

Autumn of 1939

Preliminary tasks and questions

1. Try to describe the social situation in pre-war Poland. How do you think, what were the social attitudes of the populations of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus towards Poland and the USSR?
2. Compare the social, political, cultural and economic situation of pre-war Germany under the rule of NSDAP with the situation in the Soviet Union.
3. Try to indicate the reasons (economic, political, ideological) that could have led German population of Post-WWI world to support Hitler politics and the start of the WWII.

The autumn of 1939 can be considered to be a start of the World War II. The chapter is focused on the events which occurred during the first stage of war (August-October, 1939) and is specifically written for the audiences of contemporary Belarus, Germany, Russia and Ukraine.

The Premises of the WWII

To describe the beginning of the World War II it is important to start with the premises that caused declaration of the War:

- 1) Rise to power of Adolf Hitler's **Nazi Party** in Germany in 1933, alongside with spreading of **fascism** in Italy and Japan. The ideologies based on expansionism, militarism and racism grounds.
- 2) The **Treaty of Versailles** (signed on 28 June 1919 and concluding Germany's defeat in WWI) with its **Article 231** (often referred as War Guilt Clause) that led to spreading of revanchist mood in German society:
 - Germany was required to disarm and pay 132 billion marks of reparations;
 - Referred to as 'Carthaginian Peace'.
- 3) The **Great Depression**
- 4) Policies of **appeasement** from United Nations (and also, French and British governments in particular, which in 1939 tried to switch to policy of deterrence instead).
- 5) **Munich Agreement** (or Munich Betrayal) between France and Germany, signed on 29-30 September 1938 by leaders of France, Germany, Italy and United Kingdom and allowing Nazi Germany's annexation of Sudetenland (region of western Czechoslovakia).
- 6) Anti-communism in **border states** west to USSR (plus Western Europe's Border states policy) and in Germany and Italy.
- 6) **Soviet-Polish Non-Aggression Pact** (signed in 1932, renewed in 1934, broken by USSR on 17 September 1939) and **German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact** (signed in 1934 for 10 years, broken by Germany on 1 September 1939), followed by Danzig Crisis in 1939.
- 7) The signing of **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact** (Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) on 23 August 1939, which secretly delineated the spheres of interest in Eastern Europe between the two parties.

Carthaginian Peace - a treaty of peace so severe that it means the virtual destruction of the defeated contestant. (in Merriam-Webster)

Revanchism - a policy of seeking to retaliate, especially to recover lost territory. (in Oxford Dictionaries)

Pre-War Political Situation

Nazi Germany 1933-1939 (German Reich)

Pre-War Nazi Germany started in **1933** after Adolf Hitler and NSDAP came to power. **Propaganda** soon became one of the main tools of the government to rule the state. Some of the main aims of Nazi propaganda were to unite all ethnic Germans and create images of enemies of the **Aryan race**, such as Jews, Romani people etc. One of the important pre-War campaigns was **propaganda against Poland** which accused Polish authorities of organizing and tolerating ethnic cleansing of Germans living there. This propaganda campaign was a part of a false flag **Operation Himmler**, as well as later – **Gleiwitz incident** you will read about.

The huge part of pre-War Nazi propaganda consisted of propaganda against Jewish people, which was aimed on their demonization and portrayed Jews as enemies of the race and subhuman creatures poisoning the German society. Jews were accused of stealing easy and well-paid jobs, while all the Germans, according to propaganda, were supposed to take heavy work. **Anti-Jewish propaganda** served two purposes: the legislation of anti-Jewish executive measures taken by government and the creation of atmosphere which tolerated violence against Jews. **Nuremberg Race**

Laws of September 1935 banned all «non-Aryan» people (Jews, Romani etc.) from civil-service and marriage with people classified as «Aryan».

These laws' foundations were the notions of **racial purity** and the idea of preserving Aryan race which, according to Nazi ideology, was at the top of social hierarchy and taught Germans to view Jewish people as subhuman. The portraits of the Jews as '**subhuman**' creatures were in the whole culture of Nazi Germany: media, fiction, etc. The classic example of anti-Jewish propaganda movie is 'The Eternal Jew' by Fritz Hippler. All these images created an atmosphere of tolerating social anti-Semitism and violence against the Jews. The example of such violence could be seen in the events of the **Crystal Night** (Kristallnacht). This name was given to the wave of violent anti-Jewish pogroms which took place in Germany, annexed Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia on the night of 9-10 November 1938.

At least 91 Jews were killed during that night, many synagogues and buildings owned by Jewish people were burned or destroyed, and around 30 000 Jewish men were arrested and taken to the **concentration camps**. Nazi concentration camps emerged already from the beginning of Nazi regime, from 1933 starting with **Dachau**. The first purpose of the early pre-War concentration camps was to imprison political opponents of Nazis. By doing that, Nazi state tried to guarantee itself the totalitarian power and censorship and propaganda became main tools to translate Nazi ideology. With the start of war, though, ordinary people were taken to concentration camp (Jews, Romani, homosexuals, etc.) and with the proceeding of **Holocaust**, these camps got the name of '**extermination camps**'.

The USSR

The USSR in the **1930s** became the **totalitarian state** with the leader Joseph Stalin. During the late 1920s and the 1930s the USSR took the course on forced **collectivization** and **industrialization**, which severely exhausted economic and social resources of the country. One of the consequences of these events was the **Soviet Famine** which took place in some areas of the Soviet Union in 1932-1933. The current researches give estimates from 7,5 up to 14 million people's deaths in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Southern Russia and West Siberia. Significant parts of deaths were in Ukraine, where the Famine got name of **Holodomor** and could be considered a genocide committed by Stalin and its government.

In the 1930s the totalitarian system emerged in the Soviet Union and it took the name after its leader: **Stalinism**. Stalinism could be characterized as propagandistic totalitarian state with the cult of its leader and repressive mechanisms. As well as in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union's main tool in translating the ideology of the state was **propaganda**. Propaganda was aimed on formulating the **picture of the Soviet men** fighting capitalistic societies, and in the 1930s it took the militaristic features. Besides the official propaganda, claiming the possibility of capitalistic countries attacking the Soviet Union, military units were supposed to teach civilians militaristic actions.

While the **militarization** of the country was huge, the army itself suffered from the totalitarian system. Stalinism was based on the mechanisms of the **repressions**, which started in the earlier periods of the Soviet Union and were developed by Stalin in the 1930s. These repressions got the name of the **Stalin repressions**, or the **Great Terror**. The repressions were tightly connected with the **Gulag** forced-labor camps system. The political repressions were firstly aimed at political opponents of the system, but rapidly became a tool of oppression and every group or person in the country now could be crashed by the wheels of the system. In 1936-1938 particularly alongside with other campaigns there were **repressions in the Red Army leadership**, leaving the military units with the lack of professionals just before the war.

German Invasion of Poland

German troops crossed the Polish border on **1 September 1939**. This date is known as the **start of Second World War**. In the previous parts, we already went through the premises of the war and in this part we will have a closer look on September 1939 and the following consequences on the front lines.

Appeasement

- the policy of acceding to the demands of a potentially hostile nation in the hope of maintaining peace. (in *Collins English Dictionary*)

Deterrence

- military strategy under which one power uses the threat of reprisal effectively to preclude an attack from an adversary power. (in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

Military occupation - control and possession of hostile territory that enables an invading nation to establish military government against an enemy or martial law against rebels or insurrectionists in its own territory. (in Merriam-Webster)

The Invasion of Poland (in Poland: September Campaign or the 1939 Defensive War; in Germany: Poland Campaign) was an invasion of Poland by Germany that marked the beginning of World War II on 1 September 1939.

Soviet invasion of Poland was a military operation by the Soviet Union without a formal declaration of war on 17 September 1939. Note that in Soviet historiography it was named "liberation campaign".



1. *The crusade against Poland. German cover of an exclusive magazine about the invasion of Poland*

The German Justification

On **31 August 1939**, a special broadcast published information on Polish attack of the German radio station in **Gleiwitz** stating that some Polish soldiers seized the radio and announced an anti-German message in Polish.

This information sounds like it is 'the wrong way round'?

True, this news was part of **German propaganda** to give a reason for starting the War. Actually, the 'Polish soldiers' were disguised Germans and the Gleiwitz incident was a show.

The Attack

In the early morning of **1 September 1939** the German warship "Schleswig-Holstein" opened the fire on Polish territory in front of **Danzig**. Almost at the same time, German bombers attacked the city of **Wieluń**. The residents of Wieluń have been the first victims of the War which had no comparison to any other war in the past.

The first Consequences

Great Britain and France declared war on **3 September 1939**.

Already 2 weeks later the German Armed Forces smashed the Polish resistance and the Polish state broke down on **17 September 1939**. Immediately after the Red Army occupied the East of Poland, the German Troops bombed and captured Warsaw on 27-28 September. More occupation followed.

On the **6 October** the last Polish troops capitulated. In the End of the crusade against Poland, the Polish Army counted 120 000 dead soldiers and 917 000 had to go as war captivity. Germany lost 10 600 soldiers in Poland.

Soviet Invasion of Poland and the Intervention in Western Ukraine and Western Belarus

The **Non-Aggression Treaty** between Germany and the USSR was signed on **August 23 1939**. An additional **secret protocol** was added to the contract. In fact, Hitler and Stalin have divided Europe into spheres of influence: to the Soviet sphere belonged Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Bessarabia, to German – Lithuania; Poland was divided between the USSR and Germany.

A few days later the contract began to be implemented in practice. German troops invaded Poland. At the time of the defensive battles of the Polish Army against the German troops, in accordance with the provisions of the secret additional protocol, the **Red Army crossed the Polish-Soviet border on September 17 1939**. In USSR, the actions of the Red Army in Poland were called a "**liberation campaign**" for the reunification of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus with the USSR and the BSSR.

After the occupation of Lviv by Soviet troops (22 September 1939), when the whole territories of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus were under the control of the Red Army, new Soviet-German border was formed along the **Narew, Wisla, and Xiang** rivers. In the new Soviet-German **Treaty on Friendship and the State Border** (2 September 1939), the distribution of Poland was fixed and a new line was specified. The September treaty also had **secret protocols**. Lithuania came into the sphere of influence of the USSR, whereas Germany got part of Eastern Poland (previously belonged to the sphere of influence of the USSR).

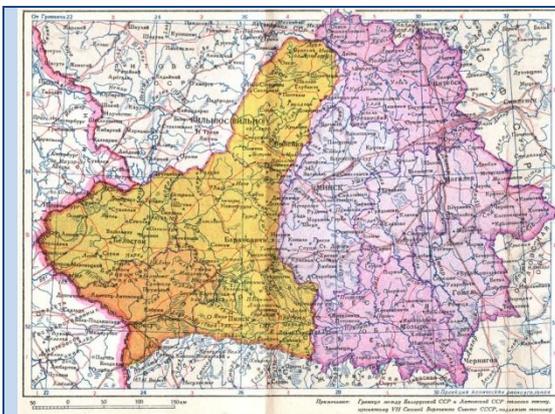
Annexation of Western Belarus and Western Ukraine

as a result of Soviet invasion of Poland, was an inclusion of Western Belarusian and Western Ukrainian territories into USSR, which was in Soviet law formulation officially named "reunification" with BSSR and USSR accordingly.

Note that in Soviet historiography it was named "Liberation of Western Ukraine and Belarus".

(1960—1965
<http://militera.lib.ru/n/6/index.html>
История Великой Отечественной войны Советского Союза 1941—1945 гг. (в 6 томах).] — М.: Воениздат)

For legal registration of the annexation of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus to the USSR on 22 October 1939, **elections to the National Assembly** held without alternative candidates took place under the control of new government. In October, the People's Assembly adopted the **Declaration on the reunification** of Western Ukraine with the Ukrainian SSR. A similar decision was made in Belarus, where Western Belarus was claimed reunited with the BSSR. V session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in early November 1939 decided on the entry of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus into the USSR.



2. Soviet map of the newly expanded BSSR (yellow), 1940. (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15990146>)

Overview of Soviet Annexation of Western Belarus

At time of Soviet Invasion of Poland, Belarusian lands have already existed in division between Poland (Western Belarus) and USSR (BSSR) for quite a while after the WWI. Belarusian People's Republic became a failed attempt to create a Belarusian state on the territory controlled by the German Imperial Army during World War I. Józef Piłsudski in his negotiations with the Belarusian leaders rejected the call for independence, and in December 1919 the Rada was dissolved by Poland and since then was in exile. Already in 1921 starosta from Wilejka wrote about the mood "of resignation and apathy among the peasants in Western Belorussia, impoverished by requisitions of food by the Bolsheviks as well as the Polish military". Due to policies of

polonization and sanitation, difficult economic situation and armed attacks on villages with Belarusians that was accused of pro-Communist moods, part of Belarusian population of Western Belarus welcomed the annexation to BSSR. Officially, 96% have voted for "reunification with BSSR", although oral history sources reveal that often people were threatened and forced to vote, and soldiers of Red Army forces were taken as part of electorate. Some protests in support for Poland also took place (Slogans n Hrodna were "Down with the Bolsheviks, long live Poland", high school students in Pinsk with leaflets "Long live Poland, down with Communists"). However, a lot of people initially supportive of USSR changed their minds after an actual annexation, for they faced even harder economic circumstances, massive draft to the Red Army and political repressions. The leaders of Hramada, Belarusian Peasants' and Workers' Union, which was supported by USSR, were then killed as "Polish spies" by Soviet regime after being banned in Poland and sent to USSR. Approximately 100.000 inhabitants of the region were arrested during two following years of annexation.

Victims

World War II had a lot of consequences for many people, ethnic groups, states and nations. The estimates of deaths are approximate, as many of them went unrecorded, but they are around **60 million**, including 20 million deaths of military people and 40 – of civilians. Many of these deaths were caused by genocide, massacres and war crimes.

On the **Nuremberg Trials** several states were accused of **war crimes** and **crimes against humanity** during WWII. Among them, the most noticeable were the trials over the members of leadership of Nazi Germany, who planned or participated in the Holocaust. The **Holocaust** (also known as the Shoah) was genocide of Jewish people conducted by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Due to the racist policies of Nazi Germany, around 6 million Jews were killed in Europe, as well as Roma people, homosexuals, Polish people and millions of Slavs. Besides being imprisoned and exterminated in concentration camps, slave labor was widely used and many massacres took place on occupied territories. One of such massacres took place in **Babi Yar** on 29-30 September 1941, killing approximately 33771 Jews.

War crimes were common among almost all the states which participated in WWII. Several countries were involved into such crimes as annexations of states. Many war crimes included massacres conducted by military forces, e.g. **Katyn** massacre. Besides that, civilians often suffered from all kinds of violence by militarism personnel, such as raping, stealing, killings etc. Violent behavior towards civilians was common among all forces, including those of resistance, e.g. partisan movements. The occupation regimes were brutal and violent during the war as well. Ethnic cleansing, slave labor and the repressions of resistances were common.

Second World War became the reason for mass deportations, often of ethnic groups, e.g. the deportation of Crimean Tatars by USSR. Forced population transfer caused thousands of deaths due to the harsh exile conditions.

World War II was characterized also as a war with high use of advanced technologies of **mass killings**. Testing of weapons on prisoners and civilians were common in e.g. Nazi Germany and Japan. Finally, WWII was the only conflict in global history, when **nuclear weapon** was used (in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the USA).

Additional Tasks and Questions

1. Discuss the reasons for governments of France and United Kingdom to lead the so called Phoney War and what impact did it have on the subsequent course of the WWII.
2. Try to indicate the intentions of Hitler and Stalin for signing the German-Soviet Frontier Treaty alongside with secret protocol on 28 November 1939. Discuss the fact that the secret articles (except one) remained unpublished in Soviet Union.
3. Investigate the politics of the future allies – France and England. How they were reacting on the vents happening both in Nazi Germany and the USSR?
4. Draw a timeline of the military happenings of autumn 1939.
5. Compare the Polish Territory of 2018 and its changes in 1939.
6. What were the main tasks of propaganda during those days?
7. Can you find some personal stories of people who ‘participated’ in the first days of the war?
8. Can you find some material that shows the German Reaction on the first attacks?
9. Find the information about Ukrainian and Belarusian population of Poland in 1939. What were their attitudes towards the Polish states? Were there any reasons for some of those civilians to become later collaborators with Nazi Germany, or, instead, take the side of the Soviet Union?
10. Using the Internet, libraries and your personal knowledge, find a story of one of the victims, described in the paragraph. The story could be taken from documentaries, memories or fiction. Describe the story to the class and analyze it.
11. Read the information on annexation of Western Belarus in a coloured box and compare it with personal letters you find in Supplementary materials.
12. Think of your country. What victims of the Second World War are most commonly known? Name several episodes and think, why exactly these memories are preserved. Are they preserved on the official level or among ordinary people?
13. Investigate the initiatives to commemorate different victims of World War II. What else could be done in your country and on international level to preserve the memories of those victims?
14. Try to indicate the reasons for Stalin to start the so called Winter War with Finland (30 November 1939-13 March 1940) after the beginning of WWI and discuss how its results influenced Hitler’s decision to commence Operation Barbarossa and attack USSR.



Supplementary materials

1. References to **two maps**, which represent the real one countries’ geography and the expected division according to Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Secret Protocol.
2. Link to the **text of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (and Secret Protocol)** in English.
3. Links to **personal stories** of people who were imprisoned in **concentration camps**.
4. Links to **letters and memoirs** of inhabitants of **Western Belarus and Western Ukraine**.