

Occupy/Be occupied

## Fighting the resistance in occupied Europe, 1939-1945

Barbara LAMBAUER

### ABSTRACT

Nazi Germany's repression in occupied territories during World War Two bears the traces of experiences from previous wars, while relying on a strategy of dissuasion. The year 1941 marked the definitive abandonment of international regulations and the beginning of systematized large-scale violence against civilians, starting with the Jews. Despite situations which were often very different, strong links and exchanges existed between occupied regions, as experiences circulated, and methods and strategies were observed, transferred, and experimented from one territory to another.



Execution of a partisan in Minsk, 1942-1943. The sign warns in both Russian and German: "Here is the leader of a guerilla group. He tormented and pillaged the population for months. He was THEREFORE hung!".

The Nazi repression of acts of resistance plays an important role in the memory of Europe today. What logic and continuities was it in keeping with, and what role did military traditions and ideological considerations play?

### German approaches before 1939

The practices of German repression against insurrection movements can be traced back to the nineteenth century and even earlier. Faced with a "mass rising" of civilians, as in 1793 or 1870-1871, German armies reacted with great severity by taking and executing hostages, and by destroying entire villages and expelling their inhabitants. In German eyes, these practices were part of the "necessity of war." The international conference organized in 1874 in Brussels failed to impose limits on such methods: the small states (Belgium, Switzerland), with support from France and England, which were in favour of the right to self-defence, met with the categorical opposition of

Germany and Russia, who rejected any form of legitimacy for “small wars.” The question thus remained open: the preamble of the convention which was signed—and later confirmed in The Hague in 1899 and 1907—referred the series of non-resolved questions to the principles of the law of nations, “as they result from the established customs between civilized nations, laws of humanity, and the demands of public conscience,” although the conception of these “customs” diverged considerably from one country to another.

During World War One, the fear—more than the real experience—of the “irregular” led to heavy German retaliation against civilians and soldiers scattered behind the front. In both the West and the East, villages and cities were reduced to ashes, and civilian hostages executed. In the Ukraine, it was only in 1918 that the German occupier abandoned its strategy of dissuasion in favour of greater involvement of local administrative and political forces, in order to achieve a relative “pacification” of the territory.

### **1939-1941: A gradual radicalization**

In the campaign against Poland in September 1939, the Wehrmacht delved into its “customs of war” to revive the practice of taking—and where necessary executing—hostages, in order to prevent or pay for acts of resistance. German propaganda created conditions which favoured excessive measures, by insisting right from the beginning on the poor treatment and “massacres” suffered by the German minority, such as in Częstochowa and Bydgoszcz. The activities of SS *Einsatzgruppen*, elite units commanded by Reinhard Heydrich to “secure” the area behind the front of any supposed enemies, rapidly degenerated and led to the systematic liquidation of the Polish elite, including the aristocracy, the clergy, and the Jews. This first operation claimed over 20,000 victims (60,000 by the spring of 1940), and sparked protests among senior members of the military, who launched proceedings in the military justice system which were interrupted by the general amnesty decreed by Hitler for deeds “committed as a result of rage in reaction to the atrocities perpetrated by the Polish.” However, in the campaign against the West in the spring of 1940, no *Einsatzgruppe* accompanied the troops.

The preparations for the campaign against the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941 marked a turning point. In view of the vast territory to be conquered, Hitler announced a “battle of destruction” in a speech before the generals of the Wehrmacht on March 30, 1941: “in the East, harshness is kindness toward the future: commanders must resolve to sacrifice and to overcome their scruples.” Military jurisdiction was suspended over crimes committed against the civilian population; any Soviet political commissars who were captured had to be systematically executed. The *Einsatzgruppen* would henceforth enjoy great autonomy with regard to the military forces they accompanied at the front.

### **Practices and repression beginning in 1941**

In the war against the USSR, the *Einsatzgruppen* acted in a preventive capacity based on a strategy of dissuasion, by sowing terror in an effort to nip any act of insurrection or sabotage in the bud. Their action took on a murderous dynamic on a large scale, with indiscriminate massacres committed notably against the Jewish population in the newly occupied territories. This action, which by the end of 1941 claimed a half million victims, was part of the first phase of what was becoming the Holocaust in Europe. To justify the massacres, the Jews were systematically classed as members of the resistance and as partisans, a pretext that fitted into Nazi propaganda against the “Judeo-Bolshevik” enemy and the “Jewish lobby.” These practices were also applied in other occupied territories. Beginning in August 1941, men from the Jewish community in Serbia were taken, along with communists, as hostages and executed in retaliation for the Yugoslav insurrection. In the autumn of 1941, all Jewish men were shot when the security of troops, communication lines, and the economic exploitation of the country were seriously threatened by insurrection. In France, the first roundups and internments of Jews were organized in May, August, and December 1941, despite the fact that resistance was not particularly threatening.

In 1942 and 1943, the ability of Soviet and Yugoslav partisans to cause damage increased, with their targets being notably local collaborators and German communication lines. The occupier continued to rely on dissuasion, reacting with draconian measures. During “major operations,” entire regions were surrounded and “combed through,” and local populations were subject to mass executions, or to deportation measures as manpower for German industry. In the last months of the occupation, the Germans even created “fortified villages” inhabited by native collaborators armed to fight the partisans.

In the West, on the other hand, and notably in France, the involvement of local authorities was at the heart of initiatives. German and French police collaborated very effectively until the autumn of 1943, as the French handed over many people suspected of acts or plots of resistance against the Germans. After an “aggravated” interrogation (including torture), the detainees were transferred to camps in the Reich; these “night and fog” deportations were carried out in Western and Northern Europe from 1942, and left no trace of, or information about, the person. Finally, as they were preparing in late 1943 for the Allied landing in France, the Germans moved their units toward the East, a front that was considered decisive for the war. Practices of repression became more radical at this time, inspired by those developed in the East: “major operations” on the Glières Plateau in March 1944 and in the Vercors in July-August 1944, and the massacres of June 1944 committed in Tulle and Oradour-sur-Glane.

The Nazi repression in occupied countries thus drew on traditions stretching back to past conflicts, to which they nevertheless added ideological considerations in order to nip any opposition in the bud. According to the geographical region and the unfolding of the conflict, practices fluctuated between methods of extreme violence—notably in Eastern and South-eastern Europe—and collaboration with local forces.

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