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Commemorating 1943 events in Volyn

By Taras Kuzio,

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The recent friendly relations between Ukraine and Poland are nothing new, having been developing for some years in spite of the historically troubled relations between the two countries. However, the upcoming commemorations of the events generally referred to as the massacres of Poles in Volhynia in 1943 may put Ukrainian-Polish relations under considerable strain.

Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation has been promoted since 1945. The most influential Polish emigre journal *Kultura* published in Paris from the late 1940's always championed reconciliation with Ukrainians. This view was unpopular among Polish emigres but found resonance within the Solidarity movement in the 1980's.

By the late 1980's when Solidarity and the opposition movement emerged from the underground to sit at a roundtable with the Communists, their views on Ukrainians were completely at odds to those that I had grown up with among emigre Poles in the U.K. Solidarity activists, such as Jacek Kuron, reiterated that "Without a free Ukraine there cannot be a free Poland!" and attended the founding congress of *Rukh* in 1989. With funds from Prolog Research, publishers of the Ukrainian equivalent of *Kultura* - *Suchasnist*, Solidarity groups printed and smuggled literature to *Rukh* and I helped edit two special Polish-language issues of *Sucasnist* for the Polish opposition.

The fruits of this reconciliation are evident in the breakthrough in Polish-Ukrainian relations in the 1990s. Poland is, and hopefully will remain, one of Ukraine's main allies in its drive for Euro-Atlantic integration. The crowning success of this reconciliation could be seen in the pope's visit to Ukraine in June 2001. Dealing with the troubled past should not

harm this tremendous progress, which is decades ahead that of the “normalization” of Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Placing the Volhynia massacres in context

Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation is well developed at the elite levels only. Polish opinion polls regularly find that the public image of Ukrainians is very low and a recent poll found that only Romanians and Gypsies have more negative stereotypes. A Ukrainian shuttle trader to Poland recently told Reuters that at the border Ukrainians are treated terribly. “There’s one (Polish) shift that’s terrible...they call Ukrainians pigs, or say ‘get out of here, you stink.’ As Professor Piotr Wrobel, chair of Polish History at the University of Toronto, confessed to me, its fine for his fellow Polish academics to be “anti-Ukrainian” but not “anti-Semitic.” Nevertheless, 300,000 Ukrainians are working inside Poland.

Historians, writers, religious leaders and political parties have nourished the Polish negative stereotype of Ukrainians for more than a century. This was even the case in Communist Poland when criticism of Russians was not permitted. However, at the same time the Communist authorities published countless books with mass circulation, films, and even school instructional materials that inculcated a stereotype of genocidal anti-Polish Ukrainians. Such views were also common in Polish Diaspora newspapers.

Books and other media articles propagating these stereotypes about Ukrainians did not suddenly cease after the Communists left office. This would have been difficult as these stereotypes had grown deep roots in Polish society and former Communists, such as President Alexander Kwasniewski, were in power. Only *Gazeta Wyborcza*, edited by Kuron’s Solidarity ally Adam Michnik, is critical of the plans for the 1943 commemoration.

Sadly therefore, the planned commemoration of the Volhynia massacres takes the entire subject out of context. Ukrainian-Polish relations were poor a long time prior to 1943. Polish repression of Ukrainians and other minorities in the 1930s led to the rise of extreme right-wing groups. According to the Canadian expert on the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Professor Emierus Petro Potichnyj, various attempts by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and UPA to contact the Polish-government-in-exile in London during world War II were rebuffed.

After World War II, the Poles claimed that they were the only nation in Nazi-occupied Europe not to collaborate with the Nazis. This myth ignores an important factor in the Volhynian conflict when Ukrainian policemen who fled to the UPA were replaced by the Nazis with local Poles. Some Poles also collaborated with the Soviet forces, the arch-enemy of the UPA.

Inflated numbers

A March University of Toronto talk by University of Alberta doctoral student Krzysztof Lada claimed that 390,000 Poles lived in 1,150 settlements in Volhynia. Of the 390,000 Poles in Volhynia, Lada calculated that 33,000 died in 1943, some 8.5 percent.

To claim that this was a “planned genocide,” as Lada and Polish officials are doing, is therefore a gross exaggeration. Of the Polish inhabitants of Volhynia, 357,000 or 91.5 percent were not physically harmed. Lada said that 142,000 of the Poles (or around half) still lived in Volhynia in 1944 when the Soviet army arrived.

Lada’s figure of 33,000 Polish deaths is nearly half the 60,000 claimed by the Polish government. A major problem is that the necessary research to ascertain the correct figure is still lacking, especially in Ukraine where even the UPA is not officially rehabilitated.

Lada's figure of 33,000 should be placed alongside 15,000 Ukrainians who also died at the same time in Volhynia.

Potichnyj, who has long edited UPA documents, concluded that "there is no document that I know of showing that the Ukrainian underground ordered wholesale slaughter." In areas of Western Ukraine where there was no Polish military activity against Ukrainians, no actions by UPA against Poles were taken.

Another aspect of the commemorations which has been ignored is the forcible expulsion of 500,000 Ukrainians to Poland in 1944-1946. President Kwasniewski (but not his prime minister or lower house of parliament) has only atoned for the 1947 ethnic cleansing of 250,000 Ukrainians at Akcja Wisla, not the far larger expulsions of Ukrainians that occurred earlier. The murder of Ukrainians by Polish units other than the government-in-exile's AK (such as the extreme right NSZ) and the destruction of Ukrainian Orthodox churches in Kholm and Pidlachia has also been ignored.

The involvement of Nazi and Soviet forces in encouraging the Volhynia conflict is also ignored. The Volhynia city of Rivne was the headquarters of Reichskommissar Erich Koch and therefore included a large concentration of German units. The destruction of Polish settlements and killing of Poles by the Soviets a year later is ignored in this year's commemoration. The words "Gestapo" and "NKVD" were removed from a monument erected in Wroclaw in 1997 while "OUN-UPA" was maintained.

The Volhynia conflict was not only purely ethnic [Volhynia is an Orthodox region]. Social problems also played a role. The forcible taking of land by poor Ukrainian peasants drew on a long tradition of Cossack revolts going back hundreds of years. In the inter-war period the Communist Party of Western Ukraine (KPZU) was very active in Volhynia.

Reactions to Polish demands

The language used in the long list of Polish demands presented by the Polish National Security Bureau (BBN) to the Ukrainian presidential administration in February uses language reminiscent of the Soviet era when Polish and Soviet Communist publications dealt with “Ukrainian nationalist bands.” The language is in the form of a diktat by a stronger country, perhaps taking advantage of Kuchma’s weakness at home and abroad.

Marek Siwiec, head of the BBN, insists that Ukraine recognize the Volhynia massacres as “genocide.” The monument to be erected in July in Warsaw will claim the far-higher figure of 60,000 Poles murdered by “OUN-UPA” as “genocide” and part of a planned “Polish holocaust.”

Although the monument is not meant to be anti-Ukrainian, the result will be to reinforce the images long cultivated in Poland of genocidal, anti-Ukrainian Poles. The BBN also wants to take this further by exhuming graves in Ukraine, renovating Polish military graves and researching in archives with a view to launching future prosecutions for “war crimes.” No similar steps are to be taken against Polish members of NSZ guilty of massacres of Ukrainians in Kholm and Pidlachia or Polish Communist and Soviet (NKVD units who organized the 1944-1946 expulsions of Ukrainians to Poland and Akcja Wisla’s ethnic cleansing. Polish approaches to this question suggest they believe that only Ukrainians are allegedly guilty of crimes against humanity, but not Poles and Soviets as well.

Not surprisingly therefore, the attempt by the Polish side to isolate this event out of context and place total blame on Ukrainian nationalists (OUN and UPA) is rejected out of hand by most shades of Ukrainian political opinion.

The 1943 tragic events in Volhynia should be commemorated. But, the manner in which the Polish authorities are undertaking the commemoration reflects traditional stereotypes of Ukrainians, which will serve to undo the tremendous progress in the reconciliation of both nations since 1945.