
Soviet repressions against Poles in the second half of the 1930s : introduction by the Editors

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SOVIET REPRESSIONS AGAINST POLES IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 1930s

Introduction by the Editors

Since the establishing of the USSR (until the 30th of December, the state was called Soviet Russia) a wave of repressions had been implemented, which intensified after the revolution and civil war, especially in the second half of the 1930s. The bloody repressions (called „jezhovshchina”) were theoretically justified during a plenum of the Central Committee of the All-Soviet Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (held between the 23rd of February and the 5th of March in 1937). Poles belonged to the first victims of the repressions in the beginning of the 1930s. Within the framework of the so called Polish operation, which officially lasted from the 20th of August, 1937 until the 17th of November, 1938 and in reality even longer, there had been arrested – as calculated by Nikita Pietrow – more than 150 thousand people, out of whom more than half were executed by being shot¹. The fact was a symptom of manslaughter committed against the Polish minority in the USSR. Simultaneously with the „operation” against Poles, there were other national minorities being persecuted as well, for example Germans, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Latvians and Macedonians. Altogether, since the 1st of October of 1936 until the 1st of November of 1938, 1 565 041 people had been arrested in the USSR². The main argument used to justify the persecution of Poles was their supposed involvement in espionage and their supposed connections with Polska Organizacja Wojskowa (Polish Military Organization [PMO]) which was supposedly an instrument of Polish Intelligence. Those accusations were false because the organization ceased to

¹ N. Pietrow, *Polska operacja NKWD*, „Karta” 1993, no. 11, p. 40.

² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

function a few years before³. The accusations had been raised the earliest in Ukraine. Tomasz Dąbal, arrested on the 29th of December in 1936 (on his birthday) was first accused of leading a POW unit in the territory of the USSR since 1933. His confession to the crime was forced during an investigation⁴.

Nikolai Jezhov⁵, Head of the security service, aimed first at the annihilation of those NKVD officers who served there from its establishing⁶, i.e. since it was headed by Feliks Dzierżyński (1877–1926), the organizer and first chairman of WCzK⁷ which was affiliated

³ POW – Polska Organizacja Wojskowa (Polish Military Organization – PMO) was established by the initiative of Józef Piłsudski in October of 1914 in Warsaw. Piłsudski was its first General Commander, replaced since July 1917 by Edward Rydz-Śmigły. Initially, POW was engaged in intelligence-guerilla activities aimed against Russia. It took part in regaining power by Poles in Galicja and Królestwo Polskie. In December of 1918 it was incorporated into the Polish Army. In February of 1918, a POW division was created in the Prussian partition whereas a year later another division was created in Górny Śląsk (Upper Silesia). It was active in Ukraine until June 1920.

⁴ Tomasz Dąbal, was born on the 29th of December in 1890 in Sobów, district of Tarnobrzeg. He was an activist of Polish and international peasant and Communist movement. As one of the leaders of „Republika Tarnobrzeńska” (Tarnobrzeg Republic) of November 1918, he became a deputy to Sejm Ustawodawczy (Constituent Assembly) (1919–1922). On the 7th of November in 1922, he was sentenced to 6 years of heavy prison, in March of 1923 he left for the USSR within the framework of a political prisoners’ exchange. He became there the main organizer of Międzynarodówka Chłopska (Peasant International) (1923–1931), a deputy of the general secretary of the organization (1923–1928), vice-chairman of the Executive Committee of the International Organization of Assistance to Revolutionaries (1924–1926), a journalist, a writer, an activist of the Polish diaspora and a scientist. He was the first deputy of the vice-chairman of the Academy of Sciences of the Byelorussian Socialist Soviet Republic (1932–1935). On the 29th of December in 1936, he was arrested, on the 21st of August in 1937 sentenced to death and on the same day shot. See more in: H. Cimek, *Tomasz Dąbal 1890–1937*, Rzeszów 1993.

⁵ Nikolai Jezhov was born in 1895. Since 1917 he was a member of Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Russia (Bolsheviks), since February of 1934 he had been a member of the Central Committee of WKP(b), since February of 1935 – a secretary of the Central Committee of WKP(b), a deputy member of the Political Bureau of Central Committee of WKP(b), responsible for the security of the USSR since the 26th of September 1936 until the 25th of November of 1938. Called the „bloodthirsty midget” (154 cm high). Arrested on the 10th of April in 1939, sentenced on the 3rd of February of 1940, shot on the following day.

⁶ NKVD – People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs, functioned in the period of 1934–1946.

⁷ WCzK – All-Russian Extraordinary Committee to Combat Counter-revolution, Sabotage and Speculation was founded by the Council of People’s Commissars on the

at the Council of People's Commissars and the first people's commissar responsible for internal affairs (since the 30th of March, 1919)⁸. Subsequently, more and more people were arrested. Decisions were taken to prolong the action while „national quota” were increased to encompass more people to be arrested (January-November 1938). During the second phase, the victimizers, i.e. the officers of the NKVD were themselves persecuted. They were labeled „Polish spies”. Jezhov himself fell prey of the operation as well. He was arrested on the 10th of April in 1939, a few months later sentenced and then shot.

In the aforementioned paper, Pietrow writes in a general manner about the repressions against Poles in the USSR, quoting also some of documents related to the operation. The persecutions, based on absurd charges, affected also members of the Komunistyczna Partia Polski (Communist Party of Poland) and its autonomous divisions, such as the Komunistyczna Partia Zachodniej Białorusi (Communist Party of the Western Byelorussia) and the Komunistyczna Partia Zachodniej Ukrainy (Communist Party of the Western Ukraine). They resulted in the dissolution of the parties⁹. The Editors of „Polityka i Społeczeństwo” have decided to publish documents related to the events which are little known and may improve the knowledge of persecutions against Poles in the USSR.

20th of December in 1917. The Committee, re-organized on the 6th of February in 1922, was then called The State Political Directorate (GPU), and then since the 18th of September of 1923 – The Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU). In July of 1934 it became part of NKVD.

⁸ Feliks Dzierżyński was the WCzK chairman, then he headed GPU and OGPU since the 20th of December of 1917 until the 20th of July 1926, with the exception of the period between the 8th of July and the 21st of August 1918. In addition, Dzierżyński was *inter alia* a chairman of the Top Council of the National Economy (WSNCh) since the 2nd of February of 1924 until his death, a people's commissar responsible for communication since the 14th of April of 1921 until the 2nd of February in 1924 as well as a chairman of Central Directorate of Metal Industry („Głównietałła”) in the years of 1924–1926.

⁹ See more in: H. Cimek, *Komuniści – Polska – Stalin 1918–1939*, Białystok 1990, p. 112 and ff.