

PACT OF CRIMINALS



THE TOAST TO **HITLER**
WHICH CHANGED THE WORLD



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In Poland's calendar of remembrance, there are two important dates just over a week apart. **The day of 15 August is the joyous Polish Army Day**, commemorating the great victory over the Bolsheviks in 1920. **In turn, 23 August is Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for the Victims of All Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes**, commemorating the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, also known as the Hitler-Stalin Pact, which caused countless suffering to Poland and the world. Those two dates encapsulate the Polish experience of the 20th century, full of martyrdom but also the moments of triumph.

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Aleksandra Wróblewska remembered well the words of a song composed by her father Franciszek Krudowski in the mid-1930s: “Far from the black land, our boat keeps on sailing. / We shall bypass the treacherous rocks. / And we shall sail on like this”. “I think,” she confessed years later, “that this is an analogy to our very happy family.” At the time, the Krudowskis were actually doing well. For them and millions of their compatriots, it was an auspicious period between two wars – the one of 1920, which gave Poland a glorious victory over the Bolsheviks, and the one of 1939–1945, which was to prove exceptionally tragic.

On 16 November 1918, Commander-in-Chief Józef Piłsudski telegraphed the governments of “all belligerent and neutral states” that an independent, sovereign Polish state had been reborn, based on democratic foundations and encompassing the territories of all three former partitions: Prussian, Austrian and Russian.

After 123 years of captivity and World War I, Poland was finally returning to the map of Europe. The Polish Army was forming and growing rapidly – several Krudowski brothers also joined it. However, the young state was yet to have clearly defined borders. In the west, the borders were forged in four armed uprisings against the Germans – the Greater Poland uprising and three Silesian uprisings. In the east, the Poles fought victorious battles with the Ukrainians for Lvov and areas up to the Zbrucz River.

The greatest threat, however, was yet to come – Bolshevik Russia, whose leaders and military dreamed of taking their bloody revolution across Europe. “Over the corpse of White Poland lies the road to worldwide conflagration,” wrote Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a commander of the Red Army’s Western Front, in an order to soldiers given on 2 July 1920. That summer, in their march westwards, Bolshevik divisions of many thousands were advancing rapidly towards Warsaw. They had already been followed by the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee – a puppet communist “government”, ushering in red terror in the occupied territories.

The Republic of Poland, only just restored to life, faced a dramatic struggle for survival. The Krudowski brothers also fought at the front: 28-year-old Marian in the 11th Infantry Regiment and Stefan, two years older, in the 12th Regiment. In the hour of greatest trial,



The crew of the armored train No. 51 "First Marshal". (IPN)

the Poles rose to the occasion. Politicians, deeply divided on other issues, managed to unite in the face of the threat. The Council of National Defence and Wincenty Witos' coalition Government of National Defence were formed.

"Like a monolithic, unshakeable wall, we must stand up to resistance. The onslaught of Bolshevism is to be smashed against the chest of the whole nation," appealed Chief of State Józef Piłsudski on behalf of the Council of National Defence. That dramatic call did not go unheeded. The ranks of the Volunteer Army, formed a few days later under the command of General Józef Haller, quickly grew to over 100,000 men. Young people in particular – pupils, students, scouts, apprentices, peasants – turned up in large numbers at the recruitment points.

It was the volunteers who played an important role in the decisive battles on the outskirts of Warsaw – for example, on 14 August near Ossów, where Father Ignacy Skorupka fell, cheering his former pupils into battle. “The day of 15 August, Assumption Day, will not have passed, and the enemy will be beaten,” he had predicted a dozen days before his death.

Sunday, 15 August 1920, indeed proved to be the turning point of this war. The Red Army was stopped near Warsaw. The next day, at dawn, a Polish counter-offensive was launched from the Wieprz River. The troops commanded by Piłsudski attacked the south wing of the surprised Bolshevik troops and reached their rear. Threatened with encirclement, Tukhachevsky’s forces were soon forced to retreat, which in many places looked like a panicked flight. The Bolshevik plan to capture Lvov also failed although Joseph Stalin – at the time the political commissar of the South-Western Front advancing on the city – already saw himself as the conqueror of the whole of Galicia, and in his correspondence with Vladimir Lenin even made plans to go much further – to Prague, Budapest, Vienna and even Rome.

The Polish victory put an end to those plans and did the whole of Western civilisation a service that is difficult to overestimate. Lord Edgar Vincent D’Abernon, a British politician, diplomat and writer, not coincidentally called the Battle of Warsaw “the eighteenth decisive battle in the history of the world” – alongside famous battles such as the Battle of Saratoga, Waterloo and the Marne. D’Abernon had no doubt that “in 1920, Poland saved Europe”. French General Louis Faury shared a similar view. The Soviet expansion was halted. The Old Continent enjoyed almost two decades of peace.

Poland made good use of that time. While the battle was still raging on the fronts, the construction of the modern state began. In the first month of independence, women gained full voting rights – earlier than in the US, UK or France. Eight-hour working shifts were introduced. Not much later, in March 1921, a democratic constitution was adopted. The scale of the challenge was immense. The state had to be rebuilt after a damaging war, and the lands of the three partitions had to be merged into one organism. It succeeded.



The march of Polish volunteer troops to the front from Warsaw (1920). (IPN)

A flagship example of the pre-war successes of Poland is the port of Gdynia. Built from scratch in the 1920s, it became the largest port in the Baltic in terms of volume of cargo handled already in the following decade. Poland's cultural and scientific achievements were equally impressive, displayed for example at regular world exhibitions up to the memorable New York exhibition of 1939.

The Krudowski family also prospered in the interwar period. Józef, the eldest of the brothers (born 1881), fulfilled himself as a composer, conductor and teacher. In 1932, he even represented Poland in art competitions held as part of the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. His brother Jan, a year younger than him, who was a kapellmeister in a military orchestra, also displayed musical talents. "Reliable, righteous, eminently idealistic, loyal, disciplined," reads the service opinion of him. Stefan (born 1890) was a renowned military doctor. Marian and Zygmunt also pursued careers in the army. Franciszek was an architect, author of plays and songs. Every year, the family met for holidays in Kadcza or Bukowiec.

When the Polish exhibition pavilion opened in Flushing Meadows Park in New York in the spring of 1939, peacetime was already coming to an end. The world looked with concern at Germany, where Adolf Hitler had built Nazi totalitarianism. Having quickly cracked down on opposition, Hitler created a strong army and started expanding in Europe. He occupied the lands of the Austrians and the Czechs and vassalised Slovakia. For further conquests, he needed an ally – and he found one in Stalin, once a political commissar and now the cruel dictator of the Soviet Union.

Flags with a swastika greeted Foreign Minister of the Third Reich Joachim von Ribbentrop as he was disembarking from his plane at Moscow airport on the afternoon of 23 August 1939. He was also warmly received in the Kremlin. “I know how much the German people love their Führer,” Stalin stated, “so I would like to raise a toast to his health”. In the morning, as the champagne glasses and caviar plates were cleared from the tables and desks, Ribbentrop and his Soviet counterpart Vyacheslav Molotov signed the devil’s bargain, rightly called the Hitler-Stalin pact. Only information about the non-aggression pact went out into the public; however, the essence of the alliance of the two totalitarianisms was a secret supplementary protocol to divide Central and Eastern Europe into spheres of influence. Poland was to be partitioned between Germany and the Soviet Union. It was an attack on the freedom not only of my country, but also of several other countries: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Romania.

The Wehrmacht struck first just a few days later. On 1 September, defenceless Wieluń, also known as the “Polish Guernica”, was bombed and the shells fired on Westerplatte the same morning



German and Russian representatives after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In the foreground from left: Minister of Foreign Affairs of Nazi Germany Joachim von Ribbentrop, Secretary of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) Joseph Stalin (in white uniform), Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars and the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR Vyacheslav Molotov (first from right). (IPN)

symbolise the start of the Second World War. When the Red Army attacked Poland from the east on 17 September, the fate of the heroically defending country was sealed. And although the last units of the Polish Army were still fighting in the first week of October, both invaders celebrated their victory with a joint parade in Brest already on 22 September. Not much later, on 28 September, the Soviets and Germans reaffirmed the alliance with the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty.

Double occupation started in Poland. Both German and Soviet occupation proved brutal and bloody. Suffice it to say that the country emerged from that war with nearly six million victims.

Several years of German rule brought the Jewish population the ordeal of the ghettos and extermination in gas chambers, and the



Joachim von Ribbentrop solemnly welcomed at Königsberg airport after the signing of the Pact. (IPN)

Poles round-ups, overt and covert executions, deportations to forced labour and concentration camps. The intellectuals were particularly persecuted, but repression could affect anyone.

When the Germans closed higher education institutions and secondary schools, Józef Krudowski became involved in underground education. Arrested in Warsaw, he was sent first to the infamous Pawiak Prison and then to the Auschwitz concentration camp. He died there on 7 August 1943.

Just as Auschwitz has become synonymous with all German crimes, Soviet crimes are to this day inseparably linked in the Polish consciousness with the words “Siberia” and “Katyń”. Hundreds of thousands of Poles were sent to Siberia, the steppes of Kazakhstan and other remote locations between 1939 and 1941. Many had already died during deportation itself, while others were finished off by slave labour on inhuman soil. In the spring of 1940, in the Katyń forest and other places of execution, the Soviets murdered without any

Warsaw burning during the siege,
September 1939. (IPN)



1939: AN ALLIANCE OF TOTALITARIANISMS





Soviet and German officers having a friendly conversation in the newly captured Polish city of Brest, September 1939. (IPN)

court verdicts almost 22,000 citizens of the Second Polish Republic, including many military and police officers.

The list of NKVD victims also includes Jan and Stefan Krudowski, who were taken prisoner by the Soviets in September 1939 (their brother Marian survived the war in German prisoner of war camps). Both were held in the Kozielsk camp, from where they were taken to Katyń and killed by a shot in the back of the head. They each orphaned two children.

“World War II took a massive toll on my family, leaving only widows and [...] orphans,” recalled Aleksandra Wróblewska, a niece of Józef, Jan and Stefan Krudowski, a few years ago. This is just one of the many tragic stories of those years. Almost every Polish family mourned their closer or distant relatives during the war.

And while Paris and London celebrated the end of the horrific war in 1945, Warsaw could not truly breathe. Not only because the city was in



Establishing the demarcation line between German and Soviet troops. In the foreground from the right is General of Armored Forces Heinz Guderian, with Soviet political commissar Borovynsky in a leather jacket. (IPN)

ruins. After the Wehrmacht withdrew, the Red Army entered in its stead. Stalin was not about to renounce the territorial gains brought to him by the pact with Hitler. Although Poland returned to the map of Europe, it was deprived of territories and non-sovereign. With the help of Soviet bayonets, a new communist government was installed. A wave of further repression was set in motion. Poles had to wait almost half a century for real freedom – until the collapse of the communist system at the end of the 1980s.

The generation of Poles born around 1880-1900, such as the Kru-dowski brothers, had their moments of glory when the country regained its independence and defended it in the war against the Bolsheviks. It also suffered terribly after two totalitarian neighbours united against Poland in 1939.

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German Soldiers breaking down the border barrier and crossing into Poland
on September 1, 1939 (IPN)

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