

Marek Hałaburda

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow

“The Polish Operation”. The genocide of the Polish people in the USSR in the years 1937–1938

The aim of this article is to remind about the genocide¹ of the Polish people, which took place in the USSR in the years 1937–1938. According to the official data based on the operation order number 00485 issued on 11 August 1937 and signed by the People’s Commissar for State Security NKVD Nikolai Yezhov, 143810 people were arrested on the charge of espionage in favour of Poland, 139835 of them were found guilty and 111091 were shot.²

The literature which deals with the subject of terror during the years 1937–1938 is ample. Many publications in the Polish language have appeared recently. The most important authors are: Mikolai Iwanow,³ Timothy Snyder,⁴ Tomasz Sommer,⁵ Nikolai Pietrow,⁶ Hiroaki Kuromiya,⁷ and Tomasz Kizny.⁸ One cannot omit two volumes of the essential work of the Institute of the National Remembrance published in 2010 and based on the archival data gained from the Ukrainian archives.⁹

¹ The term is used in its broad sense, see: R. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation*, Washington 1944, p. 79–95.

² Н. В. Петров, А. В. Рогинский, *Польская операция, НКВД 1937–1938 гг.*, [in:] *Penprecciu против поляков и польских граждан*, Москва 1997, p. 33.

³ *Pierwszy naród ukarany. Polacy w Związku Radzieckim 1921–1939*, Warszawa 1991.

⁴ *Skrwawione ziemie. Europa między Hitlerem a Stalinem*, tłum. B. Pietrzyk, Warszawa 2011.

⁵ *Rozstrzelać Polaków. Ludobójstwo Polaków w Związku Sowieckim w latach 1937–1938. Dokumenty z centrali*, red. T. Sommer, Warszawa 2010.

⁶ *Polska operacja NKWD*, “Karta” 11 (1993), p. 24–43.

⁷ *Głosy straconych*, tłum. A. Weseli, Warszawa 2008.

⁸ *Wielki terror 1937–1938*, Warszawa 2013.

⁹ *Polska i Ukraina w latach trzydziestych–czterdziestych XX wieku. Nieznane dokumenty z archiwów służb specjalnych*, vol. 8, *Wielki Terror: operacja polska 1937–1938*, part 1 and 2,

Despite many publications filling the historiographical gaps have been introduced into the scientific work flow system, it seems justified to come back to those most tragic events in the history of the Polish Diaspora in the Soviet Union once again. Memory and recognition of Stalin's crimes are duties towards the victims of those atrocities.

According to the census carried out in 1926 there were 782300 of Polish people on the territory of the USSR. The majority of them lived in Ukraine – 476400; 199300 lived in the Russian Federation, and 140 thousand of them in its European part. There were 97500 people of Polish origin in Belarus, 6300 in the area of Transcaucasia, and there were 44000 in Siberia. 16000 Poles lived in the Far East. Large groups of Poles lived in big cities; 34000 in Leningrad, 17000 in Moscow, 13000 in Kiev and 10000 in Odessa.¹⁰

The Polish Operation, which was the name of the whole action, was officially initiated by the operation order number 00485 signed by Nikolai Yezhov on 11 August 1937. The order had been confirmed two days earlier by the Politburo of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks).¹¹

The order assumed the total liquidation of the Polish Military Organisation from 20 August to 20 November 1937 “especially all its rebellious, subversive members suspected of espionage in industry, transportation and in state and cooperative farms (Sovkhoz and Kolkhoz).”¹²

People who were liable to arrest were indicated precisely:

- a) most active members of the Polish Military Organisation according to enclosed register; those disclosed during investigations and those not yet found;
- b) all prisoners-of-war of the Polish army who stayed on the territory of the USSR;
- c) fugitives from Poland regardless of the time of their arrival;
- d) political refugees and political prisoners exchanged with Poland;
- e) ex-members of the Polish Socialist Party and other Polish anti-Soviet political parties;
- f) the most active anti-Soviet, local and nationalistic element from the Polish ethnic region.¹³

The apprehensions were divided into two stages. Everyone who was serving in the Red Army, or working for the NKVD, in arms industry and other

red. by J. Bednarek, D. Bojko, W. Chudzik et al, Warszawa 2010.

¹⁰ P. Eberhardt, *Polska ludność kresowa. Rodowód, liczebność, rozmieszczenie*, Warszawa 1998, p. 61, 181; A. Patek, *Polska diaspora w Rosji Radzieckiej i Związku Socjalistycznych Republik Radzieckich*, [in:] *Polska diaspora*, red. A. Walaszek, Kraków 1996, p. 296–297.

¹¹ Н. В. Петров, А. В. Рогинский, *Польская операция...*, p. 22.

¹² *Rozkaz operacyjny Ludowego Komisarza Spraw Wewnętrznych Związku SRR nb 00485, “Karta” 11 (1993), p. 28.*

¹³ *Rozkaz operacyjny...*, p. 28.

companies working for the army, or railway, river, sea and air transport, and in energetic sector of the particular industrial companies, refineries and gasworks was arrested during the first stage. During the second 'everyone else' was arrested, and those were employed in industry not essential for the defence of the country in Sovkhoz and Kolkhoz and in offices.

It was ordered to carry out investigations together with arrests. The main impact was put on: "total disclosure of the organizers and chief members of the insurrectional groups in order to uncover the subversive net of cooperation."¹⁴ The uncovered were to be arrested immediately. The investigations were performed by special formation of the operative officers.

According to Yezhov's guidelines, the arrested in the process of proving their guilt were supposed to be divided into two categories:

a) the first category: subversive, rebellious, harmful and spying members of the Polish intelligence were subjected to be shot;

b) the second category: less active of the above mentioned were to be sent to prisons or camps for 5 to 10 years.¹⁵

Once every ten days the operative officers prepared the lists of those arrested and subordinated to a particular category, together with a short description of the investigation and intelligence data specifying the degree of guilt. The material presented with the decision of subordination to one of the two categories was to be confirmed by the People's Commissars of Internal Affairs of the NKVD of the particular levels (republic, oblast, country) and by local public prosecutors also of these particular levels. Next, signed documents were sent to the headquarters of the NKVD in Moscow. After the lists had been confirmed by the NKVD and by the Public Prosecutor General of the USSR the sentence was executed immediately.

In addition, under the influence of the order all releases from prisons and camps were hindered especially for those who practically served their time and those accused of the espionage in favour of Poland. All the materials about those people were once again sent to the NKVD in order to be reconsidered.

Yezhov ordered to inform him about the course of the operation by telegraph every five days – 1, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25 of each month.¹⁶

Four days later, on 15 August, the chairman of the NKVD issued another order number 00486 referring to "the wives and families of the enemies of the people". On the basis of that order the wives of the convicted men together with the children over 15 years of age, who were considered "socially dangerous and capable of anti-Soviet activities", were apprehended. A wife of a traitor was to be sentenced to 5–8 years of the Gulag whereas children over 15 years

¹⁴ *Rozkaz operacyjny...*, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Rozkaz operacyjny...*, p. 28.

¹⁶ *Rozkaz operacyjny...*, p. 29.

of age, depending of the degree of danger, were supposed to be imprisoned in camps, labour colonies of the NKVD or were placed in maximum security orphanages. The children of the convicts from 1 to 15 years of age were put in orphanages and nurseries. Only pregnant and breast feeding women who had sick children as well as older women needing help could avoid apprehension.¹⁷

The direct reason for the commencement of the Polish Operation was the issue of the Polish Military Organisation spy ring. In 1935 the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of Ukraine Vsevolod Balicki sent a note to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks). The note informed about uncovering of an organisation in Ukraine. A year later the authorities in Moscow were posted that an agent of the Polish Military Organisation was disclosed in the Central Committee of Ukraine. The campaign started to gather pace. More and more people were detained; Polish names appeared among them. On 26 December 1936 Tomasz Dębal, vice-chairman of the National Academy of Science of Belarus was apprehended. In his testimony he confirmed his affiliation with the organisation and gave information about its activity on the territory of the USSR.¹⁸

Well-equipped with a sustainable number of materials Yezhov could begin the action. In a confidential study entitled: "Fascist, insurrectionary, subversive, terrorist and espionage activities of the Polish intelligence on the territory of the USSR" enclosed to the order number 00485, citing investigative data, he showed the picture of "long-term and relatively unpunished work of subversive and spying activities of the Polish intelligence on the territory of the USSR." He pointed out the existence of the main command centre of the organisation in Moscow as well as its branches working on the territory of Ukraine and Belarus, especially in the border area. Having depicted the main directions of the activities, Yezhov described the history of the organization. He indicated its connections with the Michail Tukhachevsky's plot, emphasized that its members infiltrated the structures of the Communist Party of Poland, the Communist Party of Western Ukraine and the Polish section of the Communist International (Comintern) and also the structures of the party, counter-espionage, security service and the most important branches of the industry.¹⁹

Paradoxically, this organization allegedly dangerous for the Soviet country had not existed at that time. The Polish Military Organisation (PMO) was initiated in 1914 by Józef Piłsudski in order to fight Russian conqueror. It mainly dealt

¹⁷ *The Operation Order of the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs Referring to the Wives and Families of the Enemies of People*, [in:] *Rozstrzelać Polaków*, p. 125–126.

¹⁸ N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, p. 24–25.

¹⁹ *The Justification of the Operation Order Number 00485 Sent by N. Yezhov – the People's Commissar for the Internal Affairs to the Commissars of Soviet Republics, Chiefs of the NKVD of the Autonomous Republics, Oblasts and Countries*, [in:] *Rozstrzelać Polaków*, p. 86–124.

with military training courses for the young and also with counter-intelligence and subversive actions. When Poland regained its independence in 1918 most of the PMO squads were incorporated into the Polish Army. The organization was defeated and dissolved in 1921 on the territory of the USSR. Most of its members were captured and liquidated by the Bolsheviks.²⁰

So, the official justification of the repressions towards the Polish people and the threat of that not existing at that time organization to the Soviet country could not have been verified in reality. Fictional risk turned out to have been an ideal pretext for the persecution of the Polish people in Stalin's country.

The execution of the operation was preceded by the massive displacement of the Polish rural population from the territory of Belarus and Ukraine and by the order of the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the USSR number 00447 "About the operation of repressions of the ex-Kulaks, convicts and other anti-Soviet element." The prelude for the large-scale action was also the eviction of Poles from Marchlewszczyzna (Polish Autonomous District) and from other parts of Ukraine in the spring of 1936.²¹ Next, the Polish population in Belarus was displaced. It was mainly about the inhabitants of the border area situated close to Poland. The action was connected with the plans of the militarization of the western part of the borderland in the face of the looming war. That is why, the Soviet authorities aimed at getting rid of the 'fifth column' which was potentially formed by Poles.²² The transports were directed to Kazakhstan, mainly to Kokshetau and Tselinograd Oblasts and also to Siberia and places remote from the borderland of the USSR.²³

"Dekulakization" was launched on 5 August 1937 on the territory of the whole USSR. The goal of the action was to get rid of the "kulaks" and "class enemies". The category was created by the country encompassed peasants reluctant to collectivization and communist authorities, and also members of hostile political parties, conspiracy and other anti-Soviet element. In general, during the action in the years 1937–1938 there were 378326 people who lost their lives and 389070 were sent to the Gulag.²⁴

²⁰ H. Kuromiya, *Głosy straconych*, p. 194; H. Stroński, *Wielka prowokacja NKWD. Sprawa Polskiej Organizacji Wojskowej na Ukrainie w latach 1933–1939*, [in:] *Europa nieprowincjonalna. Przemiany na ziemiach wschodnich dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (Białoruś, Litwa, Łotwa, Ukraina, wschodnie pogranicze III Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej) w latach 1772–1999*, red. K. Jesiewicz, Warszawa–Londyn 1999, p. 867–877.

²¹ H. Stroński, *Koniec eksperymentu. Rozwiązanie Marchlewszczyzny i deportacje ludności polskiej do Kazachstanu w latach 1935–1936 w świetle nowych dokumentów archiwalnych*, "Ucrainica Polonica" 2007 nr 1, p. 201–220.

²² M. Iwanow, *Matka premiera. O Polakach w Dowbyszu*, "Biuletyn IPN" 2009 nr 1–2 (96–97), p. 369; A. Patek, *Polska diaspora...*, p. 301.

²³ A. Patek, *Polska diaspora...*, p. 300.

²⁴ T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie*, p. 105–107.

The orders number 00485 and 00486 gave the NKVD officers unlimited possibilities of actions. Almost all Poles and other citizens could have been arrested on the territory of the USSR. Only those who gave their own families away were likely to have been saved. The Polish Operation was so perfectly prepared that it lived up to all expectations.

The examples of the statistics from the first quarter of the actions, which were included in the mentioned phone-telegrams and sent from different oblasts to the headquarters of the NKVD in Moscow, will be presented here.

On 29 September 1937 the People's Commissar for the Internal Affairs in Kiev Izrail Leplevsky sent to Yezhov a report about the process of repressions in Ukraine. The report shows that from the beginning of the operation to the day 27 September, there were 23158 people arrested and convicted; 9458 of them were assigned to the first category and 13700 people to the second one. In addition, the Commissar informed that in the oblasts of the NKVD there had been materials on which basis 15000 people could have been arrested.²⁵

In the telegram from 16 September 1937 the chief of the West Siberian region Grigori Gorbach informed Yezhov that with the day of 10 September 1490 people had been arrested. The group included: refugees from Poland – 944, Polish prisoners-of-war – 30, political refugees – 30, members of the Polish Socialist Party and other nationalists – 471; 144 people from the above mentioned group worked in arms industry, in transport – 22, military industry – 364, farmers – 954 and soldiers of the Red Army – 6²⁶.

Yezhov was also informed by Leo Zalin about the outcome of the Polish Operation in Kazakhstan. In the telegram from September 1937 he wrote that according to the data from 15 September, 405 people were detained; 210 of them were refugees from Poland, 2 prisoners-of-war and 193 were Polish activists.²⁷

The report sent to Yezhov by Vladimir Cesarsky in August 1938 dealt with the issue of the Polish Operation in the oblast of Moscow. He informed that from 1 August 1937 to 1 July 1938 the local managements of the NKVD had arrested 2367 of Polish people. From the group 42 people were detained in ordnance factories of Moscow, 46 in the factories of the heavy industry. Next, from the 1 July 1938 to 15 August 1938 5208 of Poles and people connected with Poland were recorded in Moscow, and in the whole oblast the number reached 1066.²⁸

²⁵ *A Report from the People's Commissar for the Internal Affairs in Kiev Izrail Leplevsky to N. Yezhov about the Process of Repressions in Ukraine with a special request to increase the limit of arrests* [in:] *Polska i Ukraina w latach trzydziestych – czterdziestych XX wieku*, p. 603.

²⁶ *A Special Information from N. Yezhov to Stalin with the Copy of Telegram from Gorbach about the Progress of the Polish Operation in the West Siberian region*, 16 IX 1937, [in:] *Rozstrzelać Polaków*, p. 147.

²⁷ *A Special Information*, p. 153.

²⁸ N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, p. 33–34.

According to the previously prepared lists, the Polish intelligentsia was the primary target of repressions. The most exposed to the arrests were Polish white collar workers as well as specialists from large centres mainly from Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev. Professor Timothy Snyder from Yale University calculated that in the years 1937–1938 Poles in Leningrad were 34 times more likely to have been arrested than other Soviet inhabitants. 89% of the Polish people who were apprehended in this particular city during the Polish Operation were executed within ten days from the time of their detention.²⁹ Many teachers, people employed in the railway industry, in mining, metallurgy and other branches of the industry, which were considered "strategic", were arrested.³⁰ Everyone who stayed in touch with families abroad was also apprehended.³¹

Massive arrests encompassed the descendants of the former sybiraks (people deported to Siberia) who were staying in Siberian cities and villages: Tobolsk, Tymen, Ishim, Omsk, Sverdlovsk, Perm, Kirov, Chelyabinsk, Ufa.³² In the village of Białystok in Siberia over 120 men were arrested in February 1938. Only dozen or so of the youngest survived.³³ The Polish people who lived in the Caucasus area and the Central Asia were also persecuted.³⁴ However, the social group which suffered a great loss, as a result of the genocide of the years 1937–1938, were the Catholic priests. From 400 priests who were working at that time in the USSR only over 10 survived to 1938. Most of them had escaped to Poland before 1937. Almost everyone who had not left the territory of the USSR was executed before 1939.³⁵ The official data give the number of 120 executed Catholic priests in the years 1937–1938.³⁶

Repressions did not omit the Polish communists staying in the USSR. As a result of the Polish Operation, almost every higher level party activist was

²⁹ T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie*, p. 119.

³⁰ M. Łoziński, *Operacja polska. Stalinowska zbrodnia na Polakach w latach 1937–1938*, Kłodawa 2008, p. 81; N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, p. 33.

³¹ A. Венгер, *Рим и Москва 1900–1950*, Москва 2000, p. 523.

³² S. Fiel, *Na syberyjskim trakcie. Polacy w Kraju Tiumeńskim*, Warszawa 1999, p. 90.

³³ S. Leończyk, *Polacy – mieszkańcy wsi syberyjskiej. Walka o przeżycie 1917–1938*, [in:] *Ofiary imperium. Imperia jako ofiary. 44 spojrzenia*, red. A. Nowak, Warszawa 2010, p. 463; W. Chaniewicz, *Z historii budowy, zniszczenia i odbudowy kościoła we wsi Białystok na Syberii*, [in:] *Kościół katolicki na Syberii. Historia, współczesność, przeszłość*, red. nauk. A. Kuczyński, Wrocław 2002, p. 358.

³⁴ A. Patek, *Polska diaspora...*, p. 301.

³⁵ R. Dzwonkowski, *Losy duchowieństwa katolickiego w ZSSR 1917–1939. Martyrologium*, Lublin 1998, p. 49.

³⁶ Ch. L. Zugge, *The Forgotten: Catholics of the Soviet Empire from Lenin through Stalin*, Syracuse 2001, p. 255–178.

arrested. Most of them were executed. Consequently, Stalin disbanded the Communist Party of Poland in August 1938.³⁷

The biggest percentage of Polish men living in the USSR was employed in agriculture. The group of people suffered the most. They were arrested and executed most frequently. The apprehension of the breadwinner of the family had an enormous impact on the life of the whole family, which was frequently eliminated from the social life. Their possessions were confiscated. Moreover, according to the order referring to “the families of the traitors” from 15 August 1937 thousands of women – the wives of the arrested, were sent to the Gulag. Similarly, thousands of children under the age of 15 left without proper care were sent to nurseries and orphanages. Children over 15 years of age were sent to the NKVD centres. Lots of the people died because of bad conditions in the accommodation centres, in this way the number of casualties in the genocide increased considerably.³⁸

During the Polish Operation the employees of the Main Directorate of State Security of the NKVD followed the procedure ordered by Yezhov. After arresting of a suspect, the investigation begun. When enquiry had been carried out, a written note about every detained person was prepared together with an attachment with the summary of the investigation and agency materials. The pieces of information had been gathered for 10 days before they were put together so that they formed one list – so called ‘album’. Then, these albums were handed to the chief of the NKVD or to the two-people committee which included the NKVD chief of the particular region and a prosecutor.

The committee was able to pronounce a sentence and assign a suspect to one of the two categories; category number one (execution), category number two (5 to 10 years of imprisonment). After the work of the committee of two had been done, the album was sent to Moscow in order to be accepted by the People’s Commissar for the Internal Affairs Yezhov and also by the Public Prosecutor General Andrey Vyshinsky. Having been accepted, the documents were sent back to a particular region and the sentence was executed.³⁹ In reality, the sentences was passed during the first stage of the procedure which was the analysis of each case. An operative officer together with a chief most often suggested the sentence. The chiefs of the NKVD and prosecutors usually confirmed the sentences together or separately, without a discussion or proper analysis of the case files. The procedures were changed in the middle of 1938

³⁷ Z. Kusiak, *Komunistyczna Partia Polski*, [in:] *Encyklopedia “białych plam”*, vol. 9, kom. nauk. H. Kiereś et al., aut. haseł C. S. Bartnik, Radom 2002, p. 263–265; M. Korcuć, *W II Rzeczypospolitej*, [in:] *Komunizm w Polsce. Zdrada, zbrodnia, zakłamanie, zniewolenie*, Kraków 2005, p. 78–79.

³⁸ *Rozstrzelać Polaków*, p. 21–22.

³⁹ *Polska i Ukraina w latach trzydziestych – czterdziestych XX wieku*, p. 69–71.

because of the huge number of cases directed to the headquarters. In order to improve the actions, according to a decision of the Politburo of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) the power of issuing sentences was given to "the Special Troika" in every region. "The commission of three" included the first secretary of the oblast committee, country committee, or of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) or the Central Executive Committee, and a chief officer of the NKVD together with a prosecutor of the particular oblast, country or a republic. Their decisions were final. They were not revised by the supreme court.⁴⁰ The scale of these actions imposed fabrication of the espionage accusations and the PMO membership. Alongside investigations there appeared tortures. The most common methods of torturing were brutal beatings, long lasting sleep deprivation and standing at ease for many hours. With these methods a suspect was made to confess to having been a Polish spy or to many other absurd crimes. Moreover, testimonies incriminating other people were extorted on regular basis. Court cases and investigation minutes were also fabricated. The names of the Polish organizations and people who were to be arrested appeared in minutes and were sent to the field.⁴¹

Those who were sentenced to capital punishment were transported to places of executions. They were placed on the edge of the previously dug pit in ground and shot at the back of their heads. The bodies were pushed down to the pit, put one on one and covered up by sand. When there was a shortage of ammunition, the victims were made to sit in a row; one next to the other so that one bullet could kill several people.⁴² It is also known that the convicts were very often killed by the exhaust fumes in especially prepared vans; so called 'dushegubka' – Gas Vans. The implementation of this particular method made it possible to increase the day limit of the executions. The vehicles mentioned above were equipped with special valves which redirected exhaust fumes into air-tight chambers with convicts inside. The prisoners who had been sentenced to death were stripped naked, tied and thrown into a van. Their private possessions were taken and stolen from them by the NKVD officers. The convicts were being suffocated on their way to the places of execution.⁴³ The most important places of mass executions and burials during the time of terror in the years 1937–1938 were: Kurapaty on the outskirts of Minsk in Belarus, Bykivnia near Kiev, Lewaszewski Memorial Cemetery in Leningrad and Butovo near Moscow.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ M. Łoziński, *Operacja polska*, p. 105–106, 108; *Rozstrzelać Polaków*, p. 197–198.

⁴¹ N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, p. 30; T. Kizny, *Wielki terror 1937–1938*, p. 150–153.

⁴² T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie*, p. 121, 123.

⁴³ T. Kizny, *Wielki terror 1937–1938*, p. 177, 238.

⁴⁴ T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie*, p. 121, 123; Z. J. Peszkowski, S. Z. Zdrojewski, *Mińsk-Kuropyty, Łódź–Warszawa–Orchard Lake 1999*, p. 42–47.

Mass graves could be found in many cities, not only where “the threes” were active. They were spread all over the territory of the USSR from Arkhangelsk, Petrozavodsk, Zhitomir, Odessa, Voronezh to Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Kirovskiy, Vladivostok. Up till this day it is possible that only over one hundred of the burial places have been discovered, which is one third of the whole.⁴⁵ According to priest Dzwonkowski’s research, churches’ catacombs also served as places of torment for hundreds of people. Churches in Letychiv, Podolia and Polonne and Volynia served as good examples of those tragic scenes.⁴⁶

As it had been mentioned before, the operation was supposed to finish on 20 November 1938. In reality, it lasted much longer. On 24 and 25 January 1938 having met the chief officers of the local managements of the NKVD and having acknowledged the balance of the proceedings, Yezhov ordered further actions. He also ordered the intensification of repression. The termination of the action was planned then on 15 April 1938. Later on, the action was supposed to stop at the beginning of August but again this time the plan had not been fulfilled. Yezhov kept getting motions from the chief officers of local managements about increasing the limits of arrests.⁴⁷ Finally, the operation was brought to an end with the order number 00762 from 26 November 1938. However, in reality the official order did not stop the action. As a matter of fact, it continued for longer period of time. Poles who had been arrested before the order was issued, were shot in the second half of November and in December.⁴⁸

Initially, the Polish operation was supposed to last for three months but it continued for nearly two years. It had the biggest impact in Ukraine which is understandable because the most Poles lived right there. As part of those actions in Ukraine 55928 people were arrested and 44327 were shot. In Belarus 19931 of the Polish people were apprehended and 17772 were executed.⁴⁹ As it was mentioned at the beginning of this article, 143810 people of Polish descents were arrested on charges of espionage for Poland. From this number of people 139835 were condemned and 111091 were shot.⁵⁰

It has to be reminded that the Polish people died not only because of the order number 00485 but also as part of other operations which were carried out by the NKVD. As a result, the number of murdered Poles during the Great

⁴⁵ T. Kizny *Wielki terror 1937–1938*, p. 387–400.

⁴⁶ R. Dzwonkowski, *Kościół katolicki w ZSSR 1917–1939. Zarys Historii*, Lublin 1997, p. 255–257; *Glód i represje wobec ludności polskiej na Ukrainie 1932–1947. Relacje*, red. R. Dzwonkowski, Lublin 2004, p. 27.

⁴⁷ *A report from the People’s Commissar...*, p. 603.

⁴⁸ A. Paczkowski, *Polacy pod obcą i własną przemocą*, [in:] *Czarna księga komunizmu. Zbrodnie, terror, prześladowania*, Warszawa 1999, p. 344.

⁴⁹ T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie*, p. 121.

⁵⁰ H. B. Петров, A. B. Рогинский, *Польская операция...*, p. 33; M. Iwanow, *Matka premiera*, p. 38

Purge is much bigger than it was thought. It is estimated that about 118000 or 123000 have been killed.⁵¹ The census carried out in 1939 shows the effects of systematic persecution of the Polish people. In comparison with the census from 1926 the number of Poles decreased from 782000 to 630000.⁵² The loss might be more severe, if we take into account the fact, that the statistics give the number of the condemned and not the arrested people.

The Polish Operation became an example and a model of the ethnic cleansing against different nationalities which lived on the territory of the USSR. Almost simultaneously in August 1937 the NKVD was carrying out the actions according to the trusted method against: Bulgarian people, the Chinese, Finnish people, Estonians, Greeks, the Irish, Korean people, Latvians, German and Hungarian people. In general, during the Ethnic Operations in the years 1937–1938, there were 227986 people arrested; 172830 were shot which was 76% of the whole.⁵³

In closing, it is worth naming the most important executors of the Polish Operation and showing their lives and deaths. Firstly, from obvious reasons it is necessary to mention Nikolai Yezhov. He was born in Petersburg in 1895. From 1917 he was a member of the Party of Bolsheviks. From 1918 a soldier of the Red Army. He was systematically climbing the party ladder. In 1930 he was the Deputy People's Commissar for Agriculture. In 1930 he was appointed the head of the personnel department of the Communist Party. In 1935 he was the chairman of the Central Commission for Party Control and from February of that year also a secretary of the Central Committee. In the years 1936–1938 he was the chairman of People's Commissar for Internal Affairs (the NKVD). In July 1937 he was awarded the Order of Lenin. When Stalin decided to mitigate terror, Yezhov started to lose his influence. As a result of the Great Purge, the author of anti-Polish orders number 00485 and 00486 because of which thousands of Poles were killed, was arrested on 10 April 1939. On 3 February 1940 Yezhov was tried by the Military Collegium of the USSR and shot on 4 February 1940.⁵⁴

Mikhail Frinovsky born in 1898 was Yezhov's right hand. From June 1937 Frinovsky was the head of State Security. He was awarded the Order of Lenin in February 1936. On 6 April 1939 he was arrested and condemned to

⁵¹ M. Iwanow, *Matka premiera*, p. 22–43; T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie*, p. 124–127.

⁵² О. Мазохин, *Право на репрессии: внесудобные полномочия органов государственной безопасности (1918–1953)*, Жуковский–Москва 2006, p. 185.

⁵³ О. Мазохин, *Право на репрессии*, p. 185.

⁵⁴ J. Arch Getty, O. Naumow, *Jeżow. Żelazna pięść Stalina*, tłum. G. Waluga, J. Złotnicki, Warszawa 2007, p. 43–47, 119–130; M. Smoleń, *Jeżow Nikolaj Iwanowicz*, [in:] *Encyklopedia "białych plan"*, p. 11–16; G. Przebinda, J. Smaga, *Kto jest kim w Rosji po 1917 roku*, Kraków 2000, p. 125–126.

death by the Military Collegium of the USSR. The sentence was executed on 8 February 1940.⁵⁵

Vladimir Cesarsky born in 1895 in Odessa was also a close co-worker of Yezhov. He was the chief of the local management of the NKVD in the Moscow Oblast from May 1938. Like Yezhov, he was awarded the Order of Lenin in July 1937. He was condemned to death on 21 January 1940 by the Military Collegium of the USSR. The sentence was executed on 22 January 1940.⁵⁶

Stanislav Redens, a man of Polish descent born in Tykocin in 1892 was a person of ‘an outstanding merit’ for the Polish Operation. In the years 1934–1938 he was the chief of the local management of the NKVD of the Moscow Oblast. He was the chief of the local management of the NKVD in Kazkh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) from 1938. He was awarded the Order of Lenin in July 1937. Redens was arrested in November 1938, condemned to death by the Military Collegium of the USSR in January 1940, shot on 12 February 1940. He was rehabilitated in 1961.⁵⁷

Leonid Zakovsky was yet another important person who played a significant role in the Polish Operation. He was of Latvian origin. Zakovsky was the chief of the local management of the NKVD of the Leningrad Oblast and from January to April 1938 of the Moscow Oblast. He was awarded the Order of Lenin in June 1937. He was arrested on 29 April 1938. He was sentenced to death by the Military Collegium of the USSR on 29 August 1938, shot on the same day.⁵⁸

Viktor Zuravlov, who was a Russian born in 1902, was also close with the Commissar of the NKVD. Zuravlov was the chief of the local managements in the following oblasts: Kuybyshev (1937–1938), Ivanovo (1938) and Moscow (1938–1939). He was an author of a famous letter denouncing Yezhov and his methods. Thanks to this, he was the only person who stayed in the department of security after Yezhov had been arrested and Beria appointed to the post. Probably he committed suicide in March 1944.

Izrail Leplevsky showed signs of special cruelty and was assiduous in his activities in Ukraine. He was born in 1896 in Brest upon Bug, he was active in the NKVD yet in 1918. He became the People’s Commissar of Belarus SSR. From 1936 to 1937 he was working as the chief of the 6th department of the Main Directorate of the State Security of the NKVD. From 14 June 1937 to 27 January 1938 he was the People’s Commissar of the Ukrainian SSR. He was awarded the Order of Lenin on 22 July 1937. Leplevsky was arrested on 26

⁵⁵ N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, p. 42.

⁵⁶ N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, p. 42.

⁵⁷ N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, p. 42; Н. В. Петров, К. В. Скоркин, *Кто руководил НКВД 1934–141. Справочник*, Москва 1999, <http://www.memo.ru/history/NKVD/kto/index.htm> (15 July 2013).

⁵⁸ N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, p. 43.

April 1938. He was sentenced to death by the Military Collegium of the USSR and shot on 28 July 1938.⁵⁹

One of the most active executors of the Polish Operation was called Boris Berman. He was a Russian born in 1901. He had worked in security services from 1921. In the years 1931–1937 he was a low-ranking official in the NKVD. From March 1937 to 22 May 1938 he was the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the Belarus SSR and at the same time the head of Special Department of the Main Directorate of the State Security of the NKVD. During his rule there were 60000 people repressed in Belarus. He was awarded the Order of Lenin in December 1937. He was arrested on 24 September 1938 and condemned to death by the Military Collegium of the USSR. The sentence was executed on 22 February 1939.⁶⁰

Grigori Gorbach born in 1898 to the Ukrainian family was an executor of the repressions on the territory of the West Siberia. He started working for the secret service of the NKVD in 1920. In the years 1934–1936 he was a deputy chief of the local management of the NKVD in the country of the North Caucasus. From April to July 1937 the chief of the local management of the NKVD in the West Siberian country. Next, from July to August 1937 he worked as the chief of the local management of the NKVD of the Omsk Oblast. However, he returned to his previous post in the West Siberian country in August 1937. In October 1938 he became the chief of the local management of the NKVD in the Novosibirsk Oblast. For his work, he was awarded the Lenin Order on 11 July 1937. He was arrested on 28 November 1938 and condemned to death by the Military Collegium of the USSR. He was shot on 7 March 1939.⁶¹

Vsevolod Balicki was an executor of the repressions and great terror in the Far East. He was a Russian born in 1892. He worked in the NKVD from 1919. From November 1932 he stayed in Ukraine and as a special agent of the NKVD he supervised the crop collection during the Terror-Famine in Ukraine. In the years 1934–1937 he was the People's Commissar for the Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR. From November 1937 Balicki was the chief of the local management of the Far Eastern Country. He was awarded the Order of the Red Star in 1936. Balicki was arrested on 7 July 1937 and shot on 27 November 1937.⁶²

Abstract

The article is based on a rich and valuable literature presenting the tragic events occurred in the western part of USSR in the years 1937–1938, when more than hundred thousand people

⁵⁹ Н. В. Петров, К. В. Скоркин, *Кто руководил НКВД 1934–141*.

⁶⁰ *История органов госбезопасности. Краткая биография руководителей*, <http://www.kgb.by/history/biography> (15 July 2013).

⁶¹ Н. В. Петров, К. В. Скоркин, *Кто руководил НКВД 1934–141*.

⁶² Н. В. Петров, К. В. Скоркин, *Кто руководил НКВД 1934–141*.

accused of spying for Poland were arrested and many of them were killed. The campaign against the Polish people was initiated by the official order number 00485 issued on 11 August 1937 and signed by the Soviet People's Commissar for State Security Nikolai Yezhov.

Keywords

USSR; Polish people; genocide

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