

READING

Colonizing Poland

Only a few months after the invasion of Poland, Germany was working quickly to claim its new “living space” by removing those people the Nazis considered to be of inferior races from the Warthegau, the territory of western Poland that had been annexed to the German Reich. The Nazis then sent in settlers who they believed were German enough to take possession of the land, homes, and businesses.



Exhibit on Germany's Colonization of Poland

An exhibit at a Berlin school persuades Germans to help colonize the Warthegau area of Poland. The exhibit says "The land calls you!," and the painting shows a settler's car passing by a Polish border sign that has been knocked down.

CREDIT: SV Bilderdienst / DIZ Muenchen / The Image Works

In a December 1939 report, an observer describes how this took place:

As ethnic Germans . . . come pouring into the new Reich territories . . . an equivalent number of Poles from matching occupations are being evacuated at the same rate. Depending on the number of German farmers, traders, skilled tradesmen, etc., who are registered with the immigration offices, a corresponding number of jobs, houses, and farms previously held or occupied by Poles must be made available for them. If, for example, an incoming batch of immigrants from the Baltic states contains twenty German master bakers, then twenty Polish bakeries in Posen and the rest of the Warthegau must be evacuated. The German immigrants then move into these premises . . . Initially the evacuation of residents from the towns was not carried out selectively, but simply block by block. This often meant that railway workers and other persons working in vital industries were evacuated, causing economic disruption. Today evacuations are carried out on the basis of specially prepared lists. Polish intellectuals are evacuated as a matter of priority. Polish agricultural workers, domestic staff and factory workers are allowed to remain.¹

A Polish woman identified as "Mrs. J. K." described her expulsion from her home by the Nazis:

On 17 October 1939, at 8 a.m., I heard someone knocking at the door of my flat. As my maid was afraid to open it, I went to the door myself. I found there two German gendarmes [police], who roughly told me that in a few hours I had to be ready to travel with my children and everybody in the house. When I said that I had small children, that my husband was a prisoner of war, and that I could not get ready to travel in so short a time, the gendarmes answered that not only must I be ready but that the flat must be swept, the plates and dishes washed and the keys left in the cupboards, so that the Germans who were to live in my house should have no trouble. In so many words, they further declared that I was entitled to take with me only one suitcase of not more than 50 kilograms [110 pounds] in weight and a small handbag with food for a few days.

At 12 noon they came again and ordered us to go out in front of the house. Similar groups of people were standing in front of all the houses. After some hours waiting, military lorries [trucks] drove up and they packed us in one after the other, shouting at us rudely and also striking us. Then they took us to the railway station, but only in the evening did they pack us into [boxcars], the doors of which they then bolted and sealed. In these [cars], most of which were packed with forty people, we spent three days, without any possibility of getting out. I hereby affirm that in my [car] there were six children of under

¹ Götz Aly and Suzanne Heim, "Rearranging Populations," in *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Peter Hayes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 273–74.

ten years of age and two old men, and that we were not given any straw, or any drinking utensils, that we had to satisfy our natural needs in the tightly packed [car], and that if there were no deaths in our transport it was only because it was still comparatively warm and we spent only three days on the journey. We were unloaded, half dead at Czestochowa [in the General Government part of Poland] where the local population gave us immediate help, but the German soldiers who opened the truck exclaimed, "What! Are these Polish swine still alive?"²

The process was much the same everywhere. In the city of Posen, 88,000 Poles and Jews were arrested and then loaded onto unheated rail cars in December 1939. When those cars reached Kraków, German officials discovered the bodies of 40 children who had frozen to death on the journey.

Those who survived their expulsion from the Warthegau to the General Government were divided into groups. One group, made up of the strongest and fittest Polish men, was immediately shipped to Germany as forced labor. The other Poles were left to fend for themselves. The Jews were placed in ghettos—closely guarded sections of cities where only Jews could live. Altogether, more than a million people were displaced; two-thirds of them were ethnic Poles.

The people who moved in after the Poles, Jews, and other groups deemed inferior were expelled from the Warthegau were ethnic Germans. These German colonists came from Germany itself, as well as from Baltic countries that contained ethnic German populations before the war. Upon arrival in Poland, the colonists were often housed first in asylum and hospital buildings (emptied of residents by the Nazi "euthanasia" program) and transit camps until enough homes had been emptied of their Polish owners. A German observer described how the colonists were introduced to their new homes after that:

I was particularly impressed by the way the resettlement in Janowice . . . was organized. The resettlement unit sent a car for me at 4:30 a.m. . . . Our first destination was the transit camp in Zgierz. Parked outside the gate was a line of brown buses normally used to take German workers on vacation trips. The luggage was just then being put on board. The new colonists were sitting in a school hall eating breakfast. The head of every family had a piece of white paper hung around his neck with the number of his farm written on it (and already the numbering ran from 1441 upwards) . . . The people are put on the buses in the order of their farm numbers. . . . At a farm halfway there we meet up with a police unit of 50 or so men who have been working there during the night. Janowice

² Quoted in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919–1945*, vol. 2 (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 937–38.

comes into view up ahead. . . . Then the first carts arrive. No. 1441. A pale, elderly farmer in a poor state of health. "This is your farm," the SS man tells him. It's a small, blue-painted Polish cottage. It seems to me that the farmer turns a shade paler. He slowly approaches the high wooden gate. His wife stays on the cart, as if rooted to the spot. "And the second farm over there, the neighboring one, that's yours as well . . ." continues the SS man. "Now that's more like it," he seems to be thinking. I accompany the people as they tour the house. They wander slowly from room to room, examining everything closely. Nobody says a word. Now and then the farmer points to an object and says to his wife, "Look!" We wish the people luck and go over to the next house.³

³ Götz Aly and Suzanne Heim, "Rearranging Populations," in *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Peter Hayes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 279–80.

Connection Questions

1. How were the Nazis' beliefs about race and their quest for "living space" related?
2. How do the individual stories in this reading help you understand the consequences of the Nazi policies in Poland that were based on these beliefs?
3. Who benefited from the Nazi plan to rearrange the population of Poland? Who suffered as a result of the plan?
4. What insight does this reading provide about the factors that encouraged Germans to support the war effort?