

Volhynia Massacre

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Clergy – Martyrs of Volhynia

During the Second World War, Volhynia became the place of martyrdom for numerous Christians. Alongside a couple of tens of thousands of the faithful, 19 Roman Catholic and six Uniate clergy, including six nuns, were killed by the nationalists of OUN-UPA. Most of them were outstanding members of their local communities. Their sacrifice of their lives is the seed for the contemporary rebirth of the Church in the Lutsk Diocese.

The first such victim of Volhynia was Fr Waclaw Majewski. He was the parish priest of Melnytsia since May 1939. On 18th March 1943, he was shot by the Ukrainian police with several other people, including his housekeeper, the family of a local chemist, and the post office manager, in the woods. The victims were buried at the place of crime in a common grave.

A bit less than a month later (5th April), two clergymen – Fr Józef Szostak and Brother Piotr Mojsijonek – were killed. The former was the administrator of the Mali Holoby parish, and the latter was the member of the Piarist Order who resided in Lubeshiv. In 1943, the parish priest at the local cloister asked Fr Szostak for help in organising retreat and Easter confession. Piotr Mojsijonek was to bring the priest to his own parish afterwards. They were both murdered in the woods between Pnevo and Skomorokhy. Their bodies, which were later found, were buried in a common grave near the now non-existent church in Mali Holoby.

The same month, two other priests were killed: Fr Hieronim Szczerbiński, the parish priest of Tesluhiv, and Fr Jerzy Cimiński, the parish priest of Lysin. After some of the faithful escaped due to attacks by the UPA, Fr Szczerbiński moved to the village of Volvkovy, in the Lysin parish. In May 1943, he was joined by Fr Jerzy Cimiński. As they feared for their lives, they decided to leave the village during the night. However, they were caught and murdered by Ukrainian nationalists on the road between Volkovy and Demidivka. The perpetrators threw them both, while they could have still been alive, to a well.

A year later, Fr Stanisław Mazak, the parish priest of Shchurovtsi, Lviv region, came to Volkovy with his parishioners. Knowing the tragic story of the two priests, he attempted to recover their bodies. Unfortunately, the well was deep (about 19 metres) and full of clay, so the work proceeded slowly. Relative security was provided by the Red Army detachments that stationed nearby. When they left the village and the Ukrainians threatened the area, the attempts at recovering the remains ceased.

In June or July 1943, Ukrainian nationalists also killed Fr Piotr Walczak. This retired priest lived in the Nesvich parish. However, due to fear for his life, he preferred staying in Lutsk. He was brutally murdered on the road between Lutsk and Lavriv, in the village of Polonka.

During the Bloody Sunday of 11th July 1943, when the UPA attacked nearly 100 Polish settlements and villages, two priests were murdered while celebrating a Mass: Fr Józef Aleksandrowicz, the parish priest of Zablotsi, and Fr Jan Kotwicki, the parish priest of Khryniv. The neck of the former

was broken and his body was abandoned at the foot of the altar. Fr Kotwicki was killed when he tried to flee the church. His body was taken by his sister, who survived the massacre, and two other women to Volodymyr-Volynsky and buried in the local parish graveyard.

On the same day, two other priests were severely wounded during attacks on churches: Fr Bolesław Szawłowski – in Poritsk, and Fr Witold Kowalski – in Kisilin. The former, who had been warned by a Ukrainian resident of the neighbouring village of Pavlivka that the nationalists would attack at 11.00, informed the faithful of this through his altar boys. The people, however, did not believe this and filled the church. When the UPA surrounded it and started firing their guns, the priest tried to calm the people down and prayed for them. He absolved them of their sins and was wounded twice, he fell from the pulpit and played dead. In the evening, he crawled to the house of the local Eastern rite priest who took care for the liturgical paraments that were taken from the church at Fr Szawłowski's request.

The nationalists, however, found out that the priest had survived and murdered him a few days later. Fr Shelest managed to administer the last rites, and proceeded to bury his body at an unknown place. Fr Kowalski, whose cheekbone was injured, survived. After the war, he worked e.g. in Lubartów and Toruń.

The same month, nationalists brutally killed two more priests – Fr Karol Baran – in Stenzharychim, and Fr Konstanty Turzański – in Vyshhorodok. According to some accounts, Fr Baran was forcibly taken to the woods, where he was cut in two with a saw. Fr Turzański died with his faithful in the parish church, which was set on fire.

On 30th August 1943, when Ukrainians destroyed the Polish villages of Wola Ostrowiecka and Ostrówki, they killed the parish priest, Fr Stanisław Dobrzański. During the attack, he hid in a pile of straw, but he was found, and the Ukrainians probably beheaded him with an axe. On the same day, a member of the Society of Christ Fathers who helped in ministry, Brother Józef Harmata, was killed in the village of Ostrówki.

Oblate Fr Ludwik Włodarczyk, the administrator of the Okopy parish, a minister and a physician, was killed on 7th December 1943. Knowing the medicinal properties of herbs, he helped not only his parishioners, but also Ukrainian residents of nearby villages. During the German attack, he took pastoral care of Catholics who lived beyond the former border defined under the Riga treaty. He also helped Jews, which resulted in him being named a Righteous among the Nations.

In late 1943, in spite of the approaching winter, the Polish population felt safer in the woods than in their homes. Therefore the Ukrainian gang that entered the village on the night of December 6–7th found only the parish priest who did not want to leave the church. The perpetrators took him to the Ukrainian village of Karpylivka, where he was tortured. There are conflicting accounts concerning Fr Włodarczyk's death, all of them, however, are terrifying. According to one version, he was cut half-way with a saw, and then, when he was dying, he was used as a target for girls who learned to shoot. According to another one, the tortured priest, whose clothes had been stripped off, was thrown on the snow, and his heart was torn from his cleft torso.

However the most Uniate martyrs came from Lubeshiv. In June 1943, Fr Kasjan Czechowicz was murdered there. He probably attempted spreading the gospel among his brothers in faith and went to one of UPA camps. The Banderites threw him off a bridge over the Styr River. A month later, a Capuchin friar from the local Byzantine Slavic rite mission, Sylwester Hładzio.

Two nuns of the Sacred Heart congregation were killed on 9th November 1943: Sr Andrzejka (Maria Ossakowska) and Sr Alojza (Jadwiga Gano). They were Eastern rite nuns and they worked at the local hospital. The Banderites forced them to enter a wooden building and demanded that they renounce their Catholic faith. Most of them refused. The group included sisters. When the building had been set on fire, they tried to console the dying people.

There were two more Uniate priests who were killed in 1943: Fr Serafin Jaroszewicz, the parish priest of Żabcze, and Fr Józef Gaducewicz of Kuńkowce Wielkie. The former probably condemned the murders of Poles and refused to convert to Eastern Orthodoxy. He was burned in the local church together with his faithful. Little is known about Fr Gaducewicz's death.

On 16th January 1944, Fr Stanisław Grzesiak was martyred in Poritsk. During the war, he was an acting parish priest in Skirche. When his parishioners were evacuated to Volodymyr-Volynskiy, he went to Poritsk, where he decided to pray for the soul of Fr Bolesław Szawłowski, who had been killed half a year earlier. Banderites found him and shot him in the local church.

In Volhynia, there were also Carmelites who were murdered - Kamil Gleczman, the superior at the Novy Vyshnivets cloister, and Cyrpian Lasoń - the cook, gardener, and steward. In 1943, where attacks by the UPA grew in intensity, the cloister became a shelter for the parishioners. Fr Kamil was allowed to leave the place by his superior, but he remained there for the benefit of the local populace. He also did not join the Hungarian soldiers who left the town on 7th February 1944, though he had such an opportunity. Both friars died on that day during the attack on the cloister by the UPA.

Another priest who lost his life during the extermination of Poles in Volhynia was the Roman Catholic parish priest of Pochaiv, Fr Stanisław Fijałkowski. In July, he moved to the Dominican cloister with his parishioners. He died at the hand of nationalists on 12th March 1944 with several hundred other people.

Nationalists (Ukrainian police) were also responsible for the death of Fr Jan Budkiewicz, the minister of Mikulichin, who was arrested in Stanislaviv and died of typhoid fever in the local prison after four weeks' imprisonment in 1943.

The final resting place where some of the people listed here is unknown. The only ones who have separate graves are Fr Stanisław Fijałkowski (buried in the Pidkamin cemetery), Fr Jan Kotwicki (buried in Volodymyr-Volynskiy). Fr Józef Szostak and Brother Piotr Mojsijonek are buried together in Mali Holoby. Those who were buried in common graves included Fr Stanisław Dobrzański and Brother Józef Harmata, buried in Ostrówki, Sr Alojza - Jadwiga Gano, and Sr Andrzejka - Maria Ossakowska, buried in Lubeshiv, and in Novy Vyshnivets - Fr Kamil Gleczman and Brother Cyprian Lasoń.

The Lutsk Diocese was not the only place where Catholics of both rites suffered at the hand of Banderites. They also fervently oppressed the clergy in the Archdiocese of Lviv. In the former South-Eastern Poland, as many as 52 priests and members of religious congregations were killed by them.

Dr Paweł Naleźniak



Photo gallery

