

The Unknown Knowns

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WWII:

Until I read Fiedler's book [[303 Squadron](#) -- SS] I wasn't even aware there were Polish pilots in the Battle of Britain. So imagine my surprise at discovering that in the critical month of September alone, the 303 Squadron shot down 108 of the 967 enemy planes destroyed by the RAF and its allies. And that, over the course of the Battle of Britain, its pilots shot down three times as many aircraft, with one-third the losses, of any other RAF squadron.

Yet another fault-line! Lane attributes the erasure of 303 Squadron from historical record to Poland's eclipse by the Iron Curtain, and the West's concomitant depreciation of Polish wartime contribution. A supposedly accountable Western democracy, not an oppressive autocracy, "disappeared" the Polish fighters for political reasons. (Perhaps the story is better known in Eastern Europe?)

Lane's column reminded me of another historical obfuscation from that part of the world. "[The Worst of the Madness](#)" is a chilling survey of the blood-soaked history of Poland and points east -- Belarus, the Baltics, Ukraine, and the western periphery of Russia. Last year, Ann Applebaum wrote in *The New York Review of Books* that this region:

... experienced the worst of both Stalin's and Hitler's ideological madness. During the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, the lethal armies and vicious secret policemen of two totalitarian states marched back and forth across these territories, each time bringing about profound ethnic and political changes...

Between 1933 and 1945, fourteen million people died there, not in combat but because someone made a deliberate decision to murder them...

Timothy Snyder, a Yale historian... argues that we still lack any real knowledge of what happened in the eastern half of Europe in the twentieth century. And he is right: if we are American, we think "the war" was something that started with Pearl Harbor in 1941 and ended with the atomic bomb in 1945. If we are British, we remember the Blitz of 1940... and the liberation of Belsen. If we are French, we remember Vichy and the Resistance. If we are Dutch we think of Anne Frank. Even if we are German we know only a part of the story.

Amid our frequent and heartfelt invocations of the Holocaust and its lessons, how often do we -- here in the West -- speak of those 14 million victims? **Shouldn't cultural literacy include knowing about Polish heroism in the defense of Britain?**