

REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF DEPOPULATION IN LOWER BESKID (THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS) IN THE YEARS 1944-1947

Marek BARWIŃSKI

Arrangements of a new political order in Europe after the Second World War meant mass depopulation. By doing this, the great powers decided to prevent problems of ethnic minorities in future. Poland belonged to the states which completely changed their ethnic structure at that time. Both changes in the country borders and extensive migrations of its population had great influence on this process.

On the 27th of July 1944 an agreement between Polish communists and the government of the USSR referring to the Polish and Soviet border was signed. According to the agreement, the Curzon Line¹ was accepted as its delimitation. Despite the fact that the border had been marked on the basis of ethnic criteria, it still cut across the vast territory inhabited by people of different nationalities. In the areas situated west of the Curzon Line, some 150 thousand Belorussians, 7 thousand Lithuanians and some 600-700 thousand Ukrainians and Ruthenians lived. There were at least 100 thousand Lemkos among them. On the other hand, some 3 million Poles were scattered in the areas near the eastern borders of the Soviet Union at the same time.

Lemkos constituted a group of the Ruthenian population who inhabited the furthest areas of the western part of the country. They had a different culture, religion and language from Polish and Slavic peoples. They occupied a closed territory, spreading in the shape of a wedge into the Polish and Slovak side of the Carpathian Mountains, from the Ostrawa river in the east and the Poprad river in the west. The territory where Lemkos live on the Polish side of the Carpathian Mountains is called Lemkos' lands (Łemkowszczyzna). It occupies the eastern part of Beskid Sądecki, Lower Beskid and the western part of the Bieszczady Mountains. Ethnically, this region was of homogeneous Lemko origin. Polish people lived in a few towns only (Czajkowski 1922, Reinfuss 1948, 1987, 1990).

¹ An agreed name for the line recommended by the Council of Ambassadors on December 8, 1919 which was to become the Eastern Polish border and a part of the Western Soviet Russian border; designed by the United Kingdom's Minister of Foreign Affairs - Lord Curzon of Kedleston; it was based on the ethnic criterion. According to some sources (Pudło 1992), it extended from the Carpathian Mountains, west of Rawa Ruska, along the river Bug and further to the North, leaving the Białystok area on the Polish side, without northern Suwałki region. In real terms the line reached from Grodno in the North, only to Chełm areas, not to the Carpathian Mountains.

In the years 1944-1947 Lemkos were displaced, which were the result of an agreement made between the interim Polish communist government and the governments of the Ukrainian SSR and the Belorussian SSR. The agreement provided for a displacement of „citizens of Ukrainian, White Russian, Russian and Ruthenian nationality” from the territory of Poland to the Ukrainian and the Belorussian SSR. In contemporary official documents the displacement was referred to as „evacuation”, which was a completely inappropriate term. The documents emphasised the fact that such displacement was voluntary and no pressure should have been used. The Polish communist government, having signed the agreement on displacement, was carrying out the policy which aimed at transforming Poland into an ethnically and culturally homogenous state, without any ethnic minorities (Duć-Fajfer 1992, Michna 1995, Misilo 1992, Pudło 1992). Displacement of Ukrainians and Lemkos from Poland to the Ukrainian SSR was begun on 15 October 1944 and finished between 13-19 July 1946. According to the terms of the Polish-Ukrainian agreement, only Polish citizens of Ukrainian and Ruthenian nationalities were the subject of displacement. The displaced were allowed to take their personal belongings and livestock, up to 2 tons of weight in total (Kwilecki 1970).

Ukrainian commissions, aiming at swift completion of the said displacement, launched a very vivid agitation policy to promote the emigration. They made unreal promises concerning the conditions of life in a new homeland. Despite the agitation, the speed of migration in the Lemkos' lands in its initial stages was rather slow compared to other areas from which people were moved to the Ukrainian SSR (Kwilecki 1970). In response, the Polish authorities increased pressure on the people.

In September 1945 the second stage of „evacuation” was begun; this time troops of the Polish Army were involved. People became very hostile towards the process of displacement, they opposed the action in different ways. For instance, they claimed to be Polish, converted to Roman Catholicism, manifested their positive attitude to Poland, its tradition and culture; letters of protest were being sent to the authorities, people went into hiding in forests.

The depopulation was planned as voluntary, nevertheless the rule of people's freedom to decide where they wanted to settle, was not observed during the whole length of the process. Pressure of both an administrative and economic nature was used, and when the army got involved during the second stage, an element of „voluntarity” was no longer present (Misilo 1992, Nyczanka 1987, Kwilecki 1970).

Eventually some 483 thousand „*Ukrainians and Ruthenians*” left Poland. Lemkos were among them. It has been estimated that at least 70 thousand people, about 60-70% of the Lemko population before Second World War, were moved (Nyczanka 1987, Pudło 1992). No matter to what degree the Lemkos` displacement was voluntary or forced, it was a turning point in their ethnic situation, great majority of Lemkos moved to Ukraine and a minority remained in Poland. Lemkos in Ukraine were dispersed. The displaced from the commune of Nowy Sącz itself, were settled in 15 districts of Ukraine; from the Lviv District and Ivanofrankivsk – to the Kharkiv and Sumy Districts. This meant a permanent division of the then present ethnic group. In Poland some 30-40% of Lemkos remained. Certain parts of the Lemkos' lands were almost completely depopulated, namely in the communes of Jasło and Krosno. Many villages disappeared (Kwilecki 1970, Pudło 1992).

The next wave of the Lemkos' lands depopulation took place in 1947. It was directly connected with the „Wisła” action carried out in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Poland. It was aimed against troops of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA) and political centres of Ukrainian Nationalist Organisation (UNO). Elimination of the UIA was the objective of this action and a complete displacement of people of Ukrainian origin from the voyevodships of: Cracow, Rzeszów, Lublin to the voyevodships of Western and Northern Poland was its means. The „Wisła” action also included the whole of the Lemkos' lands, even though UIA's activities were of rare nature at that time - in particular in the western part (Misilo 1992, 1993, Nyczanka 1987, Pudło 1992).

The „Wisła” Operation Group commenced their military action on 28 April and it was completed before the end of July 1947. Displacement of Ukrainian and Lemkos was started at the beginning of the military action. This time it was forced, people had no right to choose the place of migration. Religion was the main criterion used to classify people for displacement - the population of Greek Catholic and Orthodox Church were moved. Everyone who was recognised as Ukrainian by the Polish authorities had to go. Even communists, employees of the Secret Service, former partisans from the Polish and Soviet armies, demobilised soldiers, employees of the administrative sector and members of ethnically mixed families were being displaced. In the Lower Carpathian Mountains (Podkarpacie) a few dozen Polish families who lived in the country border-zone were moved too. They had only a few hours to get ready to leave their villages. Displaced Lemkos could only take their personal belongings, livestock, deadstock and some food. There were, however, cases when they could only take up to 25 kilograms of luggage (Misilo 1992, 1993, Pudło 1992).

The main part of the depopulation action in Lemkos' lands was completed on 23 July 1947, although it was finally completed in the spring of 1950. This is when Lemkos from the Nowy Targ Commune - villages of: Jaworki, Szlachtowa, Biała and Czarna Woda - the furthest Western Lemkos settlements, known as Shlakhtov Ruthenia - were moved to the West (Pudło 1992).

The „Wisła” action was a very well organised event. Displacement of more than 70 thousand people from the areas of Lower Beskid, the Bieszczady Mountains took less than three months. The total number of displaced Lemkos during the 1947 „Wisła” action has been estimated at 30-35 thousand, which is about 25% of Lemkos who used to live there before the war. Together with the depopulation which took place in the years 1944-1947, it means that 95-98% of people were deported from that community (Grzesik, Traczyk 1992, Kwilecki 1964, 1970, 1974, Nyczanka 1987, Pudło 1992, Reinfuss 1990).

The „Wisła” action had two objectives: military and political. The army was to eliminate the armed, nationalist Ukrainian underground organisation. The solution of the Ukrainian question in Poland, through the process of displacement and purposeful dispersion of Ukrainian and Lemkos in the North and West of Poland to condemn them to complete assimilation, was the political objective.

Lemkos have always unanimously regarded the 1947 events disapprovingly. They maintain that they were moved without any reason - the rule of a mass responsibility was employed, because at that time the UIA had almost stopped their activities in Poland and in the Lemkos' lands - especially in its western part - it was practically non-existent. The Lemkos feel that the displacement was an undeserved, immense injustice (Pactwa 1992).

On 3 August 1990 the Senate of the Polish Republic for the first time in forty years condemned the „Wisła” action in moral terms, by passing a relevant resolution. The Sejm of the Polish Republic postponed the debate on this question till later².

In the Lemkos' lands no swift replacement of one ethnic group with another happened. The country was practically deserted. Some 320 villages spread throughout a region the area of 4 thousand square kilometres (Lower Beskid and Bieszczady Mountains) had hardly any inhabitants. Many of them disappeared completely. In particular, settlements east of the Jasiołka river were badly affected. Buildings were partly burnt down or demolished, in order not to leave any quarters for the UIA forces. Demolition of buildings in deserted Lemkos

² Chamber of Members of Parliament decided that the debate should take place, but only after the MP's had sufficient knowledge on this subject.

settlements in the forties and fifties was carried out not only by looters, but also by building companies from the Lower Carpathian Mountains, who later rebuilt the houses in villages near Rzeszów and Nowy Sącz. Some 100 both Orthodox and Greek Catholic church buildings were also destroyed, most of them of historical value. Only a few church buildings were damaged during Second World War or fights with the UIA. The great majority of them were either pulled down or damaged just after the displacement of Lemkos. Polish settlers, namely from nearby villages of the Lower Carpathian Mountains and Podhale and some repatriates from the USSR came to the land left by the Lemkos. Nevertheless the process of Polish people settling there was very slow. All sorts of encouragement to settle Poles in certain parts of *Post-Ukrainian and Post-Ruthenian territories* did not help to fill empty local units in Beskid. In some deserted villages, State Farms were established and remaining non-arable grounds were given to Podhale highlanders for their sheep to graze.

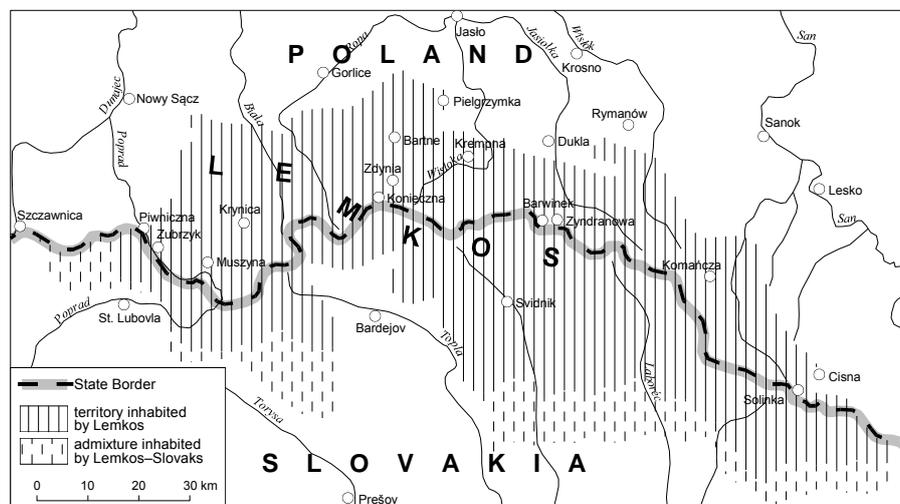
Population density along the Slovakia border in the deserted area fell down to 4 persons per square kilometres (before the Second World War the rate of population in Lemkos' lands was 50 persons per square kilometres on average). During a few post-war years the region which used to be overpopulated became almost deserted and despite the attempts to repopulate it, even nowadays it has neither reached the state of its population in numbers nor the level of economy from the pre-war times.

After the political changes in 1956, a small number of Lemkos came back to their ethnic Fatherland in Beskid. Those returns were often made difficult by institutions at the administrative level, besides Lemkos in many cases had nothing to return to, or they had to repurchase their own houses from Polish settlers. Even though Lemkos were returning from Western Poland, only some 5% of the total number of Lemkos population from the pre-war times live in Lemkos' lands at present. They constitute a significant minority in that region - for both ethnic and religious reasons, Polish Roman Catholic people prevail in this area. The Lemkos' lands in its shape from the times before Second World War ceased to exist.

Lemkos' displacement damaged the specific ethnic and cultural appearance of the region irreversibly. A complete change in ethnic composition which in this region had been practically unaltered from the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries, followed. As the result of the displacement, people who had been living in the area 140 kilometres long and under 20-30 kilometres wide for a few centuries, got divided between two countries stretching from the Dnepr to the Oder.

The displacements have changed ethnic and religious structure both in the Carpathians and

in western and northern Poland. Nevertheless, the assimilation of Ukrainian and Lemko population which was main political goal of Polish communist authorities has never been achieved. In spite of circumstances favouring assimilation such as: spatial dispersion, education in Polish schools, intermarriages, over 40-years-long political pressure, difficult contacts with native culture, the Lemkos are neither socially nor culturally assimilated. The questionnaire survey has confirmed that the Lemkos keep very strongly their national identity, religious, linguistic and cultural distinctness (Barwiński 1995, 1998, 1999).



Lemkos (1944) according to R. Reinfuss

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