

## BECOMING HITLER'S ARMY: NAZI KILLERS AND THE MAKING OF GENOCIDAL WARFARE

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### Introduction

In 1939 the pace of history was accelerating, and the continent of Europe spiralling towards war. On Germany's eastern border lay a patchwork of what Hitler perceived as small and weak countries. As part of that patchwork, Poland represented just one of many countries with which Germany had a score to settle. Promising renewal and redemption of German destiny in the post-World War One world, Hitler swore he would send his armies plunging across the Polish border from the north, west, and south, and wipe Poland from the map.

By mid-summer 1939 Germany was poised like Japan and Italy to use war to tear apart the existing world order. With his personal power unchallenged, Hitler exerted it to turn the German state towards war, refusing to allow either Britain or France to frustrate his desire for violence. Hitler's series of occupations in Eastern Europe eventually brought him to unveil demands on Poland for the restoration of the port of Danzig and the Polish Corridor, which was established to separate East Prussia from the rest of Germany.

Refusing German demands and intimidation, the Polish government stated that any attempt by the Germans to take over Danzig would result in war. Hitler was willing to bring war to both Germany and Poland, and informed his military leaders to prepare, not only for the occupation of Danzig, but for all of Poland. Hitler was not the first to assert that the liquidation of Poland was a primary German objective. General Hans von Seeckt, Commander-in-Chief of the Army (*Oberbefehlshaber des Heeres*) in 1922, had put the case about as strongly as it could be made, "the obliteration of Poland must be one of the fundamental drives of German policy [...]."<sup>1</sup> All spring and summer, the world speculated as to what would happen. With the fall of Czechoslovakia, Germany surrounded Poland on three sides. The summer passed with feverish activity in the German army

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson 2009, p. 6-7.

general staff (*Generalstab des Heeres*). On a lower level, the government was trying to avoid war, while the upper echelons worked towards war.

For the soldiers of the Wehrmacht forces, the use of violence against civilians and non-combatants was justified as military necessity. In other words, Wehrmacht forces sought the security of military lines of communication, the defence of their units against partisan and guerilla forces operating behind enemy lines, as well as the pacification of civilian populations in order to maintain calm and order while military operations were still underway during the September campaign. Their response, while wholly brutal and extreme, was understood by the Wehrmacht as a necessary measure and response against resistance from Polish civilians.

Hitler launched his war on the Poles at daybreak, on Friday, 1 September 1939. The war began as the Wehrmacht crossed the frontier at several points with fifty-three divisions. Many of the soldiers who stormed across the frontier were willing executioners, killers, and extremists of the Third Reich. Though not as ideologically extreme as the SS or the *Einsatzgruppen*, the Wehrmacht acquiesced and at many points, became a direct participant of Hitler's campaigns of annihilation and extermination. The German invasion of Poland was no spontaneous outburst of destruction. It was a co-ordinated and campaign that contained elements of indiscriminate murder that prefigured in Genocide.

The situation as it looked to General Walter von Brauchitsch, *Oberbefehlshaber des Heeres*, and General Fedor von Bock, who led Army Group North, on the fifth day of the attack was recorded by General Franz Halder in his war diary (*Kriegstagebuch*), which read "the enemy is practically beaten."<sup>2</sup> On the afternoon of 8 September, the 4th Panzer Division reached the outskirts of the Polish capital, while directly south of the city, the Wehrmacht rolled up from Silesia to the junction at the Vistula and San rivers. Polish military dispositions were unwise and their numbers and equipment proved no match for their assailants. Within forty-eight hours the Polish air force ceased to exist and there was no opposition to German aircraft as they bombed open towns and strafed crowds of fleeing refugees. On 22 August 1939, as final preparations were being made for the invasion, Hitler told his leading generals how he envisaged the coming war with Poland:

Our strength lies in our speed and our brutality. Genghis Khan hunted millions of women and children to their deaths, consciously and with a joyous heart. History sees in him only the great founder of a modern state

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<sup>2</sup> Shirer 1995, p. 625.

[...] Thus, so far only in the east, I have put my Death's Head formations at the ready with the command to send man, woman and child of Polish descent and language to their deaths, pitilessly and remorselessly [...] Poland will be depopulated and settled with Germans.<sup>3</sup>

The German invasion of Poland introduced a new dynamic to the history of warfare. This was brought about by Nazism's path of militaristic rule, which was based on the belief of German racial supremacy. Germany's assault on Poland also revealed the revolutionary impact of technological warfare, violent new military doctrine of an all-mechanized force concentrated against small and vulnerable fronts, as well as shameful theories of racial supremacy that served as pretext to unprecedented plans to re-draw the racial map of Europe. As Richard Bessel argues, "Nazism was inseparable from war" and "as a political ideology, Nazism revolved around war and struggle."<sup>4</sup> Behind the formal machinery of the Nazi régime and so interwoven into its fabric that it was impossible to disentangle the two was racially motivated hatred and a territorial expansion. The language of war was rarely absent from the propaganda of the Nazi movement and the Nazi régime. Its racist and xenophobic ideology and political movement was the crux of violence, of extermination and destruction, of cold-blooded murder and racist war that eventually engulfed what was once considered the nucleus of the civilized world.

This study explores the relationship between the Nazi leadership and Wehrmacht command during Germany's preparations for its war of extermination against Poland in 1939. The German army's military violence against civilians and non-combatants cannot be limited to the years of war considered to be the 'ideological' war (1941-1945), but must include Germany's military operations during the so-called 'clean' war as well. Accordingly, *Fall Weiss* - translated as Case White or Operation White, which was the name of Germany's master military plan for the invasion of Poland, and a massive exercise in mobile warfare (*Bewegungskrieg*), should be regarded as the Wehrmacht's initial participation in atrocities during the Second World War in Europe. Therefore the concept of 'clean war' is an empty term. Since a great extent of men within the German army were killers who confronted the reality of their actions in severe ways and willingly accepted what they were asked to do, a dynamic formed that was part of a gradual acculturation to extreme violence in Eastern Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> Evans 2009, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Bessel 2004, p. 1.

The most prevalent theme in this study is willingness. As officers employed measures in which homes and villages were razed, and civilians brutalized, their willingness to kill civilians and destroy possessions was clearly demonstrated. This wanton violence, and disregard for human life legitimized the violence that escalated. The Wehrmacht soldiers' willingness is also made possible as German security needs gave soldiers the opportunity to commit crimes against civilians and soldiers alike under the pretext of military defensive measures and pacification operations. In this sense it is important to underscore the inherent difference in the reasons why soldiers of the Wehrmacht and of the SS expressed themselves through excessive violence. For the SS, the use of disproportionate aggression and violence against civilians branded for death was purely for the fulfillment of ideological aims and objectives as established by the Hitler, Himmler, and Heydrich.

Recognizing the existence of the Wehrmacht's conduct in Poland helps make comprehensible the origins of its conduct later in the war, including its involvement in genocide. *Fall Weiss* can be seen as the prelude to the war of annihilation, and with it the genesis of genocide because the attack at the time was not only on the military adversary, but was directed against all of Polish society. While Germany's military leadership may have feared starting a general European war, most German commanders shared Hitler's desire to see Poland obliterated. Once the decision for attack was made, fear of and disdain for Poland's civilian population informed Wehrmacht preparations for the invasion and facilitated co-operation between it and the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, Nazi Party Defence Organization or the Führer's 'Praetorian Guard'). This motivation impacts the perspective that historians can take on the alleged 'clean' war.

### **The German Army and Genocide**

There are elements of the German invasion of Poland that presaged events later in the war. Omer Bartov notes that the callous behaviour of German troops toward Poles and Jews in 1939 revealed "the potential for ideologically determined brutality" that became commonplace in the occupied Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Bartov further argues that the 'barbarization' of the war in the USSR led to increasing violence against civilians and greater complicity by the Wehrmacht. While this is not an unrealistic argument, recent scholarship suggests that such proclivities existed and were executed much earlier, even before the influence of the ideologically-charged Russian campaign. Theo Schulte concludes in his study of Wehrmacht occupation

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<sup>5</sup> Bartov 1991, p. 61.

policy in the Soviet Union that “the military records for 1939 contain instructions [...] which clearly parallel those later introduced in the Rear Areas of the Soviet Union.”<sup>6</sup> These instructions included the use of massive reprisals against civilians that were carried-out by Wehrmacht troops “in a manner reminiscent of the policies [...] adopted in Poland.”<sup>7</sup>

The few historical studies of the war in Poland also allude to the criminal nature of the Wehrmacht policies and the behaviour of German military personnel. In his work on the *Einsatzgruppen* and the Wehrmacht, Helmut Krausnick reveals evidence of significant co-operation between the Wehrmacht and the SS whereby numerous incidents of murder, rape, arson, and plundering were committed by ordinary soldiers of the Wehrmacht. Hans Umbreit and Richard Lukas both describe incidents during the Polish campaign, which are strikingly comparable to events that took place in the Balkans and later in the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> Such events include the organized reprisal policies against partisans, as well as Poles and Jews considered looters, or disrupters in the German occupation and settlement processes. Such events also include pacification policies in which Poles and Jews are indiscriminately killed so as to provide an example for other inhabitants not to resist and interfere with German operations. Much of the same reprisal policies and actions against partisans and innocent bystanders takes place in the Balkans and the Soviet Union in which entire communities, including villages and towns are burned in retaliation for German soldiers being shot or even simply shot at by ordinary citizens who decided to bear arms.

From April to October 1941, German policy towards civilians in occupied-Serbia evolved from what Walter Manoschek describes as “unsystematic terrorization” to “targeted extermination.”<sup>9</sup> During this period of time in occupied-Serbia the Wehrmacht supplanted the SS as well as the *Einsatzgruppen* and police administration. The Wehrmacht subsequently assumed primary responsibility for the violent suppression of partisan activity and atrocities against Serbia’s Jewish communities.<sup>10</sup> The same escalation of violence is seen in the Soviet Union with a rise in criminal orders. On 16 September 1941, less than three months into Operation Barbarossa, General Wilhelm Keitel transmitted the order “Combating the Communist Uprising in the Occupied Areas [of the Soviet Union].” Keitel’s order specified the following:

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<sup>6</sup> Schulte 1989, p. 138, 141.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Umbreit 1977, p. 140; Lukas 1992, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Maschonek 1995, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

[...] attacks on [German] soldiers in the East should be met by putting to death 50 to 100 Communists for one German soldier, with the comment that human life was than nothing in the East. On 1<sup>st</sup> October he ordered military commanders always to have hostages to execute when German soldiers were attacked.<sup>11</sup>

Given this connection, it is necessary for scholars to reconsider the Nazi invasion of Poland and view the Wehrmacht as a profoundly Nazi institution that played a central role in policies and acts of atrocity and the making of Nazi killers and genocidal warfare. Doing so shows potential in further determining what eventually enabled the Wehrmacht to launch a war of annihilation or extermination (*Vernichtungskrieg*), and how it became complicit in genocide and the mass-killing of civilians and non-combatants elsewhere in Europe.

Despite evidence of the Wehrmacht's solidarity with the National Socialist régime by 1939, scholars still do not generally agree that the increasing Nazification of the Wehrmacht had an impact on the conduct of military operations in Poland. Isabel Hull introduced the notion of 'military extremism,' the doctrine and warfare of annihilation exercised in its extreme by Germany's Imperial Army at the turn of the twentieth century and increasingly during the First World War.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, "military extremism", according to Hull, "gravitates toward final, or total, solutions. In combat, such a solution would mean the utter annihilation of the enemy's armed forces; in occupation, it would mean the establishment of complete obedience by the population."<sup>13</sup> Hull establishes that the German army developed a uniquely violent and genocidal military culture. This military culture and ideological zeal was not as strong as it was during the Second World War. Hitler was a critical component for the annihilation of many of Europe's peoples. Hitler authorized the euthanasia program, and he provided verbal orders to begin the killing program in the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> As Henry Friedlander argues, "[...] nothing so radical or unprecedented could be initiated without Hitler's approval."<sup>15</sup> Christopher Browning states in his work *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*, that "Hitler was both the key ideological legitimizer and decision maker in this evolution process,

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/judkeite.asp>>, accessed 10 April 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Hull 2004, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Friedlander 1995, p. 284-285.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

which also depended crucially upon the initiatives and responses elicited from below.”<sup>16</sup>

Jürgen Förster in particular has repeatedly denied that events during the Polish campaign laid the groundwork for either *Vernichtungskrieg* or for the Wehrmacht’s highly destructive conduct during campaigns waged elsewhere during the war. Therefore, historians are challenged in explaining the change in the Wehrmacht’s conduct of the war from 1941 on as a result of German officers’ growing confidence in the correctness of the genocidal methods propounded by Adolf Hitler. However, Hitler was not the only Nazi to sanction the excessive use of violence and implement policies that led to the annihilation of humans in large scale. As Hitler’s designated success and commander of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Göring was heavily implicated in the annihilation of Germany’s racial enemies.

Impressed with the initiative, imagination and dynamism of the SS approach, Hermann Göring [...] authorized Security Police and SD chief Reinhard Heydrich nearly a year before the war against Poland, on 24 January 1939 to develop plans for a ‘solution to the Jewish Question’ in the German Reich.<sup>17</sup>

Göring authorized Heydrich to assume co-ordination of the resources of the Reich “for the total solution of the Jewish Question in the area of German influence in Europe.” Heydrich was ordered to formally propose options available to the Nazis “to implement the desired final solution of the Jewish Question.”<sup>18</sup> Still, others who were not directly involved with or even belonged to the SS played a role in the decision making process when it came to dealing with Germany’s racial enemies. German Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau explained routinely that it was necessary “to break the conventional rules of war, to show no mercy to those defined as Germany’s enemies, above all the people [von] Reichenau Reichenau labeled ‘Jewish Subhumans.’”<sup>19</sup> Aspects of the Polish campaign that point to later developments in the Wehrmacht’s murderous conduct are similarly overlooked or simply discounted.

German forces entered Poland intent on carrying-out Hitler’s exhortation at his home in the Bavarian Alps near Berchtesgaden, Germany (*Berghof*) in August to mercilessly destroy everything in their path. Given the

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<sup>16</sup> Browning 2000, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007403>>, accessed 7 April 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Bergen 2003, p. 154.

propensity of the Wehrmacht to commit atrocities during a brief military campaign against a clearly militarily inferior opponent like Poland, little effort was required to undertake a merciless war of annihilation against a more ideologically and militarily dangerous enemy like the Soviet Union less than two years later.

### **Nazi Foreign and Racial Policy**

Nazi foreign policy is perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of the history of the Reich. Hitler's final say in the aggressive policy towards other nations in Europe helped create the triangular crucible of war, destruction, and genocide. However, historians do not fully agree on the aims of Hitler's foreign policy. On one hand, the 'continentalists', including in particular, Trevor Roper, Jäckel, and Kuhn, understand Hitler's ultimate objective as comprising the conquest of *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the 'globalists', such as Moltmann, Hillgruber, Hildebrand, Dülffer, Thies, Hauner, and others, view Hitler's final aim as complete world mastery.<sup>21</sup> R. D. Cromwell explains "some believe that Hitler was an improviser who reacted to events, while others believe that he had a number of more or less precise objectives and had a planned timetable for achieving them."<sup>22</sup> Ian Kershaw argues that Hitler's conquest of *Lebensraum* and racial domination are the cardinal elements of his *Weltanschauung* and the politics of Nazi Germany.<sup>23</sup> Most western historians agree with Rauschning that Hitler was the final decision-maker despite the fact that other Nazi Party members were resistant to some of his policies, and that many felt that the policies preached by Hitler fell out of concert with traditional German foreign policy and were unrealistic.<sup>24</sup> There is general agreement that Hitler had at least four general aims that he hoped to achieve (a) the restoration of the armed forces of Germany, (b) the nullification of the terms of Versailles, (c) the extension of the Reich to include all Germanic peoples, and (d) the acquisition of living space (*Lebensraum*) for the Reich.<sup>25</sup>

British Historian Alan Bullock defended the position that Hitler's overall aim was the achievement of illimitable power and control, however, British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper argues that *Mein Kampf* demonstrates

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<sup>20</sup> Kershaw 1993, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Cromwell 1980, p. 49.

<sup>23</sup> Kershaw 1993, p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> Rauschning 1939, p. 195-196.

<sup>25</sup> Cromwell 1980, p. 49.



the ultimate aims of Hitler in their purest and simplest form: the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the east and deadly triumph over the Soviet Union. British historian Alan John Percival Taylor reasons that Hitler's foreign policies were nothing more than a continuation of his predecessors' with the debate centering on the question of whether Hitler's objectives existed on a global or continental scale.<sup>26</sup> Taylor's views of Hitler's initiatives rested on the idea that the Führer's foreign policy was largely reactionary to other powers in Europe, and therefore should not be characteristic of a systematic scheme. This view runs headlong into the perspectives of historians Andreas Hillgruber and Klaus Hildebrand, who argue that Hitler had been formulating his foreign policy since the 1920s, and therefore should be seen as a long-standing premeditation for the conquest of Europe.<sup>27</sup>

While the views of these historians help create a great debate over the intentions of Nazi Germany's foreign policy, whereby all theories have been subjected to scrupulous criticism, it may be safely assumed that Nazi foreign policy held a significant basis of established priorities irrespective of historians' disagreements. Furthermore, it is questionable whether economic difficulties alone fuelled such an aggressive and violent policy toward the rest of Europe. Since Hitler did not tolerate any limitations to his power, it is interesting to consider whether Hitler would have accepted the existence of any obstacles to his authority after the elimination of the Soviet Union. There is general agreement within the scholarly community that by the end of August 1939, Hitler's patience in negotiating over territory in Eastern Europe had been exhausted, and he decided to unleash an aggressive war to achieve his desired objectives. It was this decision that coincided with the eventual failure of *Blitzkrieg*, and depletion of his military flexibility, particularly by the end of Operation Barbarossa in December 1941. Thus, Hitler eventually chose to pursue a brazen ideological path of destruction and total annihilation of obstacles that would bring in perfect alignment his strategic initiatives of racial architecture.<sup>28</sup>

One of the most pervasive elements of Nazi ideology was race. As the nation was to be modeled after a racially homogenous 'Aryan' people, the consequence of this aim was the desire of Hitler and his entourage to murder what they regarded as sub-humans (*Untermenschen*) and enemies of the Reich. The Nazis regarded the Jews, Sinti and Roma (Gypsies), the mentally-ill and incurably handicapped, as well as, Poles, Slavs and Jews of Eastern Europe as enemies that needed to be eliminated in order to achieve

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<sup>26</sup> Taylor 1961, p. 68-69.

<sup>27</sup> Hillgruber 1974, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Williamson 2002, p. 61.

a prosperous and purified German Reich. These minorities, particularly the Jews reflected the primary need to merge the war with the greater conception of the war of annihilation in Europe.<sup>29</sup> The Jews and Poles were targeted with a provocative passion. Poles were regarded as enemies of Nazi Germany based on their ethnicity, but also for their involvement in the perceived mutilation of Germany following the First World War.

Lucy Schildkret Dawidowicz, Klaus Hildebrand and Karl Dietrich Bracher argue that Hitler formulated the systematic plan for the mass-murder of the aforementioned minorities, despite circumstantial events having forced Hitler to alter the way in which he sought to achieve his primary racial and biological objectives.<sup>30</sup> Other historians attempt to find a primary cause for the Holocaust and genocidal events that took place in Europe during the Second World War. The internationalists emphasized the centrality of Hitler's "ideology, pre-determined plans, and opportunistic decision making," while the functionalists emphasized the "dysfunction and unplanned destructive implosion of an unguided bureaucratic structure and tension-filled political movement [...]."<sup>31</sup> Christopher Browning explains that one approach is perceive the 'Final Solution' as a grandiose program, or "[...] more like the Manhattan Project [...]" inasmuch as it was an enormous and meticulously planned campaign that sought the achievement of pre-determined objectives.<sup>32</sup> Another approach to the 'Final Solution' is to perceive it, according to Browning, as Chernobyl, the results of which may not have been completely planned or intended but were in any case the foreseeable off-shoot of a poor system.<sup>33</sup>

There is obvious polarization in the views of historians regarding the formulation and execution of racist policy in Nazi Germany. Some historians see Hitler as having responded to domestic pressure to implement racist policies, whereas internationalists stress Hitler's central role in formulating and executing his plans at the right time. Anti-Semitism grew in Germany from 1935 onward as a result of a lack of Hitler's domestic achievements and in combination with the growing confidence of Germans after re-acquiring the Saarland. Hitler's anti-Semitic policy quieted for a period of several years after 1935. During this period, other leading Nazi officials vied with one another to devise their own plans for dealing

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<sup>29</sup> Kershaw 1993, p. 100.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>31</sup> Browning 2000, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

with Germany's Jewish 'problem', though Hitler was always seen as the ultimate source of authority in these plans.

By 1938 anti-Semitism was showing a sharp crescendo all over the country. It was being spread largely from the Nazi Party, and diffusing throughout society and the state through the use of Nazi propaganda. The messages were spread through posters, in films, in schools via new curricula being taught to children, social and community programs, as well as rallies that aimed to arouse national discontent and channel negative sentiments and hatred toward pre-determined racial and biological groups within the country and elsewhere in Europe. Through 1939 a series of decrees were made that included measures to restrict Jewish activity in all corridors of German society. In 1939, thousands of Jews were being placed into concentration camps in the German countryside, while their shops were destroyed and looted and dozens of Jews were killed without provocation. By 1939, the SS was given a formal role in dealing with the Jews, though they were not as candidly savage they were following the outbreak of war in Europe. In the years leading-up to 1939, Germany's Jews were being removed from public office, and Jewish businesses were being boycotted.<sup>34</sup> The Nuremberg Laws on Reich Citizenship, which implemented the Nazi's stated-policy of turning Jews into aliens was announced by Hitler, and by 1938 Jews were placed in custody in Buchenwald, which opened-up less than a year earlier.<sup>35</sup> By 6 July 1939, the Reich Citizenship Law gave complete control of the union of Jewish relief and charity organizations in Germany under the control of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA or State Security Head Office).<sup>36</sup>

Though the direct killing of Jews was not to come about until the war, Hitler delegated officials with the task of putting together a solution to Germany's Jewish 'problem', and the future fate of the Jews had become dangerously apparent to members of the Nazi Party. By mid-1939 formal and public declarations were made that the Nazis intended to destroy the Jews if they cause another world war, and that upon the outbreak of war in Europe, the annihilation of the Jews in Europe would take place. To some historians, the Nazi decision to embark on genocide was a matter of setting a specific date as it was Hitler who chose to start the war, and thus it was Hitler who fulfilled the conditions for the attempt to annihilate the Jews. Gerard Reitlinger contends that the Führer order in early 1941 was indicative of the official starting-point for embarking on systematic killing,

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.ushmm.org/propaganda/timeline/1933-1938>>, accessed 10 April 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

and therefore suggests early 1941 as the commencement date for the intensive implementation of the Reich's racial policies.<sup>37</sup> German historian Wolfgang Stettler proposed that the beginning of the Nazi's genocidal campaign should be set from the end of July 1941.<sup>38</sup> Christopher Browning argues that, "the center of gravity of this mass-murder was Poland [...]" in March 1942.<sup>39</sup> Browning states that as late as March of 1942, "some 75 to 80 per-cent of all victims of the Holocaust were still alive."<sup>40</sup> Henry Friedlander places the height of the Nazis' most ambitious killing operation at the moment the Germans invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941.<sup>41</sup> However, Philippe Burrin argues, while "the war against the USSR thus marked an extraordinary radicalization of anti-Semitic action: the murderous potential of Nazism had emerged in all its magnitude," he also states that, "the death sentence must have been pronounced during preparations for the Russian campaign, at the latest in the spring of 1941."<sup>42</sup> Raul Hilberg, who compiled an immense study entitled *The Destruction of the European Jews*, was more conservative in his assessment of the beginning of the genocidal campaign:

Shortly after the *Einsatzgruppen* crossed the 22 June 1941 line into the USSR, Hitler ordered the commencement of the 'Final Solution' of the 'Jewish question' on the *entire* [italics my own] European continent. The history of the Final Solution is not easy to reconstruct. We are dealing not with sudden decision but with the emergence of an idea.<sup>43</sup>

In more recent studies, such as Richard C. Lukas' *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation, 1939-1944*, a greater emphasis is placed on 1 September 1939 as the beginning of unimaginable brutality and atrocity. In his comprehensive examination of the Holocaust as it occurred in German-occupied Poland, Lukas explains the wartime realities:

When Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, the Poles became the first people in Europe to experience the Holocaust, for this was the inauguration of the German policies of systematic terror, enslavement, and extermination of civilians on an unprecedented scale. From the very moment German armies plunged across the vulnerable Polish frontier, it

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<sup>37</sup> Reitlinger 1953, p. 80-82.

<sup>38</sup> Scheffler 1960, p. 35-36.

<sup>39</sup> Browning 1995, p. 169.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Friedlander 1995, p. 284.

<sup>42</sup> Burrin 1994, p. 93-94.

<sup>43</sup> Hilberg 1985. Apud Cesarani 1994, p. 5.

was apparent that they were not waging a conventional war, that is, a war against the Polish government and its armed forces. Instead, the Germans waged war against the Polish people, intent on destroying the Polish nation.<sup>44</sup>

To some, Nazi declarations and threats were evidence of Hitler's premeditated war and genocidal intentions. Others, who argue that it is difficult not to see these as expressions of intent, argue that they are vague and unrefined, and fall-short of actual implementation. In spite of this controversy, there remains an obvious and disturbing linkage between Hitler's earlier speeches and threats aimed at the minorities of Europe, particularly the Jews, and the actual implementation of genocide from the ghettos and firing squads, to the 'Final Solution' and systematic and comprehensive use of the gas chambers. In both cases of foreign and racial policy of Nazi Germany, according to R. D. Cromwell, "most historians [...] emphasize the responsibility of Hitler. 'The Second World War was Hitler's. He planned it, began it, and ultimately lost it.' It was his unscrupulous, ruthless and aggressive policies which plunged the world into six years of devastating warfare."<sup>45</sup>

Indeed there are boundaries between extreme violence towards civilians, 'ethnic cleansing' and genocide. 'Ethnic cleansing' should be seen as the demographic engineering of the racial map and plans for population resettlement.<sup>46</sup> The major difference between 'ethnic cleansing' and extreme violence toward civilians would therefore be the lack of specific racial policy, and would simply be arbitrary violence against peoples in general. However, there may be considerable overlap in terms of reasoning and rationale behind such haphazard killing. All three intersect in the sense that extreme violence is necessary to carry-out 'ethnic cleansing', and that 'ethnic cleansing' is a central element in larger and more comprehensive plans for genocide. As Christopher Browning argues, "[...] the theory and practice of what we now call 'ethnic cleansing' was [in 1939] an important prelude to the decisions for the 'Final Solution' that followed."<sup>47</sup>

Though the German onslaught in Poland in September 1939 did not represent outright genocide, it did represent one vital component of, "[...] a broader racial imperialism in the east, [that] evolved through three distinct plans for 'ethnic cleansing' to a transitional phase of implicit genocide in connection with preparations for the war of destruction against the Soviet

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<sup>44</sup> Lukas 1992, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Cromwell 1980, p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> Browning 2000, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Union.”<sup>48</sup> Poland set a new level of expectation on the part of Adolf Hitler and the upper echelons of the Nazi leaders. Poland represented the first major act of the elimination of living forces during the war. Poland also shows that many Germans were intoxicated by Nazi visions of vast and brutal population transfers and massive loss of life. Hans Frank made his views on carrying-out such plans palpable when he said, “What a pleasure, finally to be able to tackle the Jewish race physically. The more that die, the better.”<sup>49</sup> The examination of the documentation that follows also shows a similar general sense of enthusiasm for serving the perceived and ideological needs of the National Socialist state of Nazi Germany.

The marking of select groups in Polish society, as elements branded for death, cannot be separated from genocide during the war. The initial atrocities committed against select Poles during the Nazi’s military campaign and subsequent occupation are part of the overall war of annihilation and extermination. The identification of particular groups in Poland that were savagely murdered represents the threshold that was crossed. Poland represents an important transition period in the evolution of extreme violence against civilians and non-combatants, to ‘ethnic cleansing’ to genocide. The case of Poland demonstrates how intensely and systematically anti-Semitism, racism, and indiscriminate mass-murder were imbricated. The atrocities in Poland also demonstrate how the Wehrmacht was a central player in the campaign of extermination of certain groups. It is through these acts that makes the larger picture of genocide more visible. The deliberate identification and murder of specific groups as separate from the rest of the population also demonstrates moral judgment as a cognitive ability. Thus, the moral choices of ordinary German soldiers and officers to not only acquiesce, but participate in full with the SS in Hitler’s plans helped to quickly transpire events to outright genocide. Poland became a dress rehearsal of the National Socialists’ war of annihilation.

### **Preparations for War against Poland**

Although Germany had undertaken a successful clandestine re-armament (*Aufrüstung*) program and built-up her military between 1933 and 1938, most of Germany’s senior military commanders were convinced that Germany was ill-prepared for a war with Britain and France, if they were to come to the aid of Poland. They were also certain that Britain and France would declare war on Germany if Germany invaded neighbouring Poland. In their

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

minds, the result would be a two-front war involving Britain and France, who were still militarily superior to a re-armed Germany.

With the realization that the Poles were unlikely to negotiate the possession of Danzig and the Polish Corridor, and enraged by the Western powers' guarantee, Hitler ordered the military preparations for the invasion of Poland. On 11 April 1939, the directive for *Fall Weiss* was issued:

The aim will then be to destroy Polish military strength and create in the east a situation which satisfies the requirements of national defence. The free state of Danzig will be proclaimed as part of the Reich territory at the outbreak of hostilities at the latest.

The political leaders consider it their task in this case to isolate Poland if possible, that is to say to limit the war to Poland only [...] The isolation of Poland will be all the more easily maintained, even after the outbreak of hostilities, if we succeed in starting the war with sudden heavy blows and in gaining rapid success [...] The task of the Wehrmacht is to destroy the Polish Armed Forces. To this end a surprise attack is to be aimed and prepared. Camouflaged or open mobilization will not be ordered earlier than the day before the attack and at the latest possible moment [...].<sup>50</sup>

One of the most interesting and important points to note is that histories have focused on idea that the German military silently disapproved of Hitler's military adventures, and held a generally negative attitude toward the idea of invading Poland, or any other nation in Europe, particularly if it meant open war with Britain or France. *Generalstab des Heeres* saw the invasion as the pretext for a military adventure that would involve other nations, and of which the consequences could not be foreseen. At the same time, these histories fail to consider that the same army general staff and its officers played an important role in the in the formulation of the Wehrmacht's plans for the annihilation of Poland.

Before the invasion began, the *Generalstab des Heeres* and the SD Security Service of the SS (*Sicherheitsdienst*), who would lead the Security Police of the SS (*Sicherheitspolizei*), made special arrangements for the deployment of SS para-military forces that would play an important role in conquering and pacifying Poland. Most of the arrangements were made in July and August, 1939, and much of the agreements and satisfaction that was worked-out between the two parties was based on three mutually shared convictions:

1. Both parties agreed on plans to destroy Poland from an ideological perspective.

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<sup>50</sup> Noakes, Pridham 1988, p. 735-736.

2. There was general agreement on the need for additional security forces to be provided for the defeat of Poland, particularly in terms of dealing with resistance behind German lines as the front advanced, and which was of great concern to the Army High Command.

3. Officers of the Army High Command and throughout the Wehrmacht held a general and ancient hatred for the Polish nation and all Poles living within its borders.<sup>51</sup>

Concern in terms of the second shared conviction was ingrained in extreme racist and xenophobic views of all Poles and Polish Jewry. The view of both groups held by the Nazi state and the military characterized them as extremely dangerous enemies of Nazi Germany and of the Nazi ideology. Both the state and the military viewed their devious and immoral conduct as a fundamental part of their ethnicity. The tempo of the Nazi state's anti-Polish sentiments had accelerated to a point where plans for the destruction of Polish society began as early as 1934. State and military hatred for the Polish state that "ultimately there was no place for an independent Poland in Hitler's Europe [...]."<sup>52</sup> Germany's bigoted and deep-rooted hatred for Poland was so extreme that it mutually satisfied both SS and Wehrmacht needs to work in co-operation to ensure the complete and utter destruction of Poland, and the destruction of principle components of Poland's general population.

The views of Wehrmacht commanders regarding the Poles and Poland were strongly negative. General Halder made his opinion clear when he said everyone knows that, "the Polish soldier was the 'most stupid' in Europe - save perhaps for the Romanian."<sup>53</sup> German officers' negative views of Poles were apparent even as early as the First World War, at which point their general perception was that the inferiority of Poles "manifested itself in low cultural, social and hygienic standards as well as in utter political immaturity."<sup>54</sup> Poland was seen as utterly backward, with poorly-trained men, an archaic air force, and desperately relied on military tactics of 1870-1871.<sup>55</sup>

Most of the officers of the Wehrmacht also agreed with Hitler that the time had come to employ a final strategy to deal with Poland once and for all. To the officers of the army, it was generally understood that a successful military campaign that brought about the destruction of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Williamson 2002, p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>54</sup> Geiss 1960, p. 91.

<sup>55</sup> Kershaw 1993, p. 42.



Polish state was essential for the restoration of Germany's honour. For the officers of the Army High Command, the overall honour of their nation had been utterly violated and despoiled during the final phase of the First World War at Versailles when the Polish state was created at the expense of German territory and pride, as well as the end of the wartime German occupation of Poland. The same officers were of the general opinion that undoing this particular result of the Versailles settlement would (a) correct the injustice, (b) restore Germany's honour, and (c) serve as a vital means by which Germany's eastern frontier could be secured. It also served to fulfill certain criteria of the Nazi ideology that would see ethnic Germans and ancient German lands such as West Prussia returned to the Reich.

One of the possible consequences of the invasion of Poland was a prospective war with both the British and the French, who pledged their assistance to Poland should a German invasion come to fruition. The potential for war on both sides of Germany and against the British and French alarmed nearly every Wehrmacht officer. The German army felt confident that a localized conflict with Poland alone would likely result in German success, whereas a regional war against all three nations would certainly lead to the destruction of the Wehrmacht and possibly of Germany.<sup>56</sup> Although there was some disagreement with Hitler over the invasion of Poland based on these concerns, they should not be read as general opposition within the Wehrmacht against Hitler or his plans to destroy Poland, extend the Reich, and fulfill Hitler's dreams of Greater Germany. In spite of army fears about a war on two fronts, Hitler's Polish policy was very closely linked with Britain and France. As Hitler stated in May 1939, "the Polish problem is inseparable from conflict with the West."<sup>57</sup> Hitler expressed that the destruction of Poland and subsequent possession of extensive areas in the East will be advantageous, especially in lieu of a coming war with the West, "there is no question of sparing Poland, and we are left with the decision: to attack Poland at the first suitable opportunity."<sup>58</sup>

While Hitler's plans for Poland were inseparable from conflict with the Western powers, the destruction of Poland was also inseparable from Nazi ideology. Hitler told his military commanders during a conference held on 23 May 1939 that preparations should be made for a coming war with Poland, but Danzig was not the reason for hostilities; instead Hitler insisted

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<sup>56</sup> Liddell-Hart 1978, p. 49-50.

<sup>57</sup> [library2.lawschol.cornell.edu/Donovan/pdf/Batch\\_2.../Vol/IV\\_8\\_04.pdf](http://library2.lawschol.cornell.edu/Donovan/pdf/Batch_2.../Vol/IV_8_04.pdf)>, accessed 7 January 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

that, “for us it is a matter of expanding our living space in the East and making food supplies secure.”<sup>59</sup> The conquest of Poland was the first real stage of Hitler’s possession of Eastern territory that was to serve the growth and development of the Reich. Nazi Germany’s “drive to the East” (*Drang nach Osten*) was the keystone to securing “living space” for the German people. Hitlerian “politics of space” (*Raumpolitik*), which focused on the acquisition of living space, was part of an intensive and radical objective that was inseparable from conquering Poland and waging war against the sea of nations to the east of the Reich. While the initial stages of this plan encompassed the destruction of Poland, it eventually involved the defeat, subjugation, and extensive re-structuring of the continent of Europe. It was through the brutal repression, pacification, and heinous executions of select peoples of Europe that Hitler’s desired living space would be secured and provided for the German people. This plan also involved the physical expulsion of Slavs and European Jewry from areas that were considered German and tagged for eventual Germanization by Hitler. Over population, hunger, starvation, and eventual death of millions of innocent peoples were of no consequence to Hitler. He had hoped that by 1950 Reich Minister Hans Frank, who was the newly appointed governor of *Generalgouvernement*, could report that he had completed “the devil’s work.”<sup>60</sup>

The concept of living space became even more pronounced in Hitler’s overall plan for the occupation of European territories by 1939. Hitler’s aims in the East of aggression and his dedication to the acquisition of living space were becoming increasingly open by the beginning of 1939. In February of that year, Hitler remarked to his close entourage and a small group of leading generals and officers that “the next war would be an ideological and racial war.”<sup>61</sup> Hitler told his generals that the war to come was going to be unlike any that Germany had ever engaged in. He emphasized that “Germany could either advance or ultimately decline. In 15 to 20 years’ time [Germany] shall be compelled to find a solution.”<sup>62</sup>

It was clear to his generals that Hitler’s preference for Germany’s advancement meant the expansion of living space in the East that would involve the intensive and violent German exploitation of native populations as a source of labour for the expanding Reich.<sup>63</sup> This had been the most

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<sup>59</sup> Overy 2009, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Crowe 2004, p. 72.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>62</sup> [library2.lawschol.cornell.edu/Donovan/pdf/Batch\\_2.../Vol/IV\\_8\\_04.pdf](http://library2.lawschol.cornell.edu/Donovan/pdf/Batch_2.../Vol/IV_8_04.pdf)>, accessed 7 January 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Lukas 1992, p. 2-3.

unmistakable description of Hitler's purpose for Poland and other lands in the East, including the Soviet Union. Hitler made clear even before the war had begun,

The destruction of Poland is our primary task. The aim is not the arrival at a certain line but the annihilation of living forces [...]. Be merciless! Be brutal! [...] It is necessary to proceed with maximum severity [...]. The war is to be a war of annihilation.<sup>64</sup>

In late September of 1939, just prior to the invasion of Poland Hitler confirmed, "My Death's Head Units (*Totenkopferverbände*) stand ready under orders to mercilessly send to death without pity or mercy all men, women, and children of Polish descent or language."<sup>65</sup> Hitler went on to say, "only in this way can we [Germans] obtain the living space we [Germans] need."<sup>66</sup> These orders clearly illustrate Hitler's intentions and exemplified that Nazi theory of exploitation and empire-building in Poland centered on the rejection of humanity to the Poles whom, next to European Jewry, Hitler hated above all.

A racial war was aimed solely and directly at the peoples of Eastern Europe, particularly the Jews, Poles, and Slavs. The complete destruction of these peoples was indisputably the primary objective of the Third Reich. As outlined in Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe were to be used as "living space" for the German population.<sup>67</sup> Poland was to provide a significant degree of space for the German population, which was intended to grow. Hitler's policy aims in Poland were embodied in *Generalplan Ost*, which was an elaborate program of ethnic cleansing that was divided into two parts - one that took place during the war and another that was to be implemented after Germany won the war in Europe. Within the plan was a systematized scheme for Germanization to take place in several countries in Eastern Europe. Germanization included the extermination and expulsion of Poles from what became former Poland, but the ultimate German aim was to occupy Polish territory and destroy the Polish nation.<sup>68</sup> Heinrich Himmler, Hitler's architect of genocide and war of annihilation against Europe's Jews and Slavs, stated that, "all Poles will

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Akten 1950, Band III ("Die Letzten Wochen vor Kriegsausbruch 9. August bis 3. September 1939"), Document 193, "Zweite Ansprache des Führers am 22. August 1939", p. 170-172.

<sup>66</sup> Gumkowski, Leszczyński 1961, p. 59.

<sup>67</sup> Kershaw 1993, p. 4, 6-7.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 7-8.

disappear from the world [...] It is essential that the great German people should consider it as its major task to destroy all Poles.”<sup>69</sup> Nazi messages propagated dehumanizing, and racially malicious depictions of Poles and other Slavs. Poland was portrayed as backward and dirty, as if it were synonymous with not just another place, but with another era.

Hitler authorized both the Wehrmacht as well as the SS to carry-out the systematic and indiscriminate extermination of the Polish élite just two weeks prior to launching his campaign against Poland.<sup>70</sup> However, the German definition of élite was so broad in the context of Nazi ideology, that it encompassed a significant portion of Polish society, including not only clergy, teachers, physicians, lawyers, military officers, businessmen, landowners, and writers, but also anyone who attended secondary school and retained a considerable command of the Polish language.<sup>71</sup> This also included the extirpation of the Polish intelligentsia as part of the greater German plan to completely wipe-out Polish culture.<sup>72</sup> This was also accompanied by a comprehensive policy that sought the economic destruction of a subjugated Poland.<sup>73</sup> To accommodate and fully support the actions of the SS, Hitler suggested the appointment of a civilian governor in each military district of occupied Poland.

The fact that the German army enjoyed unprecedented growth and development under the leadership of the Nazis cannot be gainsaid. Hitler’s diplomatic achievements from 1936 until the outbreak of war were nothing less than stunning. The advent of the National Socialist’s power restored the German army’s pride, and gave it a prestigious place within the state. It had also enabled the German army to swell to such numbers and harness such impressive technology and equipment that most of leaders in the German military solidly supported Hitler and his twisted plans for the racial restructuring of Europe. The only factor that instilled anxiety amid among German officers and Wehrmacht’s rank and file was the prospect of war with both Poland and the West; in spite of this, however, nearly every Wehrmacht officer showed that he was either unwilling or unable to act against Hitler and his plans.<sup>74</sup> As a result, it can safely be argued that co-operation between the Wehrmacht and the Nazis, was not limited to specific policy; rather, it blended into the ideological domain. What is most

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Höhne 2000, p. 336.

<sup>71</sup> Bartoszewski 1968, p. 16.

<sup>72</sup> Lukas 1992, p. 10, 26.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Gisevius 1961, p. 403.

striking is the fact that carrying-out the ideological tenets of Nazi Germany, it did not necessarily serve a practical purpose in fulfilling military objectives, whether tactical or strategic. When the Wehrmacht entered Poland, officers were given lists of prominent Jewish and Polish names who were deemed enemies of National Socialism and of Germans, and although regular army units were tasked with finding those listed, their military positions in the field and against their military opponents was not furthered by such tasks. Nonetheless, persons listed accordingly were still rounded-up, interrogated, incarcerated and handed-over to the SS.

There is no indication that the prospect of using excessive violence against bystanders or non-combatants prior to the invasion Poland ever provoked disapproval or criticism within the Wehrmacht against the Nazi régime. The Nazi Party was not alone in implementing ideologically-oriented policies. The German army was very active throughout the 1930s in putting into operation its own policies that were deeply rooted ideologically. For example, the German army persecuted Sinti and Roma, Gypsies, nomads, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses, and other pacifists such as Swiss-South German Mennonites either for their undesirable biological roots, for their refusal to participate in Germany's military institutions. The Wehrmacht also hinged on the conception that the behaviour of particular social groups was rooted in biological constants as well as other factors such as genetics. The Wehrmacht operated under similarly racist notions that soldiers of the purest and most 'reliable' biological composition would become the most valuable addition to its rank and file. For example, the German army purged Jews as well as Freemasons from its ranks. It also encouraged and assisted in the persecution of putative persons of 'mixed blood' (*Mischlinge*). In May 1936, one of the German army's highest ranking officers, Minister of War General Werner von Blomberg decreed:

The Nationalist Socialist concept of state demands the nurturing of the idea of race, and of a specially selected group of leaders from people of pure German, or similar blood. It is therefore a natural obligation for the Wehrmacht to select its professional soldiers, hence its leaders, in accordance with the strictest racial criteria above and beyond the legal regulations, and so to obtain a selection of the best of the German people in the military schools of the nation.<sup>75</sup>

Racist beliefs in the ordinary Germany army grew stronger with every German military victory and as Europe increasing found itself under the

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<sup>75</sup> O'Neill 1968, p. 119.

suppression of the Nazis. By 1941 von Reichenau, an active anti-Semite and proponent of SS - *Einsatzgruppen* atrocities in exterminating the Jews, described ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers as “carriers of an inexorable racial conception.”<sup>76</sup> As a proponent of extreme violence and suppression in the Soviet Union, and a general who took part in the campaign in Poland, a connection can be made with respect to the transference of brutality in leadership and barbarization from one campaign to another, and over a period of years. Von Reichenau was supportive of his soldiers committing atrocities against Jews:

In this eastern theatre of war, the soldier is not only a man fighting in accordance with the rules of war, but also the ruthless standard-bearer of a national ideal and the avenger of all the bestialities perpetrated on the German people. For this reason the soldier must fully appreciate the necessity for the severe but just retribution [and revenge] that must be meted out to the subhuman species of Jewry. The Army [Wehrmacht] has to aim at another purpose, i.e., the annihilation of revolts in hinterland which, as experience proves, have always been caused by Jews.<sup>77</sup>

The adoption of National Socialism effectively turned the Wehrmacht into a central laboratory of Nazi Germany’s ideological convictions and of Hitlerian racial policy, especially in its eventual use in the Final Solution to the Jewish problem. Historical enmity for the humiliating Versailles settlement and outright hatred for the Polish state served as mechanisms by which the Wehrmacht was effectively drawn closer to the Nazi Party. Poland was perhaps the strongest instrument through which the collaboration and co-operation of regular army forces, and the SS and Nazi Party were assured. The desire to see the obliteration of Poland was the most commonly shared view between all parties, which had always seen Poland as an off-shoot of post-war Europe approximately twenty years prior. Poland was generally seen as an artificial construct that held absolutely no historical basis for its very existence. Von Seeckt shared his view of Poland harshly:

Poland’s existence is intolerable, at variance with the survival of Germany. It must disappear, and it will disappear through its own internal weakness and through Russia - with our assistance. For Russia, Poland is even more intolerable than for us; no Russian can allow Poland to exist [...] the

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<sup>76</sup> Bartov 1991, p. 129.

<sup>77</sup> Beevor 1998, p. 56-57; Mendelsohn 1982, vol. 10, p. 11-12.

creation of the broad common frontier between Russia and Germany is the precondition for the regaining of strength for both countries.<sup>78</sup>

General Franz Halder, Chief of the *Generalstab des Heeres* who helped sketch plans for the invasion of Poland, France and the Low Countries, the Balkans and eventually the Soviet Union, spoke of the imminent conflict between Nazi Germany and Poland to Wehrmacht officers at the Armed Forces Academy in spring 1939, which plainly illustrated his belief in the unity of the Nazi Party and its ideological tenets and the Wehrmacht:

As I speak to you [Germans] today on the subject of the “coming war,” I want to point-out in advance political considerations, etc. will be left aside. The German armed forces are charged with using the sword, but it is not up to them to decide if and how it will be used. I am fully aware there are those among us who think differently than the political leadership (*Staatsführung*) on matters of foreign policy, and even ideology. Nevertheless, I will not miss this opportunity to warn them that members of the officer corps should not become unnecessarily involved in issues that lay far from the tasks with which the armed forces of the State have been charged.<sup>79</sup>

Halder concluded by saying, “Poland must not only be struck quickly, but liquidated as quickly as possible [...] we must be finished with Poland in no more than three weeks, and if possible even within fourteen days.”<sup>80</sup> Erich von Manstein correctly regarded as one of the Wehrmacht’s most successful commanders and leading proponents of mass-armoured assault as well as the architect of some of the Wehrmacht’s most spectacular offensive victories recorded his sentiments about the existence of Poland in his post-war memoirs:

Poland was bound to be a source of bitterness to us [Germany] after she had used the dictated peace of Versailles to annex German territories to which neither historical justice nor the right of self-determination gave her any claim. For us soldiers she had been a constant cause of distress in the years of Germany’s weakness. Every time we looked at the map we were reminded of our precarious situation. That irrational demarcation of the frontier! That mutilation of our Fatherland!<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Williamson 2009, p. 6-7; Schramm 1991, p. 15.

<sup>79</sup> Hartmann, Slutsch 1997, p. 479.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 489, 495.

<sup>81</sup> Powell 1982, p. 27.

General Johannes von Blaskowitz, who was made commander of German-occupied Poland in October 1939, made clear his support for the German invasion of Poland, stating that about ninety per-cent of the German people were of the same mind as the Officers on the Polish Question. Though von Blaskowitz became outraged by atrocities committed by the SS and the *Einsatzgruppen* against Poles and Jews later during the early occupation period, he was responsible for formulating the entire plan of attack for the invasion of Poland.<sup>82</sup> He even commanded the 8th Army during the military campaign, receiving the surrender of Warsaw in late September.<sup>83</sup>

The Nazis used the military leaderships' heavily negative attitude towards Poland as a way to ensure the complete destruction of its armed forces and total subjugation of its population. Utilizing the military's leadership, as well as their general exploitation of the soldier's overall attitudes about Poles and Jews should be regarded as another step closer to the excessive use of force and violence to kill in a way that served no political or military purpose. The Nazis' overt manipulation of the military and use of the Wehrmacht for ideological purposes, including the complete destruction of armed forces and subjugation of entire populations assists in the reasoning that the invasion of Poland was a testing ground for Hitler's war of annihilation. It allows historians to re-locate the origins of genocide in Europe during the Second World War.

Hitler also used the military's negative attitude to enable the use of SS formations behind the German lines to ensure the security of communication, and to ensure that no partisan activity would take place behind the advancing soldiers. Hitler informed his high-ranking military officers on 22 August 1939 of his intentions to put into practice liquidation operations of Poles and Jews in Poland through the *Einsatzgruppen* formations.<sup>84</sup> These plans were drafted approximately six weeks prior to Hitler informing the Wehrmacht of the imminent liquidations. The Army responded to the information that Hitler provided with general agreement, even as Heydrich's forces were given permission to "combat all enemies of the Reich and German people in the rear areas behind the fighting troops."<sup>85</sup> Understanding the precarious nature of having to maximize troop concentrations against Polish military and civilian opposition, there was nearly unanimous approval for the Wehrmacht, which agreed with the *Einsatzgruppen* in all of its needs. Tension did exist between the Wehrmacht

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<sup>82</sup> Wistrich 1982, p. 14-15.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>84</sup> Herbert 1996, p. 237.

<sup>85</sup> Krausnick, Wilhelm 1981, p. 36.



and the SS over the coming war with Poland, but it was weak. There was a strong corollary in terms of Wehrmacht and SS desire to see Poland wiped-out, but when it came to the extermination program, the Wehrmacht was apprehensive. Hitler put his generals' concern to use by advancing the position and power of the SS and the *Einsatzgruppen*. In an effort to solve the friction between the Wehrmacht and the SS, Hitler suggested that he would appoint a civilians governor in each military district who would ultimately bear responsibility for any extermination actions that took place.<sup>86</sup> The Wehrmacht provided the *Einsatzgruppen* with all of the necessary military equipment and rations, and even fulfilled their transportation needs entirely. A directive delivered from the commander of the 9th Military District in Germany is one example demonstrating that the use of violence by the Nazis did not generate wide-spread criticism by the Wehrmacht:

It must be clearly recognized that the Party is deliberately intolerant in order to achieve its goals. With this consciously subjective, fighting attitude, particular utterances and incidents can occur which do not always quite withstand a purely rational and objective examination. This must be accepted. We must share a common front with the Party.<sup>87</sup>

The senior officers in the Wehrmacht were very willing to see that the *Einsatzgruppen* would be able to fulfill their duties completely in order to ensure the safe and advancement of “regular” Wehrmacht soldiers as they drove across Poland.

Hitler made clear the aims of his policy from the beginning of 1939. In a speech at the Reichstag in January 1939, Hitler stated that he will destroy Europe's Jews. In August, he called for the “destruction” of Poland, and the “elimination of living forces.”<sup>88</sup> This meant the “fundamental cleansing of Jews, intelligentsia, clergy, nobles”, and any other obstacle that stood in the way of Nazi ideological aims.<sup>89</sup> Christopher Browning states that, “the arrest and decimation of Poland's leadership classes seem to have been decided even before the invasion.”<sup>90</sup> The sweeping demographic restructuring of Poland proceeded during the month of September 1939. These plans also included efforts that eventually see “[...] all Gypsies and other undesirables [...]” eventually deported enslaved.

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<sup>86</sup> Höhne 2000, p. 335-336.

<sup>87</sup> O'Neill 1968, p. 119.

<sup>88</sup> Browning 2000, p. 2-3.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

Although Hitler's intention to physically exterminate large segments of Polish society represented a considerable departure from his earlier policies on Polish society after the cessation of hostilities, Wehrmacht senior command was still willing to co-operate fully in order to fulfill their security needs. Even though the German army's high command was fully aware of the racial and biological policies as they centred on liquidations of many parts of Polish society, as well as violent depopulations and annexation, Wehrmacht high command accepted the responsibility of directing SS activities during the campaign in order to utilize these forces deal with their security needs especially since the Wehrmacht leadership was convinced that it was lacking in human resources.

It is clear that German Military Intelligence (*Abwehr*) personnel and the entire senior staff of the Wehrmacht knew of the actions that would be undertaken by the SS that were employed as part of the "regular" forces entering Poland. With the Wehrmacht accepting "executive authority" over all security forces in Poland, the German army accepted responsibility for all intended "surveillance" duties by the SS, which eventually meant executions, arbitrary arrests, and forced-resettlement. This verity ties the Wehrmacht even closer with the actions of each SS formation operating in Poland. None of this mattered to the senior command of the Wehrmacht, since it would ultimately secure the lines behind the advancing forces.

The Wehrmacht's consent and complete co-operation was a way to deal with the savagery that was expected of a perceived barbaric opponent. These sentiments were largely informed by the severe racism that was mainstay in German society since the end of the First World War. However the Nazi régime played a considerable role through the use of propaganda to develop racist sentiments that existed in Germany at the time. Violence and force against perceived political and racial opponents to the Nazi Party increased considerably within weeks of the Party coming to power.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the argument can safely be made that the severe racism that developed was largely a product of the Nazi régime. In some cases, officers and commanders of the German army based their impression of the Poles and Jews the same way that officers and commanders in the SS formed theirs. For example, they shared a general hatred for Poland as a nation and for Poles for having occupied German lands following the First World War.

The Wehrmacht also shared Hitler's hatred for democracy, Socialism, the Weimar Republic, and the conditions outlined in the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler's foreign policy achievement also increasingly impressed the commanders of the Wehrmacht. Prior to the offensive, all German soldiers

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<sup>91</sup> Bessel 2004, p. 39.

were told to expect the enemy to be aggressive, remorseless, and barbaric in both thought and manner. Severe racial and cultural bigotry, facilitated by state-level ideological propaganda, prefigured in Hitler's and the Wehrmacht's plans to conquer Poland. More importantly, it played a central role in bringing together all the institutions of the Reich to ensure a coordinated and systematized effort to annihilate Poland and Polish society.

All soldiers operating in Poland, whether part of the "regular" units of the Wehrmacht or part of the SS knew what they were being ordered to do. These orders were issued to them prior to the invasion, not by Hitler or Himmler, but by Wehrmacht commanders. Members of all institutions worked together in the coming weeks to ensure that the operation would be executed successfully and without incident, and to ensure that operations in the field would meet the needs of the Reich. This general co-operation ensured maximum results in the fields of battle and in villages and communities from the moment the Germans entered Poland.

### **German Atrocities**

In a study on Reserve Police Battalion 101 in Józefów, Poland in March 1942, based entirely on the judicial records in the Staatswaltschaft Hamburg, Christopher Browning describes the killings of Jews by ordinary Germans who were not specifically selected, received any special indoctrination, or ideological motivation. The killing actions of "the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101, [who] were not carefully selected for their suitability as mass murders [...]" illustrate the continuity between the behaviour examined in Poland and the murderous campaign that took place later in the war.<sup>92</sup> As a result of Jews having supported partisan activity, Reserve Police Battalion 101 was ordered to round-up every last Jew in the village of Józefów, upon which the younger males would be selected for labour duties and the rest shot.<sup>93</sup> For an entire day, the German soldiers rounded-up the Jews, were paired-off *face-to-face* with their victims, marched into the nearby forest and, after the Jews received instructions from their executioners to lay on the ground, the soldiers fired their carbines at point-blank range into the necks of their victims.<sup>94</sup> There I not indication that any of the soldiers showed remorse or hesitation when they were required to finish-off those still alive like wounded game. This continued for the entire day until little room could be found on the forest ground for the victims to lie before being slaughtered. As the Jews in the marketplace of Józefów learned of their fate,

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<sup>92</sup> Browning 1995, p. 181.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 176.

they remained relatively calm and quiet with most of them ready to receive their fate. Browning described the imagery of the brutal task that 2nd company performed:

[...] initially bayonets had not been fixed as an aiming guide. The result was that many of the men did not give neck shots but fired directly into the heads of their victims at point-blank range. The victims' heads exploded, and in no time the policemen's uniforms were saturated with blood and splattered with brains and splinters of bone.<sup>95</sup>

In spite of their experience, the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 fulfilled their task in Józefów. Though some soldiers past through moments where they could not continue what they had started, “[...] most persevered to the end and lost all count of how many Jews they had killed that day.”<sup>96</sup>

Browning explains that the massacre in Józefów drew an important dividing line, in which, “those men who stayed with the assignment and shot all day found the subsequent actions much easier to perform,” much like those who had committed atrocities as described in and around Częstochowa and elsewhere in Poland would find it easier to perform their tasks as following the military campaign.<sup>97</sup> According to Browning, “the shock treatment of Józefów had created an effective and desensitized unit of ghetto clearers, and when occasion required, outright murderers. After Józefów nothing else seemed so terrible.”<sup>98</sup> Similarly, for those taking part in their murderous duties near Częstochowa, the same a similarly effective desensitization would have taken place, and contributed to the overall acculturation of violence and murder that ordinary soldiers were instructed to partake in. They killed because they were ordered to, but when they were given the choice to abstain from such tasks, they killed because they wanted to.

As the Wehrmacht invaded Poland, a threshold had been reached whereupon the ordinary German soldiers were increasingly becoming instruments of Hitler's vision, as David Cesarani explains:

The instrumentality of warfare inevitably sucked the German Army into the realm of Hitler's world vision. Förster shows that by 1939 the officer corps was permeated by racist ideology. Its conduct in Poland was marked by tolerance towards the brutal measures of the SS against the population; the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

only concern of the military leadership was to ensure discipline among its troops. Hitler's generals were left in no doubt that the war against the USSR would be a war of extermination. This did not arouse protests of misgivings because the racist, anti-Bolshevik and Social Darwinist outlook of the officer corps coincided with that of the Nazi and enabled them to work in harmony. This ideological affinity played a decisive role in enabling officers and soldiers to make the leap into abetting genocide. Anti-Bolshevism and racism were prominent in army propaganda and received official sanction in the orders of the day issued to the troops during Operation Barbarossa. It found practical expression in co-operation between the army and the *Einsatzgruppen*.<sup>99</sup>

Although the means employed to bring about the destruction of the Jews and the Poles was different, the ultimate goal was the same. Lukas illustrates that the campaign of murder brought about by the SS and the Wehrmacht resulted in approximately the same number of Poles killed as Jews during the war:

As a result of almost six years of war, Poland lost 6,028,000 of its citizens, or 22 per-cent of its total population, the highest ratio of losses to population of any country in Europe. About 50 per-cent of these victims were *Polish Christians* [emphasis my own] and 50 per-cent were Polish Jews. Approximately 5,384,000, or 89.9 per-cent, of Polish war losses (Jews and Gentiles), were victims of prisons, death camps, raids, executions, annihilation of ghettos, epidemics, starvation, excessive work, and ill treatment.<sup>100</sup>

The brutality witnessed during the military campaign was a central component in the subsequent occupation of Poland, and proved to be an essential element in Hitler's "war of annihilation" against the Soviet Union less than two years following the collapse of Poland.

### **Conclusion**

The German army's lightning advance across Poland in September 1939 was remorseless. By the 16<sup>th</sup> the German army had reached Warsaw; by the end of the month the city had fallen with large sections left in ruin. Slower German infantry mopped-up pockets of Polish resistance. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, studying their interests alone, the Soviets invaded Eastern Poland, swarming across a nearly undefended frontier and continued pushing westward. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, soldiers of the Red Army met with their German collaborators at

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<sup>99</sup> Cesarani 1994, p. 12.

<sup>100</sup> Lukas 1992, p. 38-39.

the city of Brest-Litovsk. Two days later on the 20<sup>th</sup>, the Germans announced that the battle of the Vistula was “[...] one of the greatest battles of extermination of all times.”<sup>101</sup> After many days of saturation bombing and bombardment, Warsaw radio ceased to play the Polish national Anthem, and Hitler entered the ruins of the Polish capital as its latest oppressor. In less than one month of vehement fighting, the war with Poland ended, and a “nation of thirty-five million” Churchill declared, “[...] fell into the merciless grip of those who sought not only conquest but enslavement, and indeed extinction for vast numbers.”<sup>102</sup>

In Poland, the Wehrmacht did not wage a ‘normal, clean war’ but rather, a war of annihilation against prisoners of war, Jews and other civilians that were branded for death in a manner that would help “cleanse” Polish territory for Germanization. The Nazis’ plans involved millions of victims. As the National Socialist war of annihilation was prepared from 1933 on, the case of Poland presents the legacy that the war of annihilation and extermination was rehearsed for the first time in Poland in 1939.

Military propaganda and indoctrination indicates that, in many soldiers, mental ground had been prepared that would ease the transition into criminal acts. Fear, disdain, and hatred of all things Jewish and Polish were cultivated amongst the rank and file of the Wehrmacht. It is this prejudice that created one of the central pillars for atrocities committed during military campaigning in Poland and later in the war. The German soldier was taught that his enemy was bestial, conniving, sub-human, and bent on wreaking terrible violence against the German fatherland. Such sentiments and messages were echoed and reinforced by the common experience of soldiers in the German army.

Without the accomplishments of the SS and Wehrmacht in Poland in 1939, Germany could not have carried-out its genocidal goals as efficiently as it eventually did. With time the numbers the Nazis murdered went from several thousand to several hundred thousand a month. The murderous policies that were enacted later in the war fostered a heinous radicalization that had begun in 1939 with the Wehrmacht in Poland.

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<sup>101</sup> Churchill 1948, p. 447.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

## **Transformarea în armată hitleristă. Criminalii naziști și procesul de înfăptuire a războiului de genocid**

(Rezumat)

După o criză politică prelungită și seria de ocupări din estul Europei, *Führer*-ul și-a dezvăluit în cele din urmă pretenția asupra Poloniei la mijlocul verii lui 1939, în vederea unificării statelor considerate germane. Refuzul Poloniei de a se lăsa intimidată de către Hitler a aruncat cele două state într-un conflict brusc și violent. În ciuda violențelor amețitor de numeroase care avuseseră loc în Europa nazistă, ce era mai rău în materie de teritorii ocupate, crime și genocid, abia atunci avea să urmeze. Mulți istorici au insistat în special asupra atrocităților comise de nemți după invadarea Uniunii Sovietice de către *Wehrmacht*, însă campania militară a lui Hitler în Polonia și evenimentele care au urmat reprezintă exemple clare și concise de violență colectivă, măceluri în masă și exterminare. Nu a existat vreo repetiție mai de amploare a persecuției, nimicirii sistematice și crimelor în contextul unei întregi națiuni în timpul celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial în Europa. Prezentul studiu se concentrează asupra complicității armatei germane la genocid și ucidere în masă, inclusiv asupra pregătirilor sale în vederea preluării măcelului în masă al civililor din Polonia la începutul lui septembrie 1939 și, totodată, demonstrează că, în timpul invaziei Poloniei, membrii *Wehrmacht* acționau asemenea unei aripi ideologice a nazismului și se deosebeau mult mai puțin de SS decât pretind unii. Se susține că *Wehrmacht*-ul nu a purtat un război „normal, curat” ci unul de anihilare, împotriva prizonierilor de război, evreilor și altor civili condamnați la moarte într-un mod care să ajute la „purificarea” spațiului polonez în vederea germanizării. Acest studiu ilustrează disponibilitatea *Wehrmacht*-ului de a adopta măsuri nemiloase și brutale pentru a asigura ordinea și disciplina în Polonia, și demonstrează în același timp că Polonia a constituit, până la urmă, prima undă din valul de genociduri naziste ce au avut loc în întreaga Europă în timpul celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial.

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**Cuvinte-cheie:** atrocități, *Einsatzgruppen*, soluție finală, politică externă, armata germană, crime în masă, Polonia, politică rasială.

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