

German and Polish photographic images of the Self and the Other in Reichsgau Wartheland, 1939-1945.

With particular emphasis on the Wielkopolska region.

The Second World War began in September 1939 with Germany's attack on Poland. "Reichsgau Wartheland" was a German administrative unit created from former Polish territory after the military occupation. It became a model for the implementation of the Nazi regime's population and land settlement policies for Eastern Europe. The region, which was mainly populated by Poles, was to be completely "Germanized" within ten years. As a result, from the end of 1939, several hundred thousand Polish citizens were expelled and their property was expropriated. The Jews among them were concentrated in ghettos and murdered. Reich Germans and ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) from Eastern Europe were settled in place of the expelled Polish citizens. Nazi race ideology decreed that these members of the German "master race" were now to rule over Polish work slaves. In relative terms, Poland was the country which suffered the highest percentage of civilian casualties during the Second World War. As a result there are still significant communication problems between the two societies concerning the past.

According to the psychological communication theory of Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin and Don Jackson, human beings define their relationships to each other primarily in non-verbal ways, so that the "power of images" increases in conflict relationships. Consequently, a conflict can be expressed in a visually symbolic manner even though it can *no longer* or *not yet* be articulated verbally. Working within the framework of this theory, I analysed photographs created under German occupation in the Wielkopolska region, the centre of the new "Reichsgau Wartheland", as a medium of visual communication. My aim was to examine German and Polish images of the Self and the Other as reflected in the photographs taken during the period of war and occupation.

In order to make the most valid and reliable statements about the pictures, I examined approximately 30,000 photographs from three West German, and more than a dozen Polish archives, museums and libraries. From these, approximately 10,000 contemporary prints were classified as relevant picture sources from the place and period under investigation. These prints make up the body of source material subsequently analysed and interpreted. The photographs were described and compared, using methods of historical source criticism and art-historical techniques for the safeguarding of objects. Many of the photographers could not be identified, nor could the circumstances under which many of the photographs were taken be individually reconstructed. Consequently, the form of the photographic primary sources themselves became the basis for statements about their creators and their purpose. Theoretical and methodological approaches from the social sciences were used in the analysis and interpretation of the mass of photographs that have survived.

The body of source material thus generated allowed me to make statements about national and institutional differences in the preservation of photographic material. In the West German institutions only photographs taken by Germans had been preserved, while the Polish institutions held pictures taken by both Germans and Poles. After the war the photographs from “Reichsgau Wartheland” were preserved with differing national thematic emphases. Pictures that were incompatible with the collective memory of the respective nation state were generally not preserved in public institutions. Where such pictures were preserved, they existed only on the margins of the collections. In addition, the body of source material enabled me to make statements about German and Polish group specific photographic images of the Self and the Other. These images are not identical with the nationally homogenous images of the Self and the Other assumed by stereotype research. The empirical findings contradicted the assumption that nationally homogenous German and Polish photographic auto- and heterostereotypes existed even during the war. The homogenisation of national images of the Self and the Other is only evident in those photographs produced and disseminated by institutions.

The description and critical comparison of the pictures as physical objects, including aspects such as format, and of the characteristics of picture composition and subject, enabled me to reconstruct several significant creator groups. Each group is typified by a different group style, and each style is connected with particular social functions of the medium of photography:

- the function of individual self-representation within the context of a civil society (studio portraits)
- a function of private memory (“snaps”, private photo albums)
- the function of social control (police use of photographic records)
- the function of mass communication (press photography and photo-journalism)

During the war German and Polish portrait photographers, working in their studios, were often more faithful to their profession than to changing political ideologies. They photographed their customers as they wished to be photographed. The portrait photographer has traditionally masked flaws in a subject’s appearance in order to provide the “nice” picture that most customers want. The techniques employed to achieve this include a flattering use of light, conventionalised studio staging and subsequent retouching. The images created in the portrait studios during the war years were based on the same principles. Where both parties agreed to the transaction, these principles held good, regardless of the nationality of photographer and customer.

The photographs with the widest public reach were press photographs. The Nazi regime controlled the production and distribution of these photographs, just as they controlled the entire German press. The Nazi Party press experts were well aware of the propaganda effect of photographs, which are considered by the public to be more reliable than words. When the war began, close-up images of corpses were presented to the German public in print media targeted at various audiences. The images supposedly depicted ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) murdered by “brutish” Poles. These atrocity pictures were published repeatedly during the war. For the Germans, they became a visual symbol of “Polish cruelty”, seeming to justify acts of aggression towards Poles.

The entire German press received daily instructions from the Ministry of Propaganda as to which subjects they could cover, and how those subjects were to be presented. Basic instructions for portraying Poles in the press were issued in October 1939. The Polish press in "Reichsgau Wartheland" was closed down, and in its place a Nazi Gau press, from which Poles were excluded, was set up. The *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* (East German Observer), a German daily newspaper published in Poznan, and other print media used photographs repeatedly to illustrate an antagonism between "German" order and culture, on the one hand, and "Polish" disorder and lack of culture on the other. The photographs from the Warthegau published in the *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* create the illusion that the area was populated entirely by Germans, whose alleged superiority was manifested in major economic and cultural structural change. The Poles, who made up three quarters of the population, were generally not represented pictorially. The restrictions imposed by the Nazi propaganda institutions led to a national homogenization of German images of the Self and the Other in press photography.

The German SS and police were collective originators of numerous photographs for internal purposes. These photographs produced by police institutions were not made public at the time. They can be divided into roughly two types.

1. A standardised use of photography for criminal identification in the form of a three part photograph, giving a front, profile and three quarter view of the head. At the beginning of the 20th century this type of picture established itself as the model for the photographic depiction of criminals. The Polish people had been criminalised en masse, as an ethnic group, by the Nazi regime's "racial policy". Thus in "Reichsgau Wartheland" they became the favoured object of this type of photographic record.
2. Non-professional photography also appeared in internal police reports documenting the performance of the police. Most of the photographs used for this internal reporting were snapshots. Some of these images depicted the police in their working relationship to the Polish citizens. The SS and police photographs I located were nationally homogenous in so far as all the photographers were German, and the Poles were, without exception, the objects of the photographs.

Another large group of images is made up of snapshots taken by Germans. The creators of these pictures chose their subjects freely, and did not intend their photographs to be seen by the general public. The individual priorities evident in this non-professional photography give rise to a generally greater degree of heterogeneity in the images of the Self and the Other. However, there is a difference in subject matter between the snapshots taken by Germans preserved in West Germany and those preserved in Poland. For example, photographs taken by Germans, showing public executions of Polish citizens by Germans were, with one exception, preserved only in Polish institutions. The West German picture collections consisted predominantly of snapshots taken by Germans, dealing with domestic German relationships. In Poland, on the other hand, the institutions preserved many snapshots taken by Germans, illustrating the violent relationship between Germans and Poles. After the war, in the People's Republic of Poland, enlarged photographs of public executions of Polish citizens, taken by Germans, were published repeatedly and became the visual symbols of "German barbarism".

Under the German occupation, Poles in "Reichsgau Wartheland" had to work in German managed businesses. More than one hundred Poles worked as photographic laboratory assistants in such businesses. In the darkrooms they became invisible observers, witnesses to what the Germans were photographing during the war. At first, the occupying power had restricted the activity of Polish photographers in the Warthegau to the private sphere, but in the summer of 1941 even the private possession and use of cameras was forbidden. Only a minority of Poles continued to photograph in secret after this ban. The photographs taken by Poles which have been preserved are heterogeneous. Many Poles collected photographs taken by Germans. Polish laboratory assistants often secretly made extra prints of photographs brought in by Germans to be developed. Some lab assistants passed on photographs showing Nazi crimes or German troop movements to the organised Polish resistance. The most extensive documentation of the anti-Polish occupation policy in the "Gau capital" of Poznan was preserved by the Szare Szeregi, the Polish boy and girl scouts who joined the resistance at the start of the war. From 1940 onwards, they photographed numerous signs in public places forbidding Poles to enter parks, playgrounds, sports grounds, museums, libraries etc. Other photos taken by the Szare Szeregi show the secret schools they organised. The significance of these pictures can only be understood against the background of cultural and educational policy in the Warthegau at this time. The Polish population were denied access to education by the Nazi occupation force. In photographs the Poles presented themselves as equals of the Germans, and they used photographic representations of Polish culture to counter the occupiers' assertion that they were an uncultured people. The German public are unfamiliar with Polish photographic images of the Self from the war years. These images are by no means limited to a visual self representation as victim.

(English version: Berlin, November 2009)