 WITH the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, National Socialist Germany aimed to destroy the Polish nation and Polish national consciousness. The Nazi regime attempted to accomplish this in a variety of ways, including the destruction of Polish cultural institutions, forced resettlement, forced labor, incarceration in prisons and camps, random and systematic roundups of prisoners, and mass murder. To the German authorities in occupied Poland and to many Poles, it was obvious that the occupation would target the Polish Catholic Church with vigor and brutality.  

Catholicism was the religion of approximately 65 percent of interwar Poland’s population: it dominated religious life, held tremendous wealth and political power, and its clergy were widely respected as members of the intelligentsia. More importantly for the Germans, the Catholic Church was a locus and symbol of Polish national identity. 

The Nazi regime’s hostility to the Polish Catholic Church was revealed in discrimination and brutality, but German policy, contrary to what many would assume, was not uniform. The church suffered less in the General Government—the German colony established in central Poland—than in those regions annexed to the Reich, which included eastern Pomerania and the subsequent Reichsgau of Danzig-Westpreußen in the north, Upper Silesia in the south, and the Reichsgau Wartheland or “Warthegau” in the west. The Nazi

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Nazi Kirchenpolitik and Polish Catholicism in the Reichsgau Wartheland, 1939–1941

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2The term “Gau” refers to a geographic district of the National Socialist German Workers Party. After German occupation of Polish territory in 1939, the Nazi government, in an attempt to streamline party and administrative control, established the Reichsgau Danzig-Westpreußen and the Reichsgau Posen (later renamed Reichsgau Wartheland) in which the office of Nazi Party leader (Gauleiter) and government administrator or Reich Lieutenant (Reichsstatthalter) were combined. Hence, Arthur Greiser simultaneously held the posts of Gauleiter and Reichstatthalter in the Reichsgau Wartheland. The region was also frequently referred to simply as the “Warthegau,” and its capital was Posen, or present-day Poznań. The Warthegau had an area of approximately 44,000 square kilometers and a population, overwhelmingly Polish and Roman Catholic, of more than 4.5 million. See “Wstęp,” in Pobożność ludności polskiej w tzw. Kraju Warty w okresie hitlerowskiej okupacji, Documenta Occupationis, vol.13, ed. Marian Olszewski (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1990), viii. On the population figures, which fluctuated over the course of the occupation, see Catherine Epstein, Model
agenda of economic, cultural, and racial germanization was pursued most vigorously in these regions, and especially in the Warthegau, where persecution of the church was most aggressive.

Contributing to an emerging body of literature on Catholicism in German-occupied Poland, this article initiates a more comprehensive investigation of German policy toward the Polish Roman Catholic Church in the Reichsgau Wartheland and the variety of responses to it. Polish historians, church historians, and scholars of the occupation have examined Nazi church policy or Kirchenpolitik in various ways—as a manifestation of Nazi anti-Christian ideology, as an aspect of anti-Polish nationality policy in the Warthegau, or as a form of political and administrative restructuring in this newly annexed territory. German measures against the Polish church indeed filled all these roles, but they were also a constituent element of the broader ethnic/racial struggle or Volkstumskampf in the region. As such, the motives for Warthegau Kirchenpolitik were simultaneously and inseparably political, economic, national, and even racial. The following analysis links and synthesizes these diverse historiographical emphases. It describes in some detail the most important goals and characteristics of Nazi policy toward the Warthegau church, even as it stresses the inconsistencies, contradictions, and contingencies in that policy during the first two years of the occupation. It challenges the claim, dominant in the literature, that Nazi Kirchenpolitik was clearly aimed at the church’s destruction and, correspondingly, emphasizes the significance of the church’s survival.

Since World War II, Polish historians have addressed the importance of the Reichsgau Wartheland among the regions of German-occupied Poland, but its history has been largely neglected outside that country. More recent research, however, has begun to emphasize the centrality of the region in our understanding of Nazi goals and brutal methods in the 1939 invasion; the Warthegau’s role as a “laboratory of National Socialist racial policy” with respect to the regime’s germanization policies as they were applied to ethnic

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3See, for example, the extensive work of historians Czesław Łuczak, Jerzy Marczewski, Stanisław Nawrocki, and Edward Serwański, as well as the journal _Przegląd Zachodni_, published since 1945 by Poznań’s Instytut Zachodni.


5Michael Alberti, “‘Exerzierplatz des Nationalsozialismus’: Der Reichsgau Wartheland 1939–1941” in Mallmann and Musial, 111–126, here 113.
Poles and Jews, and the long-term goal of developing the Wartheland as a political, administrative, and racial Mustergau, or “model Gau,” for the Reich of the future.

Scholarship on the churches in the Warthegau is likewise limited. The English-language literature is largely confined to general studies on National Socialism and the churches or broader church histories, while the German- and Polish-language secondary literature is somewhat more extensive. Already in the 1950s, West German church historians Bernhard Stasiewski and Paul Gürtler, relying primarily on German sources, focused on the characteristics of Nazi policy toward the churches in the region, but did not address, in depth, institutional or individual Polish responses to it. Their work was amplified by more synthetic studies in the following decades. In Politika III Rzeszy w okupowanej Polsce (“The Politics of the Third Reich in Occupied Poland”) Polish historian Czesław Madajczyk argued, for example, that Nazi policy toward the Warthegau church, politically and ideologically wedded to a broader Nazi nationality policy and aimed at the church’s destruction, was to be understood as part of a larger plan for the destruction of the Polish nation as a whole. In Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik (“National Socialist Poland Policy”), Martin Broszat, a pioneering political and social historian of the Nazi era, likewise placed Kirchenpolitik in the Warthegau in the context of the regime’s broader anti-Polish nationality policy, emphasizing the uniqueness of Nazi “Sonder-Kirchenpolitik” there and arguing that while the situation of the Catholic Church in other German-controlled eastern territories began to normalize over the course of the war, treatment of the church in the Warthegau worsened. Making use of documents of the German Foreign Office, Broszat also stressed the ways in which church affairs in the Wartheland strained the relationship between the Third Reich and the

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7 The Gau was described as such by Gauleiter Greiser as reported in the Posener Tageblatt of September 22, 1939: “Unser Fernziel, das [sic] wir jedoch von vornherein bei allen unseren Handlungen stets im Auge behalten werden, soll sein, ein Mustergau des Großdeutschen Reiches zu werden.” Quoted in Madajczyk, Okkupationspolitik, 26. On the notion of the “Mustergau,” see Epstein’s recent biography, op. cit.; Rutherford, 68; and Alberti, “Exerzierplatz.”


11 Madajczyk, Okkupationspolitik, 360.


13 Ibid., 148.
Moreover, Broszat argued that Nazi policy toward the churches was not merely anti-Polish, but was also based in the regime’s anti-Christian and antireligious ideology: German measures grew out of an energetic Volksstumspolitik, but pointed as well to the goal of establishing a National Socialist Weltanschauungsstaat sui generis in the Wartheland. Worthy of note in this context is also the well-known study by church historian John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1933–1945*, in which he argued that a centrally directed “final settlement” with the Christian churches in occupied territories reached its “apothecosis” in the Warthegau, where Nazi church policy included measures that would have been implemented elsewhere had Hitler had the opportunity.

The most extensive analysis of the church in the Reichsgau Wartheland is Kazimierz Śmigiel’s 1979 study *Kościół Katolicki w tzw. Okręgu Warty 1939–1945* (“The Catholic Church in the so-called ‘Warthegau,’ 1939–1945”) in which the Polish church historian confronted not only the political, philosophical, and nationalist origins of Nazi policy, but also the effects of such policies on the Polish church. Using a variety of German sources, published Vatican documents, and materials from Polish church archives, Śmigiel addressed a variety of themes including internal diocesan administration in the Warthegau, treatment of religious orders, the loss of religious art and cultural artifacts, participation of the Warthegau clergy in acts of resistance, clandestine religious instruction, and Polish Catholic religious life in general. Although a work of detail and precision, Śmigiel’s study remains largely a legal and administrative history, and is founded on a source base that is, by current standards, limited.

Other Polish historians, both within and without the Polish Roman Catholic Church establishment, have investigated the fate of the Warthegau church, although some of these studies take the form of chronicles and necrologies rather than interpretive histories, and as such, tend to fall under the “martyrological” idiom of postwar Polish scholarship. The Polish historiography also

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14 Ibid., 154–156.
15 Ibid., 152.
includes more politically focused studies such as Jan Sziling’s *Polityka okupanta hitlerowskiego wobec kościoła katolickiego 1939–1945* 19 (“The Policies of the Nazi Occupant toward the Catholic Church, 1939–1945”) and Zenon Fijalkowski’s *Kościół katolicki na ziemiach polskich w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej* 20 (“The Catholic Church in the Polish Lands in the Years of Nazi Occupation”). The former highlights the uniqueness of church policy in the Warthegau as distinct from other areas of occupied Poland, and emphasizes its role as a template for the Reich as a whole, while the latter remains within the Marxist historiographical framework prevailing in People’s Poland in the early 1980s.

In recent decades the Catholic church in occupied Poland has come under further scrutiny as scholars have begun to examine more extensively and critically Nazi anti-Catholic measures in Poland, Catholic reactions to it, the role of antisemitism in the Polish Church, and Catholic responses to the annihilation of Jews in occupied Poland. 21 Contributing to this emerging literature and based in diverse archival sources, the present article illustrates that the history of Polish Catholicism in the Warthegau is a compelling history that demands analysis on a number of levels.


First, it is a compelling history because, unknown to most, treatment of the Catholic Church was more brutal in the Warthegau than anywhere else in German-occupied Poland, or in German-occupied Europe. An underresearched aspect of the history of the Warthegau, the Polish Catholic Church in this “model Gau” was where the severity of Nazi policy intersected with Polish national consciousness and tradition, where persecution, resistance, national identity, religious devotion, and the need for compliance all met in complex and even contradictory ways. From 1939 until the fall of 1941, Nazi policy aimed, through both administrative and violent measures, to control the church, undermine its power, and, according to many scholars, to destroy it. The bulk of what follows will therefore address the motives for and forms of Nazi church policy in the Warthegau in these years; contextualize these policies in the broader national, racial, and economic Volkstumspolitik pursued there; and consider German measures in light of the claim, common in the literature, that the destruction of the Polish church in the Wartheland was the ultimate goal. Although destruction may have been the long-term aim, a key contribution of this article is its emphasis on the non-linear and contingent aspects of Nazi policy through the fall of 1941, and on the regime’s restraint in moving forward with its antichurch agenda in the years that followed, allowing for the church’s survival.

Second, it is a compelling history because the Nazi assault on Polish Catholicism in the Reichsgau Wartheland reveals much about the regime’s long-term Kirchenpolitik in the Reich and beyond, for the Nazi elite in Berlin and Munich, and their lieutenant (Reichsstatthalter) and Gauleiter in Posen Arthur Greiser viewed this “model Gau” as a proving ground for policies against the churches, both Catholic and Protestant, to be launched in the Reich after the successful completion of the war. Measures against the Warthegau church therefore illustrate the regime’s vision for the future, and at the same time they suggest the importance of ideological considerations in the

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22 On this claim see, for example, Broszat, Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik, 154; Jerzy Kłoczowski, A History of Polish Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 298; Kazimierz Śmigiel, “Die apostolischen Administratoren Walenty Dymek und Hilarius Breitinger” in Katholische Kirche unter nationalsozialistischer und kommunistischer Diktatur: Deutschland und Polen 1939–1989, eds. Hans-Jürgen Karp and Joachim Köhler (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 259; and Stasiewski, 74. The claim that the German authorities aimed at the Polish church’s destruction was, not surprisingly, also put forth by wartime and early postwar documentation provided by the Polish underground, as well as Catholic parishes and clergy in the Warthegau. See “Raport Sytuacyjny okupacji niemieckiej za czas od 1.I. do 1.VII.1941 r.” in “Sprawozdanie sytuacyjne z kraju 1939–1941,” tom I, 49, PUMST. Similarly, a postwar June 1946 accounting of human and material losses under Greiser’s regime in the Poznań archdiocese states: “From the commencement of the Hitlerian invasion of Poland it was evident that German party authorities aimed at the total destruction of the Catholic Church, its property, and its activities.” “Wykaz szkód wyrządzonych Archidiecezji Poznańskiej przez okupację niemiecką za rządów namiestnika Greisera 1939–1945,” Instytut Pamięci Narodowej–Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni Przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, Warsaw (hereafter IPN), GK 196/19, 139.
formulation of policy. While the following analysis appreciates the significance of what Broszat called the “ideological moment” behind German measures, it is at the same time unwilling to claim the individual primacy of political, security, national, or racial interests in the formulation of the regime’s Kirchenpolitik. Rather, it emphasizes, to a greater extent than the literature, their inseparability.

Third, it is a compelling history because it suggests further areas of inquiry that remain largely uncharted in the literature: papal responses to the persecution of the Warthegau church; relations between the Vatican and the Polish episcopate, clergy, and laity; and Polish responses—ranging from compliance to overt resistance—to anti-Catholic measures. These avenues of research lead to new Polish archival sources, and their investigation will go far to illuminate the motives and failures of Vatican diplomacy, the relative effectiveness of German policy, as well as the complexities of Polish behavior under German occupation.

On August 1, 1939, the German ambassador to Poland, Hans-Adolf von Moltke, issued to the Berlin Foreign Office a report on conditions in Poland during the diplomatic crisis preceding the outbreak of war. In his report, von Moltke wrote in particular of the role of the Polish Roman Catholic Church, stating, “The Polish clergy deserve special attention, for their influence on an already highly religious population is enormous. The clergy has made itself personally responsible for influencing the population in the spirit of anti-German propaganda…. It preaches to the people that they are about to embark on a holy war. Its chauvanism is unmatched.” Von Moltke’s observations were neither particularly original nor a comprehensive prescription for policy, but they do illustrate some of the ideological assumptions behind German policy toward the Polish church. For the Nazis, the church was a bastion of Polish national identity, and its clergy were among Polish nationalism’s most numerous and ardent defenders. Consistent with this view was the Nazi assumption that Polish Catholic teaching, tradition, and, of course, clergy would therefore inspire the population to clandestine resistance or even overt rebellion in defense of the Polish nation. Thus, persecution of the Catholic clergy and their church was, in the words of Arthur Greiser’s biographer Catherine Epstein, “key to undermining Polish nationalism; it was necessary to destroy the institution that had done so much to uphold Polish national identity.”

24“Der deutsche Botschafter in Warschau an das Auswärtige Amt, Bericht vom 1. August 1939,” document no. 444 in Germany, Auswärtiges Amt, Dokumente zur Vorgeschichte des Krieges, 1939, no. 2 (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, 1939), 20; “Sprawozdanie sytuacyjne z kraju 1939–1941,” tom 1, 105–111, PUMST.
25Epstein, 222.
The path to destruction intersected with the broader imperatives of the Volkstumskampf that the Nazis were intent on waging in the Warthegau, and this demanded, first and foremost, separation of Poles and Germans, whether in the workplace, schools, recreational activities, or churches. Christian tradition and official doctrine held that the church would, ideally, function as a great equalizer and reconciler among classes, nationalities, and races. Modern nationalism and its many proponents among the clergy had, of course, radically undermined this role, yet the Polish and German churches still officially held to the notion that the church could unite rather than divide. By contrast, Nazi ideology posited that “[t]he Polish church is always in the service of Polish hatred.” and so Nazi praxis worked vigorously to alter the religious landscape of occupied Poland. This was especially urgent in the new Mustergau Wartheland, a “virgin territory” that, under Greiser’s ambitious leadership, was intended as a “parade ground” for the rigors of Nazi policy, the goal of which was a radical transformation of the region’s racial character, government, economy, and culture. As Epstein has argued, the Warthegau provided opportunity, but demanded brutality, for “the Warthegau could only become a ‘virgin territory’ if draconian methods were deployed to remove the Polish and Jewish populations. Precisely because it was so far from the Nazi ideal, Greiser’s Gau did become a model—a model of Nazi brutality.” According to Greiser’s deputy August Jäger, the Volkstumskampf had to be pursued with zeal and precision, and in a manner distinct from that of the Altreich—those regions that were part of Nazi Germany before the annexation of Austria in 1938. “The Warthegau,” Jäger claimed, “is the kernel of Poland and it is here that the fate of the Polish people is determined. Here we are accomplishing both construction and destruction. We must therefore be different from Berlin.”

The Nazi authorities therefore initiated a broad ethno-racial project that was to rid the Gau of Jews and Poles, even as they worked to destroy Polish institutions such as the church. Martin Bormann, chief of staff in the Office of the Deputy Führer, emphasized the interdependence of these initiatives in December

27 German: “jungfräuliches Land” and “Exerzierplatz,” described by Greiser as such in a September 14, 1941, speech to the Posen Gauschulungsamt. IPN, GK 196/37, 87–98, here 95, 97. See also Greiser, “Aufbau im Warthegau,” Der Schulungsbrief 8, no. 5/6 (1941), 71; Alberti, Verfolgung, 85. Greiser appears to have been remarkably consistent in his view of the Warthegau as “parade ground,” using this reference as late as November 1944 in an article: “Gedanken zur nationalsozialistischen Volkstumspolitik,” Archive, Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, Jerusalem (hereafter YV), TR.17, file 12309, item 4068282.
28 Epstein, 7.
29 “Bericht über die Tagung der Reichstreuhänder der Arbeit der Ostgebiete in Posen,” October 9, 1941, IPN, GK 196/37, 41–50, here 46. Jäger’s words here are paraphrased by the recorder of the meeting’s minutes and are not a direct quotation.
30 Often referred to as “Stab Heß” or the “Hess Staff,” the office was renamed the Party Chancellery in May 1941, and Martin Bormann was placed at its head.
1939, stating in a letter to Albert Forster, Gauleiter of neighboring Danzig-Westpreußen: “There exists for me no doubt that in the new eastern Gaus the Volksstumskampf cannot be separated from ecclesiastical/political [kirchenpoliti-
tische] questions.” According to Bormann, the Gauleiter and Reichsstatthalter in these areas, who “had been accorded special powers by the Führer,” should not be hindered by conventional ministerial control in exercising their authority over religious organizations in their territories.31

Eager to capitalize upon his authority, Arthur Greiser was committed to charting a path independent from the Altreich, and it was in the Warthegau where Nazi Volkstumspolitik and Kirchenpolitik converged on an especially destructive path. Persecution of the church in the Warthegau was not, however, always applied uniformly or systematically, and it took various forms, ranging from administrative measures restricting when and where worship services could take place, to regulation and confiscation of church property, to random executions, mass arrests, and mass deportations of priests.

Not surprisingly, the initial attack on Polish Catholicism in the Warthegau was directed against the church hierarchy, so that within a matter of weeks, all bishops in the Warthegau dioceses were either incarcerated, under house arrest, or had fled Poland. Reich Minister for Church Affairs Hanns Kerrl initially believed, in line with his vision for germanization of the region, that the Polish church hierarchy should be replaced by bishops and administrators who were either German citizens or so-called Volksdeutsche, that is, ethnic Germans living outside the confines of the Reich. This, he assumed, would not be difficult, as the bishops of Pelplin (Stanisław Okoniewski), Posen-Gnesen (Poznań/Gniezno, August Hlond), and Leslau (Włocławek, Karol Radański) had already fled their dioceses in September. The matter was all the more urgent because, according to Kerrl, the suffragan (i.e., auxiliary) bishops in these dioceses (Walenty Dymek in Posen, Michał Kozal in Leslau, and Edward van Blericq, vicar-general in Gnesen) were “fanatical Poles, and as such unacceptable to the Reich.”32 Kerrl’s plans never came to fruition, in part because he, as a weak and increasingly irrelevant minister, could not exert any meaningful influence over church affairs in the Warthegau due to Greiser’s near monopoly on power, and in part because Greiser and the higher Nazi leadership had no interest in maintaining for Polish Catholics a highly functional church, whether its bishops were Germans or not.

The mistreatment of members of the Polish episcopate was only one aspect of antichurch brutality in the early months of German control. Polish, Vatican, and German sources point to dozens of priests shot in “pacification measures” after the
outbreak of the war. Moreover, a comprehensive report of the Posen Security Police from November 1939 gives a detailed account of antichurch measures in Posen and Gnesen in the first three months of the occupation. On October 3, the German authorities undertook a so-called “Cathedral Action” in Posen during which they searched the cathedral grounds for documents, closed all diocesan offices, and placed the suffragan bishop Dymek under house arrest. Four Posen clergymen who failed to provide information about the location of diocesan files were arrested. In early November, twenty-six Polish priests connected to the activist lay organization Catholic Action were imprisoned in a cloister in Kazimierz Biskupi, as were four professors from the Posen seminary, which had been closed on October 6. In Gnesen, Vicar General Edward van Blericq was prohibited from leaving the city, and the city provost was shot, as were leaders of the activist lay organization Catholic Action. In addition, the Security Service of the Reichsführer-SS (Sicherheitsdienst, or SD) took control of all monasteries and cloisters in Posen province, and prohibited members of religious orders from leaving them. Finally, Greiser issued an order that church services could be held only on Sundays mornings between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m.

The brutal treatment of Catholic clergy and laity was consistent with an order of November 12, 1939, that required, for the purpose of “cleansing and securing” the Warthegau, the removal of “the entire intelligentsia as well as all political and criminal elements.” This included Poles who were members of “Polish national organizations, political parties of all orientations, and the politically


34 Der Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in Posen to Chef der Sicherheitspolizei Berlin, November 9, 1939, USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 38; Heydrich to Reichsminister für die kirchlichen Angelegenheiten, February 13, 1940, BAB, R 5101/22185, 111–112.
According to a memorandum of the head of the Posen State Police Office (Staatspolizeistelle) Helmut Bischoff, this initial attack on the clergy was concluded by the following summer, but the arrest, incarceration, and deportation of priests was not always undertaken in such a selective manner. Persecution of the clergy was, for example, particularly brutal in the subdistrict or Kreis of Hohensalza (Inowrocław), where German authorities regarded the majority of priests as “directly or indirectly active as political leaders of Polishness.” Accordingly, all Polish priests there were either shot or arrested. Many of the incarcerated priests were eventually released, with the result, according to one German official, that their return to former parishes was leading to renewed anti-German behavior and a resuscitation of Polish national sentiment. Such a situation was, however, in the long run intolerable to Greiser and the Nazi leadership in Berlin. Arrests of priests therefore continued in the months ahead, so that by mid-1940 some 80 percent of the secular clergy in, for example, the Posen Regierungsbezirk had been interned in cloisters on Greiser’s orders. When these makeshift prisons were liquidated in the summer of that year, the priests were deported to concentration camps in Germany.

Posen’s notorious Fort VII prison, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, and especially Dachau—these were among the destinations for hundreds of Warthegau Catholic clergymen. Arrests and imprisonment were not, however, limited to priests. Hundreds of Catholic lay leaders were imprisoned as well, as were nuns from various religious orders across the Warthegau.

In a case as bizarre as it is tragic, the Germans established in 1941 the “Nonnenlager Schmückert,” a labor camp for nuns in the southern part of the Gau that Poles referred to as “Concentration Camp Bojanowo.” From February of that year until January 1945, nuns from across the Wartheland were interned there as forced laborers where they worked in munitions manufacturing, sewed and washed clothing, and farmed. At the end of 1941 there were 293 nuns in the camp, and over

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35 Anordnung, Der Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer, Posen [Rapp], November 12, 1939, IPN, GK 196/28, 151.
36 Bischoff, Geheime Staatspolizei Posen, June 4, 1940, Abschrift, YV, TR.17, 72.
37 The designation Kreis referred to an administrative subdistrict that was part of one of the Warthegau’s large administrative districts or Regierungsbezirke, of which there were three: Posen, Hohensalza (Inowroclaw), and Kalisch (Kalisz), later redesignated as Regierungsbezirk Litzmannstadt (Łódź).
38 “Bericht über die Entwicklung der kirchlichen Lage im Reichsgau Wartheland (Abschnittsbereich Hohensalza),” n.d., USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 47. Although the report is not dated, its content makes clear that it postdates June 1940.
40 For accounts of the persecution of Carmelite nuns in the Warthegau see Benedicta Maria Kempner, Nonnen unter dem Hakenkreuz (Würzburg: Naumann-Verlag, 1979), 106–111.
the course of the occupation 615 were interned there. Moreover, nuns in the camp were required to undergo thorough and demeaning physical examinations to determine their economic value to the camp administration. They were accordingly then classified as “able to work,” “capable of light duty,” or “unable to work” based on the diagnosis. When the Vatican protested against the camp and treatment of its inmates to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the response was that it was merely a temporary measure to address the problem of homelessness among Polish nuns.

Over the course of the war and occupation, the Nazi authorities also issued hundreds of administrative measures intended to undermine the practice of the faith and limit access to public worship and the sacraments in those churches and parishes still available to Poles. Such measures included the confiscation of church property, ranging from real estate, buildings, farmland, and livestock; to vestments and liturgical linens, libraries, works of art, gold and silver communion ware, parish records, money, and bells. Nazi motives for the seizure of church property were not only intended as a defensive measure against the perceived anti-German, Polish-national activism of the Catholic establishment; there was also a clear economic motivation. As Greiser stated in a June 1942 speech: “If we have taken away the property of the Polish Church, this is not to punish faithful Catholics, but rather because economic resources for the political struggle against the German people were derived from this property. That is why there


42Gauselstverwaltung Posen to Gauarbeitsanstalt Schmückert, May 12, 1942, APP, zespół 301, syg. 273, microfilm 0-69555.

43“A Note of His Eminence the Cardinal Secretary of State to the Foreign Minister of the Reich about the religious situation in the ‘Warthegau’ and in the other Polish provinces subject to Germany,” March 2, 1943, document 3204-PS in IMT, 32: 93–105.

44Vermerk, Posen Gestapo [Stosberg] to Reichstatthalter [Birk], March 21, 1942, IPN, GK 196/19, 96; Questionnaire on material losses in the parish Odalanów, August 19, 1945, AAP, zespół 133, syg. OK 214. This questionnaire is but one example of such reports submitted in the first postwar months by Catholic parishes from across Poland.
are no more monasteries and no more church properties left in the Reichsgau Wartheland. They have all been confiscated.”

Fearing the use of the Polish language as an expression of national identity and unity, and recognizing its potential conspiratorial function, the authorities required in December 1940 the removal of all Polish inscriptions from churches, cemeteries, and gravestones and, in the same ordinance, required that all homilies be delivered in German. Seeing in any congregation of Polish Catholics the threat of anti-German conspiracy, they placed restrictions on the time and location of services, issued in June 1941 restrictions on the times and locations of religious education for youth, and set in August 1941 specific regulations governing the location, size, and character of burials. They shut down all seminaries and parochial schools, and limited the times and locations of the sacrament of reconciliation (confession). Ever regarding the Polish mass as a locus of nationalist sentiment or resistance, the Gau authorities enlisted the Gestapo to undertake Kontrolle of sermons for signs of political opposition, and they prohibited in December 1941 the singing of “patriotic” hymns during worship services.

Nazi policy not only worked to undermine any potential church-inspired resistance, but also, in line with the broader goal of separating Germans and Poles in public life, demanded strict separation of Germans and Poles in religious life as well. According to a dictate issued by Greiser in May 1941, German and Polish priests were permitted to minister only to Catholics of their own nationality, Poles were permitted only in churches officially designated and marked by a sign reading “Polish Church,” and Germans were limited to attending services in churches marked “for Germans only.” This regulation was of particular importance to Reichstatthalter Greiser who, a month earlier, had felt compelled to issue an order to combat the “outrageous and shameless occurrence” of Germans participating in Polish worship services. To Greiser it was a matter of national honor, for any German who attended a Polish Catholic church “committed a violation against the laws of the German Volk characteristic of the race” and therefore excluded her- or himself from the German Volksgemeinschaft.

45 Quoted and translated in Conway, 319.
47 Mehlhorn to Regierungspräsidenten Posen, Hohensaalfeld, to Höheren SS- und Polizeiführer, Posen, June 26, 1941, APP, zespół 299, syg. 1176, microfilm 60028.
48 Amtskommissar des Amtsbezirks Seenbrück to polnische katholische Kirche in Mühlengrund, August 18, 1941, IPN, GK 196/34, 196; Dymek to rządów kościoła, August 9, 1941, IPN, GK 196/34, 197.
50 Sprawozdanie sytuacyjne z kraju 1939–1941,” tom I, 105–111, PUMST.
51 Bischoff to Reichstatthalter [Birk], October 9, 1941, IPN, GK 196/19, 79.
consequences of violating the prohibition were severe: a one-month sentence to a concentration camp in the Warthegau for the first offense, and for the second offense, imprisonment in a concentration camp in the Altreich.\textsuperscript{52}

The above regulations and prohibitions were certainly in accord with the \textit{Nationalitätenprinzip}\textsuperscript{53} in the Warthegau, but Nazi church policy reflected the regime’s aggressive racial agenda as well. Germanization of the “model Gau” was, in the long run, dependent upon both the rapid and sustained growth of the German population and a concurrent decline in the Polish population. Addressing this issue, an August 1941 report of the Litzmannstadt SD stated that “despite the changed political conditions and the often difficult economic situation, the biological strength of the Polish people has in no way weakened.” As the report related, neither Polish deaths during the September 1939 hostilities, nor mass deportation to the General Government, nor the departure of tens of thousands of Warthegau Poles for work in the Altreich, nor any of these in combination had brought about a reduction of the Polish population in the Warthegau. In addition to calling for extensive sterilization of the Polish “primitive classes,” the report recommended setting minimum ages at which Warthegau Poles were permitted to marry.\textsuperscript{54} Gau officials were not only concerned about the demographic situation outlined in the report; some were also convinced that Polish Catholic priests were engaging in anti-German agitation by encouraging their parishioners to bear children as a means of bringing about Poland’s national renewal.\textsuperscript{55} The Reichstatthalter’s office therefore required in September 1941 that in order to marry, Polish men had to be at least twenty-eight years of age, and Polish women at least twenty-five.\textsuperscript{56} Defending this measure the following year, Greiser himself argued that “[w]e can under no circumstances back down from our Polish policy where it is concerned with … biological struggle, where we intend to reach the point that the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{52}Greiser to “alle Dienststellen der Partei und des Staates,” April 24, 1941, APP, zespół 299, syg. 1176, microfilm 60028.
  \item \textsuperscript{53}In the context of the Warthegau, the term \textit{Nationalitätenprinzip} or “nationality principle” referred to the strict separation of Poles and Germans in public, and therefore confessional life.
  \item \textsuperscript{54}Meldungen aus dem Abschnittsgebiet, Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers-SS, SD-Abschnitt Litzmannstadt, August 25, 1941, IPN, GK 196/16/CD, 146–62.
  \item \textsuperscript{55}Bericht über die Entwicklung der kirchlichen Lage im Reichsgau Wartheland (Abschnittsbereich Hohensalza), n.d., USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 47. Greiser was apparently convinced that priests were undertaking this sort of anti-German propaganda. See “Bericht über die Tagung der Reichstreuhänder der Arbeit der Ostgebiete in Posen am 9. Oktober 1941,” IPN, GK 196/37, tom IV, 41–50.
  \item \textsuperscript{56}Reichstatthalter [Jäger] to Regierungspräsidenten Hohensalza, Litzmannstadt, Posen, September 10, 1941, IPN, GK 196/16/CD, 11; Hilarius Breitinger, \textit{Als Deutschenseelsorger in Posen und im Warthegau 1934–1945: Erinnerungen} (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1984), 46–47; “A Note of His Eminence the Cardinal Secretary of State to the Foreign Minister of the Reich about the religious situation in the ‘Warthegau’ and in the other Polish provinces subject to Germany,” March 2, 1943, document 3264-PS in IMT, 32: 98.
\end{itemize}
Poles have fewer children than we. The raising of the marriage age is part of this struggle.”

The above account relates only a fraction of the restrictions and ordinances undertaken against the Warthegau church, and yet it testifies clearly to both the perceived importance of Polish Catholicism and to the diversity of Nazi measures confronting it—measures that were simultaneously and inseparably political, economic, national, and racial. Removal of priests, closure of churches, and restrictions on the availability of the sacraments limited Poles’ access to the traditions of their church and the “means of grace” that it offered. Confiscation of church property impoverished the church even as it advanced the economic transformation of the Warthegau. Restrictions on the availability of religious instruction and closure of Catholic schools prevented education in the spirit of Polish nationalism even as it ensured a Nazi monopoly on education. Prohibition of patriotic hymns and removal of inscriptions from churches emphasized political control over worship life and aimed to extinguish yet another expression of Polish national consciousness. Separation of Poles and Germans in public worship and the legal designation of “Polish” and “German” churches was in accordance with the broader Nationalitätenprinzip so rigorously applied by the Nazis in the Warthegau. Marriage restrictions further limited access to and participation the church’s ministry, even as they were intended to advance the Nazis’ racial agenda. Poles who marry later, bear fewer children.

Measures such as these were intended to inhibit day-to-day engagement in the life of the church, to defend against the oppositional traditions and potential power of Polish Catholic culture and devotion, to discourage contact between Germans and Poles, and to weaken any sense of community or conspiracy associated with the church as locus of Polish identity. Related to all of these was the Nazi effort in 1940 and 1941 to enact regulations affecting the legal status and functioning of the Warthegau’s churches, both Catholic and Protestant, both “Polish” and “German.” With respect to the Polish Catholic Church, these regulations were intended to undermine its function and status in the spirit of the restrictions discussed above. With respect to the Christian denominations as a whole, however, the regulations were intended to serve as a model for undermining the churches’ legal status in the Altreich after the war.

It is worth noting, if only briefly, that although antichurch measures were applied most aggressively to the Polish Catholic Church, all denominations felt the severity of Nazi Kirchenpolitik in the model Gau. Persecution of Poland’s Evangelical Augsburg (i.e., Lutheran) Church—also regarded as a Polish-nationalist body—was brutal, while the German Catholic parishes and the German Protestant denominations, although not subject to the wholesale closure of churches and mass incarceration of priests, suffered as

57 Reichsstatthalter, Vermerk, 1/50, December 10, 1942, IPN, GK 196/16/CD, 22.
well. Hence, even if German Catholics and Protestants were spared the brutality of the Volkstumskampf as it was being applied to Polish Catholicism and Lutheranism, they nonetheless experienced the rigors of Nazi Kirchenpolitik via discriminatory measures and legislation that were to pave the way for secularization in the future Reich.

In March 1940, Reichsstatthalter Greiser issued an order restricting the ability of “religious organizations and religious societies” (there was no reference in the order to “churches”) to collect dues from members. According to this order, only the Reichsstatthalter had the authority to empower such organizations to collect dues, and the budgets of religious organizations were subject to the evaluation and control of the Reichsstatthalter’s office. Moreover, religious organizations were no longer entitled to subvention from the state, local communities, or other public entities. What appears on the surface as little more than a bureaucratic dictate had enormous consequences for the life of the Polish Catholic Church. These restrictions, combined with an April 1941 prohibition against collections during services, dramatically undermined the church’s financial viability and made clergy, from the bishop down to the village priest, dependent on gifts in kind or, in the case of some priests, work as wage laborers.

On June 17, 1940, three months after Greiser’s order on collection of dues, a representative of the Staff of the Deputy Führer, Oberregierungsrat Krüger, traveled to Posen to discuss with Greiser’s staff and a representative of the SD a variety of issues related to subsequent church policy in the Warthegau. At this meeting, Krüger emphasized the need to revise the legal status of the churches in the Warthegau so that “after the war a Reich-wide transformation can be carried out. It is precisely during the war,” Krüger reported in the aftermath of the meeting, “that much can be accomplished in the Warthegau that would be much more difficult after its end.” The participants in the discussion agreed on a number of principles and proposals, among them, that churches in the Warthegau should have no relations with organizations outside its boundaries, that it should no longer be possible for people to be “born into” membership in a religious community, that those desiring membership be required to provide a formal and legal declaration thereof, that all religious instruction in schools be prohibited, that collections of money during services be prohibited, that Germans and Poles no longer be allowed membership in the same religious organization, and that all religious orders be shut down.

58 The most thorough treatment of Protestant bodies in the Warthegau is Görtler’s Nationalsozialismus und Evangelische Kirchen im Warthegau, op. cit.
60 Mehlhorn to van Blericq, February 6, 1941, AAP, zespół 133, syg. OK 122.
61 Stab der Stellvertreter des Führers [Krüger] to SS-Stürmbannführer Hartl, June 17, 1940, USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 47.
These principles were developed in the weeks ahead, so that when Greiser’s advisor for church affairs Wilhelm Dudzus, who was also employed by the SD, met on July 10 with representatives of the consistory of the Posen Evangelical Church, he was able to present what became known as the infamous “Thirteen Points” to regulate church-state relations in the Warthegau. Dudzus’s list stipulated, among other regulations, that “religious associations” (not “churches”) would be accorded the legal status of juridical persons under private law, but not under public law. In addition, the list echoed Greiser’s March order regulating the financing of churches, called for religious associations to cease all charitable work, demanded that convents and monasteries remain closed, limited membership in religious organizations to adults, disbanded all confessional organizations and youth groups, prohibited membership of Germans and Poles in the same religious association, and, significantly, stated that religious organizations could no longer have relations with religious groups or authorities outside of the Gau, in effect severing, for Polish Catholics, all legal and official ties to the Vatican.

The Thirteen Points exist in written form only on the basis of notes taken at the meeting by Erich Nehring, president of the Posen Evangelical Consistory. Never published as formal and official policy, they nonetheless served as a guide for subsequent discussions on church affairs, as at a meeting between Krüger and Greiser that took place in Posen only ten days later, on July 20, 1940. Called for the purpose of addressing “further measures regarding confessional affairs in the Wartheland,” the meeting was also attended by members of Greiser’s staff and, significantly, Albert Hartl, a former Catholic priest in the service of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA). A fourteen-page memorandum describing the proceedings, written by Hartl and Dr. Frühwirth from the Deputy Führer’s office, is an especially informative document, as it reveals a basic synergy with respect to church policy between the party leadership, SD, and Warthegau administration. Although the Thirteen Points are not referred to as such, Hartl’s and Frühwirth’s notes suggest that they provided a basis for discussion of how to implement the measures and transform church-state relations in both the short and long term. The meeting considered measures against both Catholic and Protestant bodies in the Warthegau, but it is clear that the Polish Catholic Church took center stage. This was evident in, for example, the

64The “Thirteen Points” are reproduced in Gürtler’s appendix, 200–201. On Nehring see Breitinger, 61, note 12. For copies of Nehring’s summary of the meeting and commentary on the Thirteen Points, dated July 10, 1940, as well as what appear to be his “talking points” for subsequent deliberations see USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 15.
emphasis placed on the anti-Polish Volkstumskampf as a guide for church policy in the years ahead, whether with respect to the language used to describe church institutions, the prohibition against membership in religious associations based on birth, the Nationalitätenprinzip as a basis for separation of Polish and German Catholics, or even funding for the maintenance of Polish churches.\footnote{65}{Frühwirth and Hardl, “Vermerk über die Besprechung [of July 20, 1940] mit Gauleiter Greiser über die konfessionellen Maßnahmen im Reichsgau Wartheland,” August 13–14, 1940, Abschrift, USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 47.}

Several scholars contend that the Thirteen Points were developed in the Nazi Party headquarters,\footnote{66}{Gürtler claims: “Die Herkunft der ’13 Punkte’ läßt sich z.Zt. nicht belegen, doch kann mit großer Wahrscheinlichkeit angenommen werden, daß sie der Parteikanzlei entstammen.” Gürtler, 47, note 11. See also Stasiewski, 53; Śmigiel, Die katholische Kirche, 70; Breitinger, 51; Conway, 316–317; Epstein, 224. Although not contesting this view, Dierker, p. 519, describes the “Thirteen Points” as “nothing other than the well-known church-political program of the Security Service and Staff of the Deputy Führer.”} and while it is likely that Munich was the source, evidence of this is not entirely clear. What is clear, however, is that Martin Bormann was frequently in consultation with Greiser over church matters in the Warthegau,\footnote{67}{The memorandum on the July 20, 1940 meeting between Greiser, Krüger, and others points in several places to the engagement of Bormann’s office in these issues. Frühwirth and Hardl, “Vermerk über die Besprechung [of July 20, 1940] mit Gauleiter Greiser über die konfessionellen Maßnahmen im Reichsgau Wartheland,” August 13–14, 1940, Abschrift, USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 47.} that Hitler had approved of the notion of special church regulations in the Warthegau,\footnote{68}{Alfred Rosenberg, Das politische Tagebuch Alfred Rosenbergs, 1934/35 und 1939/40 (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1964), 148.} and that Oberregierungsrat Krüger, at the June 17 meeting cited above, had in his sights a “Reich-wide transformation” after the war—a transformation for which regulations in the Warthegau could serve as a model. Furthermore, Hitler himself is reported to have envisioned the Warthegau playing a leading role in the secularization of German society, stating, “Therefore, as regards future relations between State and Church, it is very satisfactory from our point of view that in nearly half the Reich negotiations can now be conducted by the appropriate Reichstatthalter, unfettered by the clauses of the central Concordat.\footnote{69}{Hitler refers here to the 1933 Reichsconcordat between the Holy See and Nazi Germany.} For this means that in each district the Gauleiter can, according to the degree of emancipation acquired by the population of his Gau, lead the people forward step by step in the sense that we desire.”\footnote{70}{Adolf Hitler, entry 248, July 4, 1942, in Hitler’s Table Talk 1941–1944: His Private Conversations (New York, NY: Enigma Books, 2000), 416. Following this comment, Hitler noted his admiration for the regulation of church-state relations in the United States.} Despite strong support from the Nazi leadership, Greiser did not move quickly on the legal regulation of church status. Although he had hoped to issue a “sweeping decree that would cover all associational life,” his goal was frustrated by resistance from the Reich Ministry of Justice and Reich Chancellory.\footnote{71}{Epstein, 224.}

\footnote{65}{Frühwirth and Hardl, “Vermerk über die Besprechung [of July 20, 1940] mit Gauleiter Greiser über die konfessionellen Maßnahmen im Reichsgau Wartheland,” August 13–14, 1940, Abschrift, USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 47.}

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\footnote{68}{Alfred Rosenberg, Das politische Tagebuch Alfred Rosenbergs, 1934/35 und 1939/40 (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1964), 148.}

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\footnote{71}{Epstein, 224.}
that followed, Greiser therefore had to settle for smaller, individual restrictive measures\textsuperscript{72} such as those discussed above, but these did, in fact, reflect the principles outlined in the summer of 1940.

The efforts toward the financial and legal regulation of the Warthegau churches, as well as restrictions on their associational life in 1940, point to three main conclusions. First, when viewed in conjunction with the individual measures taken against Polish Catholics and their clergy, these measures should be understood as arising from a combination of Nazi national, political, economic, and racial imperatives. In other words, a narrow view of the Nazi measures as merely an aspect of German nationality policy or example of administrative restructuring misses the diverse motives for the regime’s Kirchenpolitik as a weapon in the broader Volkstumskampf waged in occupied Polish territory.

Second, it is clear that the Nazi leadership was eager for the Wartheland, in keeping with its role as a “model Gau,” to function as a testing and proving ground for policies hostile toward the churches that could be implemented after the war in the Reich as a whole. Ambitious leadership, as well as the Warthegau’s unique role as an annexed territory predominantly populated by racially inferior Polish Catholics, offered motive, opportunity, and means for a radical revision of traditional church-state relations and the status of Christian denominations in society—an opportunity providing both praxis and precedent for the application of such measures in the postwar Reich. Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that the measures taken in 1940, as well as the Thirteen Points, were directed against the churches both Catholic and Protestant, “Polish” and “German.” On the one hand, the Nationalitätenprinzip and demands of the broader Volkstumskampf were essential to antichurch policy in the Warthegau, especially as they were applied to Catholic Poles and members of the Evangelical Augsburg Church; on the other hand, minority German Catholics and Protestants also were subject—albeit to a lesser degree—to the Reichsstatthalter’s restrictive and coercive policies. This was consistent with the regime’s long-term goal of an ethnically German and racially homogenous postwar Reich in which the Christian churches had no relevance whatsoever, and suggests as well that the measures against the Warthegau churches were, in effect, battlefield tactics in the service of a grand strategy of secularization.

Third, and most significantly for our understanding of German policy formation and implementation, the pace and character of the legal restrictions illustrate that Kirchenpolitik in the Warthegau was not as linear and resolute as it may at first glance appear. It is commonly assumed that the Nazi regime was aiming, at least in the long run, for the total destruction of the Polish Church, and that church policy was consistently and efficiently implemented under the clear

\textsuperscript{72}Ibid.
direction of NSDAP headquarters in Munich and the Reich Chancellory in Berlin. The evidence, however, presents a more complex picture, for it appears that the Gau administration remained unconvinced of destruction of the Polish Catholic Church as its ultimate goal, that some policies were and remained open to debate, and that Arthur Greiser and local Warthegau officials, although hardly independent of party control, had considerable decision-making power over church affairs.

Hartl and Frühwirth’s report of July 20, 1940, reveals, as noted above, much about the direction and implementation of policy and the basic synergy between Gau and Party in its formation. The report suggests, on the one hand, that Nazi Party and Warthegau officials had developed a rough blueprint for the future. At the same time, however, the deliberations at that meeting showed a lack of unanimity over church policy and a degree of indecision over how to proceed in the years ahead. Participants in the July 20 meeting differed, for example, over the issue of ecclesiastical leadership. The necessity of separating the Catholic Church into German and Polish entities was clear to all, but some advocated a single German bishop to supervise the two churches, while others supported the idea of appointing both a Polish and a German bishop to lead their separate bodies. Greiser’s advisors, Wilhelm Dudzus and Herbert Mehlhorn, were of the opinion that a single German bishop would violate the segregationary practices of the Nationalitätenprinzip, while Hartl and Krüger saw, perhaps with a view to the future, the potential conflicts and struggles faced by a single German bishop attempting to shepherd both Poles and Germans as a desirable outcome that would, in effect, destabilize the church. Greiser stated his preference for a single German bishop supported by Polish and German vicars general, or deputies, but elected to delay a final decision on the matter, which was, significantly, left to him to resolve.\footnote{Frühwirth and Hartl, “Vermerk über die Besprechung [of July 20, 1940] mit Gauleiter Greiser über die konfessionellen Maßnahmen im Reichsgau Wartheland,” August 13–14, 1940, Abschrift, USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 47. See also Dierker, 519.}

Whether or not to allow Polish churches to collect contributions from parishioners was a further matter of contention. According to the March 1940 dictate from Greiser, religious organizations in the Warthegau could, with the Reichstatthalter’s approval and the accompanying restrictions, solicit regular contributions from their members.\footnote{“Verordnung über die Erhebung von Beiträgen durch religiöse Vereinigungen und Religionsgesellschaften vom 14 März 1940,” in Reichsgau Wartheland, Verordnungsblatt des Reichstatthalters im Reichsgau Wartheland, no. 13 (16 März 1940), Abschrift, USHMM, RG-15.007M, reel 47.} Greiser, Dudzus, and Mehlhorn were in favor of continuing to allow the churches to do so, while the ideologically more rigorous Krüger, surprised by this view, was opposed to such a privilege, lest “the Polish clergy turn into nationalist leaders, which could lead to a strengthening of the
Polish Volkstumskampf.”75 According to Dudzus, Polish parishes could use such contributions for the maintenance of their church buildings—a responsibility that would otherwise fall on the Gau administration. Krüger, by contrast, saw no need to renovate Polish churches. If Polish churches were in a state of dangerous disrepair, they should, he argued, be closed or destroyed, for it was only while these churches were still in Polish hands that the authorities could tear them down for the purpose of erecting “National Socialist Community Houses.” Once German settlers arrived, according to Krüger, they would begin to use the churches and, in effect, defend the buildings against the authorities.76 Like the issue of episcopal leadership, the matter remained unresolved, and was, with the blessing of the Office of the Deputy Führer (most likely Bormann), handed over to Greiser.

Worth noting in this context is that the issue of church leadership and the disagreement over financing Polish churches illustrate Greiser’s central role. Although often reliant on the consent of his superiors in formulating church policy, the Gauleiter emerges here as a motor rather than a mere instrument of policy. He was given authority to resolve differences between his Gau and the Party Chancellory, and he had the power to act on his own.

The July 20, 1940 meeting also revealed disagreement over the most fundamental of issues: whether or not it was in the interests of the Reich to allow the Polish Roman Catholic Church in the Warthegau to survive at all and, if so, in what form. This is particularly interesting in light of the common view that the regime was bent on the church’s destruction, and points to the centrality of the Polish–Catholic nexus in Nazi policy, for the survival of Protestant and Catholic churches for Warthegau Germans was not at issue here. Dudzus and Mehlhorn argued that it was, in fact, in German interests to maintain the influence of the Catholic Church among the Polish population, for the church provided a “foothold” for the Pole, who otherwise would be susceptible to criminal influences. In addition, the Polish–Catholic nexus, understood in Nazi ideology as a constituent element of Polish ethnicity, was one way to distinguish the Poles from the Germans who, ideally, should have understood themselves as atheist or simply “believers in God” (Gottgläubige). The meeting’s minutes also point to a contrasting view that the traditional and negative equation of Polishness with Catholicism had never in any way encouraged German Catholics, who were, at least in theory, anti-Polish, to give up their faith. Rather, the exposure to Polish Catholicism had undermined German Catholics’ identity as Germans. More importantly, Catholicism had for centuries

76Ibid.
been the ideological “backbone” of Polish identity vis-à-vis the Germans, and any weakening of Polish Catholic identity would therefore mean a corresponding and desired weakening of Polish national identity. As the minutes of the meeting state, the goal was not to “take the Catholic Church from the Poles” or to turn them into Gottgläubige, but to “undermine the power and influence of the Catholic Church” while, at the same time, “recognizing freedom of conscience” for Poles. In an interesting comparison, the situation in the Warthegau was likened to that in a colonial context, where the same logic allowed for the continued existence of religious organizations, but rejected any form of “Negermission” as potentially strengthening the presence of Christianity among colonial native peoples.77 The significance of this entire conversation is striking, for it appears that even among the Polish Catholic Church’s most ardent opponents there was a willingness to let the church survive, if in dramatically diminished form.

Less than a year after the annexation of the Warthegau, the conferees appeared to be approaching a turning point in policy toward the Polish Catholic Church. From the beginning of the occupation through the summer of 1940, Nazi measures had been restrictive and brutal, and they reflected the perceived role of the Polish Church in the broader Volkstumskampf being waged in the “proving ground” of the “new German East.” They were also a testimony to the ambition and resolve of both the party leadership and its Gauleiter in Posen. At the same time, however, there appears in this narrative a lack of coherence and clear direction that, in effect, postponed the most aggressive initiatives in Nazi policy until the fall of 1941.

The reasons for the delay are not clear.78 There were, to be sure, intensified measures against the Warthegau church over the course of 1941: in February a prohibition against collection of donations in churches, in April a ban on all activities of the diocesan administrative apparatus, in August further restrictions on religious education, and an overall increase in antichurch propaganda.79 But it was not until September 13, 1941, more than a year after the summer 1940 meetings, that Greiser issued a clear directive regulating the legal status of church bodies in the Warthegau.

Greiser’s September order called for the establishment of four new religious associations in the Warthegau. The decree, issued simply and rather vaguely “on the basis of authorization granted”80 stated that henceforth, to be recognized as juridical entities under private law (as opposed to public law), were (1) the

77 Ibid.
78 Dierker refers to the period as a “phase of stagnation” resulting in part from the SD’s preoccupation with affairs in the recently conquered areas of Western Europe. Dierker, 520.
79 Smigiel, Die katholische Kirche, 76.
80 Epstein notes, however, that the decree was issued without the consent of relevant government ministries. Epstein, 224. See also Broszat, Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik, 153.
Posen Evangelical Church of German Nationality in the Wartheland, (2) the Litzmannstadt Evangelical Church of German Nationality in the Wartheland, (3) the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of German Nationality in the Western Wartheland, and (4) the Roman Catholic Church of German Nationality in the Reichsgau Wartheland. The order legally codified several, but not all of the goals outlined in the “Thirteen Points” of the previous summer by limiting new membership in religious organizations to German adult residents of the Warthegau who officially registered with the local authorities, by maintaining strict separation of Poles and Germans in worship life, by requiring the Reichstatthalter’s approval of members of church boards, and by severing any legal, financial, or administrative relationships between these bodies and church organizations outside the Warthegau, whether the German protestant Reichskirche or the Vatican.\(^81\) Described by Epstein as “a milestone in the Nazis’ antichurch campaign,” the decree “suggested how the Nazis would eventually ‘de-church’ German society.”\(^82\) It created, in the place of established churches, private religious associations that no longer had any legal or financial relationship to the state, and it gave Greiser sweeping powers over these bodies. Significantly, the order also stated that other religious associations (such as those bodies, both Catholic and Protestant, that would be designated for Poles), could be recognized under private law as the Reichstatthalter saw fit.\(^83\) Greiser never took this step, however, and according to Conway, the omission of the Polish Catholic Church from the September 13 ordinance “clearly foreshadowed the eventual abolition of Polish Church life in its entirety.”\(^84\)

To some observers, it may well have appeared that this was in the offing, for the day after the Gauleiter’s decree was issued, he gave an aggressively antireligious speech to a gathering at the Gau Office for Educational Affairs. Emphasizing the central role of church policy in the broader Volkstumskampf being waged in the Warthegau, Greiser stressed the need to proceed with the church struggle in a manner much different from in the Altreich. Party comrades had not, according to Greiser, received their authority from Hitler in order to permit the continued existence in their Gau of the same sources of trouble (i.e., the churches) that

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\(^{81}\) "Verordnung Nr. 246 über die religiöse Vereinigungen und Religionsgesellschaften im Reichsgau Wartheland vom 13. September 1941,” Verordnungsblatt des Reichsstatthalters im Warthegau, BAB, R 5101/22437, 3. Both Martin Broszat and Catherine Epstein refer to Reich Chancellery chief Hans Lammers’s concern over the bases of Greiser’s authority to issue such a far-reaching decree, and the vagaries of Greiser’s claim to have promulgated it with Hitler’s approval. The matter was then resolved when Lammers raised the issue with Hitler in early November 1941. See Broszat, Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik, 153–154; Epstein, 225.

\(^{82}\) Epstein, 225.

\(^{83}\) "Verordnung Nr. 246 über die religiöse Vereinigungen und Religionsgesellschaften im Reichsgau Wartheland vom 13. September 1941,” Verordnungsblatt des Reichsstatthalters im Warthegau, BAB, R 5101/22437, 3.

\(^{84}\) Conway, 320. See also Broszat, Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik, 154.
continued to exist in the Altreich. On the contrary, it was necessary to do away with them in this virgin territory of the Warthegau. Although it might be appropriate to exhibit a certain tolerance toward Germans in the Altreich who remained in the churches, “there is no need whatsoever,” he argued, “to take this into consideration here in the midst of the Volksstumskampf, for it matters not to us whether or not the Poles have a church, priest, or anything else.” “Where wood is planed,” he succinctly concluded, “shavings will fall.”  

If this was a call for draconian measures, events of the following weeks appeared to confirm it. Beginning on October 5, German authorities initiated the so-called Action for the Destruction of the Polish Church, described by Broszat as the “decisive blow” against the Polish Roman Catholic clergy. A wave of arrests began that day, resulting in the deportation of some 500 remaining Warthegau priests to prisons and camps and the closure of nearly all Polish churches that had thus far remained open. In the Litzmannstadt diocese, for example, as of October 6, 1941, all Catholic churches were closed except six for Poles and four for Germans, while all Polish priests in the diocese, save twelve, were deported to the Konstantinów internment camp. Statistics compiled for the Posen archdiocese in the aftermath of the “Aktion” paint a particularly grim picture. While at the outbreak of war there were 681 secular clergy and 147 male members of religious orders, as of October 10, 1941, there remained only thirty-four priests to minister to Polish Catholics. Seventy-four priests had been shot or had died in concentration camps, 120 had been deported to the General Government, and 451 were currently interned in prisons and concentration camps. Within the Posen city limits, of the thirty churches and forty-seven chapels open in September 1939, only two churches and one chapel remained available for Polish Catholics as of October 10, 1941—this for a population of approximately 180,000 Poles remaining in the city.
war, only thirty remained open for Poles in October 1941, the remaining churches having either been simply locked down or put to alternative use as warehouses, riding schools, painting studios, and the like.91

Describing the “Aktion,” a report from the president of the Litzmannstadt Regierungsbezirk, Friedrich Uebelhoer, stated:

Since all rights of organization and assembly were taken from Poles, one sees in the church the final and only possibility of association. Participation in worship was therefore … a demonstration of Polishness. It was clear that this had to be impeded. Therefore, on October 6 of this year the Polish churches were, save for a few minor exceptions, suddenly closed and the Polish clergy taken into custody. The Pole is therefore robbed of his last and only means of Polish support.92

In a similar fashion, Hans Burkhardt, the president of the Hohensalza Regierungsbezirk, reported of the expectation that the “Aktion” would usher in “an essential pacification of the Polish people” and “break to a significant degree the very powerful influence of the clergy,” who “remain as ever the backbone of Polish national identity.”93

These are telling descriptions of the motives and intended results of the events of October 1941, which marked the apex of Nazi violence against the Polish Catholic Church. It is, however, also worth noting that neither Uebelhoer nor Burkhardt refer to the church’s destruction as goal or result of the “Aktion.” Destruction, or perhaps the “slow death” of the Warthegau church, may have been the long-term objective, but the immediate aim expressed here simply appears consistent with the main currents of Nazi Kirchenpolitik since German forces took control of the region in 1939: neutralization of the anti-German, nationalist threat posed by Polish Catholicism; restriction of Poles’ access to their dominant locus of association and potential resistance; and restriction of Poles’ access to the traditions, rituals, and institutions of the church. By the fall of 1941 this was largely accomplished, for church-state ties had been severed, the Polish church had no legal recognition, the overwhelming majority of churches had been closed, and their priests incarcerated.

And yet the church survived, and it did so with the authorization of the Gauleiter and his administration. Although both the September decree and the October “Aktion” were devastating for the Polish church, events in the months thereafter cast doubt on claims that these and other measures signalled

91“Aufstellung Priester und Kirchen in der Erzdiözese Posen,” October 10, 1941, BAB, R 5101/22437; Breitinger, 69.
93“Lagebericht des Regierungspräsidenten Hohensalza [Burkhardt],” October 20, 1941, IfZ, Fb 125, 383.
“the eventual abolition of Polish Church life in its entirety” or were intended as a step toward the even more radical goal of eradicating Christianity altogether. Although the church certainly did not prosper, its ministry persevered in all its forms, if in strictly limited ways. The few remaining active Polish priests in the Warthegau, despite their severely reduced numbers and the myriad of restrictions imposed on them, continued to celebrate masses, baptize infants, educate the young, celebrate the sacrament of marriage, and bury the dead—often undertaking these activities in clandestine ways. While it is impossible to determine with precision the extent to which the population at large remained faithful to the church in such trying times, sources suggest that church attendance and other public expressions of devotion remained high despite the difficult conditions.

The “situational reports” of the Polish Government-in-Exile’s Ministry of Internal Affairs refer consistently to the sustained devotion of the population at large, as well as an increasing solidarity between Polish society, the church, and its clergy. Reports of the SD, Gestapo, and other German authorities express concern over consistently high attendance at Polish Catholic masses, their Polish-national character, and crowds of worshippers overflowing onto the grounds surrounding churches. In addition, the postwar testimonies and reports of priests in Polish diocesan archives reveal that those priests who were able to continue their work under the occupation faced an overwhelming demand for the ministries of the church.

94 Conway, 320. See also Kloczowski, 298.
96 “Raport Sytuacyjny okupacji niemieckiej za czas od 1.I. do 1.VII.1941 r.” in „Sprawozdanie sytuacyjne z kraju 1939–1941,” tom I, 49–53, PUMST; “Sprawozdanie delegata Rządu za czas od 15 sierpnia do 15 listopada 1941 r.” in „Sprawozdanie sytuacyjne z kraju,” tom II, Nr. 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1941–1942, 36, PUMST; “Sytuacja w Kraju w okresie 16 grudnia 1941. - 15. stycznia 1942” in „Sprawozdanie sytuacyjne z kraju” tom II, Nr. 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1941-1942, 44, PUMST. See also “Raport o sytuacji na Ziemiach Zachodnich Nr. 4 (do 1.III.1943 r.)” in Raporty z ziem wcielonych do III Rzeszy (1942–1944), ed. Zbigniew Mazur, Aleksandra Pietrowicz, Maria Rukowska (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 2004), 84, which notes that as late as the winter of 1943 the Hohensalza Gestapo was sentencing priests for undertaking political work, the evidence for the accusation being simply that hordes of Polish worshippers were attending mass.
98 A case in point is that of Father Marian Frankiewicz, a priest at one of the two Catholic churches remaining open for Poles in Posen, who in a postwar account recalled multiple interrogations at the hands of the Gestapo, described distributing Holy Communion to thousands on Sundays, and
Further undermining the claim that the German authorities aimed at the destruction of the Polish Church in the Warthegau is the paradox that the Reichstatthalter’s office remained, even after the events of fall 1941, open to the idea of granting legal status to a Catholic Church for Poles. The decree of September 13, 1941 had provided the opportunity for the Reichstatthalter to grant legal status to religious associations beyond those listed in the document, and such a step remained under consideration for many months to follow. Evidence for this is found in the minutes of a gathering of the three Regierungsbezirk police chiefs, who met in November 1942 to discuss the current state of religious affairs in the Warthegau. At this meeting Dr. Heinrich Meyer, Greiser’s new advisor for such matters, outlined the Gauleiter’s intent to grant legal status to a church for Catholic Poles. According to Meyer, such a step, which, significantly, already had the approval of the Party Chancellery and Bormann, would not in any way result in the Polish Catholic church gaining the same status and recognition of the four German religious associations permitted in September 1941; nor would the Polish church be allowed more churches or priests. Rather, the current limitations on the religious life and religious activities of Poles were to remain in effect.

Meyer also noted that resistance against the granting of legal recognition to the Polish church was to be expected from certain quarters, despite the blessing of Bormann and the Party Chancellery. He therefore asked the three police chiefs to compile documentation and reports for their districts on the number of churches open, the number of Polish priests available, and the level of Polish participation in Catholic religious life. The goal of this effort, according to Meyer, was to assemble material that could be used to demonstrate to critics that the Polish church was *not*, in fact, a forum for anti-German resistance, and did *not* pose a threat to the security of the Reich. The significance of this meeting, largely overlooked in the literature, should not be underestimated. It challenges the prevailing interpretation that Nazi policy exhibited a clear intent to destroy the Polish church, and it confirms the intimate involvement of Martin Bormann and the Party Chancellery—involvement not only in the development of Warthegau Kirchenpolitik, but also in an effort to *sustain* the Polish Catholic Church, if only in vestigial and rudimentary form.

explained how his work in the parish, which was to serve approximately one-half of Poznań’s Polish Catholic population, continued under improvised and often clandestine conditions. Ks. Marian Frankiewicz, Ankeita, January 19, 1974, AAP, zespół 133, syg. OK 217.


Father Józef Nowacki, professor at the Poznań seminary and director of the Poznań archdiocesan archive, also referred, in his June 24, 1946 testimony at the trial of Arthur Greiser, to the November 19 meeting: IPN GK 196/38/CD1, 60. See also Śmigiel, *Die katholische Kirche*, 75–76.
Although plans for formal recognition remained on the table at least until May 1943, the Gau administration never succeeded in establishing a functional and legal relationship with the Roman Catholic Church as a whole in the Wartheland, and for Polish Catholics, their national “branch” of the church remained in legal limbo until the end of the occupation. One reason for this was the failure to reach agreement on a required statute for the Polish church. Simply put, for Polish church leaders and the Vatican to accede to any German overtures for such an arrangement would have meant offering a measure of loyalty to the Nazi state in the place of loyalty to God, canon law, and the traditions and structures of the church. On the other hand, to reject outright any such proposals ran the risk of foregoing any possible concessions from the German authorities and losing the ability to maintain current pastoral functions, circumscribed as they already were. For his part, the Posen auxiliary bishop Walenty Dymek bore no illusions that Nazi efforts toward any sort of arrangement had as their goal anything but expanded German control and further persecution. Under house arrest, and convinced that any Polish priests still active in the Warthegau would eventually be arrested anyway, he was simply in favor of the church carrying on its work as long as possible under the circumstances.

The measures against the Warthegau church in the fall of 1941 marked the institutionalization of existing antichurch policy and the stabilization of state control, but were not necessarily a portend of the “final solution” of the church question in the Third Reich. The church’s situation did not worsen dramatically after the fall of 1941; nor did its status significantly improve. It was, simply put, in “survival mode,” and this explains, in part, why the years 1942–1945 figure much less prominently in both German archival documentation and in the secondary literature. Kazimierz Śmigiel among others has concluded, based on the trajectory of antichurch measures beginning in 1939, that the long-term goal of German policy was the destruction of the Warthegau church, and that any tolerance of church activities in the latter years of the war was but a temporary concession to the Warthegau population and public opinion in the Reich. Such a conclusion may be correct, but it remains speculative, and in the final analysis, at issue here is not what the future of German policy would have been, but what the goals of existing policy were, how they were implemented, and how the Catholic Church and its adherents responded.

100 “Darlegung betr. die Rechtslage der katholische Kirche im Reichsgau Wartheland,” BAB R5101/22437, 28–33, here 30.
101 Śmigiel, Die katholische Kirche, 112.
102 Ibid., 111–114.
103 The phrase “final solution of the religious question” appears to have originated with Albert Hartl. See Dierker, 528.
104 Śmigiel, Die katholische Kirche, 316.
It may appear remarkable that the Polish church was even allowed to exist in the experimental field that was the Warthegau, and its continued existence is a reminder that there were limits to what Greiser and the Party Chancellery could and did accomplish—limits that raise important questions about the subsequent course of Nazi policy toward the church and church responses to it.

First, it appears that the limits placed on Nazi policy were largely self-imposed, but the motives for restraint after the fall of 1941—in the aftermath of such hitherto aggressive antichurch persecution—remain unclear, especially in light of the broader Nazi goal of the Reich’s secularization. There remain, however, several possibilities. As emphasized above, there were certainly those in the Gau administration who saw the value of maintaining a minimally functional Polish church as an instrument of social stabilization among the Polish population. Moreover, Greiser himself recognized that Volkstumspolitik in the “model Gau,” although deadly in its application to Wartheland Jews, was to proceed pragmatically and at a more moderate pace with respect to Poles. In a March 1943 speech, for example, Greiser emphasized the fundamental ethnic and racial irreconcilability of Germans and Poles, and stated the firm goal of extirpating Polish Volkstum in the Gau. At the same time, however, he also noted the value of a “transition period” (Übergangszeit) for the economic exploitation of the Poles.105 To what extent, then, was the restraint in post-1941 Kirchenpolitik driven by the goal of maintaining social peace among an economically valuable Polish population, and to what extent was this simply the result of a lack of unanimity or coherent agenda on the part of the Nazi leadership, whether in Posen or Berlin?

Several authors also refer to changes in Germany’s military situation as central to the shift in Warthegau Kirchenpolitik,106 but there is no consensus on the issue of precisely how struggles on both the battlefield and home front had an impact. Hilarius Breitinger, the German Franciscan responsible for the Warthegau’s German Catholics, noted in his memoir the regime’s desire to maintain the appearance of a functional Polish church so as to avoid condemnation from abroad,107 and this perspective is somewhat substantiated by a memorandum written in April 1942 by an undersecretary of state of the German Foreign Office, Ernst Woermann. Expressing concern over the negative reactions to Warthegau Kirchenpolitik abroad (especially in Spain and Italy—two countries normally not negatively disposed toward Nazi Germany), and noting that Japan and Finland had recently embarked upon diplomatic relations with the Vatican, Woermann recommended that any antichurch

106Fijałkowski, 376; Gürtler, 142; Stasiewski, 60.
107Breitinger, 142;
measures in the Warthegau be suspended at least until the end of the war. Evidence that Bormann or Greiser were significantly influenced by the Foreign Office in their dealings with the Warthegau remains, however, lacking.

It is also worth considering the extent to which, as Michael Phayer has argued, a shift in German occupation priorities in 1941–1942 reflected the emerging commitment to the total annihilation of Europe’s Jews, the resulting need to replace Jewish labor with that of gentile Poles, and a post-Stalingrad German effort to gain Polish sympathy in the war against the Soviet Union. For Phayer, the convergence of these three factors resulted in an improved situation for Polish Catholics beginning in 1942.

The decision to eliminate Europe’s Jews and the resulting need to supplant Jewish labor with Polish labor may be linked to policies toward the churches, but the links remain unclear, especially in the unique context of the Warthegau, where the Litzmannstadt/Łódź ghetto remained an enduring reservoir of Jewish labor well into the summer of 1944, where Nazi suppression of Polish culture continued unabated, and where, simply put, Kirchenpolitik differed significantly from elsewhere in occupied Poland. More importantly, the evidence does not indicate any significant improvement in the status of the Warthegau church (in contrast to the church in the General Government). We know that some Nazi administrators were interested in the legal establishment and stabilization of the church after the October 1941 Aktion, but it should also be clear that the absence of a destructive agenda is not synonymous with an attempt to improve the church’s situation.

If anything, German policy in the Warthegau in the latter years of the war is characterized by its consistency. At the November 1942 meeting discussed above, Greiser’s advisor on religious affairs, Heinrich Meyer, made it clear that the granting of legal status to the Polish church in no way meant an increase in the number available churches or active priests. “Nothing,” according to


109 See Michael Phayer, The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930–1965 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 29, where, citing Jan Sailing, “Die Kirchen im Generalgouvernement,” Miscellanea Historiae Ecclesiasticae IX (1984), 282, he makes the argument for a post-Stalingrad shift in German policy. Phayer’s claim that the shift in German policy was related to the advent of the “final solution” and annihilation of Polish Jewry is advanced in chapter two of Pius XII, the Holocaust, and the Cold War (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 16–41.

110 On the use of Jewish and Polish labor in German-occupied Poland see chapter 3 of Christopher R. Browning, Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 58–88.

Meyer, shall change with respect to church life or the religious activities of the Poles.” 112 In December 1942 Greiser, in response to an inquiry about the possibility of raising the age at which Poles were permitted to marry, emphasized again the importance of the “biological struggle” with the Poles and the necessity of maintaining existing marriage restrictions. Similarly, in May 1943 Greiser issued a decree calling upon all party and state authorities to remain consistent and consequential in their application of Volkstumspolitik in all areas of life. 113 In October 1943 Hilarus Breitinger issued to Greiser a series of complaints about the status of the church. His letter suggests not the relaxation of German policies over time, but emphasizes continuity. 114 Similarly, reports of the Polish underground resistance from September 1942 until June 1944 testify to conditions for the Warthegau church remaining largely unchanged. 115 German propaganda efforts against the Polish church continued, 116 and the strict separation of Poles and Germans in worship life was maintained at least through August 1944. 117 In December 1944, when Soviet forces were well advanced into Polish territory, the Gau administration did entertain the possibility of opening, for the use of Polish Catholics, some of the 1,200 to 1,300 churches that had been closed, 118 but this was likely an act of desperation in the waning months of the war, and it is not clear how many churches the authorities considered making available. In sum, the evidence—and especially that provided by Polish sources—points not to the relaxation of German policy toward the Warthegau church, but to its consistency through the end of the occupation.

112 “Niederschrift über die Besprechung der Leiter der Staatspolizei(leit)stellen Posen, Hohensalza und Litzmannstadt mit dem Sachbearbeiter für kirchliche Fragen beim Reichsstatthalter im Warthegau am 19.11.1942 in Hohensalza,” November 19, 1942, IPN, GK 196/19, 117. See also Śmigiel, Die katholische Kirche, 75–76.

113 Reichsstatthalter to alle Behörden, June 3, 1943, Abschrift, IPN, GK 196/37, 36.


116 “Sprawozdanie oficera polskiego o sytuacji w Polsce,” January 1, 1944, YV, O.25, file 118, 1–2.

117 Breitinger to Himmler, August 5, 1944, document 938a in Volk, 397.

118 Vermerk, Dr. Meyer-Eckhardt, Reichsstatthalter im Warthegau, December 22, 1944, IPN, GK 196/19, 58–61.
An additional important line of future inquiry concerns the papacy’s responses to the persecution of the Warthegau church in the first two years of the occupation and beyond. Already in the fall of 1939, Pope Pius XII was well informed about German atrocities in occupied Poland, the closing of churches, and the execution and incarceration of priests—information that put him in an extremely difficult position. On the one hand, he was responsible for maintaining the church’s ministry to Poland’s Catholics, the overwhelming majority of whom resided in German-occupied (and not Soviet-occupied) territory. At the same time, however, Pius also harbored hopes of helping to mediate a peace in this early stage of the war, and he was concerned about the retaliatory effects that overt protest or action might have on Catholics and the church in the Wartheland, in all of German-occupied Poland, in the Altreich, or elsewhere.

Much attention has focused on Pius’s lack of outspoken protest in the face of the destruction of Europe’s Jews, and his responses to the persecution of Polish Catholics bear certain similarities. Despite numerous appeals to condemn forcefully German policy—appeals from, for example, the Kraków Archbishop Adam Sapieha, from the exiled Cardinal Hlond, from the Polish Government-in-Exile’s ambassador to the Holy See Kazimierz Papée, and from other church leaders in Poland and abroad, Pius preferred expressions of sympathy and the avenues of diplomacy over overt protest, condemnation, or calls for resistance. Those who defend Pius’s limited actions on behalf of Polish Catholics have generally accepted the argument that papal restraint, at the very least, helped to prevent a worsening of the situation. His detractors, and among them his wartime critics, have argued that Pius’ lack of intervention appeared to many as indifference or sympathy toward the Germans, and was demoralizing to Polish Catholics and their leaders.119 This view appears to be supported by reports from the Polish resistance testifying to growing frustration with Vatican policy and criticism of Pius XII voiced by younger members of the clergy.120 The pope’s limited response to Nazi persecution of the Polish church also invites consideration of how he responded to German persecution of other victim groups, especially Europe’s Jews. According to Michael Phayer, the pope’s lack of effective intervention on behalf of Polish Catholics was not only a moral failing, but also an important precedent: the diplomatic and moral demands that the German persecution of Polish Catholics placed on the papacy early on suggested how Pius would confront, or not, the killing of Jews in the

119 Among the most vocal wartime critics of papal reticence regarding the treatment of the Polish church was Karol Radoński, the exiled bishop of the Włocławek diocese.
years ahead. In Phayer’s words, “Instead of condemning German genocide in Poland, Pius XII sought to derail the Nazi regime through clandestine diplomacy. Thus, even before the Holocaust itself had commenced, the Holy See responded to genocide in a way that would evolve into a pattern throughout the war years.” Phayer’s claim of precedent prompts reflection on how the architecture of Nazi policy toward Jews may have relied on blueprints drawn up for the treatment of ethnic Poles. It is also a reminder of the fundamental weakness of Vatican diplomacy in response to a new adversary that not only threatened the power and integrity of the church, but was simultaneously engaged in a broad ethno-racial project in occupied Poland’s “model Gau.”

There remains much to explore, and to confront these themes is to engage new sources that can push our understanding of the Warthegau church beyond conventional narratives of persecution and sacrifice. Severely damaged, but intact, the Polish Catholic Church survived more than five years of German rule and emerged in 1945 as an institution with tremendous moral capital. A spiritual and social anchor for Poles and an institution in opposition to the goals of the Nazi occupiers, the Catholic Church, diminished yet revived, fit well into a broader postwar Polish commemorative idiom emphasizing Polish national martyrdom. Redemptive and politically serviceable, this narrative has remained strong in postwar Polish historiography and has enhanced the church’s role in Poland’s culture of wartime remembrance. More recent research, however, is leading scholars toward a more precise and nuanced understanding of German policy toward the Polish church, even as it considers the complex responses to that policy on the part of the Vatican, local Catholic leadership, and Polish laity. Emphasizing the multiple motives for Nazi Kirchenpolitik, the unique role of the Warthegau as a testing ground for Reich-wide measures to be implemented in the future, as well as the limits, contingencies, and even paradoxes of German policy toward the Warthegau church in the years 1939–1941, this article is intended as a step in that direction.

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121 Phayer, Catholic Church, 29–30.