Ukrainian counterpart – Ivan Serov. The latter was just beginning his astounding career in the secret services. He later gained infamy as the repressor of the Home Army in Vilnius; the organiser of the kidnapping of sixteen leaders of the Polish Underground State; the first chief of the KGB and the repressor of Hungary in 1956.

The rules of the soviet occupant had to be met with resistance. After September 17<sup>th</sup>, many local underground organisations sprouted; Union of Armed Struggle was one of them. However, the NKVD turned out to be a difficult opponent, very efficient in fighting the Polish resistance. Mass arrests shattered more and more underground structures, and the ones that remained were usually controlled by the soviet secret services. The attempt to initiate an anti-Soviet uprising in January 1940 by taking the city of Czortków (a city located in the former Tarnopolskie voivodeship) by the local resistance, ended up failing. More than a hundred conspirators were arrested, more than twenty were sentenced to death.

## **In the land of soviet “happiness”**

Soviet rules in the short period described here, consisted not only of repressions and resistance. It was also a truly radical change of everyday life. All patriotic, Polish, national symbols and statues were removed from the cities. Many street names were changed, as they were deemed as propagating anti-Soviet messages. That way, many Piłsudski Streets received a new patron – Felix Dzerzhinsky. Street names that had even a slightest anti-Russian context were not tolerated. Hence, the Jan Kiliński Street in Brześć became the Karl Marx Street. The Communist propaganda changed not only street names, but also the landscapes of towns and cities. Huge banners with Communist slogans and portraits of the Soviet Union’s leaders: Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov and others were hanged on walls everywhere. The public space was filled with Communist symbols, and adding the fact, that the Soviets weren’t keen on renovations and repairs, it’s easy to imagine the results of such policy: the cities quickly turned grey, ugly and dirty.

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The everyday life of civilians on the occupied territory soon became grey as well. In the Soviet system, which without shame glorified itself as “the land of happiness” of the working masses, there was shortage of everything: soap, paraffin oil, sugar, cigarettes and even bread. Long queues (often up to a thousand people), a phenomenon unknown in the pre-war Poland, formed in front of the stores which occasionally had some merchandise. When the wares were finally made available, the gathered crowds stormed such stores, often arguing and even fighting with each other. People began to learn the awful truth, well known to the soviet society, that “happiness” in the soviet system meant buying a kilogram of sugar or a pair of shoes for a child. Not only were there no products in stores, but the salaries were a few times lower than before the war.

Down to earth, hardworking farmers, who were a definite majority at the occupied Kresy region, quickly felt the whip of the soviet regime. Their farms were horrendously taxed, and the farmers themselves were forced to deliver contingents for the soviet state. For not delivering either one of those, they were met with prosecution. As a result, farmers rapidly became poorer, often being forced to sell their inventories and even the lands themselves, to meet the state’s demands. What’s more, the demands weren’t only of financial

nature. The occupant also required the farmers to perform all kinds of unpaid works for the state (so-called "szarwarki") - using their own transport and equipment. Who failed to fulfil such a duty, e.g. transporting a certain amount of wood from a forest using one's own cart, had to take criminal responsibility, as if committing a crime.

### **The plague of soviet pathologies**

Following the first series of arrests and deportations, the society at the Soviet occupied areas knew that it was stepping on thin ice, since practically anyone could be arrested or deported - after all the occupational authorities didn't take their time to explain why someone was being repressed. Any car stopping in front of a building struck fear in the hearts of the Polish citizens - it could always be the NKVD. Nights -- the favourite time of "work" for the soviet political police also brought a lot of anxiety. Fearing the arrests, people often suffered from insomnia and bad dreams. In the mornings neighbours often asked among themselves: "Who did they take last night?".

The fear of the political police was even greater due to the activity of informers. Their existence was commonly known, which drastically influenced the social life: people begun censoring their own words in public, since expressing views unpleasant for the regime could bring terrible consequences. In the Soviet penal code, there was an article allowing for punishment for conducting an "anti-Soviet agitation". In practice, it meant that any critique of the occupational authorities lead to imprisonment.

The Soviets also brought other pathologies with them, which had been part of the social life in the USSR for a long time. One of them was bribery. In the system of shortages and miserable salaries, bribes were essential in getting anything: e.g. a train ticket or a rare product. Such another pathology was drinking. Under the Soviet occupation, people were getting drunk to forget about the sad reality, the fear, the poverty. Adding to the plague of drinking too much was the fact, that one of the few items that was constantly on store shelves was vodka.

The misery of life under the Soviet regime was made worse by many factors: enslavement, fear, poverty, but also by the omnipresent propaganda. After work, there were obligatory, few hours long gatherings (so-called mityngi), where Bolshevik views were shoved down people's throats. On Communist holidays, everyone had to take part in "joyful" parades.

Prior to the Second World War, the eastern territories of the Second Republic of Poland were the less developed region of the Polish state. It were mainly rural areas, often lacking modern innovations; hence they were even called "Poland B". However, when the local society experienced the soviet anti-civilisation - the lack of "bread and freedom" - the pre-war period grew in people's minds to the rank of "lost paradise".

France's defeat in June 1940 and the fear of Hitler's expansionism lead the Soviets to make sure that their rules in occupied Poland were secure. Some historians even write about the time of "thaw" for Poles in the

eastern parts of the occupied country and the soviet policy aimed to gain the support of the Polish population. For almost a year there were seemingly no deportations. Indeed, there was a little less pressure until June 1941, when the Soviets had to leave the Polish territories, attacked by their recent ally - Germany.

However, three years later they came back...

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