

70 Years since the outbreak of the war

How to remember in the right manner? For example the Baltic States

It is a dark accumulation of days of memory “70 years since the outbreak of war“. The most important date being the 1st September 1939, when the German Wehrmacht marched early that morning into its neighbouring country, Poland. Of course, that attack had many early indications and stages, finally being decided by the Hitler-Stalin-Pact of the 23rd August. It enabled both dictators to march into “their” respective halves of Poland without further risk and lead to the downfall of the three Baltic States.

Apart from Germany and Poland, only Switzerland was in a state of war on the 1st September. Two days later, England and France were at least formally involved in the war: Their military support for Poland did not happen. Fourteen days later, the SU attacked “its” Eastern Part of Poland and after a further ten weeks, on the 30th of November, neutral Finland.

The European war expanded eastwards in fact on the 8th April 1940, when Hitler marched into Denmark and Norway. It took another 4 weeks until the Germans invaded Belgium, France, Holland and Luxemburg on May 10th, 1940. Literally a year later half of the planet was burning, caused by the German attack on the Soviet Union in the summer and the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbour in December, 1941.

Therefore, there is not only one day which commemorates the beginning of the catastrophe of the 20th century seventy years ago. But no matter which anniversary approaches us, 2009 has a special meaning in any case: The young and fully conscious adults at the outbreak of war are now the last witnesses of that time. Their knowledge and their memories was of great use to the Polish fight for freedom already during the early 80’s; people of the same age in the Baltic States supported the organisers of the legendary 600 km long “Baltic Chain” in the year of change, 1989. The very real meaning of the ancient “vae victis” is to be understood by the according German age group. Time is running out for the last eye witnesses. In 2019 their generation will have passed away and will not take part in the 80th commemoration.

Under all countries involved in the 2nd World War, only the USA and USSR – despite a high blood toll – could profit from their triumph. However, the World War had changed the foundations of Europe. Even for the victorious allied countries an era had passed. Countries such as England and France were now only regional powers. The division of the continent and the four decades of communist dictatorship left a festering sore through Europe, which left its mark on the world stage of politics.

Beneath this global continental upheaval, the conclusion of the war was very different, thus the memories of war times were of “national” character. Until this very day, there is no real “European commemoration”, although the European Commission and the OECD have tried. How should this happen?

The small Baltic States being occupied twice within five years was burnt into their collective memory. This was different in Finland for instance, with its changing war coalitions. Poland as well as Germany suffered under war and violence, however, the one being the aggressor and the other the victim – but both had to bear the pain of displacement.

There are still traces of “national” memories until this very day. How could it be that the comparison, (which has been withdrawn) between the Baltic Sea gas pipe line and the Stalin-Hitler Pact could happen? These traces too explain the tough position of Poland and its Baltic neighbours within the EU towards Russia.

The list could be continued. It is no wonder that the common European commemoration is so poorly defined – the emphasis lies on common. The more meritorious are opinions and confessions at least at bi-national levels, for instance the recent statement of the German and Polish bishops of 25.8.* or the signed manifesto of a number of intellectuals on the occasion of the Hitler-Stalin Pact**. It is also promising that the German-Polish schoolbook-commission continues its tiresome efforts.

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* links: - Polish: <http://www.nton.pl/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090825/KRAJ/927015178>
- German: <http://www.dbk.de/aktuell/meldungen/01994/index.html>

** Text to be found under www.23august1939.de
(multilingual, however not translated into any Baltic language)

Interesting websites on the relations Poland – Germany:

- www.fwpm.org.pl (Foundation German-Polish cooperation, ger./pl.)
- www.pol-niem.pl (Polish Foreign Ministry for German-Polish cooperation, pl.)