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Geography and geographers during World War II

In October of 1939, for the first time in close to six hundred years, the Jagiellonian University did not inaugurate a new academic year. The city of Kraków and Poland as a whole had come under Nazi control. Several weeks later, University Rector Tadeusz Lehr-Spławiński called all University professors for a special meeting. A German officer was to present a lecture on the Third Reich's view of science and universities. The lecture turned out to be a trap. Following an arrogant and anti-Polish speech by SS-*Sturmbannführer* Brunon Müller, over 180 Polish researchers were arrested and put in trucks to be taken away. This was the beginning of their wartime Gehenna. Many would come to pay the ultimate price. On November 28th, the prisoners were taken to the Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg concentration camp near Berlin. Some of them would later be sent to the Dachau camp near Munich as well as other concentration camps.

November 6th had become a symbolic date. It quickly became apparent that this was only the first step in the Nazi campaign against the Polish educated classes.

November 6th, 1939 was the most tragic day in the history of Polish geography, and even more specifically, geography at the Jagiellonian University. A number of geographers were among the professors arrested on that day:

Jerzy Smoleński, geomorphologist, geologist, anthropogeographer, physical geographer, Jagiellonian University professor, director of the Institute of Geography, dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in 1937/38, longtime member of the University

Senate, lecturer at the UJ School of Political Science, member and correspondent of the PAU (Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences), chair of the demographics committee at the League of Nations, and an established researcher in the fields of spatial and regional planning as well as environmental protection in Poland;

Wiktor Ormicki, Jagiellonian University associate professor, one of the best “new generation” Polish geographers, lecturer at the Jan Kazimierz University in Lwów, researcher working in conjunction with the Institute of Nationality Research in Warsaw, and one of the creators of Polish regionalism as well as Polish anthropogeography. In June of 1939, the University’s Faculty of Philosophy commenced the review process designed to designate him a full professor;

Walenty Winid, anthropogeographer, Jagiellonian University associate professor, professor at the Academy of Commerce, and pioneer in the use of quantitative methods in geography and cartography;

Stanisław Leszczycki, Jagiellonian University assistant professor, founder of the Department of Tourism – one of the first departments of this type in the world, pioneer in the field of geographic research as part of spatial and regional planning, and pioneer in the field of applied geography;

Stanisław Korbel, longtime lecturer of cartography at the Jagiellonian University as well as founder of the Polish school of stenography.

Jerzy Smoleński died on January 5th, 1940, as a result of inhuman treatment at the hands of the Nazis. The news of his death was heard around the world. On January 26th, 1940, the BBC in London issued the following communiqué:

“A renowned Polish geologist and geographer, Jerzy Smoleński (George Smoleński), died in a German concentration camp. He fell victim to the Nazis’ brutal methods. Professor Smoleński [...], the author of many scientific works, was 60 years old”.

The British, Canadian, and American press published brief and not so brief memoirs about the deceased. Smoleński was hailed as a key contributor to the development of Polish and international geography. A funeral mass was celebrated in the intention of Jerzy Smoleński and other professors murdered at concentration camps at the Polish Church in Paris on February 22, 1940.

On the night of September 17th, 1941, Wiktor Ormicki died a martyr at the Gusen concentration camp. He had always told the truth and did not know how to lie. He knew that by admitting to his Jewish ancestry he would be sentenced to death. Historians consider the date of his death to be the end of *Sonderaktion Krakau*.

The other geographers were eventually freed and returned to Kraków. They began to take part in a secret education program being pursued by the Jagiellonian University

and the Academy of Commerce. Walenty Winid paid the ultimate price for his role in the program. He was murdered at Auschwitz on January 19th, 1945, on the eve the concentration camp was liberated.

The events of November 6th led to what can be termed a natural movement to create an underground university. Prof. Władysław Szafer became the rector of the Secret University. Szafer had been a rector before in 1936/37 and 1937/38. He also had not participated in the November 6th meeting with Müller.

The first secret teaching teams began to take shape in May of 1942 at the University. Two geographers, Józef Szaflarski and Stanisław Leszczycki, were part of the program from the very start. They were later joined by Mieczysław Klimaszewski.

In addition to working at the Secret University, the geographers also secretly taught at the Academy of Commerce and several high schools. The greatest contribution to teaching was made by the geographers Maria Dobrowolska and Józef Szaflarski. The first teaching team was organized by Szaflarski on January 15th, 1940. At the same time, he also conducted secret lectures in economic geography at the Academy of Commerce. He was pursued by the Gestapo, and starting in October of 1942, he began to hide in Kraków and its immediate vicinity. He did not, however, abandon his teaching mission. Maria Dobrowolska was the director of secret teaching center no. 6 in the Dębniki section of Kraków. The center was her apartment. Others took up the task of teaching in secret as well, including: Stanisław Korbel, Wojciech Walczak, Walenty Winid, Adam Gadomski. The latter two paid with their lives – both were murdered at the Auschwitz concentration camp.

While the times were very tough, geographers at the Jagiellonian University did not abandon their research efforts, although they did have to limit them. A number of textbooks and monographs were written during the occupation era. Stanisław Leszczycki worked on his habilitation thesis during the war. He also prepared materials for a future peace conference, which he believed would involve the changing of Poland's borders.

In February of 1943, the Home Army Publishing Company in Warsaw published the work of Antoni Wrzosek titled "*Silesia*" about the region from a historical perspective. The work was published as part of a series called "Returning lands. Geographic and economic perspective." Other geographers had also published their works as part of this particular series, including Jan Dylík and Maria Czekańska. Wrzosek's work became an excellent basis for the return of Silesia to Poland. Another work completed by Wrzosek during the era of Nazi occupation was:

"Index of townships in Lower Silesia and the Opole Region with German and Polish names as of January 1st, 1941."

The index of townships was published almost immediately following the end of World War II (Katowice 1945).

Eugeniusz Romer, a member of PAU and the father of Polish cartography, hid from the Nazis in Lwów for the most part of the German occupation. In 1944, the Polish government in exile requested that he come to Warsaw in order to be transported to London. The plan never came to fruition because of Romer's poor health. Instead, he found himself in the midst of the Warsaw Uprising. He left Warsaw via Pruszków and reached Kraków soon thereafter. Once he had arrived in Kraków, he began to help other geographers work on Poland's future borders. The "border change project" was directed by Romer and included other geographers such as Stanisław Pietkiewicz, Edward Rühle, Józef Szaflarski, and Stanisław Leszczycki.

Geographers working in Kraków in 1943 began to plan the process of rebuilding the geography program at the Jagiellonian University. A simplified, accelerated program of study was created, keeping in mind the anticipated need for new teachers after the war.

A number of geographers served in the Polish Army – fighting on the western front. This included Jagiellonian University professors Władysław Milata, Jan Flis, and Zdzisław Czepe. Others participated in underground operations of the Polish Home Army (e.g. Stanisław Leszczycki).

A number of geographers from Kraków were murdered at Auschwitz and Katyń for their pro-independence actions. Others were executed in the streets or tortured in Nazi as well as Soviet prisons. In addition to the university researchers who were killed, teachers, local government officials, and social activists died as well during the course of the war.

The list below includes many of the geographers from Kraków killed during the war:

Krzysztof Beres (+1944, killed in combat at Kajetanowice),
Tadeusz Betleja (+September 1939),
Władysław Breitmeier (+1943, Auschwitz),
Tadeusz Czort (+1940, Katyń),
Adam Gadowski (+1942, Auschwitz),
Edward Kazimierz Kremky (+1940, Katyń),
Walerian Łoziński (+1944, Kraków),
Wiktor Ormicki (+1941, Mauthausen-Gusen),
Zdzisław Simche (+1940, Auschwitz),
Piotr Jan Smarzyński (+1940, Katyń),
Jerzy Smoleński (+1940, Sachsenhausen),
Julian Stanoch (+1942, Auschwitz),
Walenty Winid (+1945, Auschwitz).

Geographers from other universities in Poland had given their lives as well. These include Stanisław Pawłowski, the rector of the University of Poznań in 1932–33,

a member of the PAU, vice-president of the International Geographical Union, shot to death on January 6th, 1940 at Fort No. 7 in Poznań, as well as Stanisław Lencewicz, founder of the geography program at the University of Warsaw, renowned physical geographer, murdered by the Nazis during the Warsaw Uprising on September 1, 1944.

Rajmund Galon (Poznań-Toruń) wasn't miss by POW camp, while Jerzy Kondracki (Warsaw) and Julian Jurczyński (Łódź) were imprisoned at the Woldenberg officers' prison camp. Wanda Rewińska (Stefan Batory University in Wilno) died as a soldier of the Polish Home Army. Many geographers from Lwów and Wilno were deported deep into Russia.

Every year, on November 6th, the University community remembers the fate of the professors arrested on that day in 1939. We contemplate the purpose of their experiences. Much like the millions of other victims of World War II, these individuals had also wanted to survive. However, those who had to die knew what their death should mean to their captors. The last recorded words of University Rector Stanisław Estreicher at the Sachsenhausen camp were:

“Do not forget our death. Do not let it go to waste”.

The geographer Wiktor Ormicki was sent from Sachsenhausen to Dachau and later to the Mauthausen Gusen camp, where he spoke his last words on his way to his death:

“I know why they are calling me [...]. However, I am going in peace. I am going with the conviction that I am not dying in vain – that all of this is Poland”.

The governing body of the Jagiellonian University commended the efforts of the Institute of Geography and Spatial Management in organizing a national conference on the 70th anniversary of *Sonderaktion Krakau*. The conference is called “We remember... Polish geography during World War II.” This is the first of its kind scientific gathering in Poland. We are very happy that the best geographers in Poland decided to attend this celebration. We are also pleased with the large turnout of geography students. It is to them that we direct the main message of the conference, which can be summed up in the simple but important words: “WE REMEMBER...”.

It has been rightly said:

“A fool neither forgives nor forgets. A naïve man forgives and forgets. A wise man forgives but does not forget”¹.

¹ T. S. Szasz, 1973, *The Second Sin. Personal Conduct*, New York, Doubleday.