

Poland in World War II

A Terrifying and Turbulent History

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When studying the Second World War, much attention was paid to the United States, Japan, Italy, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, Germany, and France. Poland has never appeared much in historical studies, but as this paper shows, there is every reason for it to be the center of attention. Poland was the beginning and end of the war. The history of the Poles in WW2 is the most courageous, passionate, and destructive of any country involved. No other country was hit as hard as Poland in the war; thus, its story should be told and explained to all.

The author will do his utmost to accurately describe Poland's terrifying and turbulent history between 1939 and 1945. In the wee hours of the morning on September 1, 1939, Germany initiated a sudden and unannounced invasion of Poland, sending 1.6 million troops along the whole length of their shared border in the east. The Germans made the mistake of underestimating the courageous resistance of the Polish army, which fought back with such tenacity that the German invasion was halted for several days.

If it had not been for the Red Army of the Soviet Union attacking from the western border, Poland might have been able to hold on until the United Kingdom and France realized the gravity of the situation. However, the combined might of Stalin and Hitler soon overwhelmed all of Poland. Hundreds of thousands of Poles, both soldiers and civilians, were killed, injured, captured, or displaced.

The UK and France did declare war on Germany, but they neglected to come to the aid of Poland, their ally. The Polish government moved to France, where they immediately began recreating the Polish armed forces.

Back in Poland, no one was safe from the Germans, especially not the elite class. Soon after the invasion, in the spring and summer of 1940, the German forces focused on social classes in

Poland. The Jews were instantly demoted to the lowest class of society and deprived of any legal protection. Jewish humiliation ensued. Crime and violence were not exclusively for the Polish Jews, and soon, other Poles felt the wrath of their German rulers.

They wanted to turn Poland into a country with no elite class, and the best way to accomplish that goal was to use lies and deception. Many professors were arrested and sent to concentration camps after they attended a lecture by a German at a local university. This act of targeting the intellectual elites of Poland was known as Action A-B, or the Extraordinary Operation of Pacification. Approximately 6,500 people were arrested under suspicion of engaging in resistance and exterminated, along with members of the Polish elite.

The German goal of wiping the Polish people from the face of the earth continued with no end in sight. The Germans continued with their scheme to exterminate the Poles once and for all with the sinister Operation Tannenberg. This operation was, at its core, a deliberate and organized Nazi Germans plan to kill Polish civilians. Again, the focus was placed on members of the Polish ruling class, although members of all classes were brutally murdered. These murders were carried out by special troops such as the Selbstschutz, which were sabotage units made up of Germans who had been living in Poland, and the Einsatzgruppen – the German secret police.

Even so, although they may not have known it, the Poles still living in Poland were fortunate compared to their fellow Poles who had been brought to some of the most bone-chilling locations in Europe: concentration camps.

The author of this essay extends his condolences to those Polish families who had loved ones among the fallen or the survivors of concentration camps.

Concentration camps are undoubtedly some of the most grotesque scars marking human history. The earliest established concentration camp on Polish soil was Stutthof. The first 130-150 prisoners there were from Gdańsk and arrived there on the second of September 1939, one day after the German invasion of Poland started. Its original purpose was to serve as a transit camp for civilians, but it met the requirements of a concentration camp from day one. Stutthof operated

almost until the end of the war – May 9, 1945, to be precise – when a mere 100 individuals were liberated from its grounds.

Approximately 65,000 people, many of them Poles, lost their lives in the Stutthof camp and its associated sub-camps in many locations. That is a heartrending number, but it is nothing compared to the death toll of another concentration camp: Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was the first official concentration camp in Poland and was registered as such in May 1940. The primary reason for its establishment was the overpopulation of the local prisons as well as the rapidly rising number of arrested Poles. Starting in 1942, this concentration camp became one of the centers of “The Final Solution,” a strategy promoted by the Nazi Germans to rid the world of Jews.

Auschwitz was a massive complex split into three main parts and included over forty sub-camps in which prisoners participated in slave labor for German-owned industries and farms. This notorious concentration camp had an infamous reputation for genocide and other horrors during the war, a reputation which only exceeds itself the more it is studied and examined by historians. The amount of people who breathed their last breath inside the walls of Auschwitz is staggering: 1.1 million people, one million of whom were Jews. Besides Jews, the Poles made up the largest group, with 70-75,000 dead.

Hitler’s Germany was unceasing in their pursuit of eradicating Poles, and religion was a line they were not afraid to cross. So far, the only concentration camps discussed have been in Poland. However, the Dachau concentration camp was in Germany, specifically the Bavaria region. The area upon which it was established was renowned as an unhealthy marsh in which inmates often had to stand outside for hours at a time. The American soldiers who liberated the camp were absolutely disgusted with the conditions. Calling Dachau a camp is taking a light approach; “killing factory” would be a more appropriate term.

Poles, the largest ethnic group in Dachau, were slaughtered in thousands. The daily routine involved waking up next to your fellow inmate, who was being ravaged by typhoid, on the same minuscule bed as you. If it was a good day, you might get some hopeless excuse for food. Otherwise, you starved as you worked yourself to the brink of exhaustion. When the scientists

come around, you make sure to blend in as much as possible so as not to end up in some mad experiment involving the human body. Once you have had your measly morsel of food and the guards have kicked you goodnight, you collapse next to your nearly-dead neighbor. Unconsciously, you hope he dies so that you can have the whole bed to yourself tomorrow night.

The scenario just described is horrific in every sense of the word. But at the same time, that was the reality that so many, including priests, faced at Dachau. The Germans did not care if you were a man of God. 2,720 Catholic priests, 1,780 of which were Polish, were dragged to Dachau. 868 of them died there. These priests faced unspeakable horrors in Dachau, but the women of Poland faced a whole other monster in Ravensbrück.

Ravensbrück was a concentration camp with gruesome secrets. These secrets were revealed by the brave Karolina Lanckorońska, who was imprisoned there on the eighth of September, 1943. She was known to the Germans as a “stubborn Polish aristocrat.” She is known to the world today as a fearless Pole who stood toe to toe with German interrogators, declaring the Third Reich her enemy. She knew suffering and torment, but Ravensbrück revealed horrors she had not seen. Here, German doctors attempted to further the war effort by performing experimental surgeries to advance battlefield medicine.

The Germans would not have thought to force such surgeries onto their own people, so they used Polish inmates from the concentration camp as their scientific playthings. Lanckorońska was shown Polish women scarred and mutilated by countless surgeries. These doctors showed no mercy, breaking bones, extracting muscles, slicing nerves, and relocating bones – and that was just on one patient. These Polish women were abused, mistreated, and tortured in every possible way. And yet, the doctors never found a way to break their spirit. These courageous Polish women rebelled tried to hide by mixing in with the crowd of other inmates. The doctors, relentless in their depravity, tracked them down and performed revenge surgeries. Broken, battered, and bruised, they were targeted by the executioners to be killed before the Soviets arrived. Their camp companions distracted them long enough for those admirable women to hide in the camp. Of the seventy-four Polish women and twelve other women subjected to medical experiments, five died through surgery, and six were shot. Many of them survived after the war.

This inspiring and epic tale of the Ravensbrück women should fill the modern-day
Pole with pride and awe.

Ravensbrück failed to quench the spirit of the Polish women, but the men of Poland had to face their greatest fears in Mauthausen-Gusen. Mauthausen was one of the nineteen concentration camps in the conquered territory of the German Third Reich. 197,464 is the recorded number of prisoners, and Poles accounted for over 37,000. Nearly half of the registered inmates were slaughtered in Mauthausen. Gas chambers and euthanasia centers were the main instruments the Nazi Germans used for killing people at this camp. Still, medical experiments, bullets, abuse, and appalling living conditions accounted for many more deaths.

While the women of Ravensbrück faced doctors who officially at least tried to advance the war effort, the men of Mauthausen encountered doctors who saw an opportunity to fulfill their sickest medical daydreams. The camp physician enjoyed removing vital organs simply to see how long men could live without them. The camp director killed unknown amounts of people by injecting phenol, a corrosive liquid, directly into their hearts.

Most of the prisoner population was men; women were brought in so favored prisoners could enjoy themselves. The main reason for this gender-based divide was tied to the camp's purpose. Mauthausen and its subcamps, one of which was Gusen, were set up to mine granite from the nearby mines to further the War effort. Many thousands of Poles were forced to work in these mines, where the working conditions were so bad that most of them lasted only six months until they died. The living conditions in Gusen were responsible for half of the inmate deaths living there. Gas chambers and euthanasia were also common methods.

Medical experiments at Gusen included being guinea pigs for experimental vaccines and being killed and dissected by medical students from a neighboring university. While most labor occurred in the mines, prisoners built docks, ran farms, and built armaments. One minor advantage to this labor-intensive camp was that the Germans relied on the work done there, and, as a result, prisoners were fed better than in most other concentration camps.

These Polish men undoubtedly suffered unfairly at the hands of the corrupted Germans, but they would have still given their lives as ransom if they knew what was happening to the Polish children. The men and women of Poland were worked to death by the Germans in labor camps, but what of the Polish children? What happened to those too young to work, those who, in the Germans' eyes, were a waste of space?

The men and women of Poland were given slim chances of surviving to the end of the war. The Nazi Germans made sure the children had no chance. The hatred of Germany towards Poland came from the German belief that Poles were racially inferior, an idea that led to actions such as Operation Zamosc. Similar to Action A-B and Operation Tannenberg, Operation Zamosc (1942-43) focused on the Germanization of Poland. The Germans viewed Poles as an inferior breed of human and set about ending their culture and people in a horrific ethnic cleansing.

In this particular military action, the first step was to gather many Polish citizens together. Over half a million Poles were relocated to areas within the General Government, or the GG. The next step of the plan was to "Germanize" the region. In carrying out the act of Germanization, 20% of Poles in the GG were expelled (i.e. removed), 30% of them were children.

Polish children were unceremoniously ripped out of their parents' arms – some bound for Germany to be Germanized, others brought to concentration camps to die. In other words, some Poles were sent to Germany to be fixed, while the rest were deemed too broken to repair. These ideas and operations were born out of totally depraved minds and hearts and brought needless suffering to countless Poles.

The Nazi Germans were not finished with Poland yet, and the next year was somehow even worse. There have been triumphs, joys, and celebrations in the grand scheme of human history. There have also been discoveries, advancements, and inventions. Sadly, there are portions of history that many people do not like to discuss or prefer to ignore in favor of more important events happening simultaneously.

The genocide of Wola in 1944 is precisely one of those events. Usually, historians like to focus on the broader Warsaw Uprising, but the Wola genocide deserves special recognition. The atrocities committed there are still fresh bloodstains in Polish history. Once Hitler realized that the citizens

of Warsaw had initiated an uprising, he made an example of the city. He issued an order to kill every citizen and raze the city from this earth. The events of the seven days, from August 5-12, were emotionally painful for the author to research. There is a temptation to gloss over this worst of the worst of Polish history. However, the author believes there is a need for these events to be brought out for all to see and would like to warn readers that the next few sentences will be filled with the worst actions any person can commit. The eyewitness accounts of the Wola genocide are gruesome. One Pole managed to survive by playing dead under a pile of corpses. The German SS fired machine guns into crowds and finished off the injured with grenades. There are reports of pregnant women with their unborn children being ripped out and stabbed. Hospitals full of patients were burned. In some hospitals, the nurses were raped and hung alongside the doctors. The soldiers were first ordered to kill everyone. However, the SS commanders soon ordered their soldiers to kill only men, not out of mercy for the women and children, but because the soldiers were becoming too distracted with gang-raping and pillaging. So, the command became concerned over their lack of discipline.

In response to this order, many women and children were shut in a church. The church was used as a rape factory, with soldiers grabbing whomever they pleased to violate and hurt. In seven days, 40,000-60,000 Poles were murdered, burned alive, shot, and raped. Even by conservative estimates, that is 6,000 people per day. This was cruel, systematic genocide in its most obvious and apparent form. This was the peak of the Nazi Germans' abuse of Poland. Let's not forget. If there is one lesson to be learned from the vast extent of Polish persecution at the hands of the Germans, it is that.

May history never forget the Polish men, women, and children who were slaughtered in concentration camps and killing centers.

May the world never hesitate to memorialize the Poles who were targeted as racially inferior.

May Poland never ignore the brave souls of Poland who never gave up, who never gave in, and who kept fighting for their country, their families, and their freedom.

May every single person reading this take a moment of silence and vow never to ignore or subtract from the terrifying and turbulent history of Poland during World War II

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