

GENOCIDE ● *New Chapter*

Poland's secret death camps

Poles portray themselves as the victims of a cruel history, but in the summer of 1945 they exacted a murderous revenge, writes **Paul Rowinski** in Warsaw

SLOWLY and painfully history is being rewritten in Poland. Fifty years after the Second World War ended, the country is having to come to terms with the fact which it has always denied – that it participated in the extermination of German nationals in camps constructed by the Nazis for their 'Final Solution' policy of genocide. Always denied by successive post-war administrations, the truth is finally coming into the open.

The first hint of a change of heart came at the end of an interview with the Polish prime minister, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz (see SoS, May 12). Af-

If it could be at least said that what occurred was not good, it would be enough for me

ter discussing Poland's place in a modern Europe he quietly conceded that thousands of Germans died in concentration camps run by Poles. For the first time, a Polish government had admitted to a secret which has remained closed for half a century.

Once the fighting came to an end in Europe in the spring of 1945, many Poles took revenge.

nation happened. The subject is taboo on both sides of the border and rarely discussed in the histories of the war. There were half a dozen sites across Poland where the killing took place. Only now are details about what went on there starting to come out.

The affair has been given added poignancy by national reactions to other massacres from the period. Recently, the Russian government apologised for the mass extermination in the Katyn forest of about 15,000 Polish officers, the cream of the army caught up in Russia's invasion of eastern Poland in 1939.

In addition to the mass extermination of the Jews and the Warsaw uprising in 1944, no other event is more deeply seared in the Polish mind than Katyn. The apology was long in coming but gratefully received. What, then, of the massacres at the German concentration camp in Lamsdorf/Lambinowice. Research presented in a book by Thomas Urban, *Germans in Poland*, states that more than 5,000 Germans died in the Polish-run camp set up there for Germans between summer 1945 and early 1946. The death toll is based on research presented by the camp doctor, Heinz Esser.

Curator Ulrike Treckiak, working for the German-based Society for Inter-Regional Cultural Exchange, with Poland, claims that the figure was "definitely underestimated". With the other half-dozen camps taken into consideration, even conservative estimates suggest the total dead will equal the scale of the Katyn atrocity. Treckiak put it



Gates of hell: the horror of the Nazis's 'Final Solution' is symbolised by Auschwitz. Many were Silesian country people who had had little to do with Hitler's war effort

not feel an official apology was necessary, clearing out the skeleton in the cupboard, Cimoszewicz answered: "Nobody neglects that, nobody wants to hide it."

An official apology did not pass his lips, only an admittance; an admittance which dents the image Poles portray of themselves of only having suffered at the hands of outside aggressors through a bloody past. Cimoszewicz referred to an official Polish historical monument for the German victims at Lamsdorf. The monument is continuously vandalised, daubed with anti-German insults.

Treckiak organised a recent Berlin exhibition, focusing on long historical relations between German Brandenburg and formerly German Silesia, now in Poland. A small part focused on the Polish-run camp in Lamsdorf. A museum there is supposed to deal with all camp

if he found the camp murders regrettable. The premier answered: "Yes, that's right." At this point the interview ended and the prime minister said: "Thank you, goodbye," and the unwritten chapter of a Polish past began.

Gerhard Gruschka, a victim, has just written a book about his ordeal, *Zgoda, A Place of Horror*. Gruschka was 14 when he was tortured in the Zgoda camp, near Auschwitz. "The dead from Auschwitz, I think, would not object if I place beside them the memory of those who died in Swietochlowice [Polish for Zgoda]," he said.

Gruschka's book has been reviewed in the German minority Poland. Nothing, to appear in the German. The subject has remained a taboo on both the border for half a century. On the Polish side, academic researchers still generate what happened significant in comparison to the Holocaust. That is un- For the same reason the patriots in Germany touch it, fearing the as they are trying to minimise Nazi terror.

Only one unemployed

Polish Killing Grounds

The decision to impose the 'Final Solution' – the attempted genocide of all

