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The Hidden Polenaktion:

How Understudied the *Polenaktion* and its Causal Mechanisms Are

“Foreigners Police Ordinance of August 22, 1938 ” (Reichsgesetzblatt of August 25, 1938, Berlin), 281-282

The source was found in the digital archives (called Leo-BW) of the German state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. The website for the pdfs of the law is [here](#).

The Foreigners Police Ordinance of August 22, 1938 or *Ausländerpolizeiverordnung vom 22. August 1938* was a law passed by the Reichstag that primarily allowed the German Government to immediately evict any foreigners living in the Reich who had lost their citizenship in their home country. It was passed in response to the Polish Government passing a law that declared that all Polish citizens who were living abroad for more than five years could lose their citizenship on March 31, 1938. The Polish Government was worried that many Jewish Poles living abroad would emigrate back to Poland after Germany’s annexation of Austria on March 12-13, 1938. In early October the Polish Interior minister then announced that all Polish citizens living abroad had to get a special stamp on their passport from a Polish consulate by the end of October 1938 or they would lose their Polish citizenship. This stamp was not given to Jews so Poland was clearly signaling that it was planning to revoke the Jewish Poles living in Germany’s citizenship.¹ Poland did not want Jewish immigrants returning to Poland from the now greater Germany due to the global economic depression as well as prevailing antisemitism within Poland and its government. This created a problem for Germany, which at this point wanted to force all of its remaining Jewish population to emigrate out of the Reich, because if Poland were to revoke the citizenship of its Jewish citizens who were living abroad, then Germany would be stuck with tens of thousands of Jewish Poles, which it did not want. Because of this Germany passed the above-referenced law that allowed it to deport all of the Polish Jews if they were to lose their citizenship. Then right before the roughly 50,000 Jewish Poles living in the Reich were about to lose their citizenship on November 1, 1938 they were forcibly deported

¹ 1. “1938 Expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany,” Wikipedia, February 15, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1938_expulsion_of_Polish_Jews_from_Germany.

in an event that has come to be known as the *Polenaktion*.² They were sent in trainloads to three German-Polish border towns, Neu Bentschen (Zbaszyn), Beuthen (Bytom) and Konitz (Chojnice).

One thing that surprised me in compiling this annotated bibliography was how little has been published about the Polenaktion and one of the laws behind it. I have several ideas for why this is. One potential reason for this is that the Polenaktion has been vastly overshadowed by Kristallnacht in regards to how much scholarship has been done on both events. They are connected because Kristallnacht was indirectly caused by the Polenaktion due to the deportation of Herschel Grynszpan's family that motivated Herschel to murder Ernst vom Rath, a Nazi diplomat. Vom Rath's death was used by the Nazis as a justification to launch vast pogroms over Germany that have come to be known as Kristallnacht. The scale of Kristallnacht and how much more it is remembered in reference to the Holocaust has led more historians to focus on Kristallnacht, and thus not as much work has been published about the Polenaktion, which actually caused Kristallnacht. On a side note it was encouraging to see that a lot of contemporary scholarship is being written about the Polenaktion as it seems like an event that has been understudied in the field of Holocaust studies. The other reason that I think that my source was not cited very much was that most of the work written about the Polenaktion has focused on the experiences of those who were forcibly deported from Germany, with many of the articles/books that I reviewed for this project mostly focusing on that. Additionally, the law I chose was one of several that preceded the Polenaktion and laid the groundwork for it to occur, but most historians tend to focus on the Nazi officials' decision to enact the Polenaktion and then how that was carried out rather than the law that allowed them to deport the Jewish Poles. Completing this project has been interesting because it has allowed me to see how certain things are emphasized while others are not when examining and writing about history.

² 1. Bonnie M. Harris, "The Polenaktion of October 28, 1938: Prelude to Kristallnacht and Pattern for Deportation," essay, in *Holocaust Persecution: Responses and Consequences* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 58-59.

Annotated Bibliography In Chronological Order

Eliahu Ben Elissar, *La diplomatie du Reich et les Juifs*. [Paris] 1969, p. 303.

I do not have access to this but it was frequently cited by Trude Maurer who was one of the few citers of my law.

Meltzer, Emanuel . “Relations between Poland and Germany and Their Impact on the Jewish Problem in Poland (1935-1938).” In *Yad Vashem Studies Volume XII*, edited by Livia Rothkirchen, 193–230. Israel: Ahva Co-op, 1977.

Meltzer does not reference the law but provides important early scholarship about the Polenaktion by giving more information about the event from the Polish perspective. Meltzer provides interesting information regarding the law that Poland passed to enable them to revoke the citizenship of their citizens living abroad as well as what the Germans officials' reactions were to that law. He does unfortunately skip over the Foreigners Police Ordinance, but nevertheless it provides good context on the origins of the Polenaktion.

Milton, Sybil . “The Expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany October 1938 to July 1939: A Documentation.” *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 29, no. 1 (January 1984): 169–99.

I do not have access to this but it is cited by many other works I have examined.

Maurer, Trude. “Die Ausweisung der Polnischen Juden und der Vorwand für die Kristallnacht.” Essay. In: H.J. Pehle (ed.), *Der Judenpogrom 1938: Von Der Reichskristallnacht Zum Völkermord*, 60. Frankfurt, Germany: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988.

The first source that cites the law that I am interested in was written by Trude Maurer, a historian at the University of Göttingen who studied “Eastern European Jews in the German Empire”. She

passed away in 2017 at the age of 61.³ She was also among the first wave of people to have published anything academic about the Polenaktion, along with Sybil Milton and Jerzy Tomaszewski. She focused on the experiences of the people in the refugee camp at Zbąszyń, which fits with most of the scholarship regarding the Polenaktion.

Harris, Bonnie M. "The *Polenaktion* of October 28, 1938: Prelude to *Kristallnacht* and Pattern for Deportation." Essay. In *Holocaust Persecution: Responses and Consequences*, 59. Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

Here Harris cites Trude Maurer and briefly mentions the law that I chose as my source, but in her article does not devote much time to discussing the law, in fact she only devotes two sentences to it. She, like much of the other published work (such as Trude Maurer's), focuses on the experiences of those being deported from the Reich and more specifically the story of Joseph Cysner.

Fiedler, Roman. "§ 13 Ausländerpolizeiverordnung von 1938 und § 47 Ausländergesetz von 1965. Eine Vergleichende Untersuchung." GRIN, October 19, 2020.
<https://www.grin.com/document/945569>.

This is an interesting source that is a comparative case study of two laws affecting foreigners in Germany, this one and a West German one from 1965, apparently written by a German law student. There is a small section dedicated to the Polenaktion but it is relatively insignificant compared to the rest of the article.

Deutsch, Laura. "Stateless: When Germany Deported Thousands of Polish Jews in 1938." aish.com, October 2, 2018.
<https://aish.com/stateless-when-germany-deported-thousands-of-polish-jews-in-1938/>.

Deutsch explores the Polenaktion through the experiences of her relative Avram who was one of the 17,00 Jewish Poles evicted from Germany in the Polenaktion. After Avram was deported he lived in the refugee camp in Zbaszyn before moving back to live with his mother in Poland whom he had left in search of a better life in Germany. After Germany's invasion of Poland

³Wikipedia contributors, "Trude Maurer." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trude_Maurer. (Accessed February 24, 2024)

Avram, his wife, children and mother were all executed by one of the Einsatzgruppen. This story illustrates the sheer desperation of many of the people who were deported in the Polenaktion as well as portraying what happened to them after Germany took control of Poland. However it does not mention this law.

Jewish Historical Institute. "POLENAKTION! / October, 1938. The Story of the Expellees from Germany," August 29, 2019.

<https://www.jhi.pl/en/exhibitions/polenaktion-october1938-the-story-of-the-expellees-from-germany,80>.

This website promotes an exhibit that focuses on the experiences on the stories of six families affected by the Polenaktionen whose stories were collected by Emanuel Ringelblum who was working with the Jewish Aid organization JOINT, which was one of the organizations providing aid to the roughly 8,000 refugees in Zbaszyn. Interestingly, this article focuses on the events of the Polenaktion through the Polish perspective which provides new insights such as how "On 31 March 1938, the Polish Sejm, expecting mass returns of Polish Jews living in Germany to their homeland, passed the deprivation of citizenship law". This law served as a precursor to the law that I focused on. This inclusion is a vital finding because it helps explain the reasoning behind the Foreigners Police Ordinance.

Jewish Museum Berlin. "Polenaktion ('Polish Action,' 1938)," Accessed March 14, 2024.

<https://www.jmberlin.de/en/topic-polenaktion-1938>.

This website provides an introduction to the specific archival collection of the Jewish Museum of Berlin that covers documents related to the Polenaktion. The website contains a short summary of the background behind the Polenaktion, a more detailed description of how the Polenaktion was undertaken by German police, and what the consequences of the forced deportations were on those being deported. It also contains a scan of a deportation notice given to someone named Meilech Wolkenfeld on October 28, 1938 that was given to him as he was arrested and subsequently deported to the Polish border. There is no specific reference to the Foreigners Police Ordinance of August 22, 1938, but this source provides good information about the Polenaktion.

The Holocaust Explained. "The Polenaktion – the Holocaust Explained." Accessed March 14, 2024.

<https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/life-in-nazi-occupied-europe/oppresion/the-pole-naktion/>.

The Holocaust Explained is a website managed by the Wiener Holocaust library. The website's goal is to be used as a curriculum for schools to educate about the Holocaust. The Polenaktion is briefly written about with the website covering a small amount of background information as well as how the deportations were implemented. The website mentions how the remaining Jewish Poles who had not been deported in the Polenaktion were deported in smaller groups shortly after October 27-28, 1938. Lastly, this article contains a brief mention of how the Polenaktion helped to kickstart the Kindertransport program in Great Britain through help of Jewish aid organizations who were providing aid at the refugee camp in Zbaszyn. However it does not mention the Foreigners Police Ordinance of August 22, 1938.