“Polenfeldzug”: Nazi Crimes during the War against Poland in 1939 and their Place in German Memory

Stephan Lehnstaedt
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6894-9587

Abstract

German crimes committed in Poland during the years 1939–1945 have not been forgotten in present-day Germany. But the so-called “Polenfeldzug” plays a strangely marginal role in memory. This is surprising insofar as it not only represented a drastic break from previous policy towards Poland, (Lehnstaedt, 2017) but also constituted the “prelude to the war of annihilation,” as Jochen Böhler termed it (Böhler, 2006; Böhler, 2009b). A war of annihilation not from 1941 but already in 1939. The Second World War was a crime against humanity from its very beginning.

The present article aims to shed some light on two aspects of the invasion of 1939. The first concerns the novelty of the German approach, that is the crimes committed in Poland and their prehistory, and the German memory of these events. It is, however, not on the German historiography of the occupation until 1945, but on its memory. Thus, while it does deal with the communication of research results as such, it shows that these are still widely lacking. But especially with Poland being a neighbor, NATO ally and partner in the EU, it is high time that Germans learned more about the countries’ mutual history.

First, it should be noted that the German image of Poland underwent a change in the inter-war period. This image was never really positive, however with Poland as one of the victors of the First World War, which acquired (or in fact got back) some parts of Prussia, it deteriorated significantly. The struggle for Upper Silesia and the general feeling of being robbed by the Poles were also contributory factors (Jaworski, 1984). Astonishingly, the stance changed immediately after 1933: the Nazis admired Piłsudski as the victor over Bolshevism in 1920 and as an anti-Communist (Lehnstaedt, 2019, pp. 171–173). They hoped to make Poland a junior partner of sorts in the crusade against their ideological arch-enemy and both countries' common adversary, the Soviet Union. Obviously, this did not happen. Although in 1938 Poland was happy to receive the Teschen area following the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia under the Munich Agreement (Żerko, 2013), no concessions were made in Warsaw. The Nazis were furious and intensified their propaganda aimed at regaining the "lost" areas of Western Poland. They declared the Poles enemies – Slavic subhumans. Instead of fighting Moscow together with Warsaw, in August 1939 Hitler allied himself against Poland with Stalin, with whom he signed the notorious Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Its goal was the division of Poland. Immediately thereafter, the Nazis launched their attack on the country, now safe in the knowledge that following victory Germany would not have to fight against both the Soviet Union and France but "only" against the latter. Thus, a two-front war would be avoided, especially as everyone in Berlin expected Poland to be defeated rapidly. With this, Hitler intended to achieve two of his main goals, which had also been heavily emphasized in propaganda: the revision of the Versailles Treaty of 1919, and Lebensraum (living space) in the East.

Alleged Polish border violations and attacks were staged as an immediate cause of war, the most infamous of which took place at the radio station of Gleiwitz (present-day Gliwice) and was conducted by SS men disguised as Polish civilians. In addition, German media repeatedly stressed the purported mistreatment of the German minority in Poland (the so-called *Volksdeutschen*) (Bergen, 2008), to which assistance simply had to be given. In this way Berlin could present the war as justified. Nevertheless, in September 1939 Germans remained by and large sceptical. But not because they had any sympathy for Poland. The act of revenge in the east was not controversial, however it was sobering that France and England both declared war and intended to help Poland as their ally. And in spite of everything, this worried Germany (Lehnstaedt, 2014). While, therefore, the victory over Poland was welcomed and celebrated, real euphoria – and the peak of Hitler's popularity – came only in the summer of 1940 with victory over France.

Germany began its attack on Poland on schedule at 4:45, when the training ship "Schleswig-Holstein," moored in the port of Gdańsk, opened fire on the Polish stronghold of Westerplatte. The Free City of Gdańsk, which was officially under the protection of the League of Nations and did not form a part the Reich but from 1938 was nevertheless governed by the NSDAP and Gauleiter Albert Forster, was considered by the Nazis as further evidence of Germany's inadmissible treatment in the wake of the First World War. The Westerplatte peninsula, located at the harbor exit, was under direct Polish control, however its strategic importance was negligible, and thus the attack had a predominantly symbolic significance (Stjernfelt & Böhme, 1979).

Interestingly, just a few minutes earlier – the exact time is difficult to establish, with some proposing 4:37 – the West Polish town of Wieluń was bombed. This assault was not symbolic but rather a blatant attack on civilians, as there were no soldiers in the city itself. They became the first non-military victims of the Second World War. There had been no declaration of war, and later on the same day Hitler held his infamous speech in the Reichstag, stating: "This night for the first time Polish regular soldiers fired on our own territory. Since 5:45 a.m. we have been returning the fire." Although this was a flagrant lie, it nevertheless showed that in 1939 the Nazis did not want to be seen as officially launching a war of aggression.

But that is exactly what it was. Moreover, it was a war targeting the civilian population. Already in 1939, thus preceding the development of events in 1941 in the Soviet Union, the invading Wehrmacht was followed by units of the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and SD, seven in total. Heinrich Himmler wanted them to "fight at the rear of the vanguard against all elements hostile to Germany and Germans" (Mallmann et al., 2008, p. 16). Himmler also aimed to achieve the "destruction" of Polish statehood. The Einsatzgruppen therefore focused their sights on Poles more than Jews. Today, the numbers of their victims can only be estimated. By the spring of 1940, well over 70,000 people were believed to have been murdered under the Intelligenzaktion ("intelligentsia action" or "intelligentsia mass shootings"). Between spring and summer 1940, another 7,500 people died as part of the Außerordentliche Befriedigungsaktion (extraordinary operation of pacification). These campaigns were supplemented by the "special actions," which were aimed in particular against university professors and resulted in several hundred victims. The Germans had specifically targeted the ecclesiastical, political and intellectual elites of Poland because they wanted to eliminate the country's leadership and nip any resistance in the bud.

Of course, among all these dead were Jews, and there were also anti-Semitic atrocities, but in those early days of the war ethnic (Catholic)

Poles made up more than 80% of the victims. The systematic annihilation of the Jews did not begin until 1941. Although they were already viewed as enemies and considered dangerous in 1939, the greatest threat seemed to be posed by those Poles whom Berlin had identified as potential organizers of the resistance.

The SS Einsatzgruppen were not the only murderers. Wehrmacht soldiers, too, carried out repeated massacres of civilians, for example in Częstochowa on 4 September 1939, a day after the city fell to the Germans, when soldiers of the 42nd Infantry Regiment became involved in an exchange of fire with what they believed to be partisans. Although the circumstances of this skirmish were not exactly clear, it resulted in a massacre which started when some 10,000 of the city's residents were rounded up in the market square and forced to lie face down. Men who had razors or penknives on their persons were taken aside and shot. According to German statements, three women and 96 men died that day, which is known in history as "Bloody Monday." However, an exhumation ordered by the city's German mayor in February 1940 led to the uncovery of 227 bodies (Böhler, 2006, pp. 98–107).

This is one of many examples. Propaganda had schooled the German soldier to view the Poles as cunning. Accordingly, the Landsers were quite nervous and eager to shoot without any real reason (Brewing, 2016, pp. 144–148 and 157 ff.; Böhler, 2006, pp. 33–38) – not least because they were fighting a supposedly just war against a cowardly and dangerous enemy who had inflicted considerable harm on Germany. Again and again, therefore, Polish prisoners of war – men who had already surrendered – were murdered. And the 'reason' behind this was they were continuing resistance behind the front or despite the official capitulation of their army. The former was, of course, permitted by land warfare regulations, however the German interpretation was to regard all soldiers engaged in warfare behind the front line as irregular combatants.

In Western Poland, members of the German minority became perpetrators, with the Nazi supporters among them joining the Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz. Immediately after the withdrawal of the Polish Army, more than one hundred thousand men started terrorizing and murdering their Polish neighbors – people whom they knew very well. Not all victims have been identified, and it is not always possible to determine whether the Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz was the perpetrator, or whether these paramilitaries acted together with units of the SS and Wehrmacht. Nevertheless, the Selbstschutz was responsible for well over 10,000 civilian murders, and committed nearly 400 massacres. This number does not include those killed on "Bromberg Blood Sunday," which was a retaliatory action for the murder of over 400 members of the German minority on 3/4 September 1939. The victors took a bloody revenge and massacred some 3,000 Poles in Bromberg (Bydgoszcz)

and the surrounding area alone, while many were deported to concentration camps.[1]

There are many more examples of German crimes committed in Poland during the first weeks of the war. The conflict brought with it destruction, hunger, terror and the displacement of civilians, who also fell victim to organized military violence. A great many Polish towns were bombed that September, with Warsaw experiencing the full brunt of a comprehensive bombing campaign. The Polish military was fundamentally unable to oppose the numerically and, above all, technically superior Wehrmacht, despite fighting with immense courage and determination. And on 17 September, when defeat was imminent, the Red Army invaded from the east, thus sealing the fate of the Second Polish Republic. In consequence, Hitler and Stalin divided Poland among themselves. The *status quo* remained in force until the summer of 1941, when Germany abrogated the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and attacked the Soviet Union.

*

As mentioned in the introduction, Jochen Böhler, the leading German researcher of the invasion of Poland, described the German method of warfare as essentially a "prelude to the war of annihilation." While this description may be exaggerated as regards the actions of the Wehrmacht alone – despite all the brutal excesses – it holds very much true for the Einsatzgruppen. Already on 17 October 1939, Hitler explicitly demanded from Heinrich Himmler an "ethnic battle [*Volkstumskampf*] that no longer has legal ties" (Broszat, 1965, p. 24). Hitler and his subordinates aimed at the destruction of the Polish nation, even if this did not entail killing all the Poles. However, in the racist ideology of National Socialism it was completely clear that a Slavic population was at most be allowed to play the role of servants to the German settlers in the East. And since Heinrich Himmler was the *Reichskomissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums*, this meant that the *ss* was also responsible for Germanization.

While in 1939 the criteria of a genocidal policy, as defined by the United Nations in 1948, were fulfilled, at the time it was applied primarily to ethnic Poles, not Jews. This recognition of the criminal nature of German warfare since 1939 – in other words right from the beginning of the conflict – has matured late in Germany, if at all. In many cases, there is still talk of the *Polenfeldzug*, which corresponds to the Nazi wording. Of course, there is nothing to be said per se against historical terminology, but this

1 For a German survey, cf. Markus Krzoska (Krzoska, 2012). For *Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz*, cf. Christian Weckbecker and Arno Jansen (Weckbecker & Jansen, 1992).

term conveys a certain triviality, for one is not speaking about the Second World War but 'only' about the 'campaign against Poland'. Neither is it fitting, in this sense, to speak of the 'outbreak of war', because the war did not just break out as it were, but began with the German attack, without any Polish participation or co-responsibility.

Fortunately, at least labelling this war "the 18-days campaign [*Feldzug der 18 Tage*]" is now no longer widespread; the term was also used by the Nazis to give linguistic emphasis to the rapidity of their victory. The aim here was to stress that the war had ended after a mere 18 days (and at the same time that the Soviet Union launched its attack only when Germany had already won). The latter aspect cannot be completely dismissed, and indeed it was clear before the invasion of the Red Army that Poland had lost, however fighting continued until 6 October. Thus, the Wehrmacht abbreviated its war to a short adventure in the East.

Indeed, 1 September 1939 marked the beginning of the Second World War. From this day until 8 May 1945, there was continuous fighting, death and destruction in Europe. The fact that the first part of the war was and continues to be more important in Poland than in Germany cannot come as a surprise, for it was just one of many theatres of war for Germany and just one of a host of locations for the committal of crimes. Nevertheless, the lack of research into and commemoration of these first six weeks of the conflict in Germany is surprising. If we include a study on the assault on Westerplatte, only three monographic studies concerning the military history of this part of the war have actually been published in Germany after 1945; these are supplemented with some congratulatory reports that came out immediately following the Nazi victory, and histories of individual German units, which were printed after 1945 (Stjernfelt & Böhme, 1979; Elble, 1975; Schindler, 1971).[2] There are only four German monographs devoted to the crimes of the Wehrmacht and the Einsatzgruppen, three of which were written with the participation of Jochen Böhler, who has also published a collection of sources on these atrocities (Böhler, 2006; Böhler, 2009a; Mallmann et al., 2008; Lehnstaedt & Böhler, 2013; Weitbrecht, 2001).

And that's about it. Yes, there are journal articles, and there are also studies that investigate September 1939 in the wider context of German rule in Poland, but it is nevertheless obvious that German historiography has largely ignored the invasion. It is significant that there are probably more German studies on the Bydgoszcz Bloody Sunday (Krzoska, 2012) – the Polish killings of some 400 ethnic Germans! – than on the tens of thousands of murders committed by Germans themselves. Most, but by no means all, of these works appeared in the 1950s–70s, and usually did not

2 See also Christoph Kleßmann (Kleßmann, 1989). For a reference to Nazi books, cf. Böhler, 2006.

deal with crimes committed in Poland, or attempted to relativize them. This met with efforts at criminal persecution, for example in 1949,when Erich von Manstein, who had been Chief of Staff of Army Group South in 1939, was tried and sentenced to 18 years of imprisonment for war crimes, however not for crimes committed in Poland – which seemed to confirm the legend of a clean war (Böhler, 2015, p. 362).

At least in the 21st century we may observe a change in this regard, for German crimes and the murderous character of the first weeks of the Second World War are no longer disputed as fact and are accepted as established knowledge. But it is questionable whether this is more broadly known. Yet again, it was Jochen Böhler who made the pioneering effort with the German-Polish exhibition "Immense Fortitude" [*Größte Härte*] (Böhler, 2005). The exhibition presented German crimes committed in Poland during the first weeks of the war, bringing them to the attention of a wider audience for the first time. It was a remarkable success, and was shown at 22 locations in Germany in the years 2005–2011. Nevertheless, the National Socialist narrative still dominates the minds of most people: Hitler's speech "Since 5:45 a.m. we have been returning the fire"; the staged photograph of German soldiers tearing down the border barrier in Sopot; the raid on the radio station in Gliwice – which we have already mentioned was staged; and the bombardment of Westerplatte by "Schleswig-Holstein."

In September 2019, President Steinmeier visited Wieluń and Warsaw. Without a doubt, this is a strong and important symbol of foreign policy, however its impact on commemoration in Germany remains to be seen, and will depend heavily on its reception by the media. In any case, this will be a different event than the meeting of Angela Merkel, Donald Tusk and Vladimir Putin in Gdańsk in 2009. Apart from these efforts, Germany is having a hard time with 1 September. In 1957, the GDR had declared this date as "Anti-War Day," thus causing additional defensive reactions in the West. The date quickly became a ritualized remembrance of "the" World War and of general contemplation against war and military conflicts; the specific event and the crimes by which it was accompanied did not make it into the broader consciousness.

This also is true for historiography. For although Germany commemorated the 80th anniversary in 2019, not one historical conference was held in the country on this occasion. There were individual events, and specifically the Berlin memorial sites were active; for example, the memorial site *House of the Wannsee Conference* memorial site published a volume of German war memoirs and diaries from September 1939 (Hammerle et al., 2019). These showed the perspectives of German soldiers and were used to perform a pictorial and verbal analysis of their negative, hostile view of the Poles. But while it is important to link such (mis)perceptions with the crimes, it seems doubtful that these insights will become common knowledge any time soon.

To this day, the war against Poland is widely regarded in Germany as a sort of prelude to the "real" war that began in 1941 in the Soviet Union (Böhler, 2015). Because only then did the Reich's own losses rise, with Blitzkrieg victories ceasing to be the order of the day, while the German civilian population was actually hit by the war. By contrast, the invasion of Poland seems a small matter, rarely worth mentioning and hardly comparable to the later horrors of the "real" global war – the prime example here being Stalingrad, which still receives a lot of media attention. The attack on Gdańsk has been verbalized, after all, by Günter Grass in the masterpiece *Tin Drum*, even though his work remains an exception (the other being the GDR documentary feature *Der Fall Gleiwitz* from 1961) (Böhler, 2015, pp. 362 ff.).

It is not least the enormity of the Holocaust that prevents Germans from perceiving other genocides – and actually calling them as such. Thus the crime of the Holocaust, which is incomparable and indeed very different from the crimes committed against Poland, is at the same time the greatest obstacle to a broader perception of German atrocities in Poland and against ethnic Poles – though of course roughly half of the victims of the Holocaust were Polish citizens, and more than half of Poland's victims were Jewish (Materski & Szarota, 2009). The same also applies to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, which was the basic prerequisite for the attack. This understanding of Germany and Russia uniting against Poland as a national trauma in Poland is largely ignored in Germany.

The final image is one of a lack of knowledge. It is fair to say that nowadays ignorance no longer seems to be the correct expression. That may have been the case in the past, but it is no longer true in the 21st century. The problem is not the unwillingness to acknowledge, but simply non-knowledge. There are other priorities of German remembrance, both from a state perspective (such as school textbooks), for civil society (at many memorial sites), and in the media. Polemically speaking, the invasion of Poland was not criminal enough, there were not enough victims to compete with other mass murders; neither does the war serve sensationalist exhibitionism. In this way, media, state and civic disinterest condition and reinforce each other; there is no one who can define the attack on Poland as relevant – attention economies are different.

The consequence of this ignorance is a lack of understanding for Poland – Germany's European partner. In turn, it prevents reconciliation and a serious dialogue, which would include exchanging information and developing comprehension as to why the "campaign in Poland" is not as important for Germany as it is for Poland. In Germany, however, there is deficiency of knowledge about and interest in the country's eastern neighbor. This concerns not only September 1939 or the following occupation, ridden with mass murder, but for the entire history of the German-Polish relationship since the Middle Ages. This is a tragedy, and one has to wait how ideas like a memorial devoted to crimes committed during the

occupation[3] or a German-Polish history museum (Lehnstaedt, 2018) will manifest in the Ort der Begegnung und Auseinandersetzung mit der Geschichte ("Place of Meeting and Dealing with History") that the Bundestag recently decided to set up.[4]

Bibliography

Bergen, D. (2008). Instrumentalization of Volksdeutschen in German Propaganda in 1939. Replacing/Erasing Poles, Jews, and Other Victims, *German Studies Review, vol. 31*, pp. 447–470.

Böhler, J. (2006). *Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg. Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939*. Frankfurt: Fischer.

Böhler, J. (2009a). *Der Überfall. Deutschlands Krieg gegen Polen*. Frankfurt: Eichborn.

Böhler, J. (2009b). *Zbrodnie Wehrmachtu w Polsce. Wrzesień 1939 – wojna totalna* (transl. by P. Pieńkowska-Wiederkehr). Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak.

Böhler, J. (2015). *Polenfeldzug. "Blitzsieg" oder Vernichtungskrieg?*. In: H.-H. Hahn, R. Traba (eds.), *Deutsch-polnische Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 1: *Geteilt / Gemeinsam* (pp. 359–373). Paderborn: Schöningh.

Böhler, J. (ed.) (2005). *"Grösste Härte…". Verbrechen der Wehrmacht in Polen September/Oktober 1939*. Osnabrück: Fibre.

Brewing, D. (2016). *Im Schatten von Auschwitz. Deutsche Massaker an polnischen Zivilisten 1939–1945*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Brewing, D. (2019). *W cieniu Auschwitz. Niemieckie masakry polskiej ludności cywilnej 1939–1945* (transl. by R. Dziergwa). Poznań: Instytut Zachodni.

Broszat, M. (1965). *Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik 1939–1945*. Frankfurt: Fischer.

Elble, R. (1975). *Die Schlacht an der Bzura im September 1939 aus deutscher und polnischer Sicht*. Freiburg: Rombach.

Hammerle, S. et al. (eds.) (2019). *80 Jahre danach. Bilder und Tagebücher deutscher Soldaten vom Überfall auf Polen 1939*. Berlin: Metropol.

Jaworski, R. (1984). Deutsch-Polnische Feindbilder 1919–1932, *Internationale Schulbuchforschung, vol. 6*, pp. 140–156.

Kleßmann, C. (ed.) (1989). *September 1939. Krieg, Besatzung, Widerstand in Polen. Acht Beiträge*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht.

Krzoska, M. (2012). Der "Bromberger Blutsonntag" 1939. Kontroversen und Forschungsergebnisse, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, vol. 60*, pp. 235–248.

Lehnstaedt, S. (2014). *Social Mood and Public Opinion towards the Soviet Union in Germany in 1939*. In: M. P. Deszczyński, T. Pawłowski (eds.), *Kampania polska 1939 r. Polityka – społeczeństwo – kultura*, vol. 2: *Polityka i społeczeństwo. Imponderabilia, pamięć, kultura* (pp. 217–232). Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Polski.

Lehnstaedt, S. (2017). *Imperiale Polenpolitik in den Weltkriegen. Eine vergleichende Studie zu den Mittelmächten und zu NS-Deutschland*. Osnabrück: Fibre.

Lehnstaedt, S. (2018). Die Nachbarn verstehen lernen. Plädoyer für ein polnisch-deutsches Museum, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 2.8.2018.

Lehnstaedt, S. (2019). *Der vergessene Sieg. Der Polnisch-Sowjetische Krieg 1919/20 und die Entstehung des modernen Osteuropa*. München: Beck.

Lehnstaedt, S., Böhler, J. (eds.) (2013). *Die Berichte der Einsatzgruppen aus Polen 1939. Vollständige Edition*. Berlin: Metropol.

Mallmann, K. et al. (eds.) (2008). *Einsatzgruppen in Polen. Darstellung und Dokumentation*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

3 www.polendenkmal.de, with an initiative dated 15.11.2017, also documenting German and Polish media reactions.

4 Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 19/23708, 27 October 2020, passed on 30 October 2020.

Materski, W., Szarota, T. (eds.) (2009). *Polska 1939–1945. Straty osobowe i ofiary represji pod dwiema okupacjami*. Warszawa: IPN.

Schindler, H. (1971). *Mosty und Dirschau 1939. Zwei Handstreiche der Wehrmacht vor Beginn des Polenfeldzuges*. Freiburg: Rombach.

Stjernfelt, B., Böhme, K. (1979). *Westerplatte 1939*. Freiburg: Rombach.

Wardzyńska, M. (2009). *Był rok 1939. Operacja niemieckiej policji bezpieczeństwa w Polsce. Intelligenzaktion*. Warszawa: IPN.

Weckbecker, C., Jansen, A. (1992). *Der „Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz" in Polen 1939/40*. München: Oldenbourg.

Weitbrecht, D. (2001). *Der Exekutionsauftrag der Einsatzgruppen in Polen*. Filderstadt: Markstein.

Żerko, S. (2013). *Polen, die Sudetenkrise und die Folgen des Münchener Abkommens*. In: J. Zarusky, M. Zückert (eds.), *Das Münchener Abkommen von 1938 in europäischer Perspektive* (pp. 349–382). München: Oldenbourg.