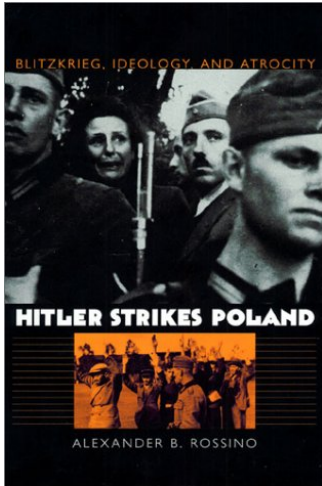

Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology and Atrocity by Alexander B. Rossino, University Press of Kansas, 2003, 352 pages.



University Press of Kansas sent us a book by Alexander Rossino of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. This book contributes to a discussion among historians in U. S. academic circles as to where to look for sources of a brutal 1941 German campaign against Russia. Some apparently claim that the 1941 campaign was unique in its uncontrolled drive of destruction; others maintain that the German forces had already demonstrated their capacity for murder and mayhem during the 1939 campaign in Poland. Rossino is sympathetic to the latter group. Rossino's main thesis is that it was the combination of (fascist) ideology--rabidly anti-Polish and anti-Jewish in 1939--that in 1941 acquired an equally fanatical anti-Soviet slant, Hitler's willing executioners, and the Drang Nach Osten drive that led to the brutal campaign of 1939; therefore, the brutality and cruelty that were so prevalent in 1941 were already on display in 1939. Rossino develops his thesis in seven chapters. Chapter 1 explores the ideological dimension of the 1939 German invasion of Poland. Chapter 2 analyzes the backgrounds of Hitler's willing executioners -- men of the German Special Forces. This appears to be the weakest chapter of the whole book -- almost all the characters described have resumes which read like carbon copies of one

another and the author's efforts to tease out the deeper meaning from them seem largely unsuccessful. Chapter 3 describes Operation Tannenberg--a plan to wipe out the Polish intellectual, political and business elites. Chapter 4 analyzes the anti-Jewish policy followed by the German forces during the 1939 campaign in Poland. Chapters 5 and 6 describe how Wehrmacht, showing only feeble signs of civility and respect for international law, slid down the slippery slope of atrocity and murder in the company of the German special forces which on their part never made any attempt to restrain their brutality. Chapter 7 looks behind the facts and examines what shaped the attitudes of the German forces through--among other things-- inspection of the letters and experience reports written by the German soldiers during and after the Polish campaign. The last chapter is followed by conclusions where the author restates his main thesis.

For someone who was born and educated in Poland there is little that is surprising in this book. However for those who never studied Polish history the book should be a required reading. Such readers will undoubtedly constitute a large share of the book's audience outside of academia. For that particular reason it is a pity that the fine work is marred by a few editorial failings which are both likely to confuse its readers and not to do justice to the peoples that the book concerns itself with. First, the author does not seem to follow any convention for names of cities, towns, villages and rivers -- Polish, German or English which are used throughout the book. Is it Gliwice or Gleiwitz, is it Bydgoszcz or Bromberg that the Polish civilians were defending from advancing Wehrmacht (not to mention Krakau and Kosciusko (p. 79)), and is it Vistula River or Wisła that flows through my country? What is needed here is a 1939 map of the region which would clearly identify the borders then in existence between Poland and Germany. The author should then refer to the geographic locations according to their administrative names used in 1939. In the book, sometimes German, sometimes Polish names are used in reference to the same places and a reader who is new to the subject might receive an impression that part of the 1939 campaign took place within the German borders. A second rather irritating habit is frequent misspelling of Polish names of geographical locations and names of Poles quoted in the book (see for example page 25). One wonders why is it so difficult for the editor or the author to make sure that all the Polish names are spelled properly and are in a proper case. There are a lot of German terms used in the book as well -- I am not able to judge the accuracy of their spelling. Nevertheless these are arranged in a glossary at the end of the book for easy reference. Why couldn't the same be done for Polish geographical and administrative names? The third objection has to do with the choice of the main photograph on the book's jacket. It depicts distraught Leni Riefenstahl--recently deceased Hitler's filmmaker--watching the execution of Jews in Końskie. This is a book about the Polish campaign and the atrocities that the German armed forces perpetrated on the Polish society -- be it Jews or Poles. Why has the editor chosen to put on the jacket of the book titled "Hitler Strikes Poland" a photograph of the prominent Nazi German filmmaker, who contributed to the development of the same ideology identified in the book as a deadly and murderous foundation of the war, rather than a photograph of its victims? This choice is difficult to understand especially since the book includes a photograph on page 127 which illustrates in a very heartbreaking and simple way the shared tragic fate of Poland's inhabitants. The photograph shows an execution of two hostages -- a Polish Christian and a Jew. To this reviewer, using this photograph on the jacket would seem much more appropriate and respectful toward its subjects.

In addition to the above there are some other minor peculiarities present while Rossino develops his argument. For example the way the author talks about the 1939 campaign might be read as implying that the Polish-German war ended when the campaign ended. This is not correct and again will confuse a less sophisticated reader. The

Polish troops fought on all fronts of WWII until its end in 1945. Then on page 79, the author uses the word “liquidate” to describe a murder of the prisoners of war and boy scouts by the German Special Forces. This is an unfortunate choice of a word. Another example of unfortunate wording is present on page 137 where those among the civilian population who chose to actively resist the invasion are described as “impetuous” individuals. Then the book frequently reasons that the retaliatory behavior of the German forces was caused by the atrocities perpetrated by the Polish forces on the ethnic Germans living in Poland in 1939. It would be fitting if the author provided us with the factual verification of the extent of the latter. Undoubtedly some of it took place, however it seems strange that the careful documenting of the claims advanced in the book is here suspended. Finally in the Conclusion on page 234 the author feels compelled to assure a reader that “[t]o point out the butchering of Polish Christians by the SS does not minimize the suffering of Polish Jews [...]” This statement seems out of place in a work which can only be described as balanced and sober, and avoids playing politics.

All in all the book is wholeheartedly recommended to anyone with even a passing interest in modern history. Buy it for your library and for your friends' libraries and ask them to do you a favor – to read it from cover to cover.

Mariusz Sumlinski