

# The beginning and end of World War II

## Poland and Belarus, 1939

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**Lesson**  
**90 minutes**

**Additional  
material**

**Diaries /  
Memoirs**

## Recollections of Polish children Memories on the attack on Poland by the Red Army on 17 September 1939

### War through children's eyes

On 17 September 1939, Soviet troops invaded the Western part of Poland, as agreed in the secret protocol to the Non-aggression pact between von Ribbentrop (for Hitler) and Molotov (for Stalin) in August 1939. Here are four excerpts from Polish children's recollections of this time.

#### Czesław S., born 1927, Stanisławów county

[After the invasion by Soviet troops, this region became part of the Soviet Union, and is now part of Western Ukraine.]

When the Soviet troops entered, they started looting right away, on the very first day. Before they entered the village where we were living at the time, their troops surrounded the village and started disarming anyone who had weapons. My father was a policeman. He turned his weapons in that first morning, and wasn't given a receipt. They went on looting the village: grain, radios, huge numbers of clocks and watches, all of which were stolen, or seized from people by force. Policemen were a target for their hostility, so my Dad hid his uniform and dressed in civilian clothes. That day – 19 September 1939 – at 3 in the afternoon, Dad was asleep because he was tired because he'd not slept at all the night before. He'd spent the previous night in the forest because he was being chased by a patrol. Anyway, that afternoon, four soldiers on horseback came to the house. They surrounded it and two of them burst in, where father was sleeping. [...] They started searching. They found Dad's uniform. One of them woke Dad up and asked whose uniform it was. Dad had to confess because there was no young man in our house. Then they ordered Dad to turn in his weapons, and Dad said, "I turned it in this morning". The soldier demanded a receipt, but no one had given Dad one. They ordered Dad to get dressed in his uniform and go with them to their command post. Naturally Dad did as they said. Mum wanted to go with Dad, but a soldier stopped Mum and me from even saying goodbye. Dad left the house. [...] Mum and her father got dressed and went to the farm. There were lots of Russian troops there, who stopped Mum from going anywhere. When Mum argued, the commander said that Dad had been deported to Russia. Mum had to go back home. [...]

#### Leon M., Grodno county

[After the invasion by Soviet troops, this region became part of the Soviet Union, and is now part of Western Belarus.]

#### The entry of the Red Army into Poland

On the morning of 17 September 1939, the Red Army entered Poland. They came in saying that they were Poland's allies. That was completely untrue. They occupied towns and smashed up shops and stole their goods. We thought they were wild animals. On the second day, which was a Saturday, at five o'clock in the morning - we were asleep in our beds - someone knocked at our neighbor's door. Daddy thought they were hunters. And then I heard someone shout "otkroj dzwiery" [open the door]. Mum was frightened. They came and shouted: "Get ready in 25 minutes". They didn't even say where we were going. They put us into a railway car like dogs in a kennel. They closed the door. Everyone was hungry. Every family wanted to eat, and all the Polish families were crying. The train was going to Siberia and the Ural . [...]



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## Walenty M., born 1927, Grodno county

### **Bloody Autumn**

When they entered Poland, the Bolsheviks murdered Polish [farmers] and foresters. Well[,] after entering the Lerypol settlement in Grodno county, Bolshevik NKVD men in disguise arrested the [farmers] and led them in the direction of the nearby forest. Suddenly we heard shots. So my older brother and his friend ran in the direction of the shots. Near the forest they saw dead bodies, among which was my father. The news spread throughout the entire settlement that the Bolsheviks had murdered the [farmers] of that settlement. [...]

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## Walenty P., Grodno county

### **Experiences under Soviet rule during the war**

The invasion of Soviet troops aroused fear in the Polish nation. [...] They started by searching for weapons, ordering the family into corners “at gunpoint.” Afterwards they took away the best cows and pigs, for which they gave us receipts (they said that we’d be given money for these receipts). Finally they started taking wheat, again issuing receipts for it. In schools they broke all the portraits, pulled down crosses, and arrested teachers for being Polish and sent their own instead. Their teachers taught us to sing songs against God and against Poland [...]

774 words

Source: Grudzinska-Gross, I., Gross, Jan T. (1981). War Through Children’s Eyes. The Soviet Occupation of Poland and the Deportations, 1939-1941. Foreword by B. Bettelheim. Transl. by R. Strom, D. Rivers. Stanford: Stanford University, Hoover Institution Press.

