

KL Gusen in the Context of the Nazi Germany Policies toward the Polish Citizens in the First Year of War

Wanda Jarzqbek

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9778-6497

The Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences

Abstract

The aim of this article is not to study the history of the Gusen camp, but to demonstrate its part in the implementation of the Nazi German policies toward Poland and the Polish citizens in the first year of the Second World War. The text is an edited and typeset paper delivered at the conference “The Onset of the New Order: Europe 1939–1940,” held in Warsaw between 17 and 19 September 2019. Narrowing the scope to a single year corresponds to the timespan which was the subject of said conference. The paper was an analysis of the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the camp and of the situation of the Polish inmates of KL Mauthausen and KL Gusen in the first year of the war. The Gusen camp has been largely forgotten, rarely studied, and barely present in social perception, both in Poland and other countries. In recent years, it has received somewhat greater attention, but rather in the context of the present state of the grounds of the former camp than in reference to the historical circumstances of its functioning. The article is an attempt to show the context of the foundation of the camp and address the question of whether it can be considered a unique node in the network of the Third Reich’s camps. From its very establishment, its prisoners were predominantly Poles, which means that its status is special from the perspective of remembering the fates of the Poles during the Second World War. In this article, the history of the camp is analyzed against the backdrop of Germany’s military goals, and in particular the provisions of the occupation policy in the Polish territories.

The Gusen concentration camp has become increasingly present in public perception in Austria and other countries, in no small part thanks to the efforts of local activists from the Gusen Memorial Committee. The camp was located 5 km from KL Mauthausen. Even if some scholars are right in claiming that the original plan was always to set up two camps, it never happened, and the commandant of Mauthausen oversaw Gusen, as well as numerous subcamps in Austria. Various names were used in the SS nomenclature: at first, it was KL Mauthausen/Unterkunft Gusen, KL Mauthausen/Gusen, KL Gusen, KL Gusen I (Gusen II and Gusen III, when new camps were established). As a result, Gusen was commonly associated with Mauthausen. In this article, in line with the conference profile, I will not be looking at the camp's history beyond 1940. Instead, I will try to demonstrate the principles of Nazi Germany's policies toward Poland and discuss the role which KL Gusen played in their implementation.

KL Gusen was established and then developed with a view to further the political, economic, and social (including demographic) goals of Nazi Germany, and this is the context in which the camp should be considered from the perspective of Polish citizens.

Nazi Germany's policies toward Poland

Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 marked the Third Reich's transition to the next stage of pursuing its goals. The so called Polish campaign was characterized by atrocities against civilians and POWs perpetrated on an unprecedented scale when compared to previous wars in Europe (Böhler, 2006). Many outside observers, as well as Poles, were shocked and could not comprehend the reasons behind such actions. Little was known at that time of Nazi Germany's long-term goals, which were neither limited to, nor primarily about, upsetting the territorial status quo in Europe and other provisions of the Paris Peace Conferences of 1919, which had come under heavy criticism in Germany after 1919. German national socialism aspired to introduce a new order covering various aspects of the functioning of states and nations. In the geopolitical sense, the plan was to delineate new global spheres of influence. However, geopolitical aims were as important as ideological ones. Military conquests were not only to win new lands and their resources for Germany, but also to pave the way for a major overhaul of social order. The Third Reich's social engineering was based on the race theory, which was also being developed in German research centers. The Germans, as the race of masters, were supposed to overrun the conquered lands, whose citizens, depending on how they were evaluated, were to be Germanized or annihilated, or their numbers were to be greatly reduced. The race theory was a tool used to justify the course of action adopted, and its

principles, including the strengthening of the Nordic race at the expense of those deemed inferior, were a goal to be attained (Heinemann, 2003; Etzemüller, 2015; Mai, 2002; Aly, 1995).

The aversion to the Slavs, expressed in Wilhelmine Germany as early as in the 19th century, was a factor in how the Poles were treated during the war (Borejsza, 2006). Many plans for Eastern Europe, where the Germans' living space (*Lebensraum*), i.e. the main settlement area, was to mostly expand, were detailed in the *Generalplan Ost*. However, it has to be stated that the plans concerning policies pursued in the East were not ready when the war broke out on 1 September 1939, and they were being developed as the conflict progressed. The broader context of the German occupation policy, which included plans to change the demographic structure of Europe, is crucial in analyzing the measures taken in the Polish territories (Łuczak, 1979; Madajczyk, 1970, 1994, 2019; Wasser, 1993).

Nevertheless, the character of occupation policies in Poland is also rooted in the history of Polish-German relations, especially in the period after the unification of Germany in 1871. The unification policy led by Prussia was opposed by the Poles – this time German citizens. After the First World War, anti-Polish sentiments were rife as a result of what the Germans saw as the loss of their eastern territories. The negative view of Poland and the Poles was grabbing traction in the Weimar Republic period and was then deliberately solidified by national-socialist propaganda (Król, 2006; Sobczak, 1973). In 1934, after signing the so-called non-aggression pact between Poland and Germany, and under the agreement on ceasing hostile propaganda, the Germans did temper anti-Polish undertones in the official media, but the stereotypes existing at the social level continued. Once Germany reneged on the 1934 pact, the anti-Polish narrative was resumed, and its outcomes were visible as soon as the war broke out.

After military operations concluded in October 1939, the Polish lands did not come under unified legislation. Part of them, mostly composed of the territories belonging to the German state before 1918, was incorporated into the Reich, and the policies toward the Poles there were particularly oppressive and brutal right from the start. Greater Poland, Pomerania, and Silesia were to be Germanized as soon as possible. The character of the occupation in the General Government was slightly different, as the Germanization of this area was not considered as a goal attainable in the short term.

Considering German policies toward the Polish lands and their inhabitants through the prism of previously-known occupation methods would not be accurate, since it would come short of offering an explanation of what was actually taking place. They cannot be viewed solely in economic terms (i.e. focusing on exploitation, subjecting Polish economy to German economy, looting of works of art, luxury goods, and other

valuables, etc.). The considerations of maintaining order or discouraging Polish rebellion alone also fail to sufficiently account for the German terror. The measures taken against the civilians served long-term plans, even if they also helped reach short-term pragmatic goals and address current affairs, such as thwarting organized defiance against German authorities. In order to analyze the goals which Nazi Germany wanted to reach in Poland and to describe the occupation reality in the Polish lands, it is crucial to conclude that the occupation was not seen as a transition period, but as a prelude to a far-reaching rebuild of the territorial and social order. The Polish nation (seen not in political but ethnic terms) was to be wiped off these lands within approximately twenty years. A different formulation of occupation goals in Poland on the one hand, and in Western European countries on the other, translated into how these lands and their inhabitants were treated. A different approach to local population could be seen in the subsequent Wehrmacht campaigns. The occupation regime was introduced as a rule in the conquered lands, but its severity clearly depended on the plans which the Germans had for them. This is why the policies toward France, Belgium, Holland, or Denmark were not the same. The occupation reality there bore no resemblance to that in the occupied Polish lands, which were to be Germanized both demographic- and material-wise (e.g. in terms of the appearance of towns and cities). It is true that the Germans made some investments, but these were supposed to be to their advantage both during the occupation and in the future.

After conquering the Polish lands, Nazi Germany proceeded to erode the Polish nation, which was the first stage of the process of annihilating it as a historically-shaped whole held together with the glue of common language, culture, and sense of community rooted in the past. To that end, various political, cultural, biological, economic, as well as morality-related methods were employed. Steps were taken toward abolishing political and social life, which consisted in banning Polish organizations, liquidating the nation's elites, preventing access to information and at the same time subjecting people to propaganda, majorly restricting access to education (elementary and vocational schools were retained in the General Government), blocking off high culture, or destroying cultural goods, including archives, libraries, monuments, and works of art. Social unity was being undermined through nationality policies, as well as through intimidation and the promotion of enemy collaboration. Difficult and often degrading conditions meant that many people focused on satisfying their most pressing needs. The legislation adversely affected the birth rate. National and social groups deemed racially worthless, i.e. Jews, Gypsies, and the mentally ill, were exterminated. The methods adopted by the occupiers have been repeatedly analyzed by researchers interested in this period (Broszat, 1961; Lukas, 2012; Łuczak, 1979; Madajczyk, 2019). In the most recent academic debates, the occupation policies

of Nazi Germany have been increasingly often seen in terms of genocide,¹ although terminology is not always consistent and there are also those who disagree with this approach.²

During the first year of the war – which is the period this article focuses on – the occupying authorities took steps to first and foremost deprive the Polish society of their political, economic, and cultural leaders. These actions were motivated by fears that these groups could mount resistance or be otherwise involved in keeping up social morale. Facing detention were university staff, high-school and elementary-school teachers, social activists, scouts, and clergymen. These groups were responsible for the transmission of the culture code, which was vital for the nation's wholeness and its cultural or linguistic identity. In certain locations, for example in Pomerania, the scale of arrests and the way of treating detainees, who were exterminated soon after being jailed, served as a form of retaliation, and at the same time were supposed to expedite the Germanization of these lands (Steyer, 1967; Ceran, Mazanowska & Tomkiewicz, 2018).

Historical research shows that preparations for anti-Polish actions commenced still before military operations were launched (Wardzyńska, 2009, pp. 12 ff.; Piekarska, 2006). Lists were compiled of persons designated a threat to the Reich's plans. Said lists were drawn up by both the Gestapo and Zentralstelle 11/P, a special unit at the Office of the Reichsführer ss. They came to be known as *Sonderfahndungsbuch Polen* (the so-called wanted list), which included the names of 61,000 persons: political and social activists, persons active in cultural, artistic, and scientific circles, participants of the Greater Poland Uprising, plebiscite activists from Masuria, Warmia, and Silesia, and members of the Polish Western Union and the Union of Poles in Germany (Rutkowska & Ziółkowska, 2019; Bębnik, 2020). The lists, ordered according to the geographical criterion, were issued to operation groups (Wardzyńska, 2009, pp. 44 ff.). By 25 October 1939, 23,000 people from these lists had already been murdered as part of operation "Tannenberg." By April 1940, operations against leadership echelons in the General Government, known as the AB Action (*Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion*), had claimed the lives of some 50,000 people who were executed, and of another 50,000, who had been sent to concentration camps. These operations were carried out surreptitiously, while

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- 1 Until the 1990s, the term "genocide" was neither widespread, nor frequent. In studies devoted to the nature of German occupation, this term was either missing or was only used with reference to one aspect of the occupation policy, i.e. mass extermination (see e.g. Pilichowski, 1980). Consequently, it appeared primarily in the context of the Holocaust. But scholars' approach was largely inconsistent. In my analysis of ways of describing the policies of the Third Reich, I underlined that some authors effectively used Lemkin's structural model of multiple levels of genocide. For more on this topic, see e.g. Jarząbek, 2016.
 - 2 Rafał Lemkin, who coined the term "genocide," used its broad definition. See Lemkin, 1944. For contemporary debates on this issue, see Madajczyk, 2016, pp. 3 ff.

the evidence of the crimes (including mass graves) were destroyed as the Germans were retreating from the Polish territories (pp. 9 ff.). A unique and well-documented event was the detention of the Jagiellonian University professors and their deportation to concentration camps, after they had been gathered under the guise of the academic year inauguration (Pierzchała, 1997). Many of them were freed following international calls, including by Benito Mussolini, but the others perished in the camps or died soon after they were released.

The operations carried out in the Polish territories were subsequent stages of implementing a political scheme, rather than isolated *ad hoc* actions taken, for example, as part of fighting or preventing resistance. Frequently, they were conducted in inconsistent fashion, since different agencies of the German state and its leaders would alter plans (Łuczak, 1979, pp. 23 ff.). During the period discussed, detainees, unless murdered on the spot, were transported to places of isolation in occupied Poland (for example, to civilian prisoner camps, transit camps, or prisons), and were then transferred to concentration camps already operating in Germany, particularly to Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Mauthausen. From May 1940, some of those arrested in said mass arrests, including individuals detained in other camps, were sent to KL Gusen, which was under construction at the time. Back then, a significant number of Poles was kept there. It has to be noted that at this point, a network of concentration camps located in the territory of occupied Poland was yet to be established.

The Poles in Gusen in the first year of war

Studies on the Gusen camp were very often a corollary of studies on the Mauthausen camp. A complete analysis of how the camp was operating has been problematic, because toward the end of the war, the SS destroyed a significant part of the camp's records. While the history of the Gusen camp is recorded in numerous secondary sources, it is known mostly through works authored by former inmates.³ Many of these works are memoirs; those who survived the camp recall it as a special node in the

3 The first works devoted to its history and development were usually authored by its former inmates. In Poland, one of the authors writing about the camp's establishment and functioning was Stanisław Dobosiewicz (Dobosiewicz, 1977). Hans Maršálek, an Austrian who wrote about the Mauthausen and Gusen camps, was a Mauthausen prisoner (Maršálek, 1987). In recent years, the history of the camp was studied by authors interested in local history, who are also involved in commemorating the sites of former camps (Haunschmied, Mills & Witzany-Durda, 2007).

network of concentration camps because of the living conditions and the treatment of prisoners.⁴

Studies show that the decisions concerning the foundation of the Gusen camp were made before the Second World War and were informed by the fact that the surrounding area was rich in granite, which the Third Reich authorities intended to use for the planned investments, such as rebuilding towns (also those located in Ostmark, i.e. the Reich-incorporated Austria), erecting buildings for the NSDAP (for example in Nuremberg, where *Parteitage*s, that is, party conventions, were held), building new roads, hardening the coastline, etc. Playing a part was also the fact that the Upper Austria had a well-developed transportation network. At that time, the SS was already using prisoners from concentration camps in Germany as labor force, and the same method was planned for the purposes of mining and processing granite near Linz. In March 1938, just after the Anschluss of Austria, Heinrich Himmler and Oswald Pohl, head of the SS administration, inspected the vicinity of Mauthausen and St. Georgen. Still before the formal acquisition of the quarries, a decision was made concerning the location of the camps: they were supposed to be established in Marbach (above Mauthausen; it was set up first) and in Langenstein, near the River Gusen. In April 1938, the Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke (DEST) company was formed, and one of its tasks was to supply natural resources for major construction enterprises in the Reich.

By the end of May, either through purchase or lease, the first set of plots for the purposes of creating the camp was acquired, together with the quarries. The construction of the future KL Gusen began in late 1939. The first buildings to have been erected were the houses for the camp staff and the barracks for the SS "Totenkopf" unit. In January 1940, the construction of the camp barracks began. At first, the workers were Mauthausen prisoners, mostly Germans and Austrians, but in time, the "Barakenbau Gusen" working unit was composed chiefly of Poles. In early March, a group of 448 Poles from the Buchenwald camp was sent to Mauthausen to erect barracks. More transports followed, which numbered approximately 2,000 people (Dobosiewicz, 1977). Most of the laborers were still quartered in Mauthausen, but some of them already slept in Gusen. According to some estimations, by 24 May (when the first transport sent directly to the Gusen camp arrived), 10% of the prisoners involved in constructing the camp had died, which was a significant number, given that they had only worked for between two and two-and-a-half months. According to Stanisław Dobosiewicz, who quotes statements by inmates,

4 Prisoners of the Gusen camp (both Polish and from other countries) produced many diaries chronicling their fates in the camp, as well as the history of the camp itself (i.a. Nogaj, 1945; Załachowski, 1946; Wnuk, 1960; Osuchowski, 1961; Gębik, 1972; Cholewa, 2000; Carpi, 2009; Zalewski, 2016).

it was as early as during the construction works that the ss men were supposedly saying that this was a camp for the Poles who were still in their homes (p. 14).

In March 1940, while the basic infrastructure of the camp was being created, Karl Walter Chmielewski was appointed chief (*Lagerführer*). He remained in the job until 1942. Between 1936 and 1939, Chmielewski served at the command office of the Sachsenhausen camp. His conduct earned him the nickname of “the devil from Gusen.”⁵ Not only was he the brains behind the camp’s death industry, but he also personally tortured prisoners. There are witness reports detailing how Chmielewski would barge into the barracks at night with other ss men and beat up inmates. He is said to have abused alcohol. Additionally, he used his position for personal gain. For example, he instructed inmates to steal materials which he then used to erect his own mansion or ordered them to make sculptures in stone and wood (Osuchowski, 1961, p. 198). Chmielewski’s origin was a matter of much debate, both during the war, among prisoners and his colleagues, and afterward, among scholars, as his name suggested he had Polish roots. He himself claimed that his family had changed its German name so it would sound more Polish, but even when he was Gusen chief, many doubted this story. Some people believed that through his conduct, including the cruel treatment of Poles, Chmielewski, who himself had Polish roots, wanted to prove himself and come across as a “true” German. Memoirs indicate that he set the standards of behavior among the camp staff and also, to an extent, among functionary prisoners. Many of them, especially kapos and block leaders, were German and Austrian criminal convicts handpicked – as other prisoners suspected – to discharge their duties for their brutality or even sadism. They robbed inmates of food and tortured and murdered them, just as the ss men did, and, additionally, forced them to perform homosexual acts (Załachowski, 1946, pp. 8 ff.; Osuchowski, 1961; Dobosiewicz, 1977).

Although KL Gusen was not completely independent of the Mauthausen camp, from the very beginning it had its own system of recording prisoners, who were assigned numbers. The camp kept its book of deaths and had its own postal service. In the period discussed, the camp commandant enjoyed a good deal of autonomy with respect to direct management. According to witnesses, on 20 May, Chmielewski personally selected the Poles from Dachau who were transferred to the camp on 24 May. The transport numbered 1,083 (or 1,084) people and was the first one to have been sent straight to Gusen. On the day of the arrival of the Dachau prisoners, 200 extremely exhausted Poles, who had been involved

5 Karl Chmielewski’s son, Walter, later provided an account of his childhood in Gusen and spoke about his father, see Schaeben, 2015. A documentary featuring Walter Chmielewski was also filmed.

in construction works, were moved to Mauthausen, where the workload was slightly lighter. The subsequent transports mostly came from the Dachau and Sachsenhausen camps. Both then and later, these were often transports of inhabitants of particular regions, which is why they were sometimes called with reference to the area where the majority of the prisoners came from, such as the Warsaw transport, the Poznań transport, etc. (Gębik, 1972, pp. 113–115). The traffic between Gusen and other camps was two-way, as some inmates were sent off, usually to Mauthausen. In late 1940, some prisoners were freed, which was a policy followed in other camps as well. It was either concluded that their sentence had run its course, or their release had been negotiated by their families. In 1940, a total of 9,000 people were sent to Gusen, and only a handful of them were not Poles. Other studies suggest that this number may have been lower, standing at 8,000. At the end of 1940, 6,000 people were serving time in the camp (Dobosiewicz, 1977, s. 198).⁶

The Polish inmates were mostly political prisoners (*Schutzhaft Polen, Pole Schutzhäftlinge*). The Polish citizens of Jewish nationality were at a disadvantage from the very beginning, being assigned to jobs which the camp staff believed to be harder or more humiliating. Poles were given certain functions: those with a good command of German sometimes worked as clerks for ordinary blocks or the hospital block (pp. 144 ff). They also held other lower clerical posts in DEST, but this was usually beyond the period discussed in this article. They were remembered by their fellow inmates for how they had discharged their duties: some of them (the majority, as the memoirs indicate) tried to help their comrades, while others did just the opposite. Prisoners who had artistic talents were also commissioned to do various jobs for the SS. The same applied to musicians and singers, whose skills, recognized by the camp staff, frequently won them a somewhat better standing in the camp's pecking order.

In the period discussed, that is, during the first year of the war, Poles (Polish citizens) made up around 96% of the prisoners' population. Stanisław Nogaj (1945, vol. 1, p. 17) estimated that 8,500 prisoners were Poles (including 122 individuals who were Polish citizens of Jewish nationality or were Jews under German law; 198 persons were Germans, including 12 Jews according to the above definition; 98 persons were Austrians, including 14 Jews, as above). The criminal prisoners, who often performed particular functions, were usually Germans and Austrians, while political prisoners of either nationality were rare at the time. From February 1941

⁶ The statistics are not fully verifiable due to lack of complete documentation. However, books of deaths and daily reports indicating changes in the number of prisoners have been preserved. At that time, the Gusen prisoners received unique numbers, but later, new prisoners were sometimes given the numbers of those who had died. The numbers were not tattooed.

onward, the nationality composition of the camp began to change after the arrival of transports of Spanish republicans. Later, nationals of other countries arrived. The Poles sent to Gusen were often representatives of social elites earmarked for systemic extermination, that is, academics, artists, state officials, teachers, journalists, social activists, or priests. The documents of many prisoners sent to the camp were often tagged with the *Rückkehr unerwünscht* ("return undesired") comment, which was effectively a death sentence. According to various witness reports, as soon as the Gusen camp started to operate, its staff would tell the prisoners that this was an extermination camp for Polish intelligentsia (*Vernichtungslager für Polnische Intelligenz*). Obviously, this was not the camp's official name. In the first year of the war, Poles who qualified as members of the intelligentsia because of their jobs accounted for a very large proportion of the prisoners. However, no detailed statistical data are available. Still, representatives of other trades were also held in the camp: they were owners of industrial enterprises, craftsmen, merchants, miners, technicians, or farmers. It would be more accurate to say that the camp was a site of incarceration and extermination of Polish elites, both national and local. Additionally, it has to be stated that in the early period, the camp prisoners were mostly people coming from the Reich-incorporated lands, that is, territories which – as already mentioned – were supposed to be Germanized in the first place.

The first few months after commissioning the camp was the period when the inmates were getting to know each other and organized themselves in various groups. On transports arriving from other camps were large numbers of prisoners coming from the same regions (or even towns), individuals who were each other's previous acquaintances from before the war, or persons who had become friends in the camps in which they were incarcerated before. Such people tried to stick together and help each other. In time, personal networks expanded, the camp community began to emerge, and the prisoners were finding their feet, learning behaviors necessary to survive, but they were also exploring opportunities to alter the new reality by adding elements of lifestyles they had led outside the camp, that is, they tried to reproduce certain familiar habits or rituals, get some sort of access to culture or entertainment, as well as observe religious practices.

A unique composition of the prisoners' population, that is, a strong presence of individuals who had completed secondary and higher education, gave rise to groups of interests, various forms of mutual instruction, and discussions (Osuchowski, 1961, pp. 135 ff.). After the period of initial adaptation to the prevailing conditions, from fall 1940, attempts were made to somehow foster cultural life, for example, poetry recitals were organized, and in time, plays were staged in closed circles (Wnuk, 1960, pp. 110 ff.). In their free time, prisoners – especially in the barracks, where the block leaders did not majorly interfere with how the inmates

were passing time – sang their favorite songs. Sometimes, they felt the need to whisper poems just to themselves. They tried to recreate them from fragments memorized by different people or scribbled them on empty cement bags. Such behaviors were acts of self-defense against surrendering and mental breakdown, as well as an escape from the horrifying reality. According to psychologists, the mechanism of creating one's own reality is sometimes a successful survival strategy in adverse circumstances.

Despite strict prohibition, religious practices were observed in the camp, where many clergymen were kept. Father Ludwik Bielerzewski from Greater Poland, who was sent to Gusen from Dachau in August 1940, was nicknamed “the provost of Gusen.” In his memoirs, he pointed to the necessity of limiting religious observance to prayers, confession, and individual or collective absolution, since it was very difficult to celebrate masses (Bielerzewski, 1978, p. 1). Bread was in short supply, and additionally, prisoners feared being found out during a raid by the kapos or the SS (Skibiński, 2018).

The Polish prisoners of the Gusen camp had different political sympathies, but the memoirs suggest that this had little bearing on mutual support. At that time, Gusen was essentially a camp for Poles, so contacts with other nationalities were limited to Germans and Austrians, although in this case, bar absolute exceptions, these were the relations between perpetrators and their victims, and this necessitated solidarity in order to mount self-defense (Nogaj, 1945, vol. 1, pp. 32 ff.). To be sure, some were always put before others: prisoners were more willing to help their friends or those to whom they were returning favors, but Nogaj writes that special courtesy was also extended to individuals who were deemed important because of their past merits or special talents. The prevailing attitude was to avoid harming others, but there were also individuals who acted against this principle for the sake of survival. Some inmates of Polish origins resigned themselves to becoming cogs in the extermination system set up in the camp: they were kapos and block leaders (Dobosiewicz, 1977, p. 119). Also non-function prisoners committed ignoble deeds, but it has to be remembered that they were under extreme pressure of the circumstances.

The first prisoners were accommodated in provisional barracks. At first, they did not have concrete floors and for two years the barracks were not insulated, that is, the walls were composed of a single layer of wood, and the roof had one layer of felt (Dobosiewicz, 1977, pp. 18 ff.). It is worth noting that the area has a mountain climate, the temperature dips below zero well into spring, and the Danube runs nearby, which means that the ground is muddy, so this also made for difficult summers because of insects. Therefore, natural conditions were another factor in the increased mortality of the prisoners.

Initially, the barracks were not even equipped with bunk beds, so the prisoners slept on the ground, hay, or sawdust. Three-story beds began

to be installed in late 1940. There were no sanitary appliances, nor the sewage system. The passages between buildings were not hardened.⁷ Construction works were still in progress and were carried out by a special working unit, but other inmates were also forcibly involved. The prisoners returning from the quarry carried gravel and sand needed for hardening the passages and erecting new buildings, and all inmates were involved in construction works on Sundays. The works finished in fall 1940. A total of 32 barracks was built, of which 24 were living quarters, while the remaining ones served as warehouses, kitchens, and workshops, but the purposes they fulfilled changed over time. The premises were at first cordoned off with a barbed-wire fence, but by the end of 1940, it was enclosed with a granite wall with watchtowers. The main entrance was through the gate of the so-called *Jourhaus* ('entrance building'), which was also where the command offices were located. Situated in the vicinity, off the camp's grounds, were the ss living quarters. The high-ranking ss men were staying outside the camp, and some of them lived in detached residences in a housing estate which had also been erected by the prisoners.

Initially, there was no camp hospital in Gusen, since there were no plans to treat prisoners. However, some barracks were later designated to accommodate severely emaciated prisoners, and one was turned into a hospital. In 1940, the camp did not have a crematory, and the dead were ferried off to Steyer, and then to Mauthausen.

Many prisoners were sent to work in the Kastenhof quarry, which bordered Gusen from the north. There were also working units operating outside the camp, as well as penal working units. In general, all works done outdoors were considered worse, since the prisoners were more exposed to weather conditions, such as scorching hot in summer, freezing cold in winter, etc. According to witness reports, the most adverse working conditions obtained in the unit tasked with the construction of the camp and in the unit of boulder carriers, who, on top of everything, were often forced to work at a tempo. Another hard job was crushing boulders. At first, there were no professional stonecutters among the Poles kept in the camp, so in time, Gusen became a center for training prisoners in this field. In charge of the training were civilian foremen and skilled inmates sent from Buchenwald specifically for this purpose (Dobosiewicz, 1977, p. 228). Prisoners working as stonecutters worked indoors and their labor quotas were not increased. As professionals, they were in a relatively better situation. The few Poles who had linguistic and vocational

7 It is worth noting that other camps established in Polish lands captured by the Germans were also frequently characterized by very primitive infrastructure: the barracks were somewhat provisional, and there were cases where prisoners were quartered outdoors for some time (this usually happened in camps located in areas where no infrastructure had been put in place e.g. in the Stutthof camp).

credentials performed specialized tasks for the DEŠT. They were hired in the construction office (where, among others, the stone mill and the compressor were designed) or the investment office. They were also involved in drawing up financial reports for the DEŠT (p. 227). Skilled workers did not account for a significant proportion of the prisoners in the first year of the war, but their importance increased as more and more German citizens were drafted.

Witness reports show that the alimentation in Gusen was poor, also when compared to other camps which the prisoners were familiar with. This was another factor in the increased mortality. Considered against the abysmal living conditions, the status of the functionary prisoners and those hired at the DEŠT offices was slightly better. Clerical workers lived in separate barracks and received bedclothes and small pillows, as well as food rations richer in protein. The function prisoners living in common barracks also received better nourishment. Additionally, the kapos very often stole the food from other prisoners. Such situations, however, were not peculiar to Gusen, being a rule in the case of other camps and prisons.

During the first year of the war, no systemic extermination on the “industrial” scale, e.g. through gassing, was carried out in Gusen. The camp was primarily a site of indirect elimination through the living conditions and treatment. Other, less “subtle” methods were also employed, such as drowning (more common from 1941), brutal beating, or smashing with boulders in the quarry. On the night between 12 and 13 August 1940, 200 Poles were murdered as part of the so-called *Rund gehts*, a night-time operation of beating and shooting at random prisoners. These were recurrent actions. Murders were perpetrated to celebrate Hitler’s birthday or an anniversary of the Munich Putsch on 9 November (Osuchowski, 1961, pp. 53 ff.). Differences in the treatment of prisoners in Gusen and elsewhere were particularly noticeable to those who had been previously interned in one of the other camps. They were tortured as soon as they were covering the distance between the train depot and the barracks.⁸ An assortment of torture techniques was employed in Gusen, which was, in a sense, comparable with that in other camps, although reports from former prisoners suggest that it was done on a larger scale in this camp (Dobosiewicz, 1977, p. 313). Some inmates were murdered during executions: for example, in August 1940, around 320 people from the so-called Warsaw transport were executed by shooting (different reports give slightly different estimations), although this tragedy did not take place in Gusen but in Mauthausen. Shortly before he died, Franz Ziereis, former Gusen commandant, said that the execution had been ordered by Reinhard Heidrich,

⁸ The arrival of the first transport and the brutality of guards are described by Stanisław Nogaj, among others (Nogaj, 1945, pp. 9 ff.).

head of the Reich Security Main Office.⁹ In any case, executions were not the prime cause of death among the Gusen prisoners. It was extremely adverse living conditions, inhumane workload on most of the prisoners, violent treatment by the camp staff, tortures, lack of medical care, and organized killings that contributed to a very high mortality rate, exceeding that in the nearby Mauthausen. Hans Maršálek estimated that between 1940 and 1942, an inmate lived around 6 months on average (Maršálek, 1987, p. 40). In 1940, 1,522 people died (p. 41).¹⁰ The ss thought that the prisoner's life expectancy should be less than three months.

Closing remarks

The first year of the functioning of the Gusen camp appears to be particularly significant from the perspective of Poland and the Poles during the Second World War. Regardless of the nature of the decisions made in 1938 concerning the location of other camps in relation to the Reich's economic plans, and in particular the intensification of granite mining, the foundation of the Gusen camp is concurrent with the implementation of Germany's plans concerning Poland.

Soon after the invasion of Poland, when mass arrests and executions of the Poles seen as a threat to the Reich's interests began (as part of Operation Tannenberg or the AB-Aktion, among others), the number of Polish prisoners sharply increased. It logically follows that decisions were made concerning the establishment of new camps of different profiles. It stands to reason that, given what was happening in the Polish territories, a decision was made to build a camp in the Langenstein commune. There has been no thorough research into materials pertaining to this issue, so it is possible that no documents can be recovered which would prove a direct connection between the time of founding Gusen and the concurrent introduction of the policies against Polish political, economic, social, and cultural elites. Nevertheless, a major temporal coincidence obtains between the erection of the camp and the subsequent stages of exterminating the leadership echelons of Polish society. The construction works accelerated during the *Intelligenzaktion*, before the *AB-aktion* was launched. The reports of former inmates, who claim that the ss men

⁹ The deposition of Standartenführer Franz Zierys, commandant of the Mauthausen concentration camp, recorded on 24 May 1945 between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. in Gusen, in the office of former Schutzhaftlagerführer Fritz Seidler (Osuchowski, 1961, p. 188). Osuchowski reports that 315 persons were executed (p. 185).

¹⁰ The statistics on the mortality rates differ. For example, Osuchowski claims that the number of deaths was 1,469 (Osuchowski, 1961). It is possible that at that time the names of prisoners were also recorded in the Mauthausen books of deaths. The numbers require verification against the preserved books of deaths.

would openly tell them about establishing a camp for Polish intelligentsia, may also serve as a hint as to the purpose of the Gusen camp, although researchers are yet to find other sources corroborating such statements.

The fact remains that in 1940, it was almost exclusively Poles, who were also transferred from other concentration camps in Germany, that were sent to Gusen. Initially, the prisoners mostly came from the Reich-incorporated lands that were supposed to be quickly Germanized, but also from the General Government. The camp's population was almost homogenous, in that it was composed of Polish citizens of a particular education status, such as teachers, priests, state officials, journalists, doctors, social activists, and also skilled workers and owners of various enterprises, landowners, and farmers. They were representatives of the country's and local elites who were active in different spheres of social life (such as politics, economy, or culture), local leaders, and other individuals who were important to their respective communities. This rule also held for persons of Jewish origins. Interned in the camp were also Poles with German roots who refused to join the *Volkliste* (German National List) and thus renounce Polishness, in which they had often been immersed for generations. Following the subsequent military conquests of the Third Reich, the character of the camp was becoming more international and heterogeneous, as its demographics were changing. Gusen warrants labeling it a camp for the Polish intelligentsia primarily in the timespan discussed in this article. In time, the proportions in the prisoners' population clearly shifted. Obviously, a significant portion of the Gusen inmates was still individuals with ties to the intelligentsia, but now prisoners from other social backgrounds were also sent to the camp. There has been no thorough research on the social structure of the inmates' population, but some conclusions can be reached based on the transport lists, death records, and documents detailing prisoner traffic between camps. In time, the policy toward the inmates also changed, there being periods of reduced repressiveness in comparison with the first year of the camp's operation.

If one considers the situation in 1940, including the living conditions, staff selection, and especially the demographics of the prisoners' population, it can be hypothesized that sending Poles to Gusen was not primarily informed by the desire to use them as labor force (although this, too, played a part), but rather by the intention of sealing off and murdering at least some of them in the short term. Thus, it can be concluded that at that time, Gusen was a major site of the implementation of Nazi Germany's plans for Poland and the Poles, which I described in the first part of this article, i.e. the extermination of leadership echelons at various levels, persons responsible for the transmission of cultural code and creating culture, and those who fought for the Polishness of the lands which belonged to Prussia during the partitions period. Therefore, the Gusen camp was a crucial component of the system designed with a view to perpetrating genocide against the Poles. Consequently, its functioning

cannot be studied without reference to the provisions, aims, and methods of Germany's occupation policies toward Poland.

(transl. by Maciej Grabski)

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