POLISH VICTIMS OF NAZISM

Thaddeus C. Radzilowski

The study of the non-Jewish victims of the genocidal and racial policies of the Nazi regime is a comparatively neglected topic. It is complex and at times a controversial issue. To treat them as victims of the Holocaust along with the Jews is to tread into a minefield. Even to compare the Jewish with the gentile experience can raise angry criticism in some quarters. There were, as we know, some very heated and emotional debates on this issue when the Holocaust Museum was being created.

All of the objections were rooted in the idea of the uniqueness of Shoah as an experience of Jewish martyrdom. The arguments range from the simple empirical fact that all historical events are unique to characterizations of the Holocaust in terms that are nothing short of metaphysical. I might note that I do accept the first notion of the historical uniqueness of the Jewish martyrdom during the Second World War. It was unprecedented in its scope, in the ambitious evil of its perpetrators and in the number of its victims relative to the entire Jewish population. As a historian I am, however, not competent to speak of the Holocaust in any spiritual or metaphysical sense or as an event that in some way transcends historical understanding.

The Nazi regime persecuted and killed for reasons based on racial ideologies, often rooted in ancient and modern prejudices that predated the Nazi period. The conflict between Hitler and his first enemies and victims, the communists, and his struggle with Christianity, especially Catholicism was, to be sure, ideological, but the ideology was not racialist. It should be noted; however, that Nazi obsession with racist theories did color Nazi anti-communist and anti-Christian beliefs. Both Christianity and communism, for example, came to

be equated with Jewishness. For example, in an October 21, 1939 meeting with Martin Bormann, Hitler spoke at great length about Christianity and Bolshevism and condemned them as two versions of the eternal Jewish threat.

Most of Nazi racial theories were developed about Poles, their closest neighbors, and extended to the other groups of Slavs. There is much less commentary in Nazi and German sources about the other groups. They were all uniformly regarded as *untermenschen* [subhuman]. It has to be also remembered that the direct Nazi encounter with most of the Eastern Slavs came after June 1941, almost two years after they had begun a fierce racial war of mass murder and enslavement against the Poles. The ferocity of the actions against Poles carried over and increased the aggression against the other civilian populations on the Eastern front.

In the fall of 1939, Hitler and Stalin invaded and conquered Poland in about five weeks. As a result, for Christian Poles World War II is the story of martyrdom at the hands of two genocidal regimes, not one. The military losses suffered by Poland in the invasion by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are heavy: about 67,000 were killed and 134,000 were wounded. More than half a million Polish soldiers were taken prisoner, about two-thirds captured by the German army. Polish civilian losses as a result of military action were considerable.

At the beginning of the war, the Nazi plan was to inflict terror on the population and break Poland's will to resist. As he gathered his generals, Hitler ordered them to "kill without pity or mercy all men, women and children of Polish descent or language . . .only in this way can we achieve the living space we need." Mobile killing squads would follow the main body of troops, shooting prisoners and any Poles who might organize resistance. The Soviets planned a similar campaign.

The campaign against Poland was conducted with a cruelty previously unknown in modern European warfare. Polish

civilians and prisoners of war were systematically shot by German and Soviet forces. Although the Nazi SS and the Soviet NKVD committed the worst crimes, regular army and air forces of both totalitarian states were full and willing participants in the slaughter. The German use of special action units in Poland was a test run. Later these same units would play an even more terrible part in the Holocaust of East European Jewry.

From the beginning of the German Occupation of Poland, it was clear that it would differ from every military occupation previously known in modern history. The murderous policies carried out against civilians during the actual military campaign had already signaled the demonic character that it would take. During the first four months of the occupation more than 50,000 civilians were executed by the new Nazi Regime. The majority of these victims—about 43,000—were Christians. Nazi policies in Poland were based primarily on a perverse pseudo-scientific racist ideology that relegated Poles and Jews to sub-human categories.

The occupation of Poland targeted Jewish and Christian citizens of Poland in different ways. During the first two years it was the Christians who in many ways bore more heavily the brunt of Nazi terror as the occupiers sought to exterminate the leadership and intelligentsia, turn ordinary citizenry into slave laborers of the Reich and begin the process of replacing the rural population with German settlers. SS commanders, including Reinhold Heydrich, saw ethnic Poles as their main foe rather than the Jews of Poland during the early part of the occupation. The first task for Hitler's minions was to eliminate any Christian Poles who could be considered leaders.

The half of Poland that was taken by Nazi Germany in 1939 was divided into two parts. The Polish Territories, which were part of Imperial Germany until 1918, were incorporated directly into the Nazi Reich. Ninety percent of the population

of this area, which was slated for thorough Germanization, was ethnically Polish. After the leading citizens, clergy and intelligentsia of the region were either killed or incarcerated in camps, the Germans began a wholesale deportation of Poles from the area. Over a million Poles had their farms, homes, businesses and property seized and turned over to the Germans and many were then deported to Central Poland. Those who were left behind were subjected to de-nationalization. They were no longer to speak Polish or consider themselves Polish. This mass deportation of Christian Poles was the dress rehearsal that allowed the Nazi Regime to perfect its techniques for the later wholesale shipment of Europe's Jews to death camps in Poland.

It was soon apparent to the Nazi leadership that the scale of their plans to eliminate the Polish leadership would overwhelm their existing systems of prison and concentration camps, so a series of new camps were created. The most infamous of those was located near Kraków in the town of Oswięcim, known by its German name, Auschwitz. The Auschwitz camp was designed to house Polish political prisoners, and inmate labor built the initial camp out of an old army base. It opened in June 1940 and remained a place of incarceration and martyrdom, particularly for Christian Poles, until 1942 when it also became the site of the most terrible massacre of Jews during the Holocaust. It remains for both people a preeminent symbol of martyrdom and tragedy.

After an attack on the USSR, the Germans also attempted to create all-German colonies in the General Government part of Poland by deporting or exterminating the local inhabitants and bringing in German settlers. In late 1942, Nazi racial theorists sought to clear part of the region around Zamość of Poles and bring in ethnic Germans to create a German colony. Whole villages were rounded up, inhabitants executed, sent to concentration camps or slave labor. Over 150,000 people (30 percent of the population) were displaced from their homes. A

similar attempt on a smaller scale occurred in Białystok where some 40,000 were displaced.

An ancillary part of the campaign of deportation and German colonization was the organized kidnapping of Polish children who had “Germanic” characteristics to be raised as Germans. In all, during the war, about 50,000 children were seized and deported to the Reich. Those who were found unsuitable upon subsequent examination were executed at camps such as Auschwitz.

In February 1940, the NKVD began its second phase of occupation, the mass deportation of Poles from the Soviet occupation zone. Over the course of the next 15 months about 500,000– 750,000 Polish men, women and children were packed into unheated cattle cars and sent to the gulags where many died of hunger, disease, overwork and execution. They were soon joined by many Jews, Ukrainians and Belarussians. Polish POWs who had fallen into Soviet hands met an even worse fate. Approximately 22,000 Polish officers, mostly well-educated reservists, were executed on Stalin’s orders.

World War II was a catastrophe for Poland on a scale that few other countries have experienced at any time in human history. The Nazi occupation lasted five and a half years. About six million Polish citizens were killed. Of these, three million were Jewish. This total represents 17 percent of the pre-War population—the highest percentage of any country in Europe. Poland’s ancient Jewish community, with a history stretching back to the early Middle Ages, was virtually wiped out. The Nazis killed two million Polish Christians, the Soviets perhaps almost a million, and about 60,000 were killed by Ukrainian nationalists. The city of Warsaw alone lost more people—170,000 to 200,000 civilians died in the Warsaw Uprising—than Britain, Belgium, Czechoslovakia and the USA put together. One and one-half million Poles were conscripted to service the Reich.

In conclusion, as we look at this dreadful catalog of mass murder and persecution, we can begin to understand better the scope and nature of Nazi genocide and, in the case of the unprecedented horror of the occupation of Poland, the role of the Soviet Union as Hitler's accomplice. There is a relationship between the motives, ideologies, and methods of the mass murders of gentile populations and the Holocaust that allows the stories to illuminate each other and give us a fuller understanding of one of the most terrible periods of human history.

Thaddeus C. Radzilowski is president of the Piast Institute: a National Institute for Polish and Polish American affairs. This article is adapted from a longer piece he wrote on the Gentile victims of Nazism.