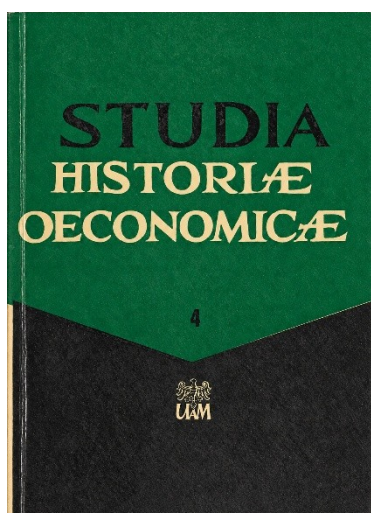




Łuczak, Cz. (1970) 'Plunder of Polish Property in the Polish Territories Occupied by Germany and 'Incorporated into the Reich' (1939-1945)', *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*, 4, pp. 171–180.

<https://doi.org/10.14746/sho.1970.04.1.010>

<https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/sho/issue/archive>

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Total value of the project: PLN 247,236.00. Amount of co-financing: PLN 220,836.00.



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Spółeczna
Odpowiedzialność
Nauki II

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PLUNDER OF POLISH PROPERTY IN THE POLISH TERRITORIES OCCUPIED BY GERMANY AND 'INCORPORATED INTO THE REICH' (1939 - 1945)

After the victory of the Nazi armies over Poland the German authorities divided the whole territory occupied by them into two parts: the so called Generalgouvernement and "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich" (eingegliederte Ostgebiete). The latter comprised the whole pre-war Polish voivodeships: Pomeranian, Poznań and Silesian and parts of the Warsaw, Łódź, Kielce, Cracow and Białystok voivodeships and also the territory of the Free City of Gdańsk¹. In that territory a previously devised programme of approach to the Polish inhabitants was ruthlessly implemented.

Plunder was one of the most important elements of the anti-Polish policies followed in that territory. Confiscation of Polish property was started by the units of the Wehrmacht in the very earliest days of occupation. They took over on behalf of the Reich the whole property of the Polish army and all the most important strategic materials². German soldiers and officers robbed the Poles as part of their "own initiative", seizing various goods from dwellings and shops³. Even in the latter case

¹ Z. Janowicz: Ustrój administracyjny ziem polskich wcielonych do Rzeszy Niemieckiej 1939 - 1945 (*The Administrative Organization of the Polish Territories incorporated into the German Reich, 1939 - 1945*). Poznań 1951, pp. 8 - 9; K. M. Pospieszalski: Hitlerowskie „prawo” okupacyjne w Polsce (*The Nazi Occupation "Law" in Poland*). In: Documenta Occupationis, V, Poznań 1952, p. 80.

² Archiwum Państwowe Poznania i Województwa Poznańskiego (The Archive of the City and Voivodeship of Poznań — subsequently quoted as APMP i WP) Treuhandstelle Posen — subsequently quoted as HTO — No. 1, p. 243; M. Brones: Niektóre problemy grabieży ekonomicznej w Polsce dokonywanej przez Wehrmacht w okresie 1. 9. - 25. 10. 1939 (*Some problems of the Economic Plunder Carried out by the Wehrmacht between September 1st and October 25th 1939*). In: Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce, XVIII, Warsaw 1968, pp. 46 - 79.

³ Cz. Łuczak: Dyskryminacja Polaków w Wielkopolsce w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej. Wybór źródeł (*The Discriminatory Measures against the Poles in Great Poland during the Period of Nazi Occupation. Selection of Sources*). Poznań 1966, pp. 195 - 196. Here is a passage from a report of the Oberbürgermeister of Inowrocław of November 6th 1939: „Ich verweise bei dieser Gelegenheit auf meinen Bericht über das Verhalten des Generals Büchs und seines Gruppenstabes. Die

all was done with an open or silent approval of the military command. The example set by the army was followed by the civilian administration authorities, the police, the units of the NSDAP and other German organizations and institutions and later also by the individual Germans, both those who had just arrived in Polish territories from the Reich and those who had lived in those territories before the outbreak of the war. The latter seized from the Poles movables and realities, very often in a pretext of enmity towards the Reich or towards the German minority in Poland. On the basis of a short report to the Gestapo about the wrong political attitude of a Pole very often without checking the information of such a report the decision of expropriation was taken. Even before the Nazi authorities succeeded in giving the whole plunder activities a general framework of organization, a part of the Polish property, particularly the movables, was in the possession of the Germans⁴. All the later attempts of the German authorities at establishing the exact value of the property seized in the initial stage of the occupation proved to be futile, because of the lack of any documentation at that early stage. According to estimates arrived at by the Germans, only the NSDAP seized Polish property amounting to 1 to 1.5 million marks in the "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich" at that initial stage⁵.

For a researcher in the economic history of the German occupation in Poland, apart from the establishing of the exact value of the property confiscated in those times it is of great importance that the authorities approved of that plunder and did not make any claims against the participants of the plundering activity. It is significant that, with a few exceptions, even the Wehrmacht was not condemned for plunder.

An action fully organized and based upon regulations of the Nazi legislature was begun in October 1939. Among the several legal acts issued in the first two decades of October 1939 pertaining to the confiscation of Polish property, the decree of October 19th 1939 was most important. In that regulation H. Göring as the plenipotentiary of the four-year plan established the Main Trusteeship Office East (Die Haupttreuhandstelle Ost, in abbreviation HTO, with its seat in Berlin). The task of that institution was to confiscate Polish property and to administer it until a take over by the German "owner", to clear debts and credits

Begehrlichkeit der Truppe nahm Formen an, die gelinde gesagt als Plünderung bezeichnet werden mußten. Im Wege der Requisition wurden Pelze, Wäsche, Daunendecken usw. besorgt. Die Offiziere machten hiervon leider keine Ausnahme".

⁴ APMP i WP — Sicherheitsdienst Posen No. 56, p. 5. Deutsches Zentralarchiv Potsdam (subsequently quoted as DZA Potsdam) — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 6176, p. 35.

⁵ DZA Potsdam — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 6154, p. 50.

and to perform other important tasks on behalf of the state. The Main Trusteeship Office East had several branch offices in the territories incorporated into the Reich (Treuhandstelle, abbreviation TO), namely in Poznań, with a subordinated office in Lodz (Treuhandnebenstelle Litzmannstadt), in Katowice, Gdynia and Ciechanów. Apart from that there were in each county town county offices of the HTO (Kreisvertrauensmann der HTO).

In spite of the formulation of the decree establishing the Main Trusteeship Office East saying that its task was to confiscate Polish property, the HTO did not have the monopoly in that sphere of activity. For instance, the Polish military sites were taken over by the Wehrmacht, farming estates and farms with the whole movable property were confiscated on the basis of the decree of the ministry of nutrition and agriculture of February 28th 1940 by a special joint stock company created for that purpose called Ostdeutsche Landbewirtschaftungsgesellschaft m.b.H. (Ostland), renamed on July 1st 1942 Reichsgesellschaft für Landbewirtschaftung m.b.H. (Reichsland). Farming estates owned by the Polish state were confiscated by the ministry of nutrition and agriculture and the forests were transferred to the chief forest inspector of the Reich (Reichsforstmeister), the Gestapo was given the right to confiscate and dispose the property of the Polish religious organizations and many industrial and agricultural enterprises were seized directly by the SS. Some of those institutions, as for instance the Main Trusteeship Office East established or initiated the establishment of additional joint stock companies and organizations which were subordinated to it and were given the task of taking over and administering Polish property, e.g. the Verwaltungs- und Verwertungsgesellschaft der HTO; Auffanggesellschaft für Kriegsteilnehmerbetriebe des Handels im Reichsgau Wartheland; Hotel und Gaststättengesellschaft Wartheland, Danzig-Westpreußen und Ostschlesien. The initial scope of competence of the Main Trusteeship Office East in the sphere of plundering of Polish property was expanded during the Nazi occupation period only once in 1940. It was given the right to confiscate furniture belonging to Poles and Jews. Furniture was confiscated in the initial months of the war by the heads of villages and mayors and from December 1939 following Himmler's decree of December 16th 1939 by the Landrats and in large cities Oberbürgermeisters.

The apparatus of police and administration so devised for the confiscation of Polish property was active in the particular administrative districts (Gau, Provinz) under the supervision of the Reich viceregents or under the supervision of chairmen (Reichsstatthalter, Oberpräsident), who, according to the decree of February 17th 1941 were nominated together with the bosses of the HTO in a given territory.

The police and the NSDAP with auxiliary organizations also participated in the activities connected with the expropriation of the Poles ⁶.

Theoretically everything that was of Polish ownership underwent confiscation. Apart of the above mentioned strategic raw materials and military installations, the first priorities in confiscation were industrial enterprises producing war materials or fully adapted to such a production and the most important transport enterprises. That was the lot of such factories as the H. Cegielski works in Poznań which were occupied immediately after the invasion by the Nazi army and which were sold to the joint stock company Deutsche Waffen- und Munitionsfabriken (DWM) on November 1st 1939 ⁷. An action of seizing all the remaining industrial enterprises, transport and trade firms and handicraft workshops was started at the beginning of December 1939. A speedy implementation of those objectives was slowed down by the lack of a sufficient number of Germans who would be proper candidates for the so called trustees (Treuhänder), i.e. administrators acting on behalf of the Main Trusteeship Office East in the expropriated Polish enterprises. The Nazi authorities could find such trustees until January 1940 only among the Volksdeutsch Germans, i.e. Germans who had lived in Poland before the war and among the German candidates from the Reich who were not yet numerous at that time. In spite of the fact that the Nazi security authorities, the Gestapo, the NSDAP and the German vocational organizations, authorized to submit their opinions about the Weltanschauung and about the political attitudes of the candidates and about their professional qualifications, made an effort to facilitate the task of the Main Trusteeship Office East, it was impossible to find the required number of candidates for the function of trustees. This was the main reason why till the end of 1939 still a comparatively great number of Polish owners of economic units escaped expropriation. This situation was radically changed in the first months of 1940 when great numbers of Germans from the Baltic states were settled in the "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich". Among those Germans there were many businessmen and industrialists to whom the administration of the Polish enterprises was entrusted and rightful owners of which were removed. Specialists from the Baltic countries also replaced those trustees who did not have proper qualifications ⁸.

⁶ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1, 1222, 2228 and 3498.

⁷ DZA Potsdam — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 6168 f. 91.

⁸ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 77 of May 21st 1940; Archiwum Sądu Wojewódzkiego w Poznaniu (The Archive of the Voivodeship Law Court of Poznań) — Handelsregister B No. 1151-1201; DZA Potsdam — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 6168 f. 39-39 v.

The intensification of the process of the expropriation of the Poles was also enhanced by the increased influx of Germans from the Reich after the French campaign. After the speedy collapse of France many persons were more convinced that the Reich was "invincible". The risk diminished or all vanished in the opinions of those persons, i.e. the risk of moving to the so called "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich". Many persons still hesitating before June 1940 to resettle in the occupied territories of Poland, arrived after that time in those territories and undertook the trusteeship of Polish economic units⁹. Thus, owing to the facts that the representatives of the two above mentioned German national groups settled in the Polish territories, the expropriation of the Poles in industry, commerce and transport was virtually completed in 1940. Only "small enterprises failing to provide sufficient means of existence to the Germans"¹⁰ remained in the possession of the Poles. This statement of the German administration referred to a small number of bars, which were not confiscated for political reasons, because the Nazi authorities wanted to facilitate in that way their observation of the Poles attending those bars¹¹, and to a part of artisan workshops. The latter was caused by the deficiency of German handicraftsmen and artisans. The existing German workshops were not able to satisfy all the needs of the population, therefore the Nazi authorities had to tolerate some Polish workshops. But the rights of those workshops were limited. Thus in the Wartheland the Polish shoemakers were allowed only to mend shoes and the number of their workshops was reduced whenever it was possible to do so¹².

A part of the confiscated Polish industrial and commercial enterprises and transport firms or artisan workshops was immediately closed down as unable to pay their way, other units were closed down for the duration of the war. Many small enterprises were merged into bigger units. As a result the number of the enterprises from which the Poles were expropriated and which were in operation during the war was much smaller than the number of enterprises before September 1st 1939. According to the statistical data at our disposal in the so called Wartheland the Poles were expropriated from 7265 industrial enterprises, 22,510 commercial

⁹ Archiwum Sądu Wojewódzkiego w Poznaniu (The Archive of the Voivodeship Law Court of Poznań). — Handelsregister B No. 1151 - 1201.

¹⁰ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1 p. 34.

¹¹ DZA Potsdam — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 6141 f. 79.

¹² Archiwum Państwowe Miasta Łodzi i Województwa Łódzkiego (The State Archive of the City and Voivodeship of Lodz) — Stadtverwaltung von Litzmannstadt No. 81 a III p. 73, APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1240 and 10654; 500 lat cechu i rzemiosł pokrewnych w Poznaniu (*500 Years of the Guild of Locksmiths and Similar Handicraftsmen in Poznań*). Poznań 1958, pp. 110 - 112.

enterprises and 20,680 artisan workshops and 187 other enterprises till May 12th 1943¹³. In the "territories incorporated into the Reich" the Nazi authorities confiscated 5700 hotels and restaurants and 1267 banks, including 37 branch offices of state banks¹⁴.

The plunder of Polish agricultural enterprises was somewhat slower, at least until the beginning of 1940. This was connected with the deficiency of proper candidates for take over and Germany, in the situation of a need of huge amounts of agricultural and livestock breeding products did not want to allow for any big disturbance of agricultural production. In spite of various regulations aimed at ensuring that the farms should pass from hands to hands, it happened from time to time that the Polish owners were expropriated and all the work was left to the servants hitherto employed in those farms. Those servants worked under the supervision of the representatives of the Nazi authorities until a German took over the farm. A great influx of Germans resettled from various European countries enabled the Nazi administration to confiscate till the end of 1940 all the big and medium sized peasant farms. Only the very small and nonprofitable (if somewhat bigger) farms remained in Polish hands as those did not attract any German farmer. Even that solution was not acceptable to the Nazi authorities, because it did not satisfy their postulate of the "total germanization of the land". Hence a decision was taken in 1941 that the farms still in Polish hands were no longer the property of the Poles living in them. This decision, aiming at the last and small group of Poles who possessed farms was followed by practical consequences. It was ruled that all incomes from the sale of the agricultural products in those farms had to be paid into a special bank account which was at the disposal of the farmers only with the approval of the German official Kreislandwirt. Thus a total control of incomes and expenditure was introduced for each individual farm. Apart from that, a German plenipotentiary was appointed to supervise one or several villages of a neighbourhood. It was the task of that plenipotentiary, representing the Ostland organization, to administer the farms still inhabited by Poles¹⁵. Thus the Poles became practically hired labourers who worked under the control of the representatives of the German economic administration. Thus the process of the confiscation of Polish farms in the "territories incorporated into the Reich" was completed in 1941 as all the farms were in German possession.

All the dwellings belonging to Poles were also confiscated. Till March 31st 1942 a total of 299,606 houses with 940,124 dwellings with the total

¹³ DZA Potsdam — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 6151 p. 214 v.

¹⁴ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1, pp. 143 and 402.

¹⁵ DZA Potsdam — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 8014 pp. 19 - 20.

amount of 11,191,285 marks of rent were taken over by the Germans. The rent from the tenants brought to the joint stock company Grundstücksgesellschaft as much as 11,254,001.00 marks of profit in the years 1940 - 1942. Apart from that state treasury and the municipal organizations obtained 27,765,429.00 marks in the form of taxes and rates paid from the exploitation of the housing units¹⁶. Thus the occupation authorities earned from the seizure of the Polish housing more than 39 million marks in just 3 years. The Germans took over 8 to 10 thousand housing units which were being constructed in September 1939¹⁷.

As early as in September and October 1939 all the Polish theatres and cinemas were confiscated and transferred into the hands of the German trustees. A number of those theatres and cinemas were later transferred to civic authorities and to various organizations or sold to German citizens. There were about 300 cinemas in the "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich". All of them were confiscated and 110 were closed¹⁸.

All monuments and objects of art also underwent ruthless confiscation by the Nazi authorities. That action was carried through in a meticulous way till the end of 1942. A part of the plundered objects which were of enormous artistic value was transferred to museums, a part was sold to antique dealers' shops, placed at the disposal of the Reichsführer SS or sent into the central provinces of the Reich. It was impossible to revindicate many of those objects after the war. It is remarkable that a large proportion of the treasures of Polish culture was suffered destruction owing to the fact that objects of art made of non-ferrous metals were sent to re-smelting for war utilization. This was one of the reasons of great and irretrievable losses Polish culture sustained. That was also largely the lot of church art objects¹⁹.

A large proportion of the confiscated Polish libraries was committed to fire²⁰.

I have mentioned above that the Wehrmacht started to confiscate strategic raw materials immediately after the invasion of the Polish territory. That activity was continued until 1942, but already from November 1939 the plunder of raw materials was delegated to the civilian

¹⁶ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1, p. 210 and 241.

¹⁷ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1, p. 225.

¹⁸ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1, p. 186.

¹⁹ APMP i WP — HTO Posen Nos. 2491, 2500, 13273.

²⁰ Archiwum Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce (The Archive of the Central Commission of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland). No. 1058z/OL. „Im Kreise Hohensalza sind die Bibliotheken teils von der Gestapo bzw. SD Außenstelle abgeholt worden oder aber wie auch in anderen Bezirken verbrannt worden”.

administration, and then a special joint stock company was formed for those purposes. It was called Verwaltungs- und Verwertungsgesellschaft der HTO. That joint stock company alone and some offices of the civilian administration confiscated in the "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich" raw materials belonging to Poles worth 75.1 million marks. All those raw materials, together with those seized by the Wehrmacht, the value of which it is impossible to establish, were transported into the Reich proper and there in most cases placed at the disposal of German industry ²¹.

Such things as furniture, jewels, radio sets, cameras and other personal belongings were also taken away from the Poles. This was done in various ways, as e.g. by confiscating all the objects to be found in a flat left by deportees, by transferring Poles from well furnished and comfortable flats or houses to dwellings representing a lower standard of furniture, fittings and appliances, or as it also sometimes happened, by entering the flats of Poles at any time and seizing more precious objects. Things confiscated in that way were offered free of charge to German population re-settled from other European countries or sold cheaply to other Germans ²².

Plunder did not spare even the families of the Polish prisoners of war remaining in German camps ²³.

Confiscation of Polish property was extended also to foreign liabilities of Polish citizens. Till the end of 1942 a sum of 6 million marks was paid to cover debts of foreign debtors from before the war ²⁴.

The Nazi authorities did not hesitate to take every opportunity to demand payment of debts of Polish citizens due to be paid to Polish institutions confiscated by the Germans in the "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich" and incurred before September 1st 1939. That procedure was at variance with all sorts of legal regulations and customs observed in finance for centuries. Return of loans was demanded, for instance, even in case when the bills of exchange, constituting the only evidence, were lost ²⁵.

As a result of the consistently executed plunder of property the Polish population of the "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich" was

²¹ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1, pp. 243, 253-257 and 280; DZA Potsdam — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 6141 f. 153.

²² APMP i WP — Landratsamt Kempen No. 5, p. 11. No. 14, p. 23; Der Reichsstatthalter im Reichsgau Wartheland No. 854; DZA Potsdam — Reichsfinanzministerium No. 6141, p. 92 and No. 6170, p. 474.

²³ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 2161.

²⁴ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1, p. 380.

²⁵ APMP i WP — HTO Posen No. 1, p. 389.

reduced in its possession to bare necessities in the fittings of its dwellings, in personal belongings and clothes.

The plunder of Polish property was one of methods applied by the Nazis to reduce all the Poles living in the "eastern territories incorporated into the Reich" to the role of helpless manual workers with a very low living standard who would be subject to unqualified obedience to the German employers. Those policies brought about to the Germans the enormous profits they were aiming at as long as the war was continued. However, as a result of the allied victory, they, fortunately, were unable to prolong the application of those policies as they planned to do after the war on behalf of the "thousand years' Reich".

Translated by:

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