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Poland's Duda calls for forgiveness and atonement on WW2 anniversary

Poland's President Andrzej Duda on Friday said that 78 years after the outbreak of the Second World War, there was a need for remembrance, forgiveness and atonement.

The president was speaking at a remembrance ceremony held at 0440 hrs in Wielun, central Poland. On September 1, 1939, the town was a scene of the first German attack on Poland (see: NOTE 1).

In his speech, Duda said that "the biggest war in world history, in which the largest number of lives was lost, has two great symbols - both of them in our country".

He pointed out the first of them was Westerplatte, where the first battle of WW2 took place, with Polish soldiers fighting heroically and inspiring the whole nation to defend its country.

The president added the second was Wielun, "but this is not a symbol of heroism. It's a symbol of bestiality, German bestiality. Of international conventions being broken. Of ordinary people being attacked treacherously, without any warning, without any notice, in their sleep".



"Of a hospital being bombed and places of worship being destroyed", he underscored.

Poland's head of state added that today, the bombing of Wielun "would be called a terrorist attack".

"Bombing a city in its sleep is not war, it is barbarity and banditry", he said.

"The attack on Wielun became a terrible symbol of that war and the methods employed by the Germans", Duda assessed.

He pointed out not only the assault took place while Wielun was asleep, but the town didn't have any military force or facilities and was without defence.

The president reminded of the casualties of WW2, which surpassed 30 million civilians, including 6 million Polish citizens.

"These were citizens of various nationalities, as Poland was, at the time, an ethnically diverse country. Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians, Tatars and of course we, Polish people, lived here, but we were all citizens of the Republic of Poland, of the Polish state, whom the Germans decided to destroy", he explained.

"We must call a spade a spade. During WW2, nobody was treated by the Germans in the way they treated Jews, Roma and Sinti people, as well as the Polish people. They were destroying us ruthlessly", Duda said.

He said nothing like that had happened before in world history and hopefully it would never happen again. Hopefully "that war was also a lesson for the world, about what comes from hatred, arrogance, totally unfettered cruelty".

The president also underlined nobody was ever punished for the attack on Wielun. He said that was why remembrance was so vital. "So I thank the residents of Wielun for your remembrance", Duda added.

"We have to know and remember who was the victim and who was the murderer, who was the victim and who was the aggressor", he said.



"We must not let this truth be obscured by time or by the scheming of various historians or pseudo-historians", the president underscored.

"Whoever falsifies history is not a historian, but a pseudo-historian, because they contradict the beautiful scientific idea that is the science of history", he explained.

Duda also pointed out there was a need for forgiveness, as it makes good neighbourly relations possible, and facilitates creation, not destruction. "And for this reason, there is a need for atonement", he added.

The president congratulated the people of Wielun on a successful reconstruction of a town which was reduced to ruin in three fourths of its area.

"I thank you once again for remembering those who were killed and those who took part in combat. For communicating this truth to youth, because it is vital that the assault on Poland never happens again", he added.

"We must build a strong state. This strong state can be built, in the first place, with the power of youth. By educating them, instilling patriotic values in them", Duda said.

"Honour and glory to the heroes, eternal remembrance for the fallen. I pay tribute to the fallen residents of Wielun and all the victims of WW2", the president concluded.

In the morning ceremony, Duda was accompanied by parliamentarians, war veterans, religious officials, representatives of local governments and state institutions, as well as the people of Wielun.

Prime Minister Beata Szydło sent a letter to the participants, read out by her chief aide Beata Kempa.

A roll-call was also read out, followed by the firing of a honorary salvo.

Duda laid flowers at a statue commemorating a demolished synagogue and at a memorial to the victims of the German bombing of Wielun.

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NOTE 1: Before the war, Wielun had around 16,000 residents and was situated only 21 kilometers away from the German border. On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany dropped 380 bombs on the city. The first target was the All Saints Hospital, bombed at 4:40 am, five minutes before the shelling of Westerplatte (see: NOTE 2)

As a result of the bombings, the city was almost completely destroyed.

According to historians, when the Luftwaffe attacked, no Polish military troops were deployed in or around the city. The city also lacked anti-aircraft defences. Thus, the bombing is considered an act of terrorism, as it targeted the civilian population.

NOTE 2: The Battle of Westerplatte was the first battle in Germany's invasion of Poland and marked the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe. On September 1, 1939, at 4:45 am the German battleship Schleswig-Holstein opened fire on the Polish Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte. The depot's Polish crew held out for seven days in the face of heavy attacks that included dive bombings.

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