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**4-11 February: Yalta conference**



**O**n 22 June 1941, Germany launched an attack on the USSR. Western countries immediately began a diplomatic offensive aimed at forging an anti-German alliance with Stalin. Great Britain and the USA offered Stalin support and guaranteed economic assistance. That was tragic for the Poles as one of the country's bloodiest oppressors overnight became an ally, theoretically not to be fought.



**T**hanks to British mediation, the Sikorski-Mayski agreement was signed, under which diplomatic relations between Poland and the USSR were restored and talks began about releasing captive Poles from prisons and prison camps. The Soviets were saying openly that according to them the border of future Poland should follow 'ethnic criteria,' which in practice meant depriving Poland of her Eastern Borderlands. Poland sought the recognition of the border set by the 1921 Treaty of Riga.



**O**n the one hand, western countries declared that Poland should be independent and within the 1939 borders yet on the other hand they had no intention of interfering in Stalin's activities on occupied territories. Despite agreeing to the creation of a Polish army, the USSR consistently made the release of Poles from prisons and their reaching recruitment points of the Polish army difficult as well as failed to provide, despite the agreement, sufficient amounts of weapons and food. Soldiers and civilians who joined Anders' army hoping to escape from the USSR faced death from starvation. In the circumstances, British authorities decided to evacuate the army to Iran. Stalin blamed Poles for avoiding fighting the Germans.

**T**hose events coincided with the Polish government's search for thousands of Polish officers who failed to report to the army, arrested by the NKVD. In the Spring of 1943, mass graves were discovered in Katyn, which led to the final breakdown of Polish-Soviet relations. Soviet propaganda blamed Germany for the crime. In order to make the lie believable, NKVD-collaborating Poles were used: Zygmunt Berling, a deserter from Anders' army (an inmate at Starobielsk himself, the camp he left in return for collaboration with Stalin), and Wanda Wasilewska. They and others – Poles cooperating with the NKVD – set up the Union of Polish Patriots in 1943, thus giving Stalin a pretext for claiming before the other Allies that he cooperated with the Poles. Additionally, an army under Berling was formed in May 1943 with Polish citizens as soldiers. In July 1943, premier and chief commander Władysław Sikorski died in an air crash in Gibraltar and was replaced in the government by Stanisław Mikołajczyk and in the army by Kazimierz Sosnkowski.

**I**n the meantime, on 28 November–1 December 1943 the ‘Big Three’ (the leaders of the anti-Hitler coalition: the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt) met for the first time in Teheran. During the meeting, Stalin blamed the Polish government for joining German propaganda against the USSR. Churchill and Roosevelt had no intention of meddling in Soviet-Polish relations. Yet again, the proposal was made to establish the future Polish border along the Curzon Line (effectively depriving Poland of her eastern provinces) with compensation in the form of formerly German territories in the north and west. The western countries actually agreed that after the war Poland would find herself in the orbit of the USSR. From then, Great Britain and the USA consistently avoided taking any decisions concerning Poland’s territory and population.

**D**espite the armed action called ‘Operation Tempest’ launched by the Poles, the Warsaw Uprising and active participation of the Polish Armed Forces in fights in the west, western Allies did not feel obliged to respond to Stalin’s behaviour aimed at forming a puppet government in Poland of Soviet agents trained by the NKVD.

**O**n 4 February 1945, another conference of the ‘Big Three’ began in Yalta in Crimea, ultimately sealing the fate of post-war Poland, condemning it to the Soviet sphere of influence. It was agreed in the discussion that democratic elections had to take place in Poland, yet Stalin criticised the idea of the presence of international observers. Poland’s eastern border was to follow the Curzon Line, yet, despite negotiations, without the city of Lviv. The western border was to be confirmed at a separate meeting already with Germany present. As compensation, Poland was to receive Lubusz Land, West Pomerania, East Prussia and the recognition of Gdańsk as a Polish city. Yalta actually legitimised the provisional government, ignoring the London government, considered legal by the Allies. It was also decided that Germans would be removed from Poland and Poles from eastern provinces resettled to the territories acquired after the war.

**I**n response to the decisions of the Yalta conference, the Polish government in exile stated that they had been taken in violation of law and the provisions of the 1941 Atlantic Charter. At the same time, the already serious divisions between Polish political leaders deepened, between supporters of soft negotiations with the USSR and those loudly crying for the withdrawal of the unfavourable decisions.

**F**rom then on, Stalin used the method of controlling Moscow-dependent puppet Poles, rigging elections and introducing so-called popular power in Poland. The Allies also let Stalin suppress the Polish underground in a bloody fashion as well as repress Home Army soldiers. The Soviet terror machine started to grind forward mercilessly. The NKVD and militia arrested all pre-war independence-minded and social activists still alive. Under the pretext of ‘anti-Soviet activity’ soldiers, officers but also inhabitants of villages and towns suspected of supporting Home Army soldiers were arrested and shot. Soviet camps and prisons filled up again. Poland found herself in the Soviet sphere of influence, and was to regain full independence only in 1991.

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## References: