

THE ERASURE OF MORALITY:

A Detailed Account of the Victimized Polish During World War II

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German Invasion of Poland on September 1st, 1939:

After officially securing his role as the chancellor of Germany in 1933, Adolf Hitler intended to strengthen and enlarge the country's military since it had been severely reduced after World War I. However, to carry out such a plan, he first signed a non-aggression pact with Poland in 1934 to ensure that a military partnership between Poland and France (which would likely be used against Germany) would be inconceivable. Hitler's decision to create a pact with Poland was deemed controversial amongst many Germans who disagreed with the Treaty of Versailles, allowing Poland to have Poznań, Silesia, and Prussia after the war, given that these were formerly German-owned territories. Great Britain and France believed that there would be peace in Europe if they followed through with Germany's expectations little by little, and their fears of not being able to take on Germany in the war were coupled with the issue of the British citizens requesting a review of the military and territorial terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

It was during France and Great Britain's appeasement that Germany breached the treaty's military restrictions, assembled the military in the Rhineland, took over Austria, and then threatened to start war in Czechoslovakia, thus causing Britain and France to sign the Munich Agreement in 1938, which permitted Hitler to have the Sudetenland as long as he gave his word to cease his uncivil practices with foreign nations from then on. Hitler broke yet another promise by taking over Czechoslovakia in 1939 and then cut ties with the German-Polish non-aggression pact. His next step was to create a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, which would not only permit Germany to invade Poland without the Soviet Union getting in its way but also ensure that Germany and the Soviet Union would have split ownership of Poland. With the pact successfully in place, Germany proceeded to invade Poland that same year, with many German citizens praising the effort as they had been led to believe that the Poles were senselessly abusing Germans in Poland and that they were also working with Great Britain and France to assert power over Germany (thanks to the narrative that was being pushed by Nazi German propaganda which, interestingly enough, also consisted of a fabricated recording of a Polish attack on Germany made by the German military and the SS). With around 1.5 million men across 60 squads, Germany entered Warsaw from every possible side. Unfortunately, Poland was severely underprepared for a counteroffensive against Germany as it had few supplies, weapons, armor, vehicles, and planes. Poland's slight advantage against Germany for a while did not matter much. Germany quickly regained the upper hand against Poland using the 'Blitzkrieg' (lightning war) strategy, which involved a sneak attack that utilized armored combat divisions and aerial warfare. Even though France and Britain were quick to support Poland by waging war against Germany on September 3rd of this year, the Polish still faced an unbearable challenge as the Soviet Union came to take over Poland along with Germany on September 17th. As Germany laid waste to

Warsaw, the city surrendered on September 28th, and Germany and the Soviet Union each ruled one-half of the country (as per their deal) the next day. Germany took over the upper portion consisting of Silesia (Śląsk), Danzig (Gdańsk), Poznań, and West Prussia (Prusy Zachodnie) in October, and Kraków, Lublin, Radom, and Warsaw were transformed into a 'General Government' under Hans Frank, a Nazi German governor-general. Two years later, in June, Germany invaded the eastern part of Poland as an act of betrayal against the Soviet Union. After enough time, the Nazi Germans seized the rest of Poland all for themselves. However, their victory over the Soviet Union and their consequential ownership of Poland did not last long, as the Soviets eventually led a strong retaliation against Germany, which motivated the Nazi German army to return to their home country using routes within Poland between 1944 and 1945 [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum].

Action A-B:

'Action A-B' (or 'AB Aktion') was a plan initiated by Germany to capture and slaughter Polish leaders and intellectuals who were capable of carrying out a resistance movement against the Nazi German regime. Governor-general Hans Frank permitted the effort on May 16th, 1940, and the result was the military, Gestapo, police, and Sicherheitsdienst capturing around 30,000 Polish people from Lublin, Kraków, Łódź, and Warsaw. The captive Poles ranged in occupation from university lecturers, politicians, teachers, priests, and writers, and they were placed into prisons where they were later interrogated. After that, they were transferred from their prisons into concentration camps such as Mauthausen, Auschwitz, and Sachsenhausen. Of the 30,000 apprehended Poles, 23,000 were put into concentration camps, while the remaining 7,000 were all victims of mass murders within Firlej, Palmiry, the Bliżyn forest, and Wincentynów [Chant, 2023].

Operation Tannenberg:

In May of 1939, before the Nazi Germans took over Poland, they worked with a small population of Germans in Poland to create a 61,000-name list of actors, activists, retired officers, and other significant Poles who were scheduled either for imprisonment or death after Germany's victory. This blueprint for the program was known as 'Operation Tannenberg,' and it consisted of 'Tannenberg' forces leading an army of 'Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei' to arrest all of the listed people before Germany could commence its war. 2,000 Polish activists were arrested and killed in Germany in August 1939, and 20,000 Poles were slaughtered within a total of 760 Einsatzgruppen, SS, and army executions between September and October of 1939. As this violence continued, the previously mentioned Germans who lived in Poland and assisted with the list formed their branch of soldiers called the 'Selbschutz.' Their killing sprees were so notorious that the Nazi Germans removed their unit after they conquered Poland in September of 1939 [Chant, 2023].

Ethnic Poles in KL Stutthof:

The Nazi Germans in Danzig were responsible for coming up with the idea of concentration camps that would house Polish undesirables. In 1939, the 'Wachsturmbann Eimann' (a new division of SS officers) was created so that they could choose good locations for these camps. In August of that year, a particular area 34 km away from Danzig was chosen to be the site where the Stutthof concentration camp would be built. During the first day of Poland's invasion, a total of 1,500 of its citizens were arrested in Danzig, and 150 of these victims were taken to Stutthof in September. After a few weeks, 6,000 people were placed in the camp, but their stay was short-lived as the SS killed nearly all of them. A gas chamber capable of holding 150 people at once was included in the camp, along with a crematory in 1943. From September to May of 1945, there were 127,000 prisoners immediately registered in the camp when they came into it. However, the ones whose death sentences were already sealed by the Germans did not get registered. The main Nazi German in charge of the Stutthof camp was an SS officer by the name of Max Pauly. Even though there were many bits of evidence pointing to his involvement in several lethal atrocities in the camp, a court in an Allied nation gave him a light 9-year prison sentence. Besides Pauly, there were many other SS officers held responsible for the heinous crimes committed in Stutthof, including Lieutenant Dittmann, 1st Lieutenant Oerli, Lieutenant Neubauer, 1st Lieutenant Otto, and Lieutenant Mathesius. Of all of the SS officers at Stutthof, the vilest one was Rudolf Spanner. Spanner owned a Danzig-based soap factory, and in 1940, he devised a method of soap creation that involved the use of real human fat. He murdered hundreds of inmates in the camp for the sake of making his soap, which he later referred to as 'Reines Jüdische Fett' ('Pure Jewish Fat'). Adding to the disturbing nature of this case is the fact that even after the Allies found chambers of bodies which Spanner extracted fat from to make soap, the infamous Nazi German was never tried as the war criminal he was after the camp's liberation, and even worse, he lived long enough to keep up his sadistic experiments. All in all, Stutthof was mostly used to wipe patriotic and educated Poles from Pomorze and Danzig off the face of the earth. While being kept as prisoners there, the Polish were forced to work as slaves, and along with their agonizing labor, they starved, contracted diseases, and were tormented in various physical and psychological ways. Through mass executions by hanging, gunfire, lethal injections, torture, gas, and beatings, about 65,000 died in this camp. No more numbers were added as the Soviet Army finally liberated Stutthof on May 9th, 1944 [source: Jewish Virtual Library].

Ethnic Poles in KL Auschwitz:

The Auschwitz concentration camp was developed 10 months after the start of World War II, and the first group of Polish political prisoners was brought into it on June 14th, 1940. What constituted a Polish person as a political prisoner was not only someone who was either disobedient to the rules of the occupying Nazi Germans or associated with a resistance movement but also someone who was a politician, a schoolteacher, an army officer, a nun, or a doctor. Since July 16th, 1941, industrial plant workers were also taken to Auschwitz so that they may be 're-educated.' Although they did not count as political prisoners, they still suffered in the same way as political prisoners in Auschwitz, with the only difference between the two groups being that the industrial workers were to be kept in prison for a specific amount of time, which would usually

be 8 or more weeks. With the terminally ill, mentally ill, and elderly Polish prisoners, the Nazi Germans resorted to using Euthanasia programs. A total of 566 psychiatric care patients from Kalwaria Zebrzydowska and Kobierzyn were exterminated via Euthanasia on June 23rd, 1942. Overall, between 130,000-140,000 Poles were taken to Auschwitz, and around 50% of them died from illnesses, awful medical care, gas chambers, lethal injections, shootings, beatings, starvation, and overwhelming work [Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2022].

Polish Priests in KL Dachau:

As part of Germany's process of eliminating the national identities of the countries it annexed, priests were slaughtered in great numbers. Of the 2,800 priests in Dachau, 1,780 of them were Polish, and 868 lost their lives there. From the spring to the summer of 1940, Polish clergy were transferred to Dachau, and because they were Polish, they were immediately put into the category of political prisoners. The priests were only allowed to engage in religious practices if they agreed to have their names added to the list of German nationality. However, since none of the priests liked those terms, the celebration of Holy Mass, the provision of spiritual comfort to other prisoners, the possession of holy objects, and the act of prayer were all banned in Dachau. The priests in the camp were faced with severe hunger, which is why they created a camp charity after 1942, when they were finally allowed to receive deliveries. Through the camp charity, they shared everything they had been provided with the other prisoners, including the rations of bread they received. Every priest was worked to the bone during their time in Dachau (to the point where they were tied to plows as they shoveled snow), and the toll these jobs took on their bodies ultimately led to some deaths. The slave labor was not the only thing to blame for the reported casualties, as the priests also suffered from cold, hunger, and severe beatings from their supervisors for every supposed mistake made during their work. Sometimes, the priests were even used as subjects for cruel and deadly medical trials. In the case of a Polish priest being somehow handicapped and unable to work properly, that unfortunate individual would be sent either to a gas chamber or to a car that also unleashed lethal gas. Amidst all this chaos, the Polish priests did not give up on their comrades and worked hard to keep them safe and healthy. Fortunately, 830 of these priests managed to come out of Dachau alive in 1945, and they used their time after being granted their freedom to tell the whole story of the madness that went on in the camp, as well as to honor those that, unfortunately, did not make it out [Marek, 2020].

Polish Women in KL Ravensbrück:

Ravensbrück was a concentration camp in northeast Germany that was mainly reserved for female prisoners. Between 1939 and 1941, the women imprisoned in this camp worked to develop uniforms in tailor workshops, and although this work was grueling, they spent most of their working hours indoors under safer conditions, which helped them survive. Life became much more difficult for these women between 1942 and 1945, however, as more and more prisoners came into the camp, thus causing a shortage in food rations for all of them. 86 of these inmates were also used as subjects for inhumane medical tests from 1942 to 1943. These tests involved exposure to harmful chemicals, amputations, and bone transplants, which ultimately led

to them either continuing their lives under excruciating pain or dying in the camp after the experiments took place. On top of this, the unhygienic and highly contaminated areas of the camp caused an outbreak of typhus, and many women were forced into sex work. In January of 1942, the Nazi Germans began to take prisoners from Ravensbrück into the Hartheim or Bernburg Euthanasia centers in Austria so that they could be killed in the gas chambers. A total of 1600 female inmates were killed during this initiative, which was called 'Action 14f13'. A year later, Ravensbrück had a gas chamber built outside of it, which was later used to execute between 5,000 and 6,000 people, and those who were not killed in the chamber were shot. Between March and April of 1945, the Nazi Germans brought the prisoners out of Ravensbrück as part of an evacuation effort as the Soviet army was on its way to their location. These evacuation procedures were known as 'death marches,' and the Nazi Germans used them in events like this where they could not make use of the prisoners in the camps so that they could then either use them as slaves for themselves or make sure that they did not get away to safety to tell stories of what happened in the camp. The Red Army eventually freed the 3000 prisoners in Ravensbrück on April 30th, 1945. Still, those prisoners were not immediately freed of their suffering after that, as the Soviet soldiers then proceeded to rape some of them. The citizens who lived near the site where these atrocities were committed were then ordered by the Soviet soldiers to bury the dead and clean the camp [The Holocaust Explained].

Polish Men in KL Mauthausen-Gusen:

The class of people who were reserved for the Mauthausen concentration camp were the men of Poland who succeeded in higher education and who were also in high social status positions. This form of division was part of a larger plan by Nazi Germany to eliminate members of Polish society who were well-versed in economics, science, and politics so that Poland's national identity could no longer be protected as the Nazi Germans came to take it over. Not only did the Germans want to remove these intellectuals who were in their way, but they also wanted to reduce the number of educational opportunities for other aspiring intellectuals so that their numbers as a group would not increase while they were being exterminated. Throughout all of this, a total of 50,000 Polish intelligentsia members were killed. At the same time, 50,000 more were brought into various concentration camps, and 35,000 within this new set were forced to work in the Gusen sub-camp of Mauthausen. One of the most significant forms of torment the Polish prisoners endured in the camp was their labor near the 'Stairs of Death.' Essentially, every inmate had to carry 110-lb stones up the stairs (which were made up of 186 steps), and this painful experience was worsened by the fact that each person had someone engaging in the same task both in front of them and behind them. Needless to say, many of these prisoners were so tired that they toppled over and caused the others working near them to fall down the stairs. To add insult to injury, the German guards forced them to start over their work at the stairs at a faster pace, and they also abused them in other ways, such as putting them through extreme cold until they contracted hypothermia, using them as subjects for unethical science experiments, threatening to shoot them unless they pushed their fellow prisoners off a cliff at 'The Parachutist's Wall,' throwing them onto electric wire fences, and starving them [Telewizja Polska, 2020].

Polish Children in KZ Litzmannstadt in Łódź:

This children's labor camp was located on Przemysłowa Street in Łódź. Very few civilians suspected that the facility was a labor camp in the first place, as it was shown to be a juvenile detention center to cover up the disturbing practices taking place within it. Children up to 16 years of age were dehumanized in the camp as they were stripped of their names and only called by their numbers, forced to work, and endured beatings every waking hour during their time there. They were made to wear grey uniforms to fully establish their newfound identities as prisoners, all while being completely deprived of exposure to the outdoors or to the people in them. The prisoner population of this camp was made up of children ranging from orphans to those whose parents were murdered by the Nazi Germans (most likely as a result of them being a part of the Polish resistance movement). Up until January of 1945, about 1,600 of the Polish youth were taken into the camp, with 900 still remaining there once the war was over. However, the actual numbers may never be determined as many pieces of evidence related to this event are either inconclusive or hard to find. Their work consisted of stitching together clothing and fixing backpacks, and they did this while battling severe cold, hunger, and typhus, all of which eventually killed 136 children in the camp. The tragedy of this ordeal only continued even after the war ended, as many people were still uninformed about the camp's existence until May 1971. This was when Ludwik Makiewicz and Jadwiga Janus Łubniewicz created the 'Broken Heart Monument' at Szarych Szeregów Park, which was dedicated to the memory of the child victims [source: Łódź-Ghetto.com].

Operation Zamość:

From 1942 to 1943, the Germans went into 300 villages in the Zamość-Lublin region and removed 110,000 Polish people from there to make 'living space' (Lebensraum) for themselves. Adults and adolescents were used for hard labor, and the younger children, handicapped people, and the elderly were taken to undisclosed locations. In contrast, several others were sent either to Majdanek or Auschwitz. The Germans also wanted Polish children from Zamość so that they could inspect their racial features and put them up for adoption for German families, which is why they raided foster homes and orphanages and managed to seize 50,000 children. Whenever a Polish mother was pregnant, she and the father would be studied physically for potential 'German' characteristics. If it were determined that none of the genes that were in demand could be found among the parents, the child would be aborted. 4,454 of the captive children were accepted for German conversion, and they were expected to disregard their Polish heritage completely. They were not permitted to speak Polish, and they received an education in specialized Nazi German programs while also having their original Polish names changed in favor of German ones. Illness and hunger took the lives of some of the children who studied under the Germans, and those who lived did not find their original families. In response to all of this monstrous behavior from the Germans, the Poles staged a resistance by assaulting German settlers on their land, which then resulted in these Polish resistance fighters being executed by the Nazi Germans. After the Germans were beaten at Stalingrad in 1943, the Polish resistance became more confident that

they would succeed in overpowering them and reclaiming their home, which is why the Germans doubled their efforts to weaken the movement and instill fear within the Polish community. They instigated daily public executions of citizens in various cities by either shooting or hanging them, and they sabotaged close to 300 villages while killing everyone from men, women, and children in the process [source: A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust].

1944 Wola Genocide:

From August 5th to August 12th, 1944, the Azerbaijani Legion and the Wehrmacht killed between 40,000 and 50,000 Polish people in Wola, an area within Warsaw. The citizens who were executed ranged from men, women, children (even infants), and elders, and some even suffered horrible fates alongside death, such as rape and/or torture. In the hospitals, the doctors and nurses were slaughtered along with their patients, who were still in their beds as they died. Survivors were hunted by dogs so that they could be killed on sight, and once all of the work was done, every trace of this massacre was removed by the killers as they made piles of bodies and burned them to ashes. Adolf Hitler demanded that all of these events take place to lower the chances of a 'Warsaw Uprising' exponentially. The work was overseen by Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, as well as the Dirlewanger and 'RONA' Kaminski brigades, and while they successfully instilled terror within Wola, a resistance movement did rise and fight back against the Germans for two months before the Germans claimed victory once again. Almost 200,000 Warsaw civilian citizens were killed by Germans during the Warsaw Uprising.

Unfortunately, many of the Germans involved in the killings during the Warsaw Uprising were never tried and convicted after the war for their crimes. One noteworthy exception is when the French military units managed to eventually apprehend Oskar Dirlewanger (one of the main commanders responsible for this genocide) on June 1st, 1945, even though he used an alias after committing his acts. He ended up dying in the Alzhausen-based POW camp where he was held, and it is believed that his death was caused by Polish guards who may have severely abused him. The other ringleader of the horrors that occurred at Wola, Heinz Reinefarth, was captured by the Allies, but he was never held legally accountable for the pain and suffering he caused. Since little evidence was presented against him in court, he was set free in Germany. He continued his life as a lawyer, a Westerland mayor, and a member of the Schleswig-Holstein parliament. He even received a pension for being a general from the German government [source: Academic Accelerator.com].

The Lesson for Today:

The heinous acts directed against the Polish people serve to warn us of the dangers that can be present when power-hungry evildoers gain a platform to influence others. The French philosopher Voltaire has been quoted as saying, 'Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities' [BrainyQuote], and never before has there been a sentence that could better summarize what allowed World War II and The Holocaust to happen. Adolf Hitler used his position as Chancellor of Germany to have his citizens believe that the German 'Aryans'

were the most genetically superior race of all, thus causing these same citizens to develop a passive attitude towards the invasion of Poland and the subsequent removal of the Polish people, language, and culture. The agenda was so powerful that some German citizens did not think it was enough to stand by their country's mission, so they volunteered to become soldiers to contribute to it as self-proclaimed patriots personally. In reality, all they did was create legacies for themselves as genocidal cogs in a sickening machine who were too devoted to their cause to realize that. In our current year, we are witnessing a similar chain of events, with Ukraine being the victim and Russia being the invader. Voltaire's aforementioned quote rings true today as Vladimir Putin presented his people with absurd notions like the Ukrainians and the Russians being practically the same people or that Ukraine is a country infested with Neo-Nazis, and then used these arguments to justify the transfer of his soldiers to Ukraine where they are working to remove the country's unique identity from the world. Whether it be through the senseless slaughter of large numbers of civilians or the kidnapping of Ukrainian children so that they can be brought to Russia and 're-educated' [Pavlevych, 2023], it is becoming increasingly evident that history is repeating itself under the same old false belief that any one nation or culture holds more value than another and that it should therefore hold more power over other regions as well. The statistics about the Polish men, women, and children who died during World War II, as well as the documentation of their horrid experiences, are legitimate proof that accepting the erasure of any ethnicity, culture, or language is also to accept the erasure of morality.

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