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## The attitude of the USSR towards Polish citizens of Jewish nationality



Before the war, Jews comprised about 9% of the total population of the lands occupied by the Red Army in 1939. After the outbreak of the war, next 250-300 thousand refugees from western and central Poland arrived in those areas. Thus, 1.4-1.5 million Jews, who then constituted 11% of the entire population of the Eastern Borderlands, were under the Soviet occupation.

The Sovietization of those areas had a negative impact on the lives of the Jewish population. After the abolition of private property, a great number of Jews found themselves on the brink of material catastrophe, as their basis of existence was self-employment as artisans or traders.

The religious life of the Jewish community suffered as a result of the Soviet activity. In consequence of the programmed secularisation, synagogues were closed or taxes were imposed on them and the impoverished population was quickly unable to pay them. The Jewish communities - kahals - were dissolved, which resulted in the suspension of financing of Jewish religious and social institutions. Another blow to the religious life of the Jews was the official ban on the use of the Hebrew language. Instead, the use of Yiddish, the language of the working masses, was supported to some extent.

The Soviets also hit the political life of the Jewish population. The new authorities dissolved or banned the activity of Jewish political parties, and arrested their leaders and more prominent activists. In this regard, Bund and Zionist activists were particularly targeted.

The Jews in the above-mentioned areas were also victims of Soviet repression and crimes, which resulted not from their ethnic origin, but from their class affiliation - this was namely the main criterion applied by the Soviet authorities. As a result, the representatives of the Jewish minority were repressed not as Jews, but as members of classes and social groups considered by the USSR as hostile to the Soviet authorities, including Polish Army officers, activists

of "counter-revolutionary" political parties and social organizations, industrialists, merchants, etc.

Jews were among the victims of the Katyn massacre. There were 290 Polish Army officers shot in the Katyn forest. They constituted about 5% of the total number of those murdered. The number of Jews imprisoned in the camp in Starobelsk has not been precisely established. However, there are estimates that there were about 200 Jews, which would make up 5% of the camp's prisoners. There were probably no Jews in the third special camp, i.e. in Ostashkov. Thus, in total, among the officers of the Polish Army murdered in the so-called Katyn massacre, there were 500-600 Jews, who constituted 5-6% of the total number of those shot.

After the German aggression against Poland, masses of the civilian population fled to the eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic. In the fall of 1939, on the Polish lands incorporated into the Byelorussian SSR there were recorded almost 45,000 refugees ("fugitives") who concentrated mainly in larger cities. Due to the fact that they were unemployed and often begged or smuggled, the Soviet authorities considered them an element that demoralized the local population. In October 1939, a decision was made to relocate them to eastern Belarus. The operation covered 22.5 thousand "fugitives", about 70% of whom were Jews. The displaced were deployed in five districts of the BSSR: Mogilev, Vitebsk, Minsk, Polesia and Gomel. However, their situation did not improve as there was no housing or work for them in these places.

The Jews, like other nationalities of the Eastern Borderlands, fell victim to mass deportations of citizens of the Second Republic of Poland into the depths of the USSR, carried out by the Soviets in the years of 1940-1941. On the occasion of the first and second deportations in February and April 1940, the Jews constituted a small percentage of those affected. It could be up to several hundred people. On the other hand, the third wave of deportations in June 1940 concerned, first of all, the "fugitive", so it mainly affected the Jews. They accounted for approx. 82-84% of 78,000 deported persons. Most of them were sent to logging, some were forced to work in mining and metallurgy. Undoubtedly, the Jews were also among the victims of the fourth deportation carried out in June 1941, which involved 36,000 citizens of the Second Polish Republic. A specific percentage of Jews was not established, but it was undoubtedly small.

The Jews considered to be "counter-revolutionary elements" were arrested by the NKVD in 1939-1941. This mainly affected political activists, especially the Bund, the Zionists and their youth subsidiary Betar. The arrests also involved members of other youth organizations, including "Hashomer-Hatzair", "Gordonia" and "Hechaluz". Arrests among Jews included not only political activists, but also people assigned by the Soviets to other categories dangerous to their power. These were people considered to be a "socially dangerous element", Jews who illegally tried to cross the borders of the USSR, and those involved in the anti-Soviet conspiracy. In total, the Soviets arrested 23,590 Jews during the given period. It is assumed that one third of them ended up in labour camps after the trials. The largest group of

those arrested were sentenced to three years in a correctional camp. A significant number of them were given a more severe sentence of eight years in a labour camp, relating to cases of espionage or being a "socially dangerous element". The Jewish labour camp prisoners arrested in the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic were scattered in various places that made up the Gulag network. However, by far the greatest number of them, about 80%, were in the camps located in the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

To sum up, the Jews, like other nationalities living or arriving in the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic in the fall of 1939, were repressed by the USSR and were hit by new orders. As citizens of the destroyed state, they were punished for the same real or suspected crimes for which Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians were punished or repressed. How bad their situation was under the Soviet occupation is best evidenced by the fact that thousands of Jewish refugees, having realized the realities of the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic annexed by the USSR, reported their willingness to repatriate to the General Government.

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