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## Anthropology of fear. Ukrainian massacres of the Polish population in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, 1943-1944

**Outline:** The Polish population of Volhynia and Eastern Galicia was gripped by fear of ethnic cleansing at the hands of Ukrainian nationalists in the years 1943-1944. This fear varied in form and intensity depending on the perceived aims which ranged from their physical extermination to simple eviction. This article attempts to analyse the fundamental determinants of Polish defensive actions in response to those fears.

**Keywords:** Volhynia, Eastern Galicia, World War II, extermination, Poles, Ukrainian nationalists, fear.

The ethnic cleansing policy against the Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia as pursued by Ukrainian nationalists from 1943, was a political and social phenomenon in which various factors can be distinguished. Historians have analysed the main underlying reasons for this policy and its course and consequences (especially on a macro scale), but their results are often divergent. The pace of events in terms of action and reaction and the rapid succession of turning points and apparent breakthroughs in this struggle for life and death tellingly impinged upon group and individual behaviour. The difficulty in research into this chapter of World War II history lies mainly in capturing the all-important details and balance which obtained between the private and emotional sphere and the extreme external conditions. This fragment of the social history of the Eastern borderlands of the Second Polish Republic that existed between 1939-1945 has not been systematically analysed yet. The extermination of the Polish population in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia can be looked at in terms of a social process. From this perspective, the point of reference in research into Polish individual and group reactions at news of massacres was the fear factor regulated by the perceived scale of the threat.

Pinning down the true effects of the fear factor is a difficult task for the historical researcher. The difficulty lies in the fact that fear is a personal experience

which manifests itself in different and unpredictable ways which at times are difficult or impossible to articulate.. It is worth emphasising that fear (also understood as anxiety, terror or dismay) of a person as a social animal living in a community will always be at its strongest in interpersonal relations<sup>1</sup>. The Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia lived under Soviet and German occupation as from October 1939. Under Soviet rule, many Polish families experienced deportation, arrests, sentences, various forms of repression and discrimination by the authorities with the approval of some of their Ukrainian and Jewish neighbours. The Poles felt that those actions were unfair. One can imagine that the attitudes of of their non-Polish neighbours had a huge influence on the presence of fear in Polish everyday life. Those neighbours, at least partially supported by the Soviet authorities, could give vent to their hostility towards the recent masters of those lands in a variety of ways. However, only in the wartime period of German totalitarian rule was death and ruthless intimidation the order of the day in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia. The Germans enlisted the remaining citizens of those lands in the Holocaust of the Jewish population. For instance, in the Scalat district in Eastern Galicia, the Nazis made the Poles bury the bodies of murdered Jews. This sometimes gave rise to nervous breakdowns which, in extreme cases, ended with the death of the grave-diggers<sup>2</sup>. The pacification of Polish and Ukrainian villages by the occupants (who were known to put entire villages to the torch), deportation to Germany as forced labourers, executions and persecution conducted by the Ukrainian police, were traumatic experiences. The result was anarchy and terror; this was its most dangerous consequence which gradually took over as the main principle governing social life<sup>3</sup>. This was becoming the rule rather than the exception in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943.

I mentioned the Holocaust on purpose. The extermination of the local Jews was the common German practice and most of the locals were aware of it. Indeed, some Ukrainians supported it passively or actively. The very far-going process of familiarizing the inhabitants of Volhynia and Eastern Galicia with genocide and violent death as an everyday occurrence, is a factor that is often overlooked or underestimated by historians. This caused an increase in the degree of fear in everyday life of the Polish population, compared to what obtained under the Soviets. One may hazard the guess that fear lodged in the heads of many people who learnt to live with it. Also, to some extent, it changed the human psyche as regards common survival instincts. We should remember that the feeling of fear was different when a person was an observer of the extermination and it did not concern directly the person or the community to which he or she belonged. During this period, the Ukrainians perpetrated all manner of outrage and atrocity against the Poles: physical assault,

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1 J. Pieter, *Strach i odwaga*, Warsaw 1971, p. 87.

2 Sz. Siekierka, H. Komański, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na Polakach w województwie tarnopolskim 1939-1946*, Wrocław 2006, p. 816.

3 A. Appadurai, *Strach przed mniejszościami. Esej o geografii gniewu*, Warszawa 2009, p. 38.

pillage and plunder<sup>4</sup>, threats, humiliation, arson, restrictions on freedom of movement, murder and the extortion of material support for the UPA [*the Ukrainian Insurgent Army*]<sup>5</sup>. However, the initially sporadic nature of the most common types of atrocities did not lead to any perception that this might be coordinated top-down action and information on the more ominous symptoms of the Ukrainian threat was treated with disbelief. Fear was especially more commonly found among older people who doggedly maintained that the murder of innocent people was not impossible<sup>6</sup>.

The level of fear increased considerably in both regions in the early spring of 1943. An early symptom of the rising tide of fear is provided by the death of the Ukrainian nationalist Onyszkiewicz from Uhniv (Rava Ruska district). The Ukrainians paraded his body round the market square three times and publicly pledged that “The Poles will never set foot on Uhniv soil”<sup>7</sup>. Painting crosses on Polish houses at night, equalling the number of family members to be murdered, became more common. Ukrainian houses, in turn, were marked with the mysterious number “102.” Due to Polish pessimism, if not fatalism, it was interpreted as the number of days left to crush the people. Similar ways of thinking were common<sup>8</sup>.

News of the first massacres of whole Polish communities in Volhynia in February 1943 spread very quickly. Survivors who managed to escape, brought the news. It is difficult to say whether everybody believed these bloodcurdling accounts, because they seemed so improbable<sup>9</sup>. However, most Poles began to give credence to these rumours as the inordinate number of dead bodies floating down Volhynian rivers became commonplace<sup>10</sup>, as did, the red glowing skies marking the burning villages from miles around, and sometimes the terrible shrieks of people being burnt alive

4 AW [in Polish: *Archiwum Wschodnie Ośrodka „Karta” w Warszawie*; in English: *Eastern Archive, Karta Institute, Warsaw*], II/1145, k. 1, H. Kulczycka, *Moje przeżycia na Wołyniu po wybuchu II wojny światowej*.

5 W. E. Siemaszko, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na ludności polskiej Wołynia 1939-1945*, vol. 1, Warsaw 2000, p. 34. The Polish underground referred to these Ukrainian actions, which threatened the Poles, “the propaganda of danger”. See BUW (Warsaw University Library), microfilm 14381, k. 28, “Jankaś” report [W. Filipkowski] on March 6, 1944.

6 See IPN Ki. (Institute of National Remembrance Kielce Branch), GKBZPNP OK/Koszalin, 53/1257, k. 4, detailed report of interrogation of witness J. Gryciuk; Władysław Żarczyński, *Byłem świadkiem*, “Na rubieży”, no. 33-34/1999, p. 56.

7 IPN Ki., 53/1046, k. 115, Akta b. OKBZH Kielce “Wieś polska na Kresach Wschodnich 1939-1945”. Session in Ameliówka, May 22-24, 1999. Of

8 W. E. Siemaszko, *op. cit.*, p. 139. The Poles also saw some hidden intentions in the behaviour of Ukrainians behavior in other regions. These attitudes increased along with reports of murders. In the village Głębozczyca (Vladimir district in Volhynia), the Polish population was convinced that the Ukrainians had shovels in their cart to bury a killed Pole and hide the traces of the crime. See more: IPN Ki., GKBZPNP OK/Koszalin, 53/1274, k. 6, detailed report of interrogation of witness K. Sobieraj.

9 Compare: IPN Ki., GKBZPNP OK/Koszalin, 53/1244, k. 2-3, Report of interrogation of witness B. Parchoć; E. Zawada, *Akcja SS “Galizien” w Siemianówce dnia 26 VII 1944 roku*, “Na rubieży”, no. 66/2003, p. 39; Tadeusz Maławski, *Byłem świadkiem*, “Na rubieży”, no. 73/2004, p. 33.

10 M. Dębowska, L. Popek, *Duchowieństwo diecezji łuckiej. Ofiary wojny i represji okupantów*, Lublin 2010, p. 196.

that carried across the fields<sup>11</sup>. Some local inhabitants participated in the identification of dead bodies no more than a couple of hours after the event. Today, it is difficult to confirm the veracity of witnesses of the massacres as recounted to their families and neighbours. The information came from people in shock, but it seems that nothing was embellished or exaggerated. This issue appeared later on when other people could distort the stories consciously or unconsciously. Rumours of similar massacres organised by the Ukrainians in the western part of Eastern Galicia which, ethnically, was predominantly Polish, is a good example of how such exaggerated fears were apt to spread<sup>12</sup>. We may be sure that this true, embellished or false information conveyed by word of mouth, intensified the feeling of fear. The unimaginably barbaric cruelty that accompanied the massacres throughout the course of their duration was known to the Germans, who reported that there was confusion and panic in “pure Polish” areas<sup>13</sup>. Also the underground Home Army and the legally functioning departments of the Central Welfare Council [*Rada Główna Opiekuńcza – RGO*] alerted their respective superior authorities that the organised mass-murders of Poles “is giving rise to a general psychosis of fear and panic.” According to them, the UPA chose a good moment to strike, because the Polish population was “living on a volcano”, under constant stress, having completely lost control of their fate. Depression, pessimism and fatalism took grip of them<sup>14</sup>. The Ministry of the Interior of the Polish Government-in-Exile informed that the constant stress and growing dismay that prevailed in the Polish population was spreading to the larger Ukrainian local populations and that bad news travelled very fast and became the norm, and aroused thoughts of fleeing<sup>15</sup>.

It seems that panic became the basic symptom of Polish fear. This panic resulted from the fact that the Ukrainians were hostile to the Polish population in both regions which seemingly made them prone to incitement to acts of mass murder. News of massacres seemingly made panic its unavoidable response. The question arises whether the Banderivets [*Stepan Bandera's fighters of the Ukrainian extreme nationalist organization founded during World War II*] thought that panic would break out among the Poles and make them abandon those lands. It was possible that at the beginning, panic was to be a tool to spark off a mass exodus, but it

11 Cf. W. E. Siemaszko, *op. cit.*, p. 79; IPN Ki., GKBZPNP OK/Koszalin, 53/1258, k. 3, Report of interrogation of witness T. Struś.

12 AW, V/1, k. 3, Wojciech Bukat's collection, Report 16-k2 on May 19, 1944.

13 *Die UPA in Halychyna, UPA w switli nimeckych dokumentiw, Litopys UPA*, vol. 6, Toronto 1983, p. 139.

14 See DATO [*State Archive of Ternopil Oblast*], f. R-3445, op. 1, spr. 29, k. 6, Fragment of “Więclaw's” report on Borszczów district on March 5, 1944; BOss. [*the Ossolineum Library*], 16623/II, k. 17, A weekly registration of the Bureau of Information and Propaganda of the Government Delegate for Poland from Ternopil Voivodship and Rohatyn district for the period from October 10 to December 18, 1944; BOss., 16721/II, k. 8, Documents of the Central Welfare Council on the situation of the Polish population in Eastern Lesser Poland between 1943-1944.

15 CAW [*the Central Military Archives*], II/52.85, k. 63, Situation report no. 11 of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Poland in exile between July-August 1943.

was ineffective. However, from the Ukrainian nationalists' perspective, the unorganized population was much easier prey. Most of the Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia living in rural areas were religious and tightly connected with the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Bandera's fighters intentionally chose special religious days of obligation to stage their massacres; their escalation in 1943-1944 came at Easter, on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and on other special days<sup>16</sup>. Massacres also took place in churches and during services. Those dates and places were sacred to people and genocide in churches was considered to be a profanation. It seems that most people at risk did not interpret those events as God's punishment for their sins and did not lose their faith. On the contrary, many of them considered prayer as the antidote to fear. All-night vigils in houses in small groups became common and people would recite the traditional Polish prayer "Under Your Protection" before holy pictures<sup>17</sup>. In the morning, they would recite the traditional Polish psalm "As Dawn Breaks". Kneeling women and children, frightened that they could die, sang religious songs at the sites where massacres had taken place<sup>18</sup>. The relentless recitation of prayers was a manifestation of Polish determination to put their fate and their strong and unshakeable faith in the hands of God.

Ukrainian behaviour during attacks also intensified the fear. Some murders were perpetrated against Polish neighbours and acquaintances, who had until then maintained good inter-ethnic relations<sup>19</sup>. This turning point in their behaviour was incomprehensible and terrifying. Sometimes, Bandera's followers did their killing to the accompaniment of lively tunes played on accordions<sup>20</sup>. There were also witnesses who spoke of the jocular comments of the attackers about the appearance of the women they were murdering. Others observed Bandera's fighters returning from their extermination missions. Each of the fighters had their faces and clothes splattered with blood and dirty with soot. In some cases, the attackers wore masks<sup>21</sup>. Sometimes witnesses caught surreptitious glimpses of Ukrainian family feasts with tables laden with food and drink, celebrating local massacres of Poles<sup>22</sup>. All of this demonized the image of Ukrainians in Polish eyes and blurred the fact that many Ukrainians helped the Poles hide and escape.

The youngest members of the population also witnessed massacres of their Polish neighbours. Children saw attacks and the yells of those being killed etched

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16 *Ibid.*, k. 283.

17 J. Wołczański, *The extermination of the Polish nation and the Roman Catholic Church by Ukrainian nationalists in Eastern Poland between 1939-1945. Source materials*, part I, Kraków 2005, p. 103.

18 See: Report of witness Aleksander Pradun, "Na rubieży", no. 2/1993(3), p. 6; BOss., 16726/II, k. 203, Edmund Bosakowski, "Na mojej drodze. Wspomnienia z Wołynia z lat 1939-1945".

19 *Ibid.* k. 200.

20 J. Wołczański, *op. cit.*, part I, p. 103.

21 Sz. Siekierka, H. Komański, *op. cit.*, p. 485.

22 W. E. Siemaszko, *op. cit.*, pp. 147, 150, 507.

themselves indelibly on their memories<sup>23</sup>. Fear gave rise to nightmares which were to haunt some children throughout the rest of their lives. Bed-wetting, crying, wailing and yelling in their sleep were not unusual resultant phenomena<sup>24</sup>. In addition, physical ailments such as paralysis caused by fear and nervous shock were common. Going grey in teenage years in individual cases was its visible result as well<sup>25</sup>. Mental disorders were the extreme consequence of fear. Some people saved from massacres lost their minds. Such situations occurred in the village Hołosków and among fugitives camping in Równe<sup>26</sup>.

The Polish underground resistance authorities thought that only by overcoming fear could the population be saved from extermination, and they realized that fear had also crept into the hearts of some Polish partisans. A directive on how to oppose the Ukrainians, opened with the words: "We cannot give in to despair at difficult moments. During attacks you should be strong and fight as brave men"<sup>27</sup>. Those exhortations were simply the imperatives of courage. Only few people realized that the strong fear that took root was a fundamental cause of stupefaction<sup>28</sup>, which did not create favourable conditions for efficient actions. The question arises whether they managed to overcome fear and the feeling of helplessness. The awareness of their defencelessness was the main problem for the Polish people, which significantly intensified their fears and sparked spontaneous decisions to flee<sup>29</sup>. Official reports, stressed that the depression that hit the Polish population was mixed with determination, and the desire to defend itself and take revenge on the Ukrainians, but the shortage of weaponry made that impossible<sup>30</sup>. Requesting the Germans for weapons sometimes took the form of begging. In addition, local Polish priests, who understood that only military help would restore belief in the efficacy of self-defence and prevent people from fleeing in panic and despair, did the same<sup>31</sup>. In some places,

23 AW, II/2311, k. 31, Piotr Rozwadowski; July 14, 1943, was the day of massacres of Polish population, citizens of Kołodno.

24 *Byłem świadkiem* – Władysław Biliński, "Na rubieży", no. 65/2003, p. 45.

25 L. Kulińska, *Dzieci Kresów II*, Kraków 2006, p. 144.

26 See Sz. Siekierka, H. Komański, E. Różański, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na Polakach w województwie stanisławowskim 1939-1946*, Wrocław 2008, p. 693; BOss., 16727/II, k. 93, Regina Janiszewska-Wolska, *Na Wołyniu w latach okupacji 1939-1945 (Równe Wołyńskie) we wspomnieniach*.

27 DATO, f. R-3445, op. 1, spr. 48, k. 1, Order signed by "Cis" [W. Filipkowski], a commanding officer of the Polish South and East Armed Forces, to soldiers on February 25, 1944.

28 J. Pieter, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

29 BOss., 16605/II, k. 209, Report on the mood of the Polish population in Lviv district due to the escalating Ukrainian terrorist action, ed. "Janka", Lviv, April 23, 1944.

30 BUW, microfilm 14381, k. 24, "Meldunek doraźnie-informacyjny" "Janka" [W. Filipkowski] no. 7 on March 1, 1944.

31 BOss., 16605/II, k. 209, Report on the mood of the Polish population in Lviv district due to the escalating Ukrainian terrorist action. A strong mood of fear and doubt, which had to weaken the importance of their comforting sermons and other forms of spiritual support of the Poles, was also noticed by Roman Catholic priests. Rev. K. Bartosiewicz, from Zawałów parish, on February 3, 1944, wrote a letter to the Metropolitan Curia of the Latin rite in Lviv that: "I kindly ask to give me one

young people took matters into their own hands and set up guerilla groups (e.g. near Volodymyr-Volynsky) whose morale was good, and who showed no sign of panic<sup>32</sup>. But that was not always the rule. In the village of Sawosze in Volhynia, there was an underground Home Army platoon which formed the self-defence force. When news broke of massacres in the nearby village of Wola Ostrowiecka on August 31, 1943, there was panic and nobody believed in the possibility of effective self-defence<sup>33</sup>. Overcoming the panic was a very difficult task. According to the Polish underground authorities, panic could have been stopped by introducing strict discipline in the villages; however, that was not always effective. Sometimes, scared people regarded these guidelines as nothing more than “paper work unsupported by weapons”<sup>34</sup>.

Panic also broke out quite often in places with self-defence forces, especially in more open spaces where there were no compact groups of buildings that could be fortified. The resistance authorities tried to solve the problem<sup>35</sup> but shortages in weapons and physical exhaustion were the typical reasons for the fall of these centres of resistance. Mental exhaustion<sup>36</sup>, caused by living in a state of incessant tension driven by fear, was also very important.

This phenomenon visited Polish people in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943-1944 in extreme forms. Many people saw massacres of their family members, neighbours and friends. In psychology, the function of fear is always the same in all situations and relies on motivating the release of mental and physical strength to overcome all the foreseen difficulties and dangers<sup>37</sup>. However, in the case of the Poles, the motivation was not so effective, and the stimulus to overcome fear was another problem. Some survivors, whose relatives had all been exterminated or whose properties had been completely destroyed by the Ukrainians, did not even

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month's sick leave, because I am almost completely exhausted because of these massacres which are occurring in the surrounding villages. I am completely awake at night for almost two weeks and do not sleep at the presbytery at night and I still hear threats about me. I perfectly understand my duty as a priest and therefore I am still at my post, but I do not know how long the Lord God will protect me and give me strength to make it through.” See more: J. Wołczański, *op. cit.*, part I, pp. 205, 337-338.

32 BOss., 16724/II, vol. 1, k. 151, “Wacław Kopisto, *Moje pokręcone losy, Wspomnienia. Od urodzenia do konspiracji na Wołyniu, lata 1911-1944*”.

33 W. E. Siemaszko, *op. cit.*, p. 499.

34 CAW, II/52.94, k. 6, Status report no. 4/44 of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Poland in exile of February to June 1944.

35 At the news that the Polish Welfare Committee in Rohatyn was organizing the departure to the west for thousands of Poles, a few families acting in self-defence near Karolówka village did not stand the nervous tension and left the place. A letter of the commanding officer of the Home Army District, in which the commander confirmed the decision to organize self-defence, was supposed to master the mood of panic. See more: BOss., 16707/II, t. 2, k. 76, “Edward Polak: Los Polaka w latach 1939-1956”.

36 BOss., 16730/II, k. 166, Paweł Zaleski, “Wspomnienia wołyńskie”. This is confirmed by the Home Army reports from Lviv district in 1944. The reports indicated that the visible and perceptible fatigue of the Poles in the region resulted not from the prolonged /ongoing war, but above all, due to the Ukrainian massacres, which caused great anxiety. See more: BUW, microfilm 14382, k. 79, Report on the Ukrainian issue on June 7, 1944.

37 J. Pieter, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

show signs of any motivation. Alcohol<sup>38</sup>, the possession of weapons, armed support from partisans or even revenge, did not always ameliorate the level of fear. Awareness of national alienation in a multi-ethnic community where hostile Ukrainians reigned supreme, intensified feelings of hopelessness. The Poles were often able to rationalise their plight and identify the culprits who were guilty of driving them into their unhinged mental condition. They saw evil culpability in the Ukrainians and demanded “a radical solution of the Ukrainian problem” after the war<sup>39</sup>. They also asked questions: “Where is our government, where are our authorities, what does Warsaw say about it, why do they not come with any help?”<sup>40</sup> There were some suspicions that the Polish Underground authorities considered the massacres as slaughter inflicted by thugs with whom the Ukrainians as such had nothing in common<sup>41</sup>. It was not only an imploring call for military help, but also a signal that there was no point in inhabiting these lands. These attitudes determined the levels of outward fear and inward strength and made many a Pole begin to perceive the infamous period of Soviet rule of 1939-1941 in brighter colours. Some people even looked forward to the return of Bolshevik power, which would guarantee them safety against Bandera’s criminals, or at least would not allow them to murder the whole population<sup>42</sup>. This was proof of weakness of the Polish Underground. These attitudes, determined by fear, influenced the first defensive actions of the Polish community which took the form of flight, going into hiding, internal and external migration, religious conversion, threats in various forms, joining the partisans of the Home Army or the Bolsheviks or the Volhynian police. In this sense, the great fear came in popular reaction to the scale of the slaughter, and its effects on individual attitudes spontaneously stimulated not by institutionalized initiatives, but by primitive survival instincts inherent in every human being.

*Translated by Marta Antoniuk*

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38 J. Wołczański, *Eksterminacja narodu polskiego i Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich w Małopolsce Wschodniej w latach 1939-1945*. Source materials, part II, Kraków 2006, p. 563.

39 BOss., 16605/II, k. 201, “Sprawozdanie za czas do połowy grudnia 1943, ed. ‘Kisiel’ – ‘Wino-Iskra”

40 CAW, II/52.94, k. 6, Status report no. 4/44.

41 BUW, microfilm 14381, k. 6, Report no. 4 BIP of “Lviv” district on April 20, 1944.

42 *Ibid.*, k. 28, “Janka’s” report [W. Filipkowski].