

Volhynia Massacre

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Grzegorz Hryciuk: Genocide in “Arcadia” – Ethnic Cleansing in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943–45

In the childhood memories of some Poles, Volhynia is often shown as a kind of Arcadia. Yet it was never so. There were constant ethnic tensions, which sometimes led to a conflict in Volhynia, Eastern Galicia, which was separated by the so-called “Sokal border” (“kordon Sokalski”), and the eastern part of the Lublin region, on the other side of the Bug River. Due to the fact that the situation was made worse by poverty, short-sighted policy of the state authorities, propaganda spread in the society, and the effect of the xenophobic “integral” nationalisms, the tensions became more intense just before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Not only did the war fail to reduce the tensions, but actually made them more intense. The joy shown by a portion of the Ukrainian population after the humiliating defeat of Poland, the policy of the Soviet occupational authorities, which favoured Ukrainians, the attempt to start a “national revolution” in the Subcarpathian Region by the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists in the second decade of September, the Polish response, numerous attacks on Polish refugees and settlers burdened the Polish-Ukrainian relations, which had been difficult beforehand, even more.

Who was a friend, who was a foe

The exceptional increase in the popularity of the Ukrainian nationalist movement, particularly the faction led by Stepan Bandera, resulted from a disappointment with the Soviet rule and the hope for a Ukrainian state connected to the Third Reich. Significant factors included also a large number of uncompromising and selfless fighters for Ukrainian independence that the nationalists would eagerly assume. Therefore, despite the ruthless terror by the NKVD, the OUN managed to establish an extensive conspiracy network that was preparing to stand against the Soviets upon the outbreak of war between the Germans and the Soviet Union.

In the summer of 1941, the list of the enemies of the Ukrainian nation, which were spread as part of the OUN propaganda calling people to arms, included Poles as major opponents, together with the Muscovites and the Jews. Apart from the anti-Jewish disturbances in Eastern Galicia, there were mass murders of Poles, and, as in the case of the murder of nine Poles of Piznanka Hetmanska, the nationalists tried to make them look as executions on the basis of a sentence issued by an “ad hoc OUN tribunal”.

The intensification of disagreements and mutual accusations between Poles and Ukrainians was facilitated by the German policy that took advantage of ethnic antagonisms. The Germans provided the Ukrainians with a relatively privileged position, but they simultaneously employed Poles as professionals in the economic apparatus and certain occupational authorities.

The Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, whose collaboration proposal was rejected by the top authorities of the Third Reich, went underground and focused on organisational and propaganda measures, and they faced a serious dilemma in late 1942 – they had to choose between the continuation of the then current policy and military struggle for “samostiyna and soborna” (independent and unified) Ukraine. The fact that the Ukrainians of Volhynia hated the brutal German occupiers, the appearance of the Soviet guerrillas in the region, the activity of the political competition, e.g. Taras Bulba-Borovets, the supporter of the Petlurist Ukrainian government in exile, and the vision of the Allied victory (after their success in North Africa) induced the OUN-B to establish their own military – guerrilla forces named Ukrainian Insurgent Army. Its formation started in October 1942, and the first deadly operations were carried out in early 1943.

Experience of the Holocaust

It turned out, however, that the basic issue was to determine the political and military priorities of the UPA. Though the hierarchy of the enemies included Poles on the third position, after the USSR and Nazi Germany, due to their weakness and the fear of the possible arrival of the Red Army from the East or the Polish army from the West (they did not exclude the possibility that the 1918 scenario due to the internal decay of Germany and the weakness of a war weary Soviet Union) they started to be tempted by a vision of an operation against Poles. Apart from the solution to the fundamental border conflict, it could consolidate the Ukrainian nation around the nationalists and offered prospects of an easy victory.

The decision to remove Poles from the territory the OUN considered “ethnically Ukrainian” was probably made during the council of the OUN military staff in Lviv in October 1942 or a few months later. The Polish population was to be expelled, and those that resisted were to be killed. The first mass murder took place in Paroslya in February 1943. This atrocity, as proved by Grzegorz Motyka, was committed by the OUN detachment under “Dowbeszka-Korobka”. The exceptional cruelty (which involved such tools as axes) was widely echoed all around Volhynia. The information on the massacre was even included in reports by Soviet guerrillas. The attacks intensified in the following months. The victims were Poles who lived in hamlets, small settlements and estates.

The leap in the number of murders took place after the UPA troops were reinforced by the Ukrainian policemen who had deserted from the auxiliary formations subordinate to the Germans in April and May 1943. They often contributed their experience from the massacres of the Jewish populations that were ordered by their German superiors. It seems that the destructive experience related to the participation in the Holocaust of the Jews or even observation thereof made the Ukrainian nationalists aware of the effectiveness of this method as a way to get rid of the ideological enemy, what is important, with impunity. It could have affected the decision of the commanders of UPA forces in Volhynia, including, primarily, Dmytro Klyachkivsky, nom de guerre Klym Savur, to start physically eliminating the Polish population of the region.

The apogee of the “anti-Polish operation” was in the first decade of July 1943. On 11th and 12th July, about 200 villages inhabited by Poles were attacked. Apart from the UPA detachment, the attacks involved the units of the Security Service of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists and the

populace of some Ukrainian villages, who were mobilised by the nationalists and sometimes tempted by the vision of robbing Polish property. Another wave of atrocities took place in western Volhynia in August 1943. Their cruelty can be illustrated by the example of two neighbouring villages: Ostrówka and Wola Ostrowiecka, where 1200 residents were killed.

A planned operation

Though the decision to exterminate Poles may seem an unauthorised initiative or an overinterpretation of the orders issued by the top management of the OUN, but in fact the top levels of the organisation approved of the mass murders in August 1943 and 1944. The particularly ardent supporters of the brutal ethnic cleansing included the new leader of the OUN, Roman Shukhevych. The physical elimination of the Polish population that had all the characteristics of genocide was the first stage of the depolonisation of Volhynia. In Autumn 1943, the top management of the OUN issued an order to destroy the material evidence of the Polish presence in Volhynia. They even recommended felling fruit trees that could indicate the fact that a Polish village or hamlet existed at a place after the buildings had been burnt or demolished.

The ethnic cleansing, which was planned and carried out by Ukrainian nationalist forces, resulted in the death of 35,000 to 60,000 Polish inhabitants of Volhynia.

The news of the murders in Volhynia reached Eastern Galicia and the Lublin region in the summer of 1943 when the tens of thousands of refugees reached those regions. In the south, they caused horror among the people, and on the other side of the Bug River, they resulted in military operations against the Ukrainian population by the Polish underground. However, though the murders of Ukrainian policemen and the Ukrainian Red Cross activists occurred as late as in early 1943, they were never mass atrocities. The first attack (in May 1943) when the Ukrainian community in the Lublin region suffered more casualties was related to the attempt at removing the "cordon sanitaire" consisting of the Ukrainian population living around villages in the Zamość area where by German colonists had settled. Attacks on Ukrainian villages became more numerous in the late summer of 1943 and in early 1944. Several thousands of Ukrainians died. Some of the Polish retaliatory operations had characteristics of war crimes. When the UPA detachments came from the east in 1944, guerrilla warfare became more intense, and it was often accompanied by murders of Polish civilians. In general, Polish retaliation resulted in significantly lower Ukrainian casualties, particularly in 1945.

In 1944, the OUN nearly fully applied the methods previously used in Volhynia to the Galicia District. According to the directives and orders of local OUN and UPA structures, the aim was to eliminate the so-called active Polish element (primarily men, but these recommendations were commonly ignored) and to force the Polish population of Eastern Galicia to flee. Due to such factors as the strength of the Polish underground and the size of the Polish element and the propaganda repercussions of the murders in Volhynia, extermination of the entire Polish population was no longer an objective. Nonetheless, the number of Polish victims reached at least 10,000–12,000 by mid-1944 (not including Ukrainian casualties resulting from retaliatory operations, which amounted to less than 5 per cent of that number), not including nearly 300,000 people who decided to flee

westwards due to the terror by the OUN-UPA.

In the latter half of 1944, just after the Red Army entered the region (i.e. under the so-called "second Soviet occupation"), the aggression against the Polish population and villages did not cease. In early 1945, there was an unprecedented growth in the intensity of attacks on Poles in Podolia. Though UPA reports falsely represented them as victories over Polish detachments subordinated to the NKVD, they usually meant operations against defenceless elderly people, women, and children. In total, Ukrainian nationalists murdered about 20,000 to 25,000 Poles in Eastern Galicia between 1943 and 1946.

The anti-Polish operations by OUN-UPA in the Eastern Borderlands had ceased by mid-1945, when the deportations of the Polish population became a faster means to remove the Poles. The long-term effect of the ethnic cleansing by the OUN-UPA included the fact that Volhynia and Eastern Galicia became nearly completely Ukrainian, though under the Soviet rule. After the Holocaust of the Jews, the murders, escape and deportation of the Poles, the phenomenon of the multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural region that was home to many disappeared.

Grzegorz Hryciuk



Photo gallery

