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## «Evacuation» or «Expulsion»?

The Displacement of Poles from the Former Polish Eastern Territories 1944-1946<sup>1</sup>

by Jerzy Kochanowski

*Abstract* – Because of the arrangements made in Teheran (1943) and Yalta (1945), the eastern territories of interwar Poland (Kresy) were annexed by the Soviet Union. In compensation, Poland received the previously German territories to its west and north. The new borders entailed the mass-migration of Poles, Germans, and Ukrainians. In September 1944 the pro-Soviet Polish Committee of National Liberation and the Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Lithuanian Soviet Republics agreed upon a «mutual evacuation of citizens». A repatriation agreement with the Russian authorities (concerning the repatriation of Poles from the USSR) was signed in July 1945. According to these resolutions, migration was to be voluntary, the evacuees were to be free to choose their new places of residence, and were to be compensated for property left behind. In reality however, pressure and terror played a major role in the «repatriation» of both Ukrainians from Poland and Poles from the USSR – not «free choice». The migration of Poles practically ended in mid 1946. From 1944-1948, 1,503,263 previously Polish citizens «officially» returned and about 518,000 Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Lithuanians were expelled from Poland to the USSR.

When World War II broke out, approximately four million Poles and one million Jews lived in the eastern territories of Poland (Kresy). Five years

<sup>1</sup> On the displacement of Poles from former Polish eastern territories after 1944, in English: J. KOCHANOWSKI, *Gathering Poles into Poland. Forced Migration from Poland's Former Eastern Territories*, in Ph. THER - A. SILJAK (eds), *Redrawing Nations. Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe 1944-1948*, Lanham MD - Boulder CO - New York - Oxford 2001, pp. 135-154; in German: J. KOCHANOWSKI, *Die Aussiedlung der Polen aus der östlichen Woiwodschaften der II. Republik (1944-1946). Der Versuch einer anderen Perspektive*, in «Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte», 3, 1999, pp. 169-197; J. KOCHANOWSKI, *Eine andere Schuldrechnung. Die polnischen Umsiedler und ihr Kampf um Entschädigungen*, in «Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft», 1, 2003, pp. 65-73; M.G. ESCH, «Gesunde Verhältnisse». *Deutsche und polnische Bevölkerungspolitik in Ostmitteleuropa 1939-1950*, Marburg 1998; P. THER, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene. Gesellschaft und Vertriebenenpolitik in der SBZ/DDR und in Polen 1945-1956*, Göttingen 1998; in Polish: J. CZERNIAKIEWICZ, *Repatriacja ludności polskiej z ZSRR 1944-1948*, Warszawa 1987; S. CIESIELSKI (ed) *Przesiedlenie ludności polskiej z Kresów Wschodnich do Polski 1944-1947*, introduction by W. Borodziej, S. Ciesielski, J. Kochanowski, Warszawa 1999; A. PACZOSKA, *Dzieci Jalty: exodus ludności polskiej z Wilenszczyzny w latach 1944-1947*, Toruń 2003; D. SULA, *Działalność przesiedleńczo-repatriacyjna Państwowego Urzędu Repatriacyjnego w latach 1944-1951*, Lublin 2002.

later, in the second half of 1944, when these territories became part of the Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian Soviet Republics, the combined number of Jews and Poles had shrunk to about half of its size before September 1939, and it remained approximately 2,5 million (almost all of them Poles; the Jewish community had been exterminated almost completely). Such heavy losses of Polish lives in Kresy were caused by imprisonment, deportations, and Soviet (1939-1941) and German (1941-1944) terror<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, during the ethnic cleansing which began in 1942 in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, the Ukrainian nationalists killed (by the summer of 1944) approximately 60-80,000 Poles and 300,000 fled to the General Governship<sup>3</sup>. When the Red Army occupied Kresy in 1944 the Poles were deported to Siberia and Central Asia or conscription into the Red Army and the pro-Soviet Polish Army<sup>4</sup>.

As a result of the arrangement made by the Allies in Teheran and Yalta, the Poles who still remained in Kresy now also lived outside the newly created territory of Poland. While the pro-Soviet Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) and the exile government in London (recognized by the Western powers until June 1945) had different opinions about the shape of the new borders, everyone agreed that postwar Poland was to be a single nation-state. This obviously entailed the forced migration of millions of people, including Germans from western and northern Poland and Poles from the former eastern Polish territories.

<sup>2</sup> A. GŁOWACKI, *Sowieci wobec Polaków na Ziemiach Wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej 1939-1941*, Łódź 1998; S. CIESIELSKI - G. HRYSIUK - A. SREBRKOWSKI, *Masowe deportacje radzieckie w okresie II wojny światowej*, Wrocław 1994; S. CIESIELSKI - W. MATERSKI - A. PACZKOWSKI, *Represje sowieckie wobec Polaków i obywateli polskich*, Warszawa 2000; A. PERETIATKOWICZ, *Ludobójstwa i wygnania na kresach: zbiór referatów*, vol. 1, Katowice - Oświęcim 1999; K. JASIEWICZ, *Zagłada polskich Kresów: ziemiaństwo polskie na Kresach Północno - Wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej pod okupacją sowiecką 1939-1941. Studium z dziejów zagłady dawnego narodu politycznego*, Warszawa 1998; J. CZERNIAKIEWICZ, *Przemieszczenia ludności polskiej z terenów przyłączonych do ZSRR po 17 września 1939 roku*, Warszawa 1993; A. MARSZAŁEK (ed), *Położenie ludności polskiej na terytorium ZSRR i wschodnich ziemiach II Rzeczypospolitej w czasie II wojny światowej*, Toruń 1990; M. MIKIETYSKI, *Zagłada ludności żydowskiej Kresów Wschodnich w latach 1941-1944*, in M. PUŁASKI (ed), *Między dwoma totalitaryzmami. Europa środkowa i południowo-wschodnia w latach 1933-1956*, Kraków 1997; K. KERSTEN, *Szacunek strat osobowych w Polsce Wschodniej*, in «Dzieje Najnowsze», 2, 1994, pp. 40-50.

<sup>3</sup> M. TERES, *Ethnic Cleansing of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia 1942-1946*, Toronto 1993; T. PIOTROWSKI (ed), *Genocide and Rescue in Wołyn: Recollections of the Ukrainian Nationalist Ethnic Cleansing Campaign against the Poles during World War II*, Jefferson NC - London 2000; W. SIEMASZKO - E. SIEMASZKO, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na ludności polskiej Wołynia 1939-1945*, vols 1-2, Warszawa 2000.

<sup>4</sup> S. CIESIELSKI - W. MATERSKI - A. PACZKOWSKI, *Represje sowieckie*, pp. 19-24.

In September 1944 the PKWN and the Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Lithuanian Soviet Republics concluded on the «mutual evacuation of citizens»<sup>5</sup>. This means that Poles and Jews had «the right» to leave the three Soviet Republics for Poland and Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Lithuanians could migrate to the Soviet Union. The terminology used to describe the forced migration of Polish citizens in 1944-1946 is still disputed. Instead of terms used in those years («evacuation» or «repatriation») the following terminology is proposed: «displacement», «compulsory displacement», «deportation». In some cases, such as in Ukraine or in the Vilna territory, «expulsion» is also appropriate.

The agreements from September 1944 emphasized that the «evacuation» was to be voluntary. The evacuees theoretically had the right to choose their new places of residence and to receive compensation for property they left behind. Each family was allowed to take a maximum of two tons of luggage. However, many things were left unclear, for example, the criteria for determining Polish or Polish-Jewish nationality. Moreover, the agreements signed in September 1944 did not apply to Poles, who had been deported to Siberia or Kazakstan. A subsequent repatriation agreement signed on July 6, 1945 included them<sup>6</sup>.

The forced migration of Germans and Poles were contingent upon each other: The former had to vacate the land for the latter. Therefore, the first wave of incoming Polish migrants arriving at the end of 1944 and in the beginning of 1945 was comparatively small. Expulsions from the former eastern territories of Poland increased in number in the spring, and even more in the summer and autumn of 1945, when the western territories were opened for new settlement. This increased influx of Poles, in turn, stimulated the expulsion of Germans. In 1944, the «evacuation» involved only Poles from the Ukrainian Soviet Republic (117,212). In 1945 the expulsions swelled to include 723,488 (the majority from Ukraine – 511,877; only 22,058 from the «interior» of the USSR). In 1946 the migrations dwindled again to 644,437 (226,140 from the Central USSR). The «evacuations» from Lithuania, Belorussia, and Ukraine practically ended in mid-1946. In the two subsequent years (1947-1948), only 2,911 persons were «repatriated» from the former eastern territories and 15,215 from Siberia and Central

<sup>5</sup> The agreements of September 9 (with the Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics) and of September 22 (with the Lithuanian Soviet Republic), see: N. GAŚSIOROWSKA-GRABOWSKA - I.A. CHRIENOW (eds), *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich. T. 8, Styczeń 1944 – grudzień 1945*, Warszawa 1974, pp. 221-227.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 500-504.

Asia. In 1944-1948, a total of 1,503,263 previously Polish citizens were «officially» moved<sup>7</sup>. The Polish Annual Statistical Report of 1949 contained a category for forced migrants who had unofficially migrated to Poland (22,815)<sup>8</sup>. The more realistic figure was given by Polish exile historian, Juliusz Siedlecki – about two hundred thousand persons<sup>9</sup>.

Many Poles also initially wanted to remain in their homeland because of deep emotional and traditional attachments<sup>10</sup>. They stayed behind, hoping that eventually there would be further border changes at a future peace conference. Some Poles, particularly the intelligentsia, were committed to fighting the Russification of the eastern territories. A letter from Sambor in Eastern Galicia, written on November 19, 1944, expressed this sentiment: «People ... think they will be better off leaving the Soviet Ukraine for Soviet Poland. To voluntarily renounce the homeland of our forefathers! A good Pole would not do it, so let the bastards go and break their necks. We need no traitors who, by signing the list, certify that Polish land is now part of Soviet Ukraine»<sup>11</sup>. Polish government institutions could only go so far in encouraging people to move. However, most Poles departed of their own accord, as a result of fear or pressure to leave. Pressure played a considerable role in the «evacuation» of Ukrainians from Poland<sup>12</sup>, and of Poles from

<sup>7</sup> *Rocznik statystyczny 1949*, Warszawa 1950, p. 26. Between the fall of 1944 and the end of 1946, 518,219 Ukrainians, Belorussians, and Lithuanians (among them approximately 480,000 Ukrainians) were expelled from Poland to the Soviet Union; *Rocznik statystyczny 1947*, Warszawa 1947, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> *Rocznik Statystyczny 1949*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> J. SIEDLECKI, *Losy Polaków w ZSRR w latach 1939-1986*, London 1988, p. 235. These were, first of all, the former soldiers of the underground Home Army (Armia Krajowa), the refugees from the terror of Ukrainian nationalists from Volhynia and Eastern Galicia or the peasants from the Wilna territory, where the local Lithuanian authorities sabotaged the agreement of «voluntary evacuation».

<sup>10</sup> About the importance of Kresy for Polish culture and history see: K. JASIEWICZ (ed), *Europa NIEprowincjonalna. Przemiany na ziemiach wschodnich dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (Białoruś, Litwa, Łotwa, Ukraina, wschodnie pogranicze III RP)*, Warszawa 1999; J. KOLBUSZEWSKI, *Kresy*, Wrocław 1996; K. HANDKE (ed), *Kresy – pojęcie i rzeczywistość*, Warszawa 1997; B. HADACZEK, *Kresy w literaturze polskiej XX wieku: szkice*, Szczecin 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie (Archive of Contemporary Documents, Warsaw, hereafter AAN), Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego (Polish Committee of National Liberation, hereafter PKWN), I/78, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> E. MISIŁO (ed), *Repatriacja czy deportacja. Przesiedlenie Ukraińców z Polski do USSR 1944-1946, T. 1, Dokumenty 1944-1945*, Warszawa 1996; O. SUBTELNY, *Expulsion, Resettlement, Civil Strife: The Fate of Poland's Ukrainians, 1944-1947*, in PH. THER - A. SILJAK (eds), *Redrawing Nations*, pp. 155-172.

Ukraine, Belorussia, and Lithuania. At times, terror was directly applied, as in the case of the anti-Polish activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. There were also very real threats of imprisonment, deportation to Central Asia or Siberia, compulsory Ukrainization or Lithuanization. A letter mailed in Luck in Volhynia in November 1944 expresses the conditions as perceived by many: «Zosia, you do not even realize what registration is, what kind of pressure there is involved, some people line up for a few days ... The reason for this congestion is you know what. Look, the Commission registers Poles to send them behind the Bug, and the administrators hand out cards to send people to the Donbas [a coal-mining region in eastern Ukraine]»<sup>13</sup>.

Authorities in each republic treated the urban and rural populations differently. Because officials wished to rid the towns of their more educated (and nationally conscious) inhabitants, the displacement of the rural population was often postponed and occasionally even sabotaged (in particular in the Lithuanian and Belorussian Soviet Republics). This was due in part to nationalism, since the larger cities in the former eastern territories were symbols of contention between the Poles, Lithuanians. For example, in Wilno only 2% of the population had been Lithuanian before World War II. The Lithuanisation of Wilno began in the fall of 1939 and was hastily concluded in the first months of 1945. In Wilno the registration of evacuees began on December 28, 1944, and was finished in March 1945. In the smaller towns and villages surrounding Wilno, however, registration was completed as late as February 1945 or never even took place at all. Often registration in rural regions was limited, especially where the national consciousness of the population seemed undeveloped. On the other hand, the inhabitants of towns lived closer to sources of information, registration points, Polish evacuations institutions, and means of transport. They were also more mobile than peasants, who wanted to take their livestock and equipment with them.

In the beginning of September 1945, Stanislaw Grabski, who supervised displacement on behalf of the Presidium of the National Council (Krajowa Rada Narodowa, KRN), stated in a report that Poles were refraining from registration for «evacuation» because «the fate awaiting the evacuees in Poland was uncertain and the conditions of transportation were awful». Grabski reported: «The Plenipotentiary was notified that a train was scheduled for a given day and that he was supposed to get one thousand registered evacuees to the station. The repatriates assembled at the sta-

<sup>13</sup> AAN, PKWN, I/78, p. 15.

tion on open-air platforms. As a rule, they waited for 10 to 15 days for the arrival of the train, unable to cook food, without shelter from rain or wind, and subject to robbery at night»<sup>14</sup>. The difficult conditions and lack of coordination provided many opportunities for corruption. Passengers often had to pay bribes to get on trains and to get trains to depart from each station, especially at the border. The transportation problems were caused by bad organisation, the destruction of railroad tracks, and wartime priorities. For example, in May 1945 Marshal Georgii Zhukov, commanding the Soviet Zone of Occupation in Germany, ordered that all train cars be vacated and sent west. As a result many convoys of evacuees were literally thrown from their trains.

The journeys of the expellees, which often took several weeks proved lethal for many of the Poles. The weather conditions combined with organizational inefficiency had tragic consequences. For example, a convoy containing 961 people traveled the 250 km from Buczacz in Eastern Galicia to Rzeszów between November 19 and December 10, 1945, in twenty-one days. In the time the train was blocked at the new border, four people froze to death. We do not know – and most probably will never know – the entirety of the losses suffered by forced migrants<sup>15</sup>.

The evacuation treaties allowed each family to take two tons of luggage: clothes, footwear, food, household equipment, livestock; professionals like doctors, artists or scientists were permitted to take the tools necessary to practice their professions. This was vastly more than the amount of goods an average German evacuee family was allowed to take with them. Altogether, between 1944 and 1948, Polish expellees took 71,000 horses, 139,000 cows, 35,000 pigs, 50,000 sheep, and 170,000 items of «miscellaneous agricultural equipment»<sup>16</sup>. But reality was slightly different. The decisions of local authorities, informal local arrangements, and local conditions overrode international agreements. Administrations in the individual republics or regions interpreted the provisos of agreements to the detriment of forced

<sup>14</sup> The whole report was published in J. KOCHANOWSKI (ed), *Protokoły posiedzeń Prezydium Krajowej Rady Narodowej 1944-1947*, Warszawa 1995, pp. 273-278.

<sup>15</sup> Early in 1946 Karol Poddebski wrote: «More enterprising people try to travel on Red Army lorries going from Russia to Western countries to collect loot. With the help of vodka it is possible to get on such lorries ... Most people who have the misfortune to rely on official repatriation are forced to wait in transit camps amidst cold, hunger, insects, and diseases for mass transport in cattle trucks. Their misery and suffering are beyond description. The death-rate during transport and their appearance after arrival testify to the conditions»; K. PODDEBSKI, *Behind the Iron Curtain*, London 1946, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> J. CZERNIAKIEWICZ, *Repatriacja*, p. 78.

migrants. The Lithuanians treated all household goods (such as mattresses, for example) as furniture and banned their export. The police confiscated furniture from those who attempted to take it with them.

Along the way, livestock died as a result of fodder shortage or was killed to feed passengers. During the journey through Ukraine, Belorussia, and Lithuania, soldiers of the Red Army or outright bandits attacked the convoys. The forced migrants also had to undergo very rigorous inspections at the border. And even when the trains arrived in Poland, the difficulties were far from over. The Polish administration was incapable of organizing the transports, and food supplies were scarce. Another set of difficulties was created by the actions of Red Army units stationed in Poland. There were many accounts of «confiscations» of goods by Red Army soldiers, such as this one from June 1945: «We were stopped in Choszczno [near to Szczecin]. The Russians authorities inspected us and looked for liquor and other objects. We were searched 7 or 8 times ... They confiscated many goods and food»<sup>17</sup>. The population from the western territories was also frequently robbed and attacked by Polish criminal bands.

Many forced migrants attempted to move to areas as close to the new eastern border as possible, since they seemed less alien than territories farther west. However, in 1945 the main goal of the Polish government was the prompt colonization of the western territories, even at the cost of chaos and losses. Particularly in 1945, no arrangements were made for the expellees after they had arrived in the western territories. Usually the repatriates were «unloaded» at stations or in the fields. The reports below describe the situation in Lower Silesia. Nevertheless, the situation in Pomerania, the Oder region, and Masuria was similar. It should be borne in mind, however, that all such reports focused on negative issues and did not necessarily describe the ordinary course of events.: «As the repatriates come with their property, furniture, and livestock, ... they camp close to the stations, sometimes between railway tracks, they build huts from planks, bags, pieces of tar (roofing) paper etc. And they live in those slums ... People are dirty, they sleep in their clothes ... Doctors called to examine the repatriates found many skin diseases, including furuncles, warts, abscesses, scabies, as well as frequent stomach and intestinal diseases among children»<sup>18</sup>. And one month later a similar report from Lower Silesia stated: «The camps of the

<sup>17</sup> AAN, Generalny Pełnomocnik Rządu ds. Repatriacji Ludności Polskiej [The Chief Plenipotentiary of the Government for Repatriation of Polish Citizens], 46, p. 422.

<sup>18</sup> AAN, Państwowy Urząd Repatriacyjny [State Office for Repatriation], X/16, p. 9 (the entire document is published in S. CIESIELSKI [ed], *Przesiedlenie*, pp. 232-234).

repatriates are a picture of grief and misery. Food is generally unavailable, and they are plagued by illnesses. Their livestock shares the same fate. Thousands of flies swarm on the leftovers, the nearby heaps of manure, and the livestock – a macabre picture. The Soviets remove the repatriate families who were not allowed to settle in certain villages and give the empty flats back to Germans»<sup>19</sup>. Some Poles bitterly complained that the Soviets preferred the Germans, temporarily halting the expulsion of Germans from certain areas, and prevented Poles from settling there.

The chaos before, during, and after the move West also caused the impoverishment of many forced migrants. Each migrant who had left property behind in the eastern territories was to be compensated for the value of the property in his new area of residence. This provision in the evacuation treaty, however, only referred to the property for which migrants held rightful proof of ownership, such as titles, court deeds, or tax returns. But many forced migrants did not possess any such proof. The papers were very often destroyed during the war. Some of migrants had left their homes in the East in haste, turmoil, or even under pressure or terror. The consequence of the strict compensation regulations was that many forced migrants did not receive anything at all. And bribery or corruption was often the only means for being allotted the promised farms or houses.

When the Polish expellees arrived in their new places of residence, they were perceived – first of all in so-called «old Poland», in the pre- 1939 borders – as a foreign element and as competitors for scarce resources, such as food or previously German or Ukrainian farms. Letters sent from Polish expellees to relatives who had remained in the previously eastern territories of Poland reflected feelings of alienation. «Dear!» one letter began, «the people here are very strange and mean, they do not think that the people from Volhynia are Poles»<sup>20</sup>.

Another reason for the hostility facing the newly arrived repatriates in the western territories was the desire of the Polish Workers' Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza, PPR) to build a «clientele» system by apportioning the land expropriated from Germans. By distributing previously German property to local followers, the Communists built a system of patronage, to the disadvantage of repatriates. One official of the State Office of Repatriation complained about the treatment of repatriates in the province of Warsaw:

<sup>19</sup> AAN, Ministerstwo Informacji i Propagandy [Ministry for Information and Propaganda], 785, pp. 24-26.

<sup>20</sup> AAN, PKWN, I/78, p. 5.

«The settlement of a repatriate is difficult, since ... the PPR prohibits settlements in the countryside and threatens to remove all settlers by force. All previously German farms are taken up by trustees, who, apparently, deserve special compensation from the state. It is impossible to remove these trustees. The secretary of the PPR said that he will respect orders of political parties and nobody else's»<sup>21</sup>. In the town of Gostynin, one hundred kilometer from Warsaw, a report dated August 1945 declared: «Although there is a large number of farms previously owned by Germans (as many as 1242), the Land Office does not permit any settlements. Only 14 families have been allocated new farms so far». A similar situation prevailed in Sochaczew, 40 km from Warsaw, in July 1945: «There are 1,123 farms, and only 311 of them have been given to repatriates»<sup>22</sup>. Finally, on May 1, 1946, the Chief Plenipotentiary for the Evacuation, Władysław Wolski, decided that the settlement of expellees should be halted in the provinces of «old Poland».

The drama of repatriation continued long after the expellees had been settled on Polish territory. It took years for the new migrants to fully integrate with the indigenous Polish population and with the new places. But this is a topic for other article.

<sup>21</sup> Archiwum Państwowe m. st. Warszawy [State Archive of the Capital City Warsaw], Państwowy Urząd Repatriacyjny, 495, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 6, 8-9.

