



**Timothy Snyder, “To Resolve the Ukrainian Problem Once and for All’: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ukrainians in Poland, 1943-1947”, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Volume 1, Issue 2 (Spring 1999): 86-120.**

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One of the greatest obstacles to understanding the history of Galicia during and after the Second World War has been that the memory of the events themselves has been constructed ethnically-- which is to say, each ethnic group has recorded their own versions of the tragic devastation of that era. The postwar phenomena of diasporas and refugee cultures have further splintered memories and perspectives, and subsequently channeled them through the prisms of the Cold War, East and West.

Polish historian Piotr Wrobel has used the phrase “double memory” to identify the phenomenon of distinct and often contradictory accounts of divergent ethnic groups who share the same history. How, for instance, is one to reconcile the memories of Poles and Jews when remembering wartime Poland? Wringing his hands at the seemingly irreconcilable divergencies between ethnically defined accounts of shared events, Wrobel recently wrote with despair: “Are we destined to remain forever entombed within these two diametrically opposed visions of the Second World War? Each [ethnic memory] is so different from the other that at times it is difficult to believe that they portray the same events.”[1]

The task of reconciliation of these disparate memories is not only daunting, but in fact guarantees that the historian’s motives will be impugned no matter how diligent the research, or how conscientious his or her efforts to be fair. And when we refocus our attention to multiethnic zones like Galicia, the struggle for totality becomes even more daunting, as we move from “double memory” to ethnically distinct multiple memories of shared events.

Timothy Snyder’s groundbreaking article on ethnic cleansing in southeastern Poland during and after World War II is a brilliant and courageous contribution, one which shows the ways in which meticulous archival research can overcome the limits of historical memory. It will emerge as an instant classic among case studies documenting in detail the process of escalation of genocidal warfare in the twentieth century. In this era when post-Soviet Poland and Ukraine are both dominated by internal nationalist efforts to reclaim their own histories, Snyder’s work is an especially important corrective for what have generally been chauvinistic and partial accounts. Needless to say, such an inevitably unpopular reading of the history of ethnic cleansing in Poland and Ukraine poses considerable personal and professional dangers to the author, which makes it especially important that we scholars work to integrate Snyder’s discoveries into our own understanding of the immediate postwar and early Cold War eras.

Nowhere is the gulf that separates ethnic memories wider than in the study of inter-ethnic violence. As Snyder wrote: “Ethnic cleansing always involves mutual claims, enabling each side

to present itself as the innocent defender of legitimate interests and its opponents as savage nationalists.” For Western scholars who do not specialize in the history of ethnic violence, it may be difficult to understand the degree to which genocide is a hate-crime perpetrated not against random strangers, but more often than not targeting personal contacts. Jan Gross captured the scene best in these observations of multi-ethnic Galicia just prior to World War II:

“In these easternmost hinterlands of interwar Europe each hamlet or village was to a large degree an isolated universe. As often happens in such an environment, intense personal hatreds were harbored, and an ethnic and religious component gave them the potential to engulf entire communities. Yet, much as the violence represented an explosion of combined ethnic, religious, and nationalist conflict, I am nevertheless struck by its intimacy. More often than not, victims and executioners knew each other personally. Even after several years, survivors could still name names. Definitely, people took this opportunity to get even for personal injuries in the past.”[2]

Getting “even for personal injuries in the past.” It is precisely this enmity-reprisal cycle that stands at the core of genocide. And Galicia was no exception. Angry over perceived past Polish wrongs and eager in the wake of the German defeat at Stalingrad to capitalize on the German occupation to solidify postwar Ukrainian claims in Galicia, Ukrainian nationalist units launched in March 1943 a brutal and violent ethnic cleansing campaign, murdering tens of thousands of Polish men, women, and children, destroying Polish settlements, seizing Polish lands and redistributing them among their own. The goal was to utilize terror as a weapon to drive out the hundreds of thousands of ethnic Poles who remained in Ukraine.

In Snyder’s scenario, the slaughter of ethnic Poles in Volhynia drove Polish reprisals against ethnic Ukrainians in Poland. By the end of 1944, there were hundreds of thousands of dead, hundreds of destroyed settlements--products of ethnic violence which markedly expanded the casualties of the war in the east. The seeming inability of ethnic Poles and ethnic Ukrainians to live together peacefully drove state policy after the war. By autumn 1944, Stalin had ordered the forced deportation of all ethnic Poles from western Ukraine, in a formal trade for all ethnic Ukrainians from southeastern Poland.

And yet, as Snyder argues so effectively, the Polish decision “to resolve the Ukrainian question once and for all” in March 1947 went considerably beyond nationalist-inspired vigilantism. And herein lies the most important part of Snyder’s meticulously documented discoveries in Polish archives. The ethnic deportations policy had by autumn 1945 ended the worst era of ethnic cleansing in the Ukrainian-Polish civil war for Galicia. Nonetheless, it was precisely the “anti-Polish ethnic Ukrainian” element in Poland who would be punished for the assassination of Polish Deputy Defense Minister Karol Swirczewski on 28 March 1947, probably by the Ukrainian Insurrection Army.

The Polish Politburo moved immediately to resettle forcibly all ethnic Ukrainians remaining in southeastern Poland (estimates ranged from 74,000 to 200,000). By 11 April 1947, Lieutenant Colonel Waclaw Kossowski had developed a “definitive policy recommendation” for “the complete extermination of the remnants of the Ukrainian population in the southeastern border region of Poland.” The ethnic cleansing campaign in Poland had escalated from popular reprisals to state-sponsored terror. Yet the state apparatus deliberately used the images of the Ukrainian

terror in Volhynia in 1943 to fuse state policy with Polish self-defense in the minds of Polish citizens.

### *Critique*

For the purposes of discussion of this excellent piece of research, I would like to focus on two main issues.

#### (1) Chronology

Somewhat arbitrarily [and perhaps fairly, give his purposes], Snyder chose to begin his record of the process of ethnic cleansing in Galicia with the March 1943 Ukrainian attacks on ethnic Poles in Volhynia. In a footnote, he mentions that there were tensions in the first Soviet occupation in September 1939--and refers readers to Jan Gross's important study.

Needless to say, in Ukrainian accounts, the foundations of the wartime enmity began to form years before. Ukrainian anti-Polish feelings did not develop in a vacuum, and no account of the process of escalation towards ethnic cleansing is complete without paying close attention to the interwar period, when Galicia was stripped from a defeated and broken Austro-Hungarian empire and awarded to Poland, herself newly independent from Russia.

Alexander Motyl has described the roots of Ukrainian violent opposition to Polish rule. [3] But the brutality of ethnic Poles towards ethnic Ukrainians is rarely discussed outside of tendentious nationalist accounts. The most widespread and intense violence took place in the anti-Ukrainian pogroms of 1934-1938. For this, alas, we do not need to rely on Polish or Ukrainian accounts alone. Monsignor Dr. Philippe Cortesi, the Papal Nuncio in Warsaw, condemned the violence in a private letter to the Polish Minister of Internal Affairs regarding just one such event of 2-3 November 1938. Polish members of the 'En-De' ('National Democracy', a militant Polish patriotic-nationalist organization) attacked Ukrainian students in their dormitories in Warsaw, unhindered by Polish police who stood by watching the brutal violence, and who waited until the end of the riots to arrest Ukrainian students for disturbing the peace. Several Ukrainian institutes were attacked, with the subsequent "destruction of everything that falls into the hands of the aggressors." A Ukrainian shop was destroyed when Polish "nationalist fanatics" set fire to the interior and then hurled a screaming young Ukrainian woman into the flames. The worst violence occurred at the Ukrainian Catholic seminary, located a mere 200 meters from the central office of the Polish state police. In the Polish crowd's iconoclastic rage, irreparable damage was done to the interior of the Ukrainian church, where icons were defiled and a priceless portrait of St. Peter destroyed. The seminary was ravaged as the angry Polish crowd systematically broke apart furniture and hurled the pieces through broken windows to the streets below. In all, at least eight Ukrainians were hospitalized with serious injuries, and two were killed. Consistent with its usual policy, the official Polish press remained mysteriously silent about such incidents. And wherever possible, the Polish police confiscated and suppressed Ukrainian underground newspapers and publications where the incidents were discussed.

The wider picture of the history of Polish-Ukrainian ethnic conflict in Galicia enables us to avoid putting too much emphasis on isolated events (like the Volhynia terror of 1943 and the Polish

terror of 1947), and instead to see how both ethnic groups capitalized on European geopolitics of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as a succession of foreign occupation regimes, to extend their influence in Galicia. The more I study Galicia, the more I come to the conclusion that \*the defining issue\* was not Soviet or German occupation and war, but rather the civil war between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Poles. In this scenario, the ethnic cleansing in the region was not solely the product of German occupation (a traditional fiction), nor merely grounded in some deep-rooted popular anti-Semitism (a regionally adjusted Goldhagen thesis), but was also driven by ethnic Ukrainian versus Polish visions of the fate of postwar Galicia. Ethnic cleansing was one among a number of weapons in the arsenals of all who fought over control of the region, and no principal player (other than the Jews) could resist the temptation of making easy gains through ethnic-based operations and policies.

(2) I found Snyder's assertion of the amelioration of Ukrainian nationalist terror after 1943 to be unconvincing. Snyder wrote: after 1943, "the UPA did continue to kill Polish civilians and to destroy Polish property. But this was now part of a more or less proportional response to attacks by Poles." Unfortunately, ethnic cleansing is not so rational and controlled as this assertion suggests. While it is true that the worst Ukrainian violence (speaking numerically) occurred in Volhynia in 1943, serious ethnic cleansing operations continued well into 1945 in Ukraine, and several years more in Poland. Typical is this case from Soviet secret police (NKVD) files in February 1945, one of hundreds of similar reports I have uncovered in my own research in Russia and Ukraine: the Ukrainian nationalist security (SB) unit OREST (based in Krasnoiansk raion, Lviv) executed all six members of the Polish family Kordowski, based in village Novosilki. Eleven armed ethnic Ukrainian men entered the cottage of Kordowski, where they conducted a search. After the search, five of six members of the family--including Kordowski's wife--were herded into a room and shot, as Kordowski looked on. Then Kordowski was led on foot to a nearby tree, where he was hanged to death, then his corpse desecrated.

### *Conclusion*

One of the greatest challenges for teaching students about the history of ethnic cleansing is, in my experience at least, the tendency of students to look for clear perpetrators and victims, a simple set of black-and-white categories. The real horror, however, comes not from the ethnically defined bogeymen of traditional accounts, not from unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by inhuman monsters, but from the discovery that our own fathers, grandfathers, and other loved ones are also capable of perpetrating such ghastly evil. The main contribution of Holocaust studies--especially the work of Hannah Arendt and Christopher Browning--has been the discovery that ordinary men, in the right conditions, can be transformed into extraordinary and violent killers.

In his superb analysis of the complexity of the ethnic cleansing campaigns in Ukraine in 1943 and Poland in 1947, Snyder has offered a far more sensitive and nuanced version than the respective victimologies served up by nationalist historians and associated diasporas. I highly recommend Snyder's article be read side-by-side with an extraordinary memoir which was published in late 1999. Waldemar Lotnik was a young ethnic Pole in Volhynia who chronicles with amazing clarity and insight his flight from Ukrainian terror in 1943, and his return for vengeance as a soldier in a Polish nationalist partisan unit in 1944-1945. Though he was a Polish

partisan, Lotnik made it clear that atrocities could be attributed equally to both sides, ethnic Ukrainian and ethnic Polish:

“The ethnic Ukrainians responded by wiping out an entire Polish colony, setting fire to the houses, killing those inhabitants unable to flee and raping the women who fell into their hands, no matter how old or young. This had been the pattern of their behaviour east of the Bug [River], where tens of thousands of Poles had been either expelled or murdered. We retaliated by attacking an even bigger Ukrainian village and . . . killed women and children. Some of [our men] were so filled with hatred after losing whole generations of their family in the Ukrainian attacks that they swore they would take an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. . . . This was how the fighting escalated. Each time more people were killed, more houses burnt, more women raped.”[4]

The real tragedy, as Tim Snyder has shown so remarkably well, is that rather than putting a stop to such senseless carnage, the early postwar Polish regime instead made ethnic cleansing a central part of its Ukrainian policy.

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Notes:

1. Piotr Wrobel, “Double Memory: Poles and Jews After the Holocaust,” *East European Politics and Societies*\_ Volume 11, Number 3 (Fall 1997), p. 567.
2. Jan Tomasz Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*\_ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 43.
3. Alexander J. Motyl, *The Turn to the Right: The Ideological Origins and Development of Ukrainian Nationalism, 1919-1929*\_ (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1980); and “Ukrainian Nationalist Political Violence in Inter-War Poland,” *East European Quarterly*\_ XIX (March, 1985): 45-55.
4. Waldemar Lotnik, *Nine Lives: Ethnic Conflict in the Polish-Ukrainian Borderlands*\_ (London: Serif, 1999), pp. 66-67.

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