

2023 Polonia Institute Scholarship Essay.

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German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939

The Invasion of Poland was a dark day full of turmoil. Initially, the Polish government was mainly concerned with the USSR, viewing them as a more pressing threat. Due to the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was forced to have a tiny army. Additionally, Poland had a treaty with France and Britain in which they promised to aid Poland if Germany attacked. In this way, the USSR seemed more dangerous. However, when Germany broke the Versailles treaty in 1935, Poland began fearing a German attack and started making a plan. Their idea was based on defense and protecting all of Poland, so they arranged troops along the border they shared with Germany. The Polish believed in their treaties with France and the United Kingdom at the time, in which they agreed to come to their aid within 15 days of a German attack. With this, the Polish government also stalled the mobilization date for the conscripted army due to pressure from Western ambassadors, who feared that the mobilization would cause a catalyst for war, as Germany would see it as a threat. This would be a grave mistake for Poland.

On September 1, 1939, Germany attacked along the entire border that the Polish tried to protect. Polish soldiers fought bravely against them; however, being largely outnumbered, they struggled at attempts to ward them off. In this way, the delay in conscription only added to Poland's lack of soldiers.

In the North, Germans won against multiple Pomorze Army units. At the same time, the Western Front achieved victory as the Polish Wolynska Cavalry Brigade inflicted heavy losses on the Germans at the Battle of Mokra. In the southwest, the Germans forced the Polish Krakow Army to retreat, allowing for the capture of Silesia; this led to the seizing of the Carpathian Mountains and this part of the Polish region. However, local self-defense units joined the fight when the regular Polish troops retreated. This group was a mixture of Silesian scouts. They defended multiple cities, including Chorzow and Katowice. However, this was not enough as German armies pushed through border defense lines, causing the retreat of the Polish units along the entire frontline.

As for the Polish Coastline, it was cut off from the rest of the country's territory. The Germans struck the Polish Post Office of Gdansk on day one of the war. The region's personnel fought back and only surrendered once the building was set on fire. Germany then attacked the Polish Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte. The garrison under Major Henryk Sucharski could fight off the first attacks. The commander,

ready to follow previous orders to surrender, did the opposite after being confronted by his officers against ceding. In particular, Captain Franciszek Dabrowski admitted to the continued fight. The Polish soldiers attacked from sea land and bombed from the air. They held their position until September 7th.

As for the Polish Navy, it was eliminated in the first days of the war. German air force sank many of Poland's best warships and submarines. With the largest Polish port lost, the defenders fought off German attacks on Oksywie, but on September 19, the Germans broke through their lines, causing Col. Dabek to take his own life as he refused to surrender. At this point, the Hel Peninsula was the only line of defense on the coastline.

The German invasion also affected civilians significantly. Although the Germans bombed and used their air force against Polish military units, they did the same to civilians—bombing transportation routes and towns without military forces or industrial facilities. German airmen would also kill refugees seen fleeing. In this way, the invasion was not just a military-based fight but also had many cruel atrocities against civilians.

As for the French and British, on September 3rd, both recognized there was no way of peaceful settlement and declared war against Germany. On September 12th, however, the prime ministers of France and Britain met and agreed not to take military action against Germany. Poland did not know about this decision. However, France continued their 'war' against Germany by dropping leaflets and capturing a couple of villages on the border. They ignored, however, their 80-fold advantage of tanks and the weak Western border of Germany. In other words, Poland was predominately on its own during the German Invasion. 1/

Action A-B

Action A-B, also called AB Aktion, was an operation that resulted in the murder of 50,000 Poles in the Third Reich area. The German government had created a list of Poles they planned to kill before seizing the area. Once Germany claimed the region, they killed these individuals. 2/ Thousands of others were sent to concentration camps. The people killed were individuals the German government worried would create uprisings against them or help create a Polish resistance. The list consisted of teachers, intellectuals, and priests. The whole event began in the Spring of 1940. 3/ Germany had wanted the event to be over by mid-1940; however, it continued into the fall. 4/

Another reason this occurred was because Hitler wanted to make room for German colonists. By removing Polish people, the idea was that there would be more room for the Germans. 5/ Overall, however, the plan

was not successful. Although the Polish resistance did suffer in terms of membership for a while, it did bounce back. Thus, showcasing true resilience. 6/

Operation Tannenberg

Once the Germans captured Poland, Operation Tannenberg was put into motion. The operation was an anti-Polish extermination of those in power. The Germans created a list of Polish elites and government officials. They planned to kill these individuals before the invasion. On Aug25, 1939, the Gestapo began setting up the headquarters for this operation. 7/ (The German Gestapo was secret police force). 8/ Fifty-five thousand individuals died due to Operation Tannenberg. 9/ Although similar to Actions A-B, it is important to note that Operation Tannenberg occurred before Actions A-B, with almost a year difference in start times. Operation Tannenberg dealt more with the Polish elites and government officials. Actions A-B was centered more around teachers, priests, and intellectuals. 10/

Ethnic Poles in KL Stutthof

Known for being one of the two concentration camps convicted by the Germans after WWII.11/ The camp killed many ethnic Poles and forced many to work under harsh conditions. This camp also received the first transport of “135-150 Polish residents of the free city of Gdansk” who were arrested on September 1, 1939, and arrived at Stutthof on September 2, 1939.12/ The camp was originally not a ‘concentration camp.’ Instead, it was a transit camp for prisoners of Stutthof.13/ It was not until Heinrich Himmler, a German politician and leader of the Protection Squadron,14/ visited the camp on November 23, 1941, and gave it the concentration camp status, effective January 7, 1942. Around 65,000 died in this concentration camp. 15/

Ethnic Poles in KL Auschwitz

Auschwitz was one of the most well-known concentration camps, which generated a lot of fear during its operation. One of the first concentration camps to be built and have the concentration camp title, it was originally constructed to deal with the overcrowding of Poles in local prisons. The first transport of Poles occurred on June 14, 1940, from a prison in Tarnow. The camp consisted of 3 different parts. Auschwitz 1, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, and Auschwitz III. From 1942-1944, Auschwitz also had more than 40 sub-camps. At these camps, Individuals did forced labor for German farms and industrial work. Around 70-75 thousand Poles were killed at this camp. 16 It was also well known that many individuals sent to this camp were also part of the resistance movement or suspected to be involved. Those in high social power were often brought to this camp as well. Examples of individuals sent to Auschwitz were priests, doctors, teachers,

government officials, professional army officers, and politicians. All of these individuals were considered political prisoners by the Germans. Some individuals unrelated to these fields were also sent to Auschwitz accidentally by getting captured during events like street roundups. The camp also served as a place that was part of the euthanasia action, which was Germany's push to kill terminally ill Polish people. Individuals who were elderly, mentally ill, and in residential care facilities were killed in the camp.17/

Polish Priests in KL Dachau

The Dachau camp was known for its horrendous conditions. Being built over a swampy area, it had an unpleasant climate. Prisoners stood for hours at a time outside in these harsh weather conditions. Many died in this camp due to forced labor, hunger, pseudo-medical exams and tests, and physical abuse.

Two hundred fifty thousand prisoners came through the camp. However, on liberation day, there were roughly 33 thousand prisoners left. However, the death count is still hard to estimate as the precise number of mortal victims and prisoners who went through the camp is difficult to measure, with a lack of entries of those delivered by the Gestapo to be murdered. In December of 1940, priests from Sachsenhausen, Oranienburg, and Mauthausen-Gusen came to the camp. A total of 2720 Catholic priests arrived, 1780 of them being Polish. Held in the camp, 868 died during their stay. 18/

They were brought in as part of a goal of denationalizing countries now under German control. The transports for the Polish clergy arrived in April of 1940 and continued until the end of the year. Subjected to the most challenging work and some of the harshest working conditions at the camp, those who could not work were sent to the gas chambers. Moreover, the Vatican did intervene, allowing the priests to attend mass from January 1941; however, this privilege was quickly removed. In September of 1941, camp authorities "made the carrying out of religious practices dependent on one's name being included in the German nationality list." 19/ None of the priests agreed to this. Consequently, the priests were banned from praying, having objects of worship, celebrating Holy Mass, and providing spiritual aid to others. They preserved, however, and found ways to organize secret holy masses and support the dying. 20/

Polish Women in KL Ravensbrück

Ravensbrück concentration camp was created in March 1939. The first female prisoners who went through the camp were German communists and resistance activists. Overall, however, Ravensbrück became the main concentration camp for women during WWII. More than 100,000 women went through the camp until the Red Army liberated the camp on April 30, 1945. The largest ethnic group at the camp, however, was the Poles, who made up around 40,000 of the women who went through the camp. Women from all

social and economic backgrounds were sent to this camp. Moreover, The camp was also known for its pseudo-medical experiments. Many of the women who survived the camp's horrors were physically and/or mentally crippled from the camp and could not get jobs or start families once freed. 21/ The experiments themselves were also horrific. Aimed at “developing treatment methods for soldiers wounded on the front,” women were experimented on, having their legs broken, muscles removed, nerve elements cut out, “shins transplanted from one leg to another,” and wounds purposely infected by bacteria to see the effect of sulfonamides. 22/

These experiments would repeatedly be done on patients over and over again. For those who survived, their sheer will is a true testament as many fought unimaginable pain and medical operations. Prisoners were known also to comfort each other, showing great kindness and faith even in such a horrific situation. 23/ Those who died from 1940 to 1943 were burned in the basement of a chapel and buried in graves that were unmarked. In 1989, however, the urns were uncovered while an individual dug a grave in the cemetery. The urns had metal plates with birth dates and names of the prisoners on them. The cremation date, the village's name, and the number on the camp list were on the lids. These urns were given to a local museum after their discovery. 24/

Polish men in KL Mauthausen-Gusen

Gusen which started its operations on May 25, 1940, was Mauthausen's first and largest subsidiary camp. Often referred to as “Vernichtungslager für die polnische Intelligenz,” or in English, “Extermination Camp for the Polish Intelligentsia by the Germans.” Gusen, along with Mauthausen, another concentration camp, was the most severe category of concentration camp in the Third Reich. It was mainly for political prisoners to work them to death. The vast majority of the prisoners were also men. However, there was a minority of females who went through the camps. Moreover, prisoners worked under harsh conditions to produce weapons, aircraft, and other supplies. Individuals who fell too sick or weak to work at the Mauthausen camp were killed. By the time individuals were done working, they were too tired even to eat. 25/

Polish children in KL Litzmannstadt in Lodz

The concentration camp constructed by Litzmannstadt, also known as the Preventive Camp of the Security Police for Polish Youth in Łódź, was designed to house children. Around anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 Polish children went through the German facility; however, it is estimated that no more than 200 were killed. Only ⅓ of the victim's names have ever been determined. Furthermore, the Germans created the camp for Polish Children to educate them on German ideology while also preventing them from affecting their children with non-German ideas. Seventy-five percent of the camp was designed for boys, and 25

percent was for girls and more minor children. The camp was designed for children between 12-16, but children under 10 began showing up, so they were left with female inmates to take care of them. They did this in a building called the "isolation ward," which was also called the "the house for little children." Moreover, the Germans brought in many kids for being loafers, hooligans, a packman, thieves, avoiding fares, children with slight physical or mental disabilities/impairments, those who avoided working, and those who did not follow the curfew. Jehovah's Witnesses and those who did not have German citizenship were also subject to being placed in the camp. Some parents were even threatened to have their children sent to the camp if they did not sign the

German Nationality list. If signed, the deportation procedure would be withheld. However, some children regained their freedom because their parents signed the Volksliste. 27/ The Volksliste showcased that individuals had German heritage but lived outside of Germany and did not have German citizenship. Additionally, the camp forced the children to work. The agricultural unit allowed the camp to avoid paying for or depending on food supplies outside the camp. The Germans sent the most robust children to work on the crops, harvest fish from the farm, and handle the farm animals. Some children were also forced to work in factories and German companies. Many children sewed materials and clothing for the war effort, especially boys. They created things like straw plaited pads for army vehicles' wheels when they got stuck in the mud. Girls also sewed, making things like embroidered tablecloths, knitted gloves, and hats. Following, children were forced to work 12+ hours daily under awful conditions. Often, children were humiliated, starved, and beaten. Flogging, especially, was a widespread punishment. Those who did not work hard enough would have a red swastika painted on the back of their coats and get smaller food rations. The camp beds were also overcrowded, unsanitary, and chilly, causing illness to spread quickly.

Operation Zamość

Operation Zamość was the plan to transport many Polish individuals living in the Zamosc region to Auschwitz to give Germans more 'living' space in the Polish area. The Germans removed a hundred and ten thousand Polish individuals from their homes. Most were sent to forced labor camps. Their plan for Auschwitz, however, became more complicated as the Germans suffered military setbacks on the Eastern front as a group of peasants and resistance from the Polish partisan units ambushed the military unit. Ultimately, the number of individuals taken to Auschwitz was around 1300. Additionally, those brought to Auschwitz went through many trials. Anyone considered sick, elderly, or disabled would be taken to the gas chambers to die. Pregnant individuals were put to death with their children with a phenol injection. The majority, however, died in the camp due to harsh treatment and cruel living conditions. Many also

died in the gas chambers upon selection. Eighty percent of all deportees from the Zamosc region perished after a few months in the camp.²⁸

1944 Wola Genocide

The Wola Genocide was caused by the German and SS police units under SS-Gruppenführer Heinz Reinefarth. From August 5-7 of 1944, 29 160,000-180,000 were killed in houses, yards, factories, hospitals, the streets of Warsaw's Wola district, and many other locations. Around 40,000 deaths were in the Wola district and 10,000 in Ochota.

According to a survivor, Franciszek Zasada's report, some dead bodies were burned by individuals threatened with being killed and joining the deceased. He was in this group. Following, 400,000-450,000 individuals were sent to the Pruszkow transit camp. 150,000 were sent to concentration camps or other forms of forced labor. Property was also destroyed, with many museums, churches, hospitals, and historic buildings demolished during the genocide. Many survivors of the incident recall being forced to get in a line or step onto piles of bodies before being shot at. A common theme between the survivors was falling without being hit or being shot in a way where they were injured but not dead. The individuals pretended to be deceased until the Gestapo, the secret police of Germany, left thinking everyone was dead. ^{30/}

Lesson for today

The atrocities of the German occupation of Poland and everything done to its civilians cannot be fully justified by words. The actions are too horrific and cruel to entirely paint all of the pain and suffering individuals had to endure. It is possible, however, to work hard to get as close as possible to showcasing the full extent of what happened so that others may understand the horrors of what occurred. Overall, this part of history lends itself to a lesson for today: perseverance and hope, even in the most difficult of times, are crucial to survival. As humans, hope is something that helps us thrive. However, hope may be the only thing one has, at times, and not just an add-on. From this part of history, we can learn about the importance of hope and lending it to others to strengthen one another. This is how many Polish individuals survived during this challenging part of history. Their internal strength to hold onto hope, even when everything they had was lost, is truly moving and inspirational.

Footnotes

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