

The Pomeranian Crime of 1939 as the Onset of Genocide during the Second World War

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Abstract

From the very beginning of the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Germans conducted mass murders of Polish civilians in the entire country, however their scale differed in individual of the occupied regions. The greatest crimes were perpetrated in the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship, where approx. 30,000 people were murdered. The German terror did not assume such proportions in any other region of annexed Poland. These atrocities targeted mainly the Polish intelligentsia, but also farmers and workers. A thousand patients of psychiatric hospitals and hundreds of Pomeranian Jews were executed and buried in the same death pits. Apart from the *Einsatzgruppen* units, members of the German minority – the activists of the *Selbstschutz Westpreussen* – also played a special role in this crime. They were particularly exposed to and receptive of the Nazi ideology due to the German propaganda concerning the so-called Pomeranian corridor and the Bloody Sunday in Bydgoszcz. The planned extermination campaign, which Rafał Lemkin believed to be the first physical genocide of the war, was portrayed as an act of self-defense and retaliation for the death of the *Volksdeutsche*. In order to emphasize the importance of the events that unfolded in Gdańsk Pomerania in 1939 as the onset of the genocidal German occupation policy, a new historical concept was introduced: “the Pomeranian crime of 1939.”

Genocide conveys the concept of destroying
great masses of peoples of a nation
Rafał Lemkin¹

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TOMASZ CERAN

In the “Terror” section of the permanent exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk there are seven black plaques with the names of the sites where the Polish civilian population was slaughtered during the first months of the German occupation. These are: Palmiry, Leszno, Bydgoszcz-Fordon, Piaśnica, the Szpęgawsk Forest, Mniszek near Świecie on the Vistula, and Paterek near Nakło.² Few visitors realize that the last five places were located in the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship. This is not a coincidence, for in 1939 the German terror was much more prevalent there than in any other region of occupied Poland. In Piaśnica near Wejherowo, 35 mass graves were discovered after the war. The bodies of the victims (305 human remains) were found only in two death pits, since in 1944 the Germans had disinterred and burned the bodies of the remaining victims. To date, about 2,500 persons have been identified – mainly members of the Pomeranian intelligentsia, but also approx. 1,200 patients of psychiatric hospitals, who were brought to Pomerania from, among others, the Reich (Tomkiewicz, 2019). In Szpęgawsk near Starogard Gdański, the Germans burned the corpses from 31 out of 32 mass graves. So far, 2,413 people have been identified, including 1,698 patients of psychiatric hospitals, 104 teachers, 85 workers, 74 farmers, 73 officials and 66 clergymen (Kubicki, 2019, p. 369). In Mniszek near Świecie on the Vistula a huge grave, nearly 100 meters long, was discovered after the war; the bodies had also been burned shortly before the end of the conflict. Here, only 52 names of victims have been established (Mazanowska, 2019, p. 19). In Fordon near Bydgoszcz, at least 309 corpses were exhumed after the war. Two thirds of the victims have been identified (Drozdowski, 2018). Whereas in Paterek near Nakło on the Noteć, the names of 206 victims have been determined, including those of 48 clergymen, 18 teachers and 9 Jews (Ceran, 2018a).

The number of plaques designating Pomeranian extermination sites at the permanent exhibition could be significantly expanded, for example by the addition of Karolewo near Więcbork, where 1,781 bodies were exhumed after the war (Mazanowska, 2017), Tryszczyn near Bydgoszcz

¹ This quote is taken from his autobiography, *Totally Unofficial* (Lemkin, 2013, p. 181).

² A photograph of the plaques with the names of extermination sites was published by Paweł Machcewicz (Machcewicz, 2017, insert with photographs).

– with 683 corpses uncovered after the conflict (Kołakowski, 2003)³, or Barbarka near Toruń – with 298 identified victims (Grochowina & Sziling, 2009). The initiator and co-creator of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Paweł Machcewicz, has rightly observed that

from the very start, Pomerania was a laboratory for German crimes. It was here that the horrendous terror was first unleashed, already in the autumn of 1939, claiming the lives of tens of thousands of victims [...]. Pomerania was very much the heart of darkness of Nazi policy in the conquered territories (Machcewicz, 2016, pp. 10–11).

When analyzing the onset of the Second World War, one cannot omit the other events that took place throughout Poland in the autumn of 1939. What is usually discussed in this context are various military aspects of the Polish defensive war, while less attention is paid to the beginning of the occupation (Moorhouse, 2019a; Moorhouse, 2019b). In older historiography these events were called the September Campaign, while now the five weeks of Polish military operations against the German Army are usually described as the “Polish Campaign of 1939,” with a particular emphasis on three facts: that the war consisted of a series of campaigns, that the world conflict began with the German attack on Poland, and that the Polish Army continued defensive operations until the first days of October (Rezmer, 2009).

Historical overviews of the Second World War usually touch on the imposition of a new administrative division of Polish territories, but little if any attention is paid to the German terror directed against the Polish civilian population in the autumn of 1939. Authors tend to focus on crimes committed by the Wehrmacht or the Einsatzgruppen, completely omitting another criminal organization – Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz, which is key to understanding the developments in Pomerania (Datner, 1967; Bojarska, 1987; Böhler, 2009; Ceran, Mazanowska & Przegiętka, 2021). Most often described are the executions and the German *AB-Aktion* in the General Government, and this serves to marginalize the importance of the earlier acts of extermination perpetrated on Polish lands incorporated into the Reich. And even if the mass murders of Polish civilians in the Western Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic are mentioned, this is rarely accompanied by observations on and an analysis of the geographical variability of the German terror. As a result, only individual execution sites are recognized. What is more, it was not only the Polish intelligentsia

³ Other publications place the number at 635, 693 or 708 bodies exhumed in Tryszczyn (Jastrzębski, 2017, p. 73).

– murdered under the *Intelligenzaktion* – that was the victim of the first months of the Nazi occupation; the Germans executed numerous farmers, workers and Jews, with the fate of the latter being a portent of the Holocaust. As Jochen Böhler writes:

by the end of 1939, the *Selbstschutz* death squads and the Security Police task groups had murdered more than 40,000 people in total; approx. 30,000 perished in Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreussen, 10,000 in Reichsgau Wartheland, 1,500 in eastern Upper Silesia, and 1,000 in Regierungsbezirk Zichenau. 5,000 people were executed in the General Government for the Occupied Polish Region. Moreover, at least 7,000 Jews were murdered in the occupied Polish lands by the end of the year (Böhler, 2011, p. 170).

Although the above numbers are just an estimate, they clearly show that in 1939 the epicenter of terror was not in the General Government, but in the lands incorporated into the Reich – especially in Gdańsk Pomerania, the “Pomeranian heart of darkness.” The German occupation policy in the annexed territories was far from homogenous, which entailed the implementation of diverse administrative methods with varying intensity.

Stanisław Salmonowicz, the doyen of Polish historians of law, observed in his memoirs that

the world, and even Polish society and the Polish historiography of the Second World War, never fully exposed – outside the regional context – the specific character of German crimes perpetrated in Pomerania during the first period of occupation (Salmonowicz, 2014, p. 48).

In an effort to change that I proposed the introduction of a new concept into the historiography of the Second World War, namely that of the “Pomeranian crime of 1939” (Ceran, 2017; polemic: Mazurkiewicz, 2018; Ceran, 2019a). I have used this term to describe the extermination of approx. 30,000 people, mainly from the Polish civilian population – the intelligentsia, farmers, workers, Jews and psychiatric patients, carried out at over 400 sites in the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship in the first months of German occupation. At the time, the German terror did not assume such massive proportions in any other region of occupied Poland.

Topical literature has hitherto lacked a common term for the events that took place in Pomerania in the autumn of 1939, which I believe to be an important reason for their limited presence in both world history and historical awareness. We continue to view the German occupation of Poland from the perspective of the General Government: the armed struggle,

the Warsaw Uprising, and the Holocaust (even though Auschwitz was situated in the territories annexed to the Reich). Even if some attention is paid to the western parts of Poland, it is usually limited to Greater Poland – which was to become an exemplary Reichsgau, the Wartheland – while Pomerania is commonly mentioned only in the context of the Battle of Westerplatte and KL Stutthof. Some historians refer to the first months of the occupation in Gdańsk Pomerania as the “bloody Pomeranian autumn” (Berendt, 2009, p. 7), but the term invokes the Nazi concept of “bloody Sunday”; so far, this issue has not been properly researched. The terms “pogrom” or “massacre” would also be inappropriate, as they suggest that the extermination was a spontaneous, unplanned and one-off event. In my opinion, the descriptor “the German Katyn of 1939” (Lisiak, 2014) is also incorrect. Katyn was a uniquely Soviet crime, and, further, the Pomeranian atrocities actually bear more resemblance to the methodical killings that occurred in Volhynia. Nevertheless, it is the perpetrators’ terminology that has been most widely adopted, with the mass murders of civilians – often extremely brutal – being referred to as “actions” (*Intelligenzaktion* – “action against the intelligentsia,” *Gewaltaktion* – “action of force,” *Säuberungsaktion* – “cleansing action” (Drywa, 2015) or *Ausrottungsaktion* – “extermination action,” *Vergeltungsaktion* – “reprisal action, revenge”) or the “political cleansing of the corridor” (*politische Flurbereinigung*). Moreover, the term *Intelligenzaktion*⁴ does not include the Pomeranian Jews and thousands of psychiatric patients who were murdered at the same time, by the same perpetrators, and in the same death pits as the Polish intelligentsia.

In describing the autumn of 1939 in Gdańsk Pomerania, historians have hitherto referenced the German administrative division of the Polish lands. However, one may proceed differently and adopt the administrative division of the Second Polish Republic. In order to understand the mechanism of the Pomeranian crime, it is essential to focus on the chief perpetrator (apart from the *Einsatzgruppen*) – the paramilitary *Selbstschutz Westpreussen*, which was composed of local Germans and known for its brutality and lawlessness. Its six inspectorates covered the entire pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship⁵, and not the Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreussen, as the latter did not yet exist. The decree on the annexation of Polish lands to the Reich entered into force on 26 October 1939; by that date, the extermination campaign had already begun, while the *Selbstschutz* had been active in Pomerania since mid-September. Both the *Einsatzgruppen* and

4 In her still seminal work on German crimes committed in Gdańsk Pomerania in 1939, Barbara Bojarska devoted separate fragments to the extermination of Jews and psychiatric patients, but this could hardly be seen – in accordance with the title of her book – as part of the extermination of the Polish intelligentsia (Bojarska, 1972).

5 Until November 1939, the *Selbstschutz Westpreussen* was also active in the district of Działdowo, which in 1938 was moved from the voivodeship of Pomerania to that of Warsaw.

the Selbstschutz carried on their activities until the end of 1939. And although the executions of psychiatric patients in Szęgawsk, Piaśnica and Chojnice were conducted also at the beginning of 1940, the primary extermination campaign was concluded in the first year of occupation. It was for this reason that I decided to use only the year 1939 in my term for the crime (Ceran, 2018b, pp. 31–35).

Such a definition of the spatial and temporal scope of the Pomeranian crime seems to be more precise than those widely used to refer to the extermination of the Polish civilian population during the Second World War. As is commonly known, the victims of the Katyn Massacre of 1940 were murdered and buried not only in Katyn, but also in Kharkov, Mednoye, and in the vicinity of Minsk and Kiev, whereas the Volhynia Massacre of 1943 (in fact, the murders continued until 1945) was perpetrated not only in the Volhynian Voivodeship, but also in the pre-war voivodeships of Stanisławów and Tarnopol and partially in the voivodeships of Lwów, Lublin and Polesie. Volhynia and the year 1943 were the apogee. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to imagine that contemporary historiography and education could dispense with these imprecise but fundamental concepts in promoting an understanding of the Polish experience of the Second World War. The term “the Pomeranian crime of 1939” should be similarly incorporated into the scientific and didactic discourse. All these concepts function as metonymic figures of speech – means of linguistic expression that enhance the emotionality and suggestiveness of statements, while at the same time ensuring their conciseness. They are historical keywords that allow us to adequately name and locate historical events (Ceran & Sprenger, 2019).

Characteristic elements of the Pomeranian crime of 1939 include:

- German propaganda, which presented the Pomeranian Voivodeship as the “Pomeranian corridor,” the very existence of which was the greatest ignominy of the Versailles Treaty and the source of untold harm to the German nation (Heiss, Lohse & Wucher, 1939; Peter, 1939; Król, 1996, pp. 223–226, 274–279);
- exploitation of the death of *Volksdeutsche*s who had been killed by Polish Army units in Bydgoszcz and its environs on 3 and 4 September 1939 during a counter-sabotage operation to justify a mass extermination campaign⁶;
- incarceration of Polish civilians in detention camps, their abuse and subsequent shooting in death pits located mostly in forests surrounding larger towns; the victims were often murdered with great brutality, using blunt instruments such as shovels and rifle butts (Jastrzębski, 1974; Jastrzębski & Sziling, 1979, pp. 88–95);

6 On the events in Bydgoszcz, see Chinciński & Machcewicz, 2008.

- utilization in the mass extermination of Poles – in addition to the Wehrmacht and the Einsatzgruppen – of the German minority’s Selbstschutz Westpreussen (Jansen & Weckbecker, 1992; Mazanowska & Ceran, 2016); the Pomeranian crime was thus partly a crime committed by neighbor against neighbor – the participation of the Selbstschutz in atrocities against Polish civilians was much less pronounced in other regions of the country;
- appearance of the “Righteous” in the Western Borderlands, i.e. sporadic cases when local Germans provided help in order to save their Polish neighbors, usually motivated by (extra) ordinary human decency (Ceran, 2019b); sometimes local ties and interpersonal relations proved stronger than propaganda and wartime moral decay;
- implementation of mass extermination as the primary method of occupation policy aimed at the de-Polonization (*Entpolonisierung*) of Polish Pomerania and its transformation into a racially “pure,” Germanic Prussia (Wardzyńska, 2009, p. 144; Böhler, Mallmann & Matthäus, 2009, pp. 196–197); to this end, the local leaders – mainly teachers and clergymen, who worked towards the regaining of independence and making Pomerania a part of the reborn Polish state – were murdered;
- interconnection of three exterminatory actions in the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship: the murder of the Polish intelligentsia, the killing of psychiatric patients (including those transported from the Reich), and the liquidation of Pomeranian Jews; those who were not shot dead were soon deported, and thus the “Jewish question” in Pomerania was “solved” by the Germans by the end of 1939 (Sziling, 1992, p. 88);
- obliteration of traces of the crime, conducted in 1944 under Sonderaktion 1005 (Special Action 1005). It involved the exhumation and incineration of corpses from 24 Pomeranian execution sites, including the three largest – Piaśnica, Szpęgawsk and Mniszek; apart from the purposeful destruction of German files, this is the main reason why the number of victims cannot be fully estimated (Hoffmann, 2013, pp. 400–404; Berendt, 2016, p. 340);
- avoidance of criminal liability by a vast majority of the perpetrators, epitomized by the commander of Selbstschutz Westpreussen, a former adjutant to Heinrich Himmler who died in Argentina in 1970; when asked about his Nazi past in the German consulate, he replied: “Meine Papiere habe ich verbrannt, Adolf Hitler habe ich nicht gekannt”⁷ (Ceran, 2014, pp. 38–39).

7 “I have burned my papers, while I never knew Adolf Hitler.”

The Pomeranian crime of 1939 constituted that part of the German occupation policy in Poland, which – in line with the interpretation of Rafał Lemkin, a Polish lawyer of Jewish origin and the originator of the term – would come to be labeled “genocide.” Although the concept itself has become politicized and is greatly overused or not defined at all, it should not be abandoned (cf. Machcewicz, 2014, pp. 229–230). Instead, it would be advisable to return to its original meaning and the intentions of its creator. It is impossible to overlook the importance of the events which occurred in occupied Poland for the birth of the concept of genocide. In his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, published in 1944, in which he first defined this notion, Lemkin wrote thus:

If one uses the term “Germanization” of the Poles, for example, in this connotation, it means that the Poles, as human beings, are preserved and that only the national pattern of the Germans is imposed upon them. Such a term is much too restricted to apply to a process in which the population is attacked, in a physical sense, and is removed and supplanted by populations of the oppressor nations (Lemkin, 1944, p. 80).⁸

Lemkin perceived genocide as a process comprising eight genocidal techniques, and thus wrote about social, economic, cultural, political, physical, biological, religious and moral genocide. They were aimed at the disintegration of political, social and cultural institutions, as well as the destruction of the language and national feelings, religion, the foundations of the economic existence of the group, personal security, liberty, health and identity. The Polish lawyer neither hierarchized the techniques of genocide nor specified whether we can speak of genocide only if all eight of them are deployed. However, there can be hardly any doubt that physical genocide, that is the mass killing of members of a group solely because they belong to that group, plays a key role in Lemkin’s concept. The Pomeranian crime of 1939, similarly to other German crimes from 1939, was not an incidental massacre, as Daniel Brewing claims, but part of a planned and well-organized extermination policy, which was portrayed in propaganda as an act of self-defense and righteous revenge on the Polish murderers of the Volksdeutsche (Brewing, 2019). The Pomeranian crime was nothing less than physical genocide, but at the same time it was an element of the holistic genocidal policy pursued by the Germans in Gdańsk Pomerania and throughout occupied Poland. What sets it apart is that in 1939, it was in the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship that this most radical technique of genocide was applied to the greatest extent. The term

8 The first edition, written in English, was published in 1944 in Washington.

“the Pomeranian crime of 1939” was coined, among others, in order to make this fact widely known.

The term “genocide” as defined by Rafał Lemkin was used by Polish prosecutors and judges during the seven main trials held before the Supreme National Tribunal in the years 1946–1948. Their goal was not only to convict the perpetrators, but also to describe the totality of the German occupation of Polish lands. All the trials were concluded before the adoption of the Convention of the United Nations on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, in other words before the concept of genocide appeared as a legal term. However, in the substantiation of the sentence passed against Albert Forster, the Gauleiter of Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreussen, the word “genocide” appears three times. The verdict notes that:

In the years 1939–1941 – an exceptionally bloody chapter in the period of Hitlerite rule in Gdańsk and Pomerania – the Hitlerite bands which he trained during his period of activity in Gdańsk, acting on his instructions and under his supervision, committed the most hideous crime a man could commit, namely that of genocide (Cyprian & Sawicki, 1962, pp. 286–287).

The term was used chiefly to emphasize the physical extermination of the Polish and Jewish civilian population in the first months of the occupation; the extermination which I named “the Pomeranian crime of 1939.”⁹ It was also used to demonstrate the difference between the 19th-century policy of Germanization of these lands and 20th-century German occupation policy during the Second World War. Further on in the substantiation it was observed:

In contrast to the Hohenzollern Germanization of these lands before 1919, which had similar aims but used different – albeit also murderous – methods, the Hitlerite system of government sought to achieve its goal by means of outright genocide (Cyprian & Sawicki, 1962, p. 274).

We can talk of the significance of the Pomeranian crime of 1939 in several contexts. In the regional context, using one common term allows us to recognize and commemorate the victims not only of individual Pomeranian execution sites, but of all such locations – some 400 – in the

9 A web portal devoted to this subject was launched in 2019: www.zbrodniapomorska1939.pl.

region, both the smaller ones, where only individuals were shot, and the death pits in which hundreds or thousands were murdered. Instead, therefore, of single trees, we can see the whole forest of German crimes in Pomerania. Moreover, without the events from 1939 we cannot properly understand the nature of the German occupation in Pomerania in subsequent years of the war, for instance the impossibility of organizing a large-scale underground movement. Many of the victims were potential members of the resistance, and that is why the Germans deliberately murdered them at the onset of hostilities. One common term may also elevate these events from the local or regional sphere to the realm of national history, where they properly belong, thus introducing them to the historical awareness of the entire Polish nation. Perhaps it will finally become common knowledge that in Poland in 1939 the greatest German crimes were committed not in the General Government or the Wartheland, but in Gdańsk Pomerania.

The Pomeranian crime of 1939, understood as the onset of genocide in accordance with Lemkin's definition, has also a profound – though as yet unappreciated – significance for the general history of the Second World War. As Peter Longerich has noted:

With its mass shootings and killings of the sick in Poland, the Hitlerite regime crossed the threshold to a systematic, racially motivated policy of extermination almost two years before the mass murder of Jews commenced in 1941 (Longerich, 2017, p. 839).

It is thus impossible to omit the importance of the events which developed in Pomerania, for it was in 1939 in Poland that the Germans first applied genocidal methods of occupation. Their victims were the residents of the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship. It was there during the Second World War that the landscape was contaminated¹⁰ earliest and to the greatest degree.

In her Nobel Lecture, delivered in Stockholm eighty years after the outbreak of the Second World War, Olga Tokarczuk observed: "A thing that happens and is not told ceases to exist and perishes." The history of the Pomeranian crime of 1939 should therefore be told and retold – both nationally and internationally.

(transl. by Aleksandra Arumińska)

¹⁰ For more about the metaphor of the "contaminated landscape", see Martin Pollack (Pollack, 2014, pp. 19–20).

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