Hi-story lessons.

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01.02.1939

Poles fight on the fronts of the Second World War 1939-1945

After Poland's capitulation in October 1939, Polish soldiers who had managed to escape through Romania and Hungary to France and volunteers from the Polish diaspora in France created an over-80,000-strong Polish army in France with chief commander General Władysław Sikorski. Polish soldiers in the west formed four infantry divisions, armoured-motorised brigade, the Polish Independent Highland Brigade and the Polish Independent Carpathian Brigade in Syria.

In 1940, they fought in the Norwegian campaign (battle of Narvik) and in the defence of France. Also engaged in the fights in Norway was the Polish submarine ORP 'Orzeł,' which at the start of the war had been detained at an Estonian port yet managed to flee to the west despite lack of maps.

Other ships of the Polish Navy, too, were operating in the west under British admiralty and were active in naval battles. Those most known included ORP Błyskawica, ORP Grom, ORP Burza, the training ship ORP Iskra, ORP Wilk as well as the already mentioned ORP Orzeł, lost in 1940. A total of twenty-seven ships took part in the war on the side of the Allies, including passenger ships like the famous M.S. Batory.

Polish aviators in England formed four air squadrons – two bombers: 300 and 301 and two fighters: 302 and 303 – incorporated to the RAF (Royal Air Force) and fighting in the battle of England (10 July–3 October 1940). Poles made up 5 percent of all the airmen involved in the battle. Squadron 303 shot down 126 German aircraft.

After talks with Stalin, the Polish premier-in-exile Władysław Sikorski signed a document with the Soviet ambassador in London Ivan Maisky (known as the Sikorski-Maisky agreement) on 30 July 1941, concerning the reinstitution of diplomatic relations with the USSR, severed in 1939. They were taken up in the context of the anti-Hitler coalition, and the agreement envisaged the creation of a Polish army made up of Poles released from prisoner-of-war and labour camps, under the command of General Władysław Anders. 25,000 Polish soldiers released from prisons and gulags were drafted. Although thousands reached Anders (including children and women wishing to use the opportunity to flee the USSR), thousands of Polish officers arrested in 1939 failed to appear at mobilisation points. A search began and finally the Katyn genocide was discovered which yet again caused a breaking of diplomatic relations between Poland and the USSR. In April 1942, Stalin eventually banned further recruitment of Poles as

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well as uniting soldiers' families, forcing Polish citizens remaining in the USSR to take Soviet citizenship.

Before that, in 1942, General Anders evacuated the troops to Iran, and then over Iraq and Palestine to Italy, where Polish soldiers – as the Second Polish Corps in the British Army – fought a victorious battle in 1944 for a cloister on the Hill of Monte Cassino and for Ancona, and in 1945 for Bologna.

After Anders' army had left, volunteers ready for military service still kept arriving from across the Soviet Union. These were often former Polish citizens of various nationalities, soldiers who for political reasons did not want to serve under Anders and those who simply did not arrive at recruitment points on time. Stalin decided to use the situation and create a Polish military formation completely dependent on the USSR under the command of Zygmunt Berling, a former officer of the Polish Army removed from the military still before 1939. As an inmate of the Starobielsk camp, Berling decided to cooperate with the NKVD and became a loyal executor of all Stalin's orders. Initially, he had held officer posts in Anders' army, yet once it left for Iran Berling deserted and remained in the USSR, for which a military tribunal convicted him to death penalty.

The soldiers of the Polish 1st Tadeusz Kościuszko Infantry Division took part in the battle of Lenino. In 1944, soldiers serving in Berling's army tried to cross the Vistula in order to help the Warsaw insurgents, yet they were not supported in any way by the Soviets, which is why their effort was of marginal importance despite the heroism of the soldiers.

In July 1944, the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) – appointed by communists on Stalin's order and claiming to play the role of the Polish government – united Berling's army with the People's Army into the Polish Army under the command of Michał Rola-Żymierski.

Achievements by Polish mathematicians in breaking the German encryption machine 'Enigma' were crucial for the outcome of the Second World War as thanks to them British and French intelligence services could use the results of their work and effectively intercept and read German cables. Marian Rejewski, Henryk Zygalski and Jerzy Różycki had begun working on decrypting 'Enigma' in 1928 already as university students.

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