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The 70th Anniversary of the Volyn Massacre: Lack of Understanding in Ukraine

Piotr Kościński, Ievgen Vorobiov

Commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the Volyn massacre caused a mixed reaction in Ukraine. The nationalists criticised it, the opposition looked on with silence, while the ruling party tried to appropriate it for their own political goals. The only ones to speak up for the cause of Polish–Ukrainian reconciliation were representatives of the churches and the intelligentsia. Poland should strive to achieve mutual understanding and reconciliation not only on the political and intergovernmental levels but also between the societies, and foremost with the society of Western Ukraine: in Volyn and Eastern Galicia.

Perceptions of the Volyn Massacre in Ukraine. Commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the tragic events of 1943–1944 in Volyn illustrated how strikingly different their perceptions are in Poland and in Ukraine. As a result, Ukrainian society does not understand the discussions between Polish politicians over the use of the word “genocide” to denote the deeds of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), to put it mildly. This situation undermines the efforts undertaken by some Polish politicians as well as clerics and intellectuals in both countries.

According to the Polish side, the UPA carried out an armed operation intended for the physical elimination of Poles living in Volyn, and as a result, the death of about 60,000 people of Polish nationality. Overall, Polish historians assess the overall number of victims on the Polish side and in Eastern Galicia (today, the Lviv-Ternopil-Ivano-Frankivsk region), at 100,000 to 130,000.

Ukrainian historians perceive the Volyn massacre differently. They define it as a Polish-Ukrainian war with civilian casualties on both sides. Sometimes, Soviet guerrillas disguised as UPA soldiers are pointed out as the perpetrators: they would attack Polish villages to trigger tensions between Poles and Ukrainians. At times, Nazi Germans are mentioned as the ones interested in creating conflicts between the two peoples.

According to the Ukrainian historians’ estimates, there were far fewer Polish victims than claimed by the Polish side, up to 35,000 people in Volyn and several thousand in Galicia. The number of Ukrainian victims is considered to be higher than the 10,000 to 15,000 estimated by some Polish historians. The perception of the Volyn massacre differs in Ukraine also depending on the territorial and political viewpoint. The stance described above is accepted mostly in Western Ukraine (where UPA guerrillas are considered heroes) and to a certain extent in the centre of the country. However, in the east, where the Soviet tradition of commemorating the struggle of the Red Army during the Second World War is still alive, the Volyn drama is either unknown or the UPA are perceived negatively as Nazi collaborators that fought against the “Soviet motherland.” Such a vision is presented by the constituencies of the ruling Party of Regions and the communists.

The Cautious Opposition. Two major opposition factions of the Ukrainian parliament have either assumed a moderate attitude in commenting on the issue or avoided doing so altogether. An official statement by Yulia Tymoshenko’s Batkivshchyna party of 5 July termed the Volyn massacre a “fratricide between Poles and Ukrainians” and called on parties and organisations in Ukraine and Poland to refrain from “speculating” on this issue and “stirring emotions.” Apart from a few (non-influential) individual politicians, Vitali Klitschko’s Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (UDAR) steered clear of any statements on the issue, thus upholding the party’s tendency to avoid commenting on any domestically divisive historical problems.

Critical Nationalists. As a nationalist party that derived substantial support from the Western regions of Ukraine in the 2012 parliamentary election, Svoboda pursued a “rejectionist” discourse with regard to the Polish estimates of the Volyn issue. Hence, the leader of the Svoboda regional chapter in Volyn claimed that a planned visit by Poland’s president to Lutsk would be “undesirable” and “provocative” as it would “humiliate Ukrainians who fought for independence on their own land.” Despite their formal declarations of commitment to “neighbourly relations with Poland,” Svoboda’s members claim that the Volyn massacre should be viewed in the context of Polish “atrocities against Ukrainians” and they demand an apology first from the Polish side.

These views have not subsided in the wake of President Bronisław Komorowski’s visit to Lutsk. For instance, Anatoliy Vitiv, a Svoboda MP representing the Volyn region, claimed that the president failed to adhere to his “pilgrim” status and accused him of misrepresenting historical events. The situation was further complicated by an assault on the president during the visit. After a young man smashed an egg on the president’s shoulder, mass media churned out suspicions that he was a Svoboda activist. The man most likely is a member of an “anti-fascist” group from Eastern Ukraine.

Party of Regions and Communists. The ruling party has managed to use the Volyn issue to highlight their previous agenda of “fighting neo-fascism in Ukraine,” declared in May 2013 to overshadow political protests held by the Ukrainian opposition and largely regarded as a political tool.

On 5 July, 148 members of Verkhovna Rada, who represented the ruling Party of Regions and the Communist Party, have signed a statement to call on the Polish Sejm to “declare the Volyn massacre by the OUN-UPA a genocide against the Polish population” and to “condemn the criminal deeds of Ukrainian nationalists.” Tellingly, they justified this call by a “rise in xenophobic and neo-Nazi sentiments in Ukraine.” However, the representatives of the president and the government of Ukraine did not comment on the anniversary, and Ukraine’s ambassador to Poland did not attend the official commemorations held in Warsaw on 11 July.

Further pronouncements by ruling party members might give a glimpse of their actual objectives. Following the declaration, Vadim Kolesnichenko, a pro-Russian MP from the Party of Regions who had attended hearings in the Polish parliament, announced a bill that would institute an award for Ukrainians who helped Poles to survive and ban the organisations responsible for the Volyn massacre “from rehabilitation.” Apparently, such a ban would target Svoboda’s rhetoric as an opposition party.

The declaration by the 148 MPs provoked a critical reaction. Leonid Kravchuk, the first president of independent Ukraine, has opined that it was a product of an “unnatural union between Polish nationalist [politicians] and Stalinist politicians in Ukraine.” Svoboda’s spokeswoman referred the matter to the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), claiming that such a declaration was tantamount to high treason and should therefore be prosecuted.

The Civil Society Response. Religious leaders were particularly active in their efforts for cross-border reconciliation. At the end of June, representatives of the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches in Poland and in Ukraine signed a common declaration of reconciliation on the 70th anniversary of the Volyn massacre. When it had seemed that such declarations would not be made, the Ukrainian churches unveiled their pastoral letters.

Further, Ukrainian and Polish intellectuals published at the beginning of July a joint call for reconciliation, in which they wrote: “Please forgive me, Brother, for the innocent blood spilt in Volyn, for my disbelief, forgive me. ... Shame burns my heart, suffocates my chest when I think of your pain, of your brethren and sisters in Volyn and Galicia. ... Forgive me for those who do not want to join me in handling the burden of responsibility for the Volyn crime, forgive (us) for the long silence of my brethren. Forgive (us) for those who see no sin in that. Forgive me for those who cannot admit the crime as crime.” Other public figures published their views: Taras Voznyak, a founder of the cultural studies journal *Yi* in Ukraine, called on the return to the “I forgive and ask for forgiveness” principle, while Kost’ Bondarenko, a historian, urged for the return to historical research of the issue instead of a political reckoning between Poland and Ukraine.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The reaction to the 70th anniversary of the Volyn massacre was so diverse in Ukraine that it is hard to talk of any comprehensive single perception. Its echo was loudest in the western part of the country, where Poles were murdered during the Second World War. At the same time, the ruling party in Kiev appropriated the anniversary for its own political goals and tried to show that the nationalists in the opposition, who associate themselves with the UPA tradition, are followers of Hitler’s allies.

Ukrainian–Polish reconciliation appears more complicated today than 10 years ago during the 60th anniversary of the dramatic events in Volyn. In Western Ukraine, the perception of the 1943–1944 events is different than in Poland as the UPA guerrillas—considered criminals in Poland—are hailed as national heroes. Conversely, Eastern Ukraine sees no need for reconciliation as it rejects the UPA. Enlisting the communists’ support in a dispute with Ukrainian nationalists seems unreasonable. Poland should thus re-evaluate its priorities and pursue mutual understanding on the Volyn issue foremost with Western Ukrainian society (and eventually that of Central Ukraine), as it is historically the region with the closest ties to Poland. It is essential to intensify the dialogue and to present the Polish view on such matters of common history. Such a project can be undertaken as part of the Polish-Ukrainian Forum. The Volyn issue should not be allocated much attention on the inter-governmental level, i.e., in contacts between the countries’ presidents or prime ministers, since as representatives of the ruling party they come from a different historical tradition than that of Western Ukraine and as such are not the right addressees for such a purpose.