

THE TWICE-OCCUPIED VILLAGES OF THE NORTH-EASTERN BORDERLANDS

The north-eastern provinces of Poland (Wilno and Nowogród Provinces) constituted a mix of nationalities, with Polish nationals forming the majority in most of these territories. In Wilno Province, 58.6% inhabitants were Polish (based on their declared mother tongue), and in Nowogród Province, that number was 52.4% (it is important to note that, in particular in Nowogród Province, there was a large population of Orthodox Christians whose native language was Polish). Belarusian and Jewish communities were also present (the latter mostly in cities). The area was predominantly rural – Wilno (modern-day Vilnius) was its only large urban area, and 89% of the inhabitants of Nowogród Province lived in the country (Lida and Baranowicze, the province's largest cities, numbered little more than 30,000 inhabitants). The rural population, which constituted the majority, became the target of repressions imposed by several occupying forces.

As a result of the invasion of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich (on 1 September 1939) and Joseph Stalin's Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (17 September 1939), as well as due to the secret pacts the two had entered into prior to the invasion, the north-eastern lands of the Republic of Poland came under Soviet occupation. The whole of Nowogród Province was incorporated into the Byelorussian SSR. Part of the Wilno Province (including Wilno itself) was given to Lithuania by the USSR, and was temporarily occupied by the Lithuanians – however, after the Red Army conquered Lithuania, the area ultimately came under Soviet control. Wilno Province was subsequently divided between the Lithuanian SSR and the Byelorussian SSR.

On 22 June 1941, war broke out between the Third Reich and the USSR, which had hitherto been allies, resulting in Wilno and Nowogród Provinces coming under German occupation. The Germans incorporated them into Reich Commissariat Ostland (Reichkommissariat Ostland) – Wilno Province was incorporated into General Commissariat Lithuania (Generalkommissariat Litauen), and Nowogród Province was joined to General Commissariat Belarus (Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien).

The Soviets began repressing the inhabitants of villages located in the north-eastern provinces from the moment the occupation began (i.e. when the German-Soviet War broke out

in June 1941). The repressions, while also aimed at members of classes which could potentially organise and serve as leaders of Poland's public life, primarily targeted rural inhabitants. Landowners, members of the intelligentsia, settlers (especially military), as well as more affluent peasants (referred to as "kulaks") were the main target. Those in any way involved in the pre-war public life of Poland were arrested and accused of "anti-Soviet" activity. Pursuant to the decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee from 5 March 1940, approximately four thousand citizens of the Republic of Poland were executed in prisons located on the territory of the Byelorussian SSR. The majority of the prisoners held in the prisons of the BSSR were murdered by the NKVD during the evacuation of prisoners after the breakout of the war between the Soviets and Germans (most of them – approx. 800 – were killed during the evacuation of the Berezwezc prison in Wilno Province. The evacuation of the prison in Minsk in Belarus took the lives of more than five hundred people, and many victims were claimed in Oszmiana (modern-day Ashmyany) as well).

Between 1939 and 1941, inhabitants of Polish villages, just like all other citizens of the Republic of Poland, were subjected to gradual mass "deportations" to deep within the Soviet Union. According to (not entirely credible) documentation maintained by the Convoy Troops of the NKVD, at least 250,000 people were taken from the north-eastern provinces of Poland, with entire families being deported (the number also includes Białystok Province; according to Polish sources, the Soviet data underestimate the real number). The inhumane conditions in which people were transported for long periods of time and which were present at their destination resulted in high mortality rates among the deportees (this applied in particular to the children and the elderly).

The above-mentioned practices of the occupiers, the goal of which was to weaken (or ruin) the Polish community and the elements of the Polish state in the annexed territories, should be perceived as instances of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Yet another form of repression used against Polish villages was the illegal (from the point of view of international law) conscription of tens of thousands of people into the Soviet military (most of them died during the initial stages of the war with Germany). Inhabitants of villages located in the north-eastern provinces were robbed of their property by the Soviet authorities (e.g. during deportations or arrests) or had excessively high contributions imposed

on them, the aim of which was to completely impoverish the peasants and force them to join the kolkhozes.

Another noteworthy phenomenon was the participation of the above-mentioned populations in the Polish underground independence movement (the Union of Armed Struggle and the Home Army), for which the foundations had already been laid during the first Soviet occupation (1939-1941), and which was expanded during the German occupation, in some instances even growing to truly massive proportions. In Wilno and Nowogród Provinces, nearly 18,000 soldiers served in the Home Army by mid-1944, most of whom came from villages and small towns.

The German occupation of 1941-1944 brought with it new threats to the villages of the north-eastern provinces. Similar to all other Polish territories conquered by the Third Reich, the local villages were exploited economically and forced to perform compulsory labour (including deportations to forced labour camps in the Reich), as well as being targeted for extermination. The Polish populace also faced the threat of Lithuanian collaborators from General Commissariat Lithuania and pro-German Belarusian activists from General Commissariat Belarus. Aligning their political hopes with Nazi Germany, the Lithuanian and Belarusian collaborators established local authorities and police and military units, and were allowed to serve in the SS. The status of the Lithuanian and Belarusian populations was principally different to the status of the Polish population with regard to being able to organise their public life, schooling and press (it was forbidden to speak Polish in government offices located in the area – even though the majority of the population was Polish). The only people whose legal status was more dire were the local Jews, who were facing total extermination.

It is difficult to estimate the losses incurred by Polish villages as a result of the economic exploitation and forced labour deportation, but they were undoubtedly considerable. By August 1942, approx. 30,000 people were taken from Wilno and the surrounding areas, and another 3000 were taken from Brasław County during that period. During the mass pacification operations which took place in Nowogród Province in the summer of 1943, tens of thousands of people were sent to work in Germany. In General Commissariat Lithuania, especially in the territories located north of Wilno, the Lithuanian collaborator government launched a planned Polish farmer deportation operation (Lithuanians from the territories of pre-war Lithuania would move into the homes of the deported Poles).

The first wave of mass executions of the inhabitants of north-eastern villages began in July 1941, shortly after the German army took control of the area. German units responsible for cleansing this territory were targeting the local Jewry, but the Polish and Belarusian communities also suffered as a result. While the Germans were in the process of dealing with the local Jewish population, Nowogród Province became the staging ground for the “Polenaction”, which began in the summer of 1942 and was instigated by pro-German Belarusian collaborators. Between 26 and 30 June 1942, more than one thousand members of the Polish intelligentsia (predominantly from smaller communes and counties) were arrested and executed. It was a terrible blow for the already weakened villages of the north-eastern reaches.

The concentration camp located in Koldyczew, Baranowicze County, was the largest site where Poles were being exterminated (more than 20,000 victims, nearly all of them from rural areas – with more than 1956 of those coming from a single region – Horodyszczce). Ponary was another such place in Wilno Province where, in addition to nearly 100,000 Jews, over ten thousand Poles lost their lives, accused of supporting the independence movement or violating German or Lithuanian regulations.

One of the most heinous crimes against the Polish people living in Wilno Province committed by Lithuanian forces in the service of Germany took place in May 1942. In retaliation for an attack by Soviet saboteurs, more than 1200 Poles from Stare and Nowe Świąciany, Łyntupy, Sobolki, Szudowce, Kaznadziszki, Hodudziszki and other villages were killed (this was only a pretence used by the Lithuanians to cleanse the area – the local Poles did not support the Bolsheviks). Other examples include the pacification of Pawłów (Oszmiana County), which took place on 4 May 1944 and was carried out by units belonging to the corps led by General Plechaviczius, as well as the murder by Lithuanian police officers of 39 Poles in Glinciszki (in retaliation for the deaths of 4 Lithuanian policemen in an ambush organised by the Home Army).

The greatest losses sustained by the civilian population came from wide-ranging anti-guerrilla operations carried out by the German military and police units commanded by the SS and police authorities. During Operation Hamburg, which took place in December 1942, 6172 people died on the territory of Gebietskommissariat Słonim (one-fourth of which were

classified as Bolshevik saboteurs, and the rest as civilian inhabitants of the local villages). During Operation Altona, which took place at the same time in the Byeń-Kosów (Polesie) region, Germans killed 1032 people (including only several dozen Bolshevik saboteurs). As a result of another such operation in Gebietskommissariat Słonim, 16 villages situated in the basin of the Szczara in Lipczan Forest were burnt down.

Operation Herman, the largest German anti-guerrilla operation, which involved two army divisions and a large police contingent, devastated Słopce and Wołożyn Counties between 14 July and 8 August 1943. More than 60 villages bordering Naliboki Forest were exterminated (only in Iwieniec Commune, Wołożyn County, and Naliboki Commune, Stołpce County, the Germans razed as many as 38 villages). The following villages were burnt down: Dudki, Mejszty, Czyżowicze, Wołoszewicze, Borkowszczyzna, Mikucie, Siwica, Dubki, Oszty, Dajnowa, Zaborze, Pietryłowicze, Ułynki, Adamki, Pohoretka, Sierkule, Siedziewicze, Kudźnia, Siwiec, Piotrowszczyzna, Jankowicze, Naliboki, Rudnia Nalibocka, Rudnia Pilańska, Rudnia Prudy, Sutoki, Kuciszczce, Zamianka, Krzeczoty, Trzebina, Ogrodniki, Niwno, Bilica, Nestorowicze, Dereźno, Skrotowszczyzna, Bronczewo, Suprośna Słoboda i Zubierowo – in total, nearly two thousand farms were obliterated in just two communes. The data on Derewno and Rubieżewicze Communes is incomplete. We know that on the territory of Derewno Commune, the pacified villages included Szarzynszcze, Ogrodniki (where 250 people were burnt alive), Kleciszczce and Preczyszczce. According to German data, punitive expeditions murdered nearly four thousand civilian inhabitants of the local villages, in addition to sending 24,000 to forced labour camps in the Third Reich or concentration camps. Their belongings were also looted. In the summer of 1943, the pacification efforts also reached the left bank of the Neman – according to the Home Army intelligence, the Germans set fire to numerous villages accused of collaborating with Soviet guerrillas near the towns of Szczorse and Turzec.

In 1943, after Operation Herman, the Germans deported the inhabitants of the Wołożyńsk villages of Zabrzeż, Jagodzień, Pacewicze and Biały Brzeg (the villages were razed, and their inhabitants were transported to Germany). Around the same time, information surfaced regarding resettlements of the Polish population in the areas around Iwacewicze.

In August 1943, an operation similar to Herman took place near Lipczan Forest, albeit smaller in scope. Pacification efforts were also underway on the right bank of the Neman, in areas bordering Szczuczyn and Wołkowysk Counties, in the summer of 1943. The total body

count is unknown, although it must have been considerable (considering that approx. 600 people died in the village of Kniżewodce alone – most of its inhabitants were accused of helping Soviet guerrillas cross the Neman).

The list of repressions against the villages of the borderlands is very long. In the spring of 1942, the Germans pacified Łogwiny (Szczuczyn County) in retaliation for saboteurs planting explosives on a train. The Germans set fire to several of the buildings there and shot at the inhabitants. Soon after, the village of Zaborie near Różanka met a similar fate for the same reason (37 inhabitants were shot). On 23 February 1943, as a result of a provocation by Soviet guerrilla fighters near the Polish village of Jatołowicze near Juraciszki, a German punitive expedition razed the village and killed its inhabitants (90 people were burnt alive). In June 1943, after the Home Army assaulted the Iwieniec garrison, the Germans shot approx. 150 Poles living there. In April 1943, the Germans executed 55 villagers suspected of working with guerrillas on the territory of Gebietskommissariat Nowogródek. In the same month, in retaliation for a German soldier killed by unknown perpetrators, the villages of Tuliczewo and Nowosady were pacified – both the buildings and their inhabitants were burnt. Between May and June 1943, Belarusian police units arrested more than 100 Poles living near Baranowicze under the preposterous accusation of supporting communism – they were all executed without trial. In retaliation for the attacks of Soviet guerrillas, the Germans set fire to several villages near Świteż (Nowogródek County). In Nieświeskie, the villages pacified by the Germans included two large ones – Kołki and Sitnica, the latter of which neighboured the Polish-USSR border and was where nearly 400 people died (that was the price paid by the local population for the recklessness of the Soviet guerrillas, who would visit villages without later returning to defend them). In April 1944, the German gendarmerie and Belarusian police pacified the village of Przewłoka near Horodyszcz, killing more than 100 people. In July 1944, shortly before the evacuation of the German forces occupying the area, more than 100 Poles who had been arrested four days prior were executed (they were murdered near Pietralewicze, in a place with a history of executions dating back to 1942). On 6 July 1944, Russian units of the SS in the service of Germany pacified the northern part of Słonim County (it is estimated that 150 Poles from Rohotna, Nowosiółek and Sanniki died as a result).

Another facet of the martyrdom of the villages of the north-eastern borderlands was related to the criminal activity of the Soviet guerrilla fighters, who acted in the interest of the Soviet Union and were tasked with preparing the area to be once again annexed by the USSR,

this time for good. The guerillas treated the local inhabitants as conquered people, exploiting them mercilessly and executing everyone who supported the Polish independence movement or who was suspected of sympathising with the Polish state. Doctor Zygmunt Boradyn, a historian from Minsk, estimates that at least two thousand Poles, primarily rural inhabitants, were killed by Soviet guerillas between 1942 and 1944 in Nowogród Province alone. Those whom the Bolsheviks did not manage to capture right away were put on SOE lists (Sotsyalno Opasnowo Elementa – socially-dangerous elements, to be arrested by the NKVD in the future). Buildings of historical value were destroyed, as well as those related to the Polish state and Catholicism (Soviet guerillas burnt down Polish manor houses, schools and churches).

On 8 May 1943, the Stalin Brigade pacified the town of Naliboki (approx. 130 Poles were killed), and the village of Derewno was razed in the same month. In January 1944, the Soviet units stationed in Rudniki Forests pacified the village of Koniuchy (more than 40 people were executed). On 18 February 1944, Soviet units pacified the village of Prowżały (14 people were killed), on 26 February 1944, the Vperyod Brigade and the Chapayev Unit assaulted the Polish villages of Izabelin, Kaczewo, Babińsk and Ługomowicze – the buildings were razed and several dozen villagers were killed (the local Home Army units came to the villagers' defence and fought a bloody battle against the Bolsheviks). In February and March 1944, the Bolsheviks murdered several dozen people on the territories south-east of Lida (mostly families of Home Army soldiers). In April 1944, the Bolsheviks razed the Polish village of Szczepki in Stołpce County (several dozen people were killed and burnt alive). On 14 May 1944, during an attack on Company I/78 pp of the Home Army stationed in Kamień, the Soviet forces burnt 80% of the village and murdered several dozen of its residents. On 13 June 1944, red guerillas pacified three villages on the Neman – Kupisk Lubczański, Kupisk Pierwszy and Kupisk Kazionny (nearly 500 farms were burnt to the ground, and an undetermined number of villagers were killed).

The encroachment of the Soviet army onto the north-eastern territories of Poland did not mean liberation for the local people, only a change of the occupier. Combating the Polish independence movement, the Internal Troops of the NKVD employed repression tactics on a massive scale, primarily against Polish villages, which constituted the base of operations for the Home Army in the borderlands. A single Soviet operation could result in several thousand people being arrested (most of those people were then deported to the gulags). One of the primary leaders of the Polish resistance in Nowogród Province, Lieutenant Stanisław “Licho”

Szabunia, estimated that 9821 people perished between September and November 1944 as a result of the pacification operations carried out by only a single division of the IT. Most of the casualties were villagers (data taken from a Home Army report, excluding those sent to the gulags or forcefully conscripted). As an example, between 15 March and 12 April 1945, during an operation which took place in Grodno and Molodechno Oblasts and which was carried out by the 6th and 10th Division of the Internal Troops, 2783 and 4462 people respectively were arrested (109 of which were executed on site). Operations carried out by the Internal Troops of the NKVD combined pacifications with razing entire villages (e.g. as in Ławże, Okolica, Juskiewiczze, Klukowicze, Kołodziszki, Grodzie, Bobrowicze). The illegal conscription into the Soviet army further desolated Polish villages, taking thousands of people from their homes and throwing them into the front lines. The “repatriation” declared in 1945 resulted in hundreds of thousands of residents of both provinces being forced to leave their heritage and cross the post-Yalta border. Those who stayed in the Taken Lands, despite heavy resistance from the vestiges of the Post-Home Army self-defence groups (which operated in an organised fashion until 1949!), were robbed of their property and forced to join the kolkhozes, becoming 20th-century slaves. Over the decades of Russian and Belarusian rule, the structure of Polish villages transformed drastically with regard to their economy and nationality (the ongoing process of Russification, and recently also – albeit to a lesser degree – Belarusianisation, the disappearance of individual farms, as well as the recent “ageing” of the villages, combined with a mass-exodus of the younger generations to cities).

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