

The beginning and end of World War II

1 September 1939: The beginning of the destruction

Lesson
90 minutes

**Additional
material**

Analysis

80 years after the invasion of Poland, German society is still struggling to come to terms with German crimes.

by Felix Ackermann, 30 August 2019

On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded its neighbour Poland. From the beginning, the attack was accompanied by the widespread bombing of cities, the targeted extermination of the Polish elite through arrests, deportations and shootings, and racist violence, which was particularly directed against the Jewish citizens of the Polish Republic.

The annexed region of Greater Poland became a laboratory for the creation of “German living space”. It was incorporated into an area known as the “Warthegau” [short form for „Reichsgau Wartheland“—Polish territory occupied by Germany from 1939 to 1945], from which the entire Slavic and Jewish population was forcibly removed, and ethnic Germans settled in their place. The systematic killing of sick people, already underway in the German Reich, was continued here. Experiments in using gas to carry out mass killing of the sick served to continue the further development of the German killing arsenal. As Germany became progressively even more radicalised after its attack on the Soviet Union, gas came to be used in the Nazi extermination camps in Poland. Of the total of six million victims of the Holocaust, about half were Polish citizens.

From the very beginning, the German occupiers saw Warsaw as the symbol of Polish resistance, which had to be broken in the course of the “Polish campaign”. For this reason, bombs were dropped on civilian targets in the centre of Warsaw as early as September 1939. The inhabitants fought back in two uprisings: in April 1943 in the ghetto and in August 1944 in the entire city centre. [...]

What does 1 September 1939 stand for?

The invasion of Poland marked the beginning not only of the destruction of entire Polish communities, but also the far-reaching self-destruction of German society. As early as 1933, a particularly large number of people in the eastern provinces of the German Reich had voted for the NSDAP, but from 1 September 1939, the symbolic violence that was already shaping everyday life inside the Reich was directed with full force and in a physical manner against an entire neighbouring country. In 2019, how many descendants of those displaced Germans realise that the loss of their homeland was essentially a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact? A week before 1 September, the Soviet Union and the German Reich had agreed to divide Poland between them. The line drawn in the secret additional protocol was intended to signify the movement west of Poland's eastern border. Stalin had no intention of releasing the eastern Polish territories conquered in the earlier Polish-Soviet war (territories found today in Belarus, Ukraine and Lithuania) from Soviet rule. As early as 17 September 1939, the Red Army occupied the east of the Polish Republic, leaving the Polish leadership no choice but to flee to London. [...]

Five years and millions of dead later, when the front once again crossed the eastern border of the Second Polish Republic, German units left scorched earth in Poland as well. [...] How many Germans know that after the suppression of the uprising 75 years ago, house after house was deliberately set on fire throughout Warsaw in order to raze this city of millions to the ground?



German memory gaps in a landscape of annihilation

German society should be told more [...] about German crimes in Poland. One reason for the widespread ignorance of the events that began in Poland on 1 September 1939 lies in Germany's divided post-war history. [...]

In most German families, fathers returning from captivity said nothing about their experiences in Eastern Europe. Most kept silent about the extent of the violence in Poland and the Soviet Union. Where might the work of remembrance start in 2019? In many German families, there are still photo albums in the attic or cellar that at least provide information about the places where the grandfathers were. [...]

Those who want to know more about the places their own male ancestors went to in the war can make enquiries at the Federal Archives. [...] For those whose grandfathers did not return from the war, the databases maintained by the tracing service of the German Red Cross and the German War Graves Commission should be able to shed some light. The information stored there about individual soldiers and the places where they were [...] offers us the chance to realise that the occupation of Poland was carried out by men who were in action there. National Socialism was not an abstract ideology; it was a worldview that many Germans carried into war, as it were, in their knapsacks. Letters from the field, many of which have been preserved in family archives, bear witness to this. In many of them, soldiers and officers of the Wehrmacht reported in September 1939 their great jubilation at the imminent defeat of the enemy on the Vistula.

Think about Poland

In 2019, there will be a public discussion on how German society should remember the Polish victims of the Second World War. [...] Should Germany still, 80 years after the war began, be separately remembering each nation affected by Nazi violence? Critics fear a multitude of individual memorial initiatives and a competition for historical recognition — an 'identity politics' competition. And yet the debate alone shows that in 2019 there is still no broad social consensus on the meaning and character of 1 September 1939: that on that day, an attack was launched on Poland that was to signal the eventual disappearance (once again) from the map of Europe of the nation state of Poland. It was an attempt to destroy a central European state, turning an entire country into a zone of annihilation. This is what 1 September 1939 stands for, far beyond the initial attack on Poland. If an understanding of this was already part of Germany's culture of remembrance, hardly anyone would publicly question the need for a monument to commemorate it. However, a documentation centre would also be urgently needed to understand the context.

*abridged with the kind permission of Dr Felix Ackermann /
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