

The 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II: Poland's perspective

Address by HE Mr Zbigniew Gniatkowski, Ambassador of the Republic of Poland
at the seminar "Commemorating the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II:
From tragic history to a brighter future"
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Today I wish to commemorate all victims of the horrific war. We also pay tribute to all of those who fought against two totalitarian systems in Europe where the war began.

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, Germany invaded Poland, which was the beginning of World War II. On 17 September, the Soviets assaulted Eastern Poland.

Poland was the first country to resist Nazi Germany in 1939. Adolf Hitler, a few days prior to the invasion, said to his army commanders: "Destruction of Poland is our primary task, (...) show no mercy. Be brutal". Several countries, including France, Great Britain, and New Zealand, 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. Poland was Adolf Hitler's first victim. The Nazis murdered three million Polish Jews and three million other Polish civilians. In concentration and death camps established and administrated by Germans 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.

Under Nazi German occupation in Poland the death penalty was imposed not only for joining the underground movement or hiding Jewish countrymen; even those involved in trading were put at risk of being executed. Food shortages, racial segregation, humiliation, the fear of being sent to labor camps – that is what people had to deal with every day.

On the other side, in former Eastern Poland, mass-scale arrests and executions of intelligentsia were carried out by the Soviets. It is estimated that in 1940-41, Soviet Russia was responsible for deporting 1.5 million innocent Polish civilians into slavery, in Siberia and other areas. In 1940, 22,000 Polish prisoners of war were shot to death in Katyń and other sites, in violation of war-time 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 NZ. 42 years ago, at the church of St Mary of the Angels in Wellington, the Polish Community founded a memorial Plaque.

Poland's defeat in September 1939 didn't put an end to fighting at home. The Polish resistance movement made it possible to create the biggest underground secret state in Europe. The Polish government organised state and military structures of the Republic of Poland in exile. The Polish Armed Forces carried on fighting abroad – in all campaigns until the very last days of the war – in France, Norway, Battle of Britain, Africa, Italy, Normandy, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

You may know that before the war Poles cracked the Enigma code and passed on their work to the British, laying the foundations for Bletchley Park's success, which shortened the war by about 2 years.

Polish pilots gained great fame through their participation in the Battle of Britain in 1940. The best airborne unit was the Polish Squadron 303. New Zealanders made up the 2nd largest foreign contingent, after the Polish one.

In 1941, the Polish Government in exile established the Consulate-General of Poland in Wellington. Consul Kazimierz Wodzicki was a great patriot raising awareness of the NZ society about Poland's struggle to survive the war. In 1943, he 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 Consul's wife Maria Wodzicka, the Polish Army League was established in Palmerston North. 10,000 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 1944, the Monte Cassino battle helped forge the reputation of the Māori Battalion as well as the fame of the Polish Second Corps under General Władysław Anders. Many Polish soldiers in the Anders' Army who eventually captured Monte Cassino were earlier released from the Soviet prisons after Hitler's invasion of Russia in 1941. At that time they saved thousands of Polish civilians, including orphaned children, while leaving the USSR in 1942. In 1944, the Polish Government in exile and the NZ Government of Peter Fraser agreed that a large group of Polish children would be invited to NZ. I am extremely pleased to see several of those "children", known as Polish Children of Pahiataua, tonight on this special occasion.

At the end of the war, in February 1945, at the conference in Yalta, the great powers decided the shape of post-war Europe. Poland found itself in a zone exclusively controlled by the Soviet Union. The massive persecutions against the freedom fighters of the Home Army began in Poland. 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 following the Kremlin's orders. A communist court sentenced to death Witold Pilecki who volunteered to organise resistance in the Nazi German concentration camp Auschwitz, 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. We remember secret heroes – resistance fighters, couriers, intelligence agents supporting the Allies - Pilecki, Jan Karski (who met with President Roosevelt to inform him about the Holocaust and the resistance in Poland), Krystyna Skarbek (called Churchill's favorite spy). We recall the Polish diplomats in Switzerland and Japan, as well as many brave people helping their Jewish neighbours and countrymen - Irena Sendler and Janusz Korczak, and many others recognised as "Righteous among the Nations" by the Yad Vashem Institute.

After the war, Western countries laboured to bring about reconciliation of nations, determined to deepen the European 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. It was not until the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope, the “Solidarność” revolution in 1980 and the collapse of communism in the late 1980s, that Poland could begin to join the process of European integration, a dream of several generations of Poles.

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. The 1st of May 2004 saw the accession of Poland to the European Union. Five years earlier Poland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

A few weeks ago in this room, the Secretary General of NATO speaking of challenges for peace today and emphasising the fundamental rights of nations to self-determination.

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, alongside other democratic nations, including New Zealand, supported Polish “Solidarity” movement being oppressed by communists. Germany was also one of the advocates of Poland on its way to NATO and the EU. Today our close cooperation bring benefits in many areas.

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. 80 years on, Poland continues to play the role of a 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 United Nations family.

In the UN Security Council, Poland demonstrates its commitments as a strong advocate of fundamental freedoms and human rights. The recent attacks on mosques in Christchurch and then the targeting of Christian communities in Sri Lanka have reminded us, in a tragic way, 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 the 22nd of 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 mutual understanding.

I am particularly pleased to team up in organising this commemorative seminar with the Centre for Strategic Studies and the Holocaust Centre. The primary role of the former is to help us better understand the world and to educate new generations. The latter is mainly focused on remembrance and education which is a very important mission. As the Polish Embassy we also often take on this role and duty. That’s why today we present a special exhibition dedicated to WWII and its tragic history as a reminder.

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