Welcome to the April session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight’s speaker is John Radzilowski, author of Frantic 7: The American Effort to Aid the Warsaw Uprising, who will lecture on the Polish forces in the 1939 German invasion of Poland.

Poland suffered disproportionally more losses and damage than any other nation in World War II. Despite their nation’s defeat, many Polish soldiers fought on with the Allied armies, as intelligence operatives, and within occupied Poland in the Polish Home Army. The sheer tenacity and endurance of the Polish people sustained their cultural and national existence under wartime oppression by both the Nazis and the Soviets and after the war under Communist control and attest to the indomitable spirit of the heirs of Sobieski.

Absorbed by Prussia, the Holy Roman (Austrian) Empire, and the Russian Empire in the late 1700s, Poland was restored as a self-governing nation in 1918 in the Versailles Treaty. War quickly began between Poland and Lenin’s Soviet Russia, already engaged in the Russian Civil War. The spectacular defeat of Trotsky’s Red Army demonstrated the fighting spirit of the Poles and ensured a deadly antipathy from the Russian Communists that Stalin avenged in blood. Furthermore, part of the border revisions imposed at Versailles to ensure a Polish corridor to the Baltic Sea (across formerly Prussian territory) served as a lightning rod for German irredentists (most specifically Adolf Hitler). After Hitler came to power, Poland found itself with profoundly antagonistic neighbors to the east and to the west.

The failure of the Western democracies to consolidate “Collective Security” in the 1930s against Germany left Poland supported by vague, ultimately empty, promises. With appeasement ascendant in 1938, Poland saw its southern flank absorbed into the Greater Reich and realized the impotency of British and French assurances. As Hitler directed his focus to “reclaiming” Danzig and the Polish Corridor he stunned Britain and France with the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression “Pact in August 1939. Despite their ideological hostility, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany agreed to carve up Poland and rearrange the borders of Eastern Europe.

Ferociously anti-Polish German and Soviet propaganda preceded the Nazi invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 and the consequent Soviet invasion of eastern Poland on 17 September. While often described as an almost effortless blitzkrieg, the Polish defenders actually inflicted heavy casualties on the invaders despite being out-matched. One of the most far-reaching contributions of Poland to ultimate victory in World War II occurred during Poland’s collapse in the fall of 1939.

Necessity had been the mother for the creation of the first-class Polish intelligence services during the 1920s and 1930s. Among their achievements was gaining possession of the German Enigma coding device. As Poland fell under the control of the Nazis and Communists, this device was shipped to England where it formed the nucleus of the British effort at Bletchley Park and the ULTRA secret. In addition, many Polish military personnel fled the country and ended up in the United Kingdom to continue the fight.

Nazi racist ideology viewed the Poles as “subhuman” and German occupation forces systematically executed the Polish intelligentsia, clergy, academics, and other leaders, explicitly to deprive Poland of its most influential figures. Similarly, the Soviet Union executed those Poles identified as “class enemies” — businessmen, political leaders, clergy, and officers of the Polish Army. Tens of thousands of Polish prisoners of war would be transported as slave labor into the Soviet death camps of Siberia. Thousands of Polish officers from Generals to Lieutenants were executed in an orgy of Soviet murder at the Katyn forest. National Socialist policies directed at the Jewish population and the creation of the General Government in central Poland under Hans Frank made this territory “Ground Zero” for what evolved into the Holocaust. Auschwitz, before becoming the greatest killing center on earth, was a concentration camp created to house Polish as well as Polish-Jewish prisoners. The Catholic martyr and saint Maksymilian Maria Kolbe was one of the Polish political prisoners at Auschwitz.

During the German-Soviet Union partnership in 1939-1941, Polish military personnel fought Germany only from England. Polish pilots in the Royal Air Force’s 303 “Kosciuszko” Squadron had the highest number of kills of any RAF squadron.
during the Battle of Britain. Once Hitler invaded the USSR in June 1941, Stalin allowed Polish military personnel to leave the GULAG and go to the West to fight the common enemy. There, they served in the Polish II Corps commanded by Lt. Gen. Wladyslaw Anders, who himself had been released from the torture cells of Lubyanka Prison in Moscow. As part of the British Eighth Army Polish II Corps fought in the Italian Campaign, most notably at the Battle of Monte Cassino.

One of the most famous members of the Polish II Corps serving with the 22nd Artillery Supply Company in Italy was a recruit who joined the Polish forces as they traveled through the Middle East to hook up with the British Eighth Army. During the Battle of Monte Cassino, German observers were stunned to see a fully grown brown bear carrying ammunition to Polish artillery positions. This was Private Wojtek, who was adopted by the Polish soldiers. He rode next to them in jeeps, and after battle would join his comrades smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. After the war, rather than live under Communism, he immigrated to England where he lived in honored retirement at the Edinburgh Zoo, until his death in 1963.

Further Readings:

Announcements:
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 18 May 2021 – The Inhuman Dakota War Trials of 1862 - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com
St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table – 30 Aug. 2021 – Fort Fisher - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net
Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - TBD - idaubenspeck52@gmail.com
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - www.mnangmuseum.org
8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 - https://www.8thhsmn.org
Friends of Ft. Snelling – www.fortsnelling.org
Winston Churchill Book Club - lin.hopkins@hotmail.com
Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - www.afmsp.org
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - granviery45@hotmail.com
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - www.cafm.org
Selim Center for Life Long Learning, UST, https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/
Western Naval Historical Association info@wnha.net

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatt@yahoo.com

The Round Table Schedule 2021-2022
11 May The “Mighty Eighth” and Victory in Europe
14 Sept. Genesis of the Pacific War
12 Oct. Pacific War
26 Oct. Reinforcing the Philippines
9 Nov. Deutsch Lecture – Arcadia Conference
14 Dec. Pearl Harbor attack
2022
11 Jan. Patton: the Enigma
8 Feb. Wake Island
8 Mar. Nuremburg Trials – Goering
22 Mar. Florence Finch - Filipino Heroine
12 Apr. Doolittle Raid
10 May Last Battle: in the Alps
The Round Table is a 501.c.3 non-profit. We would greatly appreciate your supporting the HCDWW2RT.