

Mark James Miller: Poland's Place in World War II, and Why We Must Remember Its Lessons

By Mark James Miller | Published on 01.16.2015 2:30 p.m.



My Dec. 19 column ("[Why We'll Always Have Casablanca](#)") upset some people because the references to the Nazi death camps did not state specifically that they were in German-occupied Poland and were operated by the Nazi SS, not by Poles. It was also pointed out that Poland suffered horrifically during the German occupation of 1939-1945, and lost more people — proportionately — than any other country in [World War II](#).

Few countries have endured more suffering than Poland, and in one week alone, the last week of August 1939, she was to be subjected to two of the most diabolical plots in history: the [Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact](#), more familiarly known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and [Operation Himmler](#). These two events are classic examples of the lengths governments will go to achieve their ambitions, the nefarious means they will use to attain them, and the Machiavellian ways political leaders will try to fool their own people into going to war.

World War II, which ended 70 years ago this year, began with the German attack on Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. [Adolf Hitler](#), having determined on war with Poland, felt he needed to eliminate any threat from the Soviet Union while he dealt with Poland's allies, England and France. In late August, he sent his foreign minister, [Joachim von Ribbentrop](#), to Moscow to work out the final details of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, which was signed on Aug. 23.

With this agreement Poland's fate was sealed. Secretly, the two dictators, Hitler and [Joseph Stalin](#), had agreed to divide Poland between them. The first nails in Poland's coffin had been hammered in; the final ones would soon follow.

Now all Hitler needed was an excuse to attack Poland. For this he turned to one of the most sinister and ruthless men in the Third Reich, SS Gen. [Reinhard](#)

Heydrich, second in command of the SS and chief of the Nazi security service, the SD (Sicherheitsdienst).

Heydrich is notorious in history as the architect of the **Final Solution**, the extermination of the Jews, gypsies and others deemed “life unworthy of life” by the Nazi regime. While that was the worst of his crimes, it was far from the only one. Intelligent, cunning and with absolutely no regard for human life, he quickly concocted a plan he code-named “Operation Himmler,” in a sarcastic jibe at his nominal superior, SS commander **Heinrich Himmler**.

Under the plan, German commandos, dressed in Polish army uniforms, would stage a series of “attacks” along the German-Polish border. As proof of Polish “aggression” against Germany, they would murder and leave behind the bodies of concentration camp inmates, also dressed like Polish soldiers. In another of his macabre touches of humor, Heydrich code-named these human sacrifices “Canned Goods.”

There were three fake attacks along the border. The biggest was at the radio station near the village of Gleiwitz. To lead this operation, Heydrich selected SS Capt. **Alfred Naujocks** — like himself, smart, capable and ruthless. Naujocks and a team of seven picked men would shoot their way into the radio station on the evening of Aug. 31. A Polish-speaking German would make an inflammatory, anti-Hitler speech that Heydrich had written himself, broadcast to the German people over German radio.

The German raiders were given Polish army uniforms as well as identity papers showing they were members of the Polish army. Each man involved had to take the SS Oath of Secrecy, a rarely invoked ritual that was only used for the most delicate missions.

At the **Nuremburg trials**, Naujocks testified:

“The chief of the SD, Heydrich, personally ordered me to simulate an attack on the radio station near Gleiwitz near the Polish border and to make it appear that the attacking force consisted of Poles. Heydrich said, ‘Practical proof is needed for these attacks of the Poles for the foreign press as well as for German propaganda.’”

Naujocks and his team went to Gleiwitz and waited for the signal from Heydrich to proceed with Operation Himmler. On Aug. 31, the code word came through: “Grandmama Dead.” Naujocks and his men swung into action and,

shortly after 8 p.m., Germans heard on their radios (with much shooting and shouting in the background) an angry voice in Polish denouncing Hitler and calling on Poles to rise against Germany. The hapless prisoners were shot, their bullet-ridden bodies to be placed on display as proof that Poland had started the war.

At 4:45 a.m. the following day, the Wehrmacht invaded Poland. At 5 a.m., Hitler telephoned Heydrich to congratulate him on how well Operation Himmler had succeeded. At 10 a.m. he spoke to the [Reichstag](#), but the entire world was listening as he said, "I have decided to speak to the Poles in the same language as they are speaking to us ... From now on we will answer bomb with bomb." Polish soldiers, he said, had crossed the border and attacked Germany. Now Germany was going to strike back.

German newspapers reported, "Polish insurgents cross German frontier!" "Aggressors Attack Gleiwitz ... A group of Polish soldiers seized the Gleiwitz Radio building last night ..."

The foreign media, including [The New York Times](#), all reported the attacks as being factual. Not until the Nuremberg trials did the truth emerge about Operation Himmler.

While the Poles put up a heroic resistance, they were no match for the Germans, who unleashed on them the world's first experience of blitzkrieg, "lightning war." And on Sept. 17, Stalin, invoking his part of the bargain made on Aug. 23, ordered the Red Army to invade Poland from the East. There it would remain, occupying the eastern half of the country, until the German attack on Russia on June 22, 1941.

Governments determined on war will go to great lengths to deceive both their own people and the world as to the reasons they are going to war. Long before the start of World War II, [Thomas Jefferson](#), in words that still resonate today, warned, "Governments constantly choose between telling lies and fighting wars ... One always leads to the other."

If we are to avoid the mistakes of the past it is important to know what happened in the past. What took place in Poland in 1939 *can* happen again. Caught between two ruthless dictators like Hitler and Stalin, she suffered a terrible fate.

“The past is the best prophet of the future,” in the words of [Lord Byron](#). Hopefully, these words, written in the 19th century, will not be forgotten in the 21st.

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