

JACEK KORDEL

j.kordel@bn.org.pl

National Library of Poland, Institute of Books and Readership

ORCID 0000-0003-2334-292X

THE DECIMATION OF POLISH LIBRARIES IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

DOI: 10.36155/PLib.10.00001

ABSTRACT

The fate of Polish libraries and book collections over the centuries is intricately linked with the history of the Polish nation and the Polish state. Following the failed Kościuszko Uprising, on the eve of Poland's third partition and the collapse of Polish statehood, the Russian Empress Catherine II decided to close down the Załuski Library of the Republic (*Biblioteka Rzeczypospolitej Załuskich zwana*), the first Polish national library and one of the largest and grandest libraries of eighteenth-century Europe, and move its collection to St Petersburg, where it formed the basis of the National Library of Russia. If anything, this was an augur of things to come. The destruction suffered by the Polish nation and the Polish state during the Second World War did not spare many Polish libraries, whose collections were to a great degree destroyed by shelling and bombing, and also the target of deliberate destruction. The libraries that suffered the most were those located in Warsaw, the centre of academic and cultural life in pre-Second World War Poland. The ashes of manuscripts and early printed books burnt by Nazi soldiers in the Library of the Krasieński Family Entail (*Biblioteka Ordynacji Krasieńskich*) in autumn 1944, contained in an urn which today stands inside the Palace of the Polish Republic, are a potent symbol of the tragic fate suffered by Polish libraries in general.

KEYWORDS: Second World War, cultural policy of the Third Reich, occupation of Poland by Germany, losses to Polish cultural heritage in the Second World War, libraries in the Second World War, libricide, bibliocide

THE SEPTEMBER CAMPAIGN

Already in 1939, Warsaw suffered the biggest losses of any of the country's major cities. The first German bombs fell on the capital on September 1, and between September 8 and 27 the Wehrmacht conducted artillery shelling with varying levels of intensity. Before the outbreak of the war, parts of the most valuable library collections had already been hidden in safe locations. Thus, over 20 manuscripts from the treasury of the National Library of Poland (*Biblioteka Narodowa*), including the Old Annals of the Holy Cross, the Saint Florian Psalter, the Holy Cross Sermons, the Chronicles of Gallus Anonymus and Wincenty Kadłubek, and a collection of Chopin manuscripts had been removed from the Library in the first days of August. On September 6, 1939 all these materials, together with the treasuries of the National Development Bank (*Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego*) and the Polish National Bank were evacuated from Warsaw. They found shelter in Canada, from where they were recovered at the end of the Second World War.¹

In the course of the September campaign, many libraries were destroyed by German troops and numerous library buildings suffered substantial damage. Bombing of the Central Military Library (*Centralna Biblioteka Wojskowa*), located within the complex of the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces, commenced in the first days of the war. On September 24 the Library building was burnt to the ground and its 400,000-volume collection consumed by the

1 For an overview of the efforts made to save the most valuable items of written heritage, see Andrzej Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy w latach 1939–1945*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 45–53. Mężyński considers the actions taken by the state authorities and librarians to be greatly lacking. Further research is required into the plans that were made to secure cultural goods in the event of armed conflict and their evacuation during the September campaign, not just with reference to Warsaw but also to other Polish cities.

flames. The most valuable historical items in the collection, which came from the Rapperswil Library and included early printed books and manuscripts, had been removed from the Library on the eve of the fire; however, they were destroyed during the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising.²

The Library of the Zamoyski Family Entail (*Biblioteka Ordynacji Zamojskiej*), one of the oldest and most extensive Polish family-owned libraries, stretching back to the second half of the sixteenth century, was also subjected to repeated bombing. It boasted illuminated manuscripts, incunabula, early printed books and historic cartographic, iconographic and numismatic items. The hail of bullets which shelled the Library building on September 25 damaged about 50,000 volumes, almost a third of the Entail's collection. A large number of manuscripts and printed materials that survived the Nazi occupation were eventually burnt by German soldiers on September 8, 1944 with only individual items in the collection surviving the war.³

On September 25 the Przędziecki Palace, which housed the Library of the Przędziecki Family Entail (*Biblioteka Ordynacji Przędzieckich*), was also reduced to dust, along with the majority of the valuable books in its collection, which contained over 60,000 volumes, 500 manuscripts, almost 800 parchment documents, more than 350 historic cartographic items and nearly 10,000 prints and drawings. A minor part of the collection which was rescued

- 2 See Grzegorz Nowik, 'Skarby (po wielokroć) utracone. Ratowanie zbiorów Centralnej Biblioteki Wojskowej podczas II wojny światowej i po wojnie' *Studia i Materiały Centralnej Biblioteki Wojskowej im. Marszałka Józefa Piłsudskiego*, 1 (2019), 10, pp. 9-18.
- 3 Konrad Ajewski, a researcher into the Zamoyski Family Entail, writes as follows: 'The life of the wonderful tradition of collecting, dating back to the Renaissance [...] in the Zamoyski family [...], embodied in the Library and Museum of the Zamoyski Family Entail, was violently interrupted by the Nazi invaders in September 1939'. For details of archival, library and museum items in the Zamoyski Family Entail, see Konrad Ajewski, *Zbiory artystyczne i galeria muzealne Ordynacji Zamojskiej w Warszawie*, Kozłówka 1997 (quotation on p. 257). See also Bohdan Horodyski, *Biblioteka Ordynacji Zamojskiej w latach wojny*, ed. Hanna Łaskarzewska, Warszawa 2005.

from the destroyed building was later burnt by German soldiers in September 1944.⁴

Nor did the ravages of war spare the other large Warsaw libraries. The Potocki Palace, which stored the National Library manuscripts, was also damaged as was the building of the Library of the Krasiński Family Entail,⁵ university buildings housing the collections of the University of Warsaw Library (*Biblioteka Uniwersytecka w Warszawie*) and the libraries of the University's individual faculties and departments.⁶ Fortunately, in the case of the faculties and departments, the losses were not significant. Fires caused by bombing and large-scale shelling also devastated public, educational, school and parish libraries. For example, the entire Library of the Free Polish University (*Wolna Wszechnica Polska*), comprising over 100,000 volumes, went up in flames and almost 20 percent of the branches of the Warsaw Public Library were destroyed.⁷

-
- 4 See: Konrad Ajewski, 'O trzech bibliotekach ordynackich w Warszawie w 60. Rocznicę ich zniszczenia', *Muzealnictwo*, 2004, 45, pp. 9-18; Patryk Sapała, 'Biblioteka Przędzieckich i jej zbiory', *Rocznik Biblioteki Narodowej*, 2011, 42, pp. 273-318.
 - 5 For more on the history of the Library of the Krasiński Family Entail during the Second World War, see Konrad Ajewski, *Zbiory artystyczne Biblioteki i Muzeum Ordynacji Krasińskich w Warszawie*, Warszawa 2004, pp. 241-271.
 - 6 For more on the history of the University of Warsaw Library during the Second World War, see: Wanda Sokołowska, *Dzieje Biblioteki Uniwersyteckiej w Warszawie*, Warszawa 1959; Helena Kozerska, *Straty w zbiorze rękopisów Biblioteki Uniwersyteckiej w Warszawie w czasie I i II wojny światowej*, Warszawa 1960; Stanisława Sawicka, Teresa Sulerzyska, *Straty w rysunkach z Gabinetu Rycin Biblioteki Uniwersyteckiej, 1939-1945*, Warszawa 1960. Further research is required into the losses suffered by the libraries of the various faculties, institutes, departments and so on within these institutions, not only during the Warsaw Uprising but also after it was put down.
 - 7 For more on the losses suffered by Polish libraries within Poland's 1945 borders, see: *Straty bibliotek w czasie II wojny światowej w granicach Polski z 1945 roku. Wstępny raport o stanie wiedzy*, ed. Andrzej Mężyński, Warszawa 1994 (general principles of the German policy on Polish libraries, pp. 13-116; lists of losses, pp. 143-424); *Informator o stratach bibliotek i księgozbiorów domowych na terytoriach polskich okupowanych w latach 1939-1945 (bez ziem wschodnich)*, ed. Barbara Bieńskowska, Poznań 2000. An invaluable report was published in 1944 by the Polish government in London: *Cultural losses of Poland. Index of Polish cultural losses during the German occupation, 1939-1944*, ed. Karol Estreicher, London 1944 (also published in Polish as *Straty kultury polskiej pod okupacją niemiecką 1939-1944 wraz z oryginalnymi dokumentami grabieży*, Kraków 2003). See also: *Straty kulturalne Warszawy*, vol. 1, ed. Władysław Tomkiewicz, Warszawa 1948; *Straty bibliotek i archiwów warszawskich w zakresie rękopiśmiennych źródeł historycznych*, vol. 3: Biblioteki, ed. Piotr Bańkowski, Warszawa 1955.

NAZI POLICY IN OCCUPIED POLAND

Following the September 1939 defeat, the Nazis soon installed a strict regime in the occupied territories. In the regions incorporated into the Reich – Silesia, Pomerania, Greater Poland, the Suwałki Region, the Łódź Region and part of Mazovia – it was the residents that suffered the most; all these areas were to be quickly Germanised. Almost a million Poles went into exile. Tens of thousands of members of the intellectual, cultural and social elite were murdered in the Stutthof Concentration Camp, the Piaśnica Forest and other places of mass execution, the Nazis following meticulously drawn up lists of the individuals to be murdered. Almost all Polish schools and cultural institutions were closed down.⁸ Albert Forster, Gauleiter of the Gdansk-Western Prussia District, declared on the first days of November 1939 that ‘in five years from now we will not hear a single Polish word spoken in Toruń.’⁹

Following the maxim coined by Hitler in 1935 that ‘No nation lives longer than the material testimony to its culture’,¹⁰ which appears on a plaque affixed to the House of Art (*Haus der Kunst*) in Munich, the Nazis launched a systematic process of destroying Polish libraries. In Greater Poland in late autumn 1939 the occupiers ordered the confiscation of libraries belonging to state, local government, church and social institutions, in addition to private book collections. Many publications were pulped; such was the fate, for example, of the collections of over 360 libraries belonging to the Polish People’s Libraries Society (*Towarzystwo Czytelni Ludowych*). Volumes which were not destroyed ended up in the Poznań state and university libraries – these libraries catered for Germans and were therefore being extended.

8 See, for example: Janusz Deresiewicz, *Okupacja niemiecka na ziemiach polskich włączonych do Rzeszy, 1939–1945*, Poznań 1950; Ludwik Gomolec, Stanisław Kubiak, *Terror hitlerowski w Wielkopolsce 1939–1945*, Poznań 1962.

9 ‘[...] dass man in fünf Jahren hier kein polnisches Wort mehr hören wird!’ *Thorner Freiheit*, Toruń, 39, November 3, 1939, p. 1.

10 See Hitler’s speech on culture addressed to the NSDAP Congress in 1935, in: *Reden zur Kunst- und Kulturpolitik, 1933–1939*, ed. Robert Eikmeyer, Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 90.

Lack of storage space forced the Nazis to create makeshift repositories, where over two million volumes found temporary shelter. At least one million were destroyed during the course of the war. Among the collections irrevocably lost was the collection of the Poznań Archdiocese Library, boasting over 150,000 volumes, including almost 1,000 incunabula. Almost 90 percent of this was destroyed during the Allied bombing in May 1944. Poznań's libraries suffered further still in the battles to take the city in January and February 1945. While withdrawing from the city, the Germans burned down numerous public buildings, destroying the Raczyński Library, the City Library and the book collection of the State Archives, which contained over 100,000 printed works.¹¹

The persecutions of civilians also affected the residents of other territories occupied by the Nazis and included in the General Government in October 1939.¹² As in the territories incorporated directly into the Reich, the occupation authorities planned first to rid themselves of the government and social elites. In autumn 1939, professors from many Polish universities were arrested. In perhaps the best-known example, in the course of the Sonderaktion Krakau of November 6, 1939 no less than 184 professors of the Jagiellonian University and Mining Academy were taken to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. In spring 1940 an extraordinary pacification action ('AB action') was launched, which led to the murder of several thousand individuals, symbolised by the mass execution site at Palmiry near Warsaw. Similarly, after Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union on the night of July 2, 1941, almost 50 academics from Lwów were executed at the Wuleckie HillsLwów.¹³

11 See: Jan Baumgart, 'Biblioteki wielkopolskie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej (1939-1945)', in Jan Baumgart, *Bibliotekarstwo, biblioteki i bibliotekarze. Wybór prac*, Warszawa 1983, pp. 113-169; Kazimierz Kaczmarczyk, 'Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu w czasie okupacji niemieckiej', *Archeion*, 1948, 17, pp. 84-100.

12 See: Czesław Łuczak, *Polska i Polacy w drugiej wojnie światowej*, (Polska. Dzieje narodu, państwa i kultury, 5), Poznań 1993, pp. 89-506; Czesław Madajczyk, *Polityka III Rzeszy w okupowanej Polsce*, vols. 1-2, 2nd edition, Warszawa 2019.

13 See Maria Wardzyńska, *Był rok 1939. Operacja niemieckiej policji bezpieczeństwa w Polsce Intelligenzaktion*, Warszawa 2009.

Gradually, Nazi cultural policy took shape.¹⁴ All universities, higher education institutions and secondary schools were banned, with only primary schools and vocational schools permitted to operate, to a limited degree.¹⁵ Already in late October 1939 Ernst Otto Fick, a fervent exponent of Nazi ideology, threatened a total ban on cultural activity by Poles. In compliance with Nazi regulations, from January 1940 German administrative bodies were not permitted to support any cultural life except ‘primitive entertainment’. In November 1939 an order was issued to confiscate the assets of the former Polish state; in January 1940 this was extended to private assets. In December 1939 the authorities issued an order enabling the confiscation of art works. This also obliged owners to declare any historical objects in their possession dating from before 1850, including manuscripts, printed materials and so on.¹⁶ In May 1940 the decision was made to withdraw ‘all anti-German, harmful or undesirable materials’ from bookshops and libraries. This included works by Mickiewicz, Sienkiewicz, Zofia Kossak-Szczucka and Melchior Wańkowicz.¹⁷

SYSTEMATIC LOOTING OF CULTURAL GOODS

Before the General Government’s scope of competence fully crystallised and legislation was properly enacted, the territories of the Polish state occupied by Nazi troops was a battlefield for influence by the various institutions representing the military, the police and the Nazi party. This affected the operations of cultural insti-

14 For more on German cultural policy in the General Government, see: Piotr Majewski, *Wojna i kultura. Instytucje kultury polskiej w okupacyjnych realiach Generalnego Gubernatorstwa 1939–1945*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 71–98; Czesław Madajczyk, ‘Trzecia Rzesza i życie kulturalne na terytoriach przez nią okupowanych’ in: *Inter arma non silent Musae. Wojna i kultura, 1939–1945*, ed. Czesław Madajczyk, Warszawa 1982, pp. 177–207; Karol Jonca, ‘Założenia hitlerowskiej polityki kulturalnej (i ich realizacje w stosunku do Polaków)’, *ibidem*, pp. 239–247.

15 See: Czesław Madajczyk, *Polityka III Rzeszy*, vol. 2, pp. 337–362; Eugeniusz C. Król, *Polityka hitlerowska wobec szkolnictwa polskiego na terenie Generalnej Guberni (1939–1945)*, Warszawa 1979.

16 See Piotr Majewski, *Wojna i kultura*, pp. 80, 91–97.

17 See *Liste des deutschfeindlichen, schädlichen und unerwünschten polnischen Schrifttums*, drawn up by the Department of People’s Education and Propaganda of the Office of the General Governor, published by Kraków Buchverlag Ost: No. 1, April 1940; No. 2, October 1940; No. 3, March 1942; supplement to No. 3, December 1943.

tutions, including libraries, which were subject to looting. A team of archaeologists operated in the General Government on behalf of the Reich Security Main Office, headed by Peter Paulsen, Professor of the University of Berlin. Although the original purpose of the *Kommando Paulsen* was to secure archaeological sites and confiscate prehistoric items, in October 1939 its members were assigned the task of seizing 'all cultural assets in Poland if they have any worth or relevance for Germanic or German affairs'. As justly observed by Andrzej Mężyński, in practice Paulsen's team 'turned into a group taking out of Poland anything they considered valuable'. It was this unit that was responsible among other things for removing the Veit Stoss high altar from the Church of St Mary in Kraków.

The Reich Security Main Office was also interested in libraries. Initially, they focused on collections of political books - mainly Marxist collections, but also Jewish and Masonic collections. Among other things, Paulsen seized and sent to Berlin the Library of the Sejm and Senate, boasting over 80,000 volumes, the collections of the French, Danish and Hungarian Institutes, the Library of the Linguistics Seminar of the Indo-European Institute of the University of Warsaw, and parts of the collections amassed in the libraries of the State Archaeological Museum, the Polish Institute of Foreign Cooperation and the Ukrainian Scientific Institute. Some 40,000 volumes were sent to Germany from the Main Judaic Library, the largest Jewish library in Warsaw. Of the collections in Kraków, Paulsen seized the more than 10,000-volume library of the School of Political Sciences at the Faculty of Law of the Jagiellonian University. He also planned to seize valuable illuminated manuscripts from the collection of the Library of the Zamoycki Family Entail, although ultimately he only managed to send the *Codex Suprasliensis* to Berlin, an Old Church Slavonic manuscript dating from the eleventh century. In total, the Kommando Paulsen removed at least 160,000 books from Poland; with a few exceptions, these works have never been returned to Poland.¹⁸

18 See: Andrzej Mężyński, *Kommando Paulsen, październik-grudzień 1939*, Warszawa 1939 (also published in *German as Kommando Paulsen. Organisierter Kustraub in Polen*, Köln 2000); Andrzej Mężyński 'Okupacyjne dzieje księgozbioru Biblioteki Sejmowej' *Przegląd Sejmowy*, 1994, 2, 4 (8), pp. 188-200.

The looting of cultural goods was also the domain of the Austrian art historian Kajetan Mühlmann, who enjoyed the trust of Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring. In November 1939, Mühlmann was appointed Special Delegate for the Securing of Artistic Treasures in the Former Polish Territories. The Mühlmann Commission, as it was known, was predominantly interested in museum collections; however, they also plundered libraries. From the collection of the University of Warsaw Library, about 600 drawings, six volumes of maps, 18 albums and almost 16,500 prints, including works by Albrecht Dürer and a set of prints from the library of Stanislaus II August, were relocated to Kraków. From the National Library of Poland, the Commission confiscated 410 parchment manuscripts. The Commission also intended to loot the Library's incunabula, comprising over 2,000 items; ultimately, however, these remained in Warsaw. In addition, 21 illuminated manuscripts were stolen from the Library of the Zamoyski Family Entail and an unknown number of items confiscated from the Library of the Krasiński Family Entail - the precise number is unknown as the entire collection was later destroyed.¹⁹

LIBRARIES DURING THE OCCUPATION

In the first months of the Nazi occupation, Polish librarians attempted to adjust to the new situation. The largest libraries, including the National Library of Poland and the University of Warsaw Library, together with the book collections of their faculties and professorial chairs, were closed to readers and the number of librarians' jobs was significantly reduced. Librarians were faced

19 See Andrzej Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, pp. 85-91. According to Mężyński and his colleagues, Mühlmann's goal was to 'draw up an inventory of all the valuable art works in the territory of the General Government and move the majority of them to Kraków' (ibidem, p. 85). Mühlmann himself, when interrogated by American troops at the end of the war, admitted that 'art works were indeed confiscated'. He added that he was aware that if 'Germany were to win, [the confiscated works] would not stay in Poland, but would be used to complement German art collections' - quoted in 'Z zeznań Kajetana Mühlmanna w sprawie grabieży dzieł sztuki' in: *Walka o dobra kultury*, vol. 2, p. 437. The activities of the Mühlmann' Commission deserve a separate study.

with the task of estimating the losses, putting the collections in order and carrying out makeshift repairs to damaged buildings. Part of the collections of the Library of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences was relocated by the Germans to the Agronomic Institute in Puławy. The library of the Warsaw University of Technology operated to a limited extent for the use of the *Höhere Technische Fachschule* which the Nazi authorities had opened in Warsaw. The collections of other high education institutions also suffered damage, namely those of the School of Political Sciences, the Military Engineering School, the Higher School of Journalism and the War College.²⁰

The Nazi authorities destroyed school libraries with particular rigour. It is estimated that these libraries lost 92 percent of their collections during the war.²¹ Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa writes as follows:

Poland... was to become a reservoir of ignorant labour, so a book or any instrument of education or science was useless - and cultural items were considered almost harmful. Therefore school and other

- 20 See Andrzej Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, pp. 100-121. For more on the Nazi policy on libraries (in particular academic libraries, without taking into account the fundamental principles of the Berlin government towards Poland see: Manfred Komorowski, 'Die wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken im Generalgouvernement Polen (1940-1945)' *Bibliothek - Forschung und Praxis*, 1983, 7, 1, pp. 69-75; Jan Pirożyński, Krystyna Ruszajowa, „Die nationalsozialistische Bibliothekspolitik in Polen während des Zweiten Weltkrieges“, in: *Bibliotheken während des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Peter Vodosek, Manfred Komorowski, vol. 1, Wiesbaden 1989, pp. 199-222. A study by Helena Gregor, *Die nationalsozialistische Bibliothekspolitik in den annektierten und besetzten Gebieten 1938 bis 1945*, Berlin 1978 (see pp. 35-45 on libraries in Polish territories) reproduces the policies formulated during the war in the bibliological journals *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen* and *Zeitschrift der Reichsstelle für volkstümliches Büchereiwesen*.
- 21 It is hard to accept Andrzej Mężyński's statement that: 'In Bezug auf die Sammlungen der öffentlichen Büchereien und Schulbibliotheken konnte hingegen von planmäßiger Politik keine Rede sein' [„With regard to the collections of public and school libraries, on the other hand, there could be no question of a planned policy’] - in Andrzej Mężyński, 'Polnische Bibliotheken in den Jahren 1939 bis 1945', in: *Bibliotheken in der NS-Zeit. Provenienzforschung und Bibliotheksgeschichte*, ed. Stefan Alker et al., Wien 2008, p. 295. The closure of schools, and with them school libraries, indicates that the Third Reich methodically implemented its cultural policies in Poland. The policy of the German authorities towards public and school libraries is an important area for further research, as is the Nazis' creation of a network of German public libraries.'

educational libraries were ruthlessly burned down or flooded, or their collections pulped.²²

Parts of some collections, however, were saved and secured in the National Library of Poland building. This action was approved by the German authorities. Many librarians, including Adam Lewak, the pre-war Director of the University of Warsaw Library, suspected that this was because the Nazi administration actually wanted to concentrate larger book collections in one place so that they could later relocate them to the Reich or sell them off. The National Library also became home to book collections belonging to different bodies, such as the over 30,000-volume library of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, the book collections of various societies, associations and publishing houses, and the collections of the Polish School Motherland and the Polish Academy of Literature. It is estimated that the stores of the National Library of Poland became home to over 200,000 books and magazines.²³ The Public Library of Warsaw, together with most of its branches, did not stop operating until November 1942.²⁴

In June 1940, in line with similar rules applied to archival facilities, the General Governor established the Central Administra-

22 Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, 'Ochrona zbiorów Biblioteki Narodowej' in: *Walka o dobra kultury*. Warszawa, 1939–1945, ed. Stanisław Lorentz, vol. 1, Warszawa 1970, p. 194.

23 Andrzej Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, pp. 101–112. Mężyński took issue with the views of Polish librarians. He was of the opinion that 'the ethos of a German librarian' would not permit the destruction of printed materials seized from school libraries and amassed in the building of the National Library - see *ibidem*, p. 110. In fact, public and school libraries did not report to the Central Administration for Libraries but to the Department of People's Education and Propaganda. Mężyński also fails to take into account the fact that the very closure of libraries, which deprived readers of access to books, was a loss in itself. Moreover, it should be remembered that only a fraction of the school book collections and other collections, access to which was prevented by the Nazi authorities, escaped destruction. By contrast, Mężyński saw the relocation of collections from libraries that had been dissolved to the National Library and other libraries as a rescue operation: '[...] to a reader, confused by the situation [...] it must have sounded terrifying; yet another robbery. In fact, it was a rescue' (*ibidem*, p. 69).

24 See: Ryszard Przelaskowski, 'Wspomnienia o pracy w Bibliotece Publicznej m. st. Warszawy w okresie drugiej wojny światowej' in: *Walka o dobra kultury*, vol. 1, pp. 368–397; Elżbieta Skierkowska, *Warszawska Biblioteka Publiczna na tle wydarzeń ostatniej wojny (1939–1945)*, *ibidem*, pp. 398–422.

tion for Libraries headed by Gustav Abb, Director of the University Library in Berlin. Abb created a network of state libraries (*Staatsbibliotheken*) consisting of branches in Warsaw, Kraków, Lublin and – following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union – Lwów.²⁵ According to Abb, state libraries were to become ‘places for nurturing German science in the General Government [...] and providing it with appropriate published materials’. This, he continued, was why ‘German librarians not only took over Polish libraries, secured them and rearranged them,’ but also ‘built them up into German state libraries by acquiring German scientific literature, thanks to major funding’.²⁶ In Warsaw a state library was created with branches at the University of Warsaw Library (Branch One) and the National Library of Poland (Branch Two). After the death of Edward Krasieński in the Dachau concentration camp in December 1940, the Library of the Krasieński Family Entail was also incorporated into the state library system.²⁷ These undertakings were criticised by the Polish press in exile. For example, *Dziennik Polski*, which was published in London, wrote as follows: ‘The goal of all this reorganisation... is undoubtedly a new looting of Polish cultural goods, this time conducted by professional German librarians’.²⁸

The general running of the Warsaw state library was assigned to Wilhelm Witte, an employee of the Wrocław University Library. Day-to-day operations were to be supervised by ‘persons of trust’, namely Adam Lewak in Branch One and Józef Grycz in Branch Two. The collection of the *Staatsbibliothek Warschau*, similar to that of its sister institutions, was extended to include German litera-

25 See Andrzej Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, pp. 123–161.

26 Ibidem, p. 135. The question of the relevance of the ‘ethos of a German librarian’ (see footnote 23) requires further investigation, including a systematic examination of the materials produced by German librarians – for example, those preserved in the archives of the Central Administration for Libraries at the Institute of National Remembrance and, in the case of documents produced by Wilhelm Witte, Head of the Warsaw State Library during the Nazi occupation, in the archives of the University of Warsaw Library.

27 See footnote 25.

28 ‘Grabież księgozbiorów polskich’, *Dziennik Polski*, Londyn, 105, November 11, 1940, p. 1.

ture. Attempts were made to standardise the way work was organised in line with the German model. Many projects failed, however, such as attempts to Germanise the subject catalogue. The number of readers in state libraries was limited as they were only open to German citizens and Poles working for German offices; the latter group could only use them for official purposes. Lwów.²⁹

In the spring of 1941 Wilhelm Witte ordered a thorough reorganisation of Warsaw's library collections.³⁰ The man behind this idea was Julian Pulikowski, who was born and raised in Germany and completed his doctoral studies in Austria. From 1934 onwards he was head of the Central Phonographic Archives. In Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa's judgment, 'he did not feel either instinctive or cultural reserve towards the Germans, unlike the rest of us'.³¹ The actions of Pulikowski, who died in the Warsaw Uprising, were generally assessed negatively by the community of librarians.³²

According to the planned reorganisation, the building of the Library of the Krasiński Family Entail on Okólnik Street, whose own collection amounted to over 700 parchment diplomas and just over 7,500 manuscripts, was to house special collections: manuscripts, incunabula, sixteenth-century printed materials and seventeenth and eighteenth-century Polonica. The following items were transported to the Library: almost 18,000 manuscripts from the National Library of Poland and nearly 4,000 manuscripts from the University of Warsaw Library. The building on Okólnik also received over

29 See Andrzej Mężżyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, pp. 123-161 and 209-233.

30 Polish librarians were particularly concerned about such moves. In July 1941, when preparing to meet Gustav Abb during his first visit to Warsaw, the employees of Warsaw libraries followed the guidelines proposed by Józef Grycz, which were to 'attempt to keep institutions whole, oppose the relocation of collections and try to ensure their inviolability', Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, *Ochrona zbiorów*, p. 200.

31 Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, *Ochrona zbiorów*, p. 198.

32 Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa describes Pulikowski as follows: '[...] a restless schemer of policeman-like' inclinations, he could be a real nuisance, ready to side with the German library authorities against his Polish colleagues'. At the same time she also states that he 'helped many colleagues and [...] represented the interests of the National Library and many other collections', *ibidem*, p. 198.

5,600 musical manuscripts and almost 13,000 theatre manuscripts. In total over 50,000 manuscripts were amassed there. To this should be added slightly under 34,000 historic cartographic items, mainly from the National Library, and almost 160,000 historic prints, drawings and photographs. The building also received the more than 2,000 incunabula and 50,000 early printed books (sixteenth-century publications and later Polonica) that made up the collection of the Załuski Library, recovered from Russia under the Treaty of Riga. Fortunately, as it later turned out, the early printed books from the University of Warsaw Library never reached Okólnik. Furthermore, foreign printed books from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, about 32,000 volumes, were transported to the University of Warsaw Library, along with more than 10,000 early printed books from the Library of the Krasiński Family Entail. These actions ceased in autumn 1941.³³

Warsaw's libraries also suffered to some degree from bombing by the Allies. In August and September 1942 Allied bombing destroyed the Library of the Ministry of Communication, which boasted about 27,000 volumes. In autumn 1942 steps were taken to secure the collections of various branches of the Warsaw *Staatsbibliothek*. A fireproof ceiling was installed over the storerooms of the University of Warsaw Library, while a small section of the collections kept in the Library of the Krasiński Family Entail was move to the cellars of the Library of the Zamoyski Family Entail. No more serious preparations were made at Okólnik other than relocating the collections to the cellars and lower floors. In July 1944 the possibility of transporting the most valuable historical items to the West was discussed. Gustav Abb, among others, favoured such a solution. However, this could not be implemented owing to the shortage of resources and limited technical capacity.³⁴

33 See Andrzej Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, pp. 163-182. The librarians participating in the reorganisation of the collection also discussed this matter, see: *Walka o dobra kultury*, vols. 1-2.

34 See Andrzej Mężyński, *Biblioteki Warszawy*, pp. 243-249.

THE WARSAW UPRISING (1944)

During the Warsaw Uprising, and after it was put down, Warsaw's library collections were decimated. On the first days of August 1944, as mentioned above, the Nazi troops set fire to the building of the Library of the Zamoyski Family Entail. During the Uprising, the Library of the Warsaw University of Technology was burnt to the ground. In late August, miraculously, the blowing up of the National Library of Poland was aborted. Several days later SS-Obersturmführer Moritz Arnhardt, acting on behalf of SS General Hermann Fegelein, as part of his task of 'securing Warsaw's cultural goods' from the National Library, transported out of the country 50 crates of valuable printed books and other historical written materials from the Wilanów Library (*Biblioteka Wilanowska*), over 200 crates with the collections of the University of Warsaw Library and an unknown number of German manuscripts from the Library of the Krasieński Family Entail. Having reached Austria, they were deposited at Fischhorn Castle. Józef Grycz saw Arnhardt's action as offering some hope for these historical items: 'Our policy was to release the greatest number possible of objects, since we thought it was better to have them returned afterwards than to put them at risk of being burnt, which was a risk we constantly faced'. And, indeed, the majority of the items taken by the SS were recovered by Poland soon after the war.³⁵

On September 4, German bombs fell on the building of the Library of the Krasieński Family Entail, setting several floors on fire. While trying to put out the conflagration and so save the building, the librarians threw books rescued from the blaze into the courtyard. In the fire the upper floors of the building were destroyed, but the lower floor and the cellars, where the most valuable items were kept, survived. On September 6 the building was seized by Nazi troops. Polish librarians returned to Okólnik only several weeks later. On October 14 they could see for themselves that the

35 See *ibidem*, pp. 249-260.

basement of the Library was still smouldering.³⁶ They were not able to examine the charred remains until November. Theatre historian and translator Bohdan Korzeniowski wrote as follows:

The descent to the basement was not blocked with rubble. I thus reached the cellar. At first glance I felt an overwhelming sense of joy. I wanted to cry out, 'the collection has survived!' It lay there in various thick layers. What struck me was that there was some kind of order - we had not left it like that when camouflaging the entrance to the shelter. There were no metal sheets, no sandbags. Also striking was the fact that the layers appeared to be much lower now. The volumes no longer touched the vaulted ceiling as they had done when we put them there. Closer inspection revealed the reason for this change. It was hideous. Touch a layer of the evenly arranged copies and they didn't fall apart - they vanished! The collection had been completely consumed by the fire, which must have devoured them slowly over many days. It wasn't hard to guess how they were destroyed, either. [...] They had pulled the books on the top out from under the ceiling, poured petrol on them and set them on fire. Even with a foot on their throats, they continued to carry out the sentence of extermination that they had imposed on their neighbouring country. Besides being capable of genocide, they were also capable of libricide.³⁷

Korzeniowski was accompanied by Tadeusz Makowiecki, a literary critic and historian of art and literature, who wrote in his memoirs as follows:

Silence. All the windows of the storeroom black and empty (but we know that the Library survived the Uprising). We descend (our shoes sticking in the ashes) to the huge cellars. They must have each been set fire to separately, systematically. This was where the greatest treasures were collected: manuscripts, early printed books, drawings, engravings, musical manuscripts, maps, the Załuski Library [the first Polish National Library, the largest in Europe in the eighteenth

36 See footnote 5. See also *Droga do Okólnika. W sto sześćdziesiątą rocznicę powstania Biblioteki Ordynacji Krasieńskich i w sześćdziesiątą spalenia gmachu BOK na Okólniku*, ed. Hanna Tchórzewska-Kabata, Warszawa 2005, especially the paper by Hanna Łaskarzewska, 'Straty Okólnika w czasie powstania warszawskiego i po jego upadku', *ibidem*, pp. 149-181.

37 Bohdan Korzeniowski, 'Książki' in: *Walka o dobra kultury*, vol. 2, p. 293.

century], the collection of Stanisław II Augustus, the remnants of the Rapperswil Collection, the Krasiński archives, the treasures of all the Warsaw libraries. Nothing. Nothing left of the more than 100,000 manuscripts, never made use of, never printed, now never to be printed. From gold-illuminated fifteenth-century miniatures to priceless Polish *silva rerum* and unknown letters by Żeromski, Reymont, Berent. Nothing. Again helplessness - like one felt at the cruel reports of loved ones lost. Powerless, we drag ourselves along the dark corridors of the cellars. In the deepest room, the large boiler room, there are maybe as many as a hundred wooden crates, quite empty (ready for evacuating the collections). They were the only thing the Germans didn't set fire to. Why would they? We stand there, lighting up the vaulted cavern with a few candles. Finally, we take the empty crates, two each - they will be useful in other libraries - and slowly move on. Stumbling across the rubble, passing through the mountains of bricks to the level of the first floor, we walk across the street in silence, a cortège bearing ten long wooden crates - empty, not even with ashes in them.³⁸

The destruction of the building of the Library of the Krasiński Family Entail was carried out by the Nazi authorities contrary to the provisions of the *Treaty to Cease Hostilities in Warsaw* signed on the night of October 2 and early morning of October 3 in Ożarów. Article 10 of the Treaty contained a commitment by the German side to enable 'the evacuation of objects of artistic, cultural and ecclesiastical worth'. The soldiers of the *Brandkommando*, a Wehrmacht unit specialising in the systematic destruction and burning down of Warsaw, set the surviving floors and cellars of the Library on fire.

The Library suffered the same destiny as other Warsaw cultural institutions. On the first days of September 1944 high-explosive bombs turned the building of the Central Archives of Historical Records, home to over 40,000 records from the nineteenth century, to ruins. Several days later the storerooms of the Treasury Records caught on fire: records that were saved from the conflagration

38 Tadeusz Makowiecki, 'W obronie zbiorów bibliotecznych. Wspomnienie z 1944 r.' in: *Walka o dobra kultury*, vol. 2, pp. 245-246.

were later destroyed by the Nazi troops after the insurgents withdrew from the Old Town in the first days of September. During the Uprising, the building of the City Archives caught fire and 70,000 records were burnt. The Central Archives of Historical Records suffered relatively minor damage in the course of the Uprising, but on September 2 German soldiers entered the Archives and set its cellars, storerooms and offices on fire, destroying over 1,600,000 archival items. And on November 3, 1944 Nazi troops set the previously intact building of the Central Archives of Modern Records on fire, completely destroying the records it housed.

THE PRUSZKÓW ACTION

A late chapter in the vicissitudes suffered by Warsaw's libraries during The Second World War was what is known as the Pruszków Action. This was an attempt to remove surviving books and manuscripts from Warsaw, as on Hitler's orders the city was to be razed to the ground. Under the leadership of Stanisław Lorentz, archivists and museum curators worked hand-in-hand with librarians to evacuate their institutions' collections, doing so, as recalled by Władysław Bartoszewski, 'amidst the eerie scenery of ruins, often under shelling, in a silent yet continuous race against daily destruction'. Thanks to the Pruszków Action almost 300,000 volumes were transported by the German troops to the West, specifically to Adelsdorf (Zagrodno) in Lower Silesia and to Görbitsch (Garbicz) near Frankfurt an der Oder. An important part of the evacuated items was deposited in the transit camp (Durchgangslager) that the Nazis had set up in Pruszków. Contrary to Gustav Abb's promises, the books were kept in poor conditions, in stables and farm buildings, without any supervision by German librarians. Numerous volumes were plundered and many were destroyed.³⁹

39 See: Marian Łodyński, "Pruszkowska akcja zabezpieczenia warszawskich zbiorów bibliotecznych (1944-1945)", in: *Walka o dobra kultury*, vol. 2, pp. 266-282; Maria Dembowska, "Akcja pruszkowska". *Ratowanie zbiorów bibliotecznych po Powstaniu Warszawskim*", *Przegląd Biblioteczny* 1995, 63, 1, pp. 5-14.

The final blow to Warsaw's libraries was the burning of the Public Library of Warsaw. The Library building had been seriously damaged during the Uprising, but the storerooms had survived, containing many of the books that were successfully evacuated in the Pruszków Action. On January 16, 1945 on the eve of the Soviet seizure of Warsaw, the German troops set the building on fire while withdrawing from the city. The storerooms and their books were completely destroyed. Ryszard Przelaskowski remembered the scene as follows:

The fleeing Nazis set fire to the library at the last moment. This was done entirely deliberately. How do we know? Because it was not the front building that was set on fire but rather the lower floors of the storage facilities. The iron structure of the storage facilities broke away from the wall, slowly collapsing together with the entire collection of books onto the funeral pyre. Moreover, fire devoured the major part of the pavilion from the courtyard... Of the rich book collection, only small parts remained. Thus the basis of the cultural institution, with its long-standing tradition and activities, one of the largest library buildings, was burnt down - literally the last candle burning as Warsaw went up in flames.⁴⁰

Warsaw's libraries were the subject of destructive actions by the Nazis from the first days of the war. Already in September 1939, bombing and artillery shelling caused great destruction. In the subsequent months and years of the occupation, many libraries were closed down, their collections looted, removed or destroyed. The devoted efforts of Poland's librarians, who did all they could to preserve the Polish and European heritage stored in Warsaw's libraries, were thwarted by the invaders, even in the final weeks of the war. This thorough and deliberate act of destroying the most valuable historical documents, the written heritage of the country housed in its libraries, was unprecedented in history.

In the winter of 1945, soon after the National Library of Poland had resumed its activities, the librarians collected some of the

40 Ryszard Przelaskowski, *Wspomnienia o pracy w Bibliotece Publicznej*, pp. 394-395.



FIG. 1. The urn containing ashes of manuscripts and early printed books burnt down by the Nazi soldiers in the Library of the Krasieński Family Entail in autumn 1944. Collections of the National Library of Poland.

ashes of these items of Polish and European written heritage from the building of the Library of the Krasieński Family Entail and placed them in a monument at the National Library of Poland. Despite the intervening decades, some lines of writing are still visible on the charred remnants. This historic monument (FIG. 1) is a potent reminder to anyone who visits the National Library of Poland of the decimation of Warsaw's libraries and other cultural institutions in the Second World War.'

Translated by Magdalena Iwińska