

Revisiting Nazi Germany Crimes Against Ethnic Poles

By Kenneth Okpomo

Introduction. Before the unprovoked invasion, German reconnaissance aircraft flew across Poland to collect information about potential targets. It was crystal clear that war was coming to Poland. Adolf Hitler (the ruthless dictator of Nazi Germany) had already expressed extreme hatred for Polish people, whom he deemed as an inferior race (“Untermenschens”) fit only for subjugation, domination, and eventual extermination, to create living spaces for the Aryan race.

Hitler was particularly angry with Poland over the Polish Corridor. He wanted the Polish authorities to relinquish control of the city of Gdansk (Danzig in German) and create extraterritorial highways connected to East Prussia (Prusy Wschodnie in Polish). Poland’s staunch objection to those demands had infuriated him the more. On the calculation that if he attacked Poland, Britain and France (with whom Poland had a separate alliance) would not immediately come to her defense, he opted for war, full-scale war.

Having earlier withdrawn from the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the German-Poland non-aggression pact, the Nazi German leader went behind to sign the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, which included a secret protocol for the partitioning of Poland between the two spheres of influence. The motive was to get the Soviets on Nazi Germany's side so that Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, would not interfere in the upcoming conflict. Using a false flag operation – SS men had attacked a German radio station for which the blame was heaped on the Polish state – Hitler barefacedly justified his “unwarranted” and “needless” invasion of Poland.

1) German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939

At dawn on this day, German warplanes (29 Junkers Ju 87B Stukas under the command of Captain Walter Sigelembarked) had embarked on an aerial bombardment of Poland on a massive scale. The warplanes flew into Polish airspace unchallenged and dropped a total of 46,000 kg of bombs on the town of Wieluń in an operation that lasted for nine long hours. The airstrikes destroyed 70% of the border town (which had no air defense capabilities) and reportedly caused 127 civilian casualties.ⁱ German warplanes also dropped bombs on Działoszyn and Kamieńsk, among other towns, which caused various levels of strident devastations.

Infantry units of the German military had staged an attack on the Westerplatte Peninsula, which was used by the Polish army to transship military supplies within Gdansk. Hitler was so keen on retaking this city (which has changed hands at various times) that he made it one of his first ports of call regarding attacks. The battleship Schleswig-Holstein, Stuka dive-bombers, and land-based artillery also shelled the port city.ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, the commander of a small garrison in the town, Major Sucharski, and his men had put up a heroic defense. He held back the German invaders for seven whole days until he ran out of ammunition and had no option but to surrender.

Large numbers of heavily mechanized ground troops made the crossing into Poland in full force. As they moved in, they pummeled cities, towns, and villages along the way with mortars and artillery fire. While fleeing civilians were strafed, SS dead squads moved into neighborhoods. They razed down homes as they searched for men, women, and children of Polish derivation and language with intent to annihilate them as Hitler, their Supreme Commander, had ordered.

While the Slovak army joined the German invasion, the Soviet Union invaded eastern Poland on September 17. Fighting on two fronts, the Polish army, which had slightly fewer men than her

German counterpart and obsolete military hardware, soon capitulated. It could not hold back the invading armies pending when British and French (expeditionary) forces would arrive.

There can be no doubt that, while Britain and France kept their obligation to defend Poland by declaring war on Germany two days after the invasion, by the time parliamentary approvals were gotten, emergency military budgets were passed, war plans were made, troops across multiple domains were deployed and dispatched to the theater of conflict in the context of World War II, the German War Machine had wrecked unimaginable damage on the Polish state and people.

2) Action A-B

In the course of the invasion, the Germans (also called Nazis years after WWII ended at the request of German politicians) embarked on Action A-B, otherwise known as Extraordinary Pacification Action. It entailed the systematic search, identification, (arrest), and extermination of Polish elites (and upper classes). These included nobles, government officials, politicians, judges, teachers, professors, priests, entrepreneurs, etc. They were deemed “enemies of the Reich”. The motive behind this very crude and cruel action cannot be farfetched. It was to render the Polish people leaderless.

Leaderless people are often scattered, fragmented, and directionless. By killing the Polish elites, the Nazi Germans hoped to forestall all organized protests and resistance to their invasion and colonization ambitions. Spearheaded by Hans Frank, the head of the General Government, this action was planned two years before. With the help of the German minority population of Poland, the SS was able to produce a proscription list that had the names of Polish leaders and intellectuals. More than 6,500 ethnic Poles were exterminated in cold blood.

3) Operation Tannenberg

This was the code name of an operation that began from the beginning of the invasion through October in which SS dead squads (especially men of the Einsatzgruppen) murdered Polish elites with the use of the proscription as mentioned earlier lists that contained the names of over 61,000 members of the Polish intelligentsia. The Volksdeutscher and SA militias, in conjunction with the SS dead squad, had orchestrated the hatched job. Over 100,000 people were killed during the clandestine operation, many of them on trumped-up charges. On the allegation that the victims attacked German soldiers and/or SS men, the Nazi Germans had created the justification (or semblance of it) to do to their victims as they wished.

4) Ethnic Poles in KL Stutthof

Opened on September 2, 1939, the concentration camp in Stutthof (which is 34 kilometers east of Danzig) was the first to be established by the Nazi Germans outside of Germany. It held some 85,000 prisoners at the very least by the time it was shut down in May 1945. It is instructive to note that most of the prisoners there were of Polish extraction arrested for what was thought to be political offenses. They worked in extremely hard conditions in businesses owned by the SS, arms factories, brickyards, and private industries, among others. Prisoners who were handicapped or had become too sick to work were immediately exterminated. In 1943, the SS administrators decided to add a small gas chamber (that could take 150 persons at a time) as well as a crematorium to the camp as there were too many prisoners to be gassed—the art of using wagons as gas chambers was soon introduced. The first case of execution in the camp occurred on January 11 and March 22, 1940, when 89 Polish activists and government officials were shot.ⁱⁱⁱ As various kinds of unethical pseudo-medical experiments were being practiced on

prisoners, the work of an over-incensed SS officer soon came under intense scrutiny. Prof. Rudolf Spanner was accused of using human fat (fat taken from the tissues of murdered prisoners, in effect) to make soap in his small soap factory in Gdansk (Danzig).

Many of the prisoners in this camp had died of malnutrition and disease, as well as torture and exhaustion. The typhus epidemic of 1942 and 1944 also claimed the lives of prisoners, as medical attention was almost non-existent.

5) Ethnic Poles in KL Auschwitz

Auschwitz was the largest and deadliest of all the Nazi German concentration camps. As a matter of fact, several movies and documentaries about this notorious camp, based on the accounts of survivors, have been produced. It consisted of a Prisoner camp, a Slave-labor camp, and an Extermination camp. The first set of Polish prisoners was transported to the Prisoner camp on June 14, 1940. Government officials, politicians, schoolteachers, doctors, people arrested during roundups, etc., were the prisoners in Auschwitz. In the mornings, the prisoners file out of their barracks at the sound of the gong. They line up in the winter cold or summer heat to attend the roll call. After this, they were given half a liter of tea or coffee or something similar to what they should drink. After that, they worked on a construction or manufacturing site, as the case may be, for 12 hours. They were fed half a liter of potato (or rutabaga) soup at noon. In the evening, they received about 300 grams of black bread with about 25 grams of margarine, marmalade, or cheese. Sundays are usually no-work days. Prisoners washed their clothes as well as tidied their surroundings.

Being young and able to work was what could save a prisoner from looming death in the gas chamber. Sick prisoners, women, and children, whom the Nazi German occupiers deemed

useless, were often discarded on arrival. They were sent to the gas chamber, after which their bodies were taken to the crematorium to burn.

It was in this camp that the notorious SS doctor Josef Mengele, dubbed "Angel of Death" by prisoners, unleashed a reign of terror as he carried out various kinds of pseudo-medical experiments using prisoners as guinea pigs mainly to advance the notion of the superiority of the Aryan race. In some of his experiments, he injected twin children with lethal substances as if to test their survivability, as well as took the physical measurement of dwarfs, extracted their blood and teeth, and subjected them to unnecessary X-rays and drugs.^{iv} He then sent them to the gas chambers to die there while their skeletons were sent to Berlin for further study.

When prisoners degenerated to "Muselmanns" (seriously emaciated to the point that many no longer have the will to live), they were subjected to the gas chamber or were killed by other methods. Some of the prisoners had committed suicide. One of the ways they took their lives was to throw themselves over the high-voltage electric wire fence to be electrocuted.

According to the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum, about 130-140 thousand Poles were sent to Auschwitz, approximately 10 thousand Poles (including Police prisoners) were killed without ever being registered as prisoners, half of the Poles in the camp had died due to malnutrition, beating, excessively hard labor, shooting, lethal injection, as well as murder in the gas chamber.^v

6) Polish Priests in KL Dachau

Opened in March 1933, the Dachau concentration camp, located 12 miles north of Munich in Germany, was the first concentration camp to be built by the Nazi Germans. More than 10,000 Polish priests (comprising Roman Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Old Catholics, and

Mariavites, etc.) were said to have been imprisoned there. Initially meant for the incarceration of political opponents of the Nazi regime, the camp was later used as a prison for prisoners of other nationalities. It also served as a training ground for SS guards that were posted to other Nazi German concentration camps, ghettos, and other formations.

The Nazi Germans strongly hated Christians. At the Catholic seminary in Wloclawek, Archbishop Kazimierz Majdanski of Stettino-Kamien, some of his students, and a professor were arrested by the SS on November 7, 1939, for nothing, or just for being priests, students, and academicians. They were eventually taken to Dachau. There, the prisoner experienced firsthand the attitudinal disposition of his oppressors toward religious faiths. The Archbishop recalls: "Our German executioner cursed God, denigrated the Church, and called us the 'dogs of Rome.' They wanted us to denigrate the cross and the rosary."^{vi}

Some Priests were told they would be specially treated if they renounced their faith. The Archbishop had said none of them (including Father Dominik Jedrzejewski, who was offered freedom if he gave up his priestly robe) fell by the wayside. Amid the extremely difficult work that Dachau inmates were subjected to, coupled with the insufficient food rations, beatings, and pains from the pseudo-medical experiments, the Polish priests kept their faith in God intact. Priests (such as Father Josef Kolot) would rather die (become martyrs) than succumb to pressure for them to renounce the cross and their calling as priests.

When the typhus epidemic ravaged the camp (over which the SS authorities quarantined it), the Polish priests cared for one another even at the risk of their lives. For example, Father Frelichowski had cared for sick priests, but he lost his life in the process. According to Archbishop Majdanski, 20% of the 10,017 Polish priests in Dachau died in the camp.

7) Polish women in KL Ravensbrück

The Ravensbrück camp in the German Reich was the only Nazi German concentration camp that was almost exclusively for women. From March 1939 to April 1945, when it was in operation, there were over 40,000 Polish female inmates from various works of life: medicine, law, arts, painting, and academics, among others. The SS chief, Heinrich Himmler, had wanted the camp to be a place for deviant women such as prostitutes, abortionists, criminals, and communists, among others.

Many Polish women who participated in the Warsaw uprising were sent to this camp. The women prisoners were subjected to various kinds of deadly pseudo-medical experiments by SS doctors. They included forced sterilizations, artificially created wounds that were infected with dirt and glass in the quest for a cure for gas gangrene, etc.^{vii} Women that were frequently used for such pseudo-medical experiments were called “rabbits”. For future reference, rabbits always wanted to take photos to document injuries sustained during the pseudo-medical experiments. They were also used as forced labor in the camp's industrial complex, where they worked for very long hours without rest.

However, from 1941 onwards, the status of the camp changed. It became an execution camp. Nevertheless, the Polish women inmates and their counterparts of other nationalities developed strong bonds of camaraderie. The camp had a gas chamber where sick women were sent to. Many who died or were murdered were cremated. As Ravensbrück did not have a cemetery of its own, their ashes were placed in urns and buried in the nearby cemetery at Fürstenberg in the north-east of Germany.^{viii} Sadly, about 8,000 survivors were physically and psychologically too

exhausted to embrace freedom after the Red Army liberated this camp in April 1945. Some of them died in the weeks, months, and years that followed.

8) Polish men in KL Mauthausen-Goosen

This camp for ethnic Poles, which became operational in May 1940, received the first transport of prisoners from Dachau and Sachsenhausen, among other places, on May 25. Mauthausen and its sub-camps were synonymous with hardship, sorrow, bitterness, and tears. Prisoners were rented out to local industries, most of which were quarries. The excruciating hard work in this camp caused deaths. Prisoners who were not able to cope with the fast pace of work in the industrial sites were immediately exterminated to free up space for new prisoners who were being brought in from other camps.

9) Polish children in KZ Litzmannstadt in Łódź

About 13,000 Polish children (said to be between the ages of 2 and 16) were sent to the concentration camp at Lodz (which the Germans renamed Litzmannstadt). There, they faced a lot of dehumanizing conditions, which included the bestiality of SS guards. The fact that they endured the absolute suffering by themselves (as there were no adult prisoners to render whatever form of support or protection that they could under that circumstance) made their plight even more pathetic. The camp took in juveniles arrested for petty theft, smuggling, and street trading, among other things. It also admitted children whose parents were killed or arrested by SS officers. The children were given work quotas to complete or be punished. While the boys straightened needles and made straw for shoes, wicker baskets, belts for gas masks, and leather parts for backpacks, girls worked in the kitchen, laundry, tailor's workshop, garden, etc.^{ix}

Malnutrition was the order of the day as the typical breakfast was just a slice of bread and a cup

of black coffee or another green-based substitute (sometimes sweetened with saccharine), dinner was half a liter of potato or rutabaga soup with cabbage or some other vegetable leaves.

The bestiality of SS guards toward adolescent children prisoners was well documented. In Josef Witkowski's book on the subject matter, cited by Stuart Dowell, the behavior of an SS guard named Edward Augus is captured thus: "He beat and kicked them [the Polish children] in the most sensitive places, he buried them in boxes of sand, dunked them in a barrel of water, hung them by the legs on a chain and lowered their heads into a tank of used car lubricant."^x He did not stop there, he went further: "he cut their genitals with a pen knife, beat their heels and extinguished cigarettes on [the children] prisoners chests."^{xi} Pneumonia, meningitis, tuberculosis, diarrhea, and paralysis, among other ailments, were common in the camp.

10) Operation Zamość

In 1942 the Nazi Germans attempted to use the Zamość region as a test case for the mass expulsion of ethnic Poles from their homelands to be replaced with German settlers. The exercise displaced more than 110,000 Poles from more than 300 villages. While some of those displaced were resettled in the Warsaw and Lublin area, others were moved to concentration camps in the German Reich, where they were used as forced labor.

In the course of this operation, the Germans forcefully took away some 30,000 Polish children (with blonde hair and blue eyes that were deemed rare features of the Aryan-Nordic race) to Germany for assimilation into German culture (Germanization). The children were also trained to be staunch supporters of the Nazi philosophy and regime.

Among the displaced people who fled to the forest, thousands had organized themselves into self-defense forces to resist this move. The Home Army (Armia Krajowa) and the Peasant Battalions (Bataliony Chlopskie) led the resistance movement. The CODENAMES website notes that:” After several major engagements between the resistance fighters and German units in places such as Wojda, Róża, Zaboreczno, Długi Kat, Lasowce and Hrubieszów, the Germans called a halt to their offensive efforts...”^{xii} The Polish resistance successfully set back the German colonization effort by a few months. However, the Germans soon responded with Werwolf and Sturmwind operations (which wrought heavy damage on the civilian population of Poland). Although the Nazis were ultimately able to resettle some 8,000 Germans in this area, the fight by ordinary people led to the liberation of several towns and villages in the Zamość region.

11) Wola genocide

The Polish resistance fought strongly during the Warsaw uprising on August 1, 1944. With the aid of two captured tanks, they were able to withstand as well as deal blows on the occupying Nazi German forces. They retreated, however, when Nazi Germans' reinforcement came with troops equipped with machine guns, dive-bombers, and other sophisticated weapons. Hitler and Himmler had reiterated their order to their forces to kill every Pole as well as not to take prisoners. The German military then moved into the suburbs of Wola in great annoyance. They began to attack the civilian population. With rape, arson, torture, and slaughter, among other crimes against humanity, SS men unleashed maximum horror on the local people.

At Gorczewska Street, at the railway embankment, the Germans perpetrated some of the gravest mass murders: some 10,000 ethnic Poles were taken there and shot. A total of over 40000 civilians were murdered in the Wola genocide. Their bodies were burnt. (As a matter of fact, to

conceal the evidence of their atrocities, the Germans had created a special burning detachment force whose job it was to burn down the homes and bodies of their victims). At the Franaszek factory, the ashes of 4,000 Poles were laid in a hole. Even hospitals were not spared. SS dead squad from Gen. Reinefarths group had stormed the Wolski hospital at 26 Plocka Street. They shot dead Dr. Jozef Piasecki, Prof. Janusz Zeyland, and hospital chaplain priest Kazimierz Ciecierski, as well as took the remaining staff, the sick, and others to the factory buildings in the Moczydlo sub-district where they shot them.^{xiii}

An eyewitness, Jerzy Jankowski, who was 12 years old at the time, sums up the massacre thus: "...Wola was burning, wreaths of smoke and odor of burning bodies were lingering in the air, fear and gloom reigned everywhere...The sounds of the series of machine gun fire, single shots, and exploding grenades could be heard all the time..."^{xiv} Then, the rest of Warsaw's civilians were deported to concentration and forced labor camps, and the city was converted into ruins.

12) Lessons for today

Neo-Nazis are on the rise in Germany and other European countries today. Their activities must be effectively checkmated. This group of racists should never be allowed to hold political power in Germany or elsewhere again to prevent another ethnic cleansing from happening. Last year, the German federal government took steps to ban Hammerskins Germany (a local chapter of the Hammerskins Nation that was founded in the United States in 1988). "With this ban, we are putting an end to the inhumane activities of an internationally active neo-Nazi association in Germany," said Nancy Faeser, the German Interior Minister.^{xv}

War criminals must never go unpunished. Although the Nuremberg Tribunal had sentenced some of the Nazi German perpetrators, a vast majority of them evaded justice, however. A case in

point is SS Dr. Josef Mengele (“Angel of Death”) who, after the defeat of Nazi Germany by the Allied Powers in 1945, escaped to Argentina and then to Paraguay (where he acquired the country’s citizenship) before moving to Brazil where he died in 1979 and was buried under the false name “Wolfgang Gerhard.” The mechanism of administering international justice for war crimes and crimes against humanity needs to be overhauled.

Poland of today still faces annihilating threats from the Russian Federation (Soviet successor state). Successive Polish leaders have warned that Russia (especially under Vladimir Putin) is an existential and civilizational threat to Poland and the continent at large. They were not taken seriously until Russia launched an unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 despite appeals to Putin by world leaders. With the massive bombardment of Ukrainian towns and cities with all kinds of lethal projectiles, the kidnap of Ukrainian children for adoption and Russification, food as a weapon of war, summary executions of civilians in Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy regions, etc., Vladimir Putin has shown that he has same traits as Adolf Hitler.

Putin has threatened to invade Poland, Romania, and other states.^{xvi} Already, in a hybrid warfare tactic, using key ally Belarus, hundreds of migrants were heaped on the border of Poland. Polish President Andrzej Duda has warned that Putin has begun the transfer of short-range tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus. His key ally, Aleksandr Lukashenko, has taken in thousands of Wagner mercenaries into his country after their aborted mutiny. One of their missions, it has been said, is to train Belarusian Special Forces at a military range just a few miles from the Polish border. A Russian MP, Andrey Kartapolov, has claimed that Putin could have the expelled Wagner forces invade Poland via the Suwalki gap.^{xvii} These are clear signs that the Polish state is again under serious threat.

As a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), if Russia or any other foreign power attacks Poland, NATO is duty-bound to come to the defense of the Polish nation if Article 5 is triggered. Notwithstanding, to avoid the mistakes of the past, before NATO forces arrive, the Polish army should be able to bog down the invading Russian military. To this end, Poland will have to strengthen its armed forces (in terms of size, weaponry, and capabilities)

This is exactly what the ruling Law and Justice Party is doing thus far. The Polish Defense Minister, Mariusz Blaszczak, has said as much about his country's plan to build a "great army" capable of withstanding the shock of Russian armed attacks. Having supplied the Ukrainian military with Leopard 2 tanks, Soviet-era MiG fighter jets, and vast quantities of ammunition so that it can defend itself against Russian aggression, Poland now needs to replenish its stock (with modern weapons) while transforming its military into a more mobile and NATO-compatible force. The country has spent \$10 billion on arms from the US and South Korea for tanks, howitzers, and advanced rocket systems. In comparison, the Biden administration has offered a rare \$2 billion loan in support of the ambition of modernization.

The German extermination of ethnic Poles, while remaining a dark stain on human history, has increased levels of patriotism in the Polish nation. The tragic event and experience will keep ethnic Poles ever united against the forces that seek to enslave and annihilate them.

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ⁱⁱ "Westerplatte", Liberation Route Europe, no date, <https://www.liberationroute.com/stories/169/westerplatte-where-the-war-began>

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- ^{iv} “Mengele's Medical Experiments”, The Scope of Urology Newsletter, Issue 1 – Spring 2020, <https://www.urologichistory.museum/collections/the-scope-of-urology-newsletter/issue-1-spring-2020/mengeles-experiments>
- ^v Auschwitz Birkanau State Museum, *ibid.*
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- ^{xi} *Op.cit*
- ^{xii} CODENAMES, “Operation Zamość Insurekcja”, no dates, <https://codenames.info/operation/zamosc-insurekcja/>
- ^{xiii} Janina Mankowska, Jerzy Janowski and Maciej Janaszek-Seydlitz, “The Wola massacre”, SPPW1944, no date, http://www.sppw1944.org/index.html?http://www.sppw1944.org/powstanie/wola_rzez_eng.html
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xv} “Germany bans neo-Nazi group with US links, conducts raids in 10 states”, Aljazeera, Sept 19, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/19/germany-bans-neo-nazi-group-with-us-links-conducts-raids-in-10-states>
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