

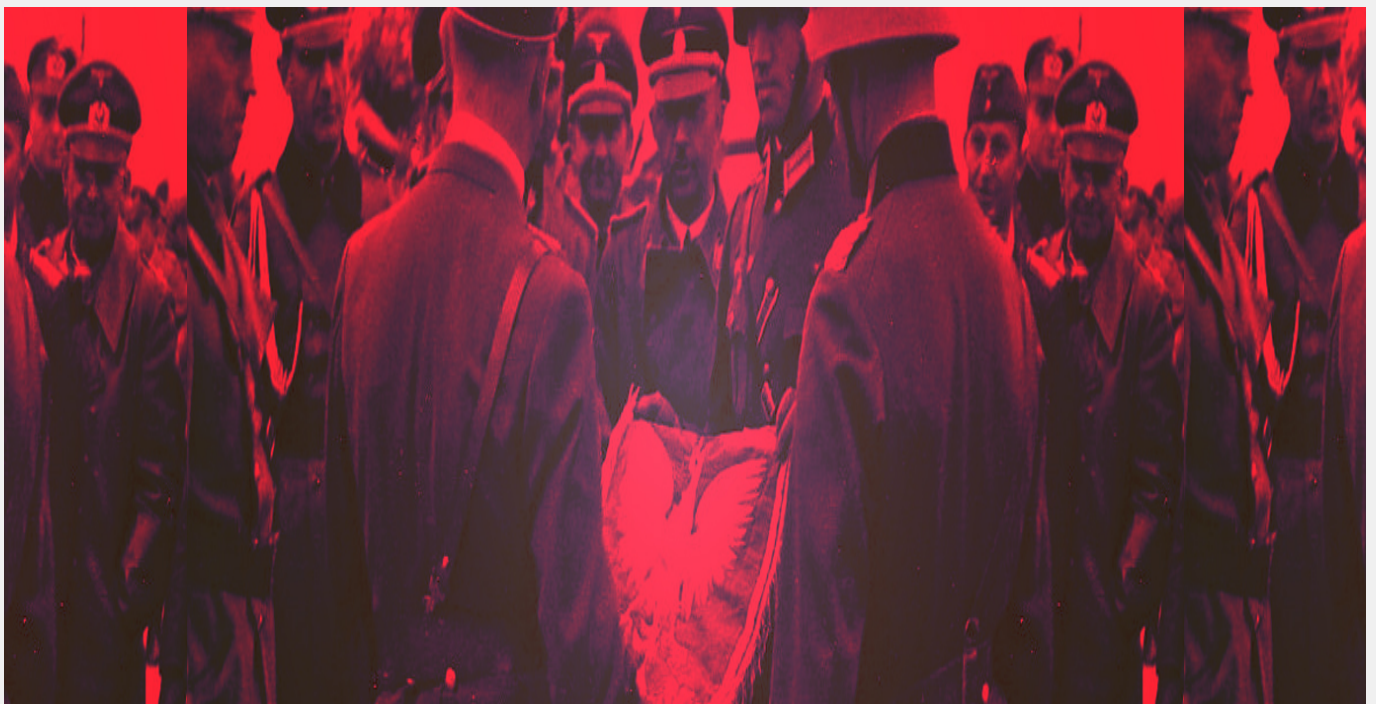
Defensive war 1939

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29.04.2024, 01:07

The Third Reich invasion of Poland and the crimes of German operational groups in the autumn of 1939

The Second World War claimed the lives of about 6 million Polish citizens. 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 proposed Poland to solve the disputed problems in Polish-German relations, Hitler's expectations did not seem particularly excessive. He wanted Poland's consent to incorporate the Free City of Danzig (Wolne Miasto Gdańsk) into the Reich (while maintaining certain economic and transportation rights for Poland), to build an extraterritorial motorway and a railway line through Polish territory (connecting Germany with East Prussia via Polish Pomerania). He also demanded that Poland join the Anti-Comintern Pact against the USSR. In return, Germany offered Poland an extension of the German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact of 26 January 1934 and inviolability of borders. Needless to say, Warsaw's consent to subordinating its policy to Berlin could have resulted in handing over the reins of Polish foreign policy to Hitler. The lack of self-reliance in this field would undoubtedly lead to the loss of independence. There was no guarantee that Hitler would keep to the terms of the agreement and would not press any further demands. As evidenced by the history of relations between the Third Reich and other states, violations of agreements and the policy of *faits accomplis* were permanent elements of Hitler's policy. An example of this may be the annexation of the Czech Republic in March 1939, a few months after the Munich Agreement in which Germany obtained the Sudetenland, at that time allegedly satisfying its territorial claims.

Surprised by the German proposal, Polish diplomacy gave their answer in early 1939. The German offer had not been accepted, however, the Poles declared their readiness to talk. For Hitler, however, it was far too little: he considered his offer addressed to Warsaw not only as one-off but also non-negotiable [1]. 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 got in the way of German expansion both towards the West (because it was bound by the alliance with France and received guarantees from Great Britain) and the East (rejecting the repeatedly submitted proposals for a joint march on Moscow). Therefore, its elimination became the goal of the Third Reich.

On 28 April 1939, in his speech in the Reichstag Hitler terminated the Polish-German Pact of Non-Aggression of 26 January 1934. [2]. Obviously, the negotiations conducted in the spring and summer of 1939 by Berlin were only meant to turn the eyes of the whole world on "peaceful" attempts to resolve the conflict, while Hitler was already determined to start the war.

His resolve in this respect is unquestionable. 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. Even if the war in the West breaks out, the destruction of Poland is at the forefront"[3]. He ordered them to conduct the war with "the greatest brutality". He cynically declared that he would provide an excuse for the German invasion: "Winners will not be asked if they were telling the truth" [4]. The excuse provided was a provocation in Gliwice, where on 31 August 1939 Polish "insurgents" allegedly took over the radio station and made a radio announcement 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 brought to the scene [5].

The Third Reich invasion on Poland, however, would be at least risky without diplomatic preparation. It was particularly important for Berlin what position Moscow would take in this matter. The invasion would certainly be facilitated by a favourable, or at least neutral, attitude of the Soviet Union. This was achieved on 24 August 1939 by the conclusion of the non-aggression pact between the Third Reich and the USSR (backdated to 23 August), which went down in history as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, named after the Foreign Minister of the Reich, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov (in many countries this pact is also known as the Hitler-Stalin pact). The secret protocol attached to it provided for the division of spheres of influence between the two totalitarian powers in Central and Eastern Europe, including the partition of Polish

lands. Earlier, the alliance of two states representing extremely different and hostile ideologies seemed unthinkable. Their joint action against Poland seemed equally unlikely [6].

When Hitler struck Poland on 1 September 1939, Stalin delayed any action until the outcome of the war campaign seemed already decided (on 9 September Molotov extended premature congratulations on the seizure of Warsaw by the Wehrmacht to the German Ambassador in Moscow [7], in fact the German army entered the Polish capital on 1 October, after the defenders surrendered). The Red Army entered Polish lands on 17 September 1939, but only the Third Reich was considered an aggressor in this war.

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

Following Hitler's order, the war campaign was conducted extremely brutally, the invading German army not sparing the civilian population, and already then, and not from 1941, the Third Reich conducted a total war, directed also against civilians. In the wake of the entering of the Wehrmacht divisions in Poland, at the beginning of September 1939, operational groups of the Security Police and Security Service appeared, consisting of members of the SS, Gestapo and other German police formations. Although they were many times less numerous than the Wehrmacht invaders, and amounted to about 2,700 officers, it turned out that they were extremely dangerous. Acting in the rear of

the front, they carried out mass arrests and executions of the defenseless civilian population [8].

At the end of August 1939, five operational groups of the Security Police and Security Service were organized and concentrated near the Polish border. Their activities were coordinated by Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Security Police and Security Service, close associate of Heinrich Himmler, head of the German police and the Reichsführer of the SS. Right after the start of the German invasion of Poland it turned out that the number of operational groups was insufficient. As a result on 3 September, at the order of Himmler, an additional operational group for special tasks was created, and 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 Gdańsk, which, in turn, operated in Pomerania. In addition to these units created specifically in connection with the attack on Poland, also the Ordnungspolizei squads, including police battalions, were sent to occupied lands [9].

The task of the operational groups was to "fight the enemy elements of the Reich and the Germans in the enemy territory in the rear of the fighting units". Such a general and enigmatic command left the commanders considerable freedom of interpretation. On 7 September, Heydrich, overseeing operational groups' activities, ordered to clear the Polish lands of "leadership layer" and Jews. This undertaking was called "clearing the foreground", and in further directives it was specified that it was about the removal of "Jews, intelligentsia, clergy and landowners" [10].

The operational groups were equipped with lists of citizens of the Second Polish Republic, whom the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin considered dangerous. The lists were drafted on the basis of information coming from various sources (from German consulates and organizations in Poland and German informers residing there). After entering Polish lands by the Germans, these lists were supplemented on the basis of documents found by administrative and police

authorities alongside with archives of political, social and veteran organizations. They became the basis for arrests of people who were ascribed anti-German attitudes. They included political and social activists, people of culture, clergy, people employed in the security authorities (police, intelligence services) broadly understood intelligentsia (teachers, representatives of liberal professions), members of veterans organizations and participants of the Silesian uprisings (1919, 1920, 1921) and the Wielkopolska uprising (1918/1919). In the territories incorporated into the Reich, the "dangerous element" also included Poles from the lands of the former Russian Partition [11].

No proscription lists were necessary in the case of Jews, who had been brutally and cruelly treated from the beginning. The basis of persecution was their origin; no difference was made due to political involvement or "anti-German" activity. Repression of the Jewish population was widespread. Jewish communities were forced to pay high contributions, property of their members (mainly shops) were robbed and confiscated. They were forced to work for the benefit of the occupant, being often humiliated and beaten. The places of religious worship was destroyed. In the autumn of 1939, many synagogues were burnt down or demolished. Torah scrolls and Jewish libraries would be destroyed. In the western lands of the Second Polish Republic, even before the end of the German invasion, "wild" expulsions of Jews were begun, who were dislodged from their homes and sent to the 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 was still looking for some pretext. It could be a 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 (German - Self-defense) [12], an organization led by the SS officers sent from the Reich, cooperated with operational groups of the Security Police and the 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 stated that "the strictest measures had to be taken against 4,247 former Polish citizens" [13]. This euphemism means the murder of the said number of citizens of the Second Polish Republic. Acts of outlawry and taking the opportunity to compensate for "private bills" were not infrequent. The anti-Polish attitude of the local Volksdeutsche was not the norm, however. Some "other Germans" helped Poles or prevented repression against them. A case was recorded when a Pole escaped death, having been pushed by a German from a truck carrying Poles arrested to be shot. In a few cases the Selbstschutz members refused to shoot Polish neighbours. The intercession by the Volksdeutsche for the arrested sometimes allowed them to be saved from murder [14]. Besides, among the victims of the operational groups were not only Poles and Jews, but also anti-fascist Germans, recognized by the Gestapo as "renegades". The Wehrmacht officers sometimes stood up for the civilians to be groundlessly executed by operational groups, although not always with the expected effect [15].

Many citizens of the Second Polish Republic were murdered in retaliatory actions, the occupant being guided by the principle of collective responsibility. In December 1939, in Wawer, in retaliation for killing two German non-commissioned officers from a construction battalion by local criminals, 107 accidentally captured Poles and Jews were arrested and executed. Seven of the wounded survived this execution.

Already in September 1939, the occupiers set themselves the task not only of destroying the Polish army, but also of all resistance which citizens of the Second Polish Republic could mount in the future. Thus, from the first days of the war, repression and terror encompassed the civilians on a large scale. The entering of the German armed forces was accompanied by preventive arrests of hostages among well-known and respected urban residents or accidentally chosen people, in order to counteract possible resistance. In this way, the occupant also wanted to prevent demonstrations or the "Polish uprising" on the anniversary of Poland's regaining independence – 11 November. In

accordance with the instructions from Berlin, repression and terror were to embrace, above all, intelligentsia. It was supposed to be a retaliation for the alleged murder of 58,000 Germans in Poland.

Furthermore, officers of the operational groups of the Security Police and Security Service, as well as soldiers of the Wehrmacht and officials of the occupation administration, were under the influence of German propaganda, which had created the myth of 58,000 murdered Germans. Joseph Goebbels, the Reich propaganda minister, made numerous efforts to blame Poland for the outbreak of the war and to depict Poles as criminals. Hitler, in turn, referred to the Poles as animals, proving that they responded only to force, which was yet another incentive for using violence as the main tool of the occupation policy [16].

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, insidious arrests of professors of the Jagiellonian University and the Mining Academy were made. The arrested professors were taken to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Thanks to the international publicity that this barbaric behaviour gained, the Third Reich buckled and most of the professors regained their freedom. Nevertheless, many of them lost their health or died due to the conditions in which they were held and the resulting diseases [17]. Similar actions were carried out by the Gestapo in Lublin, this time aimed at the professors of the Catholic University of Lublin, Warsaw and Poznań. The President of the city, Stefan Starzyński, who enjoyed the authority and respect of the inhabitants, was arrested and murdered in the Polish capital [18]. This is just one example showing the brutality of the occupant.

In the case of most of the tens of thousands arrested in the fall of 1939, however, no one intervened except for their immediate family. Usually to no avail - without even getting any information about the fate of loved ones (or receiving only evasive information). They were murdered without a judgment or on the basis of a summary court of

the Gestapo, which dealt with the investigation of the case or interrogated the accused and witnesses, but issued a predetermined verdict. It is still unknown how many people were killed at that time. The executions took place in makeshift camps, forests and gravel pits. Many of the victims remain - as intended by the occupier - anonymous to this day. Execution documents have not survived, the victims were buried in mass, nameless graves, the tracks being blurred deliberately. When the Red Army approached the occupied Polish lands, the Germans would dig up mass graves and burn down the corpses, thus preventing not only the identification of the victims, but also the assessment of their number [19]. Post-war exhumations, historical research and investigations into German crimes often did not allow the names of those murdered to be determined, and the number of victims is only approximate in many cases. According to historians' estimates, in addition to direct military operations in the autumn of 1939, about 40,000 to 50,000 citizens of the Second Polish Republic were murdered.

In November 1939, operational groups of the Security Police and the Security Service were dissolved. This did not mean, however, the end of terror. Their staff formed the Gestapo outposts in occupied Polish territories, and continued to carry out repressive actions. Gehenna continued.

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