

*Guardians of the Memory
Пази́тели на па́мeтта*

THE INVASION OF POLAND BY THE THIRD REICH AND THE CRIMES OF GERMAN OPERATIONAL GROUPS IN THE AUTUMN OF 1939

Marcin Przegiętka

Historical Research Office, Institute of National Remembrance (Poland)

Abstract. The text concerns the circumstances of the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 which started the Second World War. Synthetically, it presents the crisis in Polish-German relations which began in the autumn of 1938. The text also introduces the operational groups of the Security Police and Security Service that entered Polish territory after the Wehrmacht units and whose actions in Poland in the autumn of 1939 were extremely brutal and cruel. Their task was to “clean up” the territory occupied by Germany from “elements” hostile to the Reich and pacify it. After the dissolution of operational groups this activity was continued by in situ Gestapo offices.

Keywords: German invasion; Poland; Second World War; Hitler

Approximately six million Polish citizens perished during World War II. Most of them were victims of the Third German Reich, which on 1 September 1939 attacked Poland without declaring war.

When on 24 October 1938 the Third Reich offered Poland a resolution of the problems in Polish-German relations, Hitler’s expectations did not seem particularly excessive. He wanted Poland to agree to include the Free City of Gdansk within the Reich’s borders (while maintaining certain economic and communication rights for Poland), to build an extraterritorial motorway and a railway line through Polish territory (connecting Germany with East Prussia via Polish Pomerania), as well as joining the Anti-Comintern Pact against the USSR. In return, Germany offered Poland an extension of the declaration of non-aggression concluded on 26 January 1934, and a guarantee of its borders. It is not difficult to notice that Warsaw’s consent to subordinate to Berlin represented the threat of transferring Polish foreign policy directly to Hitler. Losing self-reliance in this area would undoubtedly lead to the loss of independence. There was no guarantee that Hitler would honour the agreement and would not make any further demands. As evidenced by the history of relations between the Third Reich and other states, violations of agreements and

the use of a *fait accompli* method were consistent elements of Hitler's policy. An example of this may be the occupation of the Czech Republic in March 1939 a few months after the Munich Agreement in which Germany gained the Sudetenland which was supposed to satisfy their territorial claims.

Polish diplomacy, surprised by the German proposal, gave their answer in early 1939. The German offer was not accepted, although the Poles declared their readiness to talk. For Hitler, however, it was far too little and he considered his offer to be a one-off as well as non-negotiable (Kornat., 2012: 279 – 288). In April 1939 he decided that the conflict with Poland would be resolved by the use of force and issued appropriate directives to the Wehrmacht. Poland, as an independent state, stood in the way of German expansion both westwards (because it was bound by an alliance with France and received guarantees from Great Britain) and eastwards (it repeatedly rejected submitted proposals for a joint march on Moscow). Therefore, its elimination became the Third Reich's goal.

On 28 April 1939, in his speech in the Reichstag, Hitler denounced the Polish-German non-aggression pact of 26 January 1934 (Żerko, 1998: 332 – 333). The negotiations conducted by Berlin in the spring and summer of 1939 were a mere spectacle demonstrating to whole world "peaceful" attempts to resolve the conflict, when in fact Hitler was already determined to start a war.

His determination is beyond doubt. A few days before the invasion of Poland, on 22 August 1939, Hitler announced to the Wehrmacht generals that "the destruction of Poland is in the foreground. The goal is to remove live forces, not to reach a specific line. Should the war also start in the West, the destruction of Poland stands in the fore" (Borejsza, 2016: 101 – 102). He ordered them to conduct war with "the greatest brutality". He cynically announced to them, that he would provide an excuse for German invasion. "The victor will never be asked if he told the truth"¹⁾. This excuse was a provocation in Gliwice, where on 31 August 1939, Polish "insurgents" were allegedly poised to storm the radio station and make a statement calling on Poles to rise in the German part of Upper Silesia. The provocation was prepared by the German services subordinate to Himmler, and the Polish "insurgents" were prisoners dressed in Polish uniforms (Böhler, 2011: 87 – 91).

However, the Third Reich's invasion of Poland would have been risky without diplomatic preparation. For Berlin, it was particularly important what stance Moscow would adopt in this matter. The invasion would be much easier with a benevolent or at least neutral attitude from the Soviet Union. This was achieved by signing a non-aggression pact between the Third Reich and the USSR on 24 August 1939 (backdated to 23 August) that went down in history as the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact named after the names of the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov (in many countries this pact is also known as the Hitler-Stalin pact). The secret ad-

ditional protocol attached to it provided for the division of spheres of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, including Polish territory, between the two totalitarian powers. Earlier, such an alliance of two states representing an extremely different and hostile ideology would have seemed unbelievable. Their joint action against Poland appeared equally unlikely (Dębski, 2007: 92 – 95, 97 – 99).

When on 1 September 1939, Hitler launched an attack on Poland, Stalin waited until the outcome of the war campaign seemed sealed (on 9 September, Molotov prematurely congratulated the German ambassador on the capture of Warsaw (Dębski, 2007: 114).

by the Wehrmacht; in fact, the German army entered the capital of Poland on 1 October, after the surrender of its defenders). The Red Army entered Polish territory on 17 September 1939, but only the Third Reich was considered an aggressor in this war.

Polish territory was divided between the two totalitarian states. The territory occupied by Germany was partially incorporated into the Reich while the remaining area became the General Governorship. Polish territories incorporated into the Reich were subjected to Germanization which was understood as expelling Jews and some Poles especially those who were considered dangerous (including representatives of the intelligentsia). In turn, the General Governorship was to be a place of deportation of “undesirable elements” from the Reich itself and incorporated lands – i.e. Jews, Roma and Poles – and was to be an area of economic exploitation conducted by the occupant. There the Germans murdered Jews from Poland and other European countries in 1942 – 1944.

According to Hitler’s order, the war campaign was conducted extremely brutally and the invading German army did not spare the civilian population and already then, and not from 1941, the Third Reich led a total war also directed against civilians. Right after the Wehrmacht divisions entered Poland, at the beginning of September 1939, some operational groups of the Security Police and Security Services consisting of members of the SS, Gestapo and other German police formations also entered Polish territory. Although they were far less numerous than the invading Wehrmacht units (about 2,700 officers) it turned out that they were extremely dangerous; operating behind front lines they carried out mass arrests and executions of the defenceless civilian population (Böhler, 2011).

At the end of August 1939, five operational groups of the Security Police and Security Services were organized and concentrated near the Polish border. Their activities were coordinated by Reinhard Heydrich head of the Security Police and Security Services and a close associate of Heinrich Himmler – head of the German police and Reichsführer SS. Right after the start of the German invasion of Poland, it turned out that the number of operational groups was insufficient. On 3 September, on the orders of Himmler, an additional operational group was created for special tasks which was sent to Upper Silesia. On 9 September, another group

was established which then operated in Wielkopolska, and on 12 September, an operational commando was established in Gdansk which in turn operated in Pomorania. In addition to these units created specifically in connection with the attack on Poland, Police squads were also deployed to occupied lands, including police battalions (Böhler, Mallmann, & Matthäus, 2009:14 – 19).

The task of the operational groups was to “fight the elements hostile to the Reich and the Germans in enemy territory behind the fighting units”. Such a general and enigmatic order left their commanders with considerable freedom of interpretation. Overseeing operational group activities on 7 September, Heydrich ordered the Polish territory to be cleared from the “leadership layer” and the Jews. This undertaking was called “clearing the foreground” and in subsequent directives, it was specified that it was about removing “Jews, intelligentsia, clergy, and landowners”²⁾.

Operational groups were equipped with lists of citizens of the Second Polish Republic whom the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin considered dangerous. The lists were prepared on the basis of information coming from various sources (from German consulates and organizations in Poland, and German informers residing there). After entering the Polish territory these lists were supplemented on the basis of documents found by administrative and police authorities, archives of political, social and veteran organizations. They became the basis for arrests of people who were suspected of anti-German attitudes. They included political and social activists, people of culture, clergy, people employed in the security authorities (police, intelligence), broadly understood intelligentsia (teachers, professionals), members of veterans’ organizations and participants in Silesian uprisings (1919, 1920, 1921) and Wielkopolska uprising (1918/1919). In the territories incorporated into the Reich, the “dangerous element” also included Poles from the territories of the former Russian partition (Böhler, 2011: 60 – 62).

No proscription letters were needed in the case of the Jews who had been brutally and cruelly treated right from the beginning. The basis of the persecution was origin, regardless of political involvement or “anti-German” activity. Repressions against the Jewish population were very wide-ranging. Jewish communities were forced to pay high contributions. Their property (mainly shops) was robbed and confiscated. They were forced to work for the occupant, humiliated and beaten. Places of religious worship were destroyed. In the fall of 1939, many synagogues were burnt or demolished. Torah scrolls and Jewish libraries were destroyed. In the western territories of the Second Polish Republic, the “savage” expulsions of Jews already began during the military campaign and they were dislodged from their homes and sent east, to the lands of the General Governorship or to the area occupied by the Soviet Union. Executions began, although it seems that during this period the occupant still looked for some pretext for doing so. This could have been the possession of a weapon (not necessarily a firearm), non-compliance with the occupant’s orders or suspicious behaviour.

The local Germans most often organized in Selbstschutz (Self-defence – in German)³⁾, an organization led by SS officers sent from the Reich cooperated with operational groups of the Security Police and Security Service. In Pomerania, according to the report of the Selbstschutz commander in this area, by the beginning of October 1939, 17,667 men had joined the organization. The document admitted that “the strictest measures had to be taken against 4,247 former Polish citizens”⁴⁾. This euphemism means the murder of the said number of citizens of the Second Polish Republic. There were plenty examples of acts of arbitrariness and the use of circumstances to “settle a score”. The anti-Polish attitude of the local Volksdeutsche was not the norm however. There are known cases of “other Germans” who helped the Poles or prevented repression against them. A Pole pushed by a German from a truck carrying prisoners condemned to execution escaped certain death. In a few cases Selbstschutz members refused to shoot their Polish neighbours. The Volksdeutsche sometimes stood in defence of the arrested, thus saving them from murder⁵⁾. Besides, Poles and Jews were not the only victims of the operational groups; anti-fascist Germans recognized by the Gestapo as “renegades” were also the victims. Even Wehrmacht officers sometimes stood up in the defence of civilians groundlessly executed by operational groups – though not always with the expected effect (Böhler, Mallmann, & Matthäus, 2009: 64 – 65).

Many citizens of the Second Polish Republic were murdered in retaliatory operations whereby the occupant was guided by the principle of collective responsibility. This was the case in Wawer in December 1939, where the Germans, in retaliation for the killing of two German non-commissioned officers from a construction battalion by local criminals, executed 107 Poles and Jews taken at random. Seven survived this execution wounded.

In September 1939, the occupiers already set themselves the task not only of destroying the Polish army, but also of all resistance that citizens of the Second Polish Republic could offer in the future. Thus, from the first days of the war, repression and terror were applied on a large-scale against civilians. The entry of the German armed forces was accompanied by the preventive arrests of hostages among well-known and respected urban residents or randomly chosen people in order to protect themselves against possible resistance. In this way the occupant also wanted to prevent demonstrations or a “Polish uprising” on the anniversary of independence, i.e. 11 November. In accordance with the instructions from Berlin, repression and terror were to involve the intelligentsia above all. This was supposed to be in retaliation for the alleged murder of 58,000 Germans in Poland.

In addition, the officers of the operational groups of the Security Police and Security Service, similarly to the Wehrmacht soldiers and officials of the occupation administration, were influenced by German propaganda which created the myth of 58,000 murdered Germans. Joseph Goebbels, propaganda minister of the

Reich, made many efforts to blame Poland for the outbreak of the war and to depict the Poles as criminals. Hitler, on the other hand, referred to the Poles as animals, further proving that “force is the only thing that works”, which was another incentive for the use of violence as the main tool of the occupation policy (Krol, 2006: chap.7, 8).

In order to destroy the nation’s will to resist, repression – again on the basis of preventive actions and collective responsibility – was directed against the intelligentsia. In Krakow, professors from the Jagiellonian University and the Mining Academy were arrested. They were taken to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. This barbaric behaviour was reported around the world; the Third Reich backed down and most of the professors regained their freedom. However, many of them lost their health or died as a result of the conditions in which they were detained and from disease⁶⁾. Similar actions were carried out by the Gestapo in Lublin where the victims were the professors of the Catholic University of Lublin, as well as in Warsaw and Poznan. In capital of Poland, Germans arrested and murdered the well-respected Mr. Stefan Starzynski, Mayor of Warsaw⁷⁾. This is just one example of the brutal conduct of the occupant.

In the case of the majority of the tens of thousands arrested in the fall of 1939, only immediate family members intervened. Usually unsuccessfully – without even obtaining any information about the fate of their relatives (or receiving evasive information). They were murdered without a verdict or on the basis of an ad hoc judgment of the Gestapo who investigated the case or interrogated the accused, and witnesses, but issued a predetermined verdict. To this day, it is not known how many people were killed at that time. The executions took place in organized provisional camps, forests, and gravel pits. Many of these victims remain – as intended by the occupant – anonymous until today. Documents regarding the execution have not been preserved. The victims were buried in mass nameless graves, and any traces have been deliberately obliterated. When the Red Army approached the occupied Polish territories the Germans excavated the mass graves and burned the bodies, making it impossible in the future not only to identify the victims, but also to determine the number of those murdered (Hoffmann, 2013). Post-war exhumations, historical research and investigations into German crimes often did not determine the names of those murdered, and in many cases only a rough number of victims is known. According to historians’ estimates, in addition to direct warfare in the autumn of 1939 about 40,000 – 50,000 citizens of the Second Polish Republic were murdered.

In November 1939 the operational groups of the Security Police and Security Service were dissolved. However, this did not mean the end of the terror, as their staff created Gestapo outposts in the occupied Polish territories which continued repressive operations. The suffering continued.

NOTES

1. Occupation and resistance in the journal of Hans Frank 1939 – 1945 (Okupacja i ruch oporu w dzienniku Hansa Franka) 1939–1945, compiled by S. Ploski, vol 1, 1939 – 1942, Warsaw 1970, p. 98.
2. C. Dams, M. Stolle, *Die Gestapo. Herrschaft und Terror um Dritten Reich*, München 2013, p. 140; H. Krausnick, H.-H. Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938 – 1942*, Stuttgart 1981, pp. 69, 87.
3. See Ch. Jansen, A. Weckbecker, *Der „Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz“ in Polen 1939/40*, München 1992; *Forgotten executioners of Hitler. Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz in occupied Poland in 1939 – 1940* (Zapomniani kaci Hitlera. Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz w okupowanej Polsce 1939 – 1940). Selected topics, edit. T. Ceran, I. Mazanowska, Bydgoszcz – Gdansk 2016.
4. Autumn 1939. Documentation of the first months of German occupation in Gdansk Pomerania (Jesień 1939. Dokumentacja pierwszych miesięcy okupacji niemieckiej na Pomorzu Gdańskim), comp. J. Sziling, Torun 1989, p. 80.
5. T. Ceran, *Murderers or killers? Wilhelm Papke, Willi Thiess and the crime in Klamry near Chełmno in 1939 in: Forgotten executioners of Hitler. Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz in occupied Poland in 1939-1940* (Mordercy czy zabójcy? Wilhelm Papke, Willi Thiess i zbrodnia w Klamrach koło Chełmna w 1939 , w: Zapomniani kaci Hitlera. Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz w okupowanej Polsce 1939 – 1940). Selected topics, edit. T. Ceran, I. Mazanowska, Bydgoszcz – Gdansk 2016, p. 153.
6. Bolewski, A. Pierzchała, H. (1898). *The fate of Polish scientists in the years 1939-1945. Personal losses* (Losy polskich pracowników nauki w latach 1939 – 1945. Straty osobowe), Wrocław – Warsaw – Krakow, p. 107; H. Pierzchała, *Torn out of the claws of the SS-State. Sonderaktion Krakau 1939 – 1944* (Wyrwani ze szponów Państwa-SS. Sonderaktion Krakau 1939 – 1944), Krakow 1997, pp. 152 – 153, 161 – 162.
7. Bartoszewski, W. (2008). *Warsaw Ring of Death 1939 – 1944. Nazi terror in the occupied capital*, (Warszawski pierścień śmierci 1939 – 1944. Terror hitlerowski w okupowanej stolicy), Warsaw, p. 70; Mankowski, Z. (1992). *Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion in Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion 1940. Action AB on the Polish lands. Materials from the scientific session* (Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion, w: Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion 1940. Akcja AB na ziemiach polskich. Materiały z sesji naukowej) (6 – 7 November 1986), edit. Z. Mankowski, Warsaw, passim.

REFERENCES

- Böhler, J. Mallmann, K.-M. & Matthäus, J. (2009). *Einsatzgruppen in Poland (Einsatzgruppen w Polsce)*. Warsaw.
- Böhler, J. (2011). *Invasion of 1939. Germany against Poland (Najazd 1939. Niemcy przeciw Polsce)*. Krakow.

- Borejsza, J.W. (2016). *Laughable one hundred million Slavs. Around the worldview of Adolf Hitler, (Śmieszne sto milionów Słowian. Wokół światopoglądu Adolfa Hitlera)*. Gdansk.
- Dębski, S. (2007). *Between Berlin and Moscow. German-Soviet relations 1939 – 1941 (Między Berlinem a Moskwą. Stosunki niemiecko-sowieckie 1939 – 1941)*. Warsaw.
- Hoffmann, J.(2013). „Das kann man nicht erzählen“. „Aktion 1005“ – Wie die Nazis die Spuren ihrer Massenmorde in Osteuropa beseitigten. Hamburg.
- Kornat, M. (2012). *Foreign policy of Poland 1938 – 1939. Four decisions of Jozef Beck (Polityka zagraniczna Polski 1938 – 1939. Cztery decyzje Józefa Becka)*. Gdansk.
- Krol, E.C. (2006). *Poland and Poles in the propaganda of National Socialism in Germany 1919 – 1945 (Polska i Polacy w propagandzie narodowego socjalizmu w Niemczech 1919 – 1945)*. Warsaw.
- Żerko, S. (1998). *Polish-German relations 1938 – 1939 (Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938 – 1939)*. Poznan.

✉ **Dr. Marcin Przegietka**

Historical Research Office
Institute of National Remembrance
7, Wołoska St.
02-675 Warsaw, Poland
E-mail: marcin.przegietka@ipn.gov.pl