

Means, Ends, and Perpetrators: Connections Between the Holocaust and the Genocide of Ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Galicia

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the connections between the Holocaust and the massacre of ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Galicia during World War Two. It argues that the latter is a genocide and that both acts share similar methods, motivations, and perpetrators. The limited English language scholarship on the massacre of ethnic Poles typically addresses it in the context of Polish or Ukrainian national history rather than that of comparative genocide. I consulted an interview with a Holocaust survivor and a collection of primary sources translated by Dr. Tadeusz Piotrowski. The connections between these acts of mass killing weaken the claim that the Holocaust was an exceptional act, call for further study of smaller acts of mass killing, and emphasize the moral ambiguity of the sovereignty of nation-states.

Key Words: Holocaust, Genocide, Massacre of Poles in Volhynia and Galicia, Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, World War II in Ukraine.

Between the years of 1941 and 1945, the vast majority of the Jews in Volhynia were killed.³⁰ They were targeted for destruction by a racially motivated political organization that saw their continued existence as incompatible with national greatness. Between 1943 and 1945, the Poles of Volhynia and Galicia were likewise targeted for destruction by a racially motivated political organization that saw their continued existence as incompatible with national greatness. The organization in the former case was Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Party, while in the latter it was Stepan Bandera’s Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Both instances of mass killing took place during the same time period and within the same region, but these are not their only points of crossover. The murder of Jews in Volhynia and Galicia was organized by Germans, but many of the men who personally committed these murders were Ukrainian nationalists affiliated with the OUN. In this paper, I will argue that the massacre of ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Galicia was an act of genocide that was inextricably linked with the Holocaust by the Ukrainian nationalists who perpetrated it, their motivations for doing so, and the brutal methods they used.³²

³⁰ The people who occupied this region of Europe spoke different languages, practiced different religions, and professed different national identities. What place names and transliterations one uses when writing about this region is a matter of controversy. I will use well-established English place names where they exist, Volhynia and Galicia being two such place names. Otherwise, I will use the place names and transliterations as they appear in the sources I reference.

³¹ Snyder, Timothy. *The Shoah in Ukraine*. Edited by Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower. Indiana University Press, 2008, 97.

³² How members of various national groups in this region and time are referred to is another matter of controversy. These people were all Polish citizens, given that the area before the war had been part of the Polish state, and in this sense “Pole” could refer to any of them. “Non-Jewish Poles” is another term which in this context lacks specificity, as it fails to distinguish between Polish speakers who practiced Catholicism and Ukrainian speakers who identified either with Orthodoxy or with the Uniate church. Identifying groups by their primary language is equally problematic. The Holocaust Survivor Joseph Grossman, whose testimony I reference in this paper, grew up primarily speaking Yiddish, but during his years of hiding spoke almost exclusively in Ukrainian. “Ethnic Pole” is a

The decision to classify a particular instance of mass killing as a genocide is a perennial matter of controversy. Instructive is the fact that the US government did not recognize the Armenian genocide, the instance of mass killing which inspired Raphael Lemkin to invent the term genocide, as a genocide until 2021.³³ ³⁴ Contemporary political realities often influence whether or not a particular instance of mass killing is widely referred to as a genocide. This is the case with the massacre of ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Galicia. Contemporary Poland and Ukraine are close allies, a relationship largely motivated by a mutual fear of Vladimir Putin’s Russia. The appetite to dig up such a painful memory between these two nations has been understandably limited. For all that it may be politically inconvenient to acknowledge in the present environment, I argue that the massacre of ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Galicia was a genocide.

According to the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, key to distinguishing between an act of genocide and other acts of mass killing is the element of intent, specifically, the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.”³⁵ The leadership of the OUN intended not merely to drive out the Poles who resided within the borders of a future independent Ukraine, but to destroy them. A report from the wartime Polish underground quotes a UPA³⁶ leader as saying that “when it comes to the Polish question, this is not a military but a minority question. We will solve it as Hitler solved the Jewish question.”³⁷ A secret directive issued by UPA commander Roman Dmytro Klachkivskiyi (also known by the *nom de guerre* “Klym Savur”) reads: “We should undertake the great action of the liquidation of the Polish element. We should take advantage of the occasion, before the Germans withdraw, to liquidate the entire Polish population from 16 to 60.”³⁸ Though the directive lists an age range, the massacres of Poles targeted those of all ages, and the order was interpreted by local OUN/UPA leaders as calling for the total destruction of ethnic Poles in their respective localities. Court testimony from the trial of Battalion Leader Stepan Koval confirms that these orders were interpreted in this fashion: “In the summer of 1943, in keeping with the orders of the commander of UPA ‘Pivnych’ ‘Klym Savur,’ I conducted an operation of annihilation against the Polish people in the Rovne region. The UPA detachment under my command destroyed

rightly problematized phrase in a part of the world devastated by violence motivated by ethnic nationalism, but it conveys the appropriate level of specificity for the purpose of this paper.

³³ “Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day.” The White House. The United States Government, April 24, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/24/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-armenian-remembrance-day/>.

³⁴ “Coining a Word and Championing a Cause: The Story of Raphael Lemkin.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed April 30, 2022. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/coin-ing-a-word-and-championing-a-cause-the-story-of-raphael-lemkin>.

³⁵ “Genocide.” United Nations. United Nations. Accessed April 30, 2022. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>.

³⁶ An acronym for the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, a paramilitary organization under the command of the OUN. In an additional complication, the OUN split into two factions called the OUN-B and OUN-M, but by the time of the massacres targeting ethnic Poles had reunited under the leadership of Stepan Bandera, whose last name is what the “B” in OUN-B refers to.

³⁷ Rossoliński-Liebe Grzegorz. *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist: Fascism, Genocide, and Cult*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2014, 266.

³⁸ Piotrowski, Tadeusz. *Genocide and Rescue in Wołyń: Recollections of the Ukrainian Nationalist Ethnic Cleansing Campaign Against the Poles During World War II*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008, 180.

the villages of Rafalowka and Huta Stepanska inhabited by Polish people.”³⁹ Eyewitness testimony from Polish survivors confirms the eliminationist nature of the massacres. Aleksandra Glowinska, aged 7 at the time, recalled that she along with her entire family were shot by Ukrainian nationalists.⁴⁰ Aleksandra was the only survivor. These were premeditated acts of mass murder explicitly intended to bring about the physical annihilation of the ethnic Poles of Volhynia and Galicia. Genocide is the only term that fully expresses the nature of these crimes.

It is no coincidence that Ukrainian nationalists committed a genocide in the same territory where the Nazis organized and carried out the Holocaust. To set the stage for the ways in which both genocides were carried out, the progression of the war in this area must be clarified. Galicia and Volhynia experienced what historian Timothy Snyder terms the triple occupation. That is, they were first invaded by the Soviet Union in 1939, then by Germany in 1941, then again by the Soviet Union in 1944.⁴¹ The triple occupation created a uniquely destabilizing dynamic in which no ethnic group felt secure. In Snyder’s estimation, it is this dynamic that accounts for the ease with which otherwise ordinary people were convinced to participate in brutal acts of mass murder.

Particularly with the massacre of ethnic Poles, but also to a lesser extent during the Holocaust, the brutality and sadism of Ukrainian nationalist perpetrators appear again and again in eyewitness accounts of the massacres.⁴² Holocaust survivor Joseph Grossman, several months after witnessing the aforementioned destruction of the Polish village Huta Stepanska, reported having been beaten nearly to death by a group of *banderivtsi*.⁴³ Ironically, he was then rescued by an older Ukrainian couple whose son was with the *banderivtsi*.⁴⁴ A group of *banderivtsi* also came to live with the couple, and kept Grossman as their prisoner for nine months, during which time they taught him to disarm unexploded ordinance and remove explosive material for later use. Grossman related that he does not know why the *banderivtsi* kept him alive, and that they killed every other Jew they came across.⁴⁵ UPA members and their local collaborators often used axes, sickles, and pitchforks to liquidate Polish villages in addition to the usual method of mass shooting. In one example illustrative of the brutality that characterizes these killings, a group of UPA partisans attacked the village of Kolonia Grada, in which all but two families had managed to escape prior to their arrival. “The partisans killed all the members of these two families, cut open the belly of a pregnant woman, took the fetus and innards from her, and hung them on a bush.”⁴⁶ By the time they embarked on their liquidation of ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Galicia, the members of the OUN/UPA were seasoned killers. Perhaps, this level of brutality can be accounted for as a natural escalation from a group of men who had spent years occupied with genocidal violence.

³⁹ Piotrowski, Tadeusz. *Genocide and Rescue in Wolyń*, 188.

⁴⁰ Piotrowski, Tadeusz. *Genocide and Rescue in Wolyń*, 39.

⁴¹ Snyder, Timothy. “The Causes of Ukrainian-Polish Ethnic Cleansing 1943.” *Past & Present*, no. 179 (2003): 197–234. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600827>, 198.

⁴² Piotrowski, Tadeusz. *Genocide and Rescue in Wolyń*, 20.

⁴³ This term appears often in the primary sources in reference to Ukrainian nationalist partisans. The term refers to the OUN leader Stepan Bandera.

⁴⁴ Grossman, Joseph. Interview 40248. Interview by Dale Daniels. *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, February 4, 1998. Accessed April 7, 2022. <https://vha.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=43415&returnIndex=0>, Segment 26.

⁴⁵ Grossman, Joseph. Interview 40248, Segment 18.

⁴⁶ Rossoliński-Liebe Grzegorz. *Stepan Bandera*, 268.

The collaboration with Nazi Germany by OUN/UPA members in both the invasion of Volhynia and Galicia and the Holocaust in Volhynia and Galicia is the most direct connection between both genocides. Even before the onset of war, the OUN collaborated with the German Abwehr.⁴⁷ In preparation for the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Abwehr organized two battalions comprised of OUN members named Nachtigall and Roland. The OUN was also heavily involved in the recruitment of men for the Ukrainian Police, an arm of the occupation structure.⁴⁸ An analysis of 118 biographies of OUN and UPA leaders found that 46 percent of them had received some form of training from German authorities as part of either the Ukrainian Police, Schutzmannschaft Battalion 201, the Waffen SS Galizien division, or in German-sponsored military or intelligence schools.⁴⁹ German-Polish historian Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe outlines the extent of OUN participation in anti-Jewish violence. “The OUN-B organized a militia, which both collaborated with the Germans and killed Jews independently. It also incited the local population to anti-Jewish violence, by spreading antisemitic propaganda and advocating, together with the Germans, revenge on the Jews for the NKVD murders.”⁵⁰ These members of the OUN/UPA could not have been better prepared to organize and perpetrate a genocide of their own.

The following UPA field report provides striking evidence of similarity between the methods used to carry out the Holocaust in this region and the methods used to carry out the genocide of ethnic Poles:

All the [Ukrainian] residents with their axes and pitchforks from the surrounding territories were brought to the village of Mosur where *Drukha* [leader] Zukh explain to them that, under the leadership of his armed unit, they were to go to the village of Ziemlica in order to settle accounts with the Poles and demanded they show no mercy to anyone they find there. The village was surrounded at night; at dawn, the residents were gathered at the center of the village. The elderly, the children, and the ill who could not walk on their own – these they killed on the spot and threw them into a well. Those gathered in the center of the village were made to dig their own graves. They killed them by hitting in the head with an axe. Those who attempted to flee were shot. All the residents of Ziemlica were liquidated; their possessions were taken for the need of the UPA; the buildings were burned.⁵¹

The similarity between this description of a massacre and the *Aktionen* of the Einsatzgruppen as described in Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men* are unmistakable⁵². In both cases, those targeted for mass killing were gathered up from the village, made to dig their own graves, then

⁴⁷ Rossoliński-Liebe Grzegorz. *Stepan Bandera*, 74.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 190.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 263.

⁵⁰As the Soviets retreated in 1941, local branches of the NKVD executed their prisoners rather than allow them to fall into German hands. As in all branches of the Soviet government at this time, there would have been Jews among NKVD personnel, a fact which would have been known by locals. The spectacle of the murdered prisoners provided a ready means of propagating the stereotype of “Judeo-Bolshevism.” Ibid, 236.

⁵¹ Piotrowski, Tadeusz. *Genocide and Rescue in Wołyń*, 181.

⁵² Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

killed in front of them, with the old and infirm killed where they were found. In this field report, the connection between the OUN’s anti-Polish genocide and their role in the Holocaust is made plain as day.

Finally, a note on sources. The residents of these villages were, for the most part, illiterate. Holocaust survivor Joseph Grossman, a native of the village of Stepan in Volhynia, described looking forward to the prospect of receiving schooling as his primary reaction to the Soviet invasion.⁵³ Consequently, there is a dearth of written primary sources on this topic at least from the perspective of those targeted for death and from local collaborators. Documents from the German military, from the wartime Polish underground, and from the OUN/UPA themselves do provide valuable information, but without postwar testimony from survivors, a great deal of information is inaccessible. Though the reliability of postwar testimony inevitably suffers from the fragility of human memory, it should not be discounted by historians, especially in cases such as this where contemporaneous written sources are in extremely short supply.

The Holocaust and the massacre of ethnic Poles in Volhynia and Galicia are two genocides closely linked by a variety of factors. They took place in overlapping time periods, often in the same villages, and were enacted by overlapping perpetrators who shared similar motivations. They were both the design of racially motivated ethnic nationalists who sought to create racially pure space. Though the genocide against ethnic Poles was by far the smaller of the two events, it too deserves to be recognized as a genocide.

This conclusion has several vital ramifications. It invites closer scrutiny to acts of mass killing similar in kind to larger ones like the Holocaust or the Armenian genocide, but smaller in scale. It calls into question the exceptional nature of the Holocaust, suggesting that eliminationist genocide rather than being the result of features unique to the Nazi party or the German people is instead a broadly generalizable phenomenon. Finally, it calls into question the moral righteousness of the principle of the sovereignty of nation-states. For as much as nationalists of all stripes would have it believed that national borders are ancient, that one people has an obvious and unique right to a specific swath of land, states characterized by ethnic homogeneity have only become a feature of the Eastern European landscape in the 20th century, a reality which was crafted through brutal acts of mass killing. Today, Ukraine’s western regions are those in which Ukrainian nationalism has its strongest foundation, standing in contrast to its eastern regions devastated by a war fought over competing ethnic and national loyalties. From this perspective, Lviv, the former capital of Galicia, is perhaps the most Ukrainian of Ukrainian cities. Through a desire to be sympathetic to the victims of a war of aggression, Western commentators now commonly repeat the historical claims expounded by Ukrainian nationalists, that Ukraine is an ancient nation with a sacred right to all the land encompassed by its pre-2014 borders. What must not be forgotten is the modern nature of the nation-state, and the brutal means by which nation-states were created. This does not imply that all nationalist claims about history should be rejected out of hand, rather, that such claims must always be approached with careful scrutiny.

⁵³ Grossman, Joseph. Interview 40248, Segment 7.

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