

Sir,

I was astonished and concerned to read recent statements by representatives of the Russian Federation, including those in Wellington, about the causes and course of the Second World War. Reminiscent of propaganda from Josef Stalin's totalitarian era, these falsifications of history to discredit Poland do a grave disservice to the victims of two totalitarianisms.

The death tolls inflicted by Nazism and Stalinism are well-known—as is responsibility for the most murderous conflict in the history of humankind. Poland was not involved in carving up Europe with Germany. Nazi Germany's ally in 1939 was the Soviet Union.

In the lead-up to war, the USSR made clear its underlying intent regarding Poland. In August 1937, 111,000 Poles, Soviet citizens, were murdered in the NKVD's "Polish Operation". Following Germany's first claims against Poland in January 1939, the USSR offered Germany political cooperation on 17 April, with Hitler then denouncing the non-aggression pact with Poland on 28 April. The Russian Ambassador's letter seeks to equate the Polish-German non-aggression pact of 1934 with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, but fails to mention that Poland had signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union two years earlier, in 1932. Poland believed those treaties would be respected, but Germany and the USSR both violated them in September 1939 when they invaded Poland.

This was directly in accord with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August and its secret protocol under which Eastern Europe was divided into German and Soviet spheres of interest. The protocol violated the independence of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Romania. It was followed by Soviet assistance to the Wehrmacht, joint NKVD-Gestapo meetings and cooperation in murdering Polish elites.

On 22 September 1939, a great military parade was held in Brest-Litovsk, celebrating Nazi Germany's and Soviet Russia's joint defeat of Poland. Such parades are not organised by parties to non-aggression pacts, but by allies and friends. On 28 September 1939, the Soviet Union signed another treaty with the Third Reich, the Boundary and Friendship Treaty, sanctioning the division of Polish territory between the two invaders.

For a time, Hitler and Stalin were not only allies but friends. Such was this friendship that when a group of 150 German communists fled to the USSR before World War II broke out, Stalin returned them to Hitler as "a gift" in November 1939, thus condemning them to certain death. Without Stalin's complicity in the partition of Poland, and without the natural resources that Stalin supplied to Hitler, the Nazi war machine would not have taken control of Europe so easily. The last trains with supplies left the USSR for Germany on 21 June 1941 – just one day before Nazi Germany attacked its ally. Thanks to Stalin, Hitler was better able to conquer new countries with impunity, confine Jews from all over the continent in ghettos and unleash the horrors of the Holocaust.

To suggest that the Soviet Union invaded Poland, occupied half its territory and shipped a million civilians, including children, to forced labour camps in order to prepare for Hitler's invasion is a blatant falsification of history. There is ample documentary and photographic evidence of the cynical Nazi-Soviet alliance from late 1939 to when Hitler finally betrayed Stalin in June 1941.

Amongst the most reprehensible of Soviet atrocities during that period was the murder in 1940 of 22,000 Polish prisoners of war in Katyń and other sites, in violation of war-time conventions. The Katyń massacre was a long-kept secret, denied until the 1990s by the USSR

who blamed the Nazis. However, in New Zealand, people knew the truth. In 1977, at Wellington's St Mary of the Angels church, the Polish Community laid a memorial plaque. A similar plaque, with soil from Katyń, was installed in Auckland St Patrick's cathedral in 1990.

The tragedies of World War II also forged enduring historical links between New Zealand and Poland. New Zealanders and Poles fought shoulder to shoulder in both the Battle of Britain and in Italy. During the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, New Zealand pilots flew from Brindisi, Italy to support the insurgents of the Polish Home Army but their brave efforts were fatally compromised when requests to use Red Army-controlled airstrips, on the right bank of Vistula River, were rejected. From the air they looked down on the dying city of Warsaw on one side of the Vistula, while the Soviet Army on the other side of the river refrained from assisting, on Stalin's orders.

We can imagine too what the New Zealanders battling at Monte Cassino heard from their companions of the Polish II Corps (known as Anders' Army), most of whom had been released from Soviet imprisonment in 1941. Those same Polish soldiers, who eventually captured Monte Cassino, had earlier saved thousands of Polish civilians when the Polish Army left the USSR in 1942.

Last November, Minister of Defence Ron Mark and other official representatives joined New Zealand's Polish community in commemorating the 75th anniversary of the arrival of 733 Polish orphaned children who had survived deportation to Siberia and Northern Russia before 1941. Invited by the Peter Fraser-led Government in 1944, they became known as the Polish Children or Children of Pahiataua. The wartime hardships they endured and the positive legacies of their New Zealand experiences remain an important part of our common history.

Minister Mark's address in Pahiataua speaks for itself: "I simply cannot imagine what these children's lives must have been like before they arrived here. The trauma they would have suffered in the forced labour camps in Russia's Siberia. The deaths of their parents. The separation from their families. Being shipped to Iran and eventually all the way here to New Zealand. Such is quite unimaginable to the average New Zealander. (...) As a soldier, as an officer, as a student of a military history, there are things that I know about Poland that, I guess, that a lot of other New Zealanders may not. The atrocities that were committed on their officers in Katyń wood, the atrocities that were committed on the nation, on the people, not just by Nazi Germany, but by Russia. The bravery with which that nation and its free army fought in battles such as Market Garden, where they parachuted in and where the British airborne took such heavy losses, but the Poles succeeded."

Having taken in the Polish children, New Zealand received other Poles in the immediate post-war years: family members, displaced persons and former soldiers, even including a few Warsaw Uprising veterans, all seeking refuge from Stalinist persecutions. New Zealanders came to understand the cruel nature of communism in Poland imposed by the Soviet Union. According to historians, credible calculations put the total number of victims of Soviet repression from 1939 until after 1944 at 566,000 Poles (arrested, deported and murdered). An estimated 259,000 of victims of repressions can be identified by name, using the sources available today.

We also remember the actions of Robert Muldoon's National Government in 1981 after martial law was imposed by Polish communists at the instigation of the Kremlin, in response to the "Solidarity" movement. While joining other Western countries in attempts to

discourage the potential military intervention of the USSR in Poland, New Zealand agreed to receive 300 political refugees from Poland and organised assistance (initiated by the Polish community and trade unions).

Reflecting the historical circumstances that brought many Poles to this country, the Polish Embassy and the Polish Community in New Zealand have worked over the decades since World War II to keep alive and acknowledge in dignified ways the tragic history of Poland as one of the first victims of two totalitarian regimes. It is disappointing in the 21st century that this task has taken on renewed urgency and importance.

In a statement on 29 December 2019, the Prime Minister of Poland Mateusz Morawiecki pointed out: “Eighty years after World War II started, attempts are made to rehabilitate Stalin for political goals of today’s President of Russia (...). In Poland there are no monuments of Hitler or Stalin. Such monuments stood here only when they were erected by the aggressors and perpetrators – the Third Reich and the Soviet Russia. The Russian people – the greatest victim of Stalin, one of the cruellest criminals in the history of the world – deserve the truth. We firmly believe that Russians are a nation of free people – and that they reject Stalinism, even when President Putin’s government is trying to rehabilitate it. There can be no consent to turning perpetrators into victims (...). Together we must preserve the truth – in the name of the memory about the victims and for the good of our common future.”

Through false narratives, the authorities of the Russian Federation are seeking to erase the joint effort of Polish and Russian experts and historians, as well as the legacy of President Vladimir Putin’s predecessors, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, who struggled for truth and reconciliation in Polish-Russian relations. “A reliable and critical look at history, instead of propaganda, would allow us to pay tribute to millions of victims of Stalinist repressions”, as the Polish Foreign Ministry noted on 21 December 2019.

The Sejm of the Republic of Poland also condemned the provocative statements attempting to hold Poland liable for the Second World War. In a resolution adopted by acclamation on 9 January 2020, the assembled deputies affirmed: “A nation’s greatness and international relations may not be built upon lies and by falsifying history”. The deputies paid homage to the victims of Nazi-Soviet totalitarianism, urging that the story of their martyrdom should never be falsified or instrumentalised. The Polish Sejm concluded its consideration of this issue with an appeal for joint reflection on the principles of mutual respect, partnership and good neighborliness. I can only join the Polish parliamentarians in this call.

Zbigniew Gniatkowski
Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to New Zealand