

## The Outbreak of the War

The news about war caused a great uneasiness in the country. This upset all aspects of economic, communal and political life. Polish diplomacy, under the leadership of Foreign Minister Józef Beck, was inconsequential and disoriented.

Poland, lying between the two superpowers - the Soviet Union from *mizrach* (the east) and Germany from *ma'arav* (the west) - did not conduct any consequential politics with either of them. Poland isolated itself financially from the Soviet Union, at its own cost. It did not wish the communist currents to be carried over into it. Political trials against communists were a daily phenomenon. All the *tfises*<sup>1</sup> (jailhouses) overflowed with supporters of the Soviet Union. Communist parties were legal in all countries except the fascist ones. Poland declared the Communist Party illegal, thus putting itself in the ranks of fascist countries. Its isolating itself financially from the Soviet Union and the political persecutions against the supporters of the communist ideal created a great dissonance between the two countries and [all] hopes of peaceful, friendly cooperation were lost.

Polish Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły's declaration, regarding the proposal to wage war against Germany together with the Soviet Union to the effect that no Soviet boot would tread upon Polish soil, tore apart any possibility of a common language between the two states. The Polish government, in its composition in 1939, was considered to be fascist, wherefore its attitude towards the eastern, Soviet neighbour was a negative one.

The other neighbour - the German, fascist one - in some respects, matched the appetites of Poland and, first of all, regarding the "Jewish Question". Ideological winds [blew] over from the west (Germany) to Poland. This was manifested in fascist currents in word and deed. The papers wrote aggressive articles against the Soviet Union and agitated against Jews, conducting a "*Żydokomuna*"<sup>2</sup> campaign. This was to say that the enemies of Poland were the Jews and the communists. The fact that the government tolerated and even supported these elements brought chaos to the country.

The politics of that period are called "*Owszem* politics". This name is derived from the reply which Jewish MPs and senators received to their interpolation in the corresponding ministries regarding taking a stand on the unrest that the *Endecja*-fascist organisations were causing with their actions against Jews. They argued that these disturbances were financially ruining the country and undercutting, abroad, the authority of the Polish government. The Polish Minister of Internal Affairs<sup>3</sup>, Feliks [Felicjan] Sławoj Składkowski, responded to this interpolation from the Sejm podium with "*Owszem*"<sup>4</sup>. The answer meant that the government was in favour of a financial boycott [against Jews]. After this declaration, the government's politics were called "*Owszem* politics".

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: These three words - *mizrach*, *ma'arav* and *tfises* - are Hebrew terms that are commonly used in Yiddish. The translations within parentheses appear as such in the original.]

<sup>2</sup> [TN: Pejorative term meaning "Jewish Bolshevism", suggesting that most Jews were communists and collaborated with the Soviet Union.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: Although Składkowski had indeed previously served as Minister of Internal Affairs, by the time he made the "*Owszem*" declaration he was already the Prime Minister of Poland.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: In his response, Składkowski spoke out against physical violence against Jews, adding, however, "but the economic battle – i *Owszem!*" (of course!), meaning that he approved of boycotting the Jews.]

The results of this declaration did not allow themselves to be delayed for long. Fights in the universities, caused by assaults on Jewish students, were a daily phenomenon. Poland's future ideological activists used *Gillette*s (razor blades) to slash the Jewish students' clothes, [and also] clubs and *kastety* [knuckledusters]. They stood in front of Jewish shops and did not allow any Polish customers to enter. In the evenings, they assaulted Jewish passers-by in the streets.

In general, social life, a war was waged against the Jewish religion by banning ritual slaughter. Not only were the secular powers drawn into this battle, in the person of the MP Prystorowa, but the Catholic Church was also harnessed, in the person of the Jesuit priest [Stanisław] **Trzeciak**. Jewish work was boycotted. Jews were not allowed to work in public positions, [or] as employees or workers in state-owned factories. No concessions were issued to Jews to conduct enterprises. As consequence, a precedent was created that the firms were Polish and the [business] owners were Jewish. The owners of the concessions were Polish and they took money for it and, in this manner, Jews ran the businesses. Despite the fact that Poland adopted many points from Hitler's system, taking in the German "spiritual" influence, the Nazi regime nevertheless strove to fully liquidate Poland.

To serious, objective politicians and sociologists, it became clear that, at the first military conflict, Poland would be ground between the millstones of war. As a result, economic difficulties arose. These conditions generated mistrust in the Polish situation and, as a result, financial credits were stopped. Since all the big business depended on credit notes, vouchers and cheques, the economy was systematically paralysed and an artificial control of prices was implemented due to the lack of confidence in the currency.

Poland completely forgot that it had over a million Germans, as citizens, who did not sleep, and strove by all means and possibilities to take control over communal and financial life. Their activity was a general sabotage to paralyse the military capability of the Polish army. These conditions created the *Nervenkrieg* [Ger., war of nerves]. The uncertainty of every day generated an apathy, a spiritual depression and a stagnation in the economy.

The general mobilisation and squeezing out of colossal sums from the Jewish population for the war loan was already to no avail. The German government's espionage apparatus was incredibly large and Polish citizens - Germans who were in Hitler's service - were in charge everywhere - in the most important positions within the military leadership, provisioning and the war industry.

The War broke out in the early morning hours of Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939. Every couple of hours, the German espionage's propaganda issued different versions which confused everyone. The then official state radio announced that all the men were to leave the cities. Everybody believed the official radio's information. All at once, millions of people started wandering, because the trains were only for military purposes. Commands issued to individual units were contradictory, fabricated by the spies. President Ignacy Mościcki issued an announcement to the effect that the Germans, the eternal foes of Poland, had attacked Polish territory. He established this firmly before the people, before history and before God.

The Polish government began to think that the catastrophe was its own fault, because it had tolerated and even aided the development of Nazi currents within the country, and that it had let itself be led into a confrontation over the Piast territory of Zaodzie<sup>5</sup>. Instead of living in peace with its Czech neighbour, and fighting together against their common enemy, it had in fact torn a piece of territory away from the Czechs - whereupon, [in 1939,] the Germans drove the Poles back out from there with blood and fire. The Jews fulfilled their obligation more than anyone else, fighting with all their strength against the Nazi enemy and introducing a Jewish content into the struggle.

The realisation came too late. Polish cities were being bombed by the Germans. The spies, who were serving in the aviation units, dismantled aeroplanes. The strategic plans were in the hands of the Germans and the government was forced to abandon the threatened city of Warsaw and move to Brisk (Brześć nad Bugiem) and, from there, it travelled to Romania.

That was the tragic finale of the Polish flirtation with German fascism. As a result of the continuous sabotage of not supplying the Polish army with ammunition and provisions, the frontlines were broken almost everywhere by the Germans, because their military and, above all, their air force, had superior might. The first German troops arrived in Częstochowa on Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939.

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<sup>5</sup> [TN: This region in the modern-day Czech Republic had been part of Poland until the Piast dynasty ended in 1653, whereupon it passed to the Czech kings. In 1938, when Nazi Germany demanded the region from Czechoslovakia, Poland rushed to annex it itself, from which Germany reaped certain benefits, such as propaganda, and which made Poland appear as an ally of the Nazis.]