



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Poland social briefing:**  
**"Volhynian Massacre" - a historical scratch on**  
**Polish-Ukrainian relations**  
**Konrad Rajca**



# **"Volhynian Massacre" - a historical scratch on Polish-Ukrainian relations**

## **Summary**

*Despite the close relations between Poland and Ukraine, the history of mutual relations, is not without events that negatively affect contemporary relations. The most important for Poland is the so-called "Volyn Massacre". This is a mass genocide committed by Ukrainian nationalists against the Polish minority in 1943-1945 in the areas of eastern, pre-war Poland occupied by the Third Reich. The crime resulted in the deaths of some 100,000 Poles. This year, the ceremony commemorating the 79th anniversary of the crime had a unique context related to Polish-Ukrainian rapprochement in the context of the war in Ukraine. In connection with the anniversary of the crime, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski sent a bill to parliament to grant Poles in Ukraine a special status. However, the apology for the Volhynian Massacre expected by many commentators from the Ukrainian authorities did not materialize.*

## **Introduction**

The 11th of July is celebrated in Poland as the National Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Genocide committed by Ukrainian nationalists against citizens of the Second Polish Republic. On the 79th anniversary of these tragic events, official ceremonies were held to commemorate the victims of the massacre. - What is happening today between Poles and Ukrainians is the best proof that it's not about revenge; there are no Poles today who don't know what the Volhynian slaughter was, and yet they welcome Ukrainians under their roof, bring help to the entire nation and state," said Polish President Andrzej Duda, who paid tribute to the victims of the Volhynian crime.<sup>i</sup>

## **The Ukrainian ambassador to attend ceremony commemorating Volyn victims for the first time**

Where so many times a rifle, an axe, a pitchfork, a knotted stick lay, bread was laid and a hand was extended to help. And it was received with gratitude and tears," the Polish president stressed during a ceremony at the Volyn square in Warsaw. The commemoration included a joint multi-faith prayer, and wreaths were laid at the Genocide Victims Monument.

The ceremonies were attended by the President of Poland, the Prime Minister and the families of the victims, among others. For the first time, the ceremony was also attended by Ukrainian Ambassador to Poland Vasyl Zwarych, who laid a wreath from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who referred on that day to the Ukrainian parliament a bill to give Poles in Ukraine a special legal and social status. - Today, one can see in this the opposite situation to that one, when Poles were tried to get rid of at all costs, including by taking their lives. Today Ukraine, through this act and gesture of the President, makes a symbolic invitation, you are welcomed here on special rights. Let this also be a sign for us in all these matters that are often difficult to talk about," stressed the Polish President.

- We want truth, we want graves, we want what is normal in the civilization in which both our nations grew up - Christian, Latin. We want to be able to pray on the graves of our loved ones, compatriots, indicated by name, if it is still possible. We want to offer the same, so that where Ukrainians are buried on our land, there will also be a grave," he said. - And there won't be as many as in Volhynia. But let's not bid on numbers. I would prefer that we bid on how much truth we can show, including the truth that is embarrassing to us, how much truth our neighbors can show. Let our new relationship between our nations and societies be built on this truth, which both our countries badly need for the future; let weakness turn into strength," said President Andrzej Duda.

For years, Poland has been demanding that Ukraine allow Polish historians to conduct research on the Volhynian massacre on Ukrainian soil and commemorate the memory of the victims of the crime there, which is blocked by the Ukrainian authorities.

### **The cooperation of Ukrainian nationalists with the Third Reich**

The Volhynian Massacre was the culmination of a wave of persecution of Polish citizens (in addition to primarily Poles, also Armenians, Czechs, Jews and other nationalities) in the eastern territory of pre-war Poland occupied by the Third Reich, which, according to Polish historians, resulted in the deaths of some 100,000 people in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia. The perpetrators of the crimes were the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists - Stepan Bandera's faction, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (OUN-UPA), which was subordinate to it, and the Ukrainian population participating in the murders of their Polish neighbors. The OUN-UPA called its actions an "anti-Polish action." This term concealed the intention which was to murder and expel Poles.

The crimes particularly intensified in July 1943 in Volhynia. From 1941 to 1944 it was part of the Reich Commissariat Ukraine - an organism created by Nazi Germany in the eastern territories of pre-war Poland inhabited by the Ukrainian population. About 10-11 thousand Poles were murdered at the time. On July 11 and 12, the OUN-UPA, which collaborated with Hitler's Third Reich, launched a coordinated attack on Poles in 150 towns. They took advantage of the fact that people gathered in churches on Sunday, July 11. There were murders in churches in Poryck (now Pawliwka) and Kisielin, among others. About 50 Catholic churches in Volhynia were burned and demolished. Crimes against Poles were often carried out with unbelievable cruelty, they were burned alive, thrown into wells, axes and pitchforks were used, victims were imaginatively tortured before death, and women were raped. In total, crimes against Poles were committed in 1,865 places in Volhynia.<sup>ii</sup>

The OUN-UPA attacked Polish self-defense bases in Volhynia where the population was sheltered, including Przebraże, where some 10,000 Poles were rescued. Only some of the self-defense bases survived. Assistance to self-defense bases was provided by Soviet partisans, as well as by Hungarian soldiers selling ammunition. There were cases of obtaining weapons from the Germans. Poles sought rescue by fleeing to cities and towns controlled by the German army. Many were deported to forced labor in Germany. There was little chance of survival for those who left self-defense bases on their own.

### **100,000 victims of Ukrainian nationalists**

The term "Volhynian Crime" refers not only to the mass murders committed in Volhynia, the former Volhynia province, but also in the provinces of Lviv, Tarnopol and Stanislaw (Eastern Galicia), as well as in the provinces of Lublin and Polesie. According to estimates by Polish historians, Ukrainian nationalists murdered about 100,000 Poles. 40-60 thousand were killed in Volhynia, 20-40 thousand in Eastern Galicia, and at least 4 thousand on the territory of present-day Poland. The UPA's terror caused hundreds of thousands of Poles to leave their homes, fleeing to central Poland. The Volhynian Massacre caused Polish retaliation, resulting in the deaths of some 10-12 thousand Ukrainians, including 3-5 thousand in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia.<sup>iii</sup>

Also dying at the hands of Ukrainian nationalists were Polish-Ukrainian families, Ukrainians refusing to take part in the criminal action and those rescuing Poles. "The Borderlands Book of the Righteous" (published by Polish Institute of National Remembrance) compiled by Romuald Niedzielka states that Ukrainians rescued 2,527 Poles. For this help, 384

Ukrainians paid with their lives. In the opinion of an expert on Polish-Ukrainian issues, historian prof. Grzegorz Motyka, "although the anti-Polish action was an ethnic cleansing, at the same time it meets the definition of genocide." For the aim was to destroy in Volhynia in its entirety, and in other areas in part, the Polish ethnic group.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Centuries of Polish-Ukrainian tensions**

In western Ukraine, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which also fought against the Soviet Union, is to this day considered a representation of Ukrainian independence aspirations and held in high esteem. To this day, the Ukrainian authorities have not admitted that its proven criminal actions, had a planned character with the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Polish population. Ukrainian historians stress that during the German occupation, Ukrainians were also killed in battles against Polish partisans and as a result of their activities.

However, the history of Polish-Ukrainian conflicts goes deeper. The eastern territories of the multinational First Republic had for centuries been inhabited predominantly by, Polish, Lithuanians, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Jewish and Tatars people. The Polish population lived there mainly in the larger cities and constituted the local elite (in the past, they were in a big part Polish nobility and wealthy magnates - owners of vast landed estates). The Ukrainian population was primarily a peasant population, which constituted the labor force in the huge landed latifundia, where so-called serfdom (forced labor on the lord's farm) and the peasant's attachment to the land were common. Hence the numerous revolts in history by the Ukrainian population and Cossacks against Polish magnates and landowners.

The interwar period was a time of national rebirth in Poland in 1918 after 123 years of non-existence on the map of Europe as a result of the partition of the country by its neighbors (Austria, Russia and Prussia) and a time of implementation of the new nationality policy of the state, which was considered discriminatory by Ukrainians.

### **Conclusion**

Ukraine is a strategic partner of Poland for geopolitical reasons. The war in Ukraine has brought the two nations firmly together. The past of Polish-Ukrainian relations, however, was rich in bloody conflicts and uprisings. The Ukrainians, strengthening their national identity, adopt as their banners, among others, heroes responsible for proven crimes against the Polish population and actively involved in active collaboration with Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

However, maintaining extremely friendly Polish-Ukrainian relations and moving Ukraine along the European path will require Ukrainians to settle accounts with the past. Polish-Ukrainian tensions over the Volhynian Massacre are often exploited by Russian propaganda seeking to divide Poland and Ukraine, so it is in the interest of both nations to work together in a friendly manner on this topic.

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<sup>i</sup> The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/narodowy-dzien-pamieci-ofiar-ludobojstwa-dokonanego-przez-ukrainskich-nacjonalistow-na-obywatelach-ii-rzeczypospolitej-p,56658>

<sup>ii</sup> The Polish Press Agency <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1340298%2C11-lipca-79-rocznica-kulminacji-zbrodni-wolynskiej-w-wyniku-ktorej-zginelo>

<sup>iii</sup> The Polish Press Agency <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1340298%2C11-lipca-79-rocznica-kulminacji-zbrodni-wolynskiej-w-wyniku-ktorej-zginelo>

<sup>iv</sup> Polsat TV Portal <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2022-07-11/79-rocznica-rzezi-wolynskiej-obchody-z-udzialem-prezydenta/>