

Polish anguish: A quest for closure

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AS THE world celebrates the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II this week, we look back to what happened between September 1939 and May 1945. Poland lost more than six million of its people, including three million Jews. By decision of the Great Powers taken at the conferences in Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam, the territory of Poland was moved to the west and shrunk by 20 per cent. Its population fell from 35 million in 1939 to 24 million in 1945. Some 40 per cent of its national assets, with many cities and towns completely destroyed, were lost.

These statistics conceal untold tragedies for millions of lives. During the war, the Nazis murdered my whole family. My experience was shared by millions of Poles. So, when I bow my head today before those who vanquished the Third Reich, it is not an empty gesture, but an expression of awareness that the victory saved millions of lives.

Millions of young Poles and Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians, Englishmen and Americans gave their lives so

that nations could live in peace. To remember their sacrifice, world leaders met in Moscow this week to pay tribute to soldiers and civilians who perished.

For Poland, it all began on Sept 1, 1939, when we were treacherously attacked from the west and south by the Nazis. Two weeks later — on Sept 17 — aggression from the east was committed by Stalinist Soviet Union. That invasion marked the fulfilment of an infamous conspiracy known as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which was signed in Moscow on Aug 23, a week before the German attack.

The conspiracy resulted in untold losses. The list of the Nazi crimes is long and terrifying. Hitler's genocide, the Holocaust, branded the history of the 20th century. The names of the camps — Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno on the Ner, Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka, Dachau — will forever remind people about the darkest side of human nature.

The crimes of Stalinism are also horrific. For Poles, their most shocking deed was the murder of 22,000 Polish prisoners-of-war, whose ashes lie in the cemeteries of Katyn, Miednoye and Kharkov.

We are told sometimes that the criminal plot of the two dictatorships — Stalin's and Hitler's — was legitimate under the international law of the time. What is more, it constituted a justified or even essential defence in view of the Munich Agreement concluded in September 1938 among Nazi Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and France.

That treaty was designed to channel German aggression eastward. True, it was a much shameful agreement conceived to appease the aggressor at the expense of Czechoslovakia. The Munich Agreement has found a highlighted place in dictionaries of international law and international relations as an example of an unjust treaty imposed upon a third party against its will. Eventually, all its signatories recognised — during or after the war — that it was invalid from the very start.

The United Nations was born out of the experiences of the war. Then, 60 years ago, it seemed that we were entering a new world of respect for law, justice and human dignity. For the nations liberated by the anti-Nazi coalition — France, West Germany, Norway, Greece, Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland, Denmark,

Austria and Italy — that promise turned into reality.

But fate was not as generous to Poland and other states of Central and South-eastern Europe. The end of the war saw the 1945 decisions of Yalta, taken over the heads of Poles by the three major powers of the anti-Nazi coalition, permitting the subjugation of Poland by Stalin dictatorship.

The same fate was shared by other nations of Central and Eastern Europe. The first days of joy at the regaining of freedom gave way to 45 years of the subjugation by a regime of violence and lawlessness which saw human dignity trampled upon.

As a British historian wrote, there is "the tendency to praise the war as unconditional success, as a wonderful enterprise which ended with the liberation of the world from Evil. (But) in the Eastern half of Europe, one foul tyranny was driven out by another; and Liberation was postponed for nearly 50 years".

This is not to present some bill of wrongs or claims.

To the contrary.

We pay tribute to all the soldiers from Russia, Ukraine, Belarussians and other nations who fought in the ranks of the Red Army — for their heroism,

dedication and sacrifice. The valiant deeds of these hundreds of thousands of nameless heroes are held in Poland in the highest esteem. Their graves are cared for properly, their memories kept alive.

The victory of 60 years ago was also the work of Poles. We have a prominent place among the defenders of the free world. Poland was the first to oppose Nazi aggression. We fought on all fronts of the war. At the end of the war, the Polish military contribution was the biggest after the Soviet Union, United States and the UK.

This year will not only be the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II but also the 30th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act signing, and 25th anniversary of the founding of the Solidarity movement in Poland — which set off the process of peaceful and democratic transformations in many states in our part of the world. These combined to bring to the end the post-war division of Europe.

And, for many, the real end of the war.

The writer is Poland's Foreign Affairs Minister. This is based on a speech he gave at the UN to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II.