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MINNPOST

For Poland, shadow of 1939 hangs over today's events

By **Nick Hayes** | 09/01/09



REUTERS/Adam Chelstowski

Soldiers stand at attention today during ceremonies at the World War II monument at Westerplatte, outside of Gdansk, Poland.

Today, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have come to the Polish city of Gdansk to stand at the scene of one of their countries' greatest crimes.

Seventy years ago, Gdansk was the Free City of Danzig — an autonomous region under the League of Nations, an enclave surrounded by Poland and carved out of the former German East Prussia, and an ethnic mixture of Poles and Germans. On Sept. 1, 1939, at 4:45 a.m., the German battleship Schleswig-Holstein opened fire on a Polish military garrison in the Westerplatte peninsula of Danzig. The Germans expanded the invasion of Poland with attacks from the north, west and south. Britain declared war on Germany on Sept. 3. France followed Britain's lead a few days later. World War II had begun.

A week before the German attack, Germany and the Soviet Union had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact pledging each to be neutral in the event the other went to war and inviting each to take its share of Poland. Germany would devour the west, leaving eastern Poland to the Soviet Union. On Sept. 17, the Soviet Union attacked Poland from the east. Overwhelmed, the Polish forces re-grouped in the south to wait for military support from Britain and France that never came.



On Oct. 6, Poland surrendered to the German occupation of its central and western regions that would last for six years, leave more than 6 million Poles dead, reduce its cities to rubble and abandon its Jewish population to death by starvation in the ghettos of its cities or the horrors of Auschwitz and the death camps of eastern Europe.

In eastern Poland, the Soviet occupation had its own record of atrocities — from the 20,000 Polish officers massacred in 1940 at the Katyn Forest to a campaign of arrests. Every second family in Soviet-occupied Poland lost a family member to imprisonment, deportation, or

execution.

From Vladimir Putin, we can expect the confession of a few sins but also the commission of a few sins of omission. On Monday, in an interview with a Polish newspaper, he acknowledged that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a "crime" and "immoral." However, he compared Stalin's action to the cynicism that led Britain and France to sign the **Munich Pact** and sacrifice Czechoslovakia to Germany. He indiscreetly added that Poland was no different from the rest when it annexed two provinces of Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Munich Pact.

Putin did not make the one comparison the Poles are demanding. His remarks have managed to unite at least for the day Polish opinion from **the nationalist right to the liberal left**.

Both demand much more from Putin. Above all else, the Poles want a public acknowledgement and apology from Putin that the crimes of Stalin were comparable to the atrocities of Hitler.

They want an admission that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was the immediate cause of the war in 1939. They also want apologies from Putin for a long list of crimes that came in 1939-40 — the massacres at Katyn; the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland, the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, portions of Ukraine and Romania; and the deportations that came with the Soviet occupation. If you remember the Polish leader who presided over martial law in the 1980s — Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, you may recall one detail in his appearance. He always wore dark glasses. As a child in 1940, he was deported to the Kazakh Soviet Republic (Kazakhstan today) where he did forced labor in the mines and suffered permanent damage to his eyes. Even those Poles — like Jaruzelski, who later collaborated with the Soviet regime — carried scars from the Soviet occupation.

This argument over the past is really an argument about the present. Putin will concede no more about the events of 1939. His regime rests upon the denial of Stalin's crimes and the re-packaging of

old Soviet myths about its past. It justifies his strong hand in the Kremlin, its claims of a "privileged sphere of interest" in the nations carved out of the former Soviet Union and its determination to keep NATO out of Ukraine and Georgia.

The Poles see the shadow of 1939 in 2009. They see shades of the Munich Pact in the West's accommodation to last year's invasion of Georgia by the Russians and their de facto annexation of Georgian territory. They resist Germany's suggestions that NATO's eastward expansion be postponed. They are suspicious about what President Obama meant in July when he called for a "re-start" of U.S.-Russian relations or why his administration chose last week to announce it was re-considering the deployment of missile interceptors — the Missile Shield — in Poland and the Czech Republic. The decision of the Obama administration to send a relatively low-level delegation led by National Security Adviser James Jones to represent the United States in Gdansk today is a signal to Warsaw that, unlike the previous administration, Obama does not want to be part of Warsaw's feud with Moscow.

There's a danger to this use of the past. As the novelist William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Poland exaggerates the Russian threat of 2009, wrongly comparing it to Stalin's Russia of 1939. Russia over-reacts to NATO and the Missile Defense Shield viewing the West of 2009 through the lens of Germany in another year of WWII — 1941.

In the West and especially in the United States, we no longer argue about the causes of WWII in Europe and view the events from the perspective of a rather simple and agreed-upon narrative. The problem with this narrative is that it is just credible enough to be dangerously wrong. We use the word "appeasement," taken from British Prime Minister **Neville Chamberlain's** justification of the Munich Pact, as a rhetorical bludgeon against those who advocate a diplomatic, rather than a military, solution to international crises. We see in every hostile, petty dictator a totalitarian on the scale of a Hitler. We see in every conflict an apocalyptic battle for the survival of civilization and expect our leaders to play the role of a latter-day Churchill.

It is not just a problem for the East Europeans. It is true for us as well. World War II is not even past.

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