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SYMPOSIUM REPORT: “*AKTION REINHARDT*
AND THE HOLOCAUST OF POLISH JEWS:
EXPLORING THE MECHANISMS AND PERPETRATORS,”
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On 9 March 2022, the Janusz Kurtyka Central “History Point” educational centre in Warsaw hosted the symposium “*Aktion ‘Reinhardt’ i zagłada polskich Żydów – w kręgu mechanizmów i sprawców*” (*Aktion Reinhardt and the Holocaust of Polish Jews: Exploring the Mechanisms and Perpetrators*).¹ The opportunity was the 80th anniversary of the start of Operation “Reinhardt” (*Aktion Reinhardt*) by the Germans,² i.e., the mass extermination of Jews residing in the General Governorate (GG). Research related to various aspects of the op-

¹ Some of the papers presented at the symposium were published in *Polish-Jewish Studies* 4 (2023).

² The codename *Aktion Reinhardt* was used for the first time in June 1942. However, the deportation from the Lublin ghetto in mid-March 1942 is considered to be the beginning of this operation and the murder of 42,000 Jews from the Majdanek concentration camp, and the labour camps in Trawniki and Poniatowa on 3 and 4 November 1943, as part of the *Erntefest* (Harvest Festival) operation, is considered to be the end.

eration has been conducted for many years.³ Despite this, relatively little is known about the Holocaust perpetrators, both those who gave the orders at various levels of the German apparatus and the people who carried them out. The symposium aimed to fill this research gap, at least to some extent. The papers presented dealt with specific individuals, as well as the effectiveness of post-war efforts to punish these criminals.

The symposium was opened by IPN Deputy President Dr. Mateusz Szpytma, who outlined the chronology of Operation “Reinhardt” and went on to define it as the most genocidal action that ever took place on Polish soil. He explained that it began in March 1942 and ended in November 1943, claiming two million lives. In this context, he stated that one of the objectives of the IPN is to commemorate the victims of this genocide and appealed to local government officials and social organisations to become involved in activities related to this anniversary.

The first paper, entitled “Zagłada Żydów w ‘Dzienniku’ Hansa Franka” (The Extermination of Jews in Hans Frank’s ‘Diary’), was delivered by Dr. Paweł Kosiński from the IPN Historical Research Office. The speaker first presented a biography of the Governor-General and his unique “Diary,” comprising of forty volumes and over eleven thousand pages. There are more than three hundred passages in this source that refer to Jews or Jewish affairs, but only about thirty are related to the Holocaust. To illustrate this, Dr. Kosiński presented a few extracts from 1942 and 1943. These mentioned, among other things, the “resettlement” of Jews and their use as a workforce in the armaments industry, but not once was it mentioned what their fate was. Moreover, in the excerpts cited, there is no information about the Governor-General’s direct involvement in the Holocaust. This theme only appears in a document called Hans Frank’s “confession.” The Governor wrote it down

³ In 2022, several research conferences were specifically dedicated to *Aktion Reinhardt*. On 23 and 24 May, the conference entitled “Infrastruktura akcji ‘Reinhardt’. Miejsca, źródła i postulaty badawcze” (“The Infrastructure of *Aktion Reinhardt*. Places, Sources and Research Postulates”) was held at the Majdanek State Museum in Lublin (followed by the publication of a volume of conference proceedings: *Infrastruktura akcji „Reinhardt”*, ed. T. Kranz, Lublin, 2023) on 21 and 22 September, the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw hosted the conference, “80 lat po Aktion ‘Reinhardt’ (1942–1943): reakcje społeczne i upamiętnienie” (“80 Years after *Aktion Reinhardt* (1942–1943): Social Reactions and Commemoration”) and between 27 and 29 November the Polin Museum in Warsaw organised the international conference “Akcja ‘Reinhardt’ i zagłada Żydów polskich” (“Operation ‘Reinhardt’ and the Destruction of Polish Jews”).

shortly before his execution in 1946 and in it stated that he stood before the court as it were, in place of Hitler. He acknowledged the legitimacy of the punishment the court inflicted on him and admitted his complicity in the Holocaust and the crimes committed against other people; to which Dr. Kosiński avers:

This is the best proof that functionaries at this level, even if they were not the ones who gave orders directly concerning the extermination of the Jews, knew perfectly well that the Jews were being murdered and not transported to the East, and unfortunately continued to serve in their positions, fulfilling various functions in the apparatus of the Third Reich. As we know, there was no collective protest.⁴

The second speaker was Dr. Soraya Kuklińska from the Historical Research Office, with a paper entitled “Odilo Globocnik – zarys biografii” (Odilo Globocnik. An Outline of Biography), in which she summarised the current state of knowledge about this SS-Brigadeführer. His colleagues fondly called him ‘Globus’ (Globe); they remembered him as a good boss and a kind man who threw monthly parties for his colleagues. This stood in contrast to his activities as an officer. A native of Carinthia, Globocnik was the SS and Police Commander in the Distrikt Lublin (Lublin Province) from the autumn of 1939, where he directed many criminal activities, including organising the first labour camp in Lublin. He was possessed by the idea of Germanising the areas entrusted to him and settling Germans there. His ideas aroused Heinrich Himmler’s enormous interest – however, it was *Aktion Reinhardt* that was the most significant operation in which Globocnik participated. In November 1941, the construction of the Bełżec extermination camp began and in the following months, camps were set up at Sobibor and Treblinka. As Kuklińska emphasised, in the spring of 1942, Globocnik became particularly concerned about the low efficiency of the extermination camps under his authority and the overloading of the railway lines – factors that caused delays in carrying out the tasks assigned

⁴ A set of 33 documents from the first volume of Governor General Hans Frank’s diary of activities and three documents from the first volume of the minutes and transcripts of various meetings of the GG leadership bodies have been made available to readers in the publication *Rok 1939 w dzienniku Hansa Franka*, trans. V. Grotowicz, ed. P. Kosiński, Warsaw, 2019.

to him. Mass-murder efficiency increased with the use of Zyklon B, which in turn was applauded by the SS-Brigadeführer. For a long time, Globocnik's effectiveness was admired by the Nazis. However, in the autumn of 1943, he lost Himmler's favour and was posted to Trieste. There, he also organised the extermination of Jews.

The next paper, "Wilhelm Joseph Blum – koordynator Aktion 'Reinhardt' w dys-tryckie radomskim" (Wilhelm Joseph Blum – Coordinator of *Aktion Reinhardt* in the Distrikt Radom), was delivered by Dr. Sebastian Piątkowski from the IPN Delegation in Radom. The historian stated that initially, Blum was only accused of crimes committed against Poles. His involvement in the Holocaust only came to light after his extradition to Poland in 1945, when, in response to an announcement placed in the press, Jewish witnesses began to come forward and testify before the court. Blum was born in Essen in 1890 and ended his participation in World War I as a hero. In 1930, he joined the NSDAP and the SS. In 1941, he joined Odilo Globocnik's staff and was one of the organisers of the Sobibor extermination camp. On 1 August 1942, he was sent to Radom. There, on the night of 4–5 August, as SS-Hauptsturmführer, he took part in the liquidation of the ghetto. As he already had experience from the liquidation of ghettos in the Lublin region, the operation was a training exercise for the German officers in Radom. Blum instructed them on how to subdue a crowd of many thousands of those doomed to extermination. He also participated in the liquidation of other ghettos and later supervised the labour camps in the Distrikt Radom (Radom Province). As a reward, he was promoted to the rank of SS-Sturmbannführer. According to Piątkowski:

In the hierarchy of executioners, Blum was somewhere in the middle. He was the implementer and originator of certain actions against the Jews, but if there was a need to take a weapon in his hand and participate in the liquidation of the ghetto, he did not hesitate and did it.

Blum was sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out on 10 April 1948, and his body was handed over to the Medical Academy in Lublin. Sebastian Piątkowski summarised his paper by stating that although Blum was only a small cog in the Holocaust mechanism, his life's journey confirms that the environment of the implementers of Operation "Reinhardt" consisted of just such people.

Dr. Roman Gieroń from the IPN Cracow Branch Historical Research Office, spoke of Wilhelm Haase and his trial. SS-Sturmbannführer Wilhelm vel Willi Haase was the chief of staff of the SS and Police Commander in Cracow, Julian Scherner, from 1942 to 1944. During Operation “Reinhardt” he commanded two liquidation operations in the Cracow ghetto (28 October 1942 and 13–14 March 1943), the liquidation of the so-called Jewish quarter in Bochnia, and the camp in Szebnie. Many witnesses remembered him as a “murderer in white gloves,” elegant and polite. In early 1944, Haase and Scherner were dismissed from their posts for bribery and other abuses. In 1948, a British court sentenced him to two years imprisonment for membership in the SS and NSDAP. He was extradited to Poland in 1950, that is, at a time when the Allied authorities had essentially already stopped transferring people accused of war crimes to Polish law enforcement authorities. When brought before the Voivodeship Court in Cracow, Haase defended himself in a similar way to other German criminals. He explained that he had acted on orders and did not have full knowledge of the Holocaust. He tried to convince the court that he was not a zealous Nazi party functionary. However, witness testimony left no doubt about his role in the Nazi crime machine, and Haase was sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out on 23 May 1952 in Cracow’s Montelupich Street prison.

Paweł Kornacki from the Historical Research Office, IPN Białystok Branch, delivered a paper entitled “Herbert Zimmerman, Wilhelm Altenloh, Fritz Friedel – ukarani współsprawcy Zagłady w okręgu białostockim?” (Herbert Zimmerman, Wilhelm Altenloh, Fritz Friedel – Punished Co-Perpetrators of the Holocaust in the Białystok District?) The purpose of this presentation was to present a certain paradox. On 26 October 1949, Fritz Gustaw Friedel, known as the “executioner of the Białystok ghetto,” was sentenced to death in Białystok. According to the testimony of Jewish witnesses, he was responsible for most of the crimes committed in the so-called closed Jewish quarter in Białystok. There is no doubt that he was a murderer, and the sentence passed by the court was just. Nonetheless, in the hierarchy of German security structures, Friedel occupied a subordinate position. Meanwhile, the main architects of the Holocaust in the Bezirk Bialystok (Białystok Province) both in the immediate post-war years and later remained beyond the reach of the Polish courts, as their extradition did not come to fruition. It was not

until the 1960s that the German justice system attempted to try them. The trial in Bielefeld, which dragged on for many years, finally led to the sentencing of Wilhelm Altenloh, head of the Białystok Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei) and SD, to eight years in prison, of which the criminal served only a few weeks. His successor, Herbert Zimmerman, co-accused in the same proceedings, committed suicide while in custody. In contrast, the Białystok SS and Police Commanders Werner Fromm and Otto Hellwig were not brought to justice at all. Almost no one in Białystok today recollects these functionaries that were jointly responsible for the deaths of nearly three hundred thousand people because, in the common historical consciousness, it is Friedel who personifies the German crimes committed against Jews. Correcting this picture seems essential.

This was followed by Dr. Monika Tomkiewicz, from the IPN Historical Research Office in Warsaw, who has for many years researched the Ponary crime. Dr. Tomkiewicz delivered a paper entitled “Ściganie i karanie sprawców zbrodni popełnionych na Żydach w Ponarach i innych miejscach straceń na Wileńszczyźnie” (The Prosecution and Punishment of Perpetrators of Crimes Committed against Jews in Ponary and Other Execution Sites in the Vilnius Region). Although the presentation did not deal with the acts committed during Operation “Reinhardt,” it showed – in a comparative perspective – a certain field of post-war reckoning with the perpetrators of crimes against the Jews. The speaker briefly discussed several post-war legal systems, including Soviet, Lithuanian, Polish, and German, according to which defendants were tried for crimes committed in the former Wilno Voivodeship. While the war was still raging, Allies agreed that war criminals would be tried by the courts of those countries on whose territory they committed their crimes. In the Soviet Union, various judicial bodies dealt with the prosecution of war criminals, including the perpetrators of the Ponary massacre, mainly members of the *Ypatingasis būrys* execution commando; they were sentenced to death or 25 years in a labour camp. In proceedings in Germany, the commander of this unit, SS-Hauptscharführer Martin Weiss, received a life sentence but was released after 27 years. After 1958, several proceedings were initiated by the Central Office of the Land Judicial Authorities for Investigation of National Socialist Crimes in Ludwigsburg. Three members of the *Ypatingasis būrys* were also brought before the courts in Poland. Monika Tomkiewicz discussed the interesting case of Władysław

Butkun, convicted in 1974, who was interviewed several decades after the war as a witness by prosecutor Elżbieta Rojowska from the Branch Committee for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (*Oddziałowa Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu*, OKŚZpNP) in Gdańsk during the investigation she was responsible for. Asked if he regretted being in the *Sonderkommando*, he stated that he apologised to those he had wronged. According to Tomkiewicz, however, this elderly man at his life's end showed little remorse. Of the other participants of the Ponary massacre, Aleksandras Lileikis, extradited from the United States in 1996, the former head of the Lithuanian *Sauguma* in the Wilno circuit, was the last to stand trial in Lithuania but died before the verdict was passed.

The last speaker, from the Warsaw Historical Research Office, Dr. Rafał Drabik, delivered the paper entitled "Udział funkcjonariuszy I Zmotoryzowanego Batalionu Żandarmerii SS w Akcji 'Reinhardt'" (The Participation of 1st Motorised Battalion Officers of the SS Gendarmerie in Aktion Reinhardt). Dr. Drabik concluded that during the German occupation of the Lublin region, pacifications took place constantly and that the historian's fundamental problem is the limited possibilities of identifying the units that took part in these crimes. Their affiliation could not be determined by Polish and Jewish witnesses who testified after the war, while what is known comes from German documentation. One of the units that participated in pacification operations here was the 1st Motorised Battalion of the SS Gendarmerie that was formed in Warsaw in June 1942, and numbered about six hundred men, seventy-five percent of whom came from Austria and twenty-five percent from Germany. It consisted of four companies, stationed at various locations and its primary role was to reinforce local German forces. During its two years of activity, battalion members took part in the pacification of around one hundred and sixty towns and other settlements. Anti-Jewish operations usually followed a similar pattern – the soldiers surrounded a given village, separated Jews from Poles and slaughtered the former. Not counting their participation in the Operation "Erntefest" and the liquidation of large ghettos, the gendarmes of the 1st Battalion are responsible for the deaths of some seven thousand Jews. The site of their first crime was the huge village of Aleksandrów. Seventeen Poles, forty-one Jews and one Soviet soldier were then killed. Another important operation mentioned by the speaker was conducted in December 1942 in the Parczew forests. At least sev-

eral dozen shelters were located there, where Jews and fugitive Soviet prisoners of war were hiding. The Germans surrounded the area and fought for several days, during which several hundred people in hiding were killed. The operation was repeated in January 1943, resulting in the deaths of at least a few dozen people. In retaliation for aiding Jews and Soviet prisoners of war, the Germans also murdered ninety-eight Polish men from the village of Białka. After the war, Germany and Austria made several attempts to bring the battalion members to justice. As a result of the proceedings, which lasted many years each, only one of them was sentenced to death, and several were imprisoned. Most of the perpetrators of the crimes remained unpunished.

The conference was summarised by Dr. Sebastian Piątkowski. He observed that, despite extensive research and a plethora of publications, historians still have a lot of work ahead of them, especially as little is known about specific criminals and units that carried out pacification operations. A biographical dictionary, including the biographies of among others, the German captains and lieutenants who commanded in the various operations and sometimes also pulled the trigger, is severely lacking. Monographs about German police units sowing terror in the occupied Polish territory are needed as well. "It is worth delving into this subject," Piątkowski argued and added, "it is worth conducting research while being aware that queries will never be closed." The various aspects of the events discussed at the symposium should be continuously explored in order to pass on the memory of the crimes and their victims to future generations.

The symposium discussed the perpetrators of the Holocaust, functionaries of the German state, and their fates. Some of them such as Frank, Blum or Friedel did not evade punishment and others, Globocnik and Zimmerman, committed suicide. Most of the functionaries of the German Reich, however, who took part in various types of crimes, remained unpunished.