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Final report

Research project: The Representation of National Investigation, Justice, and Memory of Nazi Death Camps and Their Victims in Polish Press, 1944-1955.

Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives

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Project

Introduction

This project explores Nazi concentration and death camps as the subjects of post-war investigation, justice and memory creation in Poland. I focus on the discovery and investigation of Nazi camps that were peripheral in the public consciousness of post-war Poland, despite their connection to both Polish and Jewish victimhood and the subsequent trials of Nazi criminals connected to these camps. I draw my sources from the reactions of the local Polish community documented in mass media, the visits of Jewish survivors to the murder sites, from the reports of the Polish investigators, and the legal outcomes of the Polish national trials of perpetrators as presented in newspapers and bulletins. My aim is to trace the processes that led to the marginalization and forgetting of the Nazi camps in Poland that were overshadowed by Auschwitz.

Background and Scope

The data collected by Polish, Jewish and Soviet committees was used in war crimes trials and investigations conducted by Soviet and communist Polish institutions. Apart the Nuremberg trials, justice was conducted on Polish territory, starting as early as 1944 with the Majdanek trial,

through the Chełmno trials of 1946, the Stutthof trials of 1946-47, and others. Legal procedures were employed not only to punish perpetrators, but also to make sense of the terrifying events that had taken place in the Nazi camps and to support the political aspirations of the Polish communists. The Polish nation, deprived of the right to publicly speak about the Stalinist terror, was at least allowed to confront the Nazi aggression through the justice system. A certain level of “Polonization” appeared in the narratives on the Nazi camps at the same time that the sites were becoming symbols of war crimes.

My project examines three Nazi death camps of Treblinka, Majdanek, and Chełmno, as well as one concentration camp, Stutthof. All these camps were liberated by the Red Army and almost all, except Treblinka, were the subjects of post-war trials held in Poland. They demonstrate a range of possible post-war usage: Majdanek became a state museum after it was reused as a Soviet camp; Stutthof was used as a Polish military base; and Treblinka and Chełmno were abandoned. The way the aforementioned sites of terror were memorialized or not, as well as the narratives that the post-war commissions and trials, show the character of legacy that still influences Polish national memory and the understanding of the Holocaust worldwide.

Place in literature

The trials of Nazi criminals in Poland have been little explored in literature before. Most of the existing scholarship is in Polish, only few works in English touch upon this subject. According to Alexander Prusin, who’s article deals with “Polish Nuremberg” or Supreme National Tribunal (Naczelny Trybunał Narodowy, NTN) that consisted of seven trials of major Nazi criminals in Poland in 1946-48, Polish war crimes trials could be separated into two categories. The first was the more democratic, open for the public and foreign press trials conducted under NTN of such high rank Nazis. On the other side he puts the penal courts established under the August 1944 legislation, so-called “sierpniówki” [August decrees]. These trials were conducted under the Soviet influence and used widely for the political cleansing in the country gradually falling under the communist rule.

The communist political struggle in Poland determined most of the processes in the late 1940-s, including the relatively free and democratic proceedings for NTN and the legal prosecution deprived of moral scruples against the political opposition. Nevertheless, between 1944 and

1946, over a thousand defendants from former Axis countries stood before Polish courts, which were neither penal courts for “traitors” nor major trials of high rank Nazis. However, the few studies that have appeared recently touch only upon separate cases from the NTN series of trials without attempts to take into account many other trials that took place in Poland in the early post-war period. As a result, the vast amount of investigations and legal prosecution of Nazi criminals in Poland has been neglected in the extant scholarship.

Conclusion

My research provides an overview on the coverage on the Holocaust and war crimes in Poland just after the war and the memorialization or neglect of camp sites. The proposed project fills in major gaps in scholarship. The most significant is the contribution towards the understanding of the place of marginalized camps and the image of war crimes justice in Poland after the war. It allows to demonstrate how the political change in the country influenced the public image of the Nazi crimes in Poland. The project is developed as a PhD dissertation on which I will begin working from September 2019 at NYU. The complete press overview will probably constitute one of the chapters or serve as a primary source for particular cases and arguments. I also consider presenting and publishing my findings on an appropriate occasion.

Research at the OSA

At the OSA I studied closely Polish newspapers from the period of 1944-1955 (114 titles available). From this collection, I selected the most relevant publications. Particularly, using the detected in literature titles of newspapers that definitely wrote on the war crimes trials and the camps such titles as: “*Życie Warszawy*”, “*Dziennik Polski*”, “*Głos Robotniczy*”, “*Polska Zbrojna*”, “*Kurier Codzienny*”, “*Dziennik Ludowy*”, “*Chłopska Droga*”, and others. During my work in catalogization of this collection, I found few categories of publications that I aimed to compare. It was important to analyze how democratic, communist, and catholic press reacted and covered Nazi camps and war crimes trials. Upon my arrival, I ordered 53 library items, most of which have been processed during my research stay. Some of the types of publications that I used: catholic

press, institutional bulletins, political and statistical bulletins, peasant and workers' communist newspapers, press for youth, various émigré publications, analytical monthly from inside and outside of the country, democratic press, weekly of the Polish Communist party, publications of Polish Government-in-Exile etc. In addition, I used the available bulletins of the institutions that investigated and documented Nazi crimes in Poland: Bulletin of the Main Commission for Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland (Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce) and Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute (Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego). Thanks to the great support from the OSA staff, I could also consult some additional years of relevant publications through the digital depository of the Polish National Library: <https://polona.pl/>. Apart from the press collection, I was able to access a unique Testaments to the Holocaust collection from the Wiener Library, which is available at the OSA.

Highlights

One of the main secondary sources for my research is the recent groundbreaking publication *Justice Behind the Iron Curtain: Nazis on Trial in Communist Poland*, University of Toronto Press, 2018 by Gabriel N. Finder and Alexander V. Prusin. It is the first monograph dealing with the trials on Nazi war criminals in Poland after the war, which offers an insightful analysis of legal, political, and social processes in the first postwar decade and a half. The book is already available at the OSA library, and it helped me to establish general timeline and character of postwar stages in Polish legal treatment and public opinion on Nazi crimes.

The earliest press cuttings that I acquired come from the Wiener Library collection. Series 2 of the Testaments to the Holocaust contains a few microfilm reels with a rich collection of press reports on Nazi crimes and trials published in newspapers worldwide (mostly in English and German) from 1939 to 1945 and into postwar period. These provide a crucial understanding of what was the level of knowledge on Nazi atrocities in the world and what were the opinion and plans of the Allied countries about the future punishment and international courts.

The earliest Polish newspaper found is *The Polish Daily and Soldiers Daily* published by the Polish Government-in-Exile in London in 1944. At the time when a part of the country was already liberated by the Red Army, the rest was under the German control, with Warsaw Uprising

bleeding out for long weeks, and Moscow planning to overtake the power, it is particularly important to see how Polish officials responded to still operating gas chambers in Auschwitz and other atrocities on the Jews.

The most important insight that I received from the research of Polish newspapers in the 1950s at the OSA was the awareness of the process of gradual substitution of the reports on Nazi crimes by the Cold War narratives comparing activities of Western powers to Nazi atrocities. Tropes like Auschwitz and Majdanek functioned widely as symbols of absolute evil and helped to justify struggle for power in communist Poland and international tensions between the USSR and Soviet Block countries and the West. In addition, these crimes served as shields to cover mass show trials that took place in Poland in the 1940s and 1950s during the Stalinization of the country and the purges of Polish population. The further research of the obtained material will shed more light on this phenomenon and will serve as a basis for my dissertation and potential publication.

List of the OSA holdings consulted

Books

Finder, Gabriel N., and Alexander V. Prusin. Justice Behind the Iron Curtain: Nazis on Trial in Communist Poland. University of Toronto Press, 2018. OSA 341.690268 FIN

Barkow, Ben, Alfred Wiener and the Making of the Holocaust Library. London; Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997. OSA 026/.940318.092 ALF

Periodicals

	call number	title	years
1	7/21/1/2	Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce [1951]	1951
2	Box 182	Biuletyn krajowy [1951]	1952-3

3	Box 312	Biuletyn polityczny [1951]	1952-3
4	22A	Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego [1951]	1951, No. 1, 2 ; 1952, No. 1(3), 2(4); 1953, No. 2-3(6-7), 4(8); 1954, No. 9-12; 1955, No. 15-16;
5	K/30/2/3	Chłopska Droga : tygodnik Polskiej Partii Robotniczej [1945]	Jul-51
6	K/30/2/3; 17/5/9	Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza = The Polish Daily & Soldier's Daily [1944]	1944
7	K/30/3/3	Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [1944]	1944 - 1951
8	K/30/4/2	Dziś i jutro katolicki tygodnik społeczny [1945]	January 1947 - May 1956
9	K/30/3/2	Express wieczorny [1946]	Jul-51
10	Box 43	Gromada : Rolnik polski [1952]	1952-4
11	16/6/4	Kurier Codzienny : pismo Stronnictwa Demokratycznego [1945]	July 1951 - May 1953
12	Box 33	Ku Wolnej Polsce : czasopismo Związku Byłych Żołnierzy S.B.S.K. [1951]	1952-54
13	Box 156	Kwartalnik Instytutu Polsko-Radzieckiego [1952]	1953-54
14	Box 70	Miasto [1950]	1953-55
15	Box 77	Nauka Polska : czasopismo poświęcone zagadnieniom rozwoju nauki w Polsce [1953]	1954, No. 1 - 1954, No. 4; 1955, No. 1 - 1955, No. 4
16	Box 310; K/30/3/1	Nowe Drogi : czasopismo społeczno-polityczne [1947]	1949, Vol. 3, No. 4; 1949, Vol. 3, No. 6; 1951, No. 1 - 1953, No. 12; 1954

17	Box 135	Nowe Prawo : organ Ministerstwa Sprawiedliwości i Generalnej Prokuratury R. P. [1950]	1953-55
18	Box 69; Box 88	Państwo i prawo : organ Zrzeszenia Prawników Demokratów w Polsce [1946]	1950
19	Box 151	Pokolenie : dwutygodnik Związku Młodzieży Polskiej [1948]	1949, No. 27; 1952-3
20	Box 151	Polonia : biuletyn informacyjny dla Polaków w Austrii = Zeitschrift für Polen in Österreich [1949]	1952-
21	Box 97	Prasa Polska : miesięcznik Polskiego Instytutu Prasoznawczego [1947]	1951-
22	Box 151	Przegląd Polski [1946]	1946, No. 1 - 1946, No. 6; 1947, No. 1 - 1949, No. 3
23	Box 151	Przegląd Zachodni [1945]	1952-
24	K/30/4/2; Box 83	Przekrój [1945]	April 1951 - December 1951; 1955, No. 508 - 1955, No. 559
25	K/30/3/2	Rocznik polityczny i gospodarczy [1948]	1948
26	K/30/3/4	Rocznik Statystyczny [1947]	1955
27	17/5/10	Słowo powszechne [1947]	1952 -1955
28	Box 127	Sprawy międzynarodowe [1948]	1952, No. 1 - 1952, No. 6
29	Box 100	Stolica : Warszawski tygodnik ilustrowany [1946]	1949-55
30	Box 20	Student Polski na Obczyźnie : wydawnictwo Bratniej Pomocy Studentów Polaków w Monachium [1947]	1947-49

31	Box 20	Światło = La Lumiere : zbiór artykułów i rozpraw [1947]	1952-
32	16/6/4	Sztandar Młodych : dziennik Związku Młodzieży Polskiej [1950]	1952-55
33	Box 106	Trybuna : Niepodległość i Demokracja = Tribune [1946]	1951-
34	17/5/10	Trybuna Ludu : organ Komitetu Centralnego Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej [1948]	1951 - 1955
35	k/30/4/4	Trybuna robotnicza [1945]	July 1951 - December 1951
36	K/30/4/4	Trybuna wolności : tygodnik polityczno-społeczny [1944]	July 1951 - 1955
37	K/30/1/4	Tygodnik Demokratyczny : pismo Stronnictwa Demokratycznego [1953]	1953 - 1955
38	Box 106	Tygodnik Polski = Polish weekly : informuje i służy wspólnej sprawie [1954]	1954-
39	K/30/1/4	Tygodnik Powszechny : katolickie pismo społeczno-kulturalne [1945]	January 1949 - December 1956
40	K/30/4/4	Wiadomości [1946]	1949 - 1958
41	16/6/4	Wieś : tygodnik społeczno-literacki [1944]	February 1952 - December 1954
42	Box 90	Wojsko Ludowe : miesięcznik Głównego Zarządu Politycznego Wojska Polskiego [1950]	1951, No. 7 - 1951, No. 9
43	16/6/4	Wola Ludu : organ NKW Zjednoczonego Stronnictwa Ludowego [1949]	1951-3
44	Box 148	Życie : katolicki tygodnik religijno-społeczny [1947]	1947-49

45	Box 137	Życie Gospodarcze [1945]	1952-5
46	Box 68	Życie Partii : organ Komitetu Centralnego Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej [1949]	1951-5
47	K/30/2/3	Życie Warszawy : codzienne pismo dla wszystkich sfer [1944]	1955

Archives

Testaments to the Holocaust. Documents of the Wiener Library

Series 1. Propaganda Materials; Eyewitness Accounts; Wiener Library Publications; and Photographs.

Microfilm Reels:

Reel 53
 Reel 54
 Reel 55
 Reel 56
 Reel 60
 Reel 62
 Reel 63
 Reel 68
 Reel 69
 Reel 72

Series 2: Thematic Press Cuttings Collection, 1933-1945.

Microfilm Reels:

Reel 104
 Reel 145
 Reel 146
 Reel 147