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## INTRODUCTION. THE NKVD'S "POLISH OPERATION" OF 1937–1938. DOCUMENTS OF A STALINIST CRIME

### EDITORIAL NOTE

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The authors would like to thank Sergei Prudovsky from the Russian Memorial Society for his role in acquiring and compiling the documents used in the text. We are publishing the documents, originally written in Russian, in an English translation. We have added footnotes explaining the necessary context, including key information on the individuals mentioned in the text and their functions at the time when the document was produced. Academic transcription has been used, in line with AREI's editorial standards.

The Great Terror unleashed by Stalin in the 1930s continues to cast a baleful shadow over the history of Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe even today. This meticulously planned, organised and ruthlessly implemented atrocity against the dictator's own nation claimed the lives of millions of innocent victims.

The repressions affected, first of all, Stalin's opponents and political rivals in the party, army, and security structures. The symbol of the purges was show trials staged in the media spotlight, at which the erstwhile leaders of the "motherland of the global proletariat" turned out to be traitors and spies; as such, they were mostly condemned to death. The names of tens of thousands of other victims of political repressions, anonymous for many years, were found on execution lists approved personally by Stalin and his retinue.

The Soviet terror machine did not stop here. Order No. 00447, issued on 30 July 1937 by Nikolai Yezhov, the Soviet People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, launched a mass operation against "former kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements", which in practice could mean anyone. It was during this operation that the "limits of terror", i.e., quotas of people to be condemned to death, were introduced. These quotas, at the request of local NKVD organs, were steadily increased. In violation of the law at the time, the imposed sentences condemned hundreds of thousands of the accused to death or a stint in a gulag.

Among the victims of all these crimes were Poles who were citizens of the Soviet Union.

Yet these were not all the circles of the Stalinist hell. A separate circle concerned the repressions exacted directly on representatives of national minorities. Therefore, Germans, Poles, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Greeks, Romanians, Iranians, Afghans, and Chinese living in the Soviet Union were identified as spies and enemies of the Soviet government. Using the same criminal methods and technology, the Harbinites – employees of the Chinese Eastern Railway sold to Japan in 1935 who chose to return to the USSR – were also repressed as Japanese spies.

The operation targeting Poles was not the first "national operation": that had been the "German operation", although when it began its victims were exclusively citizens of Germany living in the Soviet Union.

The NKVD's "Polish Operation", however, commands a unique place among Stalinist crimes. As Timothy Snyder put it, "Stalin was a pioneer of national mass murder, and the Poles were the preeminent victim among the Soviet nationalities".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. 119.

The “Polish Operation” was the largest and bloodiest of the NKVD’s “national operations”. According to statistical reports sent to the organisation’s Moscow headquarters, between 21 August 1937 and 15 November 1938, 139,835 people were repressed, 111,091 of whom received the most severe sentence (shooting), and 28,744 were imprisoned or sent to gulags.<sup>2</sup> So, almost 80% of all those targeted by this operation were murdered. These estimates are certainly not definitive as lack of access to Russian archives precludes verification of the number of victims.

## DOCUMENTS OF CRIMES

We hereby present two fundamental documents concerning the “Polish Operation”: Order No. 00485 and its justification, previously unpublished in English. Both provide a good illustration of the characteristics and mechanisms of the Soviet terror aimed at the country’s own citizens. Order No. 00485 was also a kind of blueprint for the next so-called national operations, defining the categories of people subject to repressions and designating the stages and methods of the operation and the severity of sentences.

On 9 August 1937, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union considered point 564 of the minutes of the meeting, issuing the enigmatic decision to “Authorise the order of the people’s commissar for internal affairs of the USSR concerning the liquidation of Polish diversionist and espionage groups and the POW organisation”.<sup>3</sup>

On 11 August 1937, Nikolai Yezhov implemented this decision by issuing secret Operational Order No. 00485, formally commencing the NKVD’s “Polish Operation”. An extensive document “regarding the fascist-insurrectionist, espionage, diversionary, defeatist and terrorist activity of Polish intelligence in the USSR” was attached to the order.

It is worth noting that the public learnt about mass crimes against “unwanted nations” only in the early 1990s, when access to Soviet archives was opened. The content of the order, thanks to the work of researchers from the Memorial Society, was first published in Poland in 1993.<sup>4</sup> In the West, a large part of it first saw the light of day in the book *Le Livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur, répression*, which was translated into many languages.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Nikita Petrov and Arsenij Roginskij, “Pol’skaja operacija” NKVD 1937–1938 gg., in *Repressii protiv poljakov i pol’skich graždan*, ed. by Aleksandr Gur’janov (Moskva: Zven’ja, 1997), pp. 41–59 (pp. 41–43).

<sup>3</sup> Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj archiv social’no-političeskoj istorii (hereafter: RGASPI), f. 17, op. 166, d. 577, l. 74. f. (fond, collection), op. (opis’, inventory), d. (dielo, file), l. (list, folio).

<sup>4</sup> Nikita Pietrow, ‘Polska operacja NKWD’, *Karta*, 11 (1993), 24–44.

<sup>5</sup> Stéphane Courtois and others, *Le Livre noir du communisme : Crimes, terreur, répression* (Robert Laffont, 1997).

The document attached to the order has been published in the original language in Ukraine<sup>6</sup> and Russia.<sup>7</sup> So far, it has only been translated into Polish.<sup>8</sup>

Let us begin, then, by examining the rationale for the criminal decision.

The picture that emerges from the document on the “fascist-insurrectionist, espionage, diversionary, defeatist and terrorist activity of Polish intelligence in the USSR” is one of a Soviet Union entwined with the spy network of the Polish Military Organisation (POW). It was POW that had supposedly planned an anti-Soviet insurrection in the first period of the revolution, had carried out defeatist activities during the Polish-Bolshevik War, and had conducted nationalist agitation on the Polish population of the Soviet Union. It was also responsible for sabotage, diversionary and terrorist activity in the economy, security services, and Red Army, and all this in collaboration with the Trotskyites and other anti-Soviet organisations. Interestingly, it was mainly Polish communists who were apparently behind all these activities. The dissolution of the Communist Party of Poland on 16 August 1938 was therefore, according to this logic, an obvious and justified move.

It should be emphasized that the story outlined by Yezhov regarding the formation and activities of POW is entirely a propaganda invention. The Polish Military Organisation, established by Józef Piłsudski in 1914 as a clandestine diversion and intelligence organisation, was dissolved when Poland regained its independence, with its units becoming part of the Polish Army. Its former members took part in the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919–1921, but this was the final episode of their operation. Nevertheless, POW became a mythical, ubiquitous spy organisation to which all the economic and political failings of the “first state of workers and peasants” could be attributed in the Soviet Union.

It was POW and its espionage and diversionary activity that supposedly led to the famine that claimed the lives of millions of people in Ukraine. By late 1936, the organisation had apparently become a threat to the entire Soviet Union. The central NKVD body launched an investigation into POW, which concluded with the sentencing of several dozen detainees, including Tomasz Dąbal,<sup>9</sup> who admitted to being the organisation’s

<sup>6</sup> Jurij Šapoval, Volodymyr Prystajko, and Vadym Zolotar’ov, *ČK–HPU–NKVD v Ukrajinii: Osoby, fakty, dokumenty* (Kyjiv: Abrys, 1997), p. 350.

<sup>7</sup> Andrej Sudoplatov, *Tajnaža žizn’ generala Sudoplatova. Pravda i vymysly o moem otce*, 2 vols (Moskva: Olma-Press, 1998), I, p. 366.

<sup>8</sup> Tomasz Sommer, *Rozstrzelać Polaków. Ludobójstwo Polaków w Związku Sowieckim w latach 1937–1938. Dokumenty z Centrali* (Warszawa: 3S Media, 2010), pp. 86–124.

<sup>9</sup> Tomasz Dąbal (transcribed as Dombal’ in NKVD documents) (1890–1937): political activist of Polish origin. Doctor of Economic Sciences, academician, and member of the VKP(b). He worked as the Head of the Department at the Moscow Institute of Mechanization and Electrification of Socialist Agriculture. He was arrested in 1936 and executed in 1937.

leader throughout the USSR.<sup>10</sup> The materials from the investigation were used when drafting Order No. 00485 and the rationale document.

Let us now analyse the contents of Order No. 00485, thereby shedding light on the mechanism of the NKVD's "Polish Operation" to reveal the "anatomy of the crime".

In a brief introduction, Yezhov condemns the security services' previous bad work, emphasising that the documentation collected and the text attached to the order "paint a picture of many years of relatively unpunished sabotage and spy work of the Polish intelligence on the territory of the Union". Thus, he blames years of negligence on his predecessor Genrich Jagoda, who was sentenced to death for, among other things, espionage.<sup>11</sup>

He then proceeds to list the categories of people to be arrested. A cursory analysis of these categories shows that it was not just Poles who could be repressed, but practically all the citizens of the Soviet Union. How else should we interpret the instruction that "the most active members of 'POW' identified during the investigation and not yet apprehended" were to be arrested? And this was indeed the case: the victims of the "Polish Operation" also included Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, Russians, and representatives of other nations and ethnic groups living in the USSR.

The search for those guilty of the imagined crimes took place through address and passport bureaus, registry offices, and directories of professional and social organisations. Evidence of mere correspondence with relatives in Poland, a stay in Poland or contact with a representative of a Polish diplomatic post was sufficient to warrant suspicion of spying and arrest.

How the arrests in Moscow took place is demonstrated, for instance, by information concerning the archival-investigative case of Ivan Sorokin, the head of UNKVD Section No. 3 for the Moscow Region in 1937–1938. This document contained a report by one Mr Zakharov, assistant head of the Moscow Region Directorate of State Security of UNKVD Branch 1, Section 4, from 13 June 1938: "once we had arrested the active people from national groups, I came to Sorokin and told him I had no one left to take. Sorokin admonished me and asked whether in my district I had Russians or Jews who had previously lived in Germany, Poland and other foreign states. I responded that there were many of them, and Sorokin noted this and said, 'You can always make them into Germans and Poles, but you have to do it carefully not to mess the case up'. After that instruction,

<sup>10</sup> *Lubjanka: Stalin i Glavnoe upravlenie gosbezopasnosti NKVD*, ed. by Vladimir Chaustov, Viktor Naumov, and Natalija Plotnikova (Moskva: MFD 2004), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Genrikh Yagoda (1891–1938): People's Commissar for Internal Affairs (1934–1936) and then People's Commissar for Posts and Telegraphs (1936–1937). Arrested on 28 March 1937. Sentenced to death on 13 March 1938 at the so-called third Moscow trial. Shot on 16 March 1938. Not rehabilitated.

Karetnikov and I began to apply it in practice, i.e., in arrest motions, interrogation protocols and other materials; if the arrestee was a Russian or Jew but they'd lived on Polish territory, we'd write that it was a Pole, and if they'd lived in Latvia, we'd write that it was a Latvian".<sup>12</sup>

In the next part of the decree, Yezhov orders that the operation be conducted in two stages. In the first, those to be arrested were "personnel of the NKVD agencies, the Red Army, military factories, defence workshops of all other factories; railway, water, and air transport; within the electric power sector of all industrial enterprises, gas and oil refineries".

They were to be followed by "all other individuals working within the industrial enterprises of non-defensive significance, state farms, collective farms, and institutions".

In practice, however, analysis of the personal data of people repressed as part of the "Polish Operation" reveals that arrests took place among all these groups at the same time. An undoubted factor in this was the vast scale of the repressive operations conducted during the Great Terror.

Next, Yezhov commanded that special groups of operational workers should be investigated, noting that "the main focus of the investigation should be complete exposure of the organizers and leaders of the sabotage groups with the aim of comprehensive identification of the sabotage network".

What the investigations and interrogations of the accused looked like in practice is vividly demonstrated by the statements of prisoners collected in December 1938, compiled by Olga Shostakowska, head of NKVD Special Section 1, Branch 8. The document cites extracts from 78 statements from more than 30 regions of the USSR.

Here are the most characteristic of them: Altai Krai UNKVD – "They tortured during interrogations, forced us to sign the protocol"; Bashkir Autonomous SSR NKVD – "During interrogations they put [prisoners] in winter clothes next to a hot furnace and beat them on the face and body..."; "they kept us on our feet for 14 days without food, beating every day"; Vinnytsia Region, Ukrainian SSR UNKVD – "...Beating with an iron rod, boxing gloves"; Irkutsk Region UNKVD – "...beating, being made to stand still or sit on a chair leg"; Karelian Autonomous SSR NKVD – "Constant interrogation for 20 days without sleep, alternating investigators..."; Georgian SSR NKVD – "During the investigation they tied our hands and feet and blindfolded us, then beat and stabbed with a nail".<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Information on archival-investigative case No. 716060 concerning I. Sorokin, Gosudarstvennyj archiv Rossijskoj Federacii (hereafter GARF), f. 10035, op. 1, d. P-31787, l. 98.

<sup>13</sup> Summary of statements made by prisoners about the use of physical measures during interrogation, Central'nyj archiv Federal'noj služby bezopasnosti (hereafter CA FSB), f. 3, op. 5, d. 2281, l. 45–51.

The use of physical methods was therefore commonplace in interrogations. So, it is hardly surprising that the accused pointed the finger at their relatives, neighbours, and work colleagues as members of a non-existent Polish spy network. Few of the accused did not admit their own guilt, and after all, according to the legal doctrine of prosecutor Andrey Vyshinsky, which was in force in the Soviet Union, a confession by the accused was sufficient proof of his guilt.<sup>14</sup> In fact, those who, despite the beatings and torture, did not admit to the deeds of which they were accused were also condemned.

All that remained was to determine the severity of the sentence. In the next part of Operational Order No. 00485, detainees were divided into two categories depending on the level of their guilt. Those included in the first category were shot, while those in the second were sentenced to between five and 10 years in a gulag or prison. Evidently, the secret order did not bother with euphemisms, i.e., “the maximum penalty”.

Executions were mostly carried out in the basements of NKVD detention centres, usually with a shot to the back of the head. Bodies were transported in unmarked cars to isolated forest areas, military training grounds, or NKVD recreation centres (sic), where they were thrown en masse into pits dug in advance. The burial sites were secret. To date, only around a hundred such resting places of the victims of 1930s Soviet repressions have been determined. According to researchers, these are only around a third of all the places where remains were hidden.

The order also specified the procedure for handling cases. A procedure for genocidal decisions was created to facilitate atrocities on a mass scale. This was the simplified, so-called ‘album’ procedure. Why bother with court proceedings, a defence and witnesses? It sufficed for the “People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the republic, the Head of Directorate of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (UNKVD) of a particular region or territory, jointly with the corresponding prosecutor of the republic, region, or territory”, to divide those arrested into the categories described above. For each prisoner, a brief description of the crimes “knocked out” of them during interrogations was then prepared. The collected descriptions of similar cases were bound into albums, hence the procedure’s colloquial name.

The final decision on whether the accused would live or die was taken by the so-called “dvoika” (the NKVD Commission and Public Prosecutor of the USSR). The sentences were therefore signed personally by Nikolai

<sup>14</sup> Andrey Vyshinsky (1883–1954): from 1931 Procurator of the Russian SFSR, then in 1935–1939 Procurator General of the USSR. From 1940, First Deputy of the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and in 1949–1953 Minister of Foreign Affairs. Until his death he was the head of the USSR’s delegation to the UN.

Yezhov and Andrey Vyshinsky or their deputies. Analysis of the dvoika's protocols shows that Vyshinsky signed the most, while Yezhov more often delegated this task to his deputies, Frinovsky<sup>15</sup> and Belsky.<sup>16</sup>

But even this system of adjudication sometimes proved inefficient as the NKVD Commission and Public Procurator of the USSR could not keep up with prompt assessment of hundreds of protocols coming in from the field. One outcome was problems with already overflowing detention centres.

On 15 September 1938, the Politburo approved the draft order of the Communist Party's Central Committee, presented by the NKVD, on establishing special troikas to deal with cases. These were to comprise the first secretary of the CP Committee of the region or krai, or the Central Committee of the Party in a given republic, the head of the relevant NKVD board and the public prosecutor of the district, krai or republic.

On 17 September 1938, Yezhov brought into effect the Politburo's resolution by signing USSR NKVD Order No. 00606 "On the establishment of special troikas to adjudicate on the cases of people arrested in the procedure of USSR NKVD Orders No. 00485 and others".<sup>17</sup>

This ordered adjudication only of the cases of people detained by 1 August 1938, as well as decreeing separate protocols for each of the so-called national operations.

It is important to emphasise that the procedure for pronouncement of guilt by special dvoikas and troikas entailed lawlessness even in the context of Soviet legislation. These organs had no constitutional or legislative authorisation.

Operational Order No. 00485 prohibited the release from prisons and gulags of people incarcerated for espionage, ordering reconsideration of cases. Yezhov also ordered the acquisition and development of a network of agents "in the Polish segment", recommending cautionary measures to protect NKVD organs from potential infiltration by Polish spies. Information on the course of the operation was to be relayed by telegram every five days.

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Frinovsky (1898/1900–1940): Commissar for State Security First Rank. Head of the NKVD's Chief Directorate of State Security (1937–1938), Deputy People's Commissar for Internal Issues. People's Commissar for the wartime Soviet Navy (1938–1939). Arrested on 6 April 1939. Condemned to death on 4 February 1940. Shot on 8 February 1940. Not rehabilitated.

<sup>16</sup> Lev Belsky, actually Abram Mikhailovich Levin (1889–1941): Commissar for State Security Second Rank. From November 1936 to April 1938 Deputy People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the USSR. Arrested in June 1939. Condemned to death and shot in October. Not rehabilitated.

<sup>17</sup> Haluzevyj deržavnyj archiv Služby bezpeky Ukraïny (hereafter HDA SBU), f. 9, d. 672, l. 161–63. Published: *Wielki Terror. Operacja polska 1937–1938. Wetykij Teror. Polśka operacja 1937–1938*, ed. by Jan Bednarek and others, 2 vols, *Polska i Ukraina w latach trzydziestych – czterdziestych XX wieku. Nieznane dokumenty z archiwów służb specjalnych* (Warszawa–Kijów: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej-Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu – Wydzielone Archiwum Państwowe Służby Bezpieczeństwa Ukrainy: Instytut Badań Politycznych i Narodowościowych Narodowej Akademii Nauk Ukrainy, 2010), VIII, II, p. 1489.



The operation was to commence on 20 August 1937 and would last three months. However, this completion date was put back multiple times. Ultimately and formally, the “Polish Operation” was concluded by Operational Order No. 00762 of 26 November 1938, given by Yezhov’s successor, Lavrentiy Beria.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the criminal system could not allow witnesses to remain at large. Based on Order No. 00486 of 15 August 1937, also issued by Yezhov, the children and wives of traitors to the motherland were also to face repression.<sup>19</sup> The order decreed that wives were subject to imprisonment in labour camps for a period of at least five to eight years, depending on the level of danger to society, and children were to be placed in camps, NKVD corrective labour colonies, or children’s homes with a special regime under the jurisdiction of people’s education commissariats in the relevant republics. Breast-fed infants were sent to camps with their condemned mothers, before being taken away from them at the age of 12 or 18 months and transferred to children’s homes and nurseries. A document on the repression of husbands of female traitors to the motherland was also produced but did not enter into force.<sup>20</sup>

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The picture that emerges from the presented documents is one of a dehumanised totalitarian system of government that created a bureaucratic mechanism of mass human annihilation. A mechanism that not only murdered innocent people but also erased the memory of millions of victims. Unfortunately, the victims of the Great Terror, including the “Polish Operation”, are not accorded adequate space in the general historical memory. We believe that the publication of the documents will change this state of affairs.

We would like to stress that the state authorities of today’s Russia are blocking access to documents that would reveal and permit reliable research on all the mechanisms of the crimes. We still do not know the names of all the perpetrators, nor, most importantly, the final numbers of victims and the sites where their bodies were hidden.

<sup>18</sup> Lavrentiy Beria (1899–1953): Soviet people’s commissar for internal affairs (1938–1945), deputy premier (1941–1953). Directly responsible for repressions in the USSR, including the Katyn Massacre. Arrested in June 1953, accused of spying and attempting to bring down the communist system. Shot in Moscow in December 1953.

<sup>19</sup> Operational Order of the People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs of the USSR No. 00486 “On the operation of repression of the wives and children of traitors to the motherland”, CA FSB, f. 3, op. 4, d. 14, l. 405–16. Published: Aleksandr Kokurin and Nikita Petrov, *GULAG (Glavnoe upravlenie lagerej)*. 1917–1960 (Moskva: MDF, 2000), pp. 106–10.

<sup>20</sup> Ciphertext on the arrest and imprisonment in gulags of the husbands of traitors to the motherland (unsent), CA FSB, f. 3, op. 4, d. 11, l. 218.