

Polish prelates welcome Putin's letter seeking better understanding

WARSAW, Poland - Two Polish archbishops welcomed Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's letter seeking a better understanding between Russians and Poles, published to coincide with Sept. 1 commemorations of the outbreak of World War II.

"This is the first such text I've ever read from an important politician speaking in his nation's name," said Archbishop Henryk Muszynski of Gniezno.

"We won the war together, and now it's time to win the battle of memories together. This is very difficult when, for 70 years, one-sided conceptions have been formed on both sides," the archbishop said of the letter published Aug. 31 in Poland's Gazeta Wyborcza daily.

Archbishop Jozef Zycinski of Lublin said he, too, was pleased with "many formulations" in Putin's letter and urged Poles to overcome their "tendency to treat Russians with a feeling of superiority."

He added that he believed closer ties were now possible between Polish and Russian church leaders, similar to the breakthrough that followed a conciliatory letter sent by Poland's bishops to their German counterparts in 1965.

Putin's letter called for mutual understanding between Russians and Poles, and Archbishop Muszynski told the Catholic information agency KAI Sept. 1 that some sections suggested "a withdrawal from one-sided, hurtful evaluations" toward "an honest accounting with the painful past, based on historical truth."

"The Russian prime minister is trying to understand Polish sensitivities," Archbishop Muszynski said. "In our understanding, many things lacking are lacking in this text. But I'm striving to find positive elements in it, such as a distancing from the politics of confrontation and a summons to reconciliation and forgiveness."

Putin's letter was published a day before he joined Polish and German leaders to mark 70 years since the German attack on Poland that sparked World War II. On

Sept. 17, 1939, the Soviets attacked Poland from the east, which current Polish President Lech Kaczynski described as “a stab in the back.”

In his letter, Putin said the “immoral character” of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact that preceded the twin invasions had been condemned by Russia’s parliament in 1989 and should be “deplored with full justification.” He also pointed out that more than 600,000 Soviet soldiers died during the 1944-45 liberation of Poland.

Polish politicians and historians have frequently deplored Russia’s lack of regret for mass deportations and executions that followed their country’s postwar occupation by the Soviet army and for the later decades of communist oppression.