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Kielce Village Museum

Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów

KIELCE PROVINCE VILLAGES DURING WORLD WAR II

The plan to exploit the Polish lands and to gradually ruin the Polish nation had been created by the leaders of the Third Reich before World War II even began. Therefore, the totality of German crimes against Poles and other nationalities must be considered as deliberate and planned actions. The occupier aimed to subjugate the Polish people and ultimately exterminate them after winning the war.

In September 1939, Kielce Province came under the control of the Wehrmacht. During the 55 days of Wehrmacht rule (1 September – 25 October 1939), its frontline units committed numerous crimes against the inhabitants of the rural areas of Kielce Province. Random residents of conquered villages were killed on sight. Residents of the following villages met their demise in this way: Lelów, Ślężany, Szczekociny, Koniecpol, Wodzisław, Chmielnik, Daleszyce and others. The Germans would often terrorise the villages they conquered by killing off parts of their populations. 80 people were killed in Lipsk, 50 in Pińczów and 30 in Miechów. The Germans also killed civilians in retaliation whenever they met with resistance from the Polish Army. After the Battle of Krasna (6 September), German soldiers killed 24 people in the village itself and the nearby village of Komorów, including 4 Jews and 3 POWs. Civilians were also frequently used as human shields. This was the case during the battles fought near Odrzywół, where seven people died as a result. Starting in mid-September, Wehrmacht, gendarmerie and Ordnungspolizei units began to arrest and execute Poles, primarily members of the intelligentsia, political and social activists, as well as Jews. It is also important to note that Polish POWs were also executed.

After completing their operations in Poland, Germany incorporated the western lands of the Second Republic into the Third Reich, and established the General Government (henceforth GG) on its central territories, with its capital in Kraków. The GG was divided into four districts: Kraków, Lublin, Radom and Warsaw. In 1941, the District of Galicia was also incorporated. The German administrators divided the District of Radom into ten counties: Busko, Jędrzejów, Kielce, Końskie, Opatów, Radom, Radomsko, Starachowice, Piotrków and Tomaszów Mazowiecki. In addition, the district also included three special cities:

Częstochowa, Kielce and Radom. For the purposes of this article, the author considers Kielce Province to be the area between the Vistula and the Pilica rivers, with the addition of the territories of Radomsko and Tomaszów Counties, which are located on the eastern bank of the Pilica.

After 26 October 1939, German civil administrators took full control of Kielce Province. While the terror tactics employed by the Germans during the war of 1939 served to help carry out the Blitzkrieg strategy, violence became a means of governance during the six years of occupation that followed. Often, the terror assumed the form of mass-scale, random strikes against defenceless civilians. Poles were murdered by Wehrmacht, Einsatzgruppen and Selbstschutz units, as well as by the SS and Waffen SS, the Gestapo, police and, rarely, other formations, i.e. Forstschutz (Forest Protection), Bahnschutz (Railway), Werkschutz (Industrial) and Sonderdienst (auxiliary formations), as well as civilian public administrators.

Most acts of repression were not even carried out under any procedural pretences. Police and gendarmerie units were given the power to use violence as they saw fit against the Polish people, regardless of age and sex. Collective responsibility was frequently enforced. The purported reason was violating German administrative orders and helping those who acted to the detriment of the Third Reich, i.e. guerrillas, people who were negligent in making their mandatory contributions and saboteurs. It was also strictly forbidden to help Jews in any way. Despite the threat of punishment, Kielce villages did not renounce their Polishness and supported all resistance efforts. For this, the local people became targets of German punitive expeditions, merciless repressions and extermination.

The first pretext used by the Germans to terrorise Kielce Province was the activity of the Polish Army Detachment commanded by Major Henryk "Hubal" Dobrzański. The "Hubal Pacification Operations" ("Aktion Hubal") took place between 30 March and 11 April 1940. As a result of these operations, 712 people were shot, and 600 farms were burnt to the ground (the following villages were razed in their entirety: Gałki, Hucisko, Szałas Stary, Skłoby), 200 people were imprisoned (two of them died due to the injuries they sustained during interrogation) and 24 were sent to concentration camps.

Roundups and deportations to concentration camps were also used as means of repressing the rural population. A new form of forced labour was implemented – the Baudienst (construction service). The German authorities ordered inhabitants of rural areas to be resettled. The northern part of the District of Radom became the target of such resettlements in 1941. The local people were deported to make room for a proving ground. Allegations of possessing firearms were also a frequent excuse for arrests and executions.

Farmers constituted a large share of inmates in German jails and prisons. Repressions against the rural areas of Kielce Province began in 1939, and lasted until 1945 with varying intensity.

In 1942, acts of terror intensified in response to villagers harbouring Jews. Help offered to Jews by Poles was a response to the increasingly strict German policy of exterminating the former. A German penal expedition shot eight Poles and two Jews, in addition to burning alive 13 Poles (including women and children) in Ciepielów Stary for helping Jews on 6 December 1942. On that same day, the expedition also burnt alive ten Poles in Rekówka.

Helping Red Army soldiers who had escaped German POW camps and often attempted to form guerrilla units was also prohibited under pain of punishment. The residents of the villages of Talczyn, Łysaków, Zawały and Rajsk were pacified by the Germans for that reason.

Initially, repressions were only targeted against individual families and their farms. It was not until 1942, and especially the spring, summer and autumn of 1943, that such operations became more frequent. The gendarmerie most frequently murdered all residents and burnt the houses and other buildings to the ground. The most frequent reason for pacification was the alleged participation of some residents in the resistance movement or helping guerrilla units.

Local German colonists often contributed to repressing the Polish population. As an example, after the pacification of Skałka Polska (11 May 1943), the belongings of those killed were pillaged by the Volksdeutsche from the neighbouring village of Antoniów. The punitive expedition to Skałka Polska murdered 91 people, including 18 children under seven years of age and 21 aged 7 to 18, 23 women under 18 years of age and 29 men aged 18 and above.

The Kielce village of Michniów, in which 204 people were killed (according to latest estimates), became the symbol of the martyrdom of Polish villages during World War II. The residents' close ties to the local guerrilla units were one of the main pretexts for pacification. The tragedy which took place on 12 and 13 July 1943 was utilised by the Polish underground propaganda office to demonstrate the extent of German cruelty, and was also a form of protest against similar terror tactics. In order to inform more people about the pacification of Michniów, the scouts from the Grey Ranks of Suchedniów organised a propaganda operation. Along the railway tracks leading from Warsaw to Kraków, they set up signs which blamed the German army for the deaths of the residents of Michniów: *Waffen SS haben hier im Dorf Michniów 200 Männer, Frauen und Kinder ermordet und dieses Dorf verbrannt*. Another

frequently-used slogan was *Deutsche Katyń*, which compared the tragedy to the murder of Polish officers at the hands of Soviet authorities. The slogan was damning, especially considering that the Germans openly considered the Katyń massacre to be an act of genocide and a flagrant violation of the rules of war.

Ties to guerrilla units constituted a frequent excuse used by the occupiers for repressing rural residents. It is important to note that Kielce Province, just like the rest of occupied Poland, was part of the Polish Underground State. The underground administration was led by the Radomsko-Kielce District Delegate of the Government of the Republic of Poland. His field equivalents were county delegates. In parallel to the secret civilian administration, the Polish Armed Forces (i.e. Service to Poland's Victory) were the military branch of the underground, later renamed the Union of Armed Struggle and the Home Army. They were supported by the Farmers' Battalions, the National Military Organisation, the National Armed forces, the People's Guard (later transformed into the People's Army) and numerous other independent organisations, such as the White Eagle Organisation, the Grey Ranks, *Jędrusie* (lit. Little Andrews), *Spaleni* (lit. the Burnt Ones) and *Muszkieterowie* (the Musketeers).

Kielce Province was second only to Lublin Province in its armed efforts to repel the occupier. More than 10,000 operations against the Germans were carried out in this area during World War II. The fighting was at its most intense in the summer of 1944, when Kielce Province became witness to a guerrilla war on the territory of Poland.

In the first half of 1944, the Germans changed their approach to the rural inhabitants of Kielce Province. These changes were a result of shifting frontlines and the increased activity of guerrilla units. The number of pacifications and arsons declined. On the other hand, mass arrests increased in number, and those apprehended were sent to concentration camps or shot in places designated for mass executions. The number of prisoner executions also increased. Manhunts spanning several villages at a time became a new tool of repression. Operation April was one such manhunt, carried out in Kozienice County between 4 and 5 April 1944. In total, 430 Poles were captured, 19 of which were publicly executed. The remaining prisoners were sent to concentration camps.

After the frontline stabilised in the autumn of 1944, the Germans began their efforts to exterminate all guerrilla units. Even though their targets were primarily members of the resistance and guerrilla fighters, inhabitants of rural areas suffered as well. These expeditions were less cruel to rural populations and resulted in fewer shootings, but the number of people sent to concentration camps increased. The material losses suffered as a result were also

significant – the goal was to ruin these villages. During Operation Waldkater in Przysucha Forests on 26 September 1944, 50 civilians were captured (some of them were executed), and four villages were burnt to the ground: Kurzacze, Budy, Gałki and Stefanów. After the Battle of Gruszka (29-30 September 1944), German police units burnt all the remaining buildings in Gruszka, Jóźwików and Mularzów, killing 30 Poles, sending 33 to concentration camps and 32 to the Third Reich to perform forced labour. Guerrilla interventions were able to successfully thwart the Germans on several occasions, and the fighters themselves were becoming increasingly more active at the time. The pacification of Radoszyce (3 September 1944) is an example of such an intervention. The Germans killed 19 residents, but were driven out of town before they were able to raze it.

The terror tactics and pacifications in Kielce Province were usually the domain of the Ordnungspolizei (the gendarmerie and militarised police units, i.e. the 1st Motorised Gendarmerie Battalion, the 3rd Battalion of the 17th Police Regiment, the 1st and 2nd Battalion of the 22nd Police Regiment). These were also often accompanied by Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei – Sipo) and Security Service (Sicherheitsdienst – SD) units. With the frontline shifting ever closer, the Wehrmacht and the eastern collaborating units began to roam the area more frequently in 1944, in addition to their active participation in operations targeting civilians in the whole of Kielce Province.

Lieutenant Albert Schuster, commander of the 62nd Motorised Gendarmerie Regiment, was one of the oppressors. He led more than a dozen terrorist expeditions in the Świętokrzyskie Mountains. By July 1943, the people of Bartoszowiny, Huta Szklana, Płucki, Jeziorko, Dębno, Wola Szczygiełkowa and Krajno, among others, fell victim to him. Lieutenant Schuster and his unit killed more than 400 people from March to July 1943.

The goal of these repressions was not only to ensure obedience, but also to collect the mandatory crop contributions imposed on Polish villages by the occupier. German authorities robbed and economically exploited Polish rural areas. Farmers were forced to perform mandatory construction labour, provide the oppressors with horses and large amounts of food. With the deterioration of the Reich's military and economic situation, the already considerable mandatory contributions were increased even further. Failing to meet the required quota could mean imprisonment, being sent to a penal or concentration camp, or death, and the contributions themselves were collected in an increasingly ruthless manner. The required amounts were more than the farmers could handle. This economic exploitation of Polish agriculture led to a significant impoverishment of the rural population.

Food sabotage was a means of combating these contributions. Farmers would poison their milk and destroy contribution documentation. Guerrilla units organised operations targeted at cattle ear taggers, collection points and the German units protecting them. In 1942, the Farmers' Battalions' HQ formed Special Units, whose task was to perform sabotage and diversionary operations, in particular, aimed at destroying documents stored in German labour offices. It also ordered for the resistance efforts against deportations to forced labour camps to be increased. FB units had to meet a quota of at least five operations in each county.

Another form of exploiting Polish rural areas was deporting their population to the Third Reich to perform forced labour. The General Government's authorities were consistent in providing the German economy with cheap workforce. 244,000 people were deported from the District of Radom between 1939 and 1945. To combat the increasing number of deportations, the Polish underground engaged in a war with the German administration, e.g. by destroying its documentation.

The economic exploitation of Polish villages led to a decline in the quality of life of their residents. Therefore, the villagers themselves often opted to take up work in German industrial plants. Another reason was that, in addition to the meagre compensation, the workers were also provided small amounts of food. Thus, the plants employed both their pre-war crews and new workers, many of them coming from the neighbouring villages. The Jewish population was also forced to work.

The Third Reich exploited the Polish industry. The factories manufactured goods for the occupier, and the natural resources were overharvested. Considering that Kielce Province was where the Germans located their arms factories, the area became of great importance to the German military. Sabotage was the most frequently-used method of fighting against the occupier in the underground. While acts of sabotage were initially spontaneous occurrences, they grew to become organised underground operations. Members of the resistance employed in German factories were able to lower the productivity of the factories in Skarżysko-Kamienna (Hugo Schneider AG – “Hasag”), Ostrowiec and Starachowice (Reichswerke AG für Berg- und Hüttenbetriebe – Herman Göring Werke), Radom (Steyer-Daimler-Puch AG) and Pionki (Westfälische Sprengstoffwerke – “Wasag”) by up to 30%. Industrial sabotage resulted in losses such as wasted resources, lower throughput and damaged equipment. At the same time, the factories secretly produced weapons for the guerrillas. These acts of sabotage did not go unanswered, however. The Germans introduced stricter control measures, organised mass roundups and carried out arrests. The factories in Skarżysko and Pionki soon

witnessed many tragedies of their Polish and Jewish workers caught in the act, as well as people brought over from Gestapo jails and prisons.

According to investigation results obtained by Judge Andrzej Jankowski from the County Commission for Investigating Nazi Crimes in Kielce (modern-day Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for Prosecuting Crimes against the Polish Nation), the initial pacification operations of 1940 were supposed to terrorise Polish society and do away with its elites. The acts of terror carried out in villages in 1941 were aimed at exploiting Polish agriculture more intensely and providing the Reich with cheap labour. The operations carried out in 1942 were supposed to crush the armed resistance movement and stop all Poles from helping Jews. The brutal and merciless punitive expeditions of 1943 were an attempt at neutralising the local guerrilla units. All these measures proved to be ineffective. The Germans failed to destroy the resistance and eliminate the guerrillas. It is also important to note that the acts of terror declined in number in comparison with the activity of the resistance.

On the whole, according to various estimates, the Germans (and other nationalities in their service) murdered 112,997 people in Kielce Province, temporarily arrested 83,328, sent 70,276 to concentration camps, and sent 215,382 to perform compulsory labour in the Third Reich between 1939 and 1945. The number of mass executions (of ten or more people) carried out by the Germans was 221, and 4300 people were killed as a result.