

German crimes on Polish victims still call for justice

Prof. Zdzisław KRASNODEBSKI

Professor of Sociology, philosopher, lecturer at the University of Bremen and the Ignatianum Academy of Krakow.

Germany never gave justice to its National Socialist past, they never compensated their victims. Heinz Reinefarth, the "Slaughterer of Warsaw," was not only never punished but made a political career in Germany, prof. Zdzisław KRASNODEBSKI argues.

World War II started in Europe with an attack by German troops on Poland on 1 September 1939. Three days later, France and the United Kingdom declared war against Germany. The attack on Poland proved to be the red line ending the policy of appeasement which accepted Hitler's consecutive aggressive steps: militarization of Rhineland, annexation of Austria, occupation of the Sudety Mountains, as well as the defeat and occupation of Czechoslovakia. When Hitler reached for Poland, it was simply too much. The West, which then meant the United Kingdom and France, was too late to understand that further concessions just made the Third Reich bolder. Unfortunately, in our times, this error of the policy of appeasement was repeated with respect to Putin's Russia, which again confirms the illusory nature of the hope of learning from errors of history.

German attack on Poland was only possible owing to Hitler's agreement with Stalin entered into on 23 August 1939 with a secret protocol where Germany and Russia divided Polish territory again. Soviet invasion of Poland on 17 September 1939 made the Polish army's resistance against the Germans vain. The two totalitarian and criminal regimes, not that ideologically distant from one another, as it is argued, collaborated until the summer of 1941, murdering Polish national and intellectual elite, parallelly and absolutely fighting all Polishness.

The war ended after five long years. What was its result for the country with whose defence it started? Poland lost almost 6 million residents and about 1/3 of its territory. Warsaw, the capital of Poland, was almost completely levelled to the ground. It is the only city in Europe where two uprisings occurred during World War II: in the Warsaw ghetto established by the Nazis – in 1943, and in all Warsaw in 1944. The latter uprising, lasting for 63 days, was the largest military movement among the anti-Hitler resistance across Europe. It was in Warsaw that the Germans committed one of the greatest crimes on civilians during World War II, when they murdered 60 thousand defenceless people in the Wola District in the first days of the uprising. Poland's capital is thus, like no other city in Europe, a place of remembrance and memory of World War II, the memory that keeps being repressed and deformed in the west of Europe...

With respect to Poland, did really the big promises come true, as included, for example in the Atlantic Charter where the President of the USA and the British Prime Minister declared, among others that "they respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them," and "after the final destruction of the Nazi

tyranny, they hope to see established a peace which will afford to all nations the means of dwelling in safety within their own boundaries, and which will afford assurance that all the men in all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want”?

The peace that followed, constructed in Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam by the President of the USA and the British Prime Minister together with one of the greatest criminals in the modern history, Joseph Stalin, surprisingly, was not just for the Poles. Polish borders were moved, which forced displacement of people on a mass scale. What was worse, Poland found itself under the soviet occupation of a totalitarian aggressor, Hitler’s ally from 1939. Whereas Germany was divided into occupation zones, Poland in fact became one big soviet occupation zone. The Poles did not obtain the “right to choose the form of government,” and were not allowed to live as “free from fear and want.” The communists harshly murdered the remains of anti-Hitler resistance movement, murdered them as fascist or spies of the West, and destroyed all manifestations of independent national existence. All generation of the Poles, similarly as in the case of other nations from Central and Eastern Europe, were destined to vegetation in the soviet influence zone. From the Polish point of view, war only ended after the fall of communism when we regained the ability of political decision-making about our fate. For us, World War II is still the latest history.

It is not, however, surprising that Polish history is not particularly a matter of interest in the west of Europe. It is certainly not commendable history to the West. Although the Poles were generously allowed to fight at the side of the allies, among others during the Battle of Britain, but after the war the bill was handed over to us for armament and ammunition. The soviet crimes committed on defenceless prisoners of war, Polish officers in Katyn, and in other places of the Soviet Union, were pushed aside and not spoken about so as not to distort cooperation with the soviet ally. Władysław Sikorski, Prime Minister of the Polish government on emigration, died in mysterious circumstances at the Gibraltar in 1943. About a year later, our western allies together with the soviets commenced the process of creating a puppet government of national unity in Poland, dominated by communists.

History of Poland during World War II and after the war also show the big lie of the myth, still present in many European countries, including France, Italy, and Greece, about liberation of Europe by the Red Army. The period of collaboration between communists and the Nazi Germany is something that the left-wing party wishes to repress from the memory because this abolishes the myth of consistent left-wing and communist anti-fascism referring to the fact that, after Nazi Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union, the communists joined the resistance in many European countries, and started even prevailing in that movement.

Polish history also abolishes another myth important to contemporary Europe: the myth that Germany, the country now dominating in the European Union, has been a model for clearing its National Socialist past and compensated its victims. It is thus worth reminding that the Federal Republic of Germany never acknowledged the right of Polish victims to compensation. All monies paid to Polish victims of German Nazism were only awarded by way of a voluntary humanitarian gesture. None of many victims of pacification in Polish villages within the framework of “fighting partisans” has never received such a compensation; nobody was also sentenced for such crimes. Heinz Reinefarth, the “Slaughterer of Warsaw,” was not only never punished but made a political career in Germany. Poland never received any war reparations. Nevertheless, the Germans believe they are nowadays a “moral superpower” setting standards for the others. The Poles, in turn, must nowadays not only fear military aggression from Russia engaged in a brutal war in Ukraine, but also ask a question

whether, in today's European Union, they can still enjoy the right to "choose the form of government" and autonomous key decision-making in their own country.

Zdzisław Krasnodębski

The text is simultaneously published in the Polish monthly "Wszystko Co Najważniejsze" as part of a project carried out with the Institute of National Remembrance and the Polish National Foundation.