

Polish Arts Club of Trenton

World War II Behind Closed Doors Stalin, the Nazis and the West

This fact sheet is provided by the Polish Arts Club of Trenton as background information to the film and book entitled, "WWII Behind Closed Doors. Stalin, the Nazis and the West," which was written and produced by Laurence Rees, Creative Director of BBC History and former Head of BBC TV History programs.

Laurence Rees provides an unfamiliar and shocking view of World War II. Based on archival material available after the fall of the Soviet Union, interviews with survivors, and dramatic reenactments, we learn about the secret deals made between British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, American President, Franklin Roosevelt, and Soviet leader, Josef Stalin. Mr. Rees demonstrates how these secret deals profoundly affected Poland and the world at large. Did the Allied leaders believe they could "handle" Stalin, or were they only focused on the overriding goal of defeating Germany and Japan? The revelations in this documentary will stir your deepest emotions. In the end, you will wonder what is going on Behind Closed Doors today.

Two Dictators – Conspirators and Enemies

Many events brought Adolph Hitler to power, including: the harsh terms imposed on Germany in the Treaty of Paris after World War I; the depression that followed World War I; the French and British government appeasements of Hitler; French and British overconfidence in their military and underestimation of Germany military strength. Coupled with a weak political leadership and desire to restore their military dominance, the Germans embraced Hitler's doctrines. At the same time, the Soviets were led by the self-imposed dictator, Josef Stalin, a man obsessed with personal power and dominance of Eastern Europe. Most western countries despised communism as much as they came to hate the Nazis and Hitler. But as shown in Mr. Rees documentary, Stalin was a master of deception and manipulation who emerged the dominant winner after WW II.

According to historians, Hitler's Nazi ethnic cleansing policies and obsession with creating a master race resulted in a death toll of between 11 to 18 million which included people from every country and religion in Europe. The atrocities lasted until the end of war in 1945. But millions of people were also killed, relocated and imprisoned by the Soviet Union under Stalin, before, during and after WW II. In addition, both the German and Soviet governments subjected millions to loss of civil liberties, confiscation of personal property, and dehumanization.

Under the guise of liberating Eastern Europe from the Nazis, Stalin fed his lust for power by eliminating the opposition, real or imagined, with no thought to human suffering. Consequently, the deals made "Behind Closed Doors" allowed the Soviet Union to dominate world events for 45 years after the war and to control Eastern Europe until the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Ironically, this event and the end of the Soviet stranglehold on Eastern Europe were precipitated by the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980's. Poland, the very nation that Hitler and Stalin carved up, and whose invasion was the match that lit the fuse of WW II, proved to be the end of Soviet domination.

The Soviet Union paid a horrendous price for its part in WW II. Over 11 million of its military and 16 million civilians were killed, as compared to the western Allied loss of 1.2 million military and civilians. (This does not include 3 million Polish Christians, 6 million Jewish victims (3 million of whom were Polish citizens), losses in other East European countries, and other categories of persecution.)

The Soviet and Allied partnership barely lasted the war, and in the end, Stalin survived Hitler, Roosevelt and Churchill. However, the US became the dominant western world power and the leader of the free world. West European countries liberated by the US and Britain rebuilt their economies with aid from the American Marshall Plan. Poland and other East European countries were absorbed into the Soviet communist system, faced reprisals, persecutions, and poverty.

The World in Turmoil: An Overview of Events

Fighting for Freedom

These scenes from the film will bring tears to your eyes and stir your heart:

August 24, 1939. The secret Non-Aggression Pact signed by Stalin and Hitler enabled Germany to attack Poland without the risk of the Soviet Union siding with Britain and France. This pact outlined the Vistula River in Poland as the new boundary between Germany and the Soviet Union, with Poland being wiped off the map of Europe.

September 1, 1939. When Germany invaded Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany. Despite Churchill's reminders that England went to war to defend Poland, the deals with Stalin behind closed doors resulted in a change of tyrants and loss of freedom for Poland.

September 17, 1939. Churchill argued that the Britain declared war on Germany to secure Poland's freedom. Yet, a similar declaration was not issued when 600,000 Soviet troops invaded Poland from the East. After the dual invasion of Poland, Stalin provided Germany with valuable raw materials, gave the German navy access to an ice free port, and offered Hitler further assistance.

March 5, 1940. Sealing the fate of 22,000 members of the Polish officer corps and intelligentsia, Stalin gave a secret order to shoot individually all the captives at three internment areas who had been arrested after the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939. In Katyn alone, 4,500 were killed and buried in the forest.

June 22, 1941. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union, Stalin formed a relationship with the British and Americans to help him fight his former ally. Churchill hated communism but said he would provide anyone who fought the Germans a favorable reference, even the devil himself.

December, 1941. The Soviets met with head of the Polish government-in-exile, General Władysław Sikorsky, to negotiate the formation of two Polish armies to fight the Germans, one under British command, the other under Soviet command. Stalin told Sikorsky that the officers imprisoned during the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland had been freed, and continued to deny the killings that he personally ordered in 1940. When in April 1943, Germany announced it had discovered mass graves in Katyn, Stalin produced falsified documents and witnesses to blame the Germans. Finally, in 1989, Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachov, admitted the Soviet atrocity.

January 1942. In the Berlin suburb of Wannsee, Hitler and his Nazi henchmen met to discuss what they called the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” aimed at the extermination of the Jewish people. Killing of the Jewish population had begun in 1941, but became a plan for total elimination and culminated with the death of six million Jews, three million of them Polish citizens.

August, 1942. Churchill visited Polish troops and the officers again asked about the fate of the Soviet-held Polish officers. Churchill said they should “Let it go, because no good could come of it.”

1942. *Time* magazine declared Stalin “Man of the Year.” *Life* magazine likened the Soviet secret police that carried out Stalin’s purges and killings, the NKVD, to the American FBI. The American and British people remained ignorant of Stalin’s form of communist, because to defeat German, their governments did not want protests against an alliance with a blood thirsty tyrant.

January - April 1943. After the Nazis isolated the Jewish population of Warsaw into a ghetto, this resistance opposed the effort to transport whoever was still alive to the Treblinka extermination camp. 13,000 Jews were killed and the remaining 50,000 residents were shipped to concentration and extermination camps.

November 1943. When Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt met in Teheran, Iran, Stalin declared he would keep the eastern part of Poland he had invaded in 1939. As compensation, Churchill suggested that Poland receive part of captured German territory on Poland’s western border.

May 1944. Polish troops distinguished themselves at the battle of Monte Casino. Over 4,000 were killed or wounded before the victory was won and the Polish flag flew over the monastery.

June 6, 1944. Allies opened a second front at Normandy, France.

Hope of Freedom Fades

June 23, 1944. When 2 ½ million Soviet troops launched their offensive, the NKVD moved into what had been the Polish city of Lwow. Files found in the German headquarters were used to punish Polish people who had expressed negative views of Stalin and Soviet communism.

August 1, 1944. 200,000 Polish people died in the Warsaw Rising. Germany destroyed 95% of Warsaw during this 60-day siege while Soviet troops, Poland’s official allies, sat outside the city and refused to help. Stalin also did not allow British and American air forces to provide supplies from Soviet held territories.

January 1945. Soviet troops entered Warsaw, including Polish troops under Soviet command. The Soviet 6th Air Force/Army Group wore Polish uniforms and spoke Polish to set the stage for a Soviet puppet government. Stalin banned the Polish government-in-exile from returning to Poland.

February 1945. Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt met at Yalta where the future of Poland was decided, but Poland was excluded. Eastern Poland was given to Stalin. Poland shrank in size in comparison to its pre-war area, as did Germany. When Churchill later met with the Polish government-in-exile, he was outraged that they did not agree to the shrinking of their country.

March 28, 1945. Churchill was outraged when 16 members of Stalin's puppet government in Warsaw were transported to a prison in Moscow. Roosevelt said he preferred to stay out of European disputes as he tried to convince Stalin to attack the Japanese in China.

May 1945. Germany surrendered and Poland remained under Soviet domination. The war never ended for thousands of people who had been deported to the Soviet Union and were never liberated. Survivors and their children remain to this day in places like Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

1946. A parade in London celebrated the end of WW II and the Allied forces. Despite numerous sacrifices of Polish troops who had served in the British military, Britain did not invite Poland to participate. Churchill did not want to upset Stalin who had broken off diplomatic relations with Poland for two reasons. The Polish government-in-exile did not accept the revised borders and insisted that the Soviet Union, not Germany, was to blame for the Katyn massacres.

Free at Last

1980's. Rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland.

1989. Fall of the Soviet Union. Poland becomes an independent republic.

The Polish Arts Club of Trenton **Serving the Polish American community since 1946**

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