

Volhynia Massacre

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Birth of Atrocity from the Spirit of Nationalism – An Interview with Father Professor Józef Marecki

An interview with Fr Prof. Józef Marecki, the head of the Chair of Auxiliary Sciences of History and Archival Science of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow, and a member of the IPN Council.

- We say: The Volhynia Massacre, but this name refers to many atrocities committed at various times and not only in Volhynia...
- The name Volhynia Massacre is inadequate to the scale, area, and the duration of ethnic cleansing of Poles carried out during the Second World War and also the following period by Ukrainian nationalists. This genocide, which lasted several years, took place in an area ranging from Volynia and Polesia to the Lublin Region, Przemyśl Region, and even Rzeszów Region, which Ukrainians considered their ethnic lands. In all those places, Poles were exterminated and their legacy was destroyed at the order of the Banderite faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and supported by the civilians, the so-called Ukrainian “chern”, who were motivated by their hatred of “Lakhs” and their desire to rob Polish property.
- We also discuss the Volhynia Massacre in the strict sense when we refer to the events that took place in Volhynia between February 1943 and February 1944. During this time, between 40,000 to 60,000 Poles were murdered in Volhynia, and over 1,000 Polish settlements were completely levelled.
- In Volhynia, there were favourable conditions for such an atrocity. After the First World War, this region, which had previously belonged to the portion of historical Poland under the Russian rule, was devastated. Large areas were settled by Poles and Ukrainians. Poles stood out due to their thrift, high level of farming culture, and education. They were the group the local public servants and teachers originated from. Like the Jews, they were the cause of the Ukrainian envy, as the Ukrainians were at a less advanced cultural level, and they were poorer. Therefore, when the elimination of Polish population centres started in Volhynia, the OUN and the UPA could easily mobilise the local “chern” to participate in the cleansing; the hostility in the region, which had been growing for years, facilitated the process.
- The cleansing of Poles in Volhynia began in February 1943.
- Smaller scale murders occurred since September 1939, and as early as April 1941, prior to the outbreak of the Soviet-German war, the OUN-B spread the slogan “Ukraine for Ukrainians”. In its manifesto, we may read that anyone who is not a Ukrainian has no right to live in the Ukrainian

state though this state did not exist. In mid-February 1943, an OUN-B conference took place where the decision was made to form guerrilla forces not only to fight the Germans but also to carry out ethnic cleansing of Poles. And in Volhynia, this cleansing started as early as in February. In June 1943, OUN-B issued a directive on the extermination of the Polish male population aged 16 to 60. Simultaneously, the UPA detachments and the "chern" were mobilised. Unlike the former Austrian partition, where there were attempts at getting rid of Poles by telling them to flee, in Volhynia, the ethnic cleansing started without any previous warning. Though the OUN-B directive concerned men, in practice, everyone who failed to hide or run away was murdered.

- As the official orders concerned the extermination of men, were murders of children, women, and the elderly unauthorised?

- It is hard to determine it clearly now. The written orders have not survived. It is worth remembering that the UPA was active in Ukraine until 1957. A portion of documents were destroyed, some of them were captured by the NKVD, and they are also inaccessible to us. Ukrainian historians maintain that it was a Polish-Ukrainian war, not an act of genocide. The facts, however, deny this. The extermination of Poles in Volhynia was accompanied by the devastation of traces of Polish presence; cultural centres, churches, presbyteries, manor houses, houses and factories were burnt. Such a combination of extermination and the systematic destruction of material culture is typical in ethnic cleansing. The perpetrators destroyed each piece of evidence of Polish presence. Their hatred of the Roman Catholic Church was also evident.

- Do we have any instructions or orders concerning such matters?

- There are reports stating that a church or churches were destroyed. This means that an order had been issued, at least in the oral form. There are accounts of witnesses, former UPA members who were interrogated by the NKVD after the war, and some accounts preserved among the Ukrainian diaspora which state that there were orders to murder and destroy. However, many murders were surely committed without orders, particularly those committed by civilians, for whom it was obvious that a "Lakh" was a mortal enemy, and murdering them was not a sin. If, at a rally held by an OUN activist, they said that the Poles were to be "removed like weed", orders were redundant. The addressees of the propaganda knew that they were supposed to punish the "Lakhs" for the "suffering of the Ukrainian nation". And the suffering should be punished with suffering. In the 1990s, I collected accounts of Ukrainians who joined the Polish side during the war. They were not numerous, they were primarily people from mixed families or those who could not bear being told to murder their loved ones. They described the atmosphere in UPA detachments.

- You are speaking about the significance of the propaganda in inciting people to commit atrocities against Poles. What ideology was the basis for this propaganda?

- It is a vast topic. However, I will start by digressing. The son of Roman Shukhevych - the commander of the UPA, Yuri Shukhevych, who is treated as a national hero in modern Ukraine, repeats the slogan: "Know, o Lakh, that all up to San in ours". Some add that the areas near Krosno, Jasło, Gorlice and Dukla are ethnically Ukrainian. A few years ago, I visited an archive in Lviv and

was asked about personal details. I gave the name Marecki, and the lady writes down "Marec'ki", with a soft sign. I say that this is a Polish name, and she tells me that she knows better how to write it. She asks me about my birthplace. I say - Krosno. And she says to me: "So you are Ukrainian. Why do you want your name to be written the Polish way?" I reply that I am a Pole and not a Ukrainian. "But you were born in Krosno, and therefore, in Ukraine." And so our conversation ended.

- I have heard several similar accounts from Lviv. Among the local intelligentsia, there are quite a few people with such mentality...

- It is true. But let us return to the previous question - we should look for the origin of the murderous propaganda of the Banderite OUN-UPA in the activity of two pre-war ideologists: Dmytro Dontsov and Yevhen Konovalts, who commissioned Stepan Lenkavskyi, who was an educationalist by profession, to write "Ten Commandments of a Ukrainian Nationalists". We will find such commandments as: "Avenge the death of Great Knights! You will not hesitate to commit the greatest crime when the benefit of the cause requires it. You will hate the enemies of your nation and plot against them. You will strive to extend the strength, fame, wealth and the territory of the Ukrainian state, even if it meant subjugating foreigners." In the 1930s, this "Decalogue" was slightly modified. "Plotting" was replaced with "fighting relentlessly", the "greatest crime" with the "most dangerous deed", and the mention of "subjugating foreigners" was removed from the command to "extend [...] the territory of the Ukrainian state". In 1926, Dontsov wrote a book titled *Nationalism*, which glorified the "will of the nation" to create the state and violence as the "strength of nationalism". This violence was to be unleashed in the nation because it was the only way the nation could liberate itself. There are no universal moral principles. Morality is derived from the strength of the nation. The strongest will survive...

- The then current Dontsov's views seriously influenced the ideology of the OUN in the 1930s.

- Such ideology still exists. A few years ago, I attended a rally in Lviv next to the former St. Anne's Church, and one of the Greek Catholic clergy said this during a service: "Nothing can prevent us from building a Ukrainian state, we cannot go back where crosses will fall upon us, when borders will be moved. There can be no Polish language in Lviv. We cannot put crosses on the graves of those who murdered are brethren from the UPA." He referred to Polish graves. I was there with my Ukrainian friend, a Basilian monk, and he said: "come, I cannot listen to this". I shuddered with fear. This was a direct reference to the Ukrainian nationalist ideology.

- What made the 20th century Ukrainian nationalism so radical?

- A hugely important factor was the unfulfilled wish to establish their own state. After the First World War, the Ukrainians did not manage to do so, unlike the Poles. Hence the frustration and the drive towards a cataclysm that would result in the opportunity for a successful fight for a Ukrainian state. And the Ukrainians regarded Hitler's invasion of Poland as such an opportunity. When the Slovak army entered southern Poland on 1st September 1939, it included a Ukrainian legion. In 1939, there were two Ukrainian detachments within German units. The German Nachtigall battalion, which consisted of Ukrainians and was commanded by Roman Shukhevych, entered Lviv in June

1941. Later on, there was the Ukrainian 14th SS division, "Galicia", which was responsible for many war crimes, such as the pacification in Huta Pieniacka...

...where Poles who managed to escape from Volhynia were. The particularly significant date in the timeline of the Volhynia Massacre was Sunday, 11th July 1943. Why?

- You asked whether there had been orders. Nothing confirms that better than the Bloody Sunday, when 99 Polish villages were attacked. The event was preceded by the gathering of UPA detachments and the "chern". Most of the attacks took place when the Poles went to attend the Mass. When the victims were particularly defenceless, which violated the right of sanctuary related to a church. Such an operation must have been planned at a high level and coordinated. Each village was surrounded, and then the attackers made the circle tighter by moving towards a central point - in most cases, a church. Arsons, firing automatic weapons at people running from the church, finishing the wounded off, robbing. Among the victims - chaos, panic: they had not expected their neighbours to do such a thing. No one thought that a son of a mixed family, a Ukrainian like his father, would be commanded to kill his mother or sister.

- Were there such cases?

- There were. *Proklatyi Lakh*, born of a Polish mother. And a commander of a UPA detachment said to such a boy: "You are half Polish. Either you die, or you kill your mother and sister." And if he had failed to kill them, he was beheaded with an axe or stabbed with a knife. In the 1990s, I spoke to two people who escaped from the UPA to join the Polish self-defence detachment in Ostroh. They provided me with details.

- The decision to attack people during the Mass was dictated exclusively by the intention to surprise the victims to prevent from resisting?

- Surprise was a certain intention, but there are more conclusions that can be drawn from the way the UPA operated. The Bloody Sunday was continued in the following months. Over 300 villages were levelled during a single month. The attacks always involving burning a church and the presbytery. Not only was a priest killed next to the altar or driven away, but in many villages, the Eucharist was desecrated, mixed with the blood of the victims. And there were situations that were very evil from the perspective of the canon law - the interrupted Masses were never finished though the monetary offerings had been accepted. Therefore, a dozen or so years ago, the then incumbent ordinary of the Lutsk Diocese, Bishop Markijan Trofimiak, announced that the second Sunday of July was the "Black Sunday" and ordered priest to celebrate expiatory Masses for those unfinished Masses in Volhynia.

- What role did the Eastern Orthodox and Greek Catholic clergy play in those attacks? We know accounts that mention them blessing the tools of the crime.

- During the massacre of Poles, there were only a dozen or so Greek Catholic parishes in Volhynia. The vast majority of parishes were Eastern Orthodox ones. My friends, Ukrainian historians,

estimate that about 25 per cent of the clergy were carried away by chauvinist sentiments and supported the ethnic cleansing or took part in them as UPA chaplains. A large portion of the Eastern Orthodox clergy was intimidated. Had any of them condemned the crime, they would be murdered. The case was identical if he hid a Roman Catholic priest, and the Ukrainians obtained such information. And among the Eastern Orthodox clergy there was a group of those who wanted to build a Ukrainian state on the corpses of Jews and Poles...

- The Holocaust in the Ukraine occurred prior to the mass murders of the Polish residents of Volhynia. And with large scale Ukrainian participation. Was the scale of the Volhynia Massacre and the presumption of the perpetrators related to their participation in the Holocaust of the Jews?

- The earlier experience surely impacted the later events. Germans involved a huge number of Ukrainians in the extermination of the Jews. SS Galizien, various police formations, the "chern". I have recently submitted a publication that contains accounts of the residents of Yazlovets who remember the names of Ukrainian policemen who boasted of the number of Jews they had killed. As some Jewish lady said: "they will make sourdough from us, but they will leave this bread with you - Poles." And this fearsome sourdough included the Gypsies, who are remembered by the few.

- We know the political objectives of and human motivation for the ethnic cleansing as far as Poles are concerned. But how can we explain the sadistic cruelty of murders and tortures: gouging of eyes, dismemberment, pouring of boiling water onto people..

- How to explain it? Some answers can be found in the "decatalogue" by Lenkavskyi, which calls for "avenging the death of Great Knights". In the eyes of a Ukrainian nationalist, a "Lakh" was a degenerate and a leech. *Provodirtsy* of the UPA knew that if the Poles of Volhynia saw their fellows murdered in a cruel way, they would flee in terror. However, it was also motivated by revenge; all those terrible things that the "Lakhs" had supposedly done to the Ukrainians in the past had to be retaliated by fearsome punishment. The Ukrainians deny it nowadays, but there is unquestionable evidence, as in the case of the Sisters of Immaculate Conception of Yazlovets. What was to be buried was a half of a body of one nun. There was also a single leg of another one.

- Death itself was not enough.

- Not enough. The "Lakhs" had to be punished for the harm done to the Ukrainians by terrible suffering. Hence torture and hesitation to finish off the wounded. But there had to be something more. Something inconceivable entered those people. Most of them would not have acted this way even in relation to animals intended for slaughter.

- Father, you once supposed that it could have been a collective possession...

- Yes, I used that expression at a conference, which was then used against me in an ignominious manner. At some other conference, an advocate of Ukrainian innocence stood up and said that one of the priests - he used my name - is spreading a rumour that the Ukrainians were possessed, that Archbishop Sheptytsky was possessed, etc. And I had only said that the option that the communities which wallow in cruelty could have been the place of collective possessions.

- Was it similar during the Holocaust in Ukraine?

- Jews were treated in a barbaric manner, but the perpetrators focused on mass murders as required by the Germans. There were also other differences. Jewish houses were not set on fire because the "chern" wanted to appropriate them. And the Polish settlements were levelled.

- Let us speak of Polish self-defence and retaliatory operations in Volhynia. Why did Poles start to defend themselves so late?

- In 1943, the Polish community in Volhynia included few young men and men in their prime. There were also few intellectuals. From 1939 on, they were arrested, deported, or they fled from the Soviets. Unlike the General Government, the Polish guerrilla forces in Volhynia were weak. The majority of the Polish community were women, children, and elderly people. The peak of the Volhynia Massacre totally surprised them in the summer of 1943. Only after several months did the situation change. Here or there, there was a retired soldier, an NCO, some policeman. Someone had had a hidden firearm or grenades, another one had a hunting rifle, pitchforks and scythes were at all farms. Hungarians who served in the German army sometimes sold weapons and ammo to the Poles. And it turns out that when a Ukrainian detachment, convinced of its impunity, enters a Polish settlement in autumn 1943, suddenly, there are shots. Ukrainians fall, the rest flees. This is very comforting for Poles. They organise patrols, warning systems, they also gather in town. For example, seven thousand people came to Ostroh, and they fortified their positions in the cloister and the high school. Then, the intensity of Ukrainian attacks dropped because the attackers were surprised by the number of casualties.

- What were retaliatory operations like? Who made carried them out?

- There were two kinds of such operations. The former involved people whose families had been murdered, who then went to kill random Ukrainians. Retaliation. Thoughtless revenge. There were also retaliatory operations against Ukrainian settlements whose residents had earlier exterminated neighbouring Polish villages. There were also organised actions that were rather preventive than retaliatory. When the intelligence groups provided information that UPA and "chern" gathered in some Ukrainian village, a spoiling attack was conducted. Such was the nature of operations by e.g. the detachment under Cpt Kocharński "Bomba" of the 27th Volhynian Infantry Division of the Home Army.

- According to the predominant opinion, two to three thousand Ukrainians were killed due to the Polish retaliation.

- No more than three thousand, but Ukrainians themselves include those who were killed in action when they attacked Polish villages in the casualties resulting from Polish retaliation.

- What was the attitude of the German occupation authorities towards the extermination of Poles.

- Permissive. Ukrainian nationalists collaborated with them, though they gradually became a danger. German wanted the UPA to murder Poles rather than fight the occupation forces.

- Were there any attempts at estimating the number of the Ukrainians who saved their Polish neighbours, warned or hid them?
- There were such attempts, but it is difficult. We should remember that between 50,000 and 70,000 Ukrainians could be missing or killed by the NKVD or the Soviet army west of the Zbruch River after the German withdrawal. Some were killed, some deported, while others fled and emigrated. There are not enough witnesses and documents. Doctor Leon Popek and others tried to count the "righteous Ukrainians". It is estimated that several thousand families opposed murders of Poles.
- How do you see the historical policy of the government of the Third Polish Republic concerning the issue of Volhynia to date and the promoted model of Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation?
- Until recently, the topic of Volhynia was marginalised due to political correctness, better cooperation with Ukraine. Poland implemented poor historical policy, which, fortunately, begins to change. Our neighbours' historical policy, particularly the kind implemented in Western Ukraine, is permeated with nationalism. Ukrainians always say: of course, we want to speak, we want to meet, organised joint academic fora. However, when such fora take place, the Ukrainians state that in their opinion, there was a Polish-Ukrainian guerrilla war in Volhynia, and, as is always the case during a war, many Poles and Ukrainians were killed. And the war broke out because Ukrainians were harmed by Poles, who conducted ethnic cleansing until Operation Vistula. Therefore, we cannot speak of any genocide. The factors that are unfavourable for reconciliation include glorification of war criminals, cult of Bandera, slogans: "all up to the San River is ours".
- Such a situation does not bode well for progress in true reconciliation. Can we do anything about it?
- I spend much time with the Polish circles related to the Borderland Regions, and I visit Ukraine often. Poles want only to correct false representations, bury their ancestors and commemorate the places where they lived and died. They seek no revenge. Modern ecclesiastical, state and non-governmental elites of both countries must face the truth, and jointly count the victims, not in order to do any bidding. If there were Ukrainians who were victims in Poland, let them commemorate them. If there were Poles who were victims in Ukraine, let us raise monuments to their memory. We should still talk, even if it has been disappointing so far.
- We will not convince a large portion of the Ukrainian elite to abandon the cult of Bandera.
- We will not. The Ukrainians, if they will, will find national heroes other than Bandera or Shukhevych. They must mature into it. And we - by which I also mean the Institute of National Remembrance - have our own duties, primarily those in the field of education, particularly towards the young generation. We must conduct research, spread knowledge on genocide in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, commemorate the victims, remember the events and the places as long as they will be condemned to oblivion.



Photo gallery

