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RUSSIA AND NATO

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Remembering Poland's agony and sacrifice

Zbigniew Gniatkowski provides a Polish perspective on the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War.

In 1939, Poland's fate was unavoidable. On 23 August 1939 the Third Reich and the Soviet Union signed a neutrality pact, known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. A secret protocol within this agreement included a plan to divide Poland between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. A week later, on 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, which was the beginning of the Second World War. The Soviet Union committed itself to supporting Germany in its military operations against Poland. On 17 September, the Soviets assaulted eastern Poland. Adolf Hitler, a few days prior to the invasion, told his army commanders: 'Destruction of Poland is our primary task... show no mercy. Be brutal.' The result of its defence was tragic — 77,000 Polish troops were killed in battle while fighting against the Wehrmacht and the Red Army; 670,000 became prisoners of war.

Poland was the first country to resist Nazi Germany in 1939. Several countries, including France, Great Britain, New Zealand and even Tonga, in a spirit of solidarity with Poland, declared war on Germany. In material terms, however, Poland, left alone in its struggle, would suffer more than five years of brutal occupation and terror, with nearly six million victims of genocide and massive persecutions.

Poland was Adolf Hitler's first victim. The Nazis murdered three million Polish Jews and three million other Polish civilians. They designated the Poles 'subhuman Slavs'. In concentration and death camps established and administered by Germans — such as Auschwitz–Birkenau, Majdanek or Sobibór — the most numerous victims were Jews, including Polish Jews and Jews from many European countries occupied and controlled by Nazi Germany, but those killed also included hundreds of thousands of Poles, and people of other ethnicities, people with disabilities perceived in an evil doctrine as 'subhuman' too. In death camps — Bełżec and Treblinka — prisoners were often killed less than thirty minutes after arrival.

Under Nazi German occupation in Poland the death penalty was imposed not just for joining the underground

movement or hiding Jewish countrymen; even those involved in trading were put at risk of being executed. Racial segregation, humiliation, food shortages, the fear of being sent to labour camps — that is what people had to deal with every day.

On the other side, in former eastern Poland incorporated into the Soviet Union, with regular army troops arrived special NKVD units, whose role was to eliminate the Polish state structures and any potential resistance. To this end, mass-scale arrests and executions of intelligentsia were carried out in the Soviet-occupied territories. It is estimated that in 1940–41, Soviet Russia was responsible for deporting 1.5 million innocent Polish civilians into slavery; they were forcibly taken to labour camps, called gulags, in Siberia and other parts of Russia, where many of them perished.

In 1940, 22,000 Polish prisoners of war, the majority of them Polish Army officers, were taken into captivity by the Soviets and shot to death in Katyń and other sites, in violation of war-time customs and conventions. The Katyń crime was discovered during the war and the memory of Soviets' atrocities was preserved — in secret in the People's Republic of Poland and openly abroad, also here in New Zealand. Forty-two years ago, at the church of St Mary of the Angels in Wellington, the Polish community installed a memorial plaque dedicated to the victims of the Katyń massacre.

Resistance movement

Poland's defeat in the defensive war of 1939 did not put an end to fighting at home. In the face of repression by both occupiers, as early as 27 September 1939 clandestine struc-



Polish pilots in the Royal Air Force

HE Zbigniew Gniatkowski is ambassador of the Republic of Poland to New Zealand.

The war that began at daybreak on 1 September 1939 with the German Third Reich's invasion of the Republic of Poland was the most barbaric and genocidal conflict in the history of the world. It is unparalleled not only for the scale of death and destruction but also for the complete breakdown of all moral and ethical norms. Memory of this great tragedy — one of the most traumatic periods in Poland's history — unites generations and reflects the respect for the sacrifice of our forebears. Its consequences still exert a major impact on the Polish nation. Eighty years on, Poland is a special guardian of memory about these events.



Kazimierz Wodzicki

tures of the Polish resistance movement made it possible to create the biggest underground state in Europe, unique in its form in the entire world. During the long years of war, the Home Army carried out military and sabotage actions against the German occupiers, while also supporting civilians and giving hope in times of hardship and despair.

The Soviet invasion of Poland speeded up the Polish government's decision to leave the country on the night of 17 September 1939. This led to organising state and military structures of the Republic of Poland in exile. Continuity of institutions was thus preserved, enabling the Polish armed forces to carry on fighting abroad — in all campaigns across Europe until the very last days of the war — in France, Norway, Battle of Britain, Africa, Italy, Normandy, the Netherlands and elsewhere.

Polish-British war achievements included working together on breaking the Enigma code. Poles cracked it first and in 1939 passed on their work to the British, laying the foundations for Bletchley Park's mass-scale codebreaking effort, which shortened the Second World War by about two years.

Polish pilots, numbering 144 persons, gained great fame through their participation in the Battle of Britain between July–October 1940. The best airborne unit in the Battle of Britain was the Polish 303 Squadron RAF; it reportedly shot down 126 German planes. New Zealanders made up the second largest foreign contingent.

Consulate established

In 1941, the Polish government-in-exile in London established the consulate-general of Poland in Wellington. In his

address delivered in 1943 in Wellington, Consul Kazimierz Wodzicki spoke of the excellent Polish pilots in Great Britain, reminding that the Polish squadrons had, on their banners, a one and a half century old motto 'For your and our freedom'. Wodzicki said: 'Poland who was the first Nation to enter this war on the strength of her own decision, after having rejected any compromise with the enemy, is paying in blood the highest price. Much has gone which is lost forever, but one thing... remains — the soul of Poland.'

In December 1941, thanks to the consul's wife Maria Wodzicka the Polish Army League was established in Palmerston North. Ten thousand Polish soldiers in the Middle East and in Italy found themselves 'under the protection' of their New Zealand 'foster-mothers', who were sending them letters, books and food parcels.

In early 1944, the Italian town of Cassino was the site of a devastating Second World War battle. Polish and New Zealand soldiers were part of the Allied forces that struggled to capture the Gustav Line and the German-held Monastery of Monte Cassino. With several offensives failing, only in May 1944 did the Polish II Corps succeed in capturing it. The Monte Cassino battle helped forge the reputation of 28 Maori Battalion as well as the fame of the Polish II Corps under General Władysław Anders. Anders was one of the finest Polish commanders in history. He died many years after the war, but in his will he asked to be buried among his fallen soldiers at the Polish Cemetery in Monte Cassino. It symbolised his greatness and unconditional loyalty to the troops he had commanded.

Many Polish soldiers in Anders's Army were earlier released from Soviet prisons after Hitler's invasion of Russia in 1941. The Anders Army, which as the Polish II Corps captured Monte Cassino, had saved thousands of Polish civilians, including orphaned children, when it left the Soviet Union in 1942. In early 1944 the Polish government in exile and the New Zealand government of Peter Fraser agreed that a large group of Polish children should be invited to New Zealand later that year. On 1 November 1944, 733 of those children and 102 caregivers came to New Zealand. On these shores they found shelter and eventually made their new home.



Prime Minister Peter Fraser welcomes Polish children brought to New Zealand in 1944



The entrance to Auschwitz concentration camp

Total destruction

In the last months of 1944, after the failure of the Warsaw Uprising, Hitler ordered Poland's capital to be razed to the ground and transformed into a frontline fortress, to be known as *Festung Warschau*. Governor-General Hans Frank's diary was clear: 'After this insurrection and its suppression, Warsaw will meet a deserved fate — total destruction.' Two hundred thousand insurgents and civilians were killed in the uprising, following which 500,000 people, the entire city's population, was expelled in Germans' reprisals. Having deported the residents of Warsaw, German troops, with support from various auxiliaries, including criminals, systematically looted the city, which they then burned and blew up building by building. Warsaw's war losses on the left bank of the Vistula River amounted to 80 per cent of all buildings. Mass-scale exterminations of the population in the occupied Polish lands followed and were continued until the last days of the Second World War in 1945.

At the end of the war, in February 1945, at the conference in Yalta, the leaders of the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Kingdom decided the shape of post-war Europe. Poland found itself in a zone exclusively controlled by the Soviet Union and its former allies revoked

their recognition of the Polish government-in-exile in London. After the war, communists took over the country and carried out the Kremlin's orders. The Soviet political police eliminated the structures of the Polish underground state. The massive persecutions against the freedom fighters of the Home Army began. Also, those soldiers who fought in the West and after the war returned to their homeland were monitored and seen as a threat to the communist rule. A communist court sentenced to death Witold Pilecki, who volunteered to organise resistance in the Auschwitz concentration camp, wrote a report on the Holocaust and fought in the Warsaw Uprising. He was executed in 1948. This was the fate of many Polish heroes who survived the war.

While thinking of war heroes, we must not forget the names of Polish commanders and soldiers fighting on all the fronts of the war — Polish generals Władysław Sikorski, Anders, Stanisław Maczek and Stanisław Sosabowski. We remember those secret heroes — resistance fighters, couriers, intelligence agents — supporting the Allies, such as Pilecki, Jan Karski (who met with President Roosevelt to inform him about the Holocaust and the resistance in Poland) and Krystyna Skarbek (called Churchill's favorite spy). We also recall the Polish diplomats in Switzerland and Japan, as well as many brave people helping their Jewish countrymen — Irena Sendler, Janusz Korczak, the Żabińskis, Ulma family and many others recognised as 'Righteous among the Nations' by the Yad Vashem Institute.

Great heroes

Poland produced great heroes of liberty in the 20th century — not only during the Second World War but also later. It is our duty to remember their heroism and martyrdom. There are many initiatives to commemorate them, including new museums, exhibitions and film productions. We need to keep reminding the world of the historic truth emphasised by the late Polish Pope Saint John Paul II: 'Never again war! Never again hatred and intolerance.'

Though a nation for one thousand years, since the end of the 18th century Poland has had only 50 years as an independent nation — between the two wars and since the



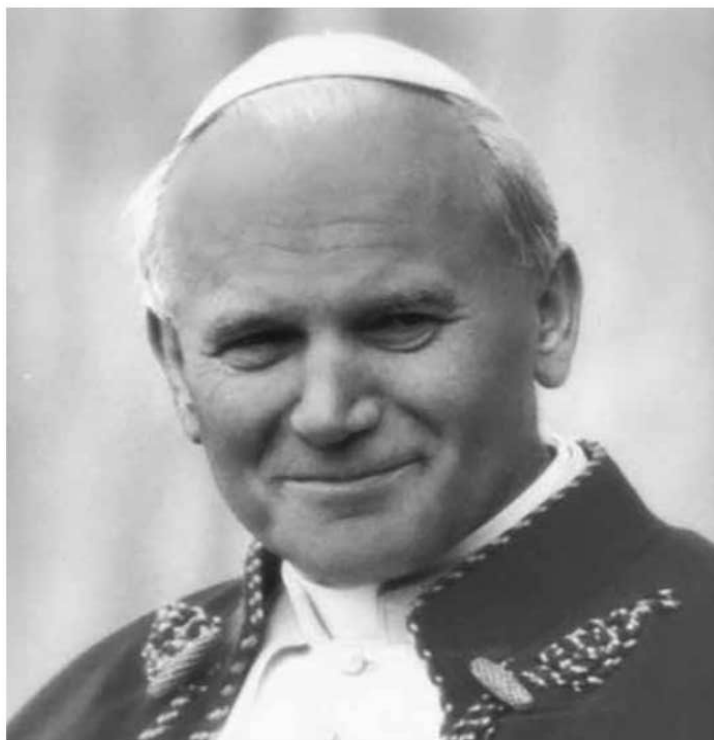
Witold Pilecki

fall of communism in 1989. After the Second World War, Western countries laboured to bring about reconciliation of nations, striving to lay down European institutions and to deepen the scope of integration. But Poland, remaining on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, was stripped of political sovereignty. However, the nation never accepted the post-war order, which led to bloody protests against the communist regime of 1956, 1970 and 1976. It was not until the election of Karol Wojtyła as pope in 1978, the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) social freedom movement in 1980–81 and the collapse of the communist bloc, which began in Poland in 1989, that Poland could begin its integration with the European family, a dream of several generations of Poles.

On 4 June 2019 we marked the 30th anniversary of the first partially free elections which followed the ‘Round Table’ talks, a symbol of the velvet revolution in our part of Europe. As a result of 45 years of communist rule imposed by the Soviet Union, Poland was economically and politically bankrupt. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, in less than a decade, we built a democracy and a free market economy — two pillars of a united Europe. Eventually, Poland achieved a historical accomplishment: it became a partner in a united common Europe, built on a foundation of respect for human rights and freedom, on principles of democracy and the right of nations to self-determination. On 1 May 2004 Poland acceded to the European Union. Five years earlier it had joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Reconciliation efforts

In the grim years of the Cold War it was in principle impossible to bring together the Polish and German nations. In 1965 the Polish bishops sent a letter to the German bishops with famous words: ‘We forgive and ask for forgiveness.’ In the 1980s German people supported Polish freedom fighters, members of the Solidarity movement being oppressed by communists. Once Poland regained its independence in 1989, both countries concluded treaties and closer co-op-



Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła)



German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Polish President Andrzej Duda and US Vice President Mike Pence at the ceremony to mark the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War in Warsaw on 1 September 2019

eration brought benefits in many areas. Germany was one of the advocates of Poland on its way to NATO and the European Union.

The memory of the tragic history of the war which utterly shook our belief in human ability to be guided by Kant’s ‘moral law’ should constitute an essential element in our collective consciousness. Eighty years on, Poland continues to play the role of a special guardian of memory about these events. We have proven that with determination it is possible to turn the tide of history. And today, we are helping to fix problems, in Europe and beyond, as a member of the European Union as well as of the UN family.

During its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Poland demonstrated its commitment as a strong advocate of fundamental freedoms and human rights. On Poland’s initiative, with the support of the United Kingdom, on 20 June 2019, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted its first-ever resolution on the protection of persons with disabilities in armed conflict.

The recent attacks on mosques in Christchurch and then the targeting of Christian communities in Sri Lanka during Easter Sunday have reminded us in a tragic way that the freedom of religion is a fundamental human right and that hatred towards religious groups may lead to mass killing of innocent people. In May 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution, initiated by Poland and supported by a number of countries including New Zealand, proclaiming 22 August as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. We honour victims and survivors with such initiatives to help educate and promote respect for religious diversity and mutual understanding between communities.

We cannot change our history, but we can work for a better future. 