

Article 26

Dr Andrzej Slawinski

Collaboration with the Germans in occupied countries – the case of Poland

During World War II inhabitants of German-occupied countries were often forced to work for the German war effort in factories or on land. Such forced labour cannot be regarded as collaboration; voluntary collaboration in a political or military sense is another matter.

From a number of occupied countries, small, semi-independent states were created and these collaborated fully with the Germans. Typical examples are: Petain's Vichy France, Tiso's Slovakia and Pavelic's Croatia.

In several occupied countries well known fascist politicians formed Nazi-style political parties. Leaders of such parties took an active part in the administration of their countries together with their occupier, e.g. Quisling in Norway, Degrelle in Belgium and Mussert in Holland.

There was quite extensive military collaboration in many occupied countries. There were numerous volunteers for the Waffen SS from Scandinavia, Baltic and Balkan Countries as well as from France, Belgium, Holland and the Ukraine. Out of 50 SS divisions 18 were formed from such volunteers (1). A number of different military formations were organised using Soviet Prisoners of War originating from several constituent Soviet Union Republics. Units composed of Vlasov's "White" Russians as well as of Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Cossacks, Caucasians, Azers and Turkomen were intended for fighting the Soviets with the view of liberating those republics. However, on many occasions such formations were employed in operations against resistance movements or partisans. Half a dozen such units were used by the Germans to fight the insurgents during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 (2).

Collaboration of the worst possible kind - active participation in the Holocaust – was relatively rare. There is evidence that Ukrainian Militias were involved in running extermination camps in the East and that Auxiliary Police Battalions originating from the Baltic countries took part in the liquidation of the Ghettos.

Account must be taken of collaboration by individuals as spies or informers for the German Police or Gestapo. Also there is the special case of collaboration taking into account – the local law and order institutions such as the police.

Faced with this vast array of information, a casual reader of general accounts of World War II, would be inclined that collaboration in occupied countries with the Germans was a virtually universal phenomenon, and would, as a matter of course, include Poland in this category.

A careful scrutiny of historical sources would reveal that there were no Polish Militias participating in the Holocaust, no Polish SS Divisions and no Polish "Quisling".

The situation in Nazi conquered Poland was somewhat more complex because of the division of the country into three parts. The Western territories were incorporated directly into the Third Reich and many Polish people were expelled from them into the central occupied part of Poland, while most of the remaining population was offered one of several possible grades of the German citizenship. Those who accepted

were soon forcibly inducted into the German Army or even in some cases into the SS. This cannot strictly speaking be seen as collaboration, although some may argue that it was.

The eastern territories of Poland were annexed by the Soviet Union, but soon after the outbreak of the German – Soviet war, they were divided into a western section which was added to the General Gouvernement (central Poland) and the eastern areas which became part of German occupied Soviet land, with some degree of autonomy for the Ukraine, Byelorussia and Lithuania, whose populations extensively collaborated with the Nazis.

The central part of Poland, occupied by the Germans was named the General Gouvernement. Its inhabitants had virtually no rights and were exploited and persecuted by the German occupier in various ways.

As far as collaboration with the Nazis in the lands of the General Gouvernement was concerned there were cases of informers, spies and traitors working for the Gestapo, but these were rather the exception than the rule. Such collaborators were usually dealt with by the Polish Resistance. Then there was the Polish (and later Jewish) order police.

The existence in all occupied countries of locally recruited order police forces presented a special problem. Such forces were nominally intended for combating the usual type of crime among their fellow-countrymen, but were in the event obliged to obey all orders of their German masters. The Nazis were very adept in such matters and were able to manipulate the policemen by redefining crime, illegal activities and anti-social behaviour to suit their own ends.

The so-called “Navy-blue” Polish Police in the General Gouvernement was composed mainly from pre-war cadres but infiltrated by some unpleasant, unscrupulous individuals who were prepared to take part in activities such as blackmail, intimidation, corruption and worse. Most of the force’s high-ranking officers were ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) or members of ethnic minorities such as the Ukrainians.

There is some evidence that the Polish Police were involved in keeping order while the Jewish inhabitants were forcibly transferred to Ghettos in larger towns by the German police or SS. In the largest of the Holocaust Nazi enterprises, the Warsaw Ghetto, Polish and Jewish Ghetto Policemen were stationed at the Ghetto gates to assist the German guards in controlling movement in and out of the Ghetto, by Polish council workers and Jewish working parties.

The Warsaw Ghetto was guarded by the militarised German police, the Gendarmerie. However some three weeks before the liquidation of the Ghetto, the guards were strengthened by policemen wearing strange uniforms. They turned out to be members of the “Szaulis” Lithuanian Militia. At the same time Polish and Jewish policemen were withdrawn from the Ghetto gates.

The Jewish Warsaw Ghetto Police Force, recruited and administered by the Nazis, had among its ranks some brutish thugs but also some weak individuals who were hoping to obtain better living conditions and to save themselves from “deportation”. Although their function was to maintain Nazi law and order within the Ghetto, in the event they were ordered by the Germans to round up hundreds of thousands of their fellow Jews, force-march them to the “Umschlagplatz” and load them onto the waiting trains, which were to take them to work camps in the East (in fact to the death camps). Eventually all the Jewish policemen were arrested by the SS, loaded onto the last transport and sent to their death.

Is it fair to condemn outright the Polish Policemen and the Jewish Ghetto Policemen for obeying the orders of their German masters? This constitutes a dilemma for many historians. Perhaps one should follow the example of a Jewish historian whose judgment on the actions and fate of those Jewish Policemen was: “They were all guilty... and they were innocent; and they were all saints” **(3)**.

Taking all the historical facts into consideration it perhaps can be concluded that in the case of Poland there was little collaboration with the Nazis of the serious, objectionable kind. It is therefore surprising that accusations of such collaboration have occurred on many occasions in the past. In an article in “Gazeta Polska” (7/11/1999) Jacek Kwiecinski refers to the statement of the well known American broadcaster Howard Stern: “It was the Poles who were responsible for the Nazi plan for the extermination of the Jews and for the

execution of the plan” and to the statement of the American television journalist Lesley Stahl, in her book “Reporting Live”: “It was the Poles who with the help of their friendly neighbours, the Germans, murdered the Jews in the 1940’s”.

The journalist and author Stewart Steven in his book “The Poles’ (3) refers to a statement made on Dutch television in 1979: “What concerns the Jews, the Poles have been collaborating with the Germans. Of the thirty five million of the Poles, only at most one hundred people have been helping Jews”. This statement was made by the Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin.

It is very sad and regrettable that such statements are made not only because they do not represent the true facts, but also as the authors are persons of high standing. Their statements are taken as the truth by many.

Perhaps one should not bother to consider something as ridiculous and incomprehensible as the description of German concentration camps as “Polish”. Such descriptions were used on various occasions in the past, but surprisingly have cropped up again in 2006 in the British media and in the German press. Unfortunately such descriptions may suggest to the relatively uninformed that there was Polish collaboration with the Nazis of the worst kind.

It is very difficult to think of a reason why such statements are made. Were they made because of ignorance? A mistake? A slip of the tongue? Was it because of the location of the camps?

The German concentration camps were of three types: for “protective custody”, for both custody and extermination and those used exclusively for systematic extermination. Most of the camps were located in the territory of the “Greater” Third Reich, which included the Polish lands incorporated to the Reich in 1939. Some extermination camps were located in parts of Poland annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939, but after 1941 were occupied by the German Army. The remaining camps were in the General Gouvrenment, which was, for most practical purposes, a slave labour colony of Poles, administered, ruled and policed by the Germans.

All the camps were administered, manned and guarded by special SS units (Totenkopfverbände) except that some death camps in the east were run jointly by the SS and the Ukrainian Militias. The only thing “Polish” about those German concentration camps was that in so many of them, many of the unfortunate inmates were Polish nationals or Polish citizens.

One can only hope that in the future those who refer publicly to such aspects of World War II, particularly if they happen to be persons in the public eye or occupying high office in their countries, would take greater care when describing such matters, and would base their opinions and judgments on historical facts.

Andrzej Slawinski

References:

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3. Stewart Steven, “The Poles”, Collins/Harvill, London 1982