

# The University in wartime – 1939–1945

## Summary

### *Poznań University in wartime*

The history of Poznań University is a heterogeneous tale full of turns and changes. Founded in 1919 as the Piast University, it was to be not only a symbol of Polishness in the western borderlands of the Polish state at the time, but quickly became one of the most important academic centres in the new Poland. It fulfilled this role throughout the inter-war period. For the Third Reich gearing up for war, Poznań University was one of the institutions earmarked for complete liquidation. These German leaders' plans were a fatal blow to academics at Poznań University.

The outbreak of World War II led to the destruction of Poznań University in its existing form. The days of September 1939 were a difficult time for the university. The German army's entry into Poznań marked the start of repression that from 8<sup>th</sup> October 1939 onwards would become a daily occurrence in the Reichsgau Wartheland, the administrative name given to Wielkopolska. Poznań professors were arrested, tortured, some were murdered and more than anything else, deported to the Reich's General Government area. Initially, a group of Poznań professors attempted to rescue their university, shielding it from the atrocities of wars, assuming that this war would be similar to previous ones and that certain standards would be upheld by the warring sides. However, this was to be a war unlike any other. The University Council set up in the first days of the war was unable to withhold the process of destruction. Brutal actions by the Gestapo and military authorities led to the takeover of the University's buildings, but also to the wanton destruction of scientific instruments and equipment. It was clear from the outset that only the buildings were of value to the German forces. In time the seized buildings of Poznań University were to house a Reich University, and all traces of Polishness were to be erased once and for all. The decision was taken to deport not only the entire Poznań academic community from Wielkopolska but also the intelligentsia. In nightmarish conditions, stripped of their property, libraries and their entire scientific output, Poznań's professors and their families set out on their wartime roaming.

Yet the history of Poznań University was not cut short, and its rebirth in the University of the Western Lands in 1940 demonstrated that the strength of Poznań's academic community was several times greater than the occupying powers had estimated. The history of this clandestine university remains a sensation to this day, as no other university operated in such a way, torn out of its environment, its previous place of residence and workplaces. The

clandestine universities set up by professors from Warsaw, Krakow or Lvov were based on the domestic, family environment. However, although deprived of any semblance of pre-war normality, Poznań's academic circles strove to begin their scientific and teaching work anew.

The idea of setting up a clandestine, secret university came from the Poznań professors centred on the "Ojczyzna" ("Homeland") group, which quickly gained the support of many people, regardless of their political sympathies or their fears as to the point of such a university in these conditions. There was no unanimous agreement on whether it made sense to run a university that is not open, would operate in secrecy and might merely become a parody of a university. The years that followed would prove such fears unjustified, and showed that this institution of higher education did in fact become a true university for professors and students alike, despite the tragedy of war.

The first rector of the University of the Western Lands was Prof. Ludwik Jaxa-Bykowski, who not only took on the role of founder, but also the duty of giving it the appropriate academic form. Both the rector and his deputy, Prof. Roman Pollak, assumed the lion's share of these responsibilities. As well as creating the university itself, later on they also concerned themselves with the quality of teaching, personally performing inspection and monitoring in order to ensure that all faculties maintained the required academic standard. Their attention encompassed faculties in Warsaw, as well as all units outside Warsaw. This was one of the foundations for the success of the University of the Western Lands.

Appointing a university senate and the first faculties provided an opportunity for the opening of the first academic year. Originally limited to lawyers and specialists in the humanities, the core staff did not only come from the former Poznań University, but also academics from Warsaw University, which had been closed down by the Germans. This cooperation existed for the duration of the whole occupation, strengthening clandestine Polish science, which was at risk of both German and Soviet repression. During the occupation a small number of Krakow professors joined the University of the Western Lands. For Polish academics, the possibility to teach and continue their research, albeit to a limited extent, was a means of opposition to Nazi occupation, and was a concept for fighting to retain national identity.

In the first academic year at the University of the Western Lands, in addition to Polish studies, other courses were started, in law, history, prehistory, pedagogy and philosophy. Though small, these groups marked a significant beginning for the university. Each subsequent year saw an increase in the number of courses which students could take, the number of students and professors themselves. The effect was the founding of the Faculties of Law, Humanities, Economics, Agriculture and Forestry, Mathematical and Natural Science, Chemistry, Medicine and even the Maritime Institute. This involved huge commitment from the pre-war academic milieu of Poznań University, and a great desire to continue academic and scientific work.

The history of each faculty at the University of the Western Lands is a separate history of the struggle to conduct classes, to educate young scientists, and also of academics to continue their own work. While there was sufficient knowledge in the faculties of humanities and its professors, at the Faculty of Medicine it was necessary to organise placements in hospitals and pharmacies, which was a difficult task among the brutal conditions of the German occupation. Such placements were organised in friendly institutions and students gained both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The best proof of the high level of teaching at UWL was that post-war universities acknowledged its diplomas and the years of studies completed there.

One of the more unusual projects within the UWL framework was founding the Maritime Institute, headed by Władysław Kowalenko. This institute was a new idea that did not continue a pre-war tradition in the Poznań academic environment. At the same time, this marked a return to the idea that Wielkopolska and its environs provide a natural support base for the Polishness of the Pomerania region and its traditions, and that the relations between both regions are stronger than might seem. The Maritime Institute within UWL became the site of research into Pomerania's role and importance to the Polish state, which was used carefully after the war in the newly opened Polish universities of Gdańsk and Gdynia.

As the war went on, it quickly became apparent that the UWL could expand its activities outside its original Warsaw headquarters. Creating further UWL centres provided an opportunity to increase the number of students able to study at university level, but also to involve academics living and hiding from the gestapo outside Warsaw. Moving around the General Government area was too risky for them, so providing classes in the city they were hiding in was a much safer option. In this way the ranks of academics were boosted, as well as a greater number of students being offered a chance to study in Warsaw. Each of the UWL's branches proved invaluable as a way of involving new groups of young people in clandestine university teaching. For these young people, their only connection with Polishness, the Polish state and one of its institutions was the University of the Western Lands.

In addition to expanding its faculties and, as a consequence, the specialisations in which classes could be offered, efforts were made to offer educational assistance to students. Crucial to this was the attempt to create a university library. This was based on its professors' private collections, salvaged during the forced deportations to the General Government lands. Private collections in Warsaw were also useful to this end, as were those in UWL branches, where private collections were housed as well as the libraries of prestigious high schools concealed at the time war broke out. There were also attempts to use the possibilities and resources of pharmacies, and also gain access to parts of hospitals. All this was carried out in the underground, based on private contacts between trusted individuals. Despite the gestapo's attempts, the German occupying forces failed to uncover the University of the Western Lands, destroy its structures and prevent it from educating students. While it is true that some arrests were made, these were individual cases and in no instance was a full group of UWL students apprehended. Even the German police were unable to discover the secret university. Right up until the end of the war, the existence and activities of the UWL remained unknown to the gestapo, which is proof of this outstanding organisation and the superbly constructed system within which it functioned.

Although the University of the Western Lands operated until the end of the war, its basic activities ended along with the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising. This made it impossible to commence the next academic year in Warsaw, and following the end of the Uprising the city's population was displaced and Warsaw was condemned to death, razed to the ground on Hitler's orders. The University of the Western Lands was only able to continue operating in a few of its branch centres, in some cases until their liberation as the Red Army took over Polish territories. However, this liberation did not take the form imagined during the long years of the German occupation. The best proof of this was the fate of the UWL's first rector. Having survived the German occupation, he threw himself into the process of re-establishing Poznań University, only to die at the hands of communist torturers in the People's Republic of Poland. There were many such stories, because the end of the Second World War did not halt

the loss of the Poznań University professors. The fight for the truth, freedom to pursue scientific research and to pass these results on to their students continued for longer than the five dark years of war and demanded courage and fortitude forged during the German occupation.

What was unique about the University of the Western Lands was not merely a question of opening classes and expanding the range of courses offered to students. Educating students to the level at which they could defend their master's thesis was one of its key tasks. Enlarging the teaching staff was equally important, as was conducting research. The war might have interrupted a lot of this work, but it did not break the spirit of the Poznań academic community. Preparing and defending a doctoral thesis within the UWL framework was a significant event, but instituting a habilitation procedure was a truly phenomenal undertaking not only on the Polish scale in the underground university conditions of World War II. This was true victory of the spirit of humanism over the nightmare of war, resistance against the inhumanity of fate between 1939-1945, of people that refused to accept that the human value had ceased to be of significance to those fellow humans who believed that they could rule the world for a thousand years. It was during this war that eminent figures in Poznań academic milieu developed and laid the foundations for their scientific work, people like Gerard Labuda, who was to go on to become rector of Poznań's Adam Mickiewicz University.

The existence and work of the University of the Western Lands between 1940-1945 did not come without victims. Unfortunately, the war did not bypass its staff, nor its students. A full list of victims is unavailable, although several attempts have been made to produce one. Of almost 3,000 students around 100 were killed, many laying down their lives in the Warsaw Uprising. Others were arrested by gestapo, executed by firing squad after being interrogated through torture. Those university personnel who lost their lives include researchers, professors, PhDs, MAs and the women operating a clandestine secretariat and dean's office for each faculty. Without their commitment and skills in organising secret headquarters for each group of students, operating such a complication mechanism as an underground university would have proved impossible. Each academic killed was an irretrievable loss to Polish science, creating a gap often difficult to fill in the post-war circumstances. The end of the war did not spell an end to such losses. The horrors of post-war communist repression afflicted the pre-war Polish academic staff and in this respect, Poznań University could not count on any special consideration.

The University of the Western Lands was the natural heir to Poznań University and was created by its staff. It became a symbol of Poles' resistance to Germanisation and to the annihilation of nations. It was also an expression of humans desire to fight for values than themselves, above all for humanism, the right to free scientific research, the freedom of science and learning. These values remained a constant challenge for the clandestine

### *The Reich University in Poznań (Reichsuniversität Posen)*

In 1941, using the buildings and equipment of the former Poznań University, the German occupying authorities opened the Reichsuniversität Posen, which operated until 1945. This was one of three institutions opened during World War II in the lands occupied by the Third Reich to which the Nazis awarded university status. The others were founded in Prague and Strasbourg.

Following the German army's invasion of Poland in September 1939, the initiative to set up a university came from Artur Greiser, Chief of the Civil Administration in the Poznań military district and later Reich Governor (Reichsstaathalter) in what was designated the Wartheland region. In founding a new Nazi university in the conquered city of Poznań, Greiser sought the support of Hitler himself, as a result of which Nazi propaganda later attributed the idea to the Third Reich's Führer.

The idea of setting up a university was just part of Greiser's idea of turning the district under his control into a "model district of the Reich" (Mustergau). The aim of all the changes planned in the political, population, economic and cultural spheres, which could be described generally as "building the new German east" was to create a textbook example, from the Nazi point of view, of a political and administrative system and economic modernisation, and to shape the cultural and natural landscape of the Wartheland region to the "character and requirements of the German nation". This was all to lead to the establishment of a new national-socialist national community, uniform in the racial, spiritual and national-political sense.

The new German university in Poznań, with its emphasis on agricultural, life and racial-political sciences, was to have a special role in implementing these plans. The particular significance of these fields and later faculties in them was the result of the political and economic objectives established by Greiser and Himmler, who envisaged the Wartheland region as a model district and the breadbasket of the Reich "Kornkammer des Reiches", as well as national socialism's army training ground. In the Polish lands the Nazis would be able to conduct large-scale social and economic experiments without the need to respect the opinions and rights of the region's former inhabitants, who they brutally deprived of their freedom and property, and in many cases, of their lives. The intention was to use the experiments in the Warta Land after the war to shape the social and political relations in the whole Great Reich.

Greiser's ally in striving to set up a university in Poznań was the Minister of Science, Education and National Culture (Reichsminister für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung – REM) Bernhard Rust, who sent his proxy, Sturmbannführer SS Dr Hans Streit, to Wielkopolska as early as on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1939. Greiser and Rust always wanted the new university to be a model institution for other German cities (Musteruniversität), the focal point of German intellectual life and, as declared in propaganda speeches) "the bastion of German in the east".

The end result was to be an academic institution that implemented a concept of education fighting to serve the "nation and fatherland", in which the idea of freedom would be replaced by aspiring to unite "education with the national spirit". In practice, this would mean the university, its staff and students all being subordinated to the needs of the state, and to conduct research projects in accordance with the ideology and needs of national socialism. Moreover, this university was to supply specialists suitably educated in terms of knowledge and ideology, who would then be used in conquering Eastern Europe.

The process of organising the university took from October 1939 to April 1941, although the initial plan was to open it in spring 1940. This process lasted a year longer than expected due to the difficulties connected with recovering the Poznań University buildings, which had been taken over by the various German police and military institutions in 1939, and also with the lack of staff and insufficient financing for the necessary investment and salaries. In February 1941 Minister Rust finally gave approval to opening the following faculties in Poznań: agriculture, medicine, philosophy, life sciences, and law and economics, in addition

to increasing the number of professorial posts to 86, including 56 ordinary (*o. Prof.*) and 32 extraordinary (*ao. Prof.*) from the 1941 financial year onwards.

Moreover, on 10 March 1941 the ministers of science, the interior and finance issued a joint “Order on the regulation of higher education in the Gdańsk – West Prussian and Warta Land districts” (*Verordnung zur Regelung des Hochschulwesens in den “Reichsgauen Danzig Westpreußen und Wartheland”*), in accordance with which the Higher School of Technology and the Academy of Medicine in Gdańsk, and the university in Poznań were brought under the direct control of the Reich Education Ministry. Educational officers were appointed to each of these institutions, who were responsible for organisational, personnel and financial matters.

The same order it was determined that ownership of all property and buildings formerly belonging to Poznań University and the National Foundation in Kórnik, as well as the property taken from the Academy of Trade and the Academy Sports Association were to be transferred to the Reich University in Posen, and from the University Settlement and Building Association in Poznań to the Main Eastern Territory Trust Office. The order also led to Poznań’s University Library being taken over and renamed the State and University Library (*Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek*).

For symbolic and propaganda reasons the date chosen for the official opening of the new university was Hitler’s birthday (20th April), although the celebrations themselves took place on Sunday 27 April 1941. The highest-ranking of the many Nazi dignitaries who came to Poznań for the opening was Minister Rust, who on behalf of Hitler declared the Reich University open. The main speakers during the event were Streit, Greiser and the newly appointed rector, P. Carstens. All emphasised Hitler’s role in the establishment of the University, and as is characteristic of totalitarian systems, praised the wisdom, far-sightedness and indomitable will of their leader. At the same time, practically all speakers underlined in various ways the new university’s role in the national-socialist “Eastern policy”.

In April 1941 the University organiser Dr Streit was appointed education officer. As Minister Rust’s representative in Poznań he supervised the university’s administrative apparatus (delegating tasks and monitoring the work of officials), managed its property and finances, and also made decisions (in agreement with the Reich Education Ministry) regarding investment. Educational and scientific matters were the remit of rector Carstens and the deans and institute directors working under him. However, within the Reich University it was the education officer that had the deciding vote in matters related to administrative and academic appointments, and in this respect he maintained regular correspondence with different departments in the Reich Education Ministry and NSDAP units. In addition, he carried out political supervision of all employees and as the minister’s local deputy, adjudicated in various administrative and personnel matters. In contrast to the rector, who performed his duties only for a particular term in office, the post of education officer was permanent.

The first rector of the *Reichsuniversität Posen* appointed by Minister Rust was the 38-year-old *Sturmbannführer SS*, Dr Peter Johannes Carstens, a medical-veterinary scientist, who performed this function until April 1944. In May 1941 Prof. Walter Geisler, the director of the Geographical Institute, was appointed vice-rector and the following were nominated deans of particular faculties: R. Wittram (Faculty of Philosophy), Kröger (Faculty of Natural Sciences), W. Gleisberg (Faculty of Agriculture), and later on M. v Sivers and Otto Hummel (Faculty of Law, State and Political Economy, colloquially known as the Faculty of Law and Economics) and H. Voss (Faculty of Medicine).

In 1944 P. Carstens resigned as rector and was replaced on the 25 April 1944 by Prof. O. Hummel. Authorized by Minister Rust, the new rector introduced personnel changes in the university authorities. Rector Carstens was appointed vice-rector, Erich Becker became the new dean of the Faculty of Law, State and Political Economy, Manfred Monje the new dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Edmund Spohr the new dean Faculty of Natural Sciences, and Heinrich Niehaus the new dean of the Faculty of Agriculture. Only the dean of the Faculty of Medicine Philosophy, R. Wittram, retained his position.

The Reichsuniversität Posen structure also had a senate comprised of: rector, vice-rector, deans and two professors nominated by the rector, and also leaders of the National Socialist Union of Associate Professors (NSD – Dozentenbund) and the National Socialist Union of Students (NSD – Studentenbund).

At the planning stage for the future university structure in late 1939, the intention was to concentrate on developing agricultural and veterinary sciences, due to the economic needs of the Warta Land and also for organisational reasons (the possibility of using the buildings and equipment of Poznań's University's Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry). This was to lay the intellectual foundations for the mass settlement from Germany's rural areas and the planned modernisation of agriculture. Plans for significant expansion of the Faculty of Agriculture also provided an important argument for opening a university, as the idea of developing the agricultural sciences in Germany's new eastern territories enjoyed the support of the Third Reich's notables, including Rosenberg and Himmler. In the months that followed, Gresier influenced the decision to expand the Faculty of Natural Sciences, justifying it in terms of its importance for the war effort, and as a result of actions taken by Prof. R. Wittram, the plenipotentiary for scientists from the Baltic countries deported to the Wartheland region, the status of the Faculty of Philosophy was also raised, because of the special tasks facing the humanities in the east, which "were to support the spiritual control of these areas". In 1941 five faculties eventually started operating at the University: Agriculture, Natural Sciences, Medicine, Philosophy and Faculty of Law, State and Political Economy, along with numerous institutes and seminars. The curriculum and research programmes were subordinated to the Nazi ideology and the needs of the war economy. These were primarily to serve the complete Germanization of the conquered territories and German economic and military expansion in Eastern Europe. However, despite the significant financial outlay, the results of research conducted by German academics working at the Reich University were scant.

In accordance with the Reich's Ministry of Education assumptions, the university in Poznań was supposed to be the first institution of higher education completely subordinated to the ideological principles of the Third Reich. For this reason particular importance was given to selecting the staff, who were to be not only competent but also entirely devoted to Hitler and the national socialist ideology. The model Reich University professor was supposed to be law-abiding (in the national socialist sense of this word), loyal, obedient and committed to building the new reality. During the recruitment process, every candidate's cv was subject to intense scrutiny to determine whether they displayed the right attitude and would be suitable material for a Nazi scholar. The first temporary contracts at the university being developed were offered in 1939. In mid-1940 5 professors were already employed in what would later become the Faculty of Agriculture. On opening in April 1941, the Reichsuniversität Posen employed 35 professors, 14 associate professors and 43 assistants. These numbers rose systematically and in the 1943/1944 winter semester the number of senior

academic staff stood at 117. However, during the later stages of the university, the number fell, due to conscription, and at the end of 1944 the university had 23 senior academic staff members and an auxiliary staff of 144.

As was the case with teaching and research staff, students were accepted into the university on the basis of ideological and racial criteria. As the first priority, all Poles and Jews were stripped of the right to study at university, regardless of their place of residence. At the same time, all candidates were scrutinized in terms of their politics and attitudes, especially those who had lived outside Germany's borders in 1939. The consequence of this was that the majority of those studying at the Reich University came from the heart of Germany, and in 1944 there were only 18 students with volksdeutsch status or foreign nationality (including 4 Norwegians) among the entire student population.

In June 1941 the number of students matriculated was 172. In the winter semester 1941/1942 saw this rise to 404, with the introduction of extra-mural studies for soldiers, and in the 1942/1943 winter semester the Reichsuniversität had 755 students (of whom 60 were women). In May 1944 the number of students reached its maximum of 228 students, of whom 231 on leave. In this period the Faculty of Natural Sciences had 208 students, the Faculty of Philosophy 254, the Faculty of Medicine 462, the Faculty of Law and Economics 22, and there were a mere 78 students at the Faculty of Agriculture, whose expansion Gresier had counted on. In the winter semester 1944/1945 the number of students stood at approximately 300.

In mid-1944 the unfavourable change in Germany's fortunes of war had its impact on the university. A large group of students and staff were called up for service, as a result of which many classes did not take place or were given by stand-in teachers. In August 1944 around half the research and auxiliary staff left in Poznań were mobilized to build fortifications in the eastern districts of the Wartheland region. Following this, in November 1944 around 100 university employees were engaged on defensive fortifications in Poznań's surrounding areas.

While it is true that the Reich Ministry of Education officially opened the winter semester, this took place outside the faculties: hardly any classes or research work took place in the faculties of Agriculture and Natural Sciences. By autumn 1944 activity at the university had all but died. At the start of 1945 some students and employees were conscripted into the anti-aircraft defence force and artillery at the Poznań Fortress (Falk und Festung Artillerie). Another group of University employees were taken into Volkssturm units, of whom part were assigned to the Poznań Fortress, while others took up positions on the old Russian-Prussian border from 1914. As the Eastern Front reached Poznań on 19 January 1945 preparations were made to evacuate the Reich University westwards, with the University of Greifswald chosen as the destination for staff and documents. On 20 January 1945 the complete evacuation of Poznań was announced, with the exception of those with defensive duties at Poznań Fortress. As a result, that same afternoon, work started on burning documents which could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Red Army for political reasons, and in the hours that followed, as significant proportion of employees and students fled Poznań. This marked the end of the Reich University in Poznań. The time of its activity did not bring any significant scientific achievements, merely the catastrophic effects for the inter-war Poznań University. The occupying power's policies had brutally halted the rapid development of Poznań University, many Polish scholars died or were condemned to exile or misery, and the property of the Polish university that had been used by the Germans in their Reich University was to a great extent destroyed.

*Translated by Rob Pagett*