

Volhynia Massacre

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2022-08-08, 05:49

Ukrainians in Interwar Poland, 1918-1939

Having been annexed by its neighbors in the late 18th century, the Polish state, as reconstituted directly after WWI, had approx. 5 million Ukrainian inhabitants. This was roughly 16% of the population. In some south-eastern regions (Volhynia, Eastern Galicia) Ukrainians constituted the majority. Most Ukrainians from Volhynia and to the west in the Lublin Voivodeship were Orthodox Christians.

The majority of Ukrainians in Galicia, however, were Uniates, or Greek Catholics (i.e., Christians preserving the Eastern rite, but recognizing the authority of the Pope), whose ethnic identity was much stronger. Over 90 % of Ukrainians in the Second Republic of Poland lived in the countryside, 3–6% worked in industry, and ca. 1% were intellectuals. According to the 1931 census, the population of the Volhynia Voivodeship was slightly over 2 million. Ukrainians constituted a vast majority of the local population — approx. 64% (ca. 1.5 million), followed by Poles — 15.6 % (ca. 340,000), Jews — 10 % (ca. 210,000), Germans — 2.3 % (ca. 47,000), Czechs — 1.1 % (ca. 30,000), and other less numerous minorities.

Pre-war Poland was rife with Polish-Ukrainian disputes. Following the overthrow of the Tsar in Russia, both the White Movement and the Bolsheviks made it impossible for Ukrainians to establish their own state with a capital in Kiev. The creation of the Western Ukrainian People's Republic was hampered by the Ukrainian defeat in the Polish–Ukrainian War and the loss of Lvov (1918). Most Galician Ukrainians did not accept the political *status quo*. On the other hand, the Polish authorities did not deliver on their own promises. For instance, they failed to open Ukrainian university (as per the 1922 Act of Parliament) and they imposed restrictions on Ukrainian elementary and secondary education. Radical Ukrainian organizations began to use terrorism as a form of political pressure. The Polish politician Tadeusz Hołówko and the minister of the interior Bronisław Pieracki were assassinated in 1931 and 1934 respectively. These were the two most infamous assassinations conducted by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), founded in 1929. The OUN also used terror against pragmatic Ukrainian activists.

In reaction to the act of sabotage conducted by the OUN in the fall of 1930, the Polish authorities ordered pacification of Eastern Galicia. This operation consisted of arrests, beatings, the compulsory quartering of Polish troops in Ukrainian villages, and in the so-called vicious searches (combined with destruction of property and crops). Even though the Ukrainian National Democratic Alliance (UNDO) did reach an agreement with the Polish government in the summer of 1935 and won its own political representation in the Polish parliament, the Polish concessions (e.g., credits for Ukrainian entrepreneurs, partial amnesty, and the release of some OUN activists from the camp for political prisoners in Bereza Kartuska) were insufficient for the Ukrainians. Even the “Volhynian experiment” – that is, fairly liberal administration of the Volhynia Voivodeship under governor Henryk Józewski during 1930–1938 – did not change the situation. When taking office Józewski declared that “a way for the Polish and Ukrainian nations to coexist peacefully had to be found.”

Nonetheless, his concessions, were also to prove insufficient. Moreover, in the late 1930s Polish authorities tightened policy towards Ukrainians, which led to Polonisation in Volhynia, especially in the Chełm region, combined with destruction of Orthodox churches.

Photo gallery

