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## The Polish State and the “Polish Operation” of the NKVD

The Great Purge in the Soviet Union claimed the lives of nearly 200,000 Polish victims. Paradoxically, the knowledge of that atrocity is not present in the public awareness of modern Poland. The only organisation in the world which has been consistently making effort to restore the memory of the “Polish Operation” of the NKVD since the mid-1990s is the Moscow-based Memorial, which has been managing the records of the Great Terror victims for years. Among the collected and documented flashcards, there are about 20,000 portrayals of Poles. In Poland, the work on commemorating the victims of that atrocity has just begun.

This state of affairs has resulted primarily from the fact that the “Polish Operation” was carried out by one of the most cruel and ruthless totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which used lies as the main tool of state policy throughout its history. The “Polish Operation” and other operations with regard to nations during the Great Terror were part of Stalinist governance. This was a totally regulated process. All the most important stages of “Polish Operation”, its basic tasks, methods and means of repression were standardised by relevant acts, decisions and the orders of the government, the Political Bureau and the NKVD. The most important role in this process, however, was played by the will and the mindset of one man – Joseph Stalin.

In managing the repression process, Stalin demonstrated exceptional insight and diligence. He personally carried out thorough the analyses of materials related to the activity of the high-ranking activists of the party, leadership of the Red Army, management of the most important branches of the national economy – who, in his opinion, were his potential rivals in the struggle for absolute power. He personally defined the primary directions of repression and indicated whom to eliminate and whom to spare. Actual guilt of one or other people important for the political life of the country had no importance. The guilt was determined by Stalin himself

through an order to arrest a specific person or a relevant permit for the NKVD organs. On the other hand, repression against hundreds of thousands of ordinary people – Poles and representatives of other nations – was the field where the organs of the party and the NKVD were active. Stalin did not go into details of mass repression, he only encouraged his subordinates to increase their involvement in the machine of terror, increase the limit of the arrested persons, apply more and more severe means of repression against the victims.

He thus consciously created a system of mutual dependence among the perpetrators. Soviet officers and NKVD employees of all levels – involved in repression – slowly became “hostages to terror”, whom, if necessary, Stalin could accuse of atrocities committed according to his own instructions. Both the “Polish Operation” and other repression under the Great Terror nearly always ended in accusations against and executions of all the perpetrators.

Despite the numerous problems and difficulties, the Stalinist machine of the Great Terror was relatively efficient. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the momentary disclosure of the formerly inaccessible Soviet archives – fragments of the documents concerning repression of the 1930s – it turned out that the NKVD had been maintaining accurate statistics, and Stalin needed true data on his victims. Therefore, we can relatively accurately reconstruct the image of the crime against Poles.

In the 1990s, due to the momentary relaxation of the government system in the Russian Federation, the access to that data was gained by the Memorial – a Russian social organisation consisting primarily of the former dissidents, opponents of Communism, whose task is to commemorate victims of the Communist repression. Due to the Polish section of the organisation, managed by Alexandr Guryanov, the data regarding the number of the victims of the “Polish Operation” could enter

the academic circulation. They are not entirely precise because the NKVD documents on "Polish Operation" include no statistics arranged according to nationality. Therefore, a small portion of data in the total list of the Polish victims of the Great Terror is based on a supposition; they will probably be confirmed as a result of further research.

During the Great Terror in the Soviet Union, about 1 per cent of the entire population of the country belonging to all nations were repressed. Among the Poles, that percentage was nearly fifteen times higher. From nearly 1,200,000 Poles living in the USSR, nearly 200,000 were exterminated.

In the interwar period, the Second Polish Republic was seen by the leadership of the Soviet Union and the Communist Internationale as the "avant-garde of the global imperialism" that, according to the Soviet propaganda, was preparing for a war against the "homeland of the world proletariat". In theory, the Polish-Soviet relations should be correct as they were regulated in detail by the 1921 Treaty of Riga. Chapter VII included a guarantee of free development for national minorities in Poland and the Soviet republics: Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. In reality, Moscow treated the provisions of the treaty exceptionally instrumentally and selectively.

In the early 1920s, the attitude of the Polish government of the interwar period to the issue of the Polish population behind the eastern border was characterised by pragmatism. As time passed, they started to be totally helpless in the face of the indoctrination methods of the totalitarian state. Communist experiments on the Polish population in the borderlands was mainly seen as another traditional Russian attempt at depolonisation of the lands "beyond the Zbruch River". Initially, the Polish government relied on Chapter VII of the Treaty of Riga and attempted to take care of the Poles in the USSR and ensure relative exterritoriality for them. Soviet citizens of Polish nationality were naively assumed to be loyal to their historical motherland, which was seen as a matter of course. Hence, the Polish government for some time devised, e.g. unrealistic plans to establish and control a Polish school system within the territory of the Soviet Ukraine and Belarus. In September 1921, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland even adopted a decision to allocate 4 million marks per month to the financing of schools beyond the eastern border. Unfortunately, the money was never spent according to their allocation.

In the latter half of the 1920s and the early 1930s, as the political situation in Europe stabilised, and more and more Western powers recognised the USSR, the attitude of the Polish press and the Polish society to the

Soviet policy with regard to nations changed. The Polish position in regard to these issues started to be characterised by pragmatism and respect to the existing conditions. The process that consisted in shedding illusions that the status quo concerning the situation of Poles in the so-called further Borderlands (this is how the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that had been incorporated to the USSR under the Treaty of Riga were called) was reflected by the following passage from *Kurier Wileński* of 10<sup>th</sup> April 1927:

'The Piemont of the Polish Communists (Markhlevshchina) is not very large or rich. Its purpose is not to be a kind of centre that is capable of development, but only a centre of agitation [...]. Bolsheviks allocated substantial amounts of money to the Polish district in order to improve the prosperity of its residents, whose task, of course, is to become the agitating personnel to be exported to Poland. On the opposite side of the frontier, the people who go to Poland with all the energy that fanatics of an idea have organise the struggle. Let no one say that there are only agitators for hire there [...]. They are no *homines novi* (novices) who work for Bolshevik gold. Most of them are people who had been in ranks of revolutionary and pro-independence organisations before the war and during its early stages and were ready to fight for Poland. If they have now fallen under the command of the Kremlin, they have done this wielding a weapon that is not easy to fight: faith. We have to mobilise our ideological resources and take up the fight using effective and infallible methods.'

However, the capabilities of Poland with regard to "mobilisation of ideological resources" were not limited by the fact that there were not much of those resources, but by the fact that there were no sufficient tools to deliver them to the addressees – Poles in the Soviet Union.

The system of the Polish autonomy in the USSR gave rise to reasonable concerns for the Polish government. The government circles of the Second Polish Republic were aware of the fact that Soviet initiatives in this regard posed a threat to the Polish interest, both in the field of the internal and foreign policy. One of the leading Polish diplomats in the USSR, Piotr Kunicki, accurately depicted the large-scale Soviet initiatives with regards to the Polish population in the Borderlands in his report:

'The Markhlevsky district is a kind of laboratory where the experimental instilling of Communism into the Polish population takes place, so they are also

attempting to create "ideal" conditions for such experiments. The attention of both the local and central party and state authorities is directed towards this laboratory. Finally, this district is supposed to become an asset for the propaganda on the international forum, primarily in relation to Poland.'

This description reflected the essence of the Soviet policy concerning the Polish population. Piotr Kunicki had his reasons to characterise its response to such policy not as a triumph for Communist ideology, but as a result of compulsion and "Poles' coming to terms with the Communist government system as a necessary evil".

The capabilities of the Polish diplomatic service to protect Poles against sovietisation and repression were very limited. In January 1929, there were six Polish diplomatic representations in the Soviet Union – an embassy in Moscow and five consulates: in Leningrad, Minsk, Kharkiv, Kiev, and Tbilisi (Tiflis). Their relations with the local groups of Poles consisted primarily in providing charity aid and material support for families of imprisoned Poles. In the 1920s, there was also a possibility to help repressed Poles through the exchanges of political prisoners. When the terror against Poles intensified, such operations were no more carried out.

After the mass repression against Poles in the Soviet Union started, the expenses of the Polish diplomatic representations in the USSR allocated to material aid for the repressed Poles constituted a significant portion of the budgets for those institutions. This aid was primarily provided via the Soviet Red Cross, and sometimes directly to those in need. The Soviet party made the possibility to provide aid to Poles in the USSR on the freedom for the so-called International Red Aid to carry out its activities in Poland. Due to a mandate from the Communist Internationale, this organisation provided help to leftist prisoners in Polish prisons.

In the 1930s, the opportunities to provide the repressed Poles with aid were even more limited. The Soviet security organs spared no efforts to isolate the Polish consular missions to the maximum extent. A Pole who was a Soviet citizen could face severe consequences due to contact with a Polish consulate. During the Great Terror, the fear of any contact with Polish diplomatic missions was so great, that the employees of the embassy and, to an even greater extent, consulates, could not call a doctor to a patient, find a person to repair anything or clean their building. What was particularly annoying was the impossibility to buy foodstuffs on the free market. High tariffs were also imposed on foodstuffs imported from Poland. The tactic used by the Soviet consisted in

isolating the Polish diplomats from any sources of information and contact with the local Polish population. The Consul General of the Republic of Poland in Kiev, Jerzy Matusiński, wrote in his report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that in order to prevent the Polish diplomats from moving around freely in their cars, there were two cars with NKVD agents parked by the consulate day and night, and they were to follow all the actions of Poles outside the premises. The consulate's phone connection to Warsaw was also cut off, and they had to wait several or dozen or so hours to be connected to the Polish embassy in Moscow.

In the face of another wave of terror against Poles, there was more and more willingness to emigrate. As early as 1930–1931, the Polish consulates were addressed by numerous Poles who begged the diplomats to allow them to leave for Poland. The situation became so urgent that the Polish Ambassador in Moscow, Stanisław Patek, turned to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, August Zaleski, in this regard. He appealed to allow the repressed Poles to come to Poland despite the difficult economic situation.

The paradox, however, consisted in the fact that the possibility for the suffering Poles to come to Poland did not depend on the Polish government. Even if the Polish consulate recognised the petitioner as a Polish citizen and issued a Polish passport for them, the Soviet authorities had to grant them an exit visa, which was done only in exceptional circumstances. The consulate in Kiev issued over 3,000 permits to return to Poland to persons who wanted to leave the Soviet Union within six months in 1933, but only three of them were granted the exit visa and could actually emigrate.

Unfortunately, it has to be said that the Polish diplomatic service in many aspects failed to do a good job to help repressed Poles. Its activity was paralysed by fear that the country might be infiltrated by Communist agents and the awareness of the difficult economic situations. This was clearly different from the attitude of the German diplomatic service, which made much more for fellow Germans repressed in the Soviet Union. During the Great Famine of 1932–1933, German diplomats forced the Soviet government to allow 23,000 Soviet citizens of German nationality to leave the USSR.

As the Great Terror started, the opportunities for the Polish diplomatic service to provide aid were reduced to nearly nothing. The Polish embassy in Moscow, particularly Polish consulates, were turned into besieged fortresses. Each step the Polish diplomats took was watched by the NKVD. Diplomatic employees were harassed in many ways to prevent them from carrying out their official duties. As described by the Consul General Jerzy

Mosiński in his report from Kiev to the Polish embassy in Moscow, NKVD agents had probably received an order to intimidate employees of the consulate. After an employee had left the building, the agents followed their every step. They did not even let the employee exchange a few words with the passers-by they happened to meet and harassed him or her in shops and on trams. They would even sit on the same bench in a park.

In August 1938, the harassment of Polish diplomats took a new form, which was unimaginable in international diplomatic relations. NKVD agents started to follow them shoulder to shoulder and tried to elbow them on any possible occasion. The garage of the consulate was blocked by NKVD cars, and even the consul general could not use cars in possession of the diplomatic mission. Such harassment of Polish diplomats ceased only after Poland had taken retaliatory action against Soviet diplomats in the Second Polish Republic. The agreement on this issue was signed on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1938.

The above presented fact demonstrates that in the 1930s, the Polish diplomatic service was, out of necessity, a passive observer of the tragedy of the Polish population in the Borderlands. It could only compassionately watch the genocide of Poles and inform the Polish government of the fact. Their capabilities under the Stalinist totalitarian regime were very limited, and as the Great Terror commenced, they virtually disappeared. The actual mechanisms that would make it possible to exert pressure on the Soviet government were very

weak, and those minimum opportunities to influence the USSR to ease the suffering of Poles who were Soviet citizens were not used. Poland was doomed to remain a passive observer of those tragic events.

What happened nearly 80 years ago is a tragedy nearly unknown in modern Poland. In the Communist period, this was a taboo, but opposed to the tragedy of Karyn or Volhynia, the memory of the "Polish Operation" has not been restored. It could be explained easily: the cause of the victims of Katyn or the massacre in Volhynia was promoted by their families who lived in Poland that could speak for them due to their high social status, particularly after the collapse of the Communist system. Those who were murdered during the "Polish Operation" do not have such spokesmen. Their relatives were either murdered along with them or deported deep into the Soviet territory and subjected to Sovietisation.

We have to stop the fading of the nation's historical memory and restore the memory of this unimaginable atrocity. The "forgotten genocide" can no longer be forgotten. The blood of a Polish peasant from the Zhytomir area is as valuable as the blood of a Polish officer killed in Katyn. The commemoration of victims of totalitarian regimes should not distinguish between Poles of the first and the second category. The "Polish Operation" claimed the lives of at least ten times more people than the massacres of Katyn, Kharkiv, Mednoye and other Stalinist crimes of 1940–1941. It is high time to restore the memory of this horrible crime.