

Witold Pilecki – The Unsung Hero of World War II

Lesson 2: Under the Soviets

CREATE THE CONTEXT

[for homework or in class the previous day]

A | Ask students what they know about the end of World War II in Europe (May 8–9, 1945) and the ensuing onset of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain. Explain briefly how the Soviet Union was tightening its control over the so-called captive nations.¹

B | Have students read, think about, and answer the following:

Read Background Information: Pilecki monograph, 100–122.

1. What was the significance of the three wartime conferences of the allies in Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam?
2. How did they change the territory of Poland, and what did these changes mean for the citizens of the pre-war Second Polish Republic?
3. Could Poles be happy with the changes?
4. How did Pilecki modify his operational methods to adjust to the new political situation?
5. Was he optimistic about the future?
6. Why did Pilecki's investigator, Col. Różański, hide Pilecki's report?

(See **Answer Key**.)

PSA (Primary Source Activity) [5 minutes]

A | Distribute the translation of the poem Pilecki wrote to the principal investigator to explain his situation.

B | Discuss why he might have chosen poetry to communicate with the investigator, and why he wanted to take all the blame on himself.

(See **Answer Key**.)

ACTIVITY A [15 minutes]

A | Prior to class, duplicate translations of two clemency pleas: one written by Pilecki and the other by his wife. You will need one set for every two students as they will work in pairs.

B | Ask students to work together to establish the main points of defense cited in both pleas (See **Answer Key**.)

¹ Recommended reading: Lane, Arthur Bliss. *I Saw Poland Betrayed: An American Ambassador Reports to the American People*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1948.

C | Ask students to comment on Pilecki's argument.

- What is the general line of his defense?
- What does he consider to be his guilt? How does it compare to the official justification of the death sentence?
- Is he repentant?

ACTIVITY B *[15 minutes]*

A | Explain that the Soviet state could be compared to a mafia or a terrorist organization just as the Nazi state could. (See Pawelczynska's classification presented in the paper, 72–73, discussed at the previous class.)

B | Refer to the excerpts with Pawelczynska's classification. (See **Answer Key to LP 1.**) Give the students a few minutes to come up with the examples from Witold Pilecki's trial illustrating every characteristic point listed by Pawelczynska. (See **Answer Key** for responses.)

WRAP-UP *[10 minutes]*

Ask the class to discuss in what way the investigation and trial of Witold Pilecki broke the rules of fair conduct of legal investigation.

IMMEDIATE ASSESSMENT

A | Write an imaginary defense of Pilecki that could have been delivered had he been granted a fair trial. Explain the reasons for his decision to provide information to his home unit abroad as well as mitigating circumstances you consider relevant.

B | Read and analyze how the newspaper titles from that period set the stage for a show trial (See **Answer Key** for excerpts.)

C | In a well-written 3–4 paragraph essay, explain what the aim of the Witold Pilecki show trial was.