

Volhynia Massacre

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The Genocide on Poles Conducted by the OUN-B and UPA

Following the mass deportations and arrests carried out by the NKVD and after the subsequent German repressions (e.g., deportation to the Reich to forced labor, arrests, detention in camps, and mass executions), by 1943 Poles constituted only 10–12 % of the entire population of Volhynia. Poles became an ethnic group deprived of most of its social activists, intellectuals, and military men. Thus, the Poles did not seek to create conflict situations.

On the contrary, they did everything to avoid them. This fact should be stressed because some Ukrainian historians try to dispute it. Contrary to the truth, they suggest that the Volhynian massacres were not the first, but the second stage of a bloody Polish-Ukrainian conflict. According to their version, which has no basis in reality, the first stage began in the spring of 1943 as a “peasant war” (a “Jacquerie”) — spontaneously, and not inspired or controlled by Bandera’s OUN. The war was purportedly declared by the “masses of Ukrainian refugees” from the Chełm region who had fled across the Bug River eastward as early as 1942/1943. In Volhynia they inflamed the anti-Polish sentiments among Ukrainian peasants by telling them about the atrocities Poles had purportedly committed against Ukrainians in the Chełm region. All this is in line with the pro-Bandera propaganda put forward during the last stages of World War II and successfully promoted after the war by émigré Ukrainian nationalist historians associated with OUN-B.

The first particularly cruel massacre of Poles took place on February 9, 1943 in the colony of Parośla located 1 km from Sarny. The number of Polish victims exceeded 155.

In early 1943 the Ukrainian auxiliary police in Volhynia and Podole had nearly 12 thousand members. In March and April approx. 5 thousand of them deserted from the German service taking weapons and ammunition. Many of them had previously participated in murdering Jews of Volhynia. Majority of the deserters joined UPA, and many of them became commanders. From that moment on the number of initially sporadic massacres of Poles increased.

The OUN-UPA terror assumed a mass scale in the summer and fall of 1943. The massacres of Poles initiated in the Sarny, Kostopol, Równe, and Zdołbun counties spread across to Dubno and Łuck counties in June 1943. In July of that year they affected the Kowel, Włodzimierz Wołyński, and Horochów counties, before spreading further still to Luboml county in August. The month of July 1943 proved particularly tragic, with the Sunday of July 11, 1943 being especially bloody. At the crack of dawn that day UPA detachments (often actively supported by local Ukrainians) simultaneously surrounded and attacked 99 Polish villages in the Kowel, Włodzimierz Wołyński, and Horochów counties, as well as in a part of Łuck county. Ukrainians ruthlessly slaughtered Polish civilians and destroyed their homes. Villages were burned to the ground and property was looted. Researchers estimate that on that day alone the number of Polish victims may have amounted to some 8,000 people — mostly women, children, and the elderly. The perpetrators used bullets, axes, pitchforks, knives, and other weapons. Many Poles were killed in churches.

Attacks on churches were indeed common, as the Bandera followers wanted to murder as many Poles as possible. On “Bloody Sunday” of July 11, the Ukrainians killed approx. 200 parishioners in the church in Poryck. The local parish priest, Father Bolesław Szablowski, a Pole, was killed a bit later. Similarly, the Polish priest Father Jan Kotwicki died along with some 150 parishioners in the church in Chrynów. Father Józef Aleksandrowicz, aged 74, was killed in similar circumstances in the Zabłoćce parish. Furthermore, Polish parishioners died in the churches in Krymno and Kisielin (approx. 40 and 80 victims respectively).

Poles had to abandon their homes and seek shelter in the cities and towns which had posts of Hungarian and German troops. It was an irony that in order to escape from the UPA Poles had to seek protection from their oppressors: firstly from the Germans, and during 1944–1945 from the Soviets. The Germans deported Polish escapees to the Reich to forced labor. To escape the massacres some escapees tried to get to the General Government, particularly to the Lublin District. Finally, a small number of Poles created self-defence centers to protect themselves, with the most well-known ones located in Przebraże (where 10,000 Poles defended themselves), Huta Stepańska (600 Poles dead), Zasmyki, Dederkały, and Ostróg. Due to the lack of arms, ammunition, and a cadre of commanders most of the approx. 100 Polish self-defence centers were defeated.

The tragic events of 1943 in Volhynia had a significant influence on the development of the Polish underground, including the formation of the largest partisan unit of the occupation period, that is, the 27th Volhynian Infantry Division of the Home Army. Formed within the framework of Operation Tempest (January–February 1944), the division had up to 7,000 soldiers. Initially (that is, until mid-March 1944) the division fought against the UPA to protect the surviving Polish population as well as against the German Army. Thereafter, it joined the Red Army in frontline combat against German and Hungarian troops. Moreover, several thousand Poles (mostly in Polesie Wołyńskie) fought in the ranks of Soviet partisan units, where Poles sought help and protection from the UPA for their families. For these same reasons, in the summer of 1944 at least several thousand Poles joined the “destruction battalions” — Soviet auxiliary military police subordinate to the NKVD. It remains uncertain as to what extent those destruction battalions formed in early 1945 protected Poles against the UPA and to what extent they provoked the UPA to carry on with its campaigns.

Photo gallery

