

# AGGRESSION

of **17 September 1939**

– **the historical lie of the current  
policy of the Kremlin**



The President of the Institute of National Remembrance  
on the causes, course and consequences of the attack on Polish citizens

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Remembrance on the causes, course  
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Warszaw, 16 September 2021



Soviet cavalry on the  
Polish territory,  
17 September 1939 (IPN)

**On 17 September 1939, Stalin fulfilled his obligations to Hitler set forth in the secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The aggression of the Red Army allowed the German Reich to accelerate its conquest of Poland. 17 September 1939 has become a symbol of the criminal cooperation between Hitler and Stalin against the free nations of Europe. Before Vladimir Putin or Alexander Lukashenko lie about the Soviet aggression of 17 September 1939 once again, it is worth recalling the causes, course and effects of this unceremonious attack on Polish citizens.**

The approaching 82nd anniversary of the Soviet aggression against Poland is taking place in the atmosphere of a historical disinformation campaign aimed at distorting well-established facts. To explain the reasons for the Soviet aggression of 17 September 1939, the ideological and propaganda structures of the Soviet era have been revived in order to convince the public that the occupation of eastern Poland by the Red Army in September 1939 was in fact the liberation of Belarusian and Ukrainian peasants and workers from the oppression of Polish landowners and representatives of the bourgeoisie. There is also a different justification, previously unknown in the Soviet canon of interpretation, in line with the propagated image of Poland as a “xenophobic” and “anti-Semitic” country ruled by “nationalists”.

Polish soldiers in Soviet  
captivity in 1939  
(IPN)



In the offensive discourse on the history of World War II, the accusations of Poland's complicity in the outbreak of the war, recurring from the Soviet times, have been compounded by disgusting insinuations of Poland's participation in the Holocaust.

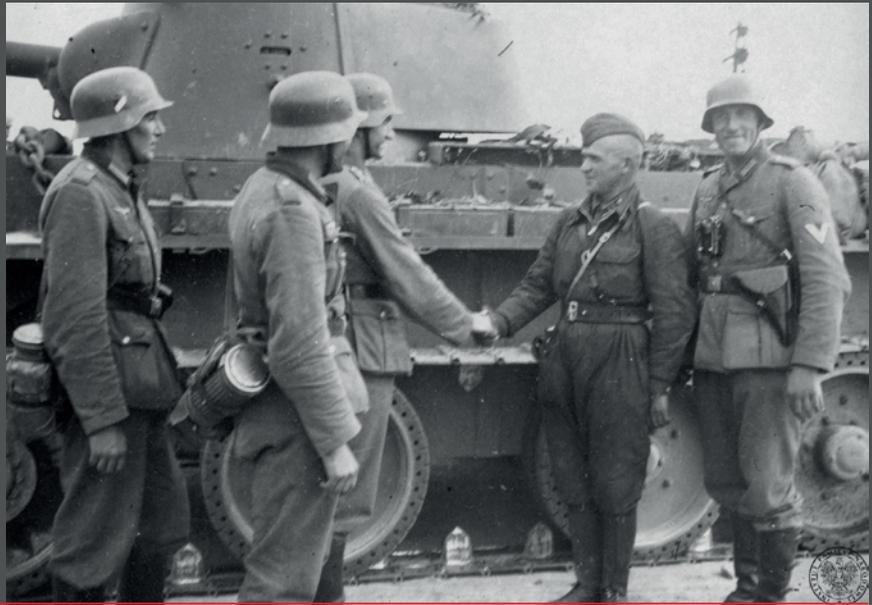
In an article on World War II published last year in *The National Interest* (the text in Russian also appeared on the Kremlin's website), President Putin stated that if the USSR had not taken over half of Poland, "millions of people of various nationalities, including Jews living in the vicinity of Brest and Grodno, Przemyśl, Lwów and Vilnius would instantly find themselves in the hands of the Nazis and their local supporters – anti-Semites and radical nationalists"<sup>1</sup>. This is especially cynical of the Russian Federation. Let us recall, then, that in the fall of 1939, Moscow refused to accept thousands of Jews expelled by the German army, the police and the SS through the demarcation line of 28 September 1939. The Jews were forced to set up camps in a strip of no-man's-land. In this case, Soviet diplomacy lodged protests at the Embassy of Nazi Germany, demanding an end to the expulsion of people from the German sphere of interest. Additionally, the USSR wanted to hand over the Jewish refugees who had fled to the Eastern

<sup>1</sup> 75th Anniversary of the Great Victory: Shared Responsibility to History and our Future" by Vladimir Putin (appeared on 18 June 2020)/ А миллионы людей разных национальностей, в том числе евреи, жившие под Брестом и Гродно, Перемышлем, Львовом и Вильно, были бы брошены на уничтожение нацистам и их местным приспешникам – антисемитам и радикал националистам. В. Путин, 75 лет Великой Победы: общая ответственность перед историей и будущим, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63527> [access: September 4, 2021]

The CO of the Red Army's 6th Cavalry Corps A. Yeryomenko meets Wehrmacht officers in Poland's eastern territories, September 1939 (IPN)



German and Soviet forces meet near the town of Stryj, 20 September 1939 (IPN)



German troops hand Stryj over to the Soviet command, 22 September 1939 (IPN)





A rally in Smorgonie  
in 1939 (IPN)

Borderlands in September 1939 to the Germans. As part of the German-Soviet refugee exchange in the spring of 1940, which involved over 60,000 people, about 1,600 Jews were transferred to the Third Reich. There would have been many more of them if the Germans had not refused to accept them.

Over half a thousand Jews, including the Chief Rabbi of the Polish Army – Major Baruch Steinberg and the Vice-President of Lwów, Wiktor Chajes, were executed during the Katyn Massacre. Most of the victims of the deportation carried out in June 1940 (82%), which included a total of approx. 78 thousand people, were Polish Jews. Their only “fault” was the fact that they wanted to return to their places of residence in the part of Poland that had been occupied by the Germans. Several



A banner over a street in  
Bialystok, September 1939  
(IPN)

thousand of them died in exile. Polish Jews also died of malnutrition, disease and overwork in Soviet labour camps. Among them was Prof. Moses Schorr, the Rabbi of Warsaw.

The Soviet authorities persecuted members of Jewish parties and organizations, which in principle were considered “counter-revolutionary”. Therefore, numerous Zionists, Bund members, Betarists, etc., among them Menachem Begin (later Prime Minister of Israel), and MPs Dr. Emil Sommerstein and Maurycy Leser were confined in Soviet prisons. In light of these well-known facts, the thesis that the USSR invaded half of Poland in order to protect the local population, including Jews, is absurd. It was used purely instrumentally to depict the Soviet Union as a state which had allegedly been pursuing an anti-German, and thus also pro-Jewish, policy since 1939.

Pursuant to Lukashenko’s decree, 17 September will be celebrated as the National Unity Day in Belarus. Today, hardly anyone can recall that in the interwar period in Soviet Belarus a similar holiday was celebrated at the state level on 11 July. It was officially called the Day



A propaganda rally calling for the incorporation of the so-called western Belarus into the USSR, October 1939 (IPN)

of the Liberation of Belarus “from the Polish occupiers”, which was associated with the occupation of Minsk in the summer of 1920 by the Red Army during the Bolshevik offensive against Warsaw. After the end of World War II, this holiday was forgotten, and the events of 17 September would be rarely mentioned because otherwise Stalin’s close cooperation with Hitler in 1939–1941 would cast a shadow on the “flawless” image of the Soviet Union.

Let us recall the chronology of events leading to the Soviet aggression of September 1939. The imperialist intentions of the Bolshevik leadership were always lined with propaganda slogans. And so, according to them, 82 years ago the Red Army started its “liberation march” to overthrow “the landowners and capitalists” and bring “freedom to the Ukrainian and Belarusian brothers” on their bayonets. In fact, on the basis of the Molotov – Ribbentrop Pact, an agreement signed in Moscow on 23 August 1939, the Soviet Union, attacking Poland on 17 September as a de facto ally of the Third Reich, entered the war on that day, annexing parts of Finland, the Baltic states and parts of Romania. Let me recall here how far-reaching the provisions of the



A fragment of a Soviet propaganda poster “our army brings freedom to the working masses”, 1939 (IPN)

Hitler-Stalin pact really were. In addition to the south-eastern and north-eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic, incorporated into the USSR as part of the Soviet union republics of the Belarusian SSR and the Ukrainian SSR, in the spring of 1940 the Soviet Union seized parts of Finland. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were annexed by the Soviets in June 1940. At the turn of June and July, 1940 Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina were occupied. These areas were incorporated into the union republics – the Ukrainian SSR, and the Moldavian SSR, the latter established in August 1940. In addition to the aforementioned, Soviet propaganda slogan of “bringing fraternal

Poles from the territories annexed by the USSR in 1939 were incorporated into the Red Army, 1940 (IPN)



help to subjugated nations” and “protection of life and property”, the leading idea of the policy of conquering new territories was to “restore justice” violated by the provisions of the Treaty of Riga.

The Treaty of Riga of 18 March 1921 divided the eastern territories of the former Polish Republic, inhabited not only by Poles but to a large extent by Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews and other nationalities, into two parts: belonging to the Republic of Poland and to Soviet Russia (formally to the Belarusian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics). The disastrous economic situation in the aftermath of World War I and the Polish-Bolshevik war, the general poverty of the region compared to other parts of Poland, “land hunger” and unemployment were the reasons for the popularity of left-wing movements advocating radical slogans of social, political and economic reconstruction. Mistakes made in the national policy of the Second Polish Republic, including restrictions in the field of education for national minorities, against the background of the myth of happiness and prosperity spread by Bolshevik propaganda in the workers’ and peasants’ state, gave rise to a feeling of disappointment and harm among Polish citizens of Ukrainian, Jewish and Belarusian descent. It was not possible to create a uniform platform on which all national minorities could jointly shape Polish statehood. This is an undeniable fact, supported by the works of Polish historiography. On the other hand, Soviet propaganda, laying bare the hostility and

Poles deported by the Soviet authorities reporting to the Polish Army units in the USSR, 1941/1942 (IPN)



disloyalty towards the Polish state on the part of national minorities, ignored the participation of Belarusian, Ukrainian and Jewish soldiers of the Polish Army in the fights on the Polish-German front.

After a short period during which it supported cultural aspirations, the Soviet national policy found its bloody finale in the Great Purge that occurred from 1937 to 1938. According to the preserved records, as well as incomplete and constantly updated data from the Russian Memorial society, no less than 111,000 people were murdered during the “Polish Operation” alone.

After the Soviets invaded Poland on 17 September 1939, deportations became the basic form of political repression, in addition to arrests. In the years of 1939–1941, four mass deportations of civilians into the USSR from areas annexed by the Soviet Union took place. If we take into account all categories of Polish citizens repressed by the Soviet authorities, i.e. those arrested, held in prisoner-of-war camps, sentenced by courts, military tribunals or other extrajudicial bodies, then according to the most conservative estimates, the number of the repressed can be estimated at nearly half a million people. These figures do not include young people forcibly referred to factory schools, those conscripted into the Red Army, brought as forced labourers to various parts of the Soviet Union, and the like. The statistics on mortality during deportations,

Poles deported by the Soviet authorities reporting to the Polish Army units in the USSR, 1941/1942 (IPN)



in places of settlement, as well as in labor camps, are still incomplete. It is extremely difficult to determine the actual number of deportees and this issue is still the subject of much controversy.

The Katyn massacre was the culmination of the Soviet repressions against the citizens of the Second Polish Republic. On the basis of a decision by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of 5 March 1940, prisoners of war from three camps in Ostashkov, Kozelsk, and Starobelsk were murdered, as were prisoners held in prisons in Soviet Belarus and Ukraine, a fact which is often forgotten. According to contemporary research, the perpetrators of the Katyn massacre may have followed the rules developed during the Great Purge. Very often, the sentences were carried out by the same executioners, headed by Vasily Blokhin, who was hated even among the Soviet murderers. Polish citizens of various denominations and nationalities lie in the Katyn pits. They were murdered for their loyalty to the Polish State. However, it was not the last stage of the bloody repressions. Another crime took place after the Third Reich, the former ally, attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941. During the evacuation of prisons from Soviet Belarus and Ukraine, thousands of falsely accused prisoners were murdered.

Polish citizens are the most numerous on the horrific list of those repressed in territories annexed by the USSR as a result of the Soviet-German agreements. Although the Poles constituted the majority of the repressed, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians, Jews, Lithuanians and representatives of other nationalities also found themselves in the NKVD torture and execution sites, and Soviet labour camps. As in the times of the Great Purge, they were most often accused of alleged espionage, the “wrong” background, lack of loyalty to the Soviet state, and other acts considered by the Soviets as crimes.

Paradoxically, communists, members of the former Communist Party of Poland and its affiliates – the Communist Party of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus – were also repressed. For instance, the name of the communist writer Andrzej Wolica and many rank-and-file communists is on the so-called Ukrainian Katyn List. Most of the activists of the Ukrainian and Belarusian national movement, very often active Soviet sympathizers, were subjected to ruthless repressions in the 1930s. It was then that Bronisław Taraszkiewicz, a former member of the Polish Sejm and one of the authors of the Belarusian orthography, was murdered. Ukrainian artists, representatives of the “executed



The passing over of the act of the perpetual lease by collective farms (IPN)

Renaissance” also died at that time. The situation was the same in Soviet Belarus. Contrary to Soviet propaganda, after 17 September 1939, the NKVD launched a real manhunt not only for Poles, but also for representatives of all other nations living in the eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic. At that time, the Ukrainian and Belarusian intelligentsia, teachers, lawyers and physicians were arrested. And although they usually strongly opposed the authorities of the Second Polish Republic and identified themselves with the Belarusian or Ukrainian nations, they were murdered nonetheless. For example, the so-called Ukrainian Katyn List includes the names of members of Ukrainian political parties, often deputies and senators of the Second Polish Republic, and a well-known Belarusian activist, former Prime Minister of the Belarusian People’s Republic, Anton Lutskevich, who died in a Soviet camp, previously accused of cooperating with Polish special services. Activists of Jewish social and political organizations

The first exhumation of the officers of the Polish Army Murdered by the NKVD in Katyn commissioned by the Germans, 16 April 1943 (IPN)



Exhumations of the officers of the Polish Army murdered by the NKVD in Katyn, April 1943 (IPN)



were arrested, schools run by religious communities were closed, and the clergy were repressed.

Industry and financial sectors were nationalized and most of the land and property of the “landlord class” reverted to the state. The Soviet economic policy, which focused on the exploitation of peasants, mandatory supplies of agricultural produce and compulsory participation in public works, the commenced collectivization of agriculture, “voluntary-and-compulsory” recruitment to work into the depths of the USSR, conscription to the Red Army, in addition to repressions, complete the sad image of “restoring historical justice.” Despite the fact that the former eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic joined the Belarusian SSR and Ukrainian SSR, the border continued to function in 1939–1941, and its crossing and movement from the eastern to the western part required appropriate consent from the NKVD.

Over the decades, the USSR’s downright mendacious propaganda presented the Soviet aggression on Poland of 17 September 1939 from a convenient point of view. Even today, despite numerous publications and in the face of obvious facts, the authorities of the Russian Federation continue to portray this armed aggression as an “act of liberation”.

It was, in fact, the enslavement and terror aimed against hundreds of thousands of victims among Polish citizens of many denominations and nationalities. It is worth remembering this.

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INSTYTUT  
PAMIĘCI  
NARODOWEJ