Deportation of Poles on the Eve of World War II

The Framework of Soviet Forced Expulsion of Nationalities

Nicholas Iwanow

Forced expulsion and extinction of separate nationalities, along with other features, is the essential trait of the repressive character of the former Soviet regime. The history of such politics dates back to the first years of the Soviet power, but it reached its peak in the middle of the 30s and during the Second World War.

Poles in the Former USSR

Poles, inhabitants of the western regions of the former USSR, have been considered the primary target of reprisal throughout the history of the Soviet Union. It was upon them that Stalinism for the first time during the years 1935–1937 carried out a shocking experiment in mass repression and genocide based on nationality rather than class or other criteria. Mass repression by the Soviet regime during the civil war (1918–1922) – the so called "red terror" – was based mainly on the class criterion. The same is true of repressions during "NEP" policy, collectivisation and industrialisation processes.

The year 1935 marked a decisive turn in the Soviet nationality policy. National minorities in the country were divided into several uneven groups. Poles were put at the head of the group of nationalities considered enemies of the Soviet power. In the late 30s Koreans from the Far East and so-called "Local Finns" from the Leningrad oblast shared the fate of Poles. Later, during the years of the Second World War the Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, Chechens and Ingushes, Turks from Meskhetia, Kalmuks and others were added to this group of targeted nationalities. But the compulsory expulsion of Poles from the border regions of the Ukraine and Belarus which took place under the terms of a decree that concerned the removal of "uncertain elements" from the territories of probable future military operations for ever qualified Poles to bear the name of most rigorously punished people.

During the interbellum period Soviet Poles constituted the largest Polish national minority in Europe, estimated at no fewer than 1,200,000 thousand persons. The prevailing majority of these Soviet citizens of Polish nationality were concentrated in those territories of pre-partitioned Poland which had been incorporated into the Soviet Republics of the Ukraine and Belorus under the terms of the Riga peace treaty of 1921. These territories (the so-called "dalsze kresy" /distant borderlands/) covered more than 200,000 square km.[1]

Polish settlements in the USSR occupy a special position in the history of the world's Polish diaspora. The national consciousness of distant borderland Poles took shape under the influence of a rich and long-time tradition of combat to preserve their Polish identity. After the restoration of the Polish state in 1918 the majority of them felt

Nicholas Iwanow, Professor of History at the University of Opole, Poland.

strong sympathy and manifested loyalty towards the reborn homeland. Those people were ethnically aboriginal, native inhabitants of the farther borderlands although they did not constitute a set of exclusively genetically Polish national groups. A vast number of them formed genetically Belorus and Ukrainian national groups that in different periods of time adopted Catholicism, which led to their eventual polonisation. The stereotype: "A Catholic equals a Pole" serving to define somebody's nationality dominated here for centuries. The religious criterion was much more effective than any other: linguistic, cultural, social or economic.[2]

The Period of Favouring Poles 1925–1935

The interbellum policy of the Communist Party towards the Polish national minority in the USSR can be divided into two completely different periods. Favouring of Poles at the beginning later changed into destruction of every single aspect of the Polish national life. During the first phase, which started in the middle of the 20s and was terminated exactly ten years later, some attempts were made to use the Polish national minority for the aim of advancing the socialist revolution in Poland. This policy was also regarded by the communist party leadership as the best and most efficient means of sovietising of the Poles.[3] For this aim a system of Polish national autonomy was established. Two miniature Polish socialist "republics" were created, the so-called autonomous nationality districts: the Julian Marchlewski district in the Ukraine (Zytomierz oblast) and the Feliks Dzierzynski district in Belarus (near Minsk). These two main centers of Polish national autonomy in the USSR were commonly called "Soviet Marchlewszczyzna" and "Soviet Dzierzynszczyzna". In addition to this, there was set up a widespread network of so-called village councils of Polish nationality.[4]

In order to shape a new consciousness, a stereotype of the Soviet Pole, authorities opened more than 670 Polish schools, two Institutes, the Polish language was introduced in local Soviet judicature, and three professional Polish theatres were opened as well as many other Polish institutions.[5]

The communist party policy towards Soviet citizens of Polish nationality was diametrically opposed to general practices observed in the evolution of the Polish diaspora throughout the world. The shaping of attitudes of loyalty towards the country of settlement was not accompanied here by the process of divesting the Polish population of its national character. Quite on the contrary, the Soviet state and the communist party did their best to neutralise the influence of many assimilative factors and to repolonise Poles who lost the command of the native language. There was a constant tendency to educate Poles in the spirit of Soviet patriotism on the basis of Polish national awareness. It was an ideologically directed process of broadly understood Sovietisation.[6]

At the beginning the Soviet Polish experiment did not much differ from the general tendency towards the extention of rights to all non-Russian nations and nationalities under the terms of the so-called "national-NEP" (new economic policy). Towards the end of the 20s the importance of the Polish experiment grew considerably because of two factors. First of all, hostile, antagonistic feelings towards the Polish state were increasing in the USSR; secondly, propaganda about the growing Polish military threat to the Soviet Union connected with this feeling intensified.

Among other factors, the myth of inevitable Polish aggression was necessary for Soviet authorities to justify reasons for intensifying Stalinist terror inside the country. Poland was the only large capitalist country with relatively substantial military potential which had a common frontier with the Soviet Union. Poland was the only country that in the opinion of the Soviet propaganda machine had the potential qualities of an aggressor.[7]

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, when constructing Soviet Polish autonomy, tried to realise the following aim: total isolation from national and sociocultural processes going on at this time in Poland; the establishing of the so-called Polish proletarian culture; inciting hostile feelings towards the historical homeland of Soviet Poles. This process was to lead to the creation of a new kind of Pole whose Polish-

ness would manifest itself only by the command of the Polish language and the knowledge of certain ideologically determined elements of national culture and who would recognise the priority of revolution interests over national interests. This process of sovietisation also embraced a very peculiar phenomenon: simplifying the Polish language in order to overcome illiteracy among the Polish rural population.[8]

The Period of Anti-Polish Repressions After 1935

The Year 1935 marked a dramatic turn in the policy of the Soviet regime towards Poles. Stalin and his colleagues realized that the process of sovietisation of the Polish national minority in the USSR had suffered a complete failure. The percentage of communist party members among local Poles was one of the lowest among Soviet nationalities. The Marchlewski Polish National district in the Ukraine appeared to be a real blank spot on the map of the general collectivisation of the Ukraine. It also appeared that the creation of the loyal Soviet Polish autonomous community was a fiction. Poles were still loyal to their motherland and their national and historical traditions, and first and foremost to Catholicism.

The Catholic church played a unique role in the territories which were a part of Eastern Poland before its partition at the end of the 18th century. It was the main stronghold of Polishness in the territories of greater Russia, the main center of propagating Polish education and culture, a guardian of centuries-old national traditions. It was also a symbol of the indissoluble bonds between Polishness and Catholicism. The Catholic faith was here treated by the whole of society as the Polish faith, and the Catholic Church as a Polish church. That is why the acts of repression that took place in the second half of the thirties were aimed first of all at the destruction of Catholicism.[9]

The repression of Catholicism virtually resulted in the complete destruction of the organized religious life of Catholics in the USSR. Out of more than 500 churches functioning all over the Soviet Union in 1923 (ministered by 360 priests), at the beginning of 1939 there were only two of them still open: in Moscow and Leningrad mainly for the use of foreign diplomats.[10]

In 1935 a huge campaign of mass expulsion of Poles from the distinct borderlands started. The first stage of it was to clear the Soviet-Polish border areas of the Ukrainian SSR of the ethnic Polish population. According to my own estimates, made on the bases of Soviet archive materials, about 120 thousand Poles were expelled. Their destination was mainly Kokchetav oblast of Kazachstan.

This first Soviet mass expulsion of a certain nationality was relatively mild. Every forcibly repatriated family had from two to seven days to prepare for the trip, for packing their belongings, etc. Actually there were no limitations on property being taken with them to Kazachstan. This concerned not only the private property of peasants, but also kolchoz property. That is why the first wave of mass expulsion of Poles resulted in a relatively small number of victims.[11]

The monument in Norilsk, Siberia, memorial to the deported Poles.

The Soviet authorities were deeply interested in effective colonisation of the northern regions of Kazachstan and organised this first expulsion of Poles as a colonisation campaign rather than a purely punitive action aimed at the physical destruction of the Polish national minority.

The second wave of anti-Polish repressions in the USSR was of a completely different character. It was not the forcible resettlement of peasant population of Polish origin, but a terror campaign to eradicate Poles as a nation from the territory of the border regions of Belarus and

other parts of the USSR. NKWD detachments were despatched to Polish villages, mainly in the Polish autonomous region named after Felix Dzierzhinski, and the local population was given some two to three hours to pack and be ready for relocation. At the same time special political courts, so-called "troiki," organized martial hearings in the local "selsoviet" or "peasant club" (usually the former Catholic church). Sentences were usually agreed upon beforehand. The most common punishment was execution by shooting. There were villages in Belarus where all of the male population was shot. It was quite common that actually only women, children and old men were deported, while other men were sent to concentration camps and executed.

Out of more than 320,000 Polish nationals in Belarus the Soviet authorities deported close to 200,000. The rest were left in peace only on the ground that their Polishness was actually based on religious affiliation, but in reality they were Belorussians. From 20 to 25% of those resettled perished during the deportation.[12]

Quite a severe wave of repression fell upon the heads of the Polish urban community in the USSR. Poles were deported from all cities that were situated less than one hundred kms. from the border. During the interbellum period Leningrad was the largest Soviet city which qualified to this category. Close to 48,000 Poles lived there. Leningrad before the second world war was only 32 km. from the Finnish border and its territory was classified by the authors of the pre-war repression as a border region. This was the basis for mass anti-Polish repression. According to the reports of the Polish consulat in Leningrad about 60% of local Poles suffered various kinds of repression. The most common sentence was 15 years in prison. About 700 Poles were shot. A large number of Poles were also deported from Berdichev, Winnica, Minsk, Zhitomir, Zmerinka and other cities.[13]

The exceptional character of anti-Polish repression in the years 1935–1938 distinguishes this Polish national tradegy even in comparison with the awful experiencies of other national groups. It was probably a final act of the de-polonization of the farther borderlands, a process started by the Czardom after the supression of the November Uprising of 1831.[14]

The destruction of Polishness on the farther borderlands in the years of greatest Stalinist terror was a crowning achievement of the long, traditional czarist policy. It was rooted in the contemporary trends of Soviet internal policy, which objectively expressed the ideology of Russian nationalism and imperialism. We might even add that this was an inherent constitutive element in the Stalinist model of rule.

Notes:

1 **Iwanow M.** Pierwszy narod ukarany. Polacy w Zwiezku Radzieckim, 1921–1939, p. 71–82.
2 **Kawecka K.** Problemy rozwoju oswiaty i kultury Polonii radzieckiej. In: Kultura skupisk polonijnych. Warszawa, 1961, p. 258.
3 **Tegoborski W.** Polacy Zwiazku Radzieckiego. Moskwa, 1929, p. 144.
4 **Iwanow M.** Op. cit., p. 116–125.
5 **Kawecka K.** Op.cit., p. 258; Central State Archives of Belarus, 701/ 1–16, p. 102, 107.
6 **Programy dla polskich** szkol radzieckich politechnicznych. Minsk, 1932, s. 31, 37.
7 **Iwanow M.** Op.cit., p. 61–62.
8 **Dombrowski Cz.** Sprawa demokratyzacji pisowni polskiej. In: Materialy dyskusyjne w sprawie reformy pisowni polskiej. Minsk, 1932, p. 10–12.
9 **Polish Central Archives** (Archiwum Akt Nowych), MSZ, 10184, p. 125.
10 Ibid, 10569, p. 4.
11 **Sierp**, 30 October 1935.
12 **Iwanow M.** Op. cit., p. 372.
13 **Polish Central Archives** (AAN), MSZ, 10569, p. 11,12.
14 **Beauvois D.** Polacy na Ukrainie, 1831–1863, Paris, 1987, p. 240–245.