Hans Frank’s Decree That Condemned Jews and Poles to Death

The date 15 October 1941 may not be as widely known or commemorated as the outbreak of the Second World War on 1 September 1939, the dates marking the establishment and dissolution of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), or the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the Warsaw Uprising. Yet it deserves our attention if we are to understand what the German occupation meant for Poles and Jews, and how a sequence of interrelated events can only be properly understood in a broader historical context.

From Isolation to Extermination – The Situation of Jews under German Occupation

Poles came under the scrutiny of the German totalitarian state’s machinery from the very first hours of the war in 1939. The situation of Jews in Polish territories occupied by Germany evolved over time. Initially, the German authorities sought to segregate Jews and concentrate them in designated urban districts known as ghettos. They introduced the requirement to wear armbands and remain within designated areas.

During this transitional or preparatory period, Jews were still permitted to function within a limited degree of autonomy granted to them by the authorities. In the first half of 1940, Warsaw even witnessed incidents in which Poles put on armbands bearing the Star of David to avoid deportation to Germany for forced labour.

15 October 1941 – Hans Frank’s Decree

Over time, however, the situation of Jews deteriorated dramatically. One manifestation of the systematic deprivation of their fundamental human rights was the decree issued by Governor-General Hans Frank on 15 October 1941, entitled the “Third Decree on Restrictions on Residence in the General Government”. This document is remarkable for at least three reasons.

First, it introduced exceptionally draconian penalties both for Jews who left ghettos without permission and for Poles who provided assistance to Jewish escapees. Moreover, Poles faced the death penalty not only for knowingly sheltering Jews, but even for supporting them or attempting to provide assistance. The occupying authorities sought in this way to isolate Jews completely from Poles and use terror to force the Polish population into passivity in the face of the murder of Jews.

Second, the decree was an expression of the Germans’ deliberate efforts to exterminate the Jewish population through hunger and disease. It was clear that the regulations would severely restrict, and in practice virtually prevent, the smuggling of food and other essential goods into the ghettos, condemning their inhabitants to death from starvation and infectious diseases.

Third, by issuing a decree of this nature, the German occupier openly revealed its criminal intentions and inhuman character. In later documents, actions amounting to genocide were concealed behind euphemistic expressions such as “deportation of Jews” or “resettlement”. Later still, during court proceedings, the perpetrators claimed ignorance.

In the decree under discussion, however, as well as in several other documents published in the General Government, the German occupier called things by their proper names: defenceless civilians, both Jews and Poles, were stripped of all rights and protection, and the death penalty was imposed for even the slightest act of disobedience.

The Tragic Consequences of the Decree

The consequences of the decree issued on 15 October were devastating. Many Jewish escapees were murdered by the Germans because they did not receive sufficient assistance from Poles.

Researchers have established the identities of more than 350 Poles murdered for helping Jews in hiding. Several hundred

others were subjected to various forms of repression, including arrest, imprisonment and confinement in concentration camps.

Despite the passage of 85 years, many details remain unknown. Numerous events will probably never be fully explained or brought to light due to the lack of witnesses or surviving documentary evidence.

We must therefore remember that the Ulma family was not an exception. There were many more families who displayed such extraordinary courage.

Visit the immersive exhibition dedicated to the Ulma family

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