

The History of the German Crime in the Szpęgawski Forest 1939-1945

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The Szpęgawski Forest was chosen for the place of murder for several reasons. It was a huge forest complex with an area of over 7,000 ha. In 1939, the place of the crime was a sandy terrain cleared from trees which was owned by the German baron Joachim von Paleske. The

area was uninhabited and had convenient access from the nearby cities of Starogard, Gniew, Pelplin and Tczew. The place of execution was surrounded by densely growing trees. The Germans additionally guarded the place against unauthorized entry so that the murders would not come to light.

The Third Reich and its subordinate Wehrmacht, Gestapo, SS, SA, EK 16, Landresgandarmerie were responsible for the crime. The officers responsible for the murders were commanded by SS officers, who were part of, among others, Einsatzkommando 16 and Selbstschutz staff. At the head of the "German self-defense" forces from Starogard stood Paul Drews. The district structures were managed by Johann von Plehn. Gerhard Wichert and Egon Sievert were some of the most active members. In many post-war testimonies, they were depicted as degenerates.

Before the executions, the victims were locked in places of seclusion, which were, among others, in the Starogard prison and the tower, the Gniew castle, the Tczew barracks, the Skórcz mill, and the Pelplin Seminary. Prisoners were forced to do physical work - they cleared off the ruins, deepened the pond and cleaned the streets. They were psychologically and physically abused. Former prisoner of the Starogard tower, Walerian Blank, testified after the war: "I was arrested on November 01, 1939. [...] until November 11, 1939. At that time, I had the opportunity to see people being beaten and murdered by the Gestapo. Their system was to shoot and hang people on their own scarves, and women were raped before that. [...] During the night [the prisoners] were taken for burials."

During the night from 12 to 13 September 1939, trucks with armed SS men and members of the Selbstschutz rode up Gdańska street in Starogard. At that time, there were workers' barracks there. All men were ordered to go out into the street, they were beaten with clubs, pushed and pulled. Everyone was forced to set themselves in a row, then their faces were lit by flashlights. Some of the men were deported to the Starogard prison, beaten and released on the second day. 11 unfortunates were deported to the forest near the village of Ciecholewy, where they were shot. Their bodies lay for several days in the forest by the road from Kokoszkowy to Szpęgawsk. The Germans sent guards there in order not to allow the bodies to be buried. Among the victims was a young scout who was 19 at the time, Józef Grzybek, who a few days earlier was supposed to throw an unknown object towards a German car and shout anti-German slogans, which leads to a suspicion that the executed crime could be a retaliation for this act. This was the beginning of the Szpęgawsk terror. As planned by the German staff in Starogard, the news of what had happened in the forest created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among the Poles.

On September 04, 1939, the SS-Wachsturmbann "Eimann" unit arrived at the psychiatric hospital in Kocborowo, under the command of SS-Obersturmführer Karl Braunschweig, responsible for the "T-4" campaign, which aimed at murdering all people with disabilities. On September 10, 1939 the first patient of the Psychiatric Hospital in Kocborowo, Augustyn Krzyża, was murdered. It was forbidden to clean up his body, which lay for several days on the floor. Other patients were brought in and intimidated that they would end the same if they did not follow instructions. From now on, humiliation and beatings became the order of the day. According to the Germans, the sick were a "worthless ballast for society". They were called "life not worth living". From September 22, 1939, to January 21, 1940, patients were

transported to Szpęgawsk every day. 1689 patients were executed there, including 75 citizens of other countries. From February 1940, as part of the "T-4" campaign, patients were taken to extermination camps or killed with luminal injections.

Throughout September and October 1939, the Germans took to murdering Jews from Kociewie. Before the war, about 143 of them lived in Starogard. Many, with the advent of the September fights, left Kociewie. On October 19, 1939, the occupation authorities called the remaining Jews to the magistrate under the pretense of discussing issues related to anti-aircraft defense. Those arrived were taken to a nearby synagogue, brutally beaten and then they were probably deported to the Szpęgawski Forest where murders were carried out. There is also another version of the crime according to which the Jews were shot in the synagogue and then their bodies were taken to Szpęgawsk.

A terrible fate was met by the Polish clergy from the Starogard and Tczew districts. The then Chełmno diocese lost about half its priests. They were transported to prisons and subjected to torture. As people who had a special influence on Poles, they were treated with much greater cruelty. One of the arrested was father Reginald Krzyżanowski from Sumin. Members of the Selbstschutz knocked his teeth out, violently poured vodka into his mouth, ordered him to strip naked and walk on his knees. Father Józef Kuchenbecker from Bobowo had a swastika cut by the executioners with a knife on his forehead.

In October 1939, the arrest of teachers began. They were placed in the mill in Skórcz and in prison in Starogard. According to Alfons Kuling's testimonies, they were beaten, harassed and forced to repeat „We will die for being Polish”. They were starved and locked in overcrowded and cold cells. The largest execution took place on October 20, 1939. At that time, 43 teachers were shot. During the war, over 200 pedagogues died in Kociewie, about 100 of whom were shot in the Szpęgawski Forest.

The Szpęgawski Forest was the place of execution of the the population from the districts of Starogard, Gniew, Tczew, Świecie and partly Kościerzyna and Bytów. Hundreds of people from other parts of the country also died. It is estimated that the Germans murdered up to 7 thousand people in Szpęgawsk of which about 2400 names were established. At the end of 1944, at the news of the approaching Soviet offensive, the Germans, by blurring traces of the crime, unearthed and burned most of the corpses, after which the remains were additionally ground and transported in an unknown direction. Only one mass grave with bodies of the teachers was preserved at the place of the crime. Currently, there are 32 mass graves in one complex and 7 graves 500-1000 m away.

Similar crimes were carried out throughout Pomerelia, where even 40,000 Poles could have died. This extermination was a strictly planned operation and as a series of events should soon be classified by historians as the first planned and fully executed genocide during World War II. The crimes in Szpęgawsk, but also those in Mniszek, Fordon, Karolewo, Piaśnica and approximately 400 other locations, are called "Zbrodnia Pomorska" (Pomerelian Crime).