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NKVD massacres and Ukrainian Pogroms in June 1941

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<p> Roberto.rodohforum</p>  <p>Posts: 276 Mar 18 12 12:12 AM</p>	<p>NKVD massacres and Ukrainian Pogroms in June 1941 Lead [-]</p> <p>TAGS : None</p> <p>What follows is my translation of an online article by Polish historian Dr. Bogdan Musial</p> <p>Quote:</p> <hr/> <p>Eastern Poland during the Marching-in of the Wehrmacht after 22. June 1941 by Bogdan Musial</p> <p>22 June 1941 is among the most important dates in the history of the 20th century. At three in the morning on that day Nazi Germany assaulted its former accomplice in the assault on Poland in September 1939. The German troops advanced quickly, while the Soviet troops fled from them. On the Soviet front and in the rear area there was chaos and panic. Millions of soldiers and civilians were moving east.</p> <p>The advancing German troops did not just cause panic, chaos and terror in the newly occupied territories, however. On the contrary, they were greeted as liberators by many Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians or Latvians, especially in the areas that had been occupied by the Soviets in the autumn of 1939 (Eastern Poland) and in the summer of 1940 (Baltic Countries). This may be difficult for many to understand from today's point of view. If we look at the history of Soviet occupation in these areas before 22 June 1941, however, this attitude appears in another light.</p> <p>The Polish territories occupied in September 1939 are appropriate as few others for a comparative examination of National Socialist and Soviet occupation policies and the crimes committed by the occupiers. From September 1939 to June 1941 both Germany and the Soviet Union pursued a policy the goal of which was to destroy the Polish state in its entirety. In the spring of 1941 the Soviets were closer to this goal than the National Socialists. It must be pointed</p>

out, however, that the NS terror in occupied Poland reached its climax only in the years 1942-1944.[1]

1 September 1939 is generally linked to the German assault on Poland. It is often overlooked that this assault happened in accordance with the Soviet Union (the Hitler-Stalin-Pact of 24 August 1939) and that the Soviet Union actively participated in the war against Poland. On 17 September 1939, when Poland was practically defeated if not yet completely occupied, Soviet troops crossed the Soviet-Polish border and occupied the eastern part of Poland. The final division of the war booty took place on 28 September 1939. On that day Ribbentrop and Molotov signed a frontier and friendship treaty wherein the partition of Poland was contractually established. The new border ran along the rivers San and Bug. The territory that fell to the Soviet Union comprised 201 000 square kilometers, i.e. 51.5 per cent of the former Polish state territory. In this area there lived about 13.2 million people who on 29 November 1939 became Soviet citizens. The population was ethnically mixed; it was made up of Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Belorussians, Lithuanians and others.

In the period between the wars there had existed a conflict constellation unique for Poland in the eastern part of the country. Furthermore the manifold and multi-layered conflicts largely coincided with the religious and ethnic frontiers, which gave them an additional dynamism and explosiveness. Thus there were conflicts among Poles, Jews, Ukrainians and Belorussians that were politically, economically, socially, religiously and ethnically motivated. The Polish state intensified these conflicts through a nationalist policy that was naturally directed against the other minorities and thus led to the creation of a strong anti-Polish mood in Eastern Poland.

Polish scientist Marian Zdziechowski rightly called the situation in Eastern Poland a Pandoras Box already in the 1920s. At the end of September 1939 this box was opened by the Soviets.

After the military occupation of Eastern Poland the Soviets went about to establish their power. Their goal was to break up the capitalist order and to introduce the communist system, i.e. to make the land soviet. For this they first had to remove the old political and social elite. The methods applied for this purpose included arrests, torture, mass deportations, forced resettlements and mass shootings.

The Soviet liberators covered occupied Eastern Poland with a terror that in its scale had been hitherto unknown there, while the Soviets could count on twenty years of experience with that terror and thus use the existing ethnical and social tensions as an instrument to consolidate their rule. They aroused and furthered, partially without intention, lowly instincts and negative phenomena like denunciation, vengefulness, envy, joy at the damage of others and the desire to deal others a blow.

The results of the about twenty-one months of Soviet rule in Eastern Poland were several hundred thousand deported (330.000 to about 400.000) and imprisoned (about 120.000) as well as thousands upon thousands tortured and murdered. In addition there were the consequences of further measures that are typical for the Soviet-Communist social and economic order: expropriation and collectivization, deficit economy, black market, corruption and nepotism. The various ethnic groups were to a different degree affected by the sovietization process and by Soviet terror. At first mainly the Poles were persecuted, although the Ukrainian and Jewish elite were also not spared. In time, however, the Ukrainian population became the focal point of persecution in present-day Western Ukraine, and in the spring of 1941 most of those persecuted were of Ukrainian origin. In addition the Soviets at this time intensified the collectivization campaign that had begun in the spring of 1940. This affected primarily the peasants, who at first profited from the sovietization. Most Ukrainians lived in the countryside, as did the Belorussians. All these measures and their consequences intensified the existing tensions and at the same time created new breeding grounds for conflict among the ethnic groups. The Jewish population got into an extremely precarious situation. On the one hand its elite was persecuted and many refugees from Western Poland

were deported to Siberia, so that the Jewish population was atomized and lost its traditional leadership elite. On the other hand the Soviet system offered many Jews a new perspective. For many of them, especially the young, Soviet rule brought social promotion.

This led to envy and the desire for revenge among the other population groups. Many non-Jews now associated the Soviet rule with the social privileging of the Jews and their participation in the power. That many Jews were persecuted and suffered disadvantages was usually overlooked. Thus the anti-Jewish resentments gained a new dimension during the Soviet rule. To the traditional prejudices rooted in economic, religious and social differences and conflicts was added the image of the Jews as beneficiaries of the sovietization process and collaborators of the Soviet occupiers.

Former Eastern Poland on the eve of the German-Soviet war resembled a witch's cauldron, where negative emotions and passions (especially hatred and desire for revenge) had heated up to an unimaginable extent due to the Soviet occupation policy. The Soviet occupiers tried to keep down these passions by persecuting anti-Jewish and anti-Soviet utterances. This, however, led to the negative emotions, which now could not even be released verbally, being further radicalized. On the other side the Soviets fanned the flames of anti-Polish, anti-capitalist and later also anti-Ukrainian sentiments and took advantage thereof to consolidate their rule. This procedure embittered and radicalized those persecuted and disfavored. Thus the Soviet measures created a complex system of negative reactions and behaviors that intensified the old social, ethnical and political tensions and at the same time brought about new conflicts.

With the pretension of intending to build a society marked by equality, justice, fraternity and altruism the Soviets in Eastern Poland achieved exactly the opposite: a rule of arbitrariness, mass terror, denunciation, ethnically and socially motivated hatred, collective urge for revenge, disfavor and cynicism. Also in economic aspects Soviet rule led to the further impoverishment of a country that was poor anyway.

The Soviet terror of the years 1939 to 1941 in former Eastern Poland climaxed in the first weeks of the German-Soviet war in massacres of thousands of prison inmates and countless encroachments against the civilian population. Compared to other Soviet and National Socialist crimes the absolute number of victims was relatively small (an estimated 20 000 to 30 000 people). Unique, however, were the conditions under which these crimes were committed and then discovered, as well as their consequences.

The carrying-out of the shootings was already unusual, for they took place under extremely unfavorable circumstances from the point of view of the perpetrators. They constituted an ad-hoc measure that was decided upon when the Soviets no longer saw it as possible to evacuate all prisoners from the areas threatened by the German troops. A liberation of the prisoners by the Germans or even their release was out of the question from a Soviet point of view. After all, they were anti-Soviet elements which needed to be exterminated anyway. In most prisons in the Baltic, Belorussia, Ukraine and Bessarabia (Moldavia) there were massacres of prisoners in these days and weeks. The victims were usually liquidated individually by a shot in the neck or, when the time was scarce, in groups with machine guns and hand grenades. In many cases the corpses remained lying in the prison cells or cellars. In Belorussia, on the other hand, the Soviets killed thousands of prisoners on so-called death marches. In prisons further away from the border there was usually enough time to conclude the actions, i.e. to bury the corpses. Threatened work camps were also dissolved in this manner. There were also numerous crimes by Red Army soldiers against the civilian population: suspects were shot, hostages taken and killed, houses and villages burned down.

Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that many Ukrainians, Poles, Latvians or Lithuanians greeted the entering German troops as liberators. An exception were the Jews, who made up about 10 per cent of the total population in Eastern Poland, as well as those who had collaborated with the

Soviets. They feared repression and excesses. Indeed after the flight of the Soviets there were in many places bloody excesses and pogroms, which were directed against the Jewish population, but also against real or presumed collaborators of non-Jewish origin.

This explosive anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic mood was now used as a tool by the *Einsatzgruppen*, whose task it was to cleanse the rear areas of actual or potential opponents of Nazi Germany. The German occupiers could in this respect count on the active assistance of many natives who knew the area. This help went from active participation in the persecution of Jews, Soviet functionaries and real or presumed Soviet collaborators to denunciations to the German authorities.

This article is a summary of three chapters from the following book: Bogdan Musial, *Konterrevolutionäre Elemente sind zu erschliessen. Die Brutalisierung des deutsch-sowjetischen Krieges im Sommer 1941*, Propylen Verlag, Berlin, Munich 2000, (second edition February 2001).

[1] see Bogdan Musial, *Die deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Polen 1939-1945: Das Generalgouvernement*, in: *Deutsch-polnische-Beziehungen 1939 - 1945 - 1949. Eine Einführung*, edited by Włodzimierz Borodziej and Klaus Ziemer, Osnabrück 2000, pages 71-104.

Dr. Bogdan Musial

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Quote: Denial of generally known historical facts should not be punishable. For those who maintain, for instance, that Germany did not take part in World War I or that Adenauer fought at IJssel in 333, their own stupidity is punishment enough. The same should apply to the denial of the horrors and crimes of the recent German past.

~ A German jurist by the name of Baumann in the German juridical magazine NJW, quoted in: Bailer-Galanda/Benz/Neugebauer (ed.), *Die Auschwitzleugner*, Berlin 1996, page 261 (my translation).

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Mar 18 12 12:22 AM

What follows is my translation of a [review](#) of Bogdan Musial's book *"Konterrevolutionaere Elemente sind zu erschossen"*. *Die Brutalisierung des deutsch-sowjetischen Krieges im Sommer 1941* by Dieter Pohl of the German *Institut für Zeitgeschichte*.

Quote:

Bogdan Musial: *"Konterrevolutionaere Elemente sind zu erschossen"*. *Die Brutalisierung des deutsch-sowjetischen Krieges im Sommer 1941*, Berlin/Munich: Propyläen 2000, 349 pages, numerous illustrations, ISBN: 3-549-07126-4, Price: DEM 44,-
Reviewed by H-Soz-u-Kult by Dieter Pohl

On 22 June 1941 there began not only the war against the Soviet Union, but also the systematic murder of the European Jews. While especially the crimes of the *Einsatzgruppen* and certain police battalions can in the meantime be considered relatively well investigated, other murders from the period June/July 1941 were barely taken notice of until the mid-1990s. In speaking of the horrendous pogroms in Eastern Poland and the Baltic, but also about the NKVDs massacres of prison inmates carried out prior to the German marching-in. Bogdan Musial, at the German Historical Institute in Warsaw, is one of the first western historians to have undertaken a detailed examination of the murderous summer of 1941 in these regions, insofar as they nowadays belong to Ukraine or Belorussia [1]. For this he can base himself on sources mostly unused so far, such as a Polish inquest from the 1990s. Especially to be pointed out is the significance of the famous Ringelblum Archive, which provides information not only about the German occupation but also about the Soviet regime in Eastern Poland until 1941.

The author comes along with an explosive thesis: the NKVDs murders at the end of June 1941, he maintains, contributed essentially to brutalizing the German-Soviet war, in other words, they were one of the causes for the subsequent murder of the Jews. In order to explain his thesis Musial reaches further back and characterizes the whole Soviet occupation policy in Eastern Poland since September 1939. This was determined not only by a rigorous Communist expropriation policy, but mainly by massive arrests, deportations and shootings. As the four main population groups, Poles (40 %), Ukrainians (34 %), Belorussians and Jews (8.5 % each) were affected by these events to a

rather different extent, however, the tensions among these ethnic groups considerably increased. The majority of the population considered especially the Jewish minority to be co-responsible for the Soviet rule of terror. This terror finally culminated in the NKVDs mass murders in June 1941. There followed the discovery of the Stalinist massacres, the wave of anti-Jewish pogroms and the use of the Soviet crimes by German propaganda.

The book was already harshly attacked shortly after its publication. The author was especially accused of trying to play down the German responsibility. Allegedly he, the critic of the Wehrmacht War Crimes Exhibition, had now shown his true political face. A closer reading of the book makes it hard to understand the justification of these attacks. For it has little in common with the historical speculations of an Ernst Nolte. [2]. And yet Musial's undertaking of presenting these complex connections cannot be considered successful.

The decisive factor for the occurrences of the time was certainly the stereotype of Jewish Bolshevism, which by no means circulated among the National Socialists alone and has so far not been systematically examined by research [3]. The first question to arise in this respect is the one about continuity, i.e. mainly about the pogroms in Eastern Poland and Soviet Russia between 1918 and 1921, but also after the Second Polish Republic. Furthermore the author not always makes a clear distinction between the demonstrable reality and its reception. Many contradictions and unhappy sentences show up in the text. Thus on page 57 we read the assertion: The Jews were happy that the Soviets occupied Eastern Poland; four pages later, however, we read that this already didn't apply to the numerous Jewish businessmen. Some figures have obviously not been verified; for instance, the proportion of Jews among Lemberg students was for a time between 38 % and 44 %, i.e. a little higher than among the Lemberg population in general, and not a grotesque 85 %, as the author maintains.[4] While the official reports about the NKVD massacres are assessed critically, many questionable eyewitness reports remain unverified. Analytical questions, such as the one about a comparison with areas outside Western Ukraine, are usually missing [5]. Instead the argumentation occasionally tends to create ethnic collective actors, without for instance taking into consideration the splitting of the political spectrum among the Jews [6]. There is the danger that the contemporaries perception is thus transferred to present-day analysis.

Musial's description of the Soviet rule of violence in Eastern Poland is also not always on the latest state of historiography. The findings of recent research on Stalinism, for instance in regard to the persecution of the Poles, one seeks in vain [7]; with a few exceptions this also applied to the whole literature from the successor states of the Soviet Union or contemporary Ukrainian documents [8]. Here the author relied too much on his main source, the research of Albin Glowacki, whose assumptions regarding mass arrests among the population groups have in the meantime been corrected: until February 1941 43 % of those affected were Poles, but 25 % were Jews [9], i.e. the latter were considerably over-represented. Musial also establishes the participation of Jewish personnel in the Soviet terror organs on the basis of insecure sources. For the NKVD there are exact numbers: among the leading Chekists the proportion sank from 39 % to 3.6 % between 1937 and 1939; in the Ukrainian NKVD 4 % of the staff were persons of Jewish nationality in 1945 [10]. Of the six regional commanders of the NKVD in Western Ukraine four were Ukrainians and two Russians. But what did all of this mean? Especially functionaries were expected to leave their Jewish origin behind. Due to their settlement structure the Jews lived almost exclusively in the cities, had less illiteracy and were more suited for administration than for instance the Ukrainians. Latvians were even more over-represented in the NKVD than Jews, but what does this tell us? Musial's analysis of the NKVD prison murders is also missing some important facts, like the central preparation order by NKGB-Chief Merkulov [11] of 23. June 1941. The two mentioned NKVD massacres at Pravenieshkes and nearby

Rumshishkes were probably one and the same event, and the number of victims of this wave of violence was higher than assumed by Musial, at least 42.776 people [12].

What makes itself unpleasantly noticed is Musial's ongoing polemic against other authors (including, on the sidelines, also myself). Thus research into NKVD crimes is said to have been neglected in favor of National Socialist crimes. This is not true in what concerns western research, let alone research in Eastern Europe. There is more research about Stalinism these days than ever before. The massacres committed by German functionaries against their prison inmates during the retreat between 1943 and 1945, on the other hand, have not yet been systematically researched. Some criticism of the anti-Polish attitude of certain authors leads far away from the topic or, as in the case of Jan Tomasz Gross, stands on shaky feet.

Not very convincing, finally, is the analysis of German politics. We don't get to know that German plans for unleashing pogroms probably existed already during the Polish campaign of 1939 or that a pogrom in Vilna with one dead and 200 injured had already occurred on 28 October 1939 [13]. Also in the dark remains the early cooperation between German authorities and the Nationalist underground regarding plans for revolutions in the hinterland. Lithuanian groups published death threats against the Jewish minority months before the invasion [14]. The existence of a heated anti-Semitic mood in the German army already before 22 June 1941 may be illustrated by the pogrom carried out by air force soldiers in German-occupied Siedlce in March 1941 [15]! The mass murders of Jews in the Baltics began on 23 June [16], not only after the opening of the prisons. Without doubt the sight of the victims of the NKVD and the Red Army and the news about them led to a radicalization of German soldiers and was a cause for participating in pogroms and for crimes against prisoners of war. But how exactly did Wehrmacht propaganda spread, how many soldiers were affected? And: what significance do these front line soldiers and these events have for the National Socialist policy of annihilation? A small one, I would say.

The description of certain pogroms is illustrated with numerous, again predominantly Polish eyewitness depositions, and brings little that is new. Unfortunately the central role of Ukrainian militia and marching groups, as worked out by recent research, also goes under in this. Here a systematic delving into the history of the Ukrainians and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, which is largely missing, would have been necessary. Furthermore the participation of Poles in pogroms, which Musial is one of the first to concede, casts a flashlight upon the question about the spontaneity of these murders, as the current debate about the massacres at Jedwabne and Radzilow shows [17].

The criticism made here should not cloud the fact, however, that this is an interesting book with much material about an important problem. The connection between the NKVD's crimes and the political climate in which the murder of the Jews happened in these regions cannot be argued away. As Ludolf Herbst put it in 1996: "There's no doubt that these actions constituted welcome justifications for the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen* and help explain the ease with which the violence could be escalated." [18] As a scientific work, however, Musial's book got stuck halfway. This complex and difficult topic would have deserved a more careful handling.

Notes:

[1] Still the "classic": Jan T. Gross: *Revolution from Abroad. The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*, Princeton 1987.

[2] Compare with the pamphlet of history professor Jerzy Robert Nowak:

[2] Compare with the pamphlet of history professor, Andrzej Walicki: *Przemilczane zbrodnie. Zydzi i Polacy na Kresach w latach 1939-1941*, Warszawa 1999.

[3] See Matthias Vetter: *Antisemiten und Bolschewiki. Zum Verhlttnis von Sowjetsystem und Judenfeindschaft 1917-1939*, Berlin 1995.

[4] With documentary support: Grzegorz Hryciuk: *Polacy we Lwowie 1939-1944*, Warszawa 2000, page 133; a little higher (46%): Albin Glowacki, *Sowieci wobec Polakw na ziemiach wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej 1939-1941*, 2nd edition, Lodz 1998, page 471.

[5] See Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weiruland 1941-1944*, Dsseldorf 1998, pages 36-50.

[6] Vladimir Melamed: *Evrei vo L'vove (XIII-pervaja polovina XX veka). Sobytaja, obscestv*, L'vov 1994, pages 142 and following; Eliachu Jones: *Evrej L'vova v gody Vtoroj Mirovoj vojny i katastrofy evropejskogo evrejstva 1939-1944*, Moskva, Ierusalim 1999, pages 50 and following.

[7] See especially Terry Martin: *The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998), pages 813-861.

[8] For instance *Litopys neskoreno Ukrainy. Dokumenty, materialy, spohady*, Volume 1, L'viv 1993, pages 32-205. Broadly sourced: Hryciuk, *Polacy*, pages 15-215.

[9] *Repressii protiv poljakov i pol'skich grazdan*, issued by A.E. Gurianov, Moskva 1997, pages 88 and following.

[10] N.V. Petrov, A.B. Skorkin, *Kto rukovodil NKVD 1934-1941*, Moskva 1999, page 495; Cadre Report of the Ukrainian NKVD for 1945, undated; Central Archive of Societal Organization in Ukraine, Kiev. Even smaller numbers for Lithuania: Wolfgang Benz/Marion Neiss (editors), *Judenmord in Litauen. Studien und Dokumente*, Berlin 1999, page 61.

[11] Petro Kulakovs'kyj, *Rozstriljani na pocatku vijny*, in: *Z archiviv VCUK, HPU, NKVD, KHB 1* (1994), pages 191 to 228, here page 192.

[12] *Ewakuacja 1941. Dokumenty*, in: *Karta 12*, 1994, pages 137-138.

[13] See Tomasz Szarota, *U progu zaglady. Zajsicia antyzydowskie i pogromy w okupowanej Europie*, Warszawa 2000, page 265.

[14] Benz/Neiss, *Judenmord in Litauen*, page 23.

[15] Monthly Report of the Supreme Field Command Warsaw for March/April 1941, Achive of the *Institut fr Zeitgeschichte*, MA 679/2.

[16] Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia*, Washington/Riga 1996, pages 211 and following.

[17] Reuben Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe*, London 1974, pages 436 and following. See now Jan T. Gross: *Sasiedzi. Historia zaglady zydzowskiego miasteczka*, Sejny 2000, and the intense reactions to this book.

[18] Ludolf Herbst: *Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933-1945*, Frankfurt a.M. 1996, page 376

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