

Volhynia Massacre

<https://volhyniamassacre.eu/zw2/controversies/184,Grzegorz-Motyka-A-Failed-Book.html>
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Grzegorz Motyka, A Failed Book

A new book has been published in Ukraine discussing the still controversial activities of the OUN and UPA, the two Ukrainian organizations that operated during WWII. Its author is not so much interested in what really happened, as in attempting to defend the UPA against allegations of having conducted organized anti-Polish cleansings.

After the outbreak of the German-Soviet war in June 1941, the Polish government-in-exile renewed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, which had been severed in September 1939 in response to the Soviet invasion of Poland. Ever afterward, Polish diplomats had nonetheless appealed for the release of twenty-thousand imprisoned officers, who, as it later became clear, had been executed in Katyń by the NKVD. During one such meeting with the Soviet leadership, Joseph Stalin, when asked about the fate of Polish prisoners, demurely replied: "Perhaps they fled to Manchuria". I was reminded of this story while reading the book by Volodymyr Viatrovykh *Drukha polsko-ukrayinska vyina 1942-1947* (The Second Polish-Ukrainian War, 1942-1947).

The author belongs to the young generation of Ukrainian historians, having debuted in 2000 with a book about raids carried out by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukrayinska Povstanska Armiya*, UPA) in Czechoslovakia. His take on these little-known historical events was received very well. This is probably why Viatrovykh was made the first director of the Center for Research on the Liberation Movement in Lviv, which brings together young scholars researching the Ukrainian resistance movement. The Center's numerous publications have no doubt broadened knowledge of the history of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (*Orhanizatsiya Ukrayinskykh Natsionalistiv*, OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. However, these publications exhibit a disturbing tendency to gloss over inconvenient subjects from the history of these organizations and to treat their members defensively. Nevertheless, it was not until his appointment to the post of the Director of the National Archives of the Security Service of Ukraine (whose collection is just as valuable as that of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance) that Viatrovykh gained wider recognition. The prestige of his position and the trust that President Viktor Yushchenko bestowed upon him made Viatrovykh one of the key figures shaping Ukrainian historical memory. He had to step down from this important position soon after Viktor Yanukovich had come to power, but Viatrovykh's writings are still considered to be of singular importance.

I was all the more disappointed, therefore, with his latest book. In fact, it is not even a scholarly work, but rather a publicist essay. It could perhaps more aptly be dubbed a defense speech made by a lawyer who, while talented, is emotionally involved in the case. The author does not even try to hide the fact that he is defending Bandera's faction of the OUN and the UPA against what in his opinion are unjust charges of having murdered Polish civilians. So great was Viatrovykh's devotion to this task that, having read the book, I almost feel as if he were not indeed interested in what actually happened between Poles and Ukrainians during World War Two. This would explain why Viatrovykh writes with a a priori agenda in mind, either rejecting or ignoring any and all arguments

and facts that do not fit. It is impossible to address all the weaknesses of the book, therefore I will focus only on several of the key issues.

Looking for the culprits

One of the main themes present in Viatrovych's study is the attempt to prove that the OUN-B (Stepan Bandera's faction of the OUN) never ordered the murder of the Polish population. According to the author, the murders were initiated spontaneously by Volhynian Ukrainians or the "first" UPA led by Taras "Bulba" Borovets: we can hardly talk about the responsibility of the OUN-B, which would not join the anti-Polish campaign until the summer of 1943, "forced" by the dynamically advancing situation. Viatrovych at the same time seeks to challenge the testimony of Yuriy "Rudyi" Stelmashchuk, , for example, who one of the perpetrators of the anti-Polish cleansing in the western districts of Volhynia. Viatrovych lists a number of doubts, suggesting manipulation on the part of officers of the Soviet security apparatus who interrogated "Rudyi". He indicates that the number of fifteen-thousand murdered Poles "Rudyi" recorded in his testimony is implausible, citing the number of people of Polish nationality killed (five thousand) amended by Stelmashchuk himself at the trial, as if this were not every bit as terrifying. Viatrovych also questions the number (about a hundred) of Polish towns and villages massacred by the UPA on July 11, 1943. If there had indeed been an organized anti-Polish campaign at that time, the author says, it would have been mentioned in the OUN's reports, whereas these reports only cite one Polish village that fell victim to Ukrainian nationalists on that day. For Viatrovych, the fact that there is no document by either OUN or the UPA ordering the anti-Polish cleansing is an irrefutable proof that such an order was never issued. In reading the "Volhynia" excerpts of Viatrovych's book, someone unaware of the complexities of Polish-Ukrainian relations might well get the impression that there were no organized massacres of Poles at all. And even if they did happen, it is not at all clear who did what exactly.

It is sometimes difficult to understand what the author's real views are. At one point he adamantly states: "at least until August 1943, there was no final decision of the OUN's Provid (High Command) as to the solution to the Polish question". However, but a mere few pages later Viatrovych approvingly quotes one of the UPA's leaders - Stelmashchuk - as admitting to having committed the mass murder of Poles in Volhynia on the orders of the OUN-B and UPA leader, Dmytro Klyachivsky, "Klym Savur". It is obvious, therefore, that some orders did in fact exist. Elsewhere Viatrovych resolutely claims: "Any attempt to answer the question whether or not the leadership of the Ukrainian underground initiated mass anti-Polish operations remains a debatable issue".

Such rhetorical tricks will lead a vast majority of the book's readers to conclude that the OUN never issued any orders pertaining to the Polish problem. And only a few people will see that Viatrovych in fact favors, or at least does not reject the hypothesis that "Klym Savur" ordered the extermination of the Polish people on his own, without consulting the High Command (Provid) of the OUN. This was the cause of the severe criticism of Klyachivsky's operations during the Third Congress of the OUN. Viatrovych brings this up because it fits the general tone of his narrative, but he does not mention how this heated discussion concluded - even though it is of crucial importance for the assessment of the OUN leadership. For as available sources clearly indicate, the Provid of the OUN-B (mainly at

the initiative of Roman Shukhevych) acknowledged “Klym Savur’s” anti-Polish operations, thus approving them. Shukhevich’s doubts were finally dispelled during his inspection of the situation in Volhynia in the autumn of 1943. It was then that he most likely decided to shift the “Volhynian tactics” to Eastern Galicia.

Scapegoat

As I have mentioned, according to Viatrovych the first mass murders of Poles were spontaneous. Here he is also trying to shift partial responsibility to the “first” UPA led by “Bulba”, who, as many seem to know, in April 1943 rejected the OUN-B’s proposal to join in the anti-Polish cleansing. The hypothesis of a “peasants’ revolt” which was to have sparked the “Volhynia events” is – contrary to what some reviewers of Viatrovych’s book claim – hardly original. As recently as 2005, this was how the Volhynian massacre was depicted by the last leader of the UPA, Vasyl Kuk, who, for that matter, only repeated the version of events widespread within Bandera circles even during the Second World War. I realize that the “peasants’ revolt” hypothesis is quite popular not only in Ukraine, and this is why I must emphasize its primary weakness: there is no evidence for it. In order for it to be considered true, one would have to indicate Polish villages slaughtered by Ukrainian peasants who had spontaneously reached for axes. Meanwhile, although the perpetrators of hundreds of murders of Poles have been identified, in each case they were Bandera’s people (or sometimes Melnyk’s troops, whom the Banderites had forced to subordinate themselves, such as Maksym “Maks” Skorupski’s group). Indeed, in not a single case has it been established that the crimes were committed by peasants themselves. The same is true of “Bulba’s” “first” UPA: this formation fought troops of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK), but no evidence to date has been found for its involvement in massacring civilians. And while Polish and Soviet reports initially described the perpetrators of attacks as “Bulba’s men”, this was due rather more to the popularity of Borovets’ formation and not its members’ actual participation in the crimes. It was because of the popularization of the name UPA by “Bulba” that Bandera’s supporters ultimately decided to “steal” it from him. Thus, until Viatrovych manages to indicate at least a few cases of mass crimes committed against Poles at the beginning of the anti-Polish operations (February–May 1943), in which the perpetrators prove beyond any doubt to be peasants or Borovets’ subordinates unrelated to the OUN-B, all his remarks on the subject should be treated as unsubstantiated.

Not only do we not know of even a single case when peasants alone perpetrated mass murders, but often we have seen situations where the UPA mobilized local people to carry out attacks on Polish settlements. For example, in the summer of 1943, in the village of Janówka, UPA partisans gathered men of Ukrainian origin between sixteen and sixty years of age, then led them to the village of Gaj and ordered them to kill the Poles who had already been rounded up along a pit, threatening them with death for disobeying this order. These people were armed only with axes and pitchforks. Interestingly, Viatrovych cites an example of a similar event, stipulating that such situations were few and always resulted from the initiative of local OUN leaders, which supposedly indicates the absence of instructions from the central leadership ordering such actions. It is worth noting the author’s “methodology”: he cannot identify even a single Polish village murdered “spontaneously”, but this does not stop him from maintaining that such a phenomenon was widespread in Volhynia.

On the other hand, he tries to dismiss reliable evidence of UPA having mobilized civilians to carry out anti-Polish deeds. However, everything shows that the attacks on Poles would not have taken place without the presence and incitement of the UPA. The OUN-B and UPA not only initiated the first such operations, but they also tried to involve the widest circles of the local population. By forcing peasants to participate in the anti-Polish cleansing the OUN probably planned to present the slaughter of some Poles as “peasant” lynchings. After all, without the active participation of the peasants, there could not be the “national revolution” so eagerly awaited by nationalists. Anyway, the idea of provoking a “peasants’ revolt” is not new – the OUN ideologues had spoken about it several years earlier.

A village shrouded in lies

According to Viatrovych, “regular information about anti-Polish operations of the UPA appears in the UPA’s documentation from June 1943.” One only needs to take up *Litopys UPA. Nova seriya* (vol. 2) to find out that this is not true. The report of the “Szauli” *sotnya* (military company of approx. 100 men) for May 1943, under the dates: May 3, 4, 15, 19, 23 and 25, eloquently states: “colonies that collaborate with the Bolsheviks and Germans were liquidated; no losses on our side”. Since anti-Polish operations were always justified, even in the official orders of the High Command of the OUN and the UPA, on the basis of the actual and alleged collaboration of Poles with Germans and Soviets, there is no doubt that this document refers to Polish villages.

Let me focus on the first *sotnya* of the UPA. Viatrovych challenges my statement that the village of Parośla was massacred on February 9, 1943 by the first *sotnya*, led at the time by Hryhoriy Perehinyak “Korobka-Dovbeshka”. Viatrovych believes that there is no conclusive evidence of this. Meanwhile, one of the accounts concerning the murder comes from a victim of the tragedy who miraculously survived. Luck would have it that it was in that person’s home that the company’s headquarters were located, where captured members of the German auxiliary police were interrogated. Since there had been no armed confrontations in the area, they must have been caught in nearby Włodzimierzec, where – as each history of the UPA informs us – on the night of February 8/9, the first *sotnya* destroyed an auxiliary police station. The hypothesis that it was that very company that entered Parośla some hours later seems plausible in this light.

In defending members of the first *sotnya* against allegations of an attack on the village, Volodymyr Viatrovych in his rhetorical zeal crosses the line of good taste. He writes that the company had insufficient weapons to attack a Polish village. Meanwhile, the residents of the said village (more than 150 people, including infants) were bound and then one by one slaughtered with axes.

Events in Eastern Galicia

The description of anti-Polish operations in Eastern Galicia included in the book also leaves much to be desired. According to the author of ‘The Second Polish-Ukrainian War’, the conflict in the region was instigated by Poles who meant to take revenge for the Volhynia slaughter, which in turn led to a backlash from the Ukrainian underground. Reading Viatrovych’s descriptions of these events, it is hard to realize that at the turn of 1943 and 1944 Ukrainian losses in Galicia were, admittedly, well

into triple digits, but Polish casualties numbered in the thousands. I would not be surprised if it turned out that the “Siromanci” *sotnya* alone killed more Poles than all the Galician units of the AK together killed Ukrainians. Although Viatrovych admits that the UPA decided to expel all Poles from Eastern Galicia under penalty of death, he cites the starting date of the mass anti-Polish campaign as May 5, 1944. Nonetheless, he fails to offer how to interpret the fact that before that date at least several thousand Poles had been killed. It is indeed true that the order of the Provid (High Command) commencing the anti-Polish campaign (which historians have known for years) is dated May 5, but its content indicates that it only repeats a previous command (it contains the phrase “once again we remind you”).

As analysis of events shows, in the second half of 1943, the OUN-B in Eastern Galicia proceeded to remove “Polish activists” (priests, teachers, foresters). The next stage involved attacking Polish villages. The campaign of mass anti-Polish cleansing and the expulsion of the Polish population of Galicia began during the Roman Catholic Easter of 1944. In July 1944 the UPA commander Shukhevich indicated April as the beginning of the cleansing. To quote him: “From April 1944 (...) the UPA Command issued an order on the deportation of Poles, if they do not resettle themselves”. Characteristically, there is not any reference to this statement of the UPA commander in Viatrovych’s book.

Viatrovych also fails to mention that, despite official instructions ordering to kill only men, the UPA campaign in Galicia often took such a cruel course that even some nationalists timidly suggested a stop to further attacks. One of the OUN activists justified such a proposal as follows: “the resistance of Polish self-defense decreased to the extent that Ukrainian measures resemble German operations against Jews. (...) I believe that we have achieved everything we needed. Whether a thousand more or less Poles leave Galicia no longer matters.”

The beginning of the war

The author lends credence to a theory popular in Ukrainian historiography – namely, that the Polish-Ukrainian conflict was instigated by Poles in 1942 in the Chełm region, which lies west of the Bug River. This claim is far removed from any facts. Ukrainians in the region did in fact fall victim to many attacks carried out by the Polish underground, but this was mainly in the years 1943–1944. Most of the attacks took place after the start of the anti-Polish cleansing in Volhynia, and therefore obviously could not have been their cause. The first mass murders of Ukrainians committed by Polish hands in this region were reported not until in May 1943. A year earlier, in the Chełm region, there had been at most minor skirmishes or individual attacks that did not have much significance for the development of later events. Viatrovych in his book cites all of one attack on Ukrainian activists which probably was indeed carried out by the AK. Aside from that, Viatrovych mentions the German pacification campaign of the spring of 1942, which claimed the lives of the residents of about twenty Ukrainian villages and a few Polish ones. He does not hide that the perpetrators of the massacre were the Germans, but at the same time he states (without giving evidence) that the Ukrainian villages were slaughtered as a result of Polish denunciations.

Even if this were true, in no way can it be considered as the beginning of the “Polish-Ukrainian

War". If mutual denunciations to the German or Soviet authorities were to mark the beginning of the Polish-Ukrainian armed conflict, it would be necessary to move the starting date to an earlier period. For example, it is no secret that the list of Lviv professors executed in 1941 by the SS was drawn up by Ukrainian nationalists. So why not start dating the war from that denunciation? Even if we remain in just the Chełm region, it is difficult to defend the date of 1942. Mutual denunciations appear as early as the beginning of the German occupation. The scale of denunciations along with the credibility of Ukrainian informants are addressed in a report dated November 6, 1940 by the German governor in Hrubieszów: "Of course, denunciations coming from the Ukrainians should be treated with caution, because their information has been confirmed only in a few cases. (...) The overflow of information from Ukrainians causes a significant amount of extra work for the German authorities." That does not mean that the Nazis ignored all Ukrainian denunciations. It was largely on this basis that in early 1940 numerous representatives of the Polish local elite were shot. Therefore, perhaps it is from these executions that the beginning of the Polish-Ukrainian armed conflict should be dated?

We can talk about the beginning of the war only in reference to a series of synchronized actions carried out by the Underground, aimed at achieving a specific goal. Until the beginning of 1943, in Polish-Ukrainian relations areas across the boards, there had occurred only isolated attacks, and more frequently provocations or mutual denunciation. But this was not yet a war. I would describe this phenomenon as "border skirmishes" and intelligence clashes. This situation changed with the onset of the slaughter in Volhynia. By the end of 1943 in the Chełm region about 600 Ukrainians were killed by Polish hands. Most of those victims – as we can see in the analysis of documents published by Viatrovych – died in 1943 (a very small number of people had been killed in the earlier period). Let me remind you that in Volhynia at that same time forty- to sixty-thousand Poles were killed. These numbers can hardly be deemed as comparable, although Viatrovych's book suggest they are.

Double standards

In writing about Polish operations targeting Ukrainian civilians, Viatrovych completely alters his narrative. While in the case of murdered Poles he expresses countless doubts, condemns any attempt to generalize, and almost demands a direct confession from the perpetrators, when it comes to the suffering of Ukrainians, he no longer needs such extensive evidence to put forward far-reaching hypotheses. After describing some – unfortunately, very true – cases of Poles massacring Ukrainians, he is eager to suggest that their number nearly matches the number of attacks against Poles. He also no longer needs documents of the Polish underground to accuse it of trying to expel Ukrainians from Eastern Galicia. While he seeks to minimize the crimes against Poles, in the case of murdered Ukrainians he tends to exaggerate. The problem is that when it comes to the years 1943–1945, it is not true. And thus I simply must ask the question that may seem wrong to many Ukrainians: if indeed Polish estimates of casualties are so exaggerated, why have almost all requests for consent for the exhumation of people killed by the UPA met with a negative response from the Ukrainian government? There is no simpler way to resolve the dispute than to analyze the remains resting to date in unmarked graves.

Viatrovych's book becomes more valuable when the author proceeds to explain the operations of the SS "Galizien" division, as well as the situation of the Ukrainian population in post-war Poland in the years 1945-1947. In the latter case, what is shown is that the condition of Ukrainians at that time was tragic. When, however, the author discusses the "war after the war", namely the Polish-Ukrainian conflict of memory after 1989, once again we are dealing with a simplified vision of reality. Describing the behavior of Polish authorities after 1989, he treats facts selectively. He mentions instances of calling for the commemoration of the victims of UPA crimes, while overlooking all initiatives to address Ukrainian expectations. In Poland a lot has been done to disclose fragments of our history that are shameful for us, as evidenced by the subsequent cases of condemning the displacement of Ukrainians during operation "Vistula". It was hoped that in response to such actions the Ukrainian side would critically reflect on the past and, therefore, unequivocally condemn the anti-Polish genocidal cleansing carried out by the UPA in 1943-1945. Only when that had failed to happen, did the milieu of Poles hailing from the Easter Borderlands come to the fore, demanding that political relations with Ukraine be contingent on its citizens coming to terms with their own history.

Many killings, but not a genocide

All of Viatrovych's rhetorical tricks, as well as his use of the term "war", stem, I presume, from an attempt to deny the criminality of the anti-Polish UPA operations. Therefore, as early as in his book's initial chapters, he rejects the term "genocide" contrasting it with "war". However, contrary to what he writes, the use of the term "war" by no means precludes a simultaneous use of the term "genocide".

If one wants to describe accurately what happened during the Second World War between Poles and Ukrainians, they must use both the term "genocide" and "armed conflict". In the years 1943-1945 there was a "war within a war" - namely, the Polish-West Ukrainian war within the Second World War. But outbreak of that smaller war is marked by massacres carried out by the OUN-B and UPA in Volhynia. Ukrainian nationalists, wanting at all costs to "repair" the effects of the conflict Ukraine lost in the years 1918-1919, being aware of their own weakness, and recognizing the use of violence and terror as an integral part of politics, decided to solve the Gordian knot of nationalities in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia by a genocidal anti-Polish campaign. Open conflict between the Polish and Ukrainian undergrounds led to a number of armed clashes, but this must not obscure the fact that the vast majority of massacres was committed against defenseless people - people who posed no threat whatsoever to Ukrainian partisans.

The two phases of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict should be clearly separated from each other. While the first one, in 1943-1945, was closely associated with the anti-Polish UPA cleansing, the second was of a different nature - it passed in the shadow of Stalin's ethnic cleansing. In the years 1944-1946, this affected on the one hand Poles expelled from Volhynia and Eastern Galicia - while on the other, Ukrainians forcibly deported from the territory of present-day Poland. In 1947, in another ethnic cleansing, the remaining Ukrainian minority in Poland was sent off to the western and northern territories. The displacements carried out on Stalin's orders (and in the case of operation "Vistula", the orders of the leading Polish communists Bierut and Gomułka, also), were

part of the great project of rebuilding Central Europe in line with Soviet wishes.

Rewritten history?

'The Second Polish-Ukrainian War' should be considered a failure as a book, written below its author's capabilities. What is worse, it is harmful to Polish-Ukrainian dialogue, because it will only deepen differences. Ukrainian readers, unfamiliar with Polish literature on the subject, will probably be impressed by the publication. They may view it as a reliable polemic with works published in Poland. Indeed, some reviewers have written about a "pivotal moment" in Ukrainian historiography and suggest that Viatrovych's conclusions be deemed the official national vision of history. Meanwhile, Polish scholars will see his book as nothing more than an attempt to justify and diminish the crimes against Polish civilians.

It remains a mystery to me what prompted Viatrovych to write such a book. He seemed more that competent to prepare a full and thorough monograph on the UPA's history. However, instead of adhering to solid historiography, he decided to write a book with an agenda: "the UPA was heroic and any accusations against it are exaggerated, fabricated or invented. Anyway, they are most certainly untrue." Is it possible that he is so fascinated with the phenomenon of the "historical politics" practiced in Ukraine's neighboring countries? Even in Russia, where the temptation to use history for political purposes is still alive, everyone is able to distinguish texts by reliable historians from those which are part and party to "historical politics".

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Photo gallery

