

‘Germanization’ in Occupied Poland: Disunity, Inconsistency, and Contradiction within the Nazi Administration.

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Following the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Nazi’s began a program designed to Germanize the territory in which they occupied. The Germanization program involved reordering Polish society, and its people, according to the requirements of Nazi racial theory, thus bringing it in line with Hitler’s vision for the German Reich. However, Hitler’s grand vision for Poland was not implemented with any uniformity, and the Germanization program was plagued by internal inconsistency and contradiction from the outset. Drawing upon Ian Kershaw’s work, this paper will advance a reconceptualization of Hitler’s role as leader of the Nazi administration, emphasizing his characteristic detachment from the everyday functions of the Nazi bureaucracy. Instead of working from the dictates of their Fuehrer, Nazi officials worked to advance Hitler’s general vision with their own personalized policies. As a consequence, in Poland, the Germanization program varied tremendously according to the personal judgment of individual Nazi administrators. This point is illustrated through an analysis of Hitler’s laissez-faire brand of administrative rule, the autonomous competition that was cultivated amongst Nazi officials, and the ambiguities associated with the ‘racial status’ of the Polish population. This paper demonstrates that the fragmented nature of the Nazi Germanization program stems from Hitler’s non-interventionist brand of leadership, which afforded district officials with the administrative autonomy to enact his vision as they saw fit.

On October 8, 1939, Adolf Hitler issued the Annexation Decree, officially commencing what would become a 6-year Nazi occupation of Polish territory. Hitler’s goal was not only to re-establish German rule over the areas of Poland that belonged to Germany prior to WWI, but also to reorder the region, and its people, based upon the tenets of Nazi racial theory.

¹ To enact Hitler’s grand vision for Poland, the Nazis pursued a program of Germanization in the annexed territories. This involved completely reforming Polish existence in a way that met the economic, political, cultural, racial, and ethnic requirements of a truly German empire. As such, one would expect a cohesive and consistent Germanization policy that systematically met the goals of “the

¹ Jackson J. Spielvogel and David Redles, *Hitler and Nazi Germany*, 7th. ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2014), 256.

Fuehrer".² However, this was not the case. Germanization policies in Poland varied greatly, and disunity, improvisation, and inconsistency between Nazi districts characterized the majority of their practical application. To understand why this was the case, it is important to analyze Hitler's laissez-faire brand of administrative rule, the autonomous competition that was cultivated amongst Nazi officials, and the ambiguities associated with the 'racial status' of the Polish population. Ultimately, the fragmented nature of the Nazi Germanization program stems from Hitler's non-interventionist brand of leadership, which afforded his district officials with the administrative autonomy to enact his vision as they saw fit.

Following the annexation of Poland, the Nazis immediately began partitioning the country into *Reichsgaus* (territorial districts). Each district was governed by a Nazi administrative official, or *Gauleiter* (district leader).³ The three largest districts in Poland were: Danzig-West Prussia in the North West, which was headed by Albert Forster, the Wartheland in West-central Poland, which was headed by Arthur Greiser, and the so-called General Government in the South, which was led by Hans Frank.⁴

On October 12, 1939, the Nazis issued a decree automatically revoking all Polish national citizenship, rendering the population affectively stateless.⁵ This paved the way for the imposition of the Germanization program, whereby the Nazis embarked on the complete destruction of Polish life and culture, which was to be replaced by an ethnically German national community. With the entire Polish population stripped of its citizenship, rights, and statehood, the Nazi

² Ian Kerhsaw, "Working Towards the Fuehrer. Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship," *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 2 (July 1993): 103, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/20081474>.

³ *The Nazis: A Warning from History*, Directed by Laurence Rees, London UK: BBC 2, 2005, DVD.

⁴ Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 141.

⁵ Diemut Majer. 'Non-Germans' Under the Third Reich: *The Nazi Judicial and Administrative System in Germany and Occupied Eastern Europe, with Special Regard to Occupied Poland, 1939-1945*, (Washington D.C: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 236; "Trial of Gauleiter Arthur Greiser: Supreme National Tribunal of Poland 21st June- 7th July, 1946." WorldCourts. CASE No. 74, Accessed March 2, 2017: 71.

administration could begin to pick and choose which Poles could be Germanized and which ones had to be removed or eliminated.⁶

Heinrich Himmler, given authority by Hitler to colonize the East, oversaw the Germanization program in Poland.⁷ Under him, Arthur Greiser and Albert Forster spearheaded Germanization in their respective districts. Both Greiser and Forster independently implemented policies that brought about the ethnic cleansing of both Poles and Jews.⁸ Although both men perpetrated horrific crimes upon the population, Greiser was especially brutal in his efforts to Germanize the Wartheland and was by far the most radical of the Eastern *Gauleiters*.⁹ He was a staunch believer in Nazi racial theory, and embarked on a program of rigid discrimination against Poles and Jews in an attempt to construct a racially pure “model Gau of the Great German Reich”.¹⁰ He evicted and relocated some 700,000 ethnic Poles to the “racial dumping ground” in the South, brought in over 500,000 German nationals to populate the Wartheland, ghettoized and enslaved 183,000 Jews in Lodz, and segregated Poles from all German spheres of activity, reducing them to a life of forced labor.¹¹

Forster, on the other hand, embarked upon a comparatively moderate Germanization program. Instead of rigidly racially discriminating against the Poles, Forster instituted Germanization lists, which forced ethnic Poles to abandon their cultural heritage and accept German citizenship.¹² Furthermore, he deported far fewer Poles from his *Reichsgau* and was quite tentative towards the resettlement of German nationals in his district.¹³ Forster certainly did engage in atrocious acts of murder and slavery, especially against Polish Jews, but on the whole his specific Germanization initiative was much more assimilative in nature than what was experienced in the Wartheland. The contrast between Greiser and Forster highlights the numerous

⁶ Majer, *Non-Germans*, 243.

⁷ Spielvogel and Redles, *Hitler and Nazi*, 256.

⁸ Timothy Snyder, “The Causes of Ukrainian-Polish Ethnic Cleansing 1943,” *Past and Present* 179 (May 2003): 197-234, 197.

⁹ Epstein, *Model Nazi*, 267.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2; “The Nazis: A Warning from History”; Spielvogel and Redles, *Hitler and Nazi*, 257.

¹² “The Nazis: A Warning from History.”

¹³ Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York: The Penguin Press), 2008, 85.

different, even contradictory, forms that Germanization took during the Nazi occupation. To understand why this is the case, one must take a deeper look into the internal structure of the Nazi administration and its impact on the reality of Germanization in Poland.

As a leader, Hitler despised all forms of administrative bureaucracy.¹⁴ He often described the German political administration as over organized and felt that an overabundance of rules set down by the judiciary and ministerial bureaucracy imposed a severe hindrance to individual agency and the adaptability of Nazi policy.¹⁵ He once stated, "The Wehrmacht provides the highest distinction for one who – acting against orders- salvages a situation by means of his own insight and determination".¹⁶ This adequately captures the nature of Hitler's unique brand of authoritarianism. Instead of passing down strict orders and regulations to his subordinates, Hitler would often delegate authority to multiple Nazi officials and provide them with only broad or ambiguous orders from which to work.¹⁷ Hitler provided his general vision for the Third Reich, but kept himself substantially removed from the day-to-day functions of the Nazi regime.

Germanization in Poland was no different. Each *Gauleiter* was given the authority to enact their own Germanization policy, and received only the most basic guidelines from Hitler. Hitler even reportedly stated, "every Reichsgau should have its own face according to the personality of its leader and the particular problems of the population".¹⁸ Since each *Gauleiter* was given the freedom to form and reform his district as he saw fit, the given policies between districts varied just as much as the personalities of their leaders. Therefore, Germanization policy was also able to manifest itself in many different ways, since consistency was not even the expectation Hitler himself. That is why Arthur Greiser was able to embark upon a radical program of genocide and mass deportation, while Forster was able to undertake a program focused mainly on Polish assimilation. Moreover, when it came to the Germanization of the Polish districts and the authority of

¹⁴ Kerhsaw, "Working Towards," 112.

¹⁵ Majer, *Non-Germans*, 1; Robert G.L.Waite, *Hitler and Nazi Germany*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), 1965, 60.

¹⁶ Majer, *Non-Germans*, 2.

¹⁷ Kershaw, "Working Towards," 109.

¹⁸ Epstein, *Model Nazi*, 6.

the *Gauleiters*, Hitler specifically stated that “no questions would be asked regarding their methods”.¹⁹ In November, 1942, Greiser sent a letter to Himmler pertaining to the Jewish situation in the Wartheland in which he had this to say about Hitler’s involvement: “I personally don’t think, that we have to consult the Fuehrer again in this matter, all the more since he told me at the last interview concerning the Jews, that I should act according to my own judgment”.²⁰ This perfectly captures both the non-interventionist approach Hitler took towards bureaucratic administration, and the high level of autonomy that was afforded to his district officials. It also helps explain why Germanization policy in Poland varied so greatly, and why inconsistencies between separate *Reichsgaus* were common.

A side effect of Hitler’s characteristic detachment from actual policy making, and his over-delegating of authority, was fierce competition between Nazi officials to win Hitler’s favor. The competition between Forster and Greiser in the enactment of the Germanization order was particularly divisive. Hitler told his *Gauleiters* that in ten years each of their territorial districts should be fully Germanized.²¹ This instigated a “competition in brutality” between Forster and Greiser over who could report in the shortest time that the racial struggle had been won and full Germanization achieved.²² As such, both men initiated Germanization policies that were radically different from one another in order to distinguish themselves in the eyes of Hitler, and ultimately win the Germanization race.²³

Greiser took the radical route, which he believed would best elicit the jubilant approval of the Fuehrer.²⁴ With the support of Himmler, he began removing the ethnic Polish population from his district in an effort to clear the territory, and thus make way for incoming German settlers. However, this was a slow and arduous process, and Greiser himself, realizing that the exploitation of Polish slave labor was a valuable asset, was reluctant to expel all of the Poles

¹⁹ “The Nazis: A Warning from History.”

²⁰ Kershaw, “Working Towards,” 116; “Nuremberg Document Number 249. Letter to Heinrich Himmler concerning the ‘special treatment’ (extermination) of tubercular Poles,” Harvard Law School Nuremberg Trials Project.

²¹ Kershaw, “Working Towards,” 115.

²² *Ibid.*, 115.

²³ Epstein, *Model Nazi*, 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

from his district.²⁵ Forster, on the other hand, was successfully Germanizing large segments of the Polish population by forcing German citizenship upon them. On paper, it seemed as though he was winning the race to Germanize his *Reichsgau*.²⁶ When Greiser and Himmler complained to Hitler about Forster's lack of adherence to the tenets of Nazi racial theory, Hitler, in characteristic fashion, told them to resolve the problem amongst themselves.²⁷ Hitler's detachment from administrative duties, and the resulting autonomy that was afforded to his *Gauleiters*, instigated a high level of contention between Forster and Greiser. That contention, in turn, caused the two Nazi officials to pursue vastly different Germanization policies in an attempt to outdo one another.

This administrative inconsistency was also, in part, generated and perpetuated by the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the 'racial status' of the ethnic Pole. There was a consistent lack of unity within the Nazi ranks over what to do with the Poles, and whether they were, or were not, fit for Germanization.²⁸ To clarify the situation, Himmler imposed a 4-point ethnic classification list, which sought to determine how various members of the Polish population should be dealt with. Those with full German blood should be made immediate national citizens; those with German blood but unfamiliar with German culture should be re-educated and made citizens; those with partial German blood should be reacquired by the nation through Germanization and eventual citizenship; and those with non-German blood should be removed, segregated, or eliminated.²⁹ Contrary to its desired purpose, this classification list only further muddied the waters, and raised questions regarding how one ought to determine into which category a Polish person should be placed.³⁰

Despite the confusion, no legal regulations were ever implemented regarding the 'racial status' of the Polish population.³¹

²⁵ Ibid., 10; "Trial of Gauleiter," 72.

²⁶ "The Nazis: A Warning from History."

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Harry K. Rosenthal, *German and Pole: National Conflict and Modern Myth* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976), 111.

²⁹ Ibid., 116.

³⁰ Ibid., 116.

³¹ Majer, *Non-Germans*, 244.

Furthermore, the *Gauleiters* insisted on their administrative autonomy, and frequently rejected recommendations from the Reich Ministry of the Interior in Berlin on the Polish question.³² Thus, local authorities were given a mandate to treat the Poles as they saw fit, usually through internal case-by-case guidelines.³³ Racially categorizing the Polish population remained an ambiguous task, and the responsibility ultimately fell to the discretion of each *Reichsgau* administration. Some *Gauleiters*, like Forster, took the more liberal view that in cases of doubt regarding racial heritage the reclamation of German blood should take priority. This re-enforced the sentiment that “no German blood should be lost” during the Germanization efforts, lest the initiative lose sight of its original purpose.³⁴ As a result, a higher percentage of Poles were considered eligible for Germanization in districts that employed a more liberal approach to German reclamation.³⁵ By contrast, some *Reichsgaus*, like Greiser’s for example, initiated a much more rigid policy towards Polish racial categorization. Strict racial examinations were imposed upon large segments of the population, and as a result many more Poles were considered unfit for Germanization.³⁶ The consequence of this persistent racial ambiguity was that the “concepts and conditions for deciding Germanization remained unsolved, vague, and fluid right up to the end of the Third Reich”.³⁷

Hitler’s ultimate plan was to annihilate all remnants of Polish society, thereby creating the necessary conditions to re-build the region as a ‘pure’ German nation.³⁸ Therefore, Germanizing Polish territory and its people –at least those who were deemed racially acceptable–took top priority. However, what Germanization truly meant, what form it should take, and especially who should and should not be Germanized, was never clearly established. As a result, each *Reichsgau* administration pursued unique and often contradictory Germanization policies with varying degrees of intensity. Hitler’s anti-bureaucratic approach afforded high levels of autonomy to individual *Gauleiters*, which prevented the construction of a unified Germanization model. It

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 236.

³⁴ Ibid., 242.

³⁵ Ibid., 242.

³⁶ Ibid., 242.

³⁷ Ibid., 243.

³⁸ Waite, *Hitler and Nazi Germany*, 15.

also cultivated fierce competition between district officials –namely, Greiser and Forster- who fought for Hitler's approval by distinguishing themselves from one another with personalized policy strategies. Finally, the ambiguous 'racial status' of the Polish population created an atmosphere of uncertainty regarding their eligibility for Germanization, which resulted in a range of policy guidelines that were both inconsistent and arbitrarily implemented. Hitler's brand of detached leadership led to a significant degree of administrative disunity within the Nazi hierarchy. As a consequence, the Germanization program in Poland was plagued with an internal ambiguity and inconsistency that persisted throughout the entirety of the Nazi occupation.

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