

Persecution of Poles

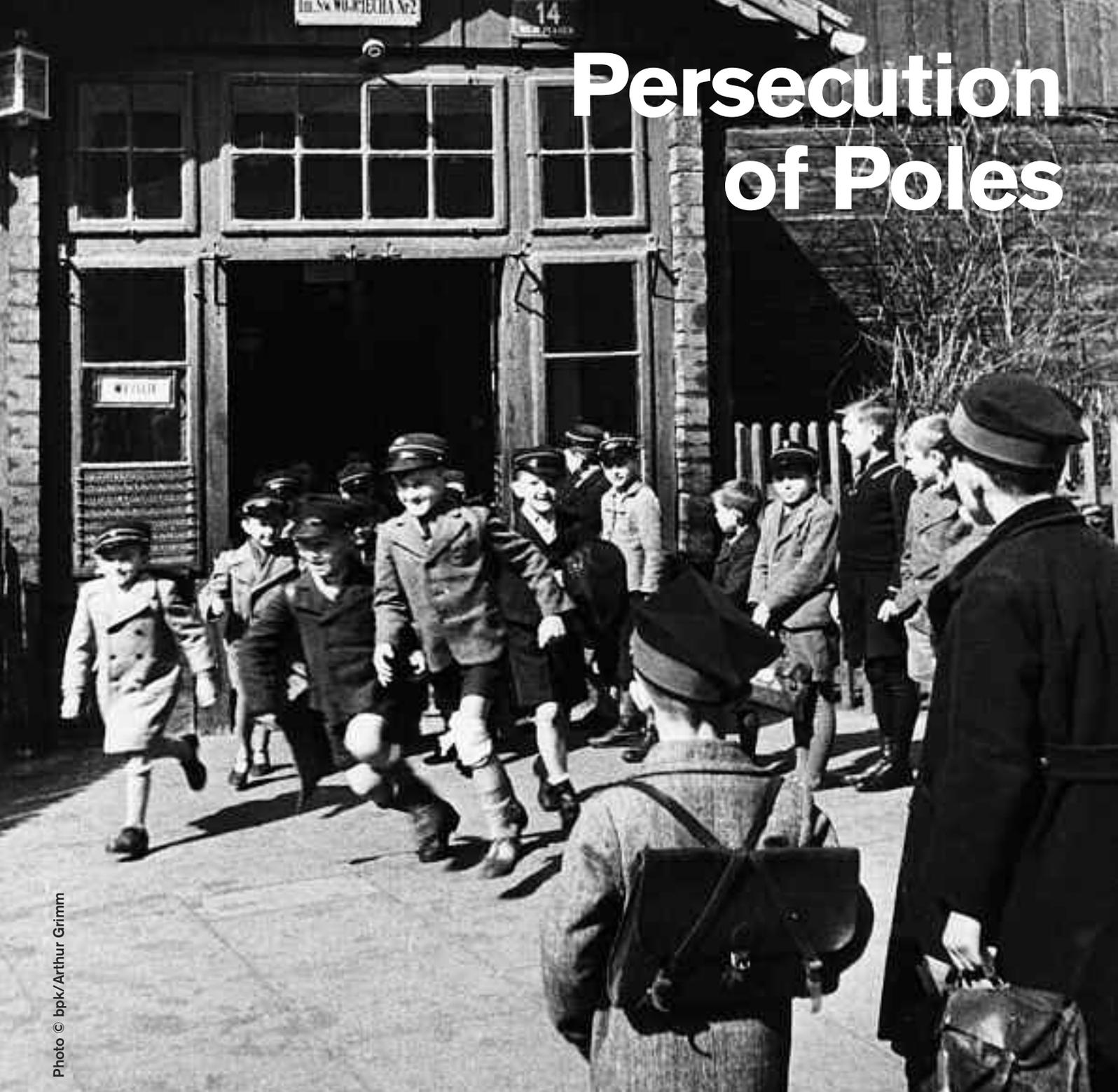
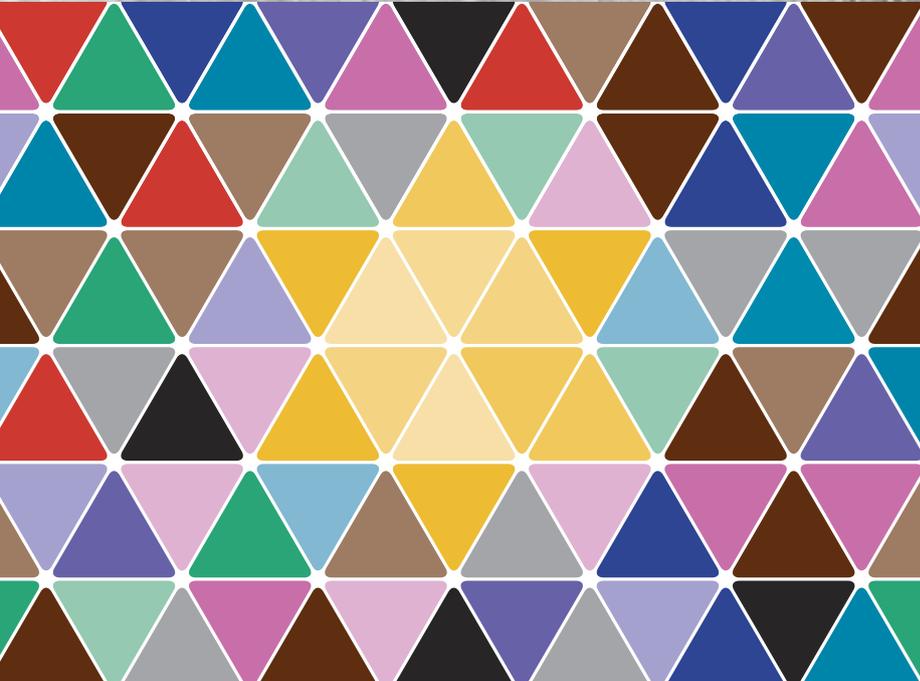


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Mosaic – Victims of Nazi Persecution



Persecution of Poles

Nazi ideology regarded the Slavic peoples of eastern Europe, such as Poles, Czechs and Russians, as racially inferior to Germans. Their lands were therefore seen as *Lebensraum* (living space) which Germany had the right to dominate. These Nazi ideas fed on common prejudices about Poles. Although Poland had once been the largest country in Europe, it had disappeared from the map at the end of the eighteenth century when it was divided between its neighbours. This led to stereotypes of Poles as backward, disorganised and not deserving of a state. As a result, when Poland regained its independence after the First World War, many Germans believed it had no right to exist.

Despite this, Hitler was often willing to work with Slavic nations (for example, Slovakia and Bulgaria) to achieve long-term aims. Therefore, despite his prejudices, he pursued a friendly policy towards Poland for most of the 1930s, based on the fact that Poland and Germany both saw the Soviet Union as an enemy. However, after his success in conquering Austria and Czechoslovakia, Hitler became more aggressive towards Poland in 1939. When it refused to give in to his demands, Hitler switched policy and allied with the USSR to destroy Poland, bringing the start of the Second World War.

Hitler made it clear that the conflict with Poland was not a normal war: it was what he termed a 'life and death struggle' which should be fought with 'the greatest harshness'. His orders, combined with existing anti-Polish prejudices and frustration with Polish resistance, led to appalling Nazi atrocities against both Polish soldiers and civilians in the September campaign of 1939. Poland was then partitioned: the east of the country was taken by the USSR whilst the western and northern provinces were directly incorporated into Germany. The area in between became the General Government (GG), a German colony.

The initial aim of the Nazis in both the GG and the incorporated territories was the extermination of Poland's elites such as political leaders, aristocrats and priests. Tens of thousands of people were murdered in late 1939 and in 1940, partly by special SS killing units known as Einsatzgruppen but also by the regular police and the German army. In addition, Auschwitz concentration camp was created in the spring of 1940 for the purpose

of holding Polish political prisoners; 70,000 non-Jewish Poles eventually lost their lives in Auschwitz. The Nazi terror particularly targeted intellectuals. For example, in October 1939, 183 professors from Kraków University and other higher education institutions in the city were arrested and sent to concentration camps in Germany. All Polish universities and secondary schools were closed because the Nazis believed that the supposedly racially inferior Poles were not suitable for higher levels of education.

Instead, the Nazis aimed to take advantage of ordinary Poles economically. More than 2 million were sent to Germany as forced labourers between 1939 and 1944. Some young people initially volunteered for such work but their reports of appalling conditions meant that the Nazis quickly resorted to round-ups to seize workers. Nazi police launched surprise raids on, for example, cinemas or trams, often taking everyone they captured. Once in Germany, Poles were forced to work for low wages and were subject to a series of special discriminatory laws such as bans on owning bicycles, using public transport or eating in restaurants. Sex with Germans was punishable by the death penalty.

The Nazis' long-term aim in Poland went far beyond mistreatment, however. In line with Hitler's concept of Lebensraum, Poland was eventually to be 'Germanised'. This meant expelling the Polish and Jewish populations and replacing them with German settlers. At first, these policies were only intended to be applied to the incorporated territories in western Poland. Between 1939 and 1941, close to 400,000 ethnic Poles together with several thousand Jews were expelled from this region into the GG. They were generally transported in cattle cars and little was done to prepare for their arrival. For example, one transport which arrived in the town of Dębica in the winter of 1939-40 was found to contain the bodies of 30 children who had frozen to death.

The invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 led to plans for Germanisation to be extended to the General Government. Although the military

situation prevented the full implementation of these plans, a start was made in the Zamość region: between November 1942 and August 1943, 110,000 people were expelled from 287 villages. Adults and older children were deported for use as forced labour, either to Germany or to the Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps. Most young children, together with old, sick and disabled people, were sent to so-called 'rest villages' where they were essentially left to die.

However, at least 4,454 children from the Zamość region were amongst tens of thousands of victims of one of the most sinister Nazi policies in Poland: they were stolen from their parents and sent to the Reich to be raised by German families. The SS leader Himmler thought that Poles who showed evidence of 'German blood' (e.g. blonde hair or a German-sounding surname) could be 'reclaimed' if they were brought up as Germans. The Polish government tried hard to find these children after the war but most were never traced.

Unsurprisingly, German policies created increasing opposition in Poland but the Nazis reacted with brutal retaliation, including mass executions of civilian hostages and the destruction of hundreds of villages. During the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, Nazi forces executed tens of thousands of civilians. Approximately 150,000 survivors of the Uprising were sent to concentration or forced labour camps.

The exact number of ethnic Poles who lost their lives during the Nazi occupation is unknown. The post-war Communist governments of Poland claimed that 3 million non-Jewish Poles died although modern estimates are generally between 1.5 and 2.5 million. This is in addition to the 3 million Polish Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, meaning that Poland lost a higher percentage of its population to the Nazis than any other country.

Further materials will become available through the course of the joint project.

For further information go to
National Education Union
www.neu.org.uk and
Holocaust Educational Trust
www.het.org.uk

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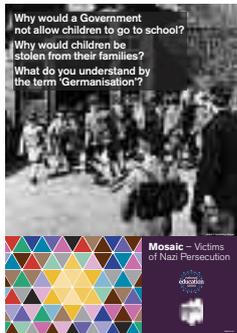


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Photo right: © Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

