Polish autonomous Silesian Voivodeship (1929). National Library, Warsaw, Poland, polona.pl

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BETWEEN 'LIBERATION' AND CONQUEST

THE RED ARMY IN UPPER SILESIA IN 1945

Abstract
The article presents the events accompanying the occupation of Upper Silesia by the Red Army in 1945, with particular emphasis on the actions of the latter which directly affected the inhabitants of this region. In this context, the problem of the division of Upper Silesia into Polish (the Silesian Voivodeship [*województwo śląskie*]) and German parts (the Opole district [*Regierungsbezirk Oppeln*]) and the consequences for the civilian population are outlined. The author has attempted to synthesise the phenomenon of terror that ensued when the towns of Upper Silesia were occupied by the Soviet army. The examples include phenomena such as suicides out of fear or terror, the killings and executions of civilians, the rapes of women (including nuns), abuse of victims, internment and deportation to the Soviet Union of males of working age, the disassembly of industrial plants, and the organised and methodical looting of property, and the destruction of built-up areas which took place after the front moved away and the fighting ceased.

Keywords: Red Army, Upper Silesia, terror, executions, rape, deportation, plunder

In January 1945, the area of Upper Silesia, up to the line of the river Oder, was seized as a result of the so-called Sandomierz-Silesian operation by the 1st Ukrainian Front of the Red Army. On January 19, 1945, the Soviet army crossed the 1939 Polish-German border and, encircling the industrialised part of the region from the north, moved towards Opole and the line of the Oder. A week later, the right bank of Opole was in the hands of the Red Army. By the end of January 1945, Soviet troops had occupied the industrial region, along with Katowice, and the offensive stopped (Stańczyk 1996; Stańczyk 1998). Combat operations resumed in the spring. At the end of March 1945, the Red Army entered Rybnik and Racibórz, and in April, the Red Army pushed out German troops from the southern part of Upper Silesia. When Berlin surrendered on May 3, 1945, Soviet soldiers entered Cieszyn, and on May 9, after the capitulation of the Third Reich, they took Głuchołazy (Warzecha 2014).

The Red Army soldiers reached Upper Silesia after almost three and a half years of fighting on the Eastern Front, where all the written and unwritten rules of warfare had been broken. Soviet propaganda successfully fuelled the inner conviction of many of the soldiers about the need to punish the Germans. It was argued in propaganda slogans that the day they crossed the border of the Third Reich should be the 'judgment day', and that the 'justice' administered by the victors should affect all Germans. The closer they got to the former Polish-German border, the more strongly their desire for revenge was fuelled. Special billboards placed along the marching routes said that they would soon find themselves in an area inhabited by 'Hitlerite beasts', who did not deserve respect or compassion, but only revenge and anger (Madajczyk 1996, 88–89).

In 1922, Upper Silesia was divided; its eastern part went to Poland, forming the greater part of the pre-war autonomous Silesian voivodeship, while the western part (with i.a. towns of Opole, Bytom, Gliwice, Zabrze, Racibórz) remained in Germany as Opole district (*Regierungsbezirk Oppeln*). This division ended in October 1939, when German-occupied Silesian voivodeship was annexed to the Reich. The Soviet soldiers in 1945 who crossed the borderline, which in the years 1922–39 had divided the region into Polish and German parts, were convinced that they were in the area of 'accursed Germania' – an area inhabited exclusively by Germans. Neither the Soviet command, nor particularly the rank and file, were aware of the complex relations between the nationalities in Upper Silesia, which at that time was still an ethnically, culturally and linguistically Polish-German border area.

And although we can also find descriptions of the brutality of the winners in numerous memories and reports from the pre-war Polish Silesian voivodeship, the scale of the crimes in this area was much smaller. The topography of terror clearly shows that it was beyond the line of the pre-war Polish-German border where all hell broke loose. Thus, while in the areas that had been part of the Polish state before September 1, 1939, the Red Army soldiers were theoretically kept within certain limits, after crossing the pre-war border of the Third Reich, they were allowed to do much more. The more so because, in accordance with an order by the Supreme Command of the Red Army of August 9, 1944, the lands that had been part of Germany before September 1939 were treated as spoils of war.

The encroachment of Soviet troops into most Upper Silesian cities, towns and villages proceeded along similar lines. Terror prevailed everywhere: executions, rapes, robberies. Any man who defended his wife or daughter was killed. In order to avoid disgrace and suffering, many people, especially women, took their own lives. There were even cases of entire families committing suicide (Miroszewski 2006, 117; Tracz 2012, 28). As always when the principle of collective responsibility is applied, the repressions mainly affected innocent people: mainly women, the elderly and children, simply because they were Germans, or because they were considered to be Germans by the Red Army soldiers. They were shot for revenge or to facilitate robbery. The murders also affected the inhabitants of towns located in the pre-war Polish part of Upper Silesia. On January 27, 1945, Red Army soldiers massacred the inhabitants of Przyszowice, which until September 1939 had lain within the border of the Polish state, and whose inhabitants had Polish citizenship. The cause of revenge were the German defence posts located on the outskirts of the village. According to another version, the soldiers confused their directions and were convinced that they were in an area that had been within the borders of Germany before September 1939. Soviet soldiers killed 69 persons. The youngest victim was ten days old, the oldest 78 years old. The victors' bullets also killed four prisoners of the Auschwitz concentration camp who had escaped from the 'death march' a few days earlier. Most of the girls and women were raped. (Grodoń 2005, 11–17, 105; Augustyniak 2015, 26-34, 106-109; Dziurok 2015, 12–13).

According to the death registers of the Roman Catholic parishes in Gliwice, 817 people died at the hands of the Red Army. The actual death toll was certainly higher; estimates range from 1000 to 1500 victims. Most of the killings occurred between 23 and 31 January.

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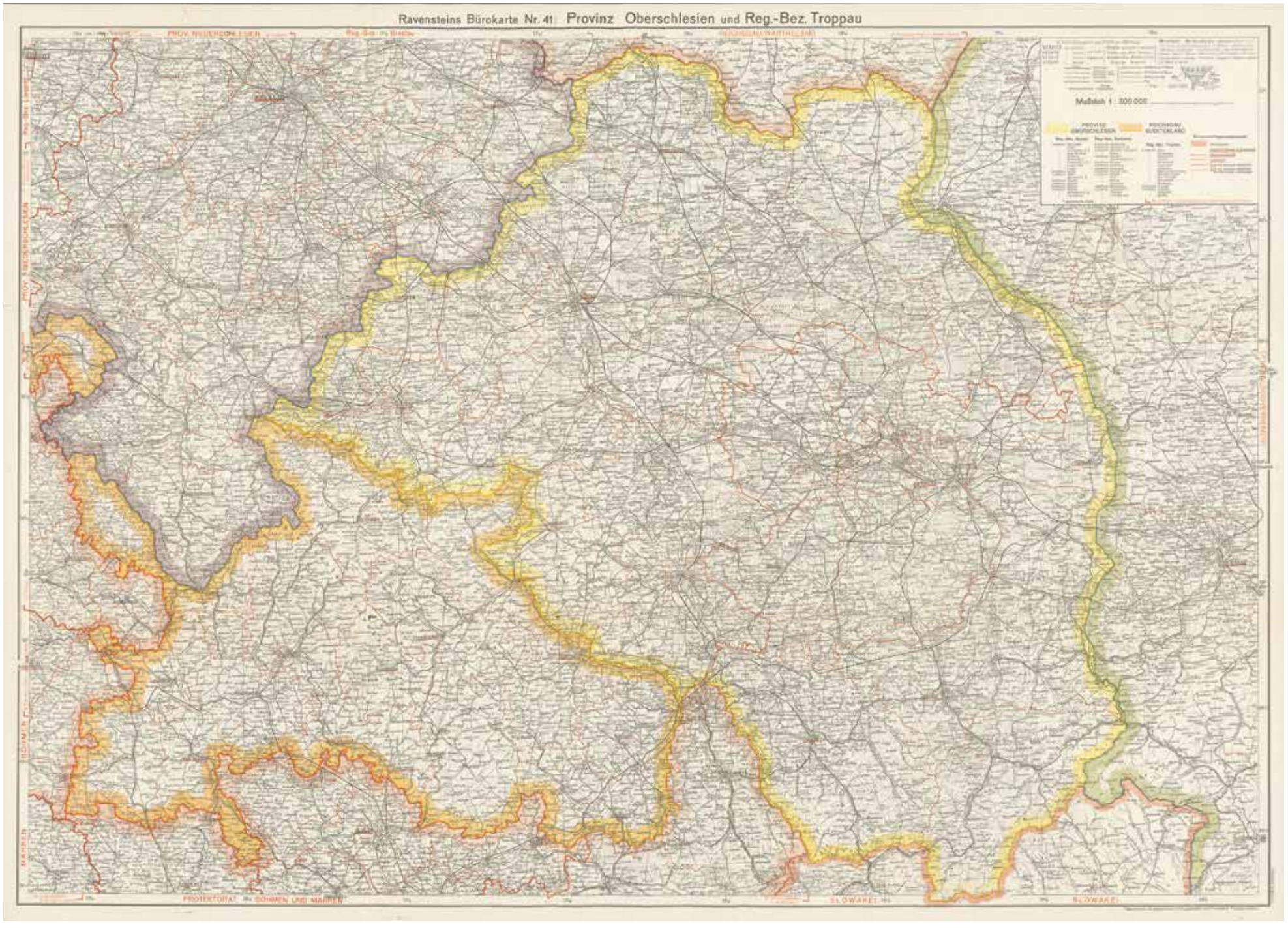

A German map of Upper Silesia (1941). The annexed pre-war Polish Silesian Voivodeship is unrecognizable (as intended to be "Germanised"), and indistinguishable from the pre-war German part of province. National Library, Warsaw, Poland, polona.pl

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The working-class suburbs were not spared either. In Gliwice-Sośnica, the inmates of the old people's home were murdered, and the building set on fire. In Szywałd in Gliwice (today Bojków, a district of the city), 120 people were murdered, including many women and several children (Tracz 2004; Dziurok 2015, 11–12).

In Miechowice, currently a district of Bytom, located right behind the pre-war frontier, between 25 and 28 January, the victors murdered almost 380 people. Most of them (almost 200) were killed on January 27, allegedly in revenge for the shooting of a Soviet officer. The men were taken from houses and cellars and killed on the spot, or led to a nearby forest and killed there with rifle fire. Some were murdered by being beaten with rifle butts or stabbed with bayonets, then being left in the cold to die in agony. The Red Army soldiers acted very meticulously, combing the area house by house. The invalids were killed with particular cruelty, probably on the basis of the conviction that they had become disabled during the war. The fact that most of them were former World War I veterans and retired miners who had suffered permanent injuries while working underground was not taken into account. As established during the investigation conducted by the prosecutors of the Branch Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Katowice, the injuries to the heads of the dead were so extensive that it was difficult to judge whether they had been shot or had had their heads crushed with rifle butts. The local parish priest, Fr. Jan Frenzl, was tortured and then shot (Bonczol 1993; Koj 2012).

Similarly to Bytom, in Zabrze the murder of a Soviet officer on January 26, 1945, became a pretext for a pogrom of civilians. In retaliation, the Red Army soldiers set fire to the church of the Holy Spirit. The fire spread quickly and the buildings on the other side of the street burst into flames. The men were taken out of the neighbouring houses and then shot (Miroszewski 2006).

The ordeal of Opole region (located on the German side of the 1922–1939 border), and especially of its part on the Western bank of Oder river, is symbolised by the massacre of the last days of January 1945 in the village of Boguszyce, where 283 civilians were murdered. Among them were both the inhabitants of the village and refugees from Opole and the surrounding towns. About 280 people were murdered in the right-bank part of Opole. Over 200 people died in Byczyna, 150 in Czarnowąsy, 118 in Pokój, and about 100 people in the village of Kup. There are many more similar examples. (Waleński 2015; Dziurok 2015, 15; Hanich 2012, 212–218).

People were often killed for seemingly trivial reasons. Often the pretext was finding a uniform of any civilian formation, such as the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*, fire brigade, post office, railroad or forest service, at home. It was enough to find swastika symbols on it. Also, the photos of husbands or sons in *Wehrmacht* uniforms (as the Polish inhabitants of the occupied Upper Silesia had been called up to serve in the German armed forces), which were often displayed in places of honour in each house, acted on the Red Army like the proverbial 'red rag to a bull', as did portraits of Hitler or Nazi banners. Having pre-war ID cards of membership of the Union of Poles in Germany, or knowing the Polish language, did not help in the face of the victors' aggression. The bloody harvest did not even spare the forced laborers, who had been awaiting the Red Army as liberators. For example, in Gliwice on January 26, 1945, Soviet soldiers murdered Franciszek Urbański, a pre-war employee of the Ministry of the Treasury in Warsaw, who after the Warsaw Rising found himself in Upper Silesia where he was assigned to forced labour in the arms industry (Tracz 2014).

Priests, monks and nuns were not spared either. Priests died defending their parishioners, especially women, or trying to mediate with the ruthless soldiers. In Gogolin, a dozen or so women who had been hiding with a priest were shot dead; the house was drenched with gasoline and set on fire. Four clergymen were murdered in Brzezinka near Gliwice, three in Prudnik, and two priests each in Bytom, Gogolin and Opole. In total, 39 Catholic priests and an Evangelical pastor died at the hands of the Red Army in the period from May to January 1945 in the part of Upper Silesia that had been part of Germany before September 1, 1939. Among the dead were 17 parish priests and 7 monks. The oldest of the murdered priests was 79 years old, the youngest was 34 years old. 27 of them were 'Utraquists,' who spoke both German and Polish, and used those languages in church ministry (Hanich 2019, 61–63).

In the eyes of the Soviet soldiers, the women living in Upper Silesia were all German, regardless of their declared nationality, mother tongue or religion. The Red Army soldiers and their commanders did not bother to check their national identifications. The tragic experiences of Upper Silesian women involved rape, including mass rapes committed by soldiers who were often drunk, which additionally intensified the aggression. They were raped regardless of their looks, age or marital status. According to the extant sources and reports, young girls as well as grey-haired elderly women were

assaulted. Group rapes when several, a dozen or even more soldiers raped one victim were particularly brutal. Most of the victims died during the rape or just after it due to wounds and injuries. Resistance only increased the brutality of the perpetrators, and any women who tried to resist their captors were raped with even greater brutality or killed. Those who tried to prevent the rapes were also murdered. Among the victims shot or beaten to death for the mere fact of standing up for women were parents, grandparents, the elderly and priests.

In Gliwice, Zabrze and Bytom, the intensity of rapes was the highest in the first three or four days after the arrival of the Red Army soldiers. The further west, the worse it was. In Dobrzeń Wielki, soldiers of the 14th Guards Infantry Division raped most of the women and girls. In the aforementioned Boguszyce and neighbouring Źlinica, soldiers from the 125th Infantry Division raped almost all the women and girls, often collectively, for three days and three nights. The same happened wherever the Soviet soldiers appeared. The most tragic events in Upper Silesia took place at the end of March 1945 in Nysa, where, after the evacuation of the population, about 200 nuns were left: members of the Sisters of Mercy of St. Borromeo, the Sisters of Saint Elizabeth, the Sisters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception, and the Sisters of Notre Dame, who looked after the sick and the elderly who stayed in the city. The Red Army soldiers murdered 27 nuns and raped over 150, some of them repeatedly. The Sisters of Saint Elizabeth suffered most: the drunken Soviet soldiers did not spare even 80-year-old old women. The nuns were killed trying to protect their sisters. In the motherhouse of the Elizabethan sisters, women were separated into Germans and Poles; the former were murdered at once, the latter raped all night. The buildings of the monastery of St. George and the monastery of St. Notburga were set alight. Drunken soldiers also set fire to the old people's home in which the old people locked inside burned to death (Maziarz 2012, 56–57; Dziurok 2015, 15; Hanich 2019, 105). Similar ordeals were endured by the inhabitants of most of the monasteries in Upper Silesia, as well as the nuns from Namysłów, Kluczbork, Prudnik, and other towns where religious congregations were located. The sisters who were outside the monasteries at the time did not escape the same tragic fate, either. In Głubczyce, women, children and the elderly sought refuge in the religious house of the Verbist priests and in the Franciscan monastery. After the town was seized, the people in hiding were

found and most of the women were raped, including the nuns. In Mikołów, on January 27, 1945, Soviet soldiers raped and then brutally murdered two sisters from the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Saviour (Salvatorian Sisters). The perpetrators stabbed them with bayonets, one of the victims had her teeth broken, and they were shot at with a revolver (Dziurok 2015, 14).

Rapes were also perpetrated on the inmates of nursing homes, health institutions, and orphans from orphanages and church foundations in Upper Silesia. Witness reports often speak of sophisticated cruelty of the perpetrators. Rape victims were additionally mutilated, and their desecrated bodies were left in the streets, as was the case *inter alia* in Strzelce Opolskie, where the Red Army soldiers, allegedly in retaliation for the shooting of a Soviet officer by a *Hitlerjugend* member, burned most of the buildings in the town centre after looting, killing and raping. The mutilated bodies of the women lay among the fires for a long time. The corpses were left with their limbs cut off, their abdomens ripped, and bottles and other objects placed in the perineum (Tracz 2015).

The rapes often ended in unwanted pregnancies. Women faced the dilemma of whether to abort the pregnancy or bring it to term. Eventually, some gave birth to the children, while others had abortions. Based on the memories and reports of doctors and nurses, we may assume that mass abortions were performed in hospitals and health clinics in the spring of 1945. In the second half of the year, a Commission for the Care of Rape Victims (*Komisja Opieki nad Ofiarami Gwałtu*) operated at the Polish Red Cross Unit in Katowice. Similar institutions were established in other cities, often under slightly different names, such as the Committee for Bringing Aid to Rape Victims (*Komitet Niesienia Pomocy Ofiarom Gwałtu*) which operated in Cieszyn (Tracz 2015). They kept records concerning the raped women and enabled access to professional medical assistance, including the termination of pregnancies. Referrals for abortion were also issued by courts and administrative authorities. The documents most often stated euphemistically that 'the rape was related to the circumstances of the war'. It is not known how many women had secret abortions, with no registration or medical report. The rapes were followed by numerous diseases of the genital organs and venereal diseases, the number of which in 1945 in Upper Silesia was staggering. Combating the diseases left behind by the Red Army soldiers took months and was a source of additional humiliation for many women. Many died as a result of complications. For years, in many Silesian

homes it was a taboo subject, and the events that happened in January 1945 were kept quiet by many women (Tracz 2015).

Obviously, it would be an oversimplification to portray all Red Army soldiers as murderers, looters and rapists. Among the mass of soldiers who swept through Upper Silesia in 1945, there were also many who, despite the cruelty of the war, retained the remnants of their humanity. There are reports (although not very common) of help being offered by the Red Army soldiers to isolated women and children. Many of them were seen to make the Orthodox sign of the cross when they saw roadside shrines or holy pictures in Upper Silesian houses. Some of them left fond memories of playing with children, or offering help in finding food for single mothers and the youngest, reminding them of their own families left in the East. Unfortunately, these soldiers seem to have been in the minority.

In Yalta, Joseph Stalin obtained the Allied consent to use German civilians as forced labour – as part of war reparations agreement. At the beginning of February 1945, right after closing of the Crimea Conference, a large-scale action was launched by the Soviet services to detain able-bodied men and then deport them deep into the Soviet Union. In accordance with a decision by the Soviet State Defence Committee, at the beginning of February 1945, a large operation to mobilise, intern and deport eastwards citizens of the German Reich, mainly men between 17 and 50 years of age, was set in motion. This operation – aiming at the so-called mobilisation of men for forced labour – was preceded by mass arrests in the rear of the First Ukrainian Front "in order to cleanse the rears of Red Army from hostile elements," ordered by Lavrentiy Beria on January 11, 1945. The order established also NKVD plenipotentiaries, authorized to arrest "the hostile elements" on the front's rear. At some point, both operations – "rears' cleaning" and deportation of able-bodied men for forced labour – overlapped. As a result of the "rears' cleaning" operation, the Polish population of the former Silesian voivodeship (a substantial part of which was included in the German National List, *Deutsche Volksliste*) suffered immensely. In mid-February 1945, announcements appearing in most of the towns of Upper Silesia, in the areas that until September 1939 had been within the borders of Germany, urged men to report to designated places, from where they were to be directed to clear up war damages. Some volunteered, but many were taken from their homes, from the streets and from workplaces. They were then put in makeshift places of isolation, from where they were led to railway stations, and subsequently

transported deep into the Soviet Union. The journeys took up to several weeks, during which the unheated wagons, poor sanitation, lack of food and medical care caused numerous deaths, even before the deportation sites were reached. Most of the detainees ended up in industrialised regions of eastern Ukraine. Smaller groups were transported into the territory of today's Belarus, to Georgia, to Kandalaksha in the Murmansk region, to Kemerovo in Siberia, and to Krasnovodsk (today Turkmenbashi) near the border with Iran. Harsh living conditions and excessive, exhausting labour resulted in high mortality. It is difficult to estimate how many people were actually deported to the Soviet Union (Węgrzyn 2014; Węgrzyn 2015; Węgrzyn 2019). The personal database of deportees developed by Dariusz Węgrzyn PhD at the IPN's Katowice Branch has already over 46,000 names on it, and this is hardly the final figure (Babak 2018; Węgrzyn 2021). It was only in the summer of 1945 that the Polish authorities took steps to release the deported, most of whom were miners. A 'List of Polish miners taken to the USSR' was drawn up, although it only contained 9,877 names (Gołasz 2020). It should be noted that as a result of those steps, up to the December 1946, 2,333 persons came back from the Soviet Union, of whom only 165 were registered in the abovementioned 'List'. Up to the end of September 1949, 5,603 miners came back, and only 1,645 were registered in 'List' (Fertacz 2004). In the years that followed, only a minority of the deported people returned home. The Soviet authorities sent back sick and exhausted people who often died on their way back or shortly after their return (Węgrzyn 2019; Węgrzyn 2015; Węgrzyn 2014; Dziurok 2015, 19-20).

Most Upper Silesian cities did not suffer due to direct military actions, and the battles that took place here and there did not involve persistent street fights, aggreviated by aviation and artillery fire. The destruction of public buildings, tenement houses and various urban components was in most cases the aftermath of the actions of the Red Army after the fighting ended. In Katowice, drunk soldiers set fire to the city-centre buildings on purpose. Also in Bytom, the Market Square and many tenement houses in the adjacent streets were completely burnt down after the city was occupied. In the euphoria of victory, the castle in Miechowice was set on fire (Woźniczka 2014, 49–50). In Gliwice, about 30 percent of the buildings in the city centre were destroyed, including a significant part of the tenement houses in the Market Square, the theatre building and Haus Oberschlesien hotel (Tracz 2004, 47–48). The old town centres in Strzelce Opolskie,

Olesno, Ujazd, Opole and Wołczyn were almost completely destroyed by arson and looting. Tenement houses in Pyskowice and Toszek were also set on fire. In Nysa, known as 'the Silesian Rome' on account of its valuable historic architecture, the buildings were almost completely burned to the ground (Foltyn 2000; Hałajko 2019).

At the orders of the Red Army command, the seized German property was referred to as 'spoils of war'. In February 1945, Plenipotentiaries of the Special Committee of the GKO (State Defence Committee) of the Soviet Union were appointed at the command of the fronts, to which the War Trophy Teams were subordinated; these bodies were the first to draw up plans and lists of objects intended for transportation deep into the Soviet Union. The HQ of the Plenipotentiary at the 1st Ukrainian Front, Maksim Saburov, was located in Bytom. The experts he supervised analysed the Silesian industry in both the Polish and German parts of Upper Silesia; by March 22, 1945, they made a list containing a detailed description of the equipment – and even entire factories – selected for removal (Woźniczka 2010, 120–121). Meanwhile, the beginning of March saw the start of the disassembly and transport of, among others, all the equipment of the pipe mills belonging to the *Vereinigte Oberschlesische Hüttenwerke* in Gliwice (Huta Gliwice); it was disassembled and transported to the Lenin factory in Dnepropetrovsk. Similarly, the contents of the *Julienhütte* (Huta Bobrek) steelworks in Bobrek were sent to the Dzerzhinsky factory in Dnipro. Also in March, the rolling mills and electric furnaces at the *Hermina Hütte* (Huta Łabędy) in Łabędy, were dismantled, and the equipment of the Upper Silesian power plants in Miechowice, Zabrze, Zdzieszowice, Mikulczyce and Blachownia was taken apart. In the second half of March, an intensive disassembly programme began; based on the materials prepared at that time, further disassembly and transportation was carried out. The dismantling was implemented by teams consisting of interned local people and POWs working under the leadership of officers of the Soviet War Trophy Teams. The employees worked in a hurry, and most of them did not have the appropriate qualifications to perform this type of work. In effect, many of the machines and equipment were severely damaged or destroyed. The Soviet War Trophy Teams dismantled almost everything that had any value, ranging from large metallurgical machines to small plants and workshops. For example, in March 1945 alone, 360 machine tools were transported from the *Eintrachthütte* (Huta Zgoda) in Świętochłowice, and 46 machines

from the *Bismarckhütte* (Huta Batory) in Hajduki (Chorzów Batory). The *Hütten- und Edelstahlwerk Malapane* (Huta Małapanew) plant in Ozimek lost two hundred machine tools, six electric furnaces, thirty moulding machines and one hundred motors. In Zabrze, the largest and most modern power plant in Silesia was completely dismantled. A similar fate befell the power plants in Blachownia, Kędzierzyn and Miechowice, among others. Finished rolled products, pipes, metal products and wire ropes were also removed. In the second quarter of 1945, the pace of the looting was so high that the occupiers could not keep up with the removal of their loot. Smaller devices and machines were taken away by cars. In June 1945 alone, about fourteen thousand railway carriages loaded with looted goods left the area of the Regional State Railways Directorate in Katowice. The dismantling and removal of industrial infrastructure was a consistent element of the policy of the victors who often completely ignored the position of the Polish side. This practice continued long after the front line had moved far to the west, and did not end with the end of the fighting on the Western Front in Europe in May 1945; this operation only came to a halt following the Polish-Soviet agreements signed after the Potsdam Conference in August 1945. By that time, however, the Soviets had successfully emptied most of the plants. The scale of the losses was enormous, and the decline in production in individual industries ranged from 50 to 70 percent. Even in March 1945, when the Polish administration took over the area of the former Opole district, a significant part of the plants were unfit for use (Dziurok, Musiał 2009, 323–342).

The murders of civilians, the terror, rapes, internment and deportation of men, the organised and methodically carried out theft and looting – all of the above add up to the tragic balance of the entry and presence of the Red Army in Upper Silesia in 1945. Given that, the hypothesis concerning the 'liberation' of the region, promoted for half a century after the war, may only have a *raison d'ëtre* in emotional terms, if we ignore the facts. However, these very facts irrefutably question the truthfulness of the idyllic accounts that the books published before 1989 are full of (Dolata 1965; Serafin 1976; Konieczny 1985; Osmańczyk 1985). Even if the entry of the Red Army did interrupt the extermination policy of the Third Reich, the behaviour of the conquerors – both in the area that had been part of the German Opole district before 1939, and the Polish Silesian voivodeship – bore all the hallmarks of a conquest, and should be regarded as such.

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