

## Article 28

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### Dr Grzegorz Jasinski, Polish Cultural Losses in the years 1939-1945

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In the years 1939–1945 the frontline crossed the territory of the Second Polish Republic several times. The Polish population suffered heavy personal and material losses as a result of the fighting, but, nevertheless, not as heavy as the losses they suffered during the long years of enemy occupation. One of the occupant's chief objectives was to degrade the Polish nation to be achieved through the physical extermination of its elites, the destruction of national awareness and integrity as well as rendering impossible the country's economic self-sufficiency.

Among the cities of Poland's Second Republic the greatest destruction was inflicted on the country's capital and centre of culture, Warsaw. At the start of the war deliberate aerial bombings destroyed approximately ten percent of its buildings. The Public Education Archive with documents from the National Education Directorate of the Duchy of Warsaw and 'Congress Poland' (1815-1831) as well as the Treasury Archive were among those burnt to the ground. Such was also the fate of the Zamoyski's *Ordynacja* Library, with a thousand or so volumes of legal documents from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as the Przezdziecki's *Ordynacja* Library with its collection of Polish texts from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in addition to a very large collection of 18<sup>th</sup>-century prints and drawings. Moreover, Warsaw's museums suffered greatly. The Museum of Ethnography as well as the Museum of Industry and Agriculture were completely destroyed by fire. In the National Museum Egyptian archaeological finds and a Far Eastern art collection were lost. The Poles managed to evacuate only some works of art out of the intentionally destroyed city. These included Jan Matejko's paintings *The Battle of Grunwald* and *Skarga's Sermon*, which were taken out the Society for Encouragement of Fine Arts building and shipped to Zamość, where they survived the entire war hidden in a shed of the Municipal Rolling Stock Yard.

On 29<sup>th</sup> September 1939 Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Union people's commissar for foreign affairs, and Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Third Reich foreign minister, signed the Soviet-German Boundary and Friendship Treaty and thus formalised the fourth partition of Poland. The common view is that there were only two occupants. However, one ought to remember that in the years 1939-1940 Wilno (Vilnius) and adjacent territories were occupied by Lithuania, whereas Slovakia occupied the Spisz and Orawa region from 1939 to 1945.

Nevertheless, it was the Soviets and Germans who partitioned Poland and thus wiped it off the political map of Europe. The next step was to deprive the Polish nation of its identity. Both occupants launched ruthless campaigns against Polish culture and its most distinguished representatives. In the newly formed General Government (GG) as well as in territories directly incorporated into the Third Reich, German became the official language – in the General Government Polish was permitted only as an auxiliary language. Access to education, art and science was radically curtailed. Polish youths were now denied the right to a secondary and tertiary education. Instead they were to attend primary and partly vocational schools. Many centres of culture were closed, including libraries, theatres and concert halls. The playing of Fryderyk Chopin's music was prohibited. Instead circus performances were propagated and people were also encouraged to watch movies in the cinema, always preceded by propaganda news chronicles. Religious practice was generally hindered. Meanwhile Polish cultural property was destroyed or looted on a massive scale.

On 19<sup>th</sup> October 1939 the German authorities ordered the confiscation of all items considered necessary for the 'securing' of German national interests and found in Polish archives, museums, public or private collections. Entrusted with this task were state institutions headed by the Main Trusteeship Office for the East, called into being by Hermann Goring on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1939, and its affiliated Society for the Study of Predecessors' Legacies. The plunder was also conducted by the Office of the General Trustee for the Securing of German Cultural Possessions in Annexed Eastern Territories as well as other special trustees, such as Dr Kaj Muhlmann or Hans Posse, Hitler's special emissary 'with a right of priority in selecting the most valuable works of art'.

As a result orders issued by Arthur Greiser, the German administrator of 'Wartheland', on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1939 the collections of Polish archives, museums and libraries were all confiscated and next shipped to the Third Reich. These included the collections of the Ethnographic Museum in Poznan, museums in Gluchow and Rogalin as well as in Kornik Castle. Cultural treasures looted from the General Government were stored in the cellars of the Jagiellonian University Library in Krakow. By mid 1940 the booty gathered there included 521 items assessed to be of international cultural value, among others, paintings from the Czartoryski Museum in Krakow (including Raphael Sanzio's *Portrait of a Young Man*, Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* and Rembrandt's *Landscape with the Good Samaritan*), 25 paintings by Bernardo Bellotto, popularly known in Poland as 'Canaletto', as well as 55 items from the Wawel Cathedral Treasury.

After taking over Poland's eastern borderlands, the soviet civilian and military administrations also set about destroying all signs of Polish civilization. On 29<sup>th</sup> November 1939 all inhabitants remaining since 2<sup>nd</sup> November on territories incorporated into the USSR were forced to accept soviet citizenship. The Polish administration was liquidated and Polish no longer had the status of an official language. All places of worship, regardless of religion, were closed and converted into warehouses or 'museums of atheism'. Numerous museums and galleries were also closed down; the total space used to display items of Polish culture in 1939 was reduced by 40 percent. Today it is difficult to assess the sheer scale of the plunder and mindless destruction of Polish cultural property by the Soviets. Already in the first weeks of occupation they looted over two thousand Polish residences. In 1940 many very valuable items from landed estates were stolen by the Moscow Museum of History. Likewise the Central Anti-Religious Museum in Moscow regularly confiscated priceless manuscripts and books from churches, monasteries and private collections. Several thousand sacred objects were destroyed. For example, the remains of the King of Poland Stanislaw August Poniatowski in the Church of the Sacred Trinity in Wolczyn were defiled and the building itself was converted into a fertilizer warehouse for the local kolkhoz.

Polish state archives also suffered terrible losses. Most of the documents from places like Tarnopol, Stanislawow or Sokal were transferred to soviet archives. An identical policy was practiced on the German side. In Warsaw alone they treated as war booty funds from the Central Military Archive, the Institute of Recent History and a large part of the collection in the Main Archive of Old Records (including 74 priceless Teutonic Order documents from the years 1215-1466). It has been estimated that as direct result of fighting and the legalised plunder in the years that followed approximately 5 million archive items were lost.

The treatment of Polish libraries was no better. The fate of those in territories incorporated into the Third Reich was particularly tragic. In the first months of the occupation public libraries in towns like Sosnowiec, Bedzin, Katowice, Cieszyn, Torun, Inowroclaw or Plock were burned down. In that time in Lodz the contents of ten municipal libraries, 100 school libraries and 15 academic society or community libraries was turned into pulp. According to calculations made in the years 1946-1948 by the Main Libraries Directive, the estimated losses to Polish literature included approximately 15.1 million volumes as well as 654 thousand exceptionally precious books.

Thousands historic buildings were also destroyed, including the Jablonowski Palace in Lwow as well as the 1161 Collegiate Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Alexius in Tum near Leczyca. Enemy inflicted damage during World War II has been estimated to account for the loss of 43 percent of Poland's pre-war architecture. A sum of 7,535 buildings were totally destroyed, whereas 11,932 buildings were at least 50 percent damaged. One should stress that among the buildings razed to the ground there were 23 examples Romanesque architecture, 1,937 Gothic buildings, 811 in the Renaissance style as well as 3,800 in the Baroque and Rococo styles. Moreover, several hundred precious statues and monuments were torn down.

Undoubtedly, these losses would have been even greater were it not for the efforts of many thousands of Poles who, frequently risking their own lives, struggled to preserve their national identity. During the occupation specialised organisations within the Polish Underground State provided clandestine lessons and made possible the continued development of various forms of art. Moreover, there were persistent actions (supervised by Stanislaw Lorentz and Karol Estreicher among others) to save cultural property as well as register robbed items to make possible the retrieval of at least some of them after the war.

Both occupying powers at all costs intended to render impossible the re-emergence of the Polish State. For this purpose they waged a ruthless war against Polish intellectual and political elites who could potentially lead the struggle to defend their country. As part of the policy to Germanize territories inhabited by 'lower Slavic races – sub-humans' (principles later to be adopted in the *Generalplan Ost*), already on 1<sup>st</sup> September an approximately two-month major campaign was begun, called Operation Tannenberg, as a result of which almost 20,000 members of the Polish intelligentsia were murdered. This was followed by other German 'actions' against the intelligentsia (*Intelligenzaktionen*): Pommern, Posen, Masovien, Schlesien and Litzmannstadt. Thus a further 40,000 Poles were murdered and 20,000 more were sent to concentration camps, where most of them perished. At the same time the Germans also carried out mass evictions and so-called 'special actions'. It was in Krakow during one these 'actions' – on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1939 – that SS Sturmbannführer Dr Bruno Müller announced to convened Polish lecturers from the Jagiellonian University, the Academy of Mining and Metallurgy and the Academy of Trade: '...Sirs! Your decision to reactivate the university, to conduct lessons, seminars, lectures and examinations proves that you have absolutely no idea of the situation that you find yourselves in. Your decision is an act of hostility against the German Reich...' That day the SS arrested 183 people, 169 of whom were sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin, where over a dozen died, including the outstanding historian and bibliographer Stanisław Estreicher, the literary historian and author of *Historii literatury niepodległej Polski* Ignacy Chrzanowski as well as Leon Sternbach, a classical philologist and expert on Byzantine history of world renown. As a result of the Germans most well known Special Pacification Action, (*AB-Aktion* or *Ausserordentliche Befriedungsaktion*), carried out on German occupied territory in 1940 at least 3,500 Poles were arrested. The victims were members of the intelligentsia, political and social activists, artists as well as those suspected of ties with the underground freedom fighting movement. These people were subjected to brutal interrogations, some were next murdered, while others were sent to concentration camps. This German policy of extermination was continued in the years that followed. In July 1941, after the outbreak of war with the Soviet Union and the capture of Lwow, dozens of Polish lecturers from the Jan Kazimierz University and the Lwow Polytechnic were arrested, and next murdered. Among the victims were Tadeusz Boy-Zelenski – physician, journalist and translator of French literature, Włodzimierz Krukowski – a world famous electrical engineer and author of 60 patents, as well as Kazimierz Bartel – mathematician and five times prime minister of the Second Polish Republic.

The most massive form of repression applied by the soviet authorities against Polish citizens were the forced deportations and resettlements which in the years 1940-1941 affected no less than half a million people.

The Soviets saw a particular danger in what they very broadly considered to be the Polish political elites. That was what led to the greatest tragedy which occurred in POW camps and prisons in Belarus and Ukraine and still burdens on relations between the Polish Republic and the Russian Federation to this day. As prisoners-of-war, many of the victims were held in special NKVD camps in Kozelsk, Ostashkov and Starobelsk as well as various prisons. The project of Lavrentiy Beria, the people's commissar for internal affairs, was to charge the Poles with counterrevolutionary activity under article 58, item 1 of the 1929 RSFRS Penal Code. At the start of March 1940 Beria sent a letter to Stalin in which he presented a list 14,736 POWs from the three special camps and also a list of 10,685 Polish citizens held in NKVD prisons in Belarus and Ukraine. Most of them were officers of the reserve, in civilian life doctors, academic lecturers, artists and teachers. They were murdered on the basis of decision BP KC WKP(b), which was made on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1940.

A huge blow to centuries of Polish cultural and material heritage came as a result of the Warsaw Uprising. In 63 days of bitter fighting, as Red Army detachments idly looked on and Western Allies managed to provide only token help, the Germans destroyed some 25 percent of the buildings in Poland's capital. Then, after the fighting had stopped, the Germans destroyed another 35 percent of the buildings. It has been

estimated that some 150,000 Poles were killed in the Uprising. Among the victims was the flower of Poland's intelligentsia, those who had survived the planned exterminations of Poland's elites. It is with good reason people say Poles at the time were firing diamonds at the enemy. Among those who perished on the barricades were three outstanding Polish poets: Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, Zdzisław Stroiński and Tadeusz Gajcy.

On balance, the war was an unmitigated tragedy for Polish culture. It meant the loss of what the country had acquired over generations and centuries, the loss of important centres of Polish culture such as Lwów and Wilno as well as the physical extermination of the nation's elites. The new territorial acquisitions to the west and north were to a great extent desolated by wartime fighting and the deliberate Soviet policy of plunder in the years 1944–1947.

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