

Volhynia Massacre

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Ewa Siemaszko, About “Wołyń” – a Polish war drama directed by Wojciech Smarzowski

Ewa Siemaszko – a researcher of the Volhynia massacre, author of books including *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na ludności polskiej Wołyńia 1939-1945*, (*Murder of Polish Citizens by Ukrainian Nationalists in Volhynia*), writes that the apocalyptic picture of the massacre of Poles shown by Wojciech Smarzowski may make many viewers familiar with the motives and the scale of the atrocities.

Though over 100,000 Poles were killed in the Volhynia Massacre, many of our compatriots have little knowledge of it. The monumental film “Wołyń” by Wojciech Smarzowski has an actual chance to change it.

The plot starts in 1939, a few months before the war, in Volhynia, where Ukrainians, Poles and Jews lived alongside one another and together. By September 1939, there were normal relations between the separate ethnic groups – acquaintances, friendship, and even mixed marriages, but on the other hand – the situation of Ukrainians as citizens was not satisfying. This was the major cause of the activity of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists against the Polish state and nation. The organisation represented the portion of Ukrainian residents of the Second Polish Republic that had not come to terms with the absence of a Ukrainian state. The third level of Polish-Ukrainian relations was the state, the Church, and the faithful. There were also tensions in this field. The pre-war relations between Poles and Ukrainians at those levels are just hinted in the film because it would be impossible to show their entire complexity, but even if we accept that the Ukrainian grudges against the Polish state were reasonable, it would be unreasonable to accept them as a reason for genocide. The pretext to show Polish-Ukrainian relations on the screen is a marriage between a Ukrainian man and a Polish woman and a strong feeling between another such pair who wanted to marry. Such relationships are a symptom of social ties and integration of different circles despite the discomfort resulting from unsatisfied national aspirations.

Since its establishment (1929), the OUN prepared to fight for a Ukrainian state in all Polish lands inhabited by Ukrainians and used an extreme nationalist, fascist ideology of integral Ukrainian nationalism. The intended state was to be ethnically homogeneous, for the Ukrainians only. This aim was to be achieved by extermination of Polish population in the part of the Second Polish Republic where the OUN developed (which was absolutely impossible in Soviet Ukraine), and where the Ukrainian state was to be established and then to be expanded afterwards, at a favourable time. OUN prepared to eliminate the Polish element for many years by ideologically indoctrinating the Ukrainian population, spreading hatred against Poles, infiltrating Ukrainian social and political circles, torpedoing any attempts at reconciliation between Poles and Ukrainians, and attacking the Ukrainians who promoted good relations between the two nations.

September 1939, i.e. the time of the German invasion of Poland, is the period of the initial larger scale Ukrainian attack on Poles, which were provoked by the outbreak of the war. As an effect of the earlier propaganda, it was a prelude to the later broad-ranging crackdown on Poles. These attacks included robberies, murders of civil servants and wartime refugees, attacks on the soldiers of the Polish Army, disarming of the soldiers, seizures of their uniforms, and cruel murders. Examples of such actions against Poles can be seen in "Wołyń". They stopped after 17th September 1939, when the Soviets entered Poland and were enthusiastically accepted by some Ukrainians against expectations.

The Soviet terror was aimed against all inhabitants, but primarily against Poles, who were arrested, sentenced to imprisonment, deported deep into the Soviet territory, and transported to forced labour camp. Important individuals and entire social groups were eliminated that way. Some Ukrainians also contributed to the persecution of Poles by informing the Soviet authorities against them and taking part in preparing lists of persons to be deported. The oppression under the Soviet occupation meant also economically ruining the population, combating religion, destroying social ties by using low motives.

This stage of depolonisation of the easternmost parts of the pre-war Poland (which Smarzowski showed in a few scenes) ended with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in late June 1941. The new occupying power was ostentatiously welcomed by the Ukrainian activist, often the same people who showed their enthusiasm to the invading Soviets. Ukrainian nationalists started spreading slogans of destruction of Poles, Jews, and Communists from the very beginning. Germans allowed Ukrainians to hold offices at the lowest levels of local authorities, the Ukrainian police, which was subordinate to the German authorities and dominated by the OUN, was established. This resulted in a situation that was favourable to the implementation of the plans made by the OUN. The privileged positions of Ukrainians in relation to Poles, which were ensured by the Germans, the German involvement in the war against the Soviet Russia on the Eastern Front and its consequence in the form of low military presence in the occupied region, made it possible to gradually prepare for the extermination of the Polish element. Prior to that, the OUN extended its structures and increased their numbers, created paramilitary formations, trained their members with regard to ideology and military operations, made them hostile towards the Poles and the Jews, provided them with reasons for the planned extermination, and recruiting Ukrainian peasants without any specific political attitude to participate in the extermination.

For the Jewish community, the German occupation of the Eastern Borderlands resulted in persecution that concluded in mass executions that were carried out in Volhynia in 1942. In the south-eastern part of pre-War Poland, most of the Jews were transported to death camps, while the remaining were executed on the spot. Ukrainians – Ukrainian policemen and members of paramilitary formations – took part in all operations against the Jews which were organised and carried out by the Germans from the 1941 pogroms to the total extermination in 1942. For the OUN members, the Holocaust of the Jews only confirmed the legitimacy of this method as a way to dispose of unwanted neighbours, while it was morally destructive for the remaining Ukrainians as it indicated that it was possible to commit large scale crimes with total impunity. Most of the elements

that were characteristic of the situation of the Polish and Jewish population under the German occupation has been shown in the film.

Since the beginning of the German occupation, the Poles in Volhynia and the south-east of pre-war Poland faced the increasingly hostile attitude from the Ukrainians. An additional factor that contributed to the sense of danger was the repression by the Ukrainian police (which was conspiratorially subordinate to the OUN), who showed their enthusiastic attitude towards the Germans in this way. Forcing the provision of quota, searches, arrests on any possible basis and murders of men by the Ukrainian police, and the simultaneous weakening of neighbourly ties, threats and “death to Lakhs [Poles]” slogans by the nationalist activists, which were accompanied by robberies and murders of individuals and their families that had some significance among the Poles, added to the atmosphere of uncertainty and terror. At that time, the OUN organised guerrilla forces that committed the first mass murders of Poles in early 1943. When the news of the annihilation of the Polish settlement of Paroslya spread around Volhynia, there were further major attacks, particularly after the Ukrainian policemen abandoned their service for the Germans in March 1943 and joined the nationalist guerrillas. They became the core of the so called Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Poles were unprepared for such a violent course of events, and their helplessness was shown in the film.

The fact that the Ukrainian ideologists were convinced that atrocities were a justified method made it possible to carry out the extermination of Poles as they had planned. The population was exterminated settlement by settlement. People were chopped with axes, stabbed with pitchforks, scythes, and their throats were slit with bayonets. The victims were burned alive and thrown into wells. The people who were terrified by the cruelty prayed for being shot. The faithful were attacked inside churches. Death lurked everywhere. A person fleeing from one place to another, which was supposed to be safe, could lose their life en route. Polish lives were taken, and the property was destroyed, robbed and burnt. Apart from the nationalist formations, the OUN convinced a portion of the Ukrainian peasantry, but also some Ukrainian clergy, who encouraged committing crimes and blessed the tools, to join the murderous machine. And though the destructive madness was triumphant and the perpetrators boasted of their atrocities during feasts, not all Ukrainians took part in it – there were clergy who called for peace and obedience to God’s commandments, there were also Ukrainians who helped Poles thus risking their own lives. This is the picture of the tragedy of Poles in Volhynia shown in Smarzowski’s film.

The massacre of Volhynia eventually had to result in defensive reflexes. First, self-defence forces were formed, and a small portion of them managed to hold their position and save larger groups of Poles or at least a single settlement. The Polish conspirators in Volhynia attempted stopping the attacks on Poles by way of negotiation with the UPA, which led to the tragic demise of the Polish representatives. Only after those dramatic events were guerrilla forces organised to defend Polish population centres and sometimes carried out preventive and retaliatory operations against nests of Ukrainian nationalists. These, however, were not equivalent to the genocide of the Polish population by the OUN-UPA. This is clearly shown by *Wołyń* in spite of the artist’s exaggeration.

Kto tego nie widział, ten nigdy w to nie uwierzy... [Who Has Not Seen That Will Not Believe It] is an

excellent choice for the title of educational material concerning the Volhynia Massacre, which has been prepared by the IPN and consists of excerpts from an account of a woman who survived the Volhynia massacre. Her fear was reasonable because it is hard for the citizens who now live in peace in their own state to imagine their fellow inhabitants, who had proper neighbourly relations with them, committing such atrocities. However, it is impossible to deny thousands of accounts of survivors that show the same method used by the Ukrainian nationalists, the same ways of killing Poles just because they were Poles. Maybe now, when the Poles are faced with the synthetic portrayal of fates of Volhynian Poles shown in the film by Smarzowski, which are derived from such individual accounts, which include repeating motifs concerning the experience of the victims of the Volhynia Massacre, and particularly the apocalyptic but unfortunately true picture of the massacre, will believe that apart from the genocide of Poles by the Germans and the Soviets, there was a third case of genocide, the one by the Ukrainians, which deserves to be remembered.



Photo gallery

