

Greater Poland Uprising 1918-1919

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The fate of the Greater Poland insurgents during World War II

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September 1939 marked the beginning of the German occupation in Greater Poland. In pursuance of a decree issued by Adolf Hitler on 8 October 1939, the whole pre-war Poznań province, including a large part of the Łódź

province and part of the Pomeranian and Warsaw provinces was directly incorporated into the German Reich as the Reichsgau Wartheland. According to German intentions, this district, treated as a “testing ground” for national socialism, was supposed to become an exemplary district of the Reich. This assumption was the foundation of the Germanisation policy of the Reichsgau Wartheland, implemented for ideological and racist considerations. Poles, categorised as an inferior human race, were the subjects of the dominant race, that is, the Germans. For this reason they became the victims of a brutal policy of extermination and furthermore, a broad spectrum of various discrimination practices, which were to exclude Poles from any forms of political and social life, was envisaged in relation to them. The Greater Poland insurgents, among whom there were many people who had made outstanding contributions to the development of independent Poland, were indicated as targets of the anti-Polish policy of the German authorities.

The fates of insurgents during the war were varied but often tragic. Many of them were killed by the occupation authorities, both the Germans and the Soviet ones, becoming victims of targeted extermination operations. Others resisted, engaging themselves in conspiratorial work. Still others fought on different fronts of the war. However, the extermination policy targeted at insurgents is particularly instilled in the collective memory. They died simply because of the mere fact of their participation in the Greater Poland Uprising and because - and this must be

emphasised particularly- of their subsequent activity in the political, social and economic life of inter-war Poland. On many occasions, the insurgent past was an additional cruel burden, which somewhat “complemented” the qualifications of insurgents as “enemies” of the German state. The cruel paradox of the situation was that there were many true patriots among the participants of insurgent battles, who participated in the reconstruction of the Polish statehood after the year 1918 with real involvement. The same sense of patriotic obligation compelled them to active resistance against the German invaders.

Obviously, it is impossible to discuss here in detail the fates of all of the insurgents in the years 1939-1945. Particular stories of selected persons will be characterised as, on the one hand they are supposed to be a biographical exemplification of the entire insurgent generation, and on the other hand, they should serve as a description of the ruthlessness and cruelty of the occupying authorities.

The wave of terror which encompassed the entire region of Greater Poland in September 1939 resulted from different causes, and the executions carried out on the participants of the Greater Poland Uprising were an element of the wider anti-Polish policy of the German authorities and were also an act of vengeance. One of the most important objectives of the Germans after invading the territory of the Republic of Poland was to break the resistance of the Polish society through the physical annihilation of all those who could organise such resistance. These persons,

regarded as the “leadership element” and “hostile anti-German elements” had to be rendered harmless in order to prevent the occurrence of any units of pro-Polish activity. For this reason, a number of preventive actions were organised during the first months of the occupation, as part of which, executions of the “Polish intelligentsia, noblemen, clergy and generally all elements which could be considered carriers of the national resistance” took place, as was expressed by Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the security police and SS Security Service (SD). The terms used in documents by the German authorities: “intelligentsia”, “leading classes”, “radical Polish elements”, “leadership circles”, “partisans” etc. were quite imprecise and at the same time inclusive enough to associate all Poles arbitrarily regarded as posing a danger to them. Above all, members of political and social organisations, characterised by significant patriotic and professional activity were qualified into the “leadership circles”. Thus, the activists of the Polish Western Union, Polish Gymnastic Society “Sokół”, Riflemen Association, National Party and members of the Union of Greater Poland Insurgents and Union of Silesian Insurgents became victims of the German terror. Clergymen, teachers, officials, attorneys, land-owners and entrepreneurs were all murdered. There is no doubt that these activities were homicidal by their nature. The future victims were identified by the local German people. They were also included in special warrants with which the Germans who invaded Poland were provided. The local German population, from among which a part was recruited by the paramilitary Selbstschutz units,

was particularly dangerous, as it was familiar with the social and political reality in which the Poles functioned.

The task of the elimination of “elements hostile to the Reich” was entrusted to several institutions. However, the most criminal activity in this area was demonstrated by special groups (Einsatzgruppe) and operational units (Einsatzkommando), which functioned in parallel with the structures of the German police and Wehrmacht. The operational groups formed, for the most part before the beginning of the military operations against Poland, followed the armies which invaded the Republic of Poland spread over the controlled territory. The elimination actions in the Greater Poland region were the responsibility of Operational Group VI (Einsatzgruppe VI - EG VI) commanded by SS-Oberführer Erich Naumann. It consisted of three operational units labelled with numbers: 11, 14 and 15. EG VI arrived in Poznań on 12 September and within less than two weeks it took over the entire operational area which covered more or less the pre-war Poznań province. The action aimed at murdering the Polish leadership class was codenamed “Tannenberg” and was conducted according to the guidelines of the above-mentioned Reinhard Heydrich. Over 240 Poles were killed in public executions alone, which took place on 20, 21 and 23 October 1939 in 14 towns of Greater Poland. A considerable percentage of the victims were participants of the Greater Poland Uprising.

On 21 October 1939, during the second day of mass shootings, the Special Operational Unit No.

14, commanded by SS-Sturmbannführer Gerhard Flesch arrived in Leszno early in the morning. It is well known that this unit was part of Operational Group VI. The unit's officials formed a martial court, before which about 50 previously arrested people were brought. Local Germans known for their anti-Polish inclinations were typified as trial witnesses. The accused were deprived of any possibility to defend themselves and the trial, in principle, boiled down to the verification of their personal details. After short consultations among the judges, it was announced that 20 people would be sentenced to death. On that very same day, immediately after the closure of the court proceedings, the Germans shot the sentenced people at 10.45 a.m. Several former Greater Poland insurgents were among the victims. The same procedure was repeated in other towns.

In the executions organised in Leszno, among others, Waclaw Kęsicki, who took an active part in the Greater Poland Uprising along the Wągrowiec and Leszno sections and was then involved in the Polish-Bolshevik war faced his death. After his return from the front, he was a soldier in the 55th Infantry Regiment in Leszno. He was the president of the Association of Former Soldiers of the 1st Greater Poland Rifle Regiment and secretary of the local Insurgent and Soldier Club. One day before his death, Kęsicki managed to bid farewell to his family, making a note on a small piece of paper: "My Dears, in this last moment I wish to bid farewell to all of you. This is tough, but apparently such is our destiny, though I did not do any harm to anyone. Do not be

desperate and do not grumble against God's will, because you could face the same doom. May God be with you. Send my love to my brothers and that they may not grumble either.". As well as Kęsicki, Bronisław Kotlarski, yet another insurgent and a well-known political and economic activist also died. He was one of the founders of the People's Bank in Leszno, and also took part in fighting against the Bolsheviks. During the inter-war period, he ran a haberdashery shop in Leszno and was active in the Association of Independent Christian Merchants. As he had been mobilised in August 1939, he participated in the September campaign. 7 more former insurgents and politically and socially active inhabitants of Leszno were also shot dead. The participants of the Uprising also died in other executions. For example in Śrem, on 20 October 1939, an industrialist and political activist Franciszek Malinowski was murdered. Also, the deputy mayor of Śrem, Antoni Muślewski, shot during the same execution, was an insurgent. On the same day in Kórnik, Alfons Ellmann was killed. As a young boy he took part in insurgent fighting in Poznań, and was later the president of the Club of Greater Poland Insurgents in Kórnik. Also some victims of the execution carried out in Gostyń on 21 October 1939 had a history of participation in the Uprising. Two days later, among 15 victims shot in Śmigiel, there were six other former insurgents.

It would need to be considered to what extent the insurgent past determined the fates of victims of the October terror. As it seems, it was of high

importance, however, it was not necessarily always a decisive factor. Participation in current political and societal life or in Polish-German battles in September 1939 was more important, as has already been mentioned, and the fact of any participation in the Greater Poland Uprising was additional - though still serious - incriminating evidence. It should be supposed that Edward Potworowski was killed in an execution in Gostyń, as he was, above all, a landowner and the president of the Poviats Society of Agricultural Circles. His tragic fate was determined by active participation in the Uprising, when he was a poviat commandant of the People's Guard and quartermaster in the "Leszno Group" staff. Władysław Pioch, in turn, stood before a firing squad because he held the post of mayor of Śmigiel at the moment of the outbreak of the war, and in the years 1918-1919, he had taken part in insurgent battles and co-organised the Polish administration in the city and surrounding areas. Also Maksymilian Stachowiak, the mayor of Śmigiel for many years, was a Greater Poland insurgent. He was also murdered at that time.

Insurgents were also killed in other numerous executions. For instance, on 30 September 1939, Stanisław Bock, a municipal and poviat councillor was shot in Śmigiel. Ignacy Cieśla, a social activist and a Greater Poland insurgent died in the same execution. Members of the Selbstschutz, in turn, murdered Konrad Pomorski, a parish priest in Rogoźno, who was a prominent independence activist already in the period of the Prussian partition. In the years 1918-1919, he

participated actively in fighting against Germans, and was involved in social activity in independent Poland. He was murdered probably at the end of the year 1939. In the same year, on 14 October, another clergyman - Priest Mateus Zabłocki was shot in the prison yard in Inowrocław. Zabłocki was a distinguished figure of the Polish independence struggles. He took part in the Greater Poland Uprising as a volunteer, fighting on the Northern Front. He was also an insurgent chaplain. In September 1939, Priest Zabłocki became the head of the citizen's guard in Gniezno and held the post of commandant of the city defence. On 10 September he was severely injured when a car in which he was a passenger, was attacked with grenades. He was taken to hospital, where a German physician took care of him. On 12 October 1939, still hospitalised, Zabłocki was arrested by the Gestapo. He was imprisoned in Inowrocław, where he was taken to a special court. Zabłocki received a double death sentence for "fighting as a partisan and incitement to sabotage", that is, both for the participation in the Greater Poland Uprising and the organisation of the civil defence of Gniezno.

A shocking testimony to the massacre of insurgents was left by Stanisław Lose, who survived the mass execution at the Jewish cemetery in Szubin. At the beginning of September 1939, Lose served as the defence commandant in Barcin. After his arrest, he was imprisoned in the camp in Szubin. From there, on 30 October 1939, together with a group of nine other Poles he was taken to the Jewish cemetery in Szubin. Lose found himself in the first group of

persons who were supposed to be shot. He was told to jump into a previously prepared pit, and after that, the Germans shot them. Lose fell and lost his consciousness. When he regained consciousness, the bodies of two other murdered people lay on him. Pretending to be dead he heard the grave diggers putting two other people, who begged them for mercy, to death. "Then - according to Lose- the Germans buried the Poles lying in the pit under a layer of earth with a thickness of 25-30 cm. Let me emphasise that the corpses of two murdered Poles lay on me in the pit. I managed to avoid being completely buried under the sand, especially my head, as it lay secured under the wall of the pit excavated at an oblique angle (...). Then I heard the echoes of footsteps of grave diggers leaving, then the sound of the iron cemetery gate... After some time I freed myself from under the weight of the two corpses lying on me along with the sand, I got my legs out, kneeled and got up. I tried to cover the tracks of my leaving of the tomb...." Lose survived the war. In 1942 he joined the Home Army and was its active member in the Masovia region.

A place of execution of the Polish elites, including insurgents was also Fort VII in Poznań, the first concentration camp on the occupied Polish territories. Among several thousand persons who were murdered there, there was a land-owner, Konstanty Chłapowski. During the Greater Poland Uprising he was the military commandant of Pniewy as well as the organiser and commander of the Pniewy battalion. After Poland had regained independence, he got involved in social and economic activities. He was shot on 29

November 1939 in Dąbrówka near Poznań. At the same time, a painter and participant of the Uprising, Stanisław Smogulecki also died after being held in Fort VII as a prisoner. In April 1940 as a result of exhaustion Aleksandra Bukowiecka née Dzierżykraj-Morawska died in Fort VII. From Autumn 1918 she had organised people's councils and insurgent troops in the vicinity of Krzywiń and Cichowo. She also financed the purchase of weapons and ammunition and supplied food to insurgents; during the inter-war period she was active in various insurgent associations. Undoubtedly the main reason why she was arrested and sent to a camp was her insurgent activity.

A separate, and in no way less tragic chapter of the history are the Greater Poland insurgents who were imprisoned in special NKVD camps and died in the Soviet Union. According to the findings of Janina Pańczakowa and Małgorzata Cichoń about 250 people who fought in the Uprising were murdered by the NKVD. For instance Jan Meissner who, during the September campaign, commanded the defence of Volodymyr-Volynskiy, and was then taken captive by the Soviets and sent to the camp in Starobilsk. In spring 1940 he was shot in Kharkiv. Meissner came from Poznań. In August, he was called up into the German Army in which he fought, among other places, on the Western Front. During the Greater Poland Uprising, he took an active part in insurgent fighting in Poznań, at that time he was mainly responsible for all issues related to rolling stock and mobilisation. Like many other insurgents, he also participated in the war with the Bolsheviks in

the year 1920. Also during the following years he had ties with the army. He was awarded several state distinctions for his numerous contributions. It is worth noticing that from among all the insurgents murdered by Soviets, at least 31 of them were Knights of the Order of the Military Cross - *Virtuti Militari*.

Many Greater Poland insurgents could also be found among the organisers of the structures of the Greater Poland independence underground. It is possible to report here a few examples of the patriotic and state-oriented activity of the former insurgents. Above all, it is necessary to indicate the Secret National Organisation (SNO), one of several dozens of underground organisations which operated within the occupied territories of Greater Poland. As well as officers and non-commissioned officers of the Polish Army, the founders of this group, organised in Gniezno, included former Greater Poland insurgents: Franciszek Gawrych and Maksymilian Sikorski. The latter was called up into the German army in the year 1914. Soon after demobilisation in December 1918, on 16 January 1919, he joined the insurgent troops in Miejska Górka. Later on he took part in the Polish-Bolshevik war. Then he worked, among other places, at the Infantry Cadets School in Ostrowia Mazowiecka. In 1935 he retired. In 1940 he took command of the Secret National Organisation established at the end of 1939. In 1940 the SNO became a large conspiratorial group with about 200 members from such poviats as: Gniezno, Września, Konin, Mogilno and Poznań. Despite the fact that the organisation was highly covert, in summer 1941

arrests began. In June 1942 the Gestapo captured Sikorski who was in hiding. He was imprisoned in Szamotuły, Wronki and Wrocław, and on 5 September 1942 he appeared before the Higher Regional Court in Poznań (at the Assizes in Wrocław), which sentenced him to seven years of imprisonment in a penal camp with hard labour. The basis for the accusation was the "preparation of high treason", that is, conspiratorial activities which were described in detail in the act of indictment and the verdict. The investigators left out Sikorski's participation in the Uprising, however, they emphasised that "after the war, he expressed his support for Poland", which, from the point of view of the German authorities, was also a serious charge. Sikorski was sent to prisons in Germany and at the beginning of 1943 he was transported to the Mauthausen-Gusen camp where he stayed until the liberation in May 1945. After his return to Gniezno, he was the president of the Union of Former Political Prisoners of German Concentration Camps and Prisons. After being uncovered, Franciszek Gawrych was also sentenced to seven years of prison. Edmund Roliński, another important activist of the SNO also appeared before the Higher Regional Court. From December 1918 till February 1919, Roliński took part in the Greater Poland Uprising in the area of the Mogilno powiat. In 1939, he participated in the defensive war of Poland and after the defeated campaign he returned to Gniezno, where he quickly got involved in conspiratorial activities. He was arrested by the Gestapo in July 1941 and one year later - in August 1942 - he was sentenced to death for the "preparation of high treason". In October 1942,

he was decapitated in prison at Młyńska Street in Poznań.

Leon Kmiotek, the commandant of the Military Organisation of Western Territories (MOWT) - the largest conspiratorial organisation in Greater Poland - was also involved in insurgent operations in the past. Its main objective was to prepare a military uprising. Furthermore its members conducted social, intelligence and informative (publication of papers) and sabotage activities. In spring 1940 the group was dismantled and many of its members were imprisoned. Kmiotek also went to prison. During World War I he had been conscripted into the German army and sent to the Eastern Front. As soon as the uprising broke out, he got involved in insurgent battles in Czarńków and its surroundings. In 1939, as a soldier of the "Poznań" Army, he took an active part in the September campaign, and after his return to Poznań, he founded the Greater Poland Military Organisation which, later on, became part of the MOWT. For these conspiratorial activities, he was sentenced to death in June 1942, and executed one year later in Wrocław.

A separate, so far poorly investigated chapter of insurgent fates, has been the accession of insurgents to the German nationality list.

Insurgents, who were often born in Prussian times and served in the German army, could sign the volkslist. Some of them took advantage of the German proposal, others firmly rejected it.

In the end, it is also necessary to mention the destruction of the tombs of insurgents as well as the monuments and memorial plaques which

commemorated this military effort. During the occupation, most of these commemorative objects, which had been built during the inter-war period, were destroyed by the Germans. The Greater Poland Uprising and its memory were supposed to be completely ousted from the public space. The destruction in this case was tremendous. For instance, the monument of the 15th Poznań Uhlan Regiment which was unveiled in 1927 in Poznań was demolished. It was unveiled again as late as in 1982. Also the monument of the Drummer of the Greater Poland Uprising in Śrem was destroyed, it was rebuilt 20 years after the war. It can be added here that most of the monuments destroyed at that time by the German occupants was reconstructed after the war.

Despite the fact that several decades have passed since the end of World War II, gaining an insight into the stories of Greater Poland insurgents during the period of occupation remains an important research postulate. The characteristics of only certain examples indicate the complexity of the problem. The insurgents died for their patriotism, resisted the invaders, lived in fear and some of them adapted to the new reality. Further studies of the fates of participants of the Greater Poland Uprising may bring many new findings.

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