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ANALYSIS OF LETTERS FROM REPRESENTATIVES OF RELIGIOUS BIBLE STUDENT GROUPS (*BADACZY PISMA ŚWIĘTEGO*) IN POLAND DURING THE NAZI OCCUPATION

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Annotation

The founder and leader of the International Bible Students movement was Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), an eminent religious figure, the first president of the Watch Tower Society. After his death, the denomination he created split into a number of communities: Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as various groups of Bible Students who refused to recognize the authority of the Watch Tower Society under the rule of subsequent presidents. The followers of these groups, who recognized only the works of Charles Taze Russell, lived in different countries of the world, including in Poland. There are practically no scientific works devoted to the study of the history of the community of Bible Students (*Badaczy Pisma Świętego*) during the Second World War, except for historical studies of adherents of these religious groups. Therefore, our study is unique for two reasons. First, it describes the branches of Bible students that had not previously come to the attention of academic religious scholars. Secondly, it presents the life and activity of its individual members under the conditions of Nazi occupation by analyzing the personal correspondence of representatives of the denomination, containing a description of important historical events. Based on the results of the analysis of the personal correspondence of the Bible Students, we see three important components. Religious activity and adherence to the principle of non-combating the Bible. Suffering and death in German concentration camps for their religious views. Coverage through letters of real events that happened to the civilian population: the Bandera massacred the Polish population, the Germans executed, tortured and enslaved the "lower" races, and a small religious group, which in all its sufferings tried to rely on God in their religious beliefs.

Keywords: Charles Taze Russell, Watch Tower Society, periodicals, correspondence, German occupation period, concentration camps, purple triangle.

Introduction

This study aims to shed light on the religious activism of Charles Taze Russell's Bible Students in Poland during the Second World War. Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), was the founder of the International Association of Bible Students, founder and first president of the Watch Tower Society, and editor of the *Watchtower* magazine. This religious leader professed restorationist views in an attempt to return to the views of the first Christians of apostolic times and did not take into account the various traditional established doctrinal systems of the great Christian denominations. After the death of Charles Russell in the late 1916, there was a struggle within the Watch Tower Society for the position of the next leader. As a result, internal disputes within the ranks of the International Association of Bible Students led to a split. During 1918 - early 1930s the following religious communities were formed:¹

1. Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses
2. Laymen's Home Missionary Movement
3. Free Bible Students Association
4. Pastoral Bible Institute
5. Dawn Bible Students Association.

Apart from the Jehovah's Witnesses, the other groups listed above continued to identify themselves as the Bible Students. The main religious movement, which further subordinated itself to the authority of the Watch Tower Society, subsequently adopted the name "Jehovah's Witnesses." Other communities have moved away from the mainstream and started publishing their own periodicals. Also, these groups recognized the written works of Charles Russell and did not consider as authoritative the publications of the Watch Tower Society published during the times of the successor presidents of the Society. As of 2006, the total number of Bible Students in the world is 10-12,000 people living in more than 50 countries.² Despite the small number of followers, these groups carry out active publishing and educational activities. In Table. 1. Statistics on the number of members of several communities of Bible Students (in Polish *Badaczy Pisma Świętego*) in Poland at the present time are given (see Table 1.). In this study, we will focus on the

¹ Charles F. Redeker, *Pastor C.T. Russell: Messenger of Millennial Hope* (Pacific Palisades, CA: Pastoral Bible Institute, 2006), 269–87, 355–75.

² Ibid. 356..

activities of representatives of these groups of Bible Students in Poland during the Second World War (09/01/1939 - 09/2/1945).

Table 1.

Statistics on Bible Student Communities in Poland as of 2021³

Religious group name	Number of members	Number of communities
The Laymen's Home Missionary Movement	1350	65
Free Bible Students Association	1467	52
The Bible Students Association in Poland, collaborated with Dawn Bible Students Association	200	15
Total:	3,017	132

Historiography

There are many scholarly works related to the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Poland and other European countries during the Nazi regime of 1933-1945.⁴ At the same time, there is little research on other groups that recognize Russell as their founder and are not associated with Jehovah's Witnesses. The largest written work compiled by the adherents of this movement themselves. Namely, the fourth and fifth volumes of the work *History of the Bible Students Movement» (Historia Ruchu Badaczy Pisma Świętego)*⁵ devoted to the development of these communities, in particular, during the Nazi occupation. There is also information describing the activities of the Nazi Bible Students in periodicals published in the United States for representatives of these religious groups. Here are these publications and the communities of Bible Students they represented.

³ Paweł Ciecieląg, Arkadiusz Góralczyk, and Grzegorz Gudaszewski, eds., *Wyznania Religijne w Polsce w latach 2019–2021* (Warszawa, 2022), 219–24. [Paweł Ciecieląg, Arkadiusz Góralczyk, and Grzegorz Gudaszewski, eds., Religious Denominations in Poland in 2019–2021]

⁴ Hans Hesse, ed., *Persecution and Resistance of Jehovah's Witnesses during the Nazi Regime, 1933-1945* (Bremen, Germany: Edition Temmen, 2001); Detlef Garbe, *Between Resistance and Martyrdom Jehovah's Witnesses in the Third Reich*, trans. Dagmar G. Grimm (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Christine Elizabeth King, *The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity* (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1982).

⁵ Julian Grzesik, ed., *Historia Kontestujących Ugrupowań Badaczy Pisma Świętego*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Lublin, 2014). [Julian Grzesik, ed., History of Contesting Groups of Bible Students]; Julian Grzesik, ed., *Historia Ruchu Badaczy Pisma Świętego. Świecki Ruch Misyjny Epifania Wyznaniową Osobą Prawną*, 2nd ed., vol. 5 (Lublin, 2015). [Julian Grzesik, ed., History of the Bible Students Movement. Secular Missionary Movement Epifania as a Religious Legal Person]

Straż i Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa (Watch and Herald of Christ's Presence) is a periodical published in Polish by *Wolnych Badaczy Pisma Świętego w Ameryce* (Free Bible Students Association). Started publishing in 1919.⁶

Na Straży (On Guard) is a Polish-language periodical of the *Zrzeszeniu Wolnych Badaczy Pisma Świętego w Polsce* (Association of Free Bible Students in Poland) community. It began to be published in 1958 and contains a lot of historical information about the activities of the *Free Bible Students in Poland*.⁷

Brzask Nowej Ery (Dawn of a New Era)—a Polish-language periodical by the *Stowarzyszenie Badaczy Pisma Świętego* (The Bible Students Association) community,⁸ who collaborated with the American community *Dawn Bible Students Association*.⁹ The publication began in 1932.

The Present Truth and Herald of the Epiphany is an English language periodical published in the United States by the *Laymen's Home Missionary Movement*.

The periodicals *Straż i Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa* and *Brzask Nowej Ery* describe events in real time. Therefore, these sources are valuable in that they reflect the thoughts and moods of people who were eyewitnesses of the events we are studying. This is not a retrospective review, but a real-time description. Printed information was submitted with a delay of three to four months. The reason for this was the existence of objective barriers to the transfer of information from the territory of hostilities to the United States, where the editorial offices of these religious periodicals were located. So, for example, information about letters for August 1939 in *Brzask Nowej Ery* was printed in the issue for November of the same year.¹⁰ And the first news about the war appeared in the January 1940 issue.

⁶ “Straż i Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa,” Wikipedia, n.d., https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stra%C5%BC_i_Zwiastun_Obecno%C5%9Bci_Chrystusa. [“Guard And Herald Of Christ's Presence,” Wikipedia].

⁷ “Kim Jesteśmy?,” *Na Straży*, n.d., <https://nastrazy.pl/redakcja/kimjestesmy.php>. [“Who Are We?,” *On Guard*]

⁸ “Stowarzyszenie Badaczy Pisma Świętego,” Wikipedia, n.d., https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stowarzyszenie_Badaczy_Pisma_%C5%9Awi%C4%99tego. [“Bible Students Association,” Wikipedia].

⁹ “Straż i Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa,” Wikipedia, n.d., https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stra%C5%BC_i_Zwiastun_Obecno%C5%9Bci_Chrystusa. [“Guard And Herald Of Christ's Presence,” Wikipedia].

¹⁰ “Listy z Polski,” *Brzask Nowej Ery* 8, no. 11 (November 1, 1939): 176. [“Letters from Poland,” *Dawn of Nowa Era* 8, no. 11].

The Main Results of the Study.

Let's start with a description of the general situation in Poland. In the second half of August 1939, in some letters from Poland there were no forebodings of the Great War. For example, a letter to the Bible Students General Convention in Detroit was filled with positive news.¹¹ Also, letters from the cities of Poznań and Bydgoszcz written on August 20 and 23 of that year, respectively, were also positive.¹² At the same time, a letter from the believer A. Padukh from Warsaw dated August 18 contains the following: "On the occasion of the American holidays, which fall annually in September, you have the privilege of using these days for your spiritual strengthening. Especially in these last times, when black clouds hang over Europe."¹³ Also a letter from Poland, for August 21 contains the following words: "the whole world is plunging into sadness, hatred into fear."¹⁴

The magazine *Brzask Nowej Ery* publishes the first article about the German aggression under the title, "The Tragic Situation in Poland." Previously, Bible Scholars preached that Poland would be in a critical situation and would be "surrounded by a ring of German steel."¹⁵ The authors emphasize that these predictions came true thanks to the study of biblical prophecy. According to the theological ideas inherited by these religious groups from the teachings of Charles Russell, before the coming of God's kingdom on earth, there would be a time of great tribulation, of which war was a part. Thus, those who were waiting for the coming of the Kingdom of God realize that various human state governments, including the Polish Republic, must soon go into oblivion. It is noted that the beginning of this new war is much harder than the First World War of 1914–1918. The new war is accompanied from the very beginning by much more destruction, and 95% of the Polish population was forced to move to the economically poorer regions of Poland. Villages were devastated that looked like they were "attacked by locusts."¹⁶ Warsaw and other Polish cities

¹¹ "Listy z Polski," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 8, no. 10 (October 1, 1939): 160. ["Letters from Poland," Dawn of Nowa Era 8, no. 10].

¹² "Listy z Polski," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 8, no. 11 (November 1, 1939): 176. ["Letters from Poland," Dawn of Nowa Era 8, no. 11].

¹³ "Listy z Polski," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 8, no. 10 (October 1, 1939): 160. ["Letters from Poland," Dawn of Nowa Era 8, no. 10].

¹⁴ "Listy z Polski," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 8, no. 11 (November 1, 1939): 176. ["Letters from Poland," Dawn of Nowa Era 8, no. 11].

¹⁵ "Widok z Wieży," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 1940): 4–5. ["View from the Tower," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 1].

¹⁶ "Widok z Wieży," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 1940): 4–5. ["View from the Tower," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 1].

suffered great destruction. Also, the Poles deliberately destroyed their crops so that the German enemies would not get the harvest. The Germans exported cattle to their country. The territory of Poland was destroyed, plundered and was left to hunger and poverty. German bombers and artillery destroyed numerous factories, leaving many Polish workers unemployed. Among the Polish population, infant mortality increased, and epidemics spread, in particular typhus. Prominent Polish government officials were arrested by the Gestapo and sent to concentration camps. All adult unmarried Polish girls and women were forcibly involved in labor battalions, where they were in danger of being subjected to sexual exploitation.¹⁷

Concerning the eastern Polish territory, which was captured by the USSR, Ukrainians condemned the Soviet terror. Emphasis was placed on the death penalty for many prominent Ukrainian national figures and the liquidation of the Greek Catholic and Orthodox churches began. Some were taken for forced labor in distant regions of the USSR. It was also noted that because of this war, the influence of Bolshevism began to increase on the world stage. So, the USSR expanded its territory to the west, and in addition to Eastern Poland, its army also captured the Baltic countries and invaded Finland. The war in Europe, also called the "German-French-English" war, is considered by Bolshevism as a means of destroying the capitalist order. However, according to the Bible Students, Bolshevism will not have a significant success in the future, as it will be followed by global political, economic and social anarchy, as this "mad war" that has already begun will lead the world to total destruction. This upheaval will later pave the way for the Kingdom of God to come.¹⁸ Regarding the takeover of Poland, the Bible Students refer to Adolf Hitler as a "Berlin maniac" who made a "*blitzkrieg*."¹⁹

Consider a letter from Poland that reached the Bible Students' office in Chicago on December 9, 1939. It contains unique testimonies of a believer who witnessed the beginning of the war. It is also confirmed that since the outbreak of hostilities and the partition of Poland, German and Soviet censorship has prevented letters from being sent to the United States. The author of the letter sent it from the territory of Hungary, where he was at that time in the status of

¹⁷ "Widok z Wieży," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 1940): 4–5. ["View from the Tower," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 1].

¹⁸ "Widok z Wieży," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 3 (March 1, 1940): 35. ["View from the Tower," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 3]; "Widok z Wieży," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 1940): 4–5. ["View from the Tower," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 1].

¹⁹ "Widok z Wieży," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 5 (May 1, 1940): 68. ["View from the Tower," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 5].

a refugee, having left the Polish land.²⁰ This believer's testimony was as follows: On the eve of the start of the German aggression, on August 30, he transported furniture from Zakopane to Bielsko-Biala in southern Poland on his truck. The distance between settlements was about 140 km. However, the next day he did not have the opportunity to return home, because already on August 31, at about 6 am, the Germans were already shelling this region. The believer saw Polish cities on fire, and Polish soldiers and civilians were fleeing from the German army. He also told how several Polish officers stopped his car and forced him to go somewhere to run away from the Germans. This journey-escape lasted 18 days, and during this period the believer witnessed terrible scenes. There was no respect for the Poles by the aggressor; the Polish military and civilians were forced to flee and hide. Many Polish towns and villages were bombed. The believer talks about cases when German planes lowered their altitude while flying over fields and meadows in order to machine-gun livestock and shepherds. Another case was that a mother with two children was walking along the road, and other people were walking that way or working in the field. Suddenly a German plane descends and shot helpless people. As a result, the mother lied dead in a ravine, and her children were crying nearby.²¹

By early 1941, it is reported that three million people were killed in Nazi-occupied Poland, and many more millions were effectively turned into slaves in German labor camps. With regard to the occupation of Eastern Poland by the Bolsheviks, it is noted that "so skillful [is] Russian ruthlessness" that it is even difficult to imagine what atrocities occurred in the territory of Poland, which "Hitler gave to Stalin."²² Food products were being exported from Poland, thus bringing the Polish population to a food crisis almost to starvation. For example, according to official German reports, it was recorded from British sources that 300,000 tons of wheat and 1 million tons of potatoes were at that time exported from Poland to Germany.²³

About the life and activities of the community *Stowarzyszenie Badaczy Pisma Świętego* (The Bible Students Association in Poland), which collaborated with the American community *Dawn Bible Students Association* letters from fellow believers from Poland were published in

²⁰ "List z terenu Wojny," *Straż I Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa* 19, no. 2 (February 1, 1940): 28–29. ["Letter from the Field of War," *Watch and Herald of Christ's Presence* 19, no. 2].

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² "Widok z Wieży," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 10, no. 4 (April 1, 1941): 63–64. ["View from the Tower," *Dawn of a New Era* 10, no. 4].

²³ *Ibid.*

periodicals, which covered the current state of affairs. It should be noted here that in the first months of the war, German and Soviet censorship did not allow letters to be sent from Poland. Therefore, it was recognized that it was impossible at that time to receive a message from Polish co-religionists.²⁴ But subsequently the delivery of letters from Poland to the United States began thanks to the organization of the Red Cross.²⁵

The content of the mailings that were successfully sent included the following: in a letter dated January 16, 1940, the German occupation authorities in the cities had forbidden to hold public meetings, however, meetings were being held in the countryside, since the occupation authorities have not yet established themselves there. In the cities, believers stopped gathering from October 1939 onward. However, they met for spiritual conversations in private homes in "twos or threes."²⁶ From a letter dated January 24, 1940, it is noted that meetings in Warsaw were still taking place, but in Lodz they were completely prohibited. People lived under the fear of military events and understood that such new military events would continue for a long time.²⁷ In an April 1940 letter, after seven months of Nazi occupation, believers emphasize that they felt like orphans after a long time, due to the impossibility of correspondence with the brothers. It is also noted that all meetings were dissolved, except for the weekly meetings in the Warsaw Protectorate. Work on the spiritual, preaching field had almost stopped, and was mainly concentrated on supporting each other in those difficult war times.²⁸ A report dated May 11, 1940, stated more clearly that in the Polish territory that had been annexed to the German Reich, meetings were prohibited altogether. At the same time, in the province around Warsaw, meetings and joint prayers were allowed and are taking place. Some fellow believers were in prison. It was also noted that many Poles went to work in the Reich to improve their financial situation.²⁹

The events of the Bible Students' general convention in 1939 were mentioned. At the time of this conference, it was emphasized in the invitation to the brethren that it might be the last. And

²⁴ "Rozmyślenia Noworoczne," *Straż I Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 1940): 3. ["New Year's Meditations," The Watch and Herald of Christ's Presence 19, no. 1].

²⁵ "Listy z Polski," *Straż I Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa* 19, no. 10 (October 1, 1940): 159. ["Letters from Poland," Watch and Herald of Christ's Presence 19, no. 10].

²⁶ "List z Francji," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 5 (May 1, 1940): 79. ["Letter from France," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 5].

²⁷ "List z Polski," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 4 (April 1, 1940): 62. ["Letter from Poland," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 4].

²⁸ "List z Kraju," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 6 (June 1, 1940): 95–96. ["Letter from the Country," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 6].

²⁹ "List z Warszawy z dnia 11 Maja 1940," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 7 (July 1, 1940): 112. ["Letter from Warsaw, May 11, 1940," Dawn of a New Era 9, no. 7].

perhaps those brothers who ignored the opportunity to attend this event eventually realized that this warning was “the voice of God.”³⁰ In a letter dated July 15, 1940, the death of a zealous minister was mentioned, Brother Krupa, who died suddenly while doing spiritual work. In this he is compared with Charles Russell, whom the Bible Students called “the messenger of the Laodicean Church,” whose end of life also came during a preaching journey. On the other hand, it is shown that some believers, who looked at such difficult and dark times, “expressed a certain satisfaction,” since they saw in these circumstances a reason to justify their cessation of the fulfillment of religious duty to serve God and their fellow believers. And it was emphasized that believers with such a direction of opinion were not much different from worldly people. During this period, also in the Polish lands, there was a normalization of life, a drop in unemployment and acceptance of the fact that many Poles go into the Reich to work,³¹

In Autumn 1940, in the settlement Zamość, province of Lublin, meetings were held every Sunday and holidays.³² In a letter from Zamość, February 1, 1941, the last pre-war convention was mentioned; it had notably taken place in that territory in Lutsk. It has been sadly noted that some had left their ranks by abandoning their faith in times of woe and trial. Meetings were also held every Sunday and on holidays. In the letter was also emphasized that in Zamość only “One brother Cieślak and Zaborowski and Stanisław Wiśniewski and several sisters” remained faithful.³³

German censorship reviewed the content of the letters and deleted those parts of the message, the distribution of which was considered undesirable or prohibited. In certain cases, for the purpose of censorship expediency, entire sentences could be deleted.³⁴ For example:

First, we send Christian greetings in the name of Jesus Christ. We inform my dear brother that we are in the former Galicia near the Carpathian Mountains, how we had to leave our dwelling and carry it out, how we stood here (*the sentence was interrupted, deleted by German censorship*), if it asks fine, and if not, then it should also be fine, the brothers from Poznań cannot send anything, because (*crossed out by the censorship*). Dear brother, I'm asking the love of God, maybe you could send some old things, because we're

³⁰ “Uprzejme Zaproszenie Na Generalną Konwencję,” *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 8 (August 1, 1940): 128. [“A Kind Invitation to the General Convention,” *Dawn of a New Era* 9, no. 8]

³¹ “List Od Brata z Polski,” *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 10 (October 1, 1940): 159–60. [“Letter From a Brother from Poland,” *Dawn of Nowa Era* 9, no. 10]

³² “Interesujące Listy z Polski,” *Brzask Nowej Ery* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1941): 16. [“Interesting Letters from Poland,” *Dawn of Nowa Era* 10, no. 1]

³³ “Interesujące Listy z Polski,” *Brzask Nowej Ery* 10, no. 5 (May 1, 1941): 78. [“Interesting Letters from Poland,” *Dawn of Nowa Era* 10, no. 5]

³⁴ “Interesujące Listy z Polski,” *Brzask Nowej Ery* 9, no. 11 (November 1, 1940): 174. [“Interesting Letters from Poland,” *Dawn of Nowa Era* 9, no. 11].

so (*crossed out*) dear brother, ask the Sisters and Brothers in the congregation. We were taken out of Poznań on December 12, 1939, here (*crossed out*) the owners have more than 10 acres of land and a lot of children, and they themselves will not take them (*crossed out*), but here you want. eat, we lie like piglets on straw, nor cover, (*crossed out*). Dear brother, we are (*crossed out*) here (*crossed out*) since April we haven't had a pleasant 2 days, it's been raining all the time, and here in the mountains (*crossed out*) only mountains, forests, we are 8 kilometers from the Czech border. "Dear brother, as you told us, how here (*crossed out*) and haggard You definitely would not recognize us, dear brother, we send Christian greetings to the whole society."³⁵

Let us pay attention to the testimony of the periodicals of the *Polish Free Bible Students Association*. At the beginning of the war, the invasion of the German army into Poland, from September 2 to 4, a general convention of Free Bible Students was held in New York. From there they sent a letter of sincere compassion to their fellow believers in Poland. It tells about sympathy for their "torturous experiences" that they had and would continue to have through military events. The great heartfelt sorrow of this "cruel war" was noted, which filled people with "inexpressible horror." At the same time, the letter contained an appeal about the hope for God's vows during the experience of difficulties, trials and mortal danger.³⁶

History of the Krakow Assembly. One can imagine the number of Free Bible Students in Poland during that historical period due to the public events they tried to hold each year. Thus, 1,500 people had planned to attend the congress in Krakow in the summer of 1937. Also, about 100 community elders from different parts of Poland attended the congress. During this convention, 28 people were baptized.³⁷

German planes began bombing Krakow on the third day of the war. Then, September 3, 1939, it was Sunday and the believers gathered at the place of worship. However, such a difficult situation prevented its implementation. In addition, one bomb fell near a place of worship. When the German administration began to work in Krakow, the Free Bible Students reported the existence of their community in this city and received permission from the new authorities to hold worship services. However, a year and a half later, on June 1, 1941, an order was issued to

³⁵ "Interesujące Listy z Polski," *Brzask Nowej Ery* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1941): 16. ["Interesting Letters from Poland," Dawn of Nowa Era 10, no. 1]/

³⁶ "Echa z Konwencji," *Straż I Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa* 18, no. 10 (October 1, 1939): 159. ["Echoes from the Convention," Watch and Herald of Christ's Presence 18, no. 10].

³⁷ Jan Szczepanik, "Krótki Zarys Historii Zboru Ludu Pana Tu Krakowie," *Na Straży*, February 5, 1988, https://www.nastrazy.pl/archiwum/1988_2_05.htm. [Jan Szczepanik, "A Short Outline of the History of the Lord's People's Church Here in Krakow," On the Guard,].

terminate the agreements of the German administration with religious communities. This innovation was connected with the preparation of the German attack on the Soviet Union. Since the meetings were closed for an indefinite period, they decided to distribute part of the church funds to the poorest believers in the community. Since there was an official ban on worship, however, believers, despite the danger, gathered at home in small groups of up to ten people.³⁸

There is a story about such a case. Almost every Sunday, young believers gather in the indicated place for 10 to 15 people. The Gestapo found out about it. A believer came, by the name of Krok, who set himself up to be arrested by the Gestapo in order to save other young fellow believers. Thus, relatively tensely, however tolerably, the German occupation passed in Krakow for the Bible Students. During this period, there were no official services in Krakow for three years and nine months. Krakow was liberated from German occupation on January 18, 1945. Then civil rights, in particular freedom of conscience and religion, were returned to the Poles.³⁹

Communities of the Żywiec region in Silesia. The community in the village of Radziechowy, founded before the war in the Żywiec region of Silesia in 1940, did not last long. It was disbanded because the Germans evicted almost the entire local population from the Żywiec region. However, the Klusak family of believers escaped resettlement. At the same time, most of their religious literature was seized from them and it was forbidden to hold divine services. In the autumn of 1942, a German family moved into their house, and the owners of the house were given two hours to leave their homes. The Klusak family of believers could take everything from the house with them, but nothing from the utility rooms. The family spent that night outdoors. However, the next day, a family of fellow believers from another village gave this Klusak family a room where they lived until the end of the war.⁴⁰

The story of Janina Fitz. Believer Janina Fitz was born and lived in a village in Eastern Poland in a German family. At the beginning of the war, it was under Soviet occupation, and in 1941 the Germans took over that territory. Half the community of Bible Students, which numbered about 30 in 1941, left for Germany. The remaining believers, 15 people in 1942 were brutally killed by "Ukrainian gangs." They killed everyone who could not flee and burned everything,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Józef Kłusak and Mieczysław Szwed, "Zbory W Żywcu I Moszczanicy," *Na Straży*, April 14, 2004, https://nastrazy.pl/archiwum/2004_4_14.htm. [Józef Kłusak and Mieczysław Szwed, "Congregations in Żywiec and Moszczanica," *On the Guard*, April 14, 2004].

including almost all religious literature. However, Yanina's family survived. She witnessed other brutal murders during those war years. She was especially disturbed by the executions of the Jews, whom she considered God's chosen people.⁴¹

Volyn tragedy. Part of the events of World War II was the situation that took place in 1943-1944 in the territory of joint residence of Ukrainians and Poles in Volhynia and Galicia and partly in the southeastern part of modern Poland, which belonged to the Polish Republic before World War II. According to the Polish historiography, this event is called "Rzeź wołyńska" (Volyn Massacre). Polish researchers claim that then there was a mass destruction of the ethnic Polish civilian population by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, as well as to a lesser extent other nationalities. To date, there is no understanding of those events between the historiographers of Poland and Ukraine.⁴²

These tragic events affected the fate of the Polish Bible Students. The story of Olga Ryl. Bible Students remember August 30, 1943, as the beginning of the "massacre." Her family lived in Zamość near Lublin. The woman says that before those events they had good relations with the local Ukrainian residents, but the Ukrainian national leaders perceived the Poles and Jews as an alien element that threatened the existence of the Ukrainian nation. She described the Bandera attack on her family but stressed that the attackers were non-locals. It is noteworthy that this story clearly distinguishes between the local Ukrainians, with whom this family was friends, and with non-local Bandera. It is emphasized that it was a Ukrainian woman from a neighboring village who told this family that a massacre was planned in Zamość. Also, it was the Ukrainian neighbor Mikhail who woke up the members of this family on August 30 in the morning to tell that the massacre had begun and the village of Zamość was already on fire. Therefore, the warned family was able to find a hiding place to stay alive. The massacre began a kilometer from their home. Both their farm and the farm of a neighbor, Ukrainian Mikhail, was burned down. Bandera fired

⁴¹ Daniel Kaleta, "Zawsze Się Modliłam," *Na Straży*, February 18, 1995, https://www.nastrazy.pl/archiwum/1995_2_18.htm. [Daniel Kaleta, "I Always Prayed," *On Watch*, February 18, 1995].

⁴² Галина Терещук, "Волинська трагедія: ненависть українців до поляків формувалась десятиліттями. Передумови і мотиви," *Радіо Свобода*, July 11, 2021, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/volynska-trahediya-polyaky-ukrayintsi-dyversanty-bandy/31352114.html>. [Halyna Tereshchuk, "The Volyn Tragedy: Ukrainians' hatred of Poles was formed for decades. Prerequisites and motives," *Radio Svoboda*, July 11, 2021]; "Rzeź Wołyńska," *Wiadomosci*, 2017, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/rzez-wozynska-6034430091801729c>. ["Volhynia Massacre," *News*, 2017].

incendiary bullets at all the people they saw and at the thatched roofs of houses. Only those who were able to escape ahead of time survived.⁴³

The story of the believing Sofia Ryl is also from Zamość. At 3 am on August 30, 1943, her family was awakened by a loud knock on the door of their house. The door was opened by Sofia Ryl's husband, and three angry Ukrainians burst in and ordered her husband to lie down on the floor. With screams and anger, they killed her 14-year-old son and her 21-year-old sister. One of the Ukrainians threw a grenade into the room, which, however, did not explode. Sophia Ryl herself did not see the atrocities, since she lay sick in her room. And at this time, her father-in-law managed to escape by hiding in a potato pit. And her husband managed to slip out of the hands of the attackers by jumping out of the window, but he was wounded by a bullet in the thigh. One of the intruders hit him on the head with a weapon and left him lying in the field, believing that he had already died. Then those Ukrainian attackers set fire to the house; the roof burned down. Sofia Ryl managed to run out of her burning house. Two Ukrainians noticed her in the yard, one of them wanted to kill her with a shot, but the other stopped her and said: "Leave her, she won't survive anyway." When the intruders left, Sophia Ryl was sitting on the ground, looking at her burning house, in which the bodies of her murdered son and sister remained. A few hours later, her Ukrainian neighbor came and tied up the bloody thigh of her bullet wounded man. Then Sophia's cousin Ryl drove up on a wagon and took Sophia and her husband to the doctor. However, her husband died on the way, and Sophia was treated for a week.⁴⁴

History of August Stahn. August Stahn (1888–1945) was one of the leading figures in the Free Bible Students movement in Poland. In addition, it is noted that he was a "unique figure" in the history of the Bible Students of both Poland and the history of this religious movement in the world as a whole. Although Stahn was a German by birth, he grew up and studied in Poland, where his parents settled near the city of Białystok. He was fluent in Russian, Ukrainian, and German, but he mastered Polish best of all. Therefore, despite his German origin and surname, he considered himself a Pole and, above all, saw his goal in serving Polish fellow believers.⁴⁵

⁴³ Julian Grzesik, ed., *Historia Kontestujących Ugrupowań Badaczy Pisma Świętego*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Lublin, 2014), 240–45. [Julian Grzesik, ed., *History of Contesting Groups of Bible Students*,].

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "Nieco Szczegółów z Życia i Pracy Br. Stahn," *Straż I Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa* 25, no. 2 (February 1, 1946): 30–31. ["Some Details from the Life and Work of Br. Stahn," *Watch And Herald Of Christ's Presence*].

In 1911, at the age of 22, he emigrated to the United States, where seven years later he accepted the views of the Free Bible Students while in the United States. He was involved in the spiritual activities of the religious community and carried it out with great enthusiasm. However, in 1927 he returned to Poland. Stahn also visited believers in France and Poland, doing evangelism and other spiritual work before World War II. In the 1930s, he lived in Poland, traveled to different parts of the country, spiritually supporting his fellow believers.⁴⁶



Rice. 1. August Stahn⁴⁷

When in the autumn of 1939, after the partition of Poland, the city of Bialystok was under Soviet occupation, where August Stan lived. Since then, he came under close surveillance by the NKVD, and almost ran into danger of being exiled to Siberia. However, when the Germans captured Bialystok in 1941, he allegedly asked that his personal documents indicate that he was a *Bibelforscher* (Bible Researcher). Thus, he himself tried to condemn himself, since in Nazi Germany the "Bible Students" were outlawed and sent to concentration camps. When asked if he would fight with weapons in his hands, Stahn replied that he would not, but he was ready to perform any other occupation entrusted to him. Also, since August Stahn was of German origin, he surprised the local Gestapo because he did not salute "*Heil Hitler*."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "60. Rocznica Śmierci Brata Stahna," *Na Straży*, February 15, 2005, https://nastrazy.pl/archiwum/2005_2_15.htm. ["60. Anniversary of Brother Stahn's Death," *On Guard*, February 15, 2005].

From an account by the Bible Student Felix Purvin, he describes the following incident in Stahn's life during the German occupation. One day in August or September 1941, Felix Purwin visited August Stahn at his home in Bialystok. Suddenly, a German officer entered the apartment with assistants to conduct a search, during which he asked Stahn: "Stahn! Are you German. And we - the Germans - 80 million. We have a wise leader, Hitler, who is the envy of the whole world, and instead of returning to your homeland and working together with Hitler and the nation, you have organized a few Jews, a few Poles, a few Lithuanians, a few Belarusians and Ukrainians, and you are creating a kind of holy army. Where is your shame, where is your honor?"⁴⁸

Over the next two years, August Stahn was summoned several times for interrogation by the Gestapo. At the beginning of March 1943 he was arrested for three months in Bialystok. On June 4, 1943, he, along with about 150 prisoners on a train, was sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp prison, where he was marked with the camp registration number "123911" with the category "IBV" (*Internationale Bibelforcher-Vereinigung*)⁴⁹, and the symbolic designation of prisoners of Polish nationality - "P". There, Stahn was located in block number 15, which was a dock for the Poles (see Fig. 2). He wore a purple triangle patch.⁵⁰ (div. Fig. 3), which was a special identification mark for Jehovah's Witnesses, Bible Students and other religious communities that did not recognize the Nazi regime and did not honor Hitler as a German Führer.

In the camp, the prisoners usually looked for their co-religionists. Stahn did it the same way. The camp administration, in order to make it impossible for the preaching of religious views, the interest of prisoners in them and cases of conversion, the administration of the concentration camp recommended limiting contacts between IBV prisoners and established that 2-3 prisoners could be in one camp block with a purple triangle. Religious ceremonies were also banned. In such circumstances, the imprisoned fellow believers met for a few minutes for a short prayer or short words of spiritual comfort. Sometimes they find an opportunity to sing songs. And in order not to

⁴⁸ Przemysław Adamowicz, "Piętno Fioletowego Trójkąta," *Na Straży*, June 12, 2006, https://www.nastrazy.pl/archiwum/2006_6_12.htm. [Przemysław Adamowicz, "The Stamp of the Purple Triangle," On Guard, June 12, 2006]

⁴⁹ Категорія IBV – німецький відповідник назви International Bible Students і стосувалася як Свідків Єгови так і членів спільнот Дослідників Біблії.

⁵⁰ Partially extant camp records in the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, together with memoirs by former prisoners, indicate that other prisoners arrested because of their religious convictions, including clergy of various denominations, also wore the purple triangle in the camp. However, Jehovah's Witnesses made up the decided majority of prisoners in this category. Source: "Jehovah's Witnesses," Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, n.d., <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/categories-of-prisoners/jehovahs-witnesses/>.

be caught (recognized) by the camp guards in the performance of religious rites, they deliberately assigned their spiritual songs to well-known German melodies. Thus, it did not arouse suspicion in the SS and the "kapo."⁵¹

When hostilities on the Eastern Front began to approach Auschwitz, Stahn was transferred to the Buchenwald camp. Already on March 2, 1945, he was transferred to the Nordhausen camp, located in central Germany. On March 24 received a serious blow to the head during a riot committed by other prisoners, from which he died four days later, on March 28, at the age of 57. His body was cremated along with the bodies of other deceased prisoners. This happened two weeks before the liberation of that territory by US troops, which took place on April 11, 1945.⁵²



Rice. 2. Auschwitz. Block 15, where August Stahn was placed on the first floor ⁵³

⁵¹ Kapos, called Funktionshäftling by the SS, were prisoners who collaborated with the Nazis to serve in leadership or administrative roles over others interned in the same Nazi concentration camp. Source: Jennifer L. Goss, "Role of Kapos in Nazi Concentration Camps," ThoughtCo, January 22, 2020, <https://www.thoughtco.com/kapos-prisoner-supervisors-1779685>.

⁵² "60. Rocznica Śmierci Brata Stahna," *Na Straży*, February 15, 2005, https://nastrazy.pl/archiwum/2005_2_15.htm. ["60. Anniversary of Brother Stahn's Death," On Guard, February 15, 2005]; Julian Grzesik, ed., *Historia Kontestujących Ugrupowań Badaczy Pisma Świętego*, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Lublin, 2014), 131. [Julian Grzesik, ed., *History of Contesting Groups of Bible Students*]; "Brat Stahn Prawdopodobnie Nie Żyje," *Straż I Zwiastun Obecności Chrystusa* 25, no. 2 (February 1, 1946): 29–30. ["Brother Stahn Probably Dead," Watch And Herald Of Christ's Presence].

⁵³ Przemysław Adamowicz, "Piętno Fioletowego Trójkąta," *Na Straży*, June 12, 2006, https://www.nastrazy.pl/archiwum/2006_6_12.htm. [Przemysław Adamowicz, "The Stamp of the Purple Triangle," On Guard, June 12, 2006].



Rice. 3. Concentration camp uniform with purple triangle worn by a *Bibelforschers* (Bible Researchers) prisoner⁵⁴

The story of "brother Stachowiak," leader of the *Laymen's Home Missionary Movement* in Poland⁵⁵ is incomplete. We do not know the full name of this person, so we will use the terms "brother" and "brother Stachowiak." His own story was published in the December 1946 magazine of this religious group. In January 1941 Brother Stachowiak was summoned to the Gestapo office in Poznań. After a long conversation with German officers, he was ordered to liquidate this religious movement in Poland, and to cease his spiritual activities, including all cooperation and correspondence with all communities of the movement. The officers suggested that the brother become a spy to seek out and pass on information about groups of Bible Students. Brother Stachowiak rejected this invitation. As a result, the officers told him to expect a disdainful attitude from them. He was periodically summoned to the Gestapo several times for interrogations about the activities of his religious group. On March 16, 1942, Brother Stachowiak was arrested and imprisoned. He was humiliated with ridicule: "Now pray to your Jewish God that He will deliver you from our hands" and "Look where the Bible and your brethren have led you." During the next

⁵⁴ "Concentration Camp Uniform Jacket with a Purple Triangle Worn by a Jehovah's Witness Inmate," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d., <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn952>.

⁵⁵ "Bro. Stachowiak's Experiences with the Nazis," *The Present Truth and Herald of the Epiphany*, no. 12 (337) (December 1, 1946): 189–92. ["Bro. Stachowiak's Experiences with the Nazis," *The Present Truth and Herald of the Epiphany*, no. 12]

interrogation in the Gestapo, their office contained his spiritual literature, confiscated during the search. Among them were books by Charles Russell and a picture-illustration of an image from the dream of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar from Daniel 2 chapter. The brother was asked to clarify the prophecy from the dream of Nebuchadnezzar having handed him a Bible. Referring to the biblical texts he clarified this topic, which represented the course of human history according to God's plan. After this, brother Stachowiak was put in a real prison, since he believed that in the future the Kingdom of God would be established on earth, and not the Thousand-Year German Reich.

There he began to feel all the unpleasantness of contacts with prisoners and harsh prison conditions. He slept in a cell on the bare floor and had nothing to cover himself with. It was quite cold in the cell because it happened in early spring. Bedbugs pestered and there were other inconveniences. Some of the prisoners had their hands and feet bound in chains. Brother Stachowiak himself became very ill at that time but was not provided with any medical assistance. He already believed that he could not endure such trials, and the end of his life was nearing. However, moral relief came to him when a Pole, who served in the German criminal police, secretly gave to the brother Stachowiak a letter of consolation from his wife and daughter. It detailed their living conditions and how they and other fellow believers hold fast to their beliefs despite outward opposition. The brother also had the opportunity to testify of his faith among his cellmates.

Subsequently, the brother was transferred to another prison in Poznań. It was a former military fort that was converted into a prison. The prisoner's quarters were located below the ground and were cold and damp. Twice a day, prisoners were released from their cells and had to run a distance of about 200 meters under lashes. The prisoners did not have access to fresh air, since there were 158 of them in each cell. The brother compares these circumstances with the Hell of the Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri. Also, the prisoners were taken to the so-called "exercises" or "gymnastics," during which the prisoners had to run up as soon as possible, because specially trained dogs were launched at them, and they were also beaten with whips.

Under these circumstances, Stachowiak befriended a Catholic priest who was imprisoned with him. Although they held discussions on debatable topics, they noticed a certain commonality of views among themselves. The priest and other friends of the brother, during the celebration of

Christmas, kissed him on the cheek and expressed wishes: "Brother, we wish you patience and victory in all your time in prison."⁵⁶

In 1943, the brother was sent to the "death camp" in Auschwitz. In the beginning, he had the flu and had digestive problems. Camp doctors did not care for sick prisoners. In such a distraught state, he had to stand with all the prisoners for several hours. If it were not for the physical support of other prisoners, brother Stachowiak would have lost consciousness in front of the German soldiers. In that case, he would have been sent to the block for the sick, and from there to the crematorium. In addition, typhoid fever, malaria, influenza, diarrhea, and other diseases were spreading in the camp. And 95% of the prisoners suffered from these ailments. However, the brother suffered these diseases and was able to stay alive.

He remembered one incident for the rest of his life. One day in Auschwitz, the camp commander ordered all the prisoners to line up at midnight. All the inmates had to stand completely naked in front of the German soldiers. Two soldiers randomly selected persons to be sent to the gas chamber. Although Brother Stachowiak survived that night, he witnessed the gassing and burning of 1,400 selected people in the crematorium. This incident was described by the brother as being torn from the hand of death. He mentions another kind of Gestapo torture he endured. They were taken out to 15-16 degrees below zero, ordered to undress and led 300 meters to the bathhouse. There they took a hot bath. After that, the prisoners were driven back into their blocks under lashes. A few hours after this procedure, the prisoners developed pneumonia or other diseases that could be fatal.

An interesting moment was the acquaintance and communication with members of the Bible Students movement from the *Pastoral Bible Institute* group. (This point is important to point out because we have found no further evidence of the history of members of this community of Bible Students on Polish land.) Although they and Brother Stachowiak had minor differences of opinion among themselves, they sincerely recognized each other as spiritual brothers, professing in general terms the views reflected in the doctrinal system of Charles Russell. The brother also preached to the imprisoned Jews the view that in the near future a restored kingdom of Israel would be established in Palestine. And then even those whose bodies have turned to ashes in crematoria will receive new life thanks to the resurrection of the dead promised by God.

⁵⁶ "Bro. Stachowiak's Experiences with the Nazis," *The Present Truth and Herald of the Epiphany*, no. 12 (337) (December 1, 1946): 190.

Due to the approaching Eastern Front, on November 1, 1944, the brother was transferred to the Oranienburg concentration camp in Germany. During the harsh winter months of 1944-45, he worked there on the street from 6:00 am to 7:00 pm. There were no suitable clothes for such cold weather conditions. However, later on April 21, 1945, due to the approach of the front to Berlin, this camp was evacuated and 40 thousand prisoners under escort had to walk to Hamburg. On the way, the prisoners suffered from hunger, ate what they could see that grew along the way, including beets. Those who could not go further, weakened on the way, were shot. 15,000 prisoners died on the road. However, on May 2, all the prisoners were released by the US Army. Brother Stachowiak himself then weighed 55 kg, while at the time of his first detention in 1942, his weight was 92 kg.⁵⁷

So, the visible life of believing prisoners in Hitler's Germany consisted of two main points. They suffer and die in the name of the Lord, because Christ also suffered. This belief supported them in the tortures to which the Germans subjected them. While in prisons and camps with others, the representatives of the Bible Students tried to fulfill their religious duty to support and help those around them.

Conclusion

The study aimed to provide a description of the historical background of the life and activities of the communities of Bible Students during the period of the German occupation of the territory of Poland. From the analyzed letters, we can build the following historical picture in which this religious group was located. The Bible Student communities were minor branches which, after the death of their founder, broke away from the mainstream religious movement known today as Jehovah's Witnesses. Their authority was the writings of Charles Russell, but not the subsequent publications of the Watch Tower Society. During the German occupation of Poland, for refusing to take up arms or submit to Hitler, many were sent to concentration camps. Sharing difficult circumstances in prisons, they tried to support each other and those who were nearby. They also maintained contact with their American co-religionists through correspondence. This religious group is unique, as there are approximately 12,000 members left in the world today. In Poland they have 3,000 believers united in more than 130 communities. But their special

⁵⁷ "Bro. Stachowiak's Experiences with the Nazis," *The Present Truth and Herald of the Epiphany*, no. 12 (337) (December 1, 1946): 191-192.

religious experience is recorded in the history of religion through the published letters in the periodicals of the Bible Students of those years, the contents of which we presented in this study.

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