The Red Army in Eastern Poland

By the end of the 1939 September Campaign, Poland was under both Nazi and Soviet occupation. The line of demarcation between the German and Soviet spheres of influence along the Vistula River in Poland, as outlined in the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, was shifted east, to the Bug River. The Soviets were compensated with rights to Lithuania, which had originally been assigned to the German sphere. The German-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Demarcation of September 28, 1939, formalized the new boundaries between the two allies and called for cooperation in ruthlessly suppressing all signs of Polish agitation.

On the eastern side of the border, in what the Soviets called Western Byelorussia and Western Ukraine, they staged plebiscites meant to show the local population’s collective desire to join the Soviet Union. Beginning in 1939, until the Nazi invasion in June 1941, those considered a security risk to the Soviet government, including hundreds of thousands of Poles, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and Jews of all nationalities, were arrested and deported to labor camps and isolated settlements in Siberia and Central Asia, where about half perished from the extreme conditions. As for the Polish prisoners of war taken by the Soviets in 1939, most never saw Poland again; those who were officers were nearly all executed by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, in the spring of 1940.

The Polish Army Abroad and the Home Army

After the “September defeat” the Polish army and government were forced to reconstitute themselves on Allied soil. On September 30, a new government in exile was formed under General Wladyslaw Sikorski, first in France and then in England. Nearly 100,000 Polish soldiers, who had withdrawn into Romania, Hungary, and the Baltics before making their way to France, were formed into four infantry divisions, a mountain brigade, and a tank battalion and would see combat during 1940 in Norway and France. In occupied Poland the first cells of the underground resistance, later known as the Home Army, began forming. Those groups would quickly coalesce into a functional underground state, complete with representatives of all of the political parties, a civil service, secret radio stations, couriers, dozens of illegal publications, and a clandestine army, organized into forest and urban detachments. Initially the war was expected to end quickly, but after the fall of France in mid-1940, the Polish underground had to resign itself to a protracted and bloody resistance to the Nazi occupiers.