


Fall 2020

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Recommended Citation

Letizia, Lauren R., "Before Barbarossa: The Nazi Occupation of Western Poland, September 1, 1939-June 22, 1941" (2020). *Student Publications*. 880.
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Abstract

The Nazi invasion and occupation of Western Poland was a vital first step to the development and fulfillment of the genocidal processes of the Holocaust. The utilization of mass arrests, executions, and shootings led to the persecution and death of hundreds of thousands of Poles and Polish Jews prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union and inception of the Final Solution in the summer of 1941.

Keywords

World War II, Poland, Nazi policies towards Jews, Nazi occupation

Disciplines

European History | History | Holocaust and Genocide Studies | Military History

Comments

Written for Hist 218: History of Modern Germany

Before Barbarossa: The Nazi Invasion and Occupation of Western Poland
September 1, 1939- June 22, 1941

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History 218: Modern Germany
November 13, 2020

On August 29, 1939, the foreign ministers hailing from two ideologically opposed nations negotiated and signed a treaty that would change both the physical and societal landscape of Eastern Europe. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, also known as the German-Soviet Pact, not only insured Hitler's pursuit of "blood and land," but also ignited the Second World War. Having neutralized Stalin and his Red Army with economic and territorial incentives, Nazi Germany was free to conquer its stubborn neighbor, Poland. It would only have to cede the eastern territory to the Soviet Union in exchange for mutual nonaggression. Germany unleashed its Blitzkrieg on Poland on September 1, 1939, winning a devastating victory over the independent nation in a matter of weeks. Millions of Polish citizens were now under Nazi rule. Though all Poles suffered greatly during the invasion, it symbolized a greater threat for Polish Jews and Jewish nationals in the region. Germany now had jurisdiction over approximately 1,000,000 Jews. It annexed West Prussia, Poznan, Upper Silesia, and the Free City of Danzig and established a *Generalgouvernement*, or General Government, out of the cities of Warsaw, Lublin, Krakow, Radom, and Lvov.¹

Before its commencement of the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union (*Operation Barbarossa*), Germany occupied, either directly or indirectly, half of Poland. The Nazis used this period from 1939-1941 to lay the violent groundwork for the persecution of Poles and Polish Jews, creating a personal test-site for mass reprisal executions, shootings, and arrests that would be used against the Jewish, Russian, and Ukrainian populations of the Soviet Union. Upon the execution of Operation Barbarossa, the initial Nazi oppression of Poles and Jews in Western

¹"Invasion of Poland Fall 1939," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, May 30, 2019).

Poland would spawn the Final Solution and the death camp networks throughout Eastern Poland and the Soviet Union.

Nazi Germany was already experiencing the success of its territorial aspirations prior to turning its forces on Poland. The annexation of the Rhineland in 1936 was followed by the Austrian *Anschluss* in March of 1938 and the annexation of the Sudetenland a year later. However, Hitler's desire for German domination was not satiated. After annexing countries without military resistance from France and Britain, he seized the opportunity to shift the objective to Poland. Though Hitler publicly claimed his animus towards the country stemmed from the dispute over the formerly German region of Danzig, Poland was the stepping-stone to the "*Drang nach Osten*" or "Push to the East." The quest for "living space" or *Lebensraum* could not be achieved without its seizure. Hitler wanted to forcibly remove Poles and Polish Jews from the territory to make room for repatriated German citizens. Additionally, political relations between the two nations had been deteriorating since the end of World War I. However, they reached their breaking point in 1938 when Poland rejected the anti-Comintern Pact that was proposed by Germany and Italy to defend against the Soviet Union. Hitler also wanted to use the Pact to isolate Poland from the Western nations.² Poland's refusal proved to Hitler that he would not be able to subordinate the nation through negotiation. If Germany was to become the most dominate country in Europe, it had to remove Poland as a democratic political entity.

In addition to its political opposition, Poland was a physical reminder to Germany of the loathed Treaty of Versailles which became synonymous with German national humiliation. After

²Alexander B. Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 5.

the First World War, Poland was given independence, causing Germany to lose substantial territory. General Erich von Manstein, a German tank commander, wrote in his memoirs:

Poland was bound to be a source of bitterness to us after she used the dictated peace of Versailles to annex German territories to which neither historical justice nor the right of self-determination gave her any claim. For us soldiers she had been a constant cause of distress in the years of Germany's weakness. Every time we looked at the map we were reminded of our precarious situation. That irrational demarcation of the frontier! The mutilation of our Fatherland!³

Manstein's view was felt throughout the high ranks of both the Wehrmacht and the Nazi security ministries such as the SS and Gestapo. Hitler and many German citizens longed to correct the political and economic losses incurred by the forfeiture of the Polish Corridor and to assuage the danger to East Prussia which was surrounded by Poland and Lithuania.

After arriving at the realization that the Polish thorn could only be removed from Germany's side with force, Hitler and his propaganda ministry began to stoke racial hatred towards the Poles. They portrayed them as a stupid, unskilled, barbaric people who had never developed a culture. It was widely believed that the only culture found in Poland was created by Germans and that "the educational and cultural level [of the populace] in Poland was not high."⁴ In the case of Polish Jews, it was propagated that they lived in cities such as Warsaw and had control over media and radio. They were Soviet sympathizers and German-haters. Fueled by these prejudices, Hitler's pending military campaign was to "have no pity" and be won utilizing "the greatest brutality and without mercy." On August 22, 1939, at a meeting with Nazi and military leaders, the Führer stated that the true goal of the invasion was the "physical elimination" of, at the very least, a portion of the Polish citizenry. A vital pillar in the anti-Polish propaganda campaign regarded the large German minority living in Poland. These

³Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 7.

⁴Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 23.

Volksdeutsche were perceived as victims of violent Polish nationalist organizations who killed and tortured them with the assistance of Jews in an effort to “Polonize” their communities. Ironically it was the “Germanizing” of Polish communities that led to the death of thousands.

As military strategies solidified, Hitler continued to make clear that the Polish invasion was to be the tool with which to destroy the German/Polish racial conflict forever. It was a *Volkstumkampf*, an ethnic struggle, for the preservation of the Third Reich and the diffusion of National Socialism throughout Europe. He declared, “SS Death’s Head units stand ready under orders to mercilessly send to death men, women, and children of Polish descent.”⁵ This declaration, coupled with intense propaganda campaigns, foreshadowed an annexation that would be quite different from the previous territorial expansions of 1936, ‘38 and early ‘39. The goal was not solely to unite the German diaspora or recoup lost land; it was to destroy a nation and its people. With Hitler’s pronouncement, the invasion of Poland would have little, if any, limitations on the use of deadly force. The first target of these bloody actions would be the Polish intelligentsia, clergy, and political opponents and partisans.

For months leading up to the invasion, Hitler and his security officials used every element at their disposal to compile information on the Polish citizenry and organize a security apparatus. The Wehrmacht could not be the only arbiters of racial actions. Therefore, agreements were drafted between Gestapo Headquarters, the Army High Command (*Oberkommando des Heeres-OKH*), and the *Abwehr* to coordinate SS and police units behind the German army. These units were formed into the notorious *Einsatzgruppen*. They were composed of men from different Nazi agencies including the Gestapo, *Sicherheitspolizei* (Security Police), the SD or

⁵Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 10.

Security Services, and Kripo which was the Criminal Police.⁶ Overseen by Heinrich Himmler's protégé Reinhard Heydrich, their mission was to secure the land behind the German military as it pushed east through Poland.

Heydrich's creation was utilized in the annexations of Czechoslovakia and Austria but did not gain its infamy until the invasion of Poland. According to author Timothy Snyder, "It was in Poland that the Einsatzgruppen were to fulfill their mission as 'ideological soldiers' by eliminating the educated classes of a defeated enemy."⁷ This desired liquidation would be called *Operation Tannenberg*, after the German army victory over the Russians in 1914. Heydrich ordered his Einsatzgruppen to decapitate the Polish academic and high society by murdering 61,000 Poles during the operation. In Hitler's words, "only a nation whose upper levels are destroyed can be pushed into the ranks of slavery."⁸ The Einsatzgruppen would be the first German units to participate in the authorized (and unauthorized) mass murder of foreign civilians. Their methods would be perpetuated throughout the invasion of Russia and the Holocaust.

Prior to September 1, 1939, the Wehrmacht also engaged in Party propaganda to prepare its troops for their mission in Poland. It held "ethnic composition and culture" sessions and lectures to educate the men about the inferior Poles. They were informed that Polish insurgents were abusing and defiling fellow Germans. On July 1, 1939, the General Staff of the army published a bulletin proclaiming Poles as "fanatically stirred-up and capable of sabotage and other attacks." If they could win victories, they "will become arrogant and aggressive," but a rapid German offensive will make "him pessimistic." The Wehrmacht troops were also told that

⁶Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 10.

⁷Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 126

⁸Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 126.

humane treatment of the Poles would “be seen as weakness...”⁹ The German army, in tandem with the Nazi propaganda machine, tried to hammer into their men the racial and ethnic superiority of their nation as well as the righteousness of the German cause. The Wehrmacht could not show mercy to the Poles lest they be overcome by the vileness of these “subhumans.” This indoctrination paved the way for unspeakable violence against innocent civilians during the Nazi invasion and occupation of Poland.

When the Wehrmacht and the Einsatzgruppen invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, the brutality of Nazi ideology was unleashed. Operation Tannenberg wiped out a substantial portion of Polish educated, religious, and upper-class society, becoming the first coordinated effort of targeting citizenry by the Nazis. These and other mass killings spawned from the Germans’ need to crush Polish nationalist resistance and sabotage. Instructions supplied to troops and security units required that all Polish and Jewish men and boys between seventeen and 45 years old should be arrested and imprisoned in German prisons or concentration camps such as Dachau. However, as German security forces and military encountered Polish resistance in occupied towns, killings and mass executions became more mainstream.

One of the first instances of mass murder occurred in the town of Bydgoszcz, near Pomerania and East Prussia. It housed a considerable German population that was widely involved in Nazi underground groups. These groups warred against the Polish nationalists at the start of the German invasion and occupation of the town on September 5. Polish soldiers killed approximately one thousand Volksdeutsche and forced others on a march to the city of Kutno where they shot 100 prisoners. This event was what the Nazi government needed to ignite anti-

⁹Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 25.

Polish hatred within Germany and to sanction mass killings in Bydgoszcz. When the last of the Polish military retreated from the town on September 5, 1939, the 50th German Infantry Division and the Einsatzgruppen seized control. After subduing a few scattered village militia units, Brigadier General Eccard Freiherr von Gablenz declared on September 5-6 that the entirety of Bydgoszcz had to be pacified due to reports of German officers being attacked by Polish citizens. The troops searched homes for weapons, and, if any were found, the owners were shot on the spot. They utilized Volksdeutsche informants to learn the names of “suspicious” individuals. According to Gablenz’s diary, German soldiers and police arrested thousands of people and deported them to prisons throughout the town.¹⁰

The security action was then turned to the fulfillment of Operation Tannenberg. Bydgoszcz was searched for teachers, politicians, lawyers, and other important citizens. A survivor of this mass arrest, Franciszek Derenzinski, remembered:

I was picked up on the street by German police and led to the artillery barracks, along with around five hundred other Poles. Ethnic Germans were there identifying people who had allegedly murdered *Volksdeutsche*. These persons were immediately shot and local Jews were forced to dig a grave for them in the courtyard of the barracks.¹¹

By the time the wave of town-wide pacification was ended, the Einsatzgruppen had murdered approximately 900 Polish citizens. The killings continued throughout October and November, causing deaths of 1,200 Bydgoszcz citizens, “including the city’s entire Jewish population and most of its intelligentsia.”¹²

Mass reprisal shootings were common for the Einsatzgruppen and military security forces during the early years of occupation. Most mass killings were symbols of vengeance for the

¹⁰Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 64.

¹¹Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 64-65.

¹²Rossino *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 72.

maiming or killing of German soldiers by Polish rebels. The United States Vice Consul Thaddeus Chylinski stationed in Warsaw reported in November 1941 that the Gestapo perpetrated a mass execution of 150 Poles in Wawer, a town near Warsaw, on December 26, 1939. They were “mowed down with machine guns for the murder of two German soldiers in a brawl with two notorious bandits.” He proceeded to write, “I have personally seen streets in the districts of Praga and Wola where the bodies of Poles killed during punitive expeditions were left lying for several hours where they dropped as an object lesson to others.”¹³

However, not all shootings or executions were responses to Polish resistance. In her 1947 letter to her brother, Holocaust survivor Else Pintus wrote about the violence she witnessed after Nazis occupied her home of Danzig. “Then around two o’clock in the night, a shot rang out, very close by.....Next morning we learned that in Strunkowski’s yard, they had shot a boy, who was trying to get home from somewhere, 16 or 17 years old, barefoot, his shoes clenched in his hands.”¹⁴ SS officer and commander of Einsatzkommando I/I Ludwig Hahn told his men that Polish civilians and soldiers should be treated in the same way, declaring they should be shot at the sign of “the slightest resistance.” On September 4, 1939, Hahn’s Einsatzgruppe executed 58 people and shot over 1,500 Poles in East Upper Silesia.¹⁵

The German invasion and occupation of Western Poland also led to the targeting of Polish Jews. These *Ostjuden* were viewed as the lowest of the lower, inferior even to German Jews. They were victims of the major execution and shooting actions throughout the invasion and were quickly singled out during the occupation. One of the first policies forced upon Polish

¹³Thaddeus Chylinski, *Poland Under Nazi Rule 1939-1941: A Report by Thaddeus Chylinski, American Vice Consul in Warsaw* ed. Donna B. Gawell (Independently Published: Donna Gawell, 2019), 31-32.

¹⁴Else Pintus and Doris J. Stiefel, *The Diary of Else Pintus: The Story of a Holocaust Survivor*, (Center of Jewish History, 1998), 1-2.

¹⁵Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 82.

Jews was ghettoization. This policy was born out of Himmler's plan to deport all Jews to the Lublin district of the General Government by February of 1940. The Germans began to cordon off Jews in sections of cities and towns, creating temporary ghettos until deportations were arranged. However, too many complications arose, and the plan was abandoned in the summer of 1940. Ghettos now became permanent districts. Ghettoization was not uniform across Poland. The infamous Warsaw ghetto was the first to be severed from the outer community because the Germans feared the spread of disease. Other ghettos, such as in Lodz, followed suit. Once the ghettos were sealed, they were cut off from the city economy and food supplies rapidly became scarce. They were makeshift labor camps as well as tourist sites for traveling Germans.¹⁶ Many Nazi officials hoped to kill off the Jews through starvation. Alexander Paflinger, deputy administrator of the Lodz ghetto stated, "A rapid dying out of the Jews is for us a matter of total indifference, if not to say desirable, as long as the concomitant effects leave the public interest of the German people untouched." In other words, the death of the Jews would be the goal so long as the health and economic interests of the Germans were unhindered. The Jewish ghettos were places of hunger, disease, and death. It is estimated that more than 500,000 Jews died in the ghettos, almost 10 percent of all Holocaust victims.¹⁷

With the inability to forcibly remove Jews from German territory, many officials targeted Jews for gruesome killings. In the small town of Dynów, Order Police squadrons burned twelve Jews to death in a synagogue. Then, they arrested 60 Jewish men, marched them to a forest and shot them over a pit.¹⁸ In the city of Lutomiersk, near Lodz, the 24th Infantry of the Wehrmacht rounded up the community into the main square and divided them into Poles and

¹⁶Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 145.

¹⁷Christopher R. Browning, *Nazi Ghettoization Policy in Poland: 1939-1941* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 364.

¹⁸Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, 99.

Jews. They then chose Jews from a “prearranged list” and called out names of eleven Jewish men. Jozef Wisnewski stated to Polish investigators that “the Jews were led to the synagogue and ritual bath that stood nearby it and after a while shots were heard.” Another witness of this execution described a young Jewish boy who “sensed what was about to happen and began crying and begging for his life. The German began hitting him and pulling at him so that the shirt he had on was ripped to shreds. Despite this he kept begging for his life and for that he was shot no fewer than five times, after which his body slumped to the ground.”¹⁹ The Einsatzgruppen, meanwhile, were excelling at anti-Jewish actions. They were ordered to persecute Jews so they would move east towards the Russian line. During one such mission in Bedzin, an Einsatzgruppe burned down the town synagogue with flame throwers and killed approximately 500 Jews in a two-day span.²⁰

The Nazi invasion and occupation of Western Poland from September 1939 to June 1941 were watershed moments that ignited the genocidal spark of the Third Reich ideology. Before Operation Barbarossa and the push into the Soviet territories, the Nazi security units and Wehrmacht soldiers established effective terrorist methods of mass executions, arrests and imprisonments in ghettos and labor and concentration camps, as well as the mass violence that would define the killing processes of the Final Solution. The Polish Campaign was a crucial prelude to the implementation of the Holocaust against Eastern European Jewry, Poles, and people deemed enemies of the Führer.

¹⁹Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews: Third Edition*, vol. 3 (Yale University Press, 2003), 1048.

²⁰Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 127.

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