

In one of the most famous photographs of that time, the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Council of People's Commissars, Vyacheslav Molotov, sits behind a desk. He holds a fountain pen in his hand. In front of him, there is a printed sheet of paper. A man leans down from the side, giving him further sheets of paper to sign. The German equivalent of Molotov, Joachim von Ribbentrop, stands in the back, slightly lowering his eyeght. The other officers also have serious faces. Joseph Stalin is the only smiling person. Thanks to the agreement that would become known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Hitler was given all he wanted. Yet, it was Stalin who gained the most from the Treaty of August 23, 1939.



Lithuania, and probably also Bessarabia. "The protocol states that the Germans and Russians would decide on the possible creation of some rump Polish state in the future. In 1939, Hitler allowed such a possibility, but since Stalin was not completely interested in it, he abandoned this idea," emphasizes Prof. Kornat.

News about the project of the next partition of Poland quickly reached the West. The first to learn about it were the Americans, who then shared the information with Great Britain, which passed it on to France. The only government that remained unaware until the end was the Warsaw cabinet.

Pact of Illusions

The pact with Stalin allowed Hitler to gain much greater access to Soviet natural resources, led to the isolation of Poland, demonstrated to Western leaders that defending Poland is not really worth the effort, and, in the perspective of conflicts with them, pushed away the threat of fighting on two fronts. "However, Stalin gained more," says Prof. Kornat. He was able to occupy large territories without starting a war with the West. More importantly, though, while standing aside, he would throw a match on the powder keg, which at that time was Europe. "Stalin stood by Lenin's theory of

imperialist war. According to that theory, the capitalist states of Western Europe would sooner or later take action against each other; and after the devastating war, the Soviet Union would enter the arena, subjugate them, and install communism," explains Prof. Kornat. During the meeting of the Politburo of the Soviet party, Stalin argued: "it is in the interest of the USSR – the workers' homeland – that a war breaks out between the Reich and the capitalist Anglo-French bloc (...). For this reason, it is imperative that we agree to conclude the pact proposed by Germany, and then work in such a way that this war, once it is declared, will last as long as possible."

Stalin finally wanted to subjugate not only the Allied States, but also Germany. Hitler never abandoned the dreams of expanding the living space, Lebensraum, that Germans should look for in the East. "That is why both sides were aware that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a temporary solution," emphasizes Prof. Kornat.

When on September 1 German troops attacked Poland, and seventeen days later the Red Army divisions entered Polish territory from the east, it became quite clear that the war would be long. ■

Eukasz Zaleski, a journalist, writes for Polska Zbrojnia

First WWII Victims

Less than two weeks before the invasion of Poland, on August 22, 1939, at the briefing of the higher Wehrmacht commanders in Obersalzberg, Adolf Hitler uttered significant words that affected the nature of the upcoming war's activities.

“Our strength consists in our speed and in our brutality. Genghis Khan led millions of women and children to slaughter – with premeditation and a happy heart. History sees in him solely the founder of a state. It's a matter of indifference to me what a weak western European civilization will say about me. I have issued the command – and I'll have anybody who utters but one word of criticism executed by a firing squad – that our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy. Accordingly, I have placed my death-head formation [SS-Totenkopfverbände] in readiness – for the present only in the East – with orders to them to send to death mercilessly and without compassion, men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language. Only thus shall we gain the living space (Lebensraum) which we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” [cit. by Lochner, Louis Paul (1942). *What About Germany?*. Dodd, Mead & Company. pp. 11–12].

A leading role in Blitzkrieg, as the German tactics was with time called, was given to the air force. The Luftwaffe was the eye in the Führer's apple, the embodiment – besides the armored troops – of his vision of the war of the future. The aviators were to be the avant-garde of that brutal attack, as General Albert

Kesselring stressed in his speech to the graduates of the military aviation schools: “As you circulate over the enemy's cities and fields, you should suppress all your feelings. You must tell yourself that the beings you see are not human. The only people are the fighting Germans. For the German Luftwaffe, there are no so-called non-military objects or emotional considerations. Enemy states should be wiped off the surface of the earth.”

Wieluń, a town of 15,000 inhabitants located twenty kilometers from the Polish-German border of that time, could not boast of industrial or military facilities, apart from a small sugar factory. It was also not a transport hub; there were no units of General Juliusz Rómmel's “Łódź” Army operating in this area, and no military fortifications were built around the town. Theoretically, many people could feel relatively safe, and count on the fact that the main border fights would avoid their hometown. However, thanks to General Wolfram von Richthofen, the former Commander of the Condor Legion and the German Assault Air Force Commander, it was different in 1939. It was Richthofen – the cousin of the famous “Red Baron,” the German Ace of the Great War, Manfred von Richthofen – who led the air raid on the Spanish Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Now, his subordinates were to be reminded

POLAND AGAINST AGGRESSION OF GERMANY AND RUSSIA IN SEPTEMBER 1939

