

Defensive war 1939

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2021-11-29, 06:47

The Mirror Cracked from Side to Side. Poland from the perspective of Soviet authorities and citizens in the wake of and during Soviet aggression on Poland in September 1939.



Evoking repugnance towards the victim of an armed attack by an aggressor is as old as war itself. Rarely does the aggressor explicitly admit that their intention is to gain land and its riches or capture the inhabitants of a given territory.

Most often the "blame" for aggression, which is not referred to as aggression, is transferred from the attacker onto the victim, to whom the worst features and actions are attributed. It is often stated that the aggressor simply had no other choice but to "respond by using armed force".

The situation was no different in the case of the two worst totalitarianisms of the 20th century: the German Third Reich and the Bolshevik Soviet Union. Hitler attempted to justify the invasion of Poland by creating a myth of Polish "provocations", which - as he informed the Soviet Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Vyacheslav Molotov on 16 August 1939 - "... Germany is determined not to tolerate indefinitely" [1]. Also the Soviet Union, in order to justify the aggression directed against Poland on 17 September 1939 in agreement with Hitler, fabricated an image of the victim of assault,

which was to convincingly give grounds for the said deed in the eyes of the world. Perhaps the most astounding element of this image was the claim that ... the victim of the assault does not exist.

The reconstruction of the image of Poland fabricated in the summer of 1939 by the Soviet authorities ought to begin with an otherwise obvious reminder that the Stalinist Soviet Union was a police state. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Soviet political police - NKVD - played a significant role in creating the image of the USSR's western neighbour. In 1939 - it is not known exactly when, but most likely shortly prior to attacking Poland - the NKVD had prepared a document containing a detailed analysis of Poland's political system. It was stated that the characteristic feature of Poland is "the multiplicity of parties, political groups and trends" [2]. The ruling camp of "Polish fascism" - which referred to either the ruling party or to Poland as a whole - was, according to the document, the Camp of National Unity. The evaluation of subsequent parties functioning on the Polish political scene was equally negative. The National Party was portrayed through its desire to introduce a "dictatorship" of the Polish nation and the Catholic Church in Poland. The Peasant Party was described as a "large kulak-peasant party" [3]. It must be admitted, however, that the NKVD noticed that the Party was in opposition to the "Piłsudski government". The Polish Socialist Party and the Jewish BUND were defined as parties which played a "treacherous role" towards the "oppressed proletariat" (in addition, the BUND was attributed "anti-Soviet-Trotskyist" and anti-German orientation). As for social organizations operating in Poland, they also did not find recognition in the eyes of the analysts from the NKVD. The Association of Settlers was characterized particularly critically on the grounds that almost all members of this organization, referred to as "chauvinist-patriotic", "are police informers and deal with the recruitment of spies sent to the USSR" [4]. The negative image of Polish political parties and social organizations presented in this document should not be surprising; from the point of view of the single-party Soviet system, all of them - the "multiplicity of parties, political groups and trends" - were unacceptable.

In the realities of the Soviet Union of the 1930s, however, the final say in all matters belonged not to the NKVD but to Stalin. The characteristics of Poland, short but eloquent, was presented by Stalin on 7 September 1939 in the Kremlin, during a meeting with his closest colleagues (including the Secretary General of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov). He began by remarking that historical Poland was a national state, which is why the "revolutionaries" defended it against enslavement and partitions. Today's Poland - continued Stalin - is a fascist state which oppresses Ukrainians and Belarusians. Therefore, the destruction of Poland means that there will be one bourgeois-fascist state less. "What would be wrong with this," Stalin asked rhetorically, "if as a result of the destruction of Poland, we spread the socialist system to new areas and new people? " [5].

Stalin's recommended interpretation of the perception of Poland presented by him on the seventh day of Germany's aggression against Poland quickly spread to the world. The next day the Presidium of the Comintern Executive Committee sent the directive to communist parties around the world, proclaiming that the international proletariat would not defend "fascist Poland" which oppressed other nationalities [6].

The article entitled *On the internal causes of Poland's military defeat* published on 14 September 1939 in the Moscow 'Pravda', was of particular significance for the Kremlin's creation of a very negative image of Poland. Having provided the diagnosis of why Poland had been defeated as early as 10 days after the outbreak of war, the "explanation" of this state of affairs was presented. It was said that such a rapid defeat of the Polish state cannot be explained solely by German dominance in the field of new technologies and the lack of aid for Poland provided by England and France. The main reason for the Polish state "falling apart" was said to have been its national policy. Poland's ruling circles were said to have oppressed national minorities, in particular Ukrainians and Belarusians, and transformed "Western Ukraine and Western Belarus" [7] into a "rights-free colony" brutally exploited by Polish landowners. This type of policy made it impossible

to consolidate the multinational Polish army, which resulted in a military defeat. In order to further stress the exaggerated, supposedly dominating influence of policies towards national minorities on the outcome of the struggle with Germany, the article presents manipulated data on their numbers: There were supposed to have been 8 million Ukrainians in Poland (in fact 5 million) and 3 million Belarusians (in fact 1.4). [8] There is no need to mention that the whole diagnosis of Poland's defeat in the war with Germany was pure demagoguery: in 1939, the German armed forces were the most powerful land army in the world, which alone could not be resisted effectively by any other. It is worth noting, however, that contrary to the statements contained in the article, soldiers of non-Polish nationality mobilized to the Polish army fought fiercely in its ranks against the Germans. Cases of their evasion from mobilization or desertions on their part did occur, but had a limited scope. [9]

The Polish Embassy in the Soviet Union assumed that the article published in "Pravda" was "preparing the ground for a possible decision" [10]. It was not exactly the right diagnosis: the decision to strike Poland had already been made, and the article was meant to prepare the ground for making the news public. The appearance of press reports concerning an uprising which broke out in Eastern Lesser Poland, and the Belarusians in Poland initiating riots and seeking to create an independent republic [11] published in the Moscow press on the same day were, as the Embassy noted, meant to serve the same purpose. This misleading information was supposed to - as one can imagine - portray Poland as a country not only defeated in the west by the Germans, but also overpowered by "revolutionary trends" - in the east.

On the night of 16-17 September 1939, the Polish Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Wacław Grzybowski, was summoned to the seat of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, where he was read a note signed by Molotov, justifying the decision taken by the

Soviet authorities to send Soviet troops to Poland. It was stated that the Polish-German war had revealed the internal bankruptcy of the Polish state: Poland had lost all industrial districts and cultural centers, Warsaw as the capital of Poland did not exist, and the Polish government had decayed and showed no signs of life. This meant that the Polish state had ceased to exist. Poland - deprived of its leadership - the note continued - had become "an easy field of all kinds of dangerous and unexpected actions that could become a threat to the USSR" [12]. The population of Ukrainian and Belarusian descent was defenseless and left to its own fate. In view of the above circumstances, the Soviet government ordered the armies to cross the border and take the life and property of the people of "Western Ukraine and Western Belarus" into their care.

All statements contained in the note, except the fact that the Soviet army had received orders to cross the border with Poland, were false. Poland had its own government, its capital was not seized, and Germany occupied only the central and western parts of the country. The eastern part of Poland, with such centers as Lwów and Vilnius, was free from the aggressor's army. In fact, even a full conquest by Germany would not have given the Soviet Union any right to declare Poland a non-existent country. According to international law, in such a situation, the Polish state would be under occupation. This would have nothing to do with the liquidation of statehood.

Nonetheless, the Soviet authorities made sure that their version of Poland as a country that had allegedly ceased to exist reached the international community and Soviet society: Molotov's note was sent to all states with which the USSR maintained diplomatic relations, it was also printed in the central Soviet press.

Molotov's radio appearance of 17 September 1939 also served to propagate this line of reasoning. It largely repeated the content of the note, which had been read out to the Polish Ambassador the previous night. Molotov said that the Polish-German war meant that the Polish state had actually ceased to exist: it was not known where the Polish

government resided, Warsaw was no longer the capital of the state, and all industrial areas and most of the big cities had been lost. Poland had become a "convenient place for any randomness and surprises", which may pose a threat to the USSR. The head of the Soviet government further argued that the USSR government cannot remain indifferent to the fate of "brothers and sisters" - Belarusians and Ukrainians who had formerly been nations deprived of rights, and now had been left to their fate, which is why " he ordered the Supreme Command of the Red Army to give orders to the troops to cross the border and take protection of the lives and property of the people of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus "[13].

The invasion of Poland was justified not only at the central but also at the local level. For instance, in "Sovietskoy Sibiri", the daily newspaper of Novosibirsk Oblast (published in Novosibirsk), providing "help" to Ukrainians and Belarusians was justified by claiming that the nations of "Western Belarus" and "Western Ukraine" were "separated" from the Soviet Union only as a result of "historical injustice" [14]. Although not stated bluntly, this was a clear reference to the 1920 defeat in the war with Poles and the border that was established as a result.

Preparing in mid-September 1939 to fulfill the arrangements of the pact with Germany, the Soviet authorities also made sure that the "proper" image of Poland would also reach the soldiers of the Red Army. In the battle order for the Staff of the Belarusian Front of 16 September 1939, the Western neighbour of the USSR was presented as a "land-capitalist" state ruled by a "clique", which had allegedly initiated the war against Germany. [15] The order issued two days later by the War Council of the Front presented Poland not only as a "unjust" social system, but also "illegally" exercising power over its eastern territories, which is evidenced by the following statement: "The Great Socialist Revolution gave the Polish nation the right to self-

determination. The Polish landowners and capitalists, after suppressing the revolutionary movement of workers and peasants, seized Western Belarus and Western Ukraine, deprived these nations of their Soviet homeland, and ensnared them in the chains of slavery and oppression "[16]. This "historical" introduction was followed by a diagnosis of the current state of Poland: "In Western Ukraine and Belarus," it was written," a revolutionary movement is spreading. Outbreaks and uprisings of Belarusian and Ukrainian peasants in Poland have begun. The working class and the peasantry of Poland are uniting to break the back of their bloody oppressors "[17]. As can be seen in the order under discussion, Poland, and strictly speaking its eastern lands, was presented as a country almost overpowered by a revolution.

It was a completely mystified picture. If anti-Polish outbreaks on the part of Belarusians and Ukrainians occurred in the country, it was only after the Red Army entered Poland. Some of these incidents were also inspired by communists [18]. Similarly, on the same day, the commander of the Belarusian Communist Party, Mikhail Kovalov, issued an order to his subordinate army, which stated: "(...) for 20 years, the Police boots of Piłsudski's supporters had trodden the family lands of our Belarusian and Ukrainian brothers with impunity. These lands never belonged to Poles. These indigenous Belarusian and Ukrainian lands were seized by Polish generals and landowners on those days when the Soviet republic, defending itself against numerous counter-revolutionary forces, was still not strong enough "[19]. The version of a "forceful takeover" of "Western Ukraine" and "Western Belarus" by the Polish state was also promoted in the Polish-language press published by the Red Army entering Poland. In "Słowo Żołnierza" [Soldier's Word"], a newspaper published by the Political Board of the Ukrainian Front, it was written (20 September 1939): "In 1920, with the support of the Triple Entente states, Poland invaded the territory of Ukraine and ruthlessly seized Galicia and part of Belarus " [20] .

Of course, the claim that the eastern lands of the Republic of Poland were "forcefully" seized by Poland were untrue. The incorporation of these lands into Polish territory was not the result of armed

annexation, but the act of international law: a peace treaty signed between Poland and the Soviet Union on 18 March 1921 in Riga. The Polish eastern border was also recognized by the Western powers: the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors of the Principal Allied and Associated Powers with regard to this matter was made on 15 March 1923.

The command of the Red Army also created a mystified image of the attacked country with the non-Polish population of the Republic of Poland in mind; this image, portraying the country's fate under Polish rule as grim, was to justify and legitimize the "liberating" mission of the Red Army. And so in the address "Belarusian Brothers", published on 17 September 1939 by the aforementioned commandant Kovalov, it was claimed that for twenty years the Belarusian population living in Poland had been oppressed by Polish masters: landowners and capitalists who took control of their land, forests and pastures did everything to make beggars out of them. All Belarusian schools in the area were closed down, depriving Belarusians of the opportunity to learn their mother tongue [21]. It can be stated that although landowners' estates included about one-quarter of the land of the so-called Western Belarus, during the entire period of the Second Polish Republic's existence, their area decreased, due to the parceling of land systematically passed into peasant hands. As far as the issue of poverty is concerned, the entire population of the area, not just Belarusians, were affected. Poverty (in the area) resulted not from the fact that - as it was demagogically stated in the proclamation - the masters and landowners "sucked the last blood" out of the Belarusians. It was caused by the backwardness resulting from the policy of the Russian partitioner, poor soils, war damage and poor harvest. [22].

Soldiers of the Polish Army were also the target of the fictitious image of Poland promulgated by the Red Army. On the day of the aggression, Komandarm Kovalov issued a summons to the soldiers of the Polish Army, calling for them not to mount resistance against the Red Army. He justified this call by conjuring an image of Poland ruled by landowners and capitalists, for whose interests Polish soldiers should

not shed blood. Of course, in the proclamation, the leitmotiv of Soviet propaganda was repeated: Poland was the oppressor of the non-Polish nationalities living within its borders, and the Polish ruling circles sowed discord between Poles, Belarusians and Ukrainians [23].

The crowning achievement of the anti-Polish campaign conducted by the Soviet authorities from mid-September 1939 was the introductory article published in "Pravda" on 29 September 1939. In this text, Poland, defined as "artificially inflated, living from the plunder of other lands", and in addition "noble", was presented as a tool of "pounding" policy pursued by England and France towards the Soviet Union. [24]

It is worth paying attention to the anachronistic perception of Poland as a state dominated by the gentry after the World War I. Already in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 17 March 1921, it was unequivocally established (Article 96) that "the Republic of Poland does not recognize family or state privileges, as well as any coats of arms, family titles and other, except scientific, official and professional" [25]. This regulation meant the actual liquidation of the nobility in Poland.

The image of "noble" Poland was promoted not only in the "Pravda", but also in local press. For example: on 24 September 1939 in the previously mentioned Novosibirsk "Sovietskoy Sibiri" an article was published: "The struggle of the Ukrainian people to liberate themselves from the oppression of the Polish nobility and join Ukraine to Russia", in which the history of Ukrainians was presented as an endless battle with their "eternal enemy - Polish nobility "[26].

And what was the image of Poland in Soviet society? Was it simply a reflection of what was being promoted by the omnipresent propaganda? Or did the society of the USSR create a different image of their Western neighbour?

While considering this issue, it is impossible not to notice that very

little is known about the views prevailing in Soviet society. In the Soviet Union, there was no freedom of press or speech: even a private expression of opinions other than those imposed by the authorities was classified as "anti-Soviet agitation" and was subject to criminal repression (most often being sent to a forced labour camp for several years). The NKVD reports provide the most information about the moods and views of the population: the political police closely monitored the "reactions of the population" to the party and government policy, recording "anti-Soviet" statements with particular meticulousness.

On the basis of these reports, we can cautiously conclude that the pact with Germany caused various reactions among the people of the Soviet Union: from uncritical acceptance of the "party line", through surprise and even shock, to harsh criticism of the agreement with "fascists". In this context, opinions about Poland were also voiced. For example, a lecturer at the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, Grinfeld, an enthusiast of the agreement, emphasized in his statements that signing the pact with Germany was an excellent move because it meant the isolation of Poland. [27] The critics of the system, who included Kuchperuk from Kiev, assessed that signing the pact with Germany meant selling Poland to the Germans, which was no different to selling Czechoslovakia to Germany in Munich by England and France [28].

Subsequent opinions regarding the pact with Germany and Poland appeared just after the invasion of Poland by the Third Reich. Once again they were divided. Those accepting the pact with Germany indicated that without it the Soviet Union would be forced to fight "(...) for some Poles, our former enemies" [29]. Hitler's attempt to take over Poland was by some interpreted as something positive - it would lead to the creation of a common border with Germany and the merger of the two strongest countries in Europe. Others, on the contrary, believed that although Poles were a "mean nation", being neighbours with Germany was no better, or they went even further, assuming that Poland's seizure was a step towards the attack on the Soviet Union

planned by Hitler [30]. Disoriented, unaware of the anti-Polish conspiracy of Germany and the Soviet Union, Soviet society sometimes even expressed the opinion that the approaching of German troops to the borders of the USSR was the result of England and France's decision to hand over Poland to Germany and in this way lead to Hitler's clash with the Soviet Union.

Germany's attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 aroused in Soviet society primarily compassion for the victim of aggression. Konstantin Simonov, in September 1939, a young (24) war correspondent in Mongolia (later a well-known Soviet writer) recalled: "When the war between Germany and Poland broke out, all the compassion felt by myself and my colleagues from the military newspaper went out to Poland. It was a situation where the stronger side attacked the weaker one, and a non-aggression pact is one thing but who would have wanted the victory of fascist Germany in the beginning of a European war, let alone an easy victory? "[31] . Another noteworthy voice of compassion with Poland belonged to the agronomist Galimsky, who on the 8th day of the German-Polish war said: "Poor, unhappy country. It cannot build its independence. Finally it worked. For 20 years [Poland - S.K.] has been building its life and now the country is dying. Poor Polish nation. Poland was destroyed by the old war [i.e. World War I - S.K.], and now is being destroyed by the new one "[32].

Voices of compassion for Poland were heard even among the staff of the Red Army. In the political report of 13 September 1939 on the situation in the 13th Rifle Corps, it was stated that many of its commanders did not understand the international situation. A (rhetorical) question posed by the chief of staff of this unit, Colonel. Boloznyev: "Who do we have more sympathy for, for Poland or Germany?" [33] can serve as an example of the disorientation of the soldiers.

As you can see, Soviet society to a large extent "did not keep up" with the policy of the leadership of the state. Brought up in previous years in the anti-fascist spirit, Soviet society was still hostile to the Third

Reich, which – alongside Japan – was considered the main enemy of the Soviet Union. Although the average resident of the Stalin state did not like Poland too much – the propaganda that the Polish state is a threat and an element of the "capitalist encirclement" in which the Soviet Union is located fulfilling its purpose – the reluctance towards the Polish neighbour was not as strong as it was towards Germany.

We do not have information on the public reception of the aforementioned article "*On the internal causes of Poland's military defeat.*" We know, however, that the argument about the need to help "the Belarusian and Ukrainian brothers " [34] presented in Molotov's radio interview of 17 September 1939 proved to be most convincing for the Soviet public.

A resident of Moscow recalled: "When the Soviet troops entered the Belarusian and Ukrainian lands of Poland, we did not doubt the Party's official standpoint that this action was undertaken to protect the inhabitants of these areas" [35]. The aforementioned writer Konstantin Simonov reacted to the information that in connection with the "disintegration of Poland" Soviet troops entered "Western Belarus and Western Ukraine" in a similar manner - as he writes - he accepted this "with a feeling of unconditional joy" [36]. How did he justify it? In general, Poland's bad relations with the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s, for which - as is clear from his statements - he blamed solely Poland. The entering of the Red Army into the aforementioned lands and their "liberation" was therefore considered "just", the more so because if the Soviet Union had not taken control over them, the Germans would have. The universality of this type of reaction is evidenced by the record in the journal kept by a member of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, the minister and geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, from which it follows that "everyone" accepts the occupation of "Western Ukraine and Belarus." In his commentary on this fact, there is a great Russian imperial ideology: (...) Stalin's - Molotov's politics - wrote Vernadsky - are realistic and it seems to me that they are just and state oriented"[37].

And so Dragomanov, a translator working in the editorial office of the "Sztuka" Publishing House in Kiev, expressed the view that the entry of the Red Army into Poland was "In fact, the fourth partition of Poland, made in accordance with the agreement between Stalin and Hitler" [38]. The aspirant at the Folklore Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Lanovoy, evaluated it quite similarly, saying: "What will the whole world say? They will say that we are partitioning Poland together with fascist Germany. [39] And here is another statement, an engineer working at the main post office in Kiev, Kiewlicz, completely rejecting the official interpretation of the "liberation" of Ukrainians and Belarusians: "The Soviet Union's seizure of Western Ukraine and Belarus was agreed with Germany at the time of signing the pact [on non-aggression - SK]. It is not giving brotherly help, but taking someone else's territory "[40]. As can be seen from the above, more shrewdly thinking individuals were able to work out the existence of a secret agreement with Germany regarding the division of Poland. Given the fact that the USSR was a police state, we can safely say that there were quite a lot of critical opinions on the invasion of the Soviet army on Polish territory, seen as aggression and the seizure of someone else's land.

Many statements of the citizens of the USSR which can be found in the NKVD reports were in line with the official propaganda which claimed that as a result of the "liberation", the inhabitants of Poland would find themselves in a land of freedom and prosperity. However, there were also opposing views . For example, a student of the Kiev Medical Institute, Homerbart, said on 24 September 1939: "It would have been better not to free the nations of Western Ukraine and Belarus from the oppression of [Polish] masters, because the situation is not that much better here. They are going to realize this soon"[41].

This article can be summarized in several points:

1. The essence of the image of Poland created by the Soviet authorities in the described period was presenting it as a state that was defeated by Germany and "ceased to exist" not because of the military

advantage of the German army, but due to its internal weaknesses - first and foremost the oppressing of national minorities;

2. The version propagated by the authorities of the USSR as of 14 September 1939, that Poland had ceased to exist as a state, and that therefore the Soviet Union ought to help the Ukrainians and the Belarusians living in its territory, did not reflect the actual state of affairs. It was intentionally created to remove the accusation of an armed attack from the Soviet Union. This is clearly the result of Molotov's speech of 10 September 1939, who in an interview with the German Ambassador in Moscow, Werner von Schulenburg, openly stated that " the Soviet government intends to take advantage of the further advance of German troops to declare that Poland is breaking into pieces, and as a result, the Soviet Union should come to the rescue of Ukrainians and Belarusians who are 'threatened' by Germany. This pretext, in the eyes of the masses, will present the intervention of the Soviet Union in a noble light and will prevent the Soviet Union from being considered an aggressor "[42].

3. The goals that the Kremlin set for itself in creating and disseminating the aforementioned image of Poland were achieved only partially. The thesis of the non-existence of the Polish state was not recognized in England or France. The Government of the United Kingdom in a statement issued on 19 September 1939 categorically rejected the claim that the Polish state does not exist. In a note addressed to the Soviet authorities on the next day, the French government accused the USSR authorities of violating neutrality towards a state at war [43]. This thesis was more successful within Soviet society, although its minority resistant to propaganda remained unconvinced, and was of the opinion that by entering the Polish territories the USSR had committed aggression against an existing state.

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