

READING

The War against Poland: Speed and Brutality

While the Nazis carried out their plan to strengthen the German “race”—purging the Reich of Jews, Sinti and Roma, the mentally and physically disabled, and others they considered defective or racially inferior—the invasion of Poland marked the start of the next phase of the Nazi racial program: the acquisition of *Lebensraum*, or “living space.” According to historian Doris Bergen, the Nazi policies concerning “race” and “space” were closely related:

Hitler was obsessed with two notions: that humanity was engaged in a giant struggle between “races,” or communities of “blood”; and that “pure Germans,” members of the so-called Aryan race, needed space to expand . . . Any race that was not expanding, he believed, was doomed to disappear.¹

In August 1939, just days before the invasion of Poland, Adolf Hitler spoke to his generals about the coming war:

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 state. . . . I have issued a command—and I will have everyone who utters even a single word of criticism shot—that the aim of the war lies not in reaching particular lines but in the physical annihilation of the enemy. Thus, so far only in the east, I have put my Death’s Head formations at the ready with the command to send every man, woman and child of Polish descent and language to their deaths, pitilessly and remorselessly. . . . Poland will be depopulated and settled with Germans.²

The message was clear: the aim of the war in Poland was to conquer “living space” for Germans, so it was to be waged against the people of Poland as well as the Polish army. A German pilot known only as Pohl who was captured later in the war described his actions in the early days of the war in a conversation with Meyer, a fellow prisoner:

¹ Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 52.

² Quoted in Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 11.

Pohl: On the second day of the Polish war I had to drop bombs on a station at Posen. Eight of the 16 bombs fell on the town, among the houses, I did not like that. On the third day I did not care a hoot, and on the fourth day I was enjoying it. It was our before-breakfast amusement to chase single [Polish] soldiers over the fields with [machine gun] fire and to leave them lying there with a few bullets in the back.

Meyer: But always against soldiers?

Pohl: People (civilians) too. . . . I was in the "Kette" (a flight made of three aircraft). The leader bombed the street, the two supporting machines the ditches, because there are always ditches there. . . . You should have seen the horses stampede!

Meyer: Disgusting that with the horses . . .

Pohl: I was sorry for the horses, but not at all for the people. But I was sorry for the horses up to the last day.³

Pilots attack their targets from a distance; soldiers come face to face with theirs. Gerhard M., a storm trooper, wrote this in his diary on September 7, 1939:

Burning houses, weeping women, screaming children. A picture of misery. But the Polish people didn't want it any better. In one of the primitive peasant houses we even surprised a woman servicing a Polish machine-gun. The house was turned over and set alight. After a short while the woman was surrounded by flames and tried to get out. But we stopped her, as hard as it was. Soldiers can't be treated any differently just because they're in skirts. Her screaming rang in my ears long after. The whole village burned. We had to walk exactly in the middle of the street because the heat from the burning houses on both sides was too great.⁴

In the midst of this violence, General Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander in chief of the German army, was troubled by the lack of "manly discipline" displayed by his German soldiers in Poland. Threatening dishonorable discharge for "officers who continue to disobey orders and enrich themselves," he wrote:

³ Quoted in Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldiers: German POWs on Fighting, Killing, and Dying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 47–48.

⁴ Quoted in Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 20–21.

There are a considerable number of cases of officers illegally driving people from their homes, confiscating items without permission, enriching themselves by failing to report or stealing goods, mistreating or threatening their inferiors, partly in states of excitement and irresponsible drunkenness, failing to carry out orders with grave consequences for the troops under their command, and committing sexual offenses against married women. The image that results is that of a pack of marauding mercenaries who cannot be reprimanded sharply enough. Whether they are acting consciously or not, these officers are parasites who have no business in our ranks.⁵

Because the German army was supposed to “live off the land” during its conquest of Poland, von Brauchitsch permitted soldiers to confiscate Polish property without penalty. But he continued to issue new regulations until the end of 1939 in order to maintain discipline in the ranks.

⁵ Quoted in Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldiers: German POWs on Fighting, Killing, and Dying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 53.

Connection Questions

1. How did Nazi beliefs about “race and space” affect how Germans fought the war against Poland? How was their conquest of Poland different from what many people in 1939 expected from war?
2. How did the pilot Pohl’s feelings about carrying out bombings change during the first few days of the war? How do you explain the change?
3. What do the sources in this reading suggest about the motivations of German soldiers who treated Polish civilians brutally?
4. What did Walther von Brauchitsch find disturbing about the behavior of German soldiers toward Polish civilians? How did he respond?