The First Months of Occupation in Poland

On the 1st of September 1939, the German Army invaded Poland, and within several weeks completely routed the Polish Army. The beginning of the occupation was characterized by an atmosphere of chaos and destruction. The constant shelling had destroyed many houses, killing numerous civilians. There was widespread financial ruin, and public institutions had been forced to close. Millions of people became refugees, whether because their houses had been destroyed or because they had been forced to flee from the advancing German forces. On the 28th of September Warsaw capitulated. In the weeks before its surrender, 10,111 Polish and Jewish citizens and prisoners of war were murdered by German soldiers. The Polish government fled the country, relocating at first to Paris, until the French defeat in June 1940, when it moved to London, from where it issued orders to the Armia Krajowa (the Polish Home Army).

In a secret addendum, appended to the Ribbentrop-Molotov treaty and signed in August 1939, Poland was divided between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany; large portions of its Western and Northern territories, among them Upper Silesia and the province of Łodz, were annexed by the Third Reich. In these regions lived some 110,000 Jews. The central area in Poland was placed under German civil administration and renamed the “Generalgouvernement” (the General Governorate). More than 1.5 million Jews lived in this region, which the Germans considered part of occupied Poland, and which was not annexed to the Reich. Some 1.2 million Jews lived in the Eastern part of Poland, which was annexed to the Soviet Union and to Lithuania.

Immediately after the German invasion of Poland, the Jews in cities and towns began to suffer from extreme, arbitrary violence, including humiliations in public streets and mass murder. In many places, German authorities began conscripting Jews for forced labor, kidnapping passersby and forcibly seizing people in their homes. Sometimes forced labor was only used as an excuse to humiliate the Jews by forcing them to do menial work without any concrete goal, while subjecting them to beatings and abuse. At the same time, in some places the Jews were subjected to decrees and laws passed by various administrative bodies, such as the administration of the Generalgouvernement, and local and regional branches of the SS. Jews were forbidden to have radios and to use the trains for intercity travel in Poland. Jewish schools and synagogues in many cities throughout Poland were closed, and during the first weeks of the invasion, the Germans blew up hundreds of synagogues. At the same time, the Jews were marked with a yellow star or a blue and white armband, in order to enable their identification, and to separate them from the rest of the population. In addition, they were inundated with new rules and decrees meant to exclude them from financial life and divest them of their property.

It is important to remember that the Jewish community in Poland had always been extremely poor, and that many Jews were on the verge of starvation even before the German occupation. For this reason, the financial sanctions caused grievous damage. Without a source of income, the Jewish family structure and the Jewish community suffered a general collapse. In every city in Poland the Jews suffered from violence and different decrees, but because there were no uniformed, detailed, or clear instructions on how to treat the Polish Jews, but only general guidelines, local administration handled the Jews differently in different places.