Dante's Hell

When German forces invaded Poland in September 1939, a series of atrocities were unleashed against civilians and the military by the Wehrmacht's regular soldiers as well as by SS troops – commonly the supposed perpetrators of such crimes. **Roger Moorhouse** lifts the lid on this dark chapter of history.

On 12 September 1939, the German film-director Leni Riefenstahl was in Poland following the progress of the German invasion. As the maker of the propaganda films *The Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* she was one of Hitler's most famous film directors and propagandists, and had been granted war correspondent status to report on the German attack on Poland.

A couple of days earlier, she had arrived with a film crew in the town of Końskie, 100km south west of Warsaw, to visit the nearby headquarters of the German 10th Army, and its commander General Walther von Reichenau, one of Hitler's favourite generals. Instead of glad-handing the Nazi elite, however, Riefenstahl would be witness to some disturbing events.

That day, Końskie saw the funeral of four German soldiers who had been killed nearby in combat. Rumour had it that their bodies had been mutilated, so tempers among German troops were running unusually high. As was not uncommon, groups of soldiers began combing the town for Jews, 40 of whom were duly captured and set to work digging graves for the soldiers. Only a few of them were given shovels, the remainder dug with their bare hands while being beaten and abused by the German mob. All the while, a Wehrmacht officer attempted – largely unsuccessfully – to maintain order.

■ **This photograph of Riefenstahl is purportedly the moment she witnesses terrible events unfold at Końskie. As a result, she is said to have asked that her war reporting engagement be cancelled.**

Watching the volatile situation deteriorate, Leni Riefenstahl was doubtless horrified by the yawning chasm between Nazism's pristine propaganda image, which she had helped create, and the bloody reality. When the officer departed, the violence increased with the Jews being kicked and punched by the crowd of soldiers. According to her own account, Riefenstahl attempted to intervene, berating the men and imploring them to follow the order to disperse. In response, she claimed, she was herself abused and had a rifle pointed at her.

Soon after that, a brutal attempt to restore order triggered a wholesale massacre, with soldiers shooting blindly into the fleeing crowd. In the aftermath, 22 Jews lay dead, shot or beaten to death by the mob. Riefenstahl was so upset that she asked that her war reporting engagement be cancelled and returned forthwith to Berlin. She would never visit an active warzone again.

THE JEWISH QUESTION

The killing at Końskie was not an outlier. Such actions became grimly commonplace during the German invasion of Poland. Petty humiliations and harassment were the very least that could be expected; Jews were routinely beaten and abused; forced to scrub the pavements or to shave their sidecurls. More murderous examples are legion. At Błonie, west of Warsaw, 50 Jews were massacred; at Pułtusk, 80; at Krasnosielc another 50. At Limanowa, near Kraków, nine Jews were killed, along with the Catholic Pole who tried to intervene. In the worst instance, at Przemyśl in south-eastern Poland, a three-day killing spree saw around 600 Jews rounded up and machine-gunned at a local cemetery. As one eye-witness recalled, it was "like a scene from Dante's hell."

Given the ideological obsessions of the Nazi regime,

■ **Smoke rises above a village in September 1939 as Wehrmacht troops advance into Poland.** *(GA)*

■ **A transport column of Infanterie-Regiment Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler passing Polish civilian refugees in September 1939. During the campaign in Poland this unit was attached to the Army's 17. Infanterie-Division.** *(GA)*

German troops from Artillerie-Regiment 56 during the invasion of Poland, September 1939. *(From a private Artillerie-Regiment 56 member's photo album)*

and the dark reputation that its soldiers would later earn for themselves, it would be easy to imagine that such actions were motivated solely by anti-Semitism. Of course, anti-Semitism was a core component of the Nazi creed and was often expressed by German troops; many of whom came into contact with the Eastern Jews that were so stereotypically represented in Nazi propaganda for the first time in Poland. Passing close to Łódź, one soldier mockingly referred to the crude cartoons of hook-nosed, ringleted Jews that were often shown in the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer*, commenting that such pictures: "...which once appeared to us to be exaggerated, were eclipsed by the reality we saw and smelled". Another soldier suggested that: "Those who do not know of the Jewish Question, or don't want to know about it, should be sent here. Here they can study it thoroughly and they will be converted."

Anti-Semitism was certainly present, therefore, and was certainly a radicalising factor in the deteriorating behaviour of German troops. Yet, a wider reading of the contemporary accounts from the September campaign in Poland reveals that there was more going on than just anti-Jewish sentiment; other factors are at play. Crucially, it appears that incidents against Jews were only a part of a broader barbarisation of warfare. Civilian populations – whether Jewish or not – were routinely targeted, for instance; not least from the air. The towns and cities of Poland suffered indiscriminate air raiding that autumn, most egregiously in examples such as the towns of Wieluń, Sulejów and Frampol, which were destroyed despite having no military presence or any strategic significance.

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REPRISALS AND PACIFICATIONS

The German ground offensive was no more discriminating. Indeed, atrocities against civilians and POWs soon became routine. In countless instances, German troops behaved with wanton, murderous cruelty towards Polish civilian populations, targeting ordinary people as hostages, or murdering them as "bandits". Already in the opening days of the war, the brutal tone was set. In the village of Serock, near Bydgoszcz, the Germans murdered around 35 Poles in retaliation for a single shot fired at them. In Jankowice, near Katowice, 12 Polish "partisans" were shot in revenge for the killing of a German officer; they included three children, aged 10, 12 and 14. In Wyszanów, near Poznań, 17 women and children were killed when German soldiers threw hand-grenades into a cellar, despite the victims' pleas for mercy.

Any pretext sufficed. In the village of Torzeniec, near Kępno, men of the Wehrmacht 41st Infantry Regiment avenged themselves on local inhabitants after a brief

■ **The Panzers roll in Poland, September 1939. As with so many photographs taken during the invasion, black smoke billows on the horizon.** *(GA)*

■ **Wehrmacht troops take a break during the 1939 Polish invasion.** *(Kurt Seeliger - Licence CC-BC SA 4.0)*

■ **A soldier of the Wehrmacht in fatigue uniform (Drillichanzug) escorts Jewish civilians to forced labour duties in Zvolen on 18 September 1939. The original caption reads: "...they are being politely motivated to work."** *(Kurt Seeliger - Licence CC-BC SA 4.0)*

night-time firefight cost three of their men their lives. Believing that the villagers had fired on them, the soldiers set barns and houses alight and then shot those who tried to escape the flames. Thirty four villagers were killed, including a mother and her 2-year-old daughter. A further 13 Poles were murdered in Gostyń, 26 in Łaziska Górne, 38 in Zimnowoda, 75 in Parzymiechy and 159 in Albertów.

Actions such as these were often euphemistically called "reprisals" or "pacifications" by the Germans. The inhabitants of Bydgoszcz endured a systematic, week-long "pacification", in response to the Polish suppression of an ethnic German rising in the opening days of the war. Over 1,300 Poles died, many of whom were dragged from their homes and slaughtered in cold blood. Some 40 Polish hostages were shot in the town's market square, *pour encourager les autres*, including a group of boy scouts and the priest who rushed to give them the last rites.

At Simonsdorf, in the Danzig Free State, a further 40 Poles – railway and customs employees, along with their families –

■ **General Walther von Reichenau who commanded the 10th Army during the invasion of Poland.**

Captured Polish soldiers are marched into captivity and a very uncertain future.

were killed by German forces after they had frustrated a surprise attack. According to an eye-witness, their bodies were piled up and a sign was erected declaring: "Here lies the Polish minority from Simonsdorf". At Sulejówek, 50 civilians were murdered in retaliation for the death of a single German officer. At Kajetanowice, meanwhile, 72 Poles were massacred in response to the death of two German horses in a friendly fire incident. The list goes on.

LEGITIMATE DEFENSIVE ACTIONS

In part, of course, such atrocities were a consequence of the nature of the German advance – what we retrospectively call Blitzkrieg – in which mobile, fast-moving troops disrupted and isolated a more static defence, thereby causing many defenders to be left behind the advance, where any continued resistance could easily be interpreted as the work of "irregulars" or "partisans".

The combination of this fractured, ill-defined front line, with inexperienced troops, often resulted in what has become known as "partisan psychosis": the fear, actively stoked by some Wehrmacht commanders, that Polish snipers and "bandits" were lurking behind every hedgerow and in every building, waiting to launch an ambush or an attack from the rear. As one trigger-happy

The original caption of this photo, taken on 8 September 1939, reads: "Polish tree snipers (Baumschützen) on the market square in Drzevica." It appears likely that these men are probably Polish soldiers. *(Kurt Seeliger - Licence CC-BC SA 4.0)*

Jewish prisoners are set to work digging graves for German soldiers in Końskie, some using only their bare hands. *(American Holocaust Museum)*

A Wehrmacht officer oversees the segregation of Jews during the invasion. Very few, if any, of these unfortunate individuals were likely to have survived the war. *(From a private Artillerie-Regiment 56 member's photo album)*

German infantryman wrote home: "As we're in enemy territory I trust no-one! The pistol should talk before I believe someone."

This phenomenon was certainly recognised at the time. The war diary of the German 31st Infantry Division, for instance, noted that "the first days of the war have already shown that the men and the inexperienced officers were made insufficiently aware in their training of the typical conditions in warfare." The result, it said, was a "nervousness, anxiety and disorientation" which led to "shootings and arson". Local civilians, therefore, were often targeted in revenge for the legitimate defensive actions of the Polish army.

In addition, the convention that civilians were executed if they were found in possession of a weapon gave carte blanche to some of the most brutal impulses of German soldiers. As many eye-witnesses recalled, a weapon could be interpreted in myriad ways and could include such innocuous items as flintlocks, pocketknives, razors or rusty bayonets. Farmers were particularly at risk, as even the most routine search of their properties could often yield a shotgun or a pitchfork. Consequently, they regularly found themselves victims of German massacres: 18 were shot after the defence of Uniejów, for example, while 24 were murdered at Wylazłow, 30 were killed in Chechło and a further 32 near Łowicz.

Polish civilians being evicted from their village by soldiers of the Infanterie-Regiment Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, September 1939. *(GA)*

DRUGS, INEXPERIENCE AND PARTISAN PSYCHOSIS

Some have suggested that there might be a pharmacological reason for the murderous impetuousness shown by German troops in 1939. Pervitin, a methamphetamine that produced improvements in energy, concentration and libido, had become very popular in Germany before the war, and tests carried out by the Wehrmacht, which issued the drug in particular to

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This small group of Polish men were captured at Drzewica on 8 September 1939. The original caption reads: "After threats to shoot everyone were made, the people being held identified these men as partisans." *(Kurt Seeliger - Licence CC-BC SA 4.0)*

The drug Pervitin, a methamphetamine, was widely in use among German soldiers at the time of the invasion of Poland and has been used to partly explain the atrocities which took place. However, it is clear that racism and Nazi ideology were the prime motivators.

drivers during the invasion of Poland, revealed among the subjects heightened alertness, increased self-confidence, reduced inhibitions and a greater willingness to take risks. Of course, Pervitin was already easily available to ordinary soldiers, and though the level of consumption is unclear, it can be assumed that a proportion of them had their own supply. When the author Heinrich Böll wrote to his parents and siblings from Poland that autumn, he asked that they: "send Pervitin".

The military benefits of the drug are obvious. Soldiers who were alert, willing to take risks and able to stay awake for three days on end, made for highly effective fighters in the new age of mobile warfare. Indeed, the guidelines issued the following year for the drug's safe use stated that "the experience of the Polish campaign" showed that military success in 1939 had been "crucially influenced" by the taking of Pervitin. Alongside military advantage that it bestowed, it is very probable that Pervitin – by lowering inhibitions – made German soldiers much more likely to commit atrocities against civilian populations, particularly when combined with 'partisan psychosis'. Just as Pervitin turned Wehrmacht soldiers into more

In this chilling photograph, Wehrmacht soldiers hold a group of Jewish men prisoner in Poland during September 1939, searching them all. *(From a private Artillerie-Regiment 56 member's photo album)*

A Polish town, apparently undamaged, is viewed from the front gun position of a Heinkel He 111 bomber.

efficient fighters, it almost certainly made them into more efficient killers as well.

Yet, whatever the role played by Pervitin, inexperience, or 'partisan psychosis', there can be no doubt that the primary driver of German atrocities in Poland in 1939 was simple racism. German prejudice towards the Poles was widespread and well-documented, and Nazi ideology added to it a biological element which saw Poles very simply as a lesser form of human life; a people slated only for servitude to their German masters and long-term extermination.

Consequently, the very act of resistance to the German invasion was invariably seen through a racist lens. German soldiers told themselves that the Poles' harrying and ambushing of a superior enemy was the sort of cowardly warfare that was waged only by the racially inferior. By Nazi logic, therefore, it was deserving only of the most brutal punishment. As one soldier wrote of the Poles at the time: "[they] behave in an un-European way and indeed an un-human way ... Who can blame us for using harsher methods?"

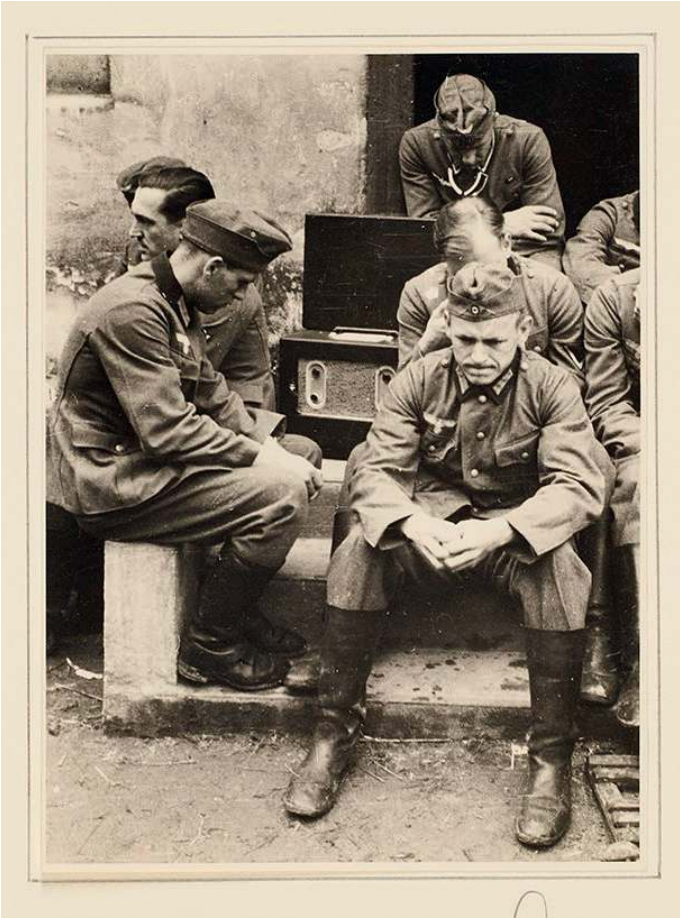
CLAUS VON STAUFFENBERG

A good example of German thinking at this time is the massacre near the village of Ciepiełów, south of Warsaw. On 8 September, the advance of the German 15th Motorized Infantry Regiment was halted outside the village by the Polish 74th Infantry in a brief but bloody engagement, during which a popular German company commander was killed by a Polish sniper. The regimental commander, Colonel Walter Wessel, was enraged, mourning the loss of his captain and cursing the "impudence" of the Poles for wanting to halt his advance. In response, he ordered that some 300 Polish POWs were to be treated as partisans. They were stripped of their papers and their uniform jackets and ordered to march in single-file to the rear. Some minutes later, the chatter of machine guns was heard, and an eye-witness saw the prisoners "shot, lying in the ditch by the side of the road."

As events at Ciepiełów demonstrated, German soldiers often did not treat Polish civilians or POWs with respect because they did not consider they deserved it. To many German minds of the time, the Poles were "uncivilised", "filthy", "a rabble"; in short, as one soldier proclaimed, they were "barely human". Even the later hero of the German resistance, Claus von Stauffenberg, was infected by the racist *zeitgeist*. Reaching the river Vistula that autumn, he wrote home and damning the Poles as "an unbelievable rabble, very many Jews and very much mixed population. A people which is surely only comfortable under the knout."

Such attitudes were grimly commonplace, and the atrocities that resulted were not anomalies or isolated occurrences; they were witnessed in almost every Polish village and town. The statistics speak for themselves. On the day of the Końskie massacre alone – 12 September – there were 29 other massacres and killing sprees, claiming nearly 300 victims. And that day was far from exceptional.

Hitler had told his generals just before the invasion that "the destruction of Poland" was his priority. It seems they took him at his word. In Poland, German soldiers were engaged in a race war, and the Polish



■ **Wehrmacht soldiers in Poland in September 1939 listen intently to a wireless broadcast. On 3 September came news that Britain had declared war on Germany in response to the invasion.** *(Kurt Seeliger - Licence CC-BC SA 4.0)*

■ **American photographer, Julien Bryan, comforts ten-year-old Kazimiera Mika whose sister had just been killed in a German air attack. Bryan was in Poland in September 1939, later creating a documentary called called Siege. Of this little Polish girl, he later said: "The child had never before seen death and couldn't understand why her sister would not speak to her. The child looked at us in bewilderment. I threw my arm about her and held her tightly, trying to comfort her. She cried. So did I."**

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people – whether soldiers or civilians – were the enemy. Throughout September, the German campaign in Poland saw at least 615 such mass killings, costing over 12,000 lives. By contrast, the French campaign of 1940 saw only two notable massacres of POWs – at Le Paradis and Wormhoudt – and, tellingly, both units involved had committed atrocities in Poland in the previous autumn.

For English-speaking readers, the Polish campaign of 1939 often gets overlooked; passed over with a few mythical references to the foolish Polish cavalry supposedly charging German tanks. Yet, a closer study of the campaign shows not only that the Poles defended themselves with considerable vigour, giving as good an account of themselves as the British and French did six months later, but also that the campaign saw the debut of many nefarious practices that would feature in the later war: indiscriminate bombing, targeting of civilians and brutal ethnic cleansing.

It serves as a reminder – if another is required – that the nature of the war, and of German conduct in the east, was hideously different to that most usually seen by British forces in the western theatre. The 'bloodlands' of Eastern Europe were where the Nazis' racist ambitions would see their grim realisation. A process that began not with Operation Barbarossa in the summer of 1941, but in Poland in September 1939.