

Volhynia Massacre

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Polish-Ukrainian Historical Disputes over the Volhynian Massacres

The anti-Polish drive of the pro-Bandera Ukrainian underground during World War II, together with the subsequent Polish retaliation it largely spawned, undoubtedly mark the bloodiest period of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in the 1940s. This conflict raged in territories which were within Poland's interwar borders (basically, the country's south-east), and which, taken as a whole, had nearly co-equal Polish and Ukrainian populations.

We use the word "conflict" because there was obvious antagonism between Poles and Ukrainians, and they waged a fight for land – even though they had been citizens of the same state (the Second Republic of Poland, 1918-1939). "Conflict" is thus one of the terms used to describe what happened between Poles and Ukrainians during World War II.

The perpetrators — Bandera's Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) and its military wing, that is, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) — used the codename "anti-Polish operation" in their documents in to refer to the planned extermination of the Poles. Bandera's followers carried this aim out during 1943–1945 on the disputed territories of Volhynia, Eastern Galicia, and the south-eastern Lublin region (centered on Chełm), which they regarded as "indigenously Ukrainian." The present-day state of the Polish-Ukrainian historical debate on the topic is therefore but one proof of how complex the matter is. The endless publicist discussion, which is often accompanied by negative emotions, continues to heat up the historical debate. Thus, the echoes of those tragic events continue to have a significant influence on political decisions in Poland and Ukraine with regard to commemoration of the victims – for indeed, they have become an element of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict of memory.

Differences in Historical Discourse

The main difference between the approach of Polish and Ukrainian historians is in the terminology which they use to describe and evaluate the conflict. As mentioned earlier, some Ukrainian historians tend to treat those events, which the perpetrators themselves called an "anti-Polish operation," as a stage in the "second Polish-Ukrainian war of 1942–1947." The supporters of this thesis regard the massacres of 1943-45 as a continuation of the Polish-Ukrainian War of 1918–1919 for control over Lvov and Eastern Galicia, which ended in Ukrainian defeat. Nevertheless, more moderate Ukrainian researchers use the term "Volhynian tragedy."

The complex issues connected with the genesis and course of the "anti-Polish operation" in Volhynia have recently reentered Polish-Ukrainian historical debate. Some have even ventured to return to the theories that the anti-Polish attacks conducted by the OUN-B and the UPA were Soviet-inspired. The earlier events in the Chełm region (from the spring of 1942 until the subsequent winter) occupy an important place in the "new" approach of some Ukrainian historians. Those events were mostly connected with the German colonization operation launched in late 1942 in the Zamość region (Aktion in Zamosc), which some local Ukrainians were drawn into.

According to some Ukrainian historians the Volhynian massacres were not the beginning of a Polish-Ukrainian war, but rather its second (if not subsequent) stage. Moreover, the first wave of massacres of Volhynian Poles (until the spring of 1943) was a “peasant war,” a “popular revolt” (a “Jacquerie”) — something spontaneous and not inspired or controlled by Bandera’s OUN. This “revolt” was purportedly initiated by the “masses of Ukrainian refugees” from the Chełm region to the west, who had fled across the Bug River and arrived in Volhynia as early as the winter of 1942-43. Once in Volhynia they inflamed the anti-Polish sentiments among Ukrainian peasants with their stories about the atrocities Poles had supposedly committed against Ukrainians in the Chełm region. The number of civilian victims on both sides of the “peasant war,” which purportedly broke out in Volhynia in early 1943, was allegedly comparable. At the same time, some question the very existence of the documents of the pro-Bandera underground proving that the anti-Polish operations had a planned, organized, and mass character not only in Volhynia and not only in the first half of 1943. For instance, the climax of the “anti-Polish operation” in the Chełm region in the spring of 1944 is regarded solely as the necessary defense of the local Ukrainians against the terror that the Polish underground had used non-stop since the spring of 1942. In this way some Ukrainian historians promote the pro-Bandera theses that the suffering of Ukrainians from the Chełm region predated the suffering of Poles in Volhynia. After the war these theses dating back to the final period of World War II were successfully developed by emigrant Ukrainian historians associated with the OUN-B.

Most Polish researchers continue to refer to the events in Volhynia, Eastern Galicia, and in the Chełm region as genocidal ethnic cleansings, the Volhynian (or Volhynian-Galician) slaughter, or, using legal terminology, they simply call them genocide. Some scholars, however, tend to use the controversial term of *genocidium atrox* (atrocious genocide), as they regard the Bandera followers’ crimes as more ghastly than the Nazi or Stalinist genocides.

The Genesis of the “Anti-Polish Operation” of the OUN-B and the UPA

All governments of the Second Republic of Poland made mistakes in their policy toward the Ukrainian minority, especially on the eve of the war (e.g., the Polonization operation in the Chełm Region and in Volhynia). It seems, however, that the “anti-Polish operation” was a direct result of the OUN’s ideology of integral nationalism (until 1939) and its radical faction’s fascination with fascism (at least until 1942/1943). The ethnic policies of the Soviets and Germans (1939–1942) on the occupied south-eastern territories of the Second Republic of Poland were surely another factor. The former conducted deportations during 1940–1941, while the latter systematically exterminated the Jewish population, with help from some Ukrainians, beginning with the summer of 1941. In consequence, the Banderites concluded that they could follow the example of the two totalitarian powers to successfully solve the ethnic problems standing in the way of the establishment of a radically nationalist Ukrainian state. At the end of the war and in its immediate aftermath, however, the OUN-B was anxious to cover up the traces of the massacres and to “democratize” the organization through a new political platform — the Ukrainian Supreme Liberation Council. Most probably the aim of the Council was to avoid embarrassment in the eyes of the West, which as early as 1943 was recognized as a potential ally in the struggle against the USSR for the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state on all “ethnically Ukrainian” territories.

The Essence of the “Anti-Polish Operation”

Regardless of the differences in their approach to this topic, Polish historians agree that the “anti-Polish operation” had nothing to do with the Polish-Ukrainian “war”, as the operation’s main aim was to exterminate all Poles regardless of sex or age in certain disputed territories (e.g., in Volhynia from early 1943 until 1943/1944). In its milder variants (in Eastern Galicia and the Chełm region from the summer of 1943 until the spring of 1945) the aim was to exterminate “only” some Poles (mostly men) and to expel the rest from the territories the OUN-B deemed integral parts of the future Ukrainian state. However, according to Ukrainian sources there were many exceptions to that rule.

The military confrontation between the UPA on the one hand, and the Polish underground (the Home Army [Armia Krajowa, AK] and Peasant Battalions [Bataliony Chłopskie, BCh]) on the other, was no “war” either. Only the intensive fighting in the Chełm region lasting from March/April 1944 until June/July 1944 had the features of a guerilla war. On the other territories where the Polish-Ukrainian conflict went on during the German occupation the Polish underground was too weak to defend Poles against Ukrainian attacks, let alone to engage in regular warfare against pro-Bandera partisan units – all the more so, as most troops (e.g., the 27 Volhynian Infantry Division of the Home Army) were assigned to carry out Operation Tempest against Germany.

Time Frame

According to Polish historians, the “anti-Polish operation” began with the first mass slaughter conducted on February 9, 1943 by the UPA company commanded by Hryhorij Perehyniak “Dovbeshko-Korobko” in the Parośla rural colony in Volhynia (at least 155 Polish victims). In turn, the events of May 18, 1945 in the villages of Radków, Łachowce, Rzeplin, and Borodyca and their vicinity in the Chełm region are regarded as the epilogue of the operation. On that day the “Vovky” UPA company massacred several dozen Polish civilians. It is important that the said events took place on the eve of the truce between OUN-B and UPA and the post-Home Army underground in the Chełm region.

Polish Retaliation

The issue of the genesis and evaluation of the Polish underground’s retaliation are rather controversial, particularly in Polish academic milieu. Most victims of the retaliatory operations conducted during 1943–1945 were Ukrainian civilians. But Polish historians agree that the often bloody Polish retaliation cannot be equated with the planned extermination operation led by OUN-B and devised by its leadership. The retaliation of the Polish underground and Polish self-defense were usually motivated by the necessity to protect Poles against Ukrainian attacks. At times the retaliation was simply an act of merciless revenge. As the events escalated, the retaliatory attacks were conducted by order of the High Command of the Home Army [Komenda Główna AK]. Polish troops were to conduct broader terrorist operations (as the retaliation operations were called in Home Army documents), using the principle of collective responsibility toward the enemy population (e.g., in the early spring of 1944 in the Chełm region). But the main differences between the Polish retaliatory attacks and the “anti-Polish operation” conducted by the OUN-B and the UPA

were their intentions and the incomparably smaller scale of the former operations.

Unfortunately, sober, fact-based discussion is hampered by some Polish participants of those events and by conservative, nationalist milieux who try to belittle Ukrainian suffering or to justify the violence by deeming it a “higher necessity.” For instance, the Ukrainian peasants killed at the end of the German occupation by the Home Army and the Peasant Battalions in Sahryń are usually referred to as chance victims of “stray bullets.” Similar efforts are made with regard to the anti-Ukrainian violence inflicted by the Polish nationalist partisan units (National Armed Forces [Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, NSZ]) in the eastern Lublin Region after July 1944. In their search for conspiracy theories some try to take the blame off the National Armed Forces for its crimes against Ukrainians (e.g., the case of Wierzchowiny), claiming that they were inspired or conducted by Soviets or by Polish communists.

Number of Victims (1943–1945)

According to conservative Polish estimates, the “anti-Polish operation” conducted by the OUN-B and UPA resulted in a total of 80,000–100,000 victims (from early 1943 to mid-1945): 40,000–60,000 in Volhynia, 30,000–40,000 in Eastern Galicia, at least 4,000 in present-day Polish territory, including up to 2,000 in the Chełm region. The number of Ukrainian victims of the Polish retaliation during that period is estimated at 9,000–13,000 (ca. 2,000–3,000 in Volhynia, 1,000–2,000 in Eastern Galicia, and 6,000–7,000 in the present-day Polish territory, including 2,500 in the Chełm region). According to Ukrainian historians, approx. 17,000–24,000 Ukrainians died at the hands of Poles from late 1942 until early 1945 (10,000–12,000 in Volhynia, Polesie, and in the vicinity of Beresteczko, 3,000–5,000 in Eastern Galicia, 4,000–7,000 in the Chełm region, including up to 4,000 in the Hrubieszów county). Ukrainian historians estimate the Polish losses, in turn, at 40,000–60,000, including 23,000–40,000 in Volhynia, and 15,000–20,000 in the Eastern Galicia. Ukrainian estimates do not include Poles killed in the Chełm region.

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Photo gallery

