

## Poles under German Occupation

# The Situation and Attitudes of Poles during the German Occupation

The Polish population found itself in a very difficult situation during the very first days of the war, both in the territories incorporated into the Third Reich and in The General Government. The policy of the German occupier was primarily aimed at the liquidation of the Polish intellectual elite and leadership, and at the subsequent enslavement, maximal exploitation, and Germanization of Polish society. Terror was conducted on a mass and general scale. Executions, resettlements, arrests, deportations to camps, and street round-ups were a constant element of the everyday life of Poles during the war.

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Food rationing was imposed in cities and towns, with food coupons covering about one-third of a person's daily needs. Levies — obligatory, regular deliveries of selected produce — were introduced in the countryside. Farmers who failed to deliver their levy were subject to severe repressions, including the death penalty. Devaluation and difficulty with finding employment were the reason for most Poles' poverty and for the everyday problems in obtaining basic products. The occupier also limited access to healthcare. The birthrate fell dramatically while the incidence of infectious diseases increased significantly. Many Poles were deported to forced labor in the Third Reich and some Polish children were subjected to Germanization.

During the war Poles were practically deprived of access to education. On the territories incorporated into the Third Reich the Germans abolished the Polish school system and prohibited the use of the Polish language. Only a small number of Polish children and young people had access to elementary education (of course, in German). High schools and institutions of higher learning in The General Government were closed and only elementary schools and some vocational schools continued to operate. Many of Poland's cultural, art, and scientific institutions were closed while their collections, some of which were unique, were destroyed or looted. Polish economic, sports and

most local government institutions were also liquidated.

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By Hitler's decrees of October 8 and 12, 1939, western and northern Poland were incorporated into the German Reich. Part of Silesia (including the city of Katowice and the town of Oświęcim renamed "Auschwitz" by the Germans) was incorporated into Provinz Oberschlesien. The region of Greater Poland (including the cities of Poznań and Łódź and the town of Chełmno renamed "Kulmhof" by the Germans) was transformed into Reichsgau Wartheland. Much of the Polish northern territory and the Free City of Gdańsk were transformed into Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreußen. The Ciechanów area (northern Masovia) was named Regierungsbezirk Zichenau and was incorporated into Provinz Ostpreußen. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union (June 22, 1941), further Polish prewar territories were incorporated into the Reich: the Białystok area was named Bezirk Białystok and was subordinated to Provinz Ostpreußen.

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The Poles under German occupation did not accept the loss of their independent state. 'Service for Poland's Victory' (Służba Zwycięstwu Polski, SZP) was established as early as late September 1939. This was the first underground military organization whose aim was to continue the struggle against the German aggressor. Soon other organizations appeared. They based their structures and were founded primarily upon pre-war political and army milieux or veteran organizations. In December 1939 the Service for Poland's Victory transformed into the Armed Combat Union (Związek Walki Zbrojnej, ZWZ), and at the beginning of 1942 into the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK). The Home Army quite successfully integrated the underground organizations which had operated separately. During its peak period the organization included about 380,000 members. It was the most numerous and the best organized underground army in occupied Europe. It even had its own armament production plants. Other organizations were e.g. the National Armed Forces (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, NSZ), the Peasants' Battalions (Bataliony Chłopskie), and the People's Guard (later People's Army) (Gwardia [Armia] Ludowa, GL, AL).

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Poles adopted various stances during the German occupation, from fighting the occupier, active resistance (e.g., clandestine education, helping escapees), passive resistance (e.g., German regulations' boycott), through forced loyalty (e.g., railway employees and peasants) and voluntary loyalty (e.g., volunteers for labor in the Reich), adaptation to the occupation-period situation (e.g., civil administration employees), to collaboration (e.g., editors and journalists of the Polish-language

press printed by the occupier) and treason (e.g., Gestapo informers). But it should be stressed that the negative postures had only an individual dimension. The Polish authorities both at home and abroad unconditionally rejected the possibility of cooperation with the occupier.

Separate space should be devoted to the Poles' attitude toward the Holocaust during the war. During the interwar period Poland was the country with the largest Jewish population in Europe. It is estimated that on September 1, 1939 there were about 3,470,000 Jews in Poland (about 10 percent of Poland's population). The World War II period (especially the 1942–1944 period) was a time of organized, mass-scale extermination of the Jewish population, which was conducted to a large extent on occupied Polish territory. Witnessing the tragedy of the Jewish people, the Poles adopted various attitudes, from helping them at the risk of their own lives, helping for money, indifference, or finally trying to become rich or survive through blackmail, denunciation, or simply murder. Evaluation of those postures and presentation of this issue in the right proportions is still one of the most controversial and emotionally-charged issues in contemporary historical discourse on Polish-Jewish relations in the 20th century.

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The two most common forms of help the Poles provided to the Jews were: organized help provided by the Council for Aid to the Jews (Rada Pomocy Żydom, "Żegota") set up in 1942; and individual help. The Council tried to organize help in the whole country in consultation with the Polish civilian authorities' underground structures. It provided money, medicines, and food (there were even special groups which secretly brought such aid into the ghettos), organized shelters for hiding Jews, and forged documents. In Warsaw alone "Żegota" took care of about 4,000 people, including several hundred Jewish children. Representatives of the Catholic Church also actively helped the Jews. Some found shelter in cloisters while others were issued forged certificates of baptism.

Poland was one of just a few countries in occupied Europe where helping Jews was punished by death. Furthermore, not only those who actively helped the Jews (by hiding or transporting them or by selling them food) were subject to capital punishment. Those who knew where they were hiding and did not inform the German authorities also risked their lives. The rule of collective responsibility was also implemented in such cases: the punishment was inflicted not only on the helper, but also on his/her family and neighbors. Hence, it should be stressed even more that in fact a whole lot of often anonymous, common people who listened to their conscience and decided to risk their lives

and help the Jews played a paramount role in rescuing the Jews. It should stressed again that the Poles constitute the most numerous group (over 6,000) among those awarded with the Righteous among the Nations Medal. Today it is estimated that there were 2.9–3 million Polish Jewish victims of the Holocaust and that the number of saved Jews amounted to ca. 30,000–35,000.

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Prejudices against Jews common in certain milieux of prewar Polish society did not disappear in the face of the occupation-period's total annihilation of the Jewish population in Poland. Moreover, the occupier tried to intensify that hostile sentiment not only through far-ranging anti-Jewish propaganda, but also by construction of a system of gratifications for those who helped capture escaping or hiding Jews. Some Poles demanded ransom for hiding Jews or denounced them to the Gestapo. Persons who extorted money from the Jews or their Polish helpers in return for not denouncing them were colloquially called szmalcownicy – which sounds like 'slime-bag'. Some hiding or escaping Jews were killed, usually for fear that the German authorities would find them or for fear of hostile neighbors or greediness. The authorities of the Polish Underground State treated all such incidents as acts of collaboration (treason) and severely punished them as such. This included the death penalty.

The creation of highly complex underground civilian government structures (aside from the military's underground structures) was a world-scale phenomenon. The Delegate of the Polish Government in Exile was those structures' highest representative in occupied Warsaw. He recognized the authority of the Polish government which during the war operated in exile in London. There was also the underground administration (with a number of departments responsible for particular spheres of public life, similarly as during peacetime), a judiciary, underground press and books, and a system of clandestine education. The military and civilian structures in the occupied country made up the Polish Underground State, which the Germans never managed to destroy.

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In the Polish territory incorporated into the Reich the occupier tried to implement a more general Germanization policy, e.g., through introduction of the [Ethnic] German People's List (Deutsche Volksliste). The list divided the inhabitants of the territory into four groups. Category I and II were ethnic Germans, who acknowledged their German origin and actively supported Germany. The Poles whom the German authorities believed could possibly be Germanized might be given category III or IV.

The German occupier's intensive pressure (especially in Upper Silesia and in Pomerania) combined with a wide spectrum of repressions for refusal made many Poles sign the Volksliste, which almost always involved enlistment into the Wehrmacht or obligatory service in other German military formations.

*Jan Daniluk*



[Arthur Greiser - Reich Governor of Reichsgau Wartheland. \(BArch\) Arthur Greiser - Reich Governor of Reichsgau Wartheland. \(BArch\)](#)



[Hans Frank - Governor General of the occupied Polish territory \(not incorporated into the Reich\). \(IPN\) Hans Frank - Governor General of the occupied Polish territory \(not incorporated into the Reich\). \(IPN\)](#)



[Fritz Bracht - Oberpräsident of the Upper Silesia Province. \(IPN\) Fritz Bracht - Oberpräsident of the Upper Silesia Province. \(IPN\)](#)



[German troops marching in the streets of Warsaw, October 1, 1939 \(IPN\)](#) [German troops marching in the streets of Warsaw, October 1, 1939 \(IPN\)](#)



[The Germans destroying the Kraków monument of Adam Mickiewicz, one of the most important Polish poets, August 17, 1940. \(IPN\)](#) [The Germans destroying the Kraków monument of Adam Mickiewicz, one of the most important Polish poets, August 17, 1940. \(IPN\)](#)



[Transport of forcibly resettled Polish population in Łódź \(IPN\)](#) [Transport of forcibly resettled Polish population in Łódź \(IPN\)](#)



[German and Soviet soldiers in Brześć by the Bug river during a parade, which was a symbol of German-Soviet brotherhood-in-arms, September 22, 1939 \(IPN\)](#) [German and Soviet soldiers in Brześć by the Bug river during a parade, which was a symbol of German-Soviet brotherhood-in-arms, September 22, 1939 \(IPN\)](#)



[Part of the Polish capital, Warsaw, destroyed in German bombings, September 1939. \(IPN\)](#)



[Albert Forster - Reichsstatthalter and Gauleiter of Danzig-West Prussia since 1939. \(IPN\)](#) [Albert Forster - Reichsstatthalter and Gauleiter of Danzig-West Prussia since 1939. \(IPN\)](#)



[An SS and police parade in Kraków on the first anniversary of the General Government, October 25, 1940 \(BArch\)](#) [An SS and police parade in Kraków on the first anniversary of the General Government, October 25, 1940 \(BArch\)](#)



[German soldiers removing the Polish national emblem from one of the offices in Gdynia, September 1939 \(BArch\)](#)



[Erich Koch – Oberpräsident of the East Prussia Province. \(BArch\)](#) [Erich Koch – Oberpräsident of the East Prussia Province. \(BArch\)](#)

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## Gallery

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