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1940 – Forgotten War?

1940 – zapomniana wojna?

1940 — WOJNA ZAPOMNIANA

MEMORY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR
POLAND 1939
SOVIET OCCUPATION
GERMAN OCCUPATION
GENOCIDE
ANNIHILATION
RESISTANCE
BATTLE OF BRITAIN

PAMIĘĆ O II WOJNIE ŚWIATOWEJ
POLSKA 1939 R.
OKUPACJA SOWIECKA
OKUPACJA NIEMIECKA
LUDOBÓJSTWO
ZAGŁADA
OPÓR
BITWA O ANGLIĘ

Abstract

The public memory of World War II differs sharply between Eastern and Western Europe. For Poland in particular, 1939 stands out as the year in which Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union invaded the country, imposing a brutal and murderous occupation. As a result, the social and intellectual elites above all were targeted for extermination to rob any potential resistance of their leadership. While the Soviets aimed to create a Communist-style society, with state ownership of the economy, the Nazis regarded the Poles as racial inferiors, eventually planning to kill 80 to 85% in order to make way for German settlers. The Jews of Poland were exterminated in ghettos and camps as supposed agents of an international conspiracy to destroy Germany. While these policies were getting under way, 1940, when Germany and the Soviet Union were still allies, saw little military action in the region. Moreover, with Poland reeling from the shock of the invasions, there was little resistance in 1940, and even some collaboration, though it is important to remember that thousands escaped to fight in the Polish Armed Forces in the West organized by polish government and participate in the struggle against Hitler. In Western Europe, by contrast, 1940 was in some ways the most memorable year of the war, with Hitler's conquest of France and other countries. The defeat of the German Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain, under the inspirational leadership of Winston Churchill, has become central to British public memories of the war, playing a strong part in ideological justifications of Britain's decision to leave the European Union.

Abstrakt

Powszechna pamięć o II wojnie światowej różni się znacznie w Europie Wschodniej i Europie Zachodniej. Zwaszcza w Polsce 1939 r. wyróżnia się jako rok, w którym hitlerowskie Niemcy i stalinowski Związek Sowiecki najechały kraj, narzucając mu brutalną i morderczą okupację w celu eksterminacji – w szczególności elit społecznych i intelektualnych, a także tych, którzy mogliby stanąć na czele oporu. Podczas gdy Sowieci dążyli do stworzenia społeczeństwa komunistycznego, z państwową własnością gospodarki, niemieccy narodowi socjaliści uważali Polaków za podrzędnych rasowo i planowali ostatecznie unicestwić od 80 do 85% populacji, aby zrobić miejsce dla niemieckich osadników. Żydów w Polsce eksterminowano w gettach oraz w obozach koncentracyjnych i zagłady jako rzekomych agentów międzynarodowego spisku mającego na celu zniszczenie Niemiec. W czasie gdy polityka obu okupantów była w fazie realizacji, w 1940 r. III Rzesza i Związek Sowiecki byli nadal sojusznikami, ale w tym regionie Europy dochodziło wówczas do niewielu działań wojennych. Co więcej, po wstrząsie, jakim była inwazja Polski, w 1940 r., wciąż jeszcze nie wykształciły się tam powszechny opór czy współpraca, choć trzeba pamiętać, że tysiące Polaków uciekło na Zachód, aby walczyć w Polskich Siłach Zbrojnych, zorganizowanych przez rząd Rzeczypospolitej, i uczestniczyło w walce z Hitlerem. Z kolei w Europie Zachodniej 1940 r. był pod pewnymi względami najbardziej pamiętnym rokiem wojny, kiedy to Hitler podbił Francję i inne kraje: Norwegię, Danię, Belgię, Holandię i Luksemburg. Klęska niemieckiej Luftwaffe w bitwie o Anglię, pod inspirującym przywództwem Winstona Churchilla, stała się centralnym punktem brytyjskiej publicznej pamięci o wojnie, odgrywając też ważną rolę w ideologicznym uzasadnieniu decyzji Wielkiej Brytanii o opuszczeniu Unii Europejskiej.

In what sense, if any, has the year 1940 been forgotten? To understand the dynamics of remembering and forgetting, it is important at the outset to distinguish between history – the scholarly, critical, document-based investigation and understanding of the past – and memory – the public commemoration of the past. History is an intellectual, rational exercise; memory is an emotional, empathetic activity. History is reason; memory is feeling. But there are further distinctions to be made. Public memory, or as it is sometimes known, cultural memory, is not the same as personal or individual memory. Those who lived through, experienced, and remember 1940 are now few indeed, and have entered extreme old age. So public memory has its own life, separate from, though obviously not unrelated to, personal memory. It reflects just as much the political and cultural demands of our own time as it refers back to what actually happened in the past. Public memory is

what the present day chooses for its own purposes to remember. In a sense, it is more about the future than the past.

The same kind of things can be said about forgetting. If the year 1940 has been forgotten, that is not because of any lack of investigation by historians, rather, it is because it does not provide much material suitable for commemoration in the present. That is particularly the case if, as in Poland, the memory of World War II is focused on the celebration of nationhood in the present. At the same time, of course, public memory is always a site of contestation – just as history is; different parts of the public disagree on what is appropriate to remember, or to forget. Governments often have their own particular reasons for encouraging a particular form of public memory, while others – and not just oppositional movements – frequently have a rather different set of reasons and a different way of remembering the past. If public memory is about creating a collective vision of who we are, and what we want to be in the future, then it is hardly surprising that it is the subject of argument and debate. At the same time, it stands in a complex and conditional relationship to history. In the end, it cannot stray too far from the representation of historical reality without running the risk of discrediting itself.

How we remember, or choose to forget, the year 1940 has to be seen in relation not only to the actual events of that year but also to the events of 1939 and 1941. The starting-point in the run-up to the outbreak of war is often dated to the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact on 23 August, pledging Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union not to attack each other or aid each other's enemies. It included secret protocols, not revealed until after the end of the war, dividing Poland along the Curzon Line and agreeing to the inclusion in the Soviet sphere of influence of the Baltic States, Bessarabia and part of Finland. This was followed on 1 September by the Nazi invasion of the western half of Poland, and on 17 September by the Soviet takeover of the eastern half. The Polish state, resurrected at the end of the First World War, was dismembered again, and once more ceased to exist, its interests being represented by a government in exile in the United Kingdom.

In recent years, these events have once more become the focus of what one might call 'memory wars'. From a historical point of view, it is important to underline the fact that the war was unleashed by Hitler, and that the responsibility for its outbreak lay with his megalomaniacal desire for conquest and domination in Europe. Hitler acted and other countries reacted. It was not Poland, or Russia, but Germany that began the war. Britain and France declared war on Germany in 1939 as a defensive act, having finally realized with the German invasion of

Czechoslovakia in March that Hitler did not intend merely to revise the Treaty of Versailles but to unleash the general European war he had been preparing ever since he had come to power more than six years before. In order to do this, Hitler decided to pick off what he regarded as weak Central European countries first, securing his border to the East before turning his attention to the West.

The German invasion of Poland in September 1939 was carried out swiftly and brutally. Outnumbered and outgunned, the Polish armed forces were rapidly defeated. Hitler intended the war to be a war of racial enslavement and extermination from the very beginning. Already before the war, Hitler had told his generals that 'Poland will be depopulated and settled with Germans'. In the parts of Poland occupied by Nazi Germany, 65,000 Poles had already been shot by German troops and ethnic German militias supported by the German invaders between September and December 1939. This was only the beginning. Between December 1939 and January 1941, over a million Polish citizens, a third of them Jewish, were dispossessed, thrown out of their houses and farms, and deported from the areas incorporated into the Reich into the so-called General Government, without food or possessions or any means of support. A quarter of a million were deported from the Wartheland in 1940 alone.

Hitler's intention was for them to make way for German settlers and ethnic Germans who returned from areas of Eastern Europe under Soviet control in their hundreds of thousands with the agreement of the Soviet authorities. Polish education was halted, schools closed, teaching materials and books destroyed, Polish culture and language suppressed. Artworks and treasures were looted on a massive scale. Most food supplies were confiscated to feed the German armed forces or taken off to Germany. Ration books were issued with a mere 669 calories allotted to the Poles by the end of 1940, and 2,613 to the Germans. A vast black market emerged, and bands of robbers broke into houses. Simply, in order to survive, increasing numbers of young Poles volunteered for work in the Reich, or were pressured into going: 700,000 of them were working in agriculture there by the middle of 1940. Nearly 200,000 Polish children deemed to be capable of Germanization were sent to the Reich, given new identities, and adopted by German families. Polish priests, deemed by the Nazis to be encouraging Polish nationalism, were arrested in large numbers and sent to the concentration camp at Dachau.

Polish Jews were regarded by the Nazis as a separate category from the very beginning. While non-Jewish Poles were, to Hitler and his regime, 'Slavs' to be cleared out of the way to make room for German settlers, Jews, defined by their race rather than their religion, were something

else altogether: genetically programmed to be subversive, dangerous and dedicated to destroying civilization in general and the 'Aryan', or in other words, Germanic race altogether. The deportation of Jews from the areas incorporated into Germany began almost immediately after the invasion. In the course of 1940, sealed ghettos were set up in Polish towns and cities. Winter fuel, food and other supplies were scarce, the Jews were treated by German troops and SS men with open, murderous brutality, and death rates began to climb. That this was the prelude to the Jews' removal to death camps, where they were murdered, only became clear towards the end of the following year.

The Poles who lived in the Soviet-occupied eastern part of the country fared little better than their counterparts in the west. Officers, police, prison guards, customs officials and similar uniformed agents of the Polish state were arrested, or taken out of prisoner of war camps, and shot, along with professionals, landowner, civil servants, and others of the same social standing. Some four and a half thousand were executed by the Soviet secret police in the Katyn Forest, and a further seventeen thousand at a variety of other locations. Ukrainian and Belarusian paramilitaries were encouraged by the Soviet occupation forces to slaughter many more. Half a million Poles were imprisoned in the Soviet zone of Poland itself, and one and a half million deported in cattle trucks to labour camps and collective farms in Siberia, Kazakhstan and other parts of the Soviet empire. At least one in three of these were Jewish. The Soviets regarded all these people as part of the Polish ruling class and leaders of Polish nationalism, to be removed in order to pave the way for the Bolshevisation of society in the occupied area. Polish culture was to be eradicated, Polish bookshops closed, Polish street names replaced, and Polish institutions such as universities barred from teaching Polish literature. In addition, as allowed by the terms of the pact, Stalin incorporated the Baltic States, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia into the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940. His attack on Finland had initially been repulsed in the 'Winter War' but numbers told in the end, and in March 1940 an uneasy peace was reached, marked by Soviet annexations of Finnish territory in the east of the country. Further south, in June 1940, the Soviets seized Bessarabia and northern Bukovina from the Romanians. Similarly brutal and murderous policies were enacted here as in Poland by the new Soviet authorities.

It should not be forgotten that under the terms of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact signed in August 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were actually allies. There were regular conferences between representatives of the two powers; the Soviet Union delivered large quantities of food and raw materials to Germany, including oil, in return for deliveries

of military hardware. Shockingly, Stalin also handed back to the Nazis a substantial number of German Communists who had taken refuge in the Soviet Union after the Nazi seizure of power; some of them, arrested during the purges, were taken directly from the Soviet Gulag to a German concentration camp. From Stalin's point of view, the pact was a defensive measure, designed to secure his borders while he hurriedly rearmed and reconstituted the military leadership decimated by his own purges earlier in the decade. It was not the first act of the war, nor did it pave the way for the war or make it possible. Hitler and the German military leadership regarded 'Slavs' as their racial inferiors and considered the Soviet Union so weak that an alliance between the Poles and the Russians (unacceptable to the Polish Government anyway) would not have stopped them from launching their invasion.

Despite the obvious similarities between the occupation policies of the Nazis and the Soviets, however, there were also some very significant differences. Private enterprise was taken over by the state in the Soviet zone, while it was encouraged in the German-occupied territory, as long as it was German-owned. The Soviet Union grounded its extermination of Polish elites in the concept of class, eliminating those they regarded as the exploiting, ruling classes, whatever their ethnic background, and extending, within the structures of state socialism, equal rights and benefits to those they regarded as the exploited. The Nazis grounded their policies in racism, regarding all Poles, whatever their social standing, wealth or status, as racially inferior, and especially targeting Polish Jews. Looking forward to the subsequent years of the war, more than five million Polish citizens, including Jews, lost their lives as a result of the Nazi occupation, while the number who died as a result of the relatively short-lived Soviet occupation was considerably smaller, at an estimated 150,000.

More importantly, however, it was in 1940 that the long-term intentions of the Nazis towards the Poles and other so-called Slavic nations under their control either in the present or at some time in the future became clear. Hitler already began preparations for the invasion of the Soviet Union in July 1940; it had been an intention of his since the 1920s. At the same time, Nazi experts in 'Eastern policy' at Heydrich's Reich Security Head Office began drafting what became the *Generalplan Ost*, the General Plan for the East. Poland was simply the dress-rehearsal. Following what its originators were convinced would be the total victory of Nazi Germany over the Soviet Union, the entire area was to be cleared, over a few years, of 'Slavs', who would be dispossessed to make room for-op German settlers and townsfolk as well as allowed to die of starvation and medical neglect. The Plan envisaged the death over the following few years of 80 to 85% of Poles, 75% of

Belarussians, 65% of Ukrainians, 50 to 60% of Russians, and 50% of Czechs. In addition, some 85% of the population of Estonia and 50% of the populations of Latvia and Lithuania were also to be left die. Overall, the number of people the Nazis intended to exterminate in Eastern Europe is estimated to have been between 30 and 45 million, a truly staggering number, genocide on an almost unimaginable scale. This puts Nazi policy into an entirely different league from that of the Soviet Union in the Second World War. That, in the end, is why it is misguided to equate the Soviet and German occupation of Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe, or to celebrate the memory of men who collaborated with the Nazis in order to fight the Soviets, like the Holy Cross Mountains Brigade in Poland, or the anti-Semitic partisan movement led by Stepan Bandera in Ukraine.

In 1940, these acts of collaboration were yet to come. But during the first months of the German occupation in 1939 and 1940, there was relatively little resistance in Poland, though one can point to some sporadic incidents. This should not be surprising: shock and dismay at the unexpected, indeed unprecedented brutality of the occupation, together with the Germans' deliberate targeting of the social and political elites who could have been expected to provide leadership, meant that – as in almost every other German-occupied country – it took some time before a resistance movement could organize itself. This was made more difficult by the fact that large numbers of Polish soldiers and airmen had escaped from Poland in order to continue the fight from abroad. In contrast to their policy in other occupied countries, the Nazis did not install a collaborationist government, but removed any element of self-government from Poland altogether. Some institutions were more or less forced to work for the Nazis, such as the notorious Blue Police, but all the main structures of Polish Government were swept away. A government in exile was established in Britain, which began to sponsor a resistance movement in Poland itself, but the Home Army which resulted from its efforts was not founded until early in 1942. Insofar as public memory of the war in Poland focuses on resistance to the occupiers, therefore, it does not have a great deal to celebrate in 1940.

The atmosphere in the early months of the occupation was vividly described by the physician Zygmunt Klukowski, a hospital superintendent in Szczebrzeszyn, who noted in his diary the disintegration of Polish society under the impact of the extreme and shocking levels of violence, deprivation, destruction and murder perpetrated by the Germans in 1940: there was widespread drunkenness, despair and disorder; Poles were joining with the Germans in looting Jewish-owned shops; Poles were denouncing each other to the Germans for possessing

weapons, in order to obtain food and supplies. Many young men, who might have been the focus of a resistance movement, volunteered for work in Germany, or were pressured into volunteering. There were numerous drunken brawls, which, Klukowski noted, the Germans were rather pleased about. Young women were descending into prostitution. 'I never expected the morale of the Polish population to sink so low', he wrote on 19 February 1940, 'with such a complete lack of national pride'. This situation was not so different from that of other newly defeated and occupied countries, though conditions in Poland under both the Nazi and the Soviet occupation were far harsher than those obtaining in any other part of German-occupied Europe in 1940. It was not until 1941 and the German-led invasion of the Soviet Union and the Balkans that the situation was to change.

For all the violence and brutality of the German and Soviet occupation, 1940 in Central and Eastern Europe remained something of a hiatus between the military action of September 1939 and the renewed military action, leading swiftly to mass murder and genocide, from July 1941 onwards. But in Western Europe, the year 1940 was entirely different. Certainly, to begin with, there was relatively little action. Known as 'the phoney war', 'der Sitzkrieg', or the 'drôle de guerre', the months from September 1939 to April 1940 saw very little action except for some incidents at sea. It was later argued by some German generals, after the war, that if Britain and France had mounted a land invasion of Germany at the very start of the war, Hitler would have been forced to withdraw troops and equipment from the invasion of Poland, with the result that the German armed forces, which were still very far from achieving their full strength, would have been fatally weakened on both fronts, east and west. In the UK, however, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had only entered the war with extreme reluctance and was unwilling to undertake any decisive belligerent action. The British and French were unprepared for an invasion of Germany, and their armed forces were also very far from achieving their full strength. One can only speculate about the consequences of taking action in September 1939; in any case, the outcome would have been extremely uncertain.

The situation only changed when Nazi Germany, after many delays, caused not least by bad weather, launched a full-scale invasion of Norway and Denmark on 9 April 1940, seeking to open a safe ice-free channel for Swedish iron ore exports to Germany. While Denmark capitulated immediately, there was fierce resistance in the mountainous terrain of Norway, aided by British naval action and landings of British troops. But the British expedition was a fiasco, and the troops were forced to withdraw. On 8–10 May, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain lost

a large part of his support in the British House of Commons after failing to give a convincing defence of his government's conduct of the war. He was forced to resign, and was replaced by Winston Churchill, whose military experience and record of opposing Chamberlain's policy of appeasing Hitler were widely felt to make him the right man for the job. Churchill immediately formed a wartime coalition cabinet. Its first task was to deal with a dramatic deterioration of the military situation, as Hitler's forces invaded France, Luxemburg, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Unprepared and outmaneuvered, the Anglo–French armed forces that tried to halt them in their tracks were totally defeated. At the beginning of June, more than 300,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force were shipped back to England from Dunkirk by the Royal Navy, aided by a flotilla of small civilian ships and boats. France surrendered on 22 June 1940. Germany was now occupying the whole of Western Europe between Spain and Sweden.

Churchill managed to outmanoeuvre the members of his government, led by former Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, who wanted to conclude a separate peace with Germany. He argued correctly that the terms would be equivalent to surrender. It was during this period that he delivered the great speeches that rallied Britain behind his determination to defy Hitler. 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat', he said in his first speech as Prime Minister, on 13 May. 'We shall go on to the end', he declared on 4 June: 'We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender'. On 18 June he declared:

> I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation... The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands; but if we fail then the whole world, including the United States, and all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister, and perhaps more prolonged, by the lights of a perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth and Empire lasts for a thousand years, men will still say: "This was their finest hour".

In the late summer and autumn of 1940, Hitler carried out an intensive campaign of aerial bombardment against the UK, first of all trying to cripple the Royal Air Force by destroying its airfields, then attempting

to damage war production and break civilian morale by bombing Britain's towns and cities, above all, London. This continued for several months but failed to achieve its objective, largely because the Royal Air Force had superior combat aircraft and more pilots. During this period, Hitler was preparing a plan to invade the British Isles – 'Operation Sealion' – but he abandoned it on 19 September 1940 and scaled down the bombing campaign. It was, in truth, uncertain whether Operation Sealion had been serious in the first place. These events marked Hitler's first defeat, in what Churchill had called at the beginning the Battle of Britain.

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In the United Kingdom, far from being forgotten, the year 1940, as a result of these events, is more vividly and more widely remembered than any other year of the Second World War. Indeed, it formed the centerpiece of the politicized strand of public memory that lay behind the successful campaign to take Britain out of the European Union. During the Brexit campaign, Boris Johnson, now Prime Minister, attacked the idea of European unity with the claim that 'Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried this out, and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods'. The language of Britain standing alone against the Continent became so engraved in the rhetoric of Brexiteers that a headline in the Brexit-supporting popular newspaper the *Daily Mail* on the 75th anniversary of VE Day earlier this year described the day as a commemoration of 'Britain's Victory over Europe' (mu italics). Supporters of Britain remaining in the EU were defamed as 'appeasers', Brexit portrayed as the recovery of British sovereignty and autonomy as if the EU was an occupying power.

These views went together with the belief that it had been above all Britain that had defeated Germany in the war. In May 2015, a YouGov opinion poll found that 50% of people in Britain considered that Britain had contributed most to the defeat of Hitler; in France by contrast only 14% took this view; in the United States, a mere 7%. In 1945, 55% of French people surveyed took the view that the Soviet Union had contributed most, but this view faded from memory during the following years as the ideologies of the Cold War took a grip. In 2005, 55% of Americans thought America had contributed most, and in no country surveyed did the figure voting for the Soviet Union exceed 25%, a figure that reflected both ignorance in the West about the Eastern Front from 1941 to 1945, and the long-term effects of the Cold War on public memory in western countries. No other country put Britain

anywhere near first. As far as the judgment of historians is concerned, the contribution of America and the Soviet Union is generally reckoned to have been about equal, looking at the war from start to finish, and across the whole global theatre of operations. That's not to belittle the role of Britain and other countries, but these were to be the two postwar global superpowers, in a different league from all the rest.

These polls dovetailed with the belief that Britain stood alone against Hitler while other countries capitulated. But, of course, Britain did not stand alone. To begin with, some 3,000 of the French troops evacuated from Dunkirk joined de Gaulle's Free French army in Britain, to be joined over the coming months by many more. Then, 5,000 soldiers from the Republic of Ireland moved to Britain to join the war against Germany. In July 1940, almost 4,000 Czech soldiers were recruited into the British army. The RAF formed four squadrons from Czech airmen. Eighty-seven Czech pilots fought in the Battle of Britain, and eight of them were killed. More remarkably still, 19,000 Poles were evacuated from France at Dunkirk. More than 8,000 Polish aircrew had reached Britain by July 1940. They were taught English and given training in flying and maintaining British aircraft. The 145 Polish pilots made up about 5% of the total number of RAF pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain, but they accounted for 12% of victories.

The myth of 'Britain alone' also edits out something that Churchill himself repeatedly mentioned in his great speeches: the contribution of troops from the British Empire, from Australia, Canada, India, Malaya, New Zealand, and many other countries scattered across the globe from Africa to the Pacific. They fought not only in their own region but also in the Mediterranean theatre of operations. They supplied contingents to Britain itself. The contribution of the Empire in terms of finances, raw materials and food was if anything more important. Churchill was also clear from the outset that the war could not be won without the help of the United States, which already in 1940 began assisting Britain with supplies. As he said in his great speech of 13 May 1940, Britain 'would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old'.

The year 1940, then, is far from forgotten in Britain. Even the majority of British people, who do not support Brexit, remember it with pride. For very different reasons, it is also remembered vividly in the rest of Western Europe, the humiliation of defeat and occupation powering the postwar movement for European unity. Nevertheless, the second half of 1940 saw an uneasy quiet descend upon the Continent. Resistance movements across occupied Western Europe were slow to get going. Germany seemed to have achieved Continental dominance, and there

seemed to begin with little point in trying to challenge it. People were waiting to see what would happen. There were few military actions, and the most dramatic of these, on 3 July, when a British naval force destroyed the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir, killing more than 1,200 men, in order to stop the French warships from falling into German hands, was extremely controversial, and turned French opinion against the British.

Military action there followed the entry of Italy into the war on Germany's side on 10 June 1940. For the rest of the year, the British, using primarily troops from the member countries of the Empire and Commonwealth, fought the Italians in North and East Africa, with no clear result achieved by the end of the year. Mussolini's ambition to create an Italian Empire in the Mediterranean and in North Africa found further expression in the Italian invasion of Greece in October 1940. Hitler and Mussolini seemed to be carrying all before them.

It was not until 1941 that the tide began to turn. 'Operation Barbarossa', launched by Hitler a year to the day after the French surrender, on 22 June 1941, which overnight sparked the formation of Communist-led resistance movements all over occupied Europe. Everywhere this led, over the following months, to the emergence of other resistance movements, including the Polish Home Army, and by the early months of 1942, partisan operations, above all in Poland and Yugoslavia, were posing a growing threat to German lines of communication and supply. The emergence of resistance movements was a slow and uneven process and reached its height in Western Europe only after the Allied D-Day landings in northern France on 6 June 1944. There were serious tensions between the communist and noncommunist resistance movements, breaking out into open conflict in Greece and Yugoslavia, foreshadowing the division of Europe between East and West after the war. Stalin's betrayal of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 was only the most dramatic example of these conflicts, and one that forms a significant part of the Polish public memory of the war.

In 1940, however, all this was yet to come. In Eastern Europe, it represented something of a hiatus, as Germany and the Soviet Union consolidated their power and built up their strength for the conflict that was to come. In Western Europe, however, it saw dramatic military action, disastrous for Germany's enemies on every front. The year 1940 marked the high point of Hitler's popularity in Germany, after the defeat of France. Most German people expected peace to follow. When Churchill rejected a vaguely worded peace offer from Hitler in mid-July 1940, 'the Germans I talk to', the American correspondent William L. Shirer, reported, 'simply cannot understand it. They want peace'. They were not to achieve it for nearly five years.

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