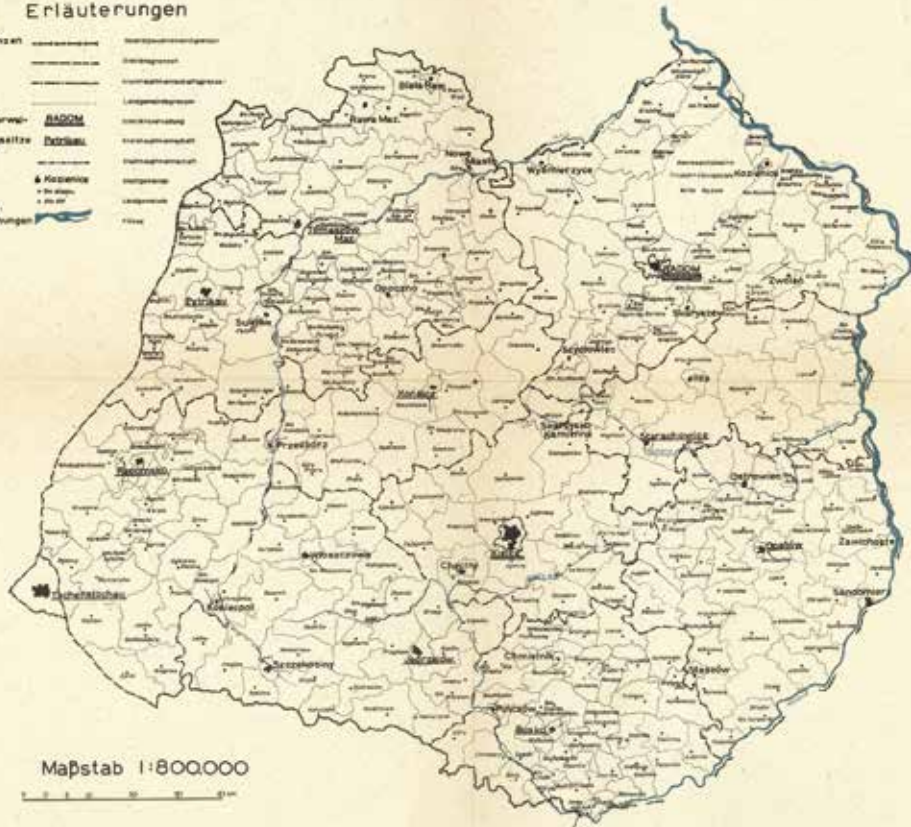


# GENERALGOUVERNEMENT - DISTRIKT RADOM

## Erläuterungen

- Grenzen**
- Staatsgrenzen
  - Provinzgrenzen
  - Kreisgrenzen
  - Landgemeinde
- Verwaltungseinheiten**
- RADOM** Kreis
  - Distrikte** Kreis
  - Kapitel** Kreis
- Sonst. Bezeichnungen**
- Eisenbahn
  - Fluss



Maßstab 1:800.000



Verarbeitet im Reichsamt für  
die Verwaltung des besetzten Ostens  
(Verwaltungsamt Radom, 1939)

German official map 'Generalgouvernement: Distrikt Radom' (1939), showing the southeastern part of German wartime Distrikt Radom, with wartime districts Opatów and Busko, where in 1944 the Sandomierz bridgehead was set.  
National Library, Warsaw, Poland, polona.pl

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# THE RED ARMY'S 'FRONTLINE OPPRESSION' AT THE SANDOMIERZ BRIDGEHEAD (AUGUST 1944 – JANUARY 1945)

## **Abstract**

This article is part of a current of research into social history during the Second World War, dealing with how the Red Army's Sandomierz-Baranów bridgehead on the western bank of the Vistula operated from the second half of 1944 to the beginning of 1945. It draws upon testimonies confirming the occurrence of the phenomenon of the so-called 'frontline oppression' at the Sandomierz bridgehead. This term has been used to describe the negative aspects associated with the period when Soviet troops were stationed there. The forms of oppression included crimes and offences committed by individual soldiers or groups of Red Army soldiers against the inhabitants of the bridgehead or their property. In addition, other forms of oppression included organised actions, involving the over-exploitation of the products and raw materials from the area. Both individual and collective actions of this nature contributed to the deterioration of the quality of life and the condition of the community residing at the bridgehead at the time. The Sandomierz bridgehead was one of several parts of Polish territory where the German occupying authorities' writ had ceased to run. The civilian administration was being exercised by offices subordinate to the Polish Committee of National

Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*, PKWN), an authority dependent on and subordinate to the Soviet Union. Thus, the region of interest was part of a state which the Soviet authorities recognised as their ally. Despite that, the circumstances accompanying the stationing of the 'allied' Red Army at the bridgehead are much different from those that have been perpetuated over the years giving a one-sided and false picture of the presence of Soviet troops on Polish territory after 1944.

**Keywords:** Red Army, Sandomierz bridgehead, frontline oppression, assaults, looting, over-exploitation

## Introduction

The establishment and functioning of the military bridgehead in the Sandomierz area in August 1944 (until the offensive of the Red Army's January in 1945) remains one of the most important events in the history of the Kielce region. The military significance of the Sandomierz bridgehead is far more than merely a regional phenomenon. Piotr Sierant regarded its establishment as an important event in the final phase of the Second World War. The establishment of the military bridgehead near Sandomierz was one of the effects of the Lwów-Sandomierz operation carried out by the Red Army in the summer of 1944. The Sandomierz bridgehead proved to be the most extensive area of its kind. Soviet soldiers captured also two smaller bridgeheads at this time: one on the Vistula near Magnuszew, the other on the Narew near Różan. The crossing of the Vistula and the subsequent securing of the captured bridgehead opened up significant opportunities for the Soviet forces to launch another major military operation thereafter. The four-month period when the Soviet troops were stationed in the Sandomierz area allowed for the accumulation of the necessary resources, thanks to which the objectives set for the soldiers of the 1st Ukrainian Front in the summer of 1944 could be achieved as early as the first half of 1945. As part of the Vistula-Oder operation, the soldiers on this part of the front launched an attack from the Sandomierz bridgehead, which paved the way for taking Cracow and reaching Upper Silesia. The military importance of the Sandomierz bridgehead is also evidenced by the scale of the casualties inflicted during the battles. According to estimates, no fewer than 40,000 German soldiers (according to the Soviet data) and around 18,000 Red Army soldiers (according to the German data) died in the so-called Great Battle of the Sandomierz bridgehead

(August 1944), which lasted for about three weeks. Both armies also lost a significant amount of weapon and military equipment, including armoured vehicles (no less than 700 tanks) and aircraft (Sierant 2004, 278; Stańczyk 2001, 173–174, 177–178; Matusak 1975, 31). This phenomenon has been noted and discussed by researchers of the history of World War II (see among others, Stańczyk 1998) and historians dealing with the outset of the Communist rule in the region. Questions related to the circumstances in which local organs and institutions of authority subordinate to the PKWN were set up in the Sandomierz area have been discussed by Zbigniew Kalandyk, among others (see Kalandyk 2005); Marek Jończyk and Robert Kuśnierz have written about the foundations of the apparatus of repression in the bridgehead area (Jończyk 2008; Kuśnierz 2012). Cases of communist repressions against the residents of Sandomierz have been analysed by Konrad Fedorowski and Robert Piwko, among others (Fedorowski 2012; Piwko 2016 (1); Piwko 2016 (2); Piwko 2019). The social history of the bridgehead has been explored to a lesser extent; topics related to this issue have been touched upon by Z. Kalandyk, Grzegorz Miernik and Józef Myjak, among others (see Kalandyk 2016; Miernik 2012; Myjak 2013). The social situation in the region received limited attention from Stanisław Meducki, the co-author of a multi-volume monograph on the history of Sandomierz (Meducki 1994). It should be noted that under the Communist dictatorship certain aspects of political and social life were excluded from research, due to the pro-Soviet direction of the state's politics of history. Polish-Soviet relations were presented from the perspective of absolute Polish-Soviet 'friendship'. The literature produced at the time, including scholarly works, omitted or failed to present a complete picture of this relationship. This may be exemplified by two monographs written during the Communist period, in which extensive sections were devoted to the situation prevailing at the bridgehead. Thus, when describing the course of the so-called land reform of 1944, Stefan Iwaniak completely omitted anything related to the stationing of the Red Army in the region. Jan Naumiuk also did not mention it when discussing the beginnings of the Polish Workers' Party in the Sandomierz area (see Iwaniak 1975, 43-77; Naumiuk 1976, 196–246).

The aim of the present article is to supplement the state of research into everyday life at the bridgehead during the time under discussion. This sketch is devoted to a topic hitherto neglected by historians, historians of local history and journalists: it attempts to characterise the social effects of the stationing of Red Army troops

at the Sandomierz bridgehead (the issues related to the stationing of Red Army troops in the Kielce region in 1944–1945 have not so far been taken up by many researchers: see Zawisza 2013; Wróbel, Śmietanka-Kruszelnicki 2006). The stay of the Soviet troops there, even though it lasted less than six months, was one of the most important factors shaping the social situation in the region. The author has decided to present and discuss examples of the statements, behaviour and attitudes of the Red Army soldiers who were involved in the so-called ‘frontline oppression’ (*ucisk przyfrontowy*). This term was used to describe the activities of the Red Army soldiers and the Soviet military administration contributing to the deterioration of the quality of life among the permanent residents of the Sandomierz district. The term ‘frontline oppression by the Red Army’ comes from the documentation made by the Sandomierz district governor, *starosta*. A report documenting the situation in the Sandomierz district in June 1945 refers to the “unfriendly atmosphere towards the Red Army” that apparently prevailed among the local population. Cyprian Kalina, the district governor (*starosta*) of Sandomierz at that time, explained that the reluctant attitude towards the Soviet army was the result of the experience of the very same ‘frontline oppression’ exerted by the Red Army on the local population (see the State Archive in Kielce, Sandomierz Branch, hereinafter APS, collection Starostwo Powiatowe w Sandomierzu, hereinafter SPS, 62, Situation reports 1944-5, the Sandomierz *starosta*’s report for June 1945, Sandomierz, 20 July 1945, p. 31).

The time framework adopted in this article coincides with the duration of the bridgehead. It was established in the final phase of the Lwów-Sandomierz operation in August 1944. The outset of the Red Army’s January offensive (the Vistula-Oder operation) marks the end of its existence in January 1945. The Sandomierz bridgehead was created in the eastern part of the pre-war Kielce voivodeship. It occupied an area of about 2000 km<sup>2</sup>: the territory of the bridgehead beyond the front line included the area of the pre-war Sandomierz district (*powiat*) and parts of the Stopnica and Opatów districts (the Sandomierz district minus part of the Zawichost municipality [*gmina*]; the Opatów district [the municipalities of Piórków, Łągów, Baćkowice, Iwaniska, Modliborzyce, Malkowice, Rębów and Gęsicze]; and the Stopnica district [the entire municipalities of Łubnice and Oględów, and partly those of Kurozwęki, Oleśnica, Pacanów, Szydłów, Tuczępy, Wolica], see Naumiuk 1976). Its shape resembled a triangle,

the base of which ran along the line of the River Vistula from the south and east (this southern section started at the height of the villages of Kępa Lubawska and Szczucin; in the north it ended near the River San's estuary into the Vistula), and its sides were at the southern and northern borders of the frontline (in the north the border crossed the areas of the municipalities of Dwikozy, Wilczyce, Lipnik and Baćkowice; in the south, the municipalities of Biechów, Stopnica, Tuczępy, Szydłów, Kurozwęki and Rembów. The two frontiers merged in the area of the municipalities of Łagów and Piórków, in the Opatów district). According to estimates, up to 300,000 people may have lived in that area in the second half of 1944 – the inhabitants, an unknown number of the Red Army soldiers, as well as functionaries of the security apparatus and other Soviet institutions.

The paper is based on research conducted in the Sandomierz Branch of the State Archive in Kielce, including the collection of the Sandomierz District authority (*Starostwo Powiatowe w Sandomierzu*). This collection offers insightful material relating to this subject: first of all, records of official correspondence between the municipal authorities and the district authorities, concerned with issues related to the various forms of 'frontline oppression' exerted on the civilian population. Similar data can also be found in official reports and accounts. Some of the surviving letters include reports or notices submitted by individuals to lower-level authorities (*zarządy gmin*, municipality authorities). Mostly handwritten, they bear no signs of self-censorship, polishing or generalisations. In my opinion, the materials are reliable. The testimonies documenting the negative behaviour of the Red Army soldiers come from different parts of the area under consideration, and confirm that the conduct of the Red Army soldiers was commonplace. One example was the scale of looting carried out by individual soldiers or their units. It should be emphasised that the referenced materials come from institutions of the party-state apparatus of the so-called People's Republic of Poland. Formally, they were subordinate to the Communist authorities established in Poland at that time: the Polish Committee of National Liberation (PKWN) and the Country's National Council (*Krajowa Rada Narodowa*, KRN). In fact, these bodies were tools for carrying out the orders of the Communist party, the Polish Workers' Party (*Polska Partia Robotnicza*, PPR). In my opinion, therefore, the provenance of the documents and the circumstances in which they were written strongly support the credibility of the records contained in them.

## Many Faces of 'Frontline Oppression': Evacuation, Requisitions, Looting, Assaults, Demolition

The phrase 'frontline oppression' (*ucisk przyfrontowy*) has been used to describe the actions taken by the Red Army which negatively affected the situation of the local civilians, both regarding the permanent residents and temporary residents of the bridgehead area. The formal framework for the operation of the Soviet Army on the occupied Polish territories recognised by the Soviet Union as subject to the authority of the PKWN (i.e. those which excluded the pre-war Republic of Poland's eastern territories) was contained in an agreement signed on 26 July 1944 in Moscow between the PKWN and the Soviet government "on the relations between the Soviet Commander-in-Chief and the Polish administration since the entry of the Soviet army onto Polish territory". The agreement contained provisions which formally laid out the principles governing the Soviet units' dislocation into two zones: in the direct battle zone, and in areas beyond this zone. In the case of the former (Articles 1 and 5), full authority rested with the 'commander-in-chief of the Soviet troops', and a liaison officer on the Polish side, was designated as a PKWN's representative. In the case of those areas not constituting the operational zone, administrative authority was to be vested in an administration appointed by the PKWN (see the 'Agreement between the PKWN and the Government of the USSR on relations between the Soviet Commander-in-Chief and the Polish administration after the entry of Soviet troops on Polish territory', published in *Dokumenty* 1974, 155-7). This agreement legalised the Soviet military administration of the occupied territories.

In the light of the definition given above, we may distinguish three main forms of oppression. First, criminal acts or offences committed by an individual or a group of the Red Army soldiers against the inhabitants or against their property. Such acts were commonplace. (see Zawisza 2013, 131-132). Here I will not present the course, consequences and balance sheet of the repressive policy against those individuals and groups the Soviet authorities and the Communist authorities in Poland considered hostile. Such acts took place at the Sandomierz bridgehead with particular intensity after October 1944. As part of the marginalisation and liquidation of 'political

enemies, all those who had been members, soldiers, co-workers and supporters of the Polish Underground State, or of circles critical of the 'new' authorities and the values they represented, were subject to repression. In the second half of 1944, there were a number of cases of arrests, detentions, imprisonments, searches of persons and apartments, brutal 'interrogations', as well as deportations to the USSR, and murders committed for political reasons (Meducki 1994, 208, Piwko 2019, 75–82). The oppression also took a more organised nature, for example, involving the military's 'acquisition' (looting) of a range of products and materials at the expense of civilians. This included food, crops and livestock, but also timber, metals, equipment and tools. Conducting this kind of 'expansive economy' led, in extreme cases, to the stripping of farms and villages of the basic products and raw materials, as well as items of agricultural equipment and tools, even down to the destruction of the basic infrastructure: buildings, roads and the power grid (also by cutting down electricity poles). Another question is how to assess the operation that the Red Army command initiated and implemented on the basis of military justification, and which simultaneously caused a drastic deterioration of the standard of living among the civilians.

The most significant example of this form of repression was forced evacuation of approximately between 60,000 and 100,000 people residing in villages in close proximity to the bridgehead's perimeter. Such actions were justified in terms of military objectives (to prepare the defence infrastructure) and humanitarian needs (to protect the population and prevent an increase in the number of civilian victims of German shelling). However, this evacuation, which was ordered and partly executed by the army, was not properly carried out for various reasons. One serious problem was that the administrative authorities subordinate to the PKWN proved to be weak and unprepared for the challenge. It became clear that they lacked the means, not so much to transport the large numbers of people deep into the bridgehead, as to provide basic conditions for them to stay there. For example, a questionnaire prepared in 1946 in the Dwikozy municipality near Sandomierz contained basic information on the scale of crimes and destruction committed during the war and German occupation. A brief outline of the situation of the individuals displaced from the bridgehead was included at the end of the report along with a critical assessment of the way in which the evacuation was implemented:



The relocated population on both the Russian and German sides [of the front] was left on its own. The situation was similar on the territory of liberated Poland, even though the Polish government had already been established. Nevertheless, there was no one to take care for people or take any interest in them. Most people slept in backyards, sheds and pigsties despite the cold and frost. The sick and the hungry had no one to come to their aid. (State Archive in Kielce [hereinafter APK], collection Urząd Kielecki Wojewódzki II, 2182, Sandomierz district: chronicle of events during the occupation, questionnaire on events of historical importance in Kielce voivodeship in 1939–1945, Dwikozy, 1946, p. 9)

The displacement of thousands of people led to a sharp increase in population density. Overcrowded areas spread all over the bridgehead, with evacuees and permanent residents burdened by their presence, stagnated during the autumn and winter seasons. One of the evacuees, Zofia Kowalska *née* Godzina, was nine years old in August 1944. As a child, she remembered the circumstances of leaving the family farm in Gołębiów. In 2013, she remembered:

After Gołębiów was taken by the Russians, the military command ordered the inhabitants to move out of the village. We were relocated deep into the bridgehead. The inhabitants of Gołębiów settled in the village of Byszów in the Klimontów commune. There, we were not directly affected by the activities on the front, as we had been [before]. We were in exile until February 1945. Our parents arranged some makeshift habitation in the camp. They put straw on the planks and some bedding on top. My mother set up a field kitchen in the yard in front of the cowshed. (Myjak 2013, 55–56)

In extreme cases, such as the one in the Rytwiany municipality, the number of relocated people more than tripled the number of permanent residents. Rytwiany, which had had a population of 1,941, was expanded by a further 6,523 people, including 895 children under the age of five. In other villages in the municipality the situation was similar: 6,226 people (including 219 children under five) were evacuated to Kłoda, with 793 inhabitants; 1,090 people (including 125 children under five) were evacuated to Szczeka, with 674 inhabitants; 1,704 people (including 319 children under five) were evacuated to Ruda, with 468 inhabitants, and 172 people (including 17 children under five) were evacuated to Niedziałka, with 333 inhabitants (APS,

SPS, 464, lists of displaced persons and those in need of assistance; list of displaced persons residing in the Rytwiany municipality, Rytwiany, 1944, 155).

The risk of humanitarian and epidemic disaster was regularly reported by the district doctor in Sandomierz. The authorities of the most endangered municipality also presented similar reports. Official requests were made to the provincial authorities for a “relief” from the excess population of evacuees, but also from the military troops stationed there. One such example is given in a letter from November 1944, in which the municipality authority in Samborzec (Sandomierz district) asks for help from the Voivodeship National Council in Kielce (which was still under German occupation at that time) with its seat in Sandomierz. They wrote:

According to the statement, there are 1303 residential buildings in the municipality of Samborzec. Permanent residents 6362, evacuees 8535. 14,897 people in total. In addition to this population, the army is also stationed there. In view of the huge concentration of the population, which we cannot properly accommodate, and which can no longer live in barns or be provided with proper provisions, we ask the Voivodeship National Council [in Kielce with its seat in Sandomierz] to intercede with the military authorities of the Red Army with regard to liberating the [municipality] of Samborzec from the army. (APS, SPS, 7, Social actions directed by the district governor, letter to the Voivodeship National Council in Kielce with seat in Sandomierz on the situation in Samborzec commune, Sandomierz, 22 November 1944, p. 11).

In such a difficult atmosphere, there were a number of interactions and contacts between Red Army soldiers and residents, including those of a negative nature. The most frequently recorded crimes committed by the Red Army soldiers included repeated thefts and robberies, often combined with various forms of violence – intimidation, threats, beatings, rape, injury and death. This is confirmed by numerous cases reported in the autumn of 1944 in the municipality of Osiek in today’s Staszów district. Thefts occurred mainly at night. One such example is a robbery on a farm in Osieczek (now part of the town of Osiek). A cartload of Soviet soldiers drove into a farmyard and entered the barn, taking some of the unthreshed grain; they used the rest as fodder for their horses. When the farmer tried to stop the looting, he was, as noted in the report, “turned

back by soldiers threatening him with weapons” (APS, SPS, 594, Damage done by the Red Army in the Sandomierz district; minutes concerning a theft committed by Red Army soldiers against Rozalia Bala, resident of Osiek commune, Osiek, 20 November 1944, 10). Another case of an audacious robbery took place in Pliskowola near Osiek. Soviet soldiers arrived in the yard of a local farm. First, they broke the locks on the barn doors. Then, unhurriedly, in front of the farmer, members of the household and witnesses, they loaded up a total of 120 sheaves of barley and wheat, after which they drove away (APS, SPS, 594, Damage done by the Red Army in the Sandomierz district; minutes concerning a theft committed by Red Army soldiers against Stanisław Dzieciuch, resident of Osiek commune, Pliskowola, 6 November 1944, 12. According to the documentation, the same farmer was again robbed of straw on the night of 13/14 November 1944). It should be added that the inhabitants of this village experienced a number of similar acts during this period. Farms were looted of their agricultural produce, above all cereals, fodder crops and straw. This “nuisance” increased particularly at farms located along main routes or local junctions linking different roads. Repeated acts of theft were carried out by Red Army men from various mobile detachments. As reported to the district authorities, misfortunes of this kind were experienced, among others, by Józef Niekurzak from the village of Wiązownica-Kolonia (a village near Staszów), whose crops and other farming tools were stolen during Red Army marches. In October 1944 alone, this farmer lost 300 kg of wheat grain, more than 140 sheaves of grain and a cart (APS, SPS, 594, Damage done by the Red Army in the Sandomierz district; minutes concerning a theft committed by Red Army soldiers against Józef Niekurzak, resident of Osiek commune, Osiek, 1944, p. 18).

The theft of fodder vetch from Jan Święch, another resident of the Osiek commune, was similar in nature. He testified to the municipal authorities that on 11 November 1944, two Red Army men had come to his farm demanding that he handed over vetch for the army horses. The farmers, who were already burdened by a quota, then refused to hand over the goods unless they were given a receipt. In response, the soldiers threatened to come back for the vetch, but this time at night. Over the next two nights, the farm was robbed of all the vetch in its possession (APS, SPS, 594, Report of a theft committed by Red Army soldiers against Jan Święch, a resident of Osiek commune, Osiek, 1944, p. 11). A farmer from the village of Wiązownica Duża, near Staszów,

suffered a different kind of damage when a detachment of eighty Soviet soldiers stayed at his home. They were quartered in the barn where the farmer had deposited the year's harvest. After they left the "quarters", the farmer estimated his losses at 4 quintals of rye and 6 quintals of oats – cereals which were subject to compulsory quotas (APS, SPS, 594, Damage done by the Red Army in the Sandomierz district; minutes concerning a theft committed by Red Army soldiers against Michał Ferenc, resident of Osiek commune, Wiązownica Duża, 18 October 1944, p. 56). The situation of those affected by this type of theft was doubly complicated, as they had lost not only basic products enabling them to survive the approaching winter, but also goods which were part of the obligatory quotas established for the maintenance of the Red Army, and had been confiscated from them without a receipt.

At times, the repetitive nature of these thefts turned into a process designed to deprive the farms of all their goods – crops, livestock and equipment. The Red Army quartermaster troops took the products they needed without any payment or receipts. Grain, straw and vegetables were taken from barns, meadows and other storage places. Horses and cattle were grazed on the fields, meadows and orchards without the agreement of their owners, and crops were also arbitrarily harvested directly from the fields.

Another example was the fate of the Agricultural Experimental Plant, which operated in Zdanów near Obrazów in Sandomierz district. The management of the Plant and representatives of the municipal authorities meticulously described the plundering of the agricultural property that took place in August and September 1944. At that time, the farm was said to have lost its crops of barley, peas and seed vetch one after another. Soviet soldiers were accused of digging up fodder carrots and sugar beet from the fields. The plant was also robbed of some of its livestock, and basic agricultural equipment – carts, horse collars and rubber wheels – was also confiscated (APS, SPS, 594, Damage done by the Red Army in Sandomierz district, minutes concerning the losses of the Agricultural Experimental Plant in Zdanów, Zdanów, 1944, p. 6). Finally, the *pièce de resistance* was completely unreasonable destruction of farm buildings to obtain firewood for field kitchens and baths. In December 1944, the course of this final phase was reported:

The [Soviet] army, after stripping the planks and cutting the internal ties, collapsed the large barn built on brick pillars. They stripped the

wood to use as firewood in the kitchens and baths, and took it away in wagons in an unknown direction. The experimental barn, which had been used for special purposes and had internal facilities for about 100 cages, was demolished internally – the ceilings, the cages etc. Only the inner ties and the roof remained. In the manor barn, the army stripped the sheathing all the way down for fuel and earthworks. In the stable, the two transverse walls (internal) were demolished. The outbuilding for agricultural tools, near the granary, and the tractor shed were also demolished, as were all the small pigsties and outbuildings for fuel. They stripped various parts of the agricultural implements to make iron for horseshoes. (APS, SPS, 594, Damage done by the Red Army in Sandomierz district, minutes concerning the losses of the Agricultural Experimental Plant in Zdanów, Zdanów, 1944, 8).

The harvesting of timber and building materials in other parts of the bridgehead was also carried out in an irrational manner. In Osiek, the residential and municipal buildings were systematically demolished. As reported to the district authorities, this was done on the basis of a decision by the war commander quartered in the town. The material thus ‘obtained’ was used to repair the road network which had been destroyed. The mayor (*wójt*) of Osiek pointed out that after the houses destroyed during military operations had been demolished, the Red Army then started to demolish buildings which were suitable for living or working. For that reason, he requested the district governor (*starosta*) to intervene as soon as possible:

We humbly ask the c[itizen] *starosta* to kindly ask the military authorities, to whom the commissar [in Osiek] is subordinate, to withdraw this order because the Red Army will demolish all the private houses in a very short time. They have demolished the fire station, and partly the school, and they even intend to demolish the building of the Commune Board [in Osiek]. (APS, SPS, 378, Matters concerning planned development, Letter from the Osiek Communal National Council requesting an intervention concerning the destruction of buildings, Osiek, 23 November 1944, p. 16).

Stanisław Wesołowski, one of the young residents of the bridgehead, also recalled the scale of the destruction: neither private farms nor buildings of offices and public institutions were spared. In August

1944, his family was evacuated from Słoptowo near Lipnik in Opatów district. This is how he remembered the landscape of the village upon his return, in the first half of 1945:

At the end of August 1944, the Russians relocated the entire village – including our family – beyond the front line. After pushing the people out, the soldiers started to demolish the houses, as well as the barns and wooden farm buildings. However, they did not destroy our house; the [Soviet] colonel did not allow it – because they wanted to live comfortably. [...] The Russians stripped the buildings for firewood. They also cut down trees. The situation was similar in Malżyn, which neighboured Słoptów – there, too, the Red Army demolished almost all the buildings. (Myjak 2013, 73)

The need to obtain wood (for firewood and fortifications) meant that the trees in the forests were also felled, in an almost uncontrolled manner. The scale of the phenomenon can be evidenced by the report of one individual who was said to have lost about 3,000 trees in his forest in less than a week in October 1944 (see APS, SPS, 594, Damage done by the Red Army in the Sandomierz district, Report of damage to the forest reported by a resident of the village of Osieczek, Osiek, 30 October 1944, 58).

The destruction of the buildings – whether for fuel or for the construction/extension of military infrastructure – was a particularly painful and unjustifiable action. It must be remembered that in the autumn and winter of 1944, thousands of people living in the frontline municipalities had been evacuated, and it was only the buildings that allowed the displaced people to survive, by providing them with shelter from the cold, rain and snow.

A lesser-known example of the economic overexploitation of the bridgehead is the connected with a short story of the operation of fish farms. Not long into the autumn of 1944, the few fish farm ponds that had ‘survived’ the occupation and the battle for the bridgehead were stripped bare by excessive fish harvesting and destroyed by the ‘catching methods’ used by poachers, i.e. stunning the fish by throwing grenades into the ponds. The fish farms had been intended to help combat food shortages. According to a decree by the chairman of the PKWN to supply fish to the state in nationalised farms, up to 90% of the autumn season’s catch was to be transferred to the state. In the second half of 1944, the first reports documenting the current state of fish management in the individual communes reached the

Sandomierz district governor (APS, SPS, 564, State of fishing areas, order by the chairman of the PKWN on the obligation to supply fish to the state, Lublin, 1944, 9–10). These reports also contained information on the Soviet troops' ongoing fishing and destruction of the ponds' infrastructure. In the municipality of Łoniów, the fish farms took up a total area of 55 hectares (APS, SPS, 564, State of fishing areas, letter from the municipal authority in Łoniów concerning the state of the farms, Łoniów, 18 November 1944, 1). In spite of this, by mid-November 1944, the ponds had already been deprived not only of fish suitable for consumption, but also of a considerable part of the fry, which was not yet fully valuable, and particularly the valuable so-called spawners (fish ready for breeding). Of the dozen or so ponds mentioned, only four were left intact, containing fish for breeding and juveniles. The December 1944 report mentioned attempts to protect their contents. It stated in an alarming tone:

The caretaker of the fish ponds in Zawidza [near Łoniów], set up by the commune, cannot secure or maintain the ponds because the army quartered in Zawidza were deliberately destroying the ponds and catching the fish, and they want to shoot the caretaker. (APS, SPS, 564, State of fish areas, letter from the communal authority in Łoniów concerning the state of the farms, Łoniów, 9 December 1944, 5)

The authorities of the municipality of Tursko-Wielkie near Osiek in the Staszów district reported on how the 'harvesting' of the fish from the ponds was carried out. In November 1944, there were three breeding ponds of 2.75 hectares in the commune, all in the village of Ossala near Osiek in the Staszów district. In September and October, Red Army soldiers used grenades to collect about 280 kg of fish from there. A succinct but telling message was sent to the district authorities at the time: "At present there are no fish to be caught in the above-mentioned ponds." (APS, SPS, 564, State of fishing areas, letter from the communal authority in Strużki, Tursko Wielkie, 22 December 1944, 6)

Other letters to the provincial authorities were drafted in a similar vein. On the basis of partial data from the municipalities of Osiek, Samborzec and Sandomierz, it was confirmed that fish stocks were significantly depleted in the ponds and along the 'Sandomierz' section of the River Vistula (APS, SPS, 564, State of fishing areas, letter from the Sandomierz *starosta* concerning the state of farms, Sandomierz, 30 November 1944, 3). According to the head of the District Land Office in Sandomierz:

All the farms in the front belt, i.e. on the territory of our whole district, have been destroyed by the Red Army soldiers, and 95% of the fish in the ponds were taken by them. When the ponds were destroyed by the army, some of the fish were taken by civilians as well. The amount of the fish taken by civilians is 5%. Based on the above data, the Red Army took 56,222 kg of fish flesh from our district. (APS, SPS, 564, Protocol on fish production in the Sandomierz district, Sandomierz, [n.d.], p. 29)

## Quotas

The inhabitants of the bridgehead municipalities were obliged to meet the quotas mentioned in the documents several times. The amount of obligatory deliveries was regulated by two legal acts introduced by the PKWN administration in August 1944. These were the decrees of 18 August 1944 on war material services in kind, i.e. obligatory deliveries of cereals and potatoes to the state (*Dekret PKWN 1944 (1)*, art. 2), and of 22 August 1944 on war material services in kind, i.e. obligatory deliveries of meat, milk and hay to the state (*Dekret PKWN 1944 (2)*, art. 2, 8). They contained indexes of the products covered by the so-called war material services in kind. The cited decrees divided the territory of “Lublin” Poland into five areas (“voivodeships”). The Sandomierz bridgehead, which in the document was referred to as the “voivodeship” of Kielce, had to meet the following targets: 11,000 tonnes of wheat, 35,000 of rye, 11,000 of barley, 13,000 sheep and 68,000 potatoes. The bridgehead made up between 7% and 10% of the total produce which was to be harvested from the areas occupied by the Red Army. The PKWN’s second decree set the following targets: 5300 tonnes of horned cattle meat (7% of the total quota), 1400 of non-horned livestock meat (5.7% of the total quota), and 6,000 of hay (5% of the total quota).

The first summary of the status of these compulsory deliveries was made in the autumn of 1944. The surviving document lists the quantities of goods taken/received between August and November 1944 by the Red Army alone. The protocol signed by the military and civilian authorities contains several interesting points. Among other things, it specifies the standards for the quotas which the bridgehead municipalities were to provide for the Soviet troops. According to the data from November 1944, the plan was to take 10,400 tonnes of grain (including 4800 tonnes of rye, 1400 of wheat, 2000 of barley, 2200 of oats, and 77 of millet), 8000 tonnes of potatoes, 1000 of vegetables,



884 of meat, 1300 of hay and 5000 of straw. On the basis of the documentation signed by representatives of the Red Army and the civilian authorities, it was established that the quota had been reached in November of that year. According to more detailed information, by that time the Red Army in the Sandomierz bridgehead had received/taken 14,060 tonnes of cereals (i.e. 135% of the original quota), 20,187 tonnes of potatoes (252% of the quota), 1810 tonnes of vegetables (181% of the quota), 729 tonnes of meat (82% of the quota), 11,210 tonnes of hay (862% of the quota) and 17,407 tonnes of straw (348% of the quota) (APS, SPS, 594, Damage caused by the Red Army in the Sandomierz district, Act confirming the receipt by the Red Army of agricultural products from the area of part of the Kielce voivodeship, [n.p.], 22 November 1944, pp. 1–2). In most cases, therefore, the accepted quotas were exceeded, not infrequently by quite considerable amounts. In addition, the inhabitants of the bridgehead also donated more than 29,000 litres of milk and about 6000 eggs for the upkeep of the army. “Only” in terms of the so-called meat quota did the amount of goods officially collected fail to reach the adopted level of 729 tonnes.

The document adopted was a record of the “cooperation” to date. It contains quite detailed calculations of the type and number of goods taken by the Red Army. However, when we compare its contents just with the findings contained in this study, it can be stated that this list was incomplete. Its contents described only a fragment of the real situation – the official level of cooperation between the Red Army and the institutions of the Polish civil administration subordinate to the PKWN. The calculations were limited to a few of the contingent (main) categories, selected additional products (e.g. milk, eggs) and estimates of the losses incurred during the armed struggle. The referenced document does not take into account all the products and materials “procured” by the Red Army troops, or the circumstances of their acquisition.

The content of the document has also been commented on to a somewhat critical degree in a study discussing the state of agriculture in the bridgehead. The prelude to these considerations was the question posed, probably in the winter of 1944, as to whether the local farmers had the material capacity to do their spring sowing. The author of this document – who would have been familiar with the specifics of the bridgehead, and would also have had at his disposal data on the harvest levels in 1937, as well as estimates of war losses and the scale of the produce confiscated by the Red Army after August

1944 – gave an unequivocally negative response. Moreover, in his opinion, the content of the documents circulating between the civil and military administrations contained serious underestimations of the levels to which those areas had been depleted. In his opinion, the errors could have lain in one of three areas: underestimating the war losses, underestimating the volume of goods taken by the Red Army in the second half of 1944, or using underestimates in both cases. The study's author based his conclusions on the gap he discovered concerning an assessment of the farmers' actual capacity to carry out spring sowing. In his opinion, the level of individual stocks of, for example, the quantity of seed grains, made it in principle impossible to carry out field work without considerable external assistance. To illustrate the extent of the "missing" grain and potatoes in the area, he used a comparison that appealed to the imagination. In his opinion, in order to carry out spring sowing and planting, up to 375 ten-tonne wagons of grain and 1650 of the same wagons of potatoes would have had to be sent to the Sandomierz area (see APS, SPS, 560, Sowing action, Study on the estimated state aid needed to carry out the spring sowing action in part of the Kielce voivodeship, [Sandomierz], 1944, 51–70).

The issue of the quotas established and implemented in 1944 is a complex matter. With regard to the deliveries of goods made to the Red Army, we can see the two-dimensionality of the information. Some of the goods were transferred according to the provisions of documents honoured by both sides. On this matter, we have individual certificates on whose basis we can estimate at least the minimum values of the products taken, including by the Red Army. Another proportion of the goods, not completely estimated, was taken outside the accepted arrangements. Thus, in this aspect too, the Red Army can be seen as a significant factor in overburdening the local economy with the scale of its demand for basic goods and products, thus aggravating the deterioration of the local community's living standards. In simple terms, the excessive level of quotas drained the residual resources available to this community. Much of the legitimately obtained goods went to Soviet soldiers, who at the same time were pursuing their own "policy" towards the same community. As shown in this study, this was not infrequently based on the looting of the same products and goods already covered by the quotas.

Specification of the documents	Total Grain	According to kind						
		Rye	Wheat	Barley	Oat	Millet	Pea	Oily seeds
Planned	10 400	4 800	1 400	2 000	2 200	–	–	–
Received according to division	779,6	314,6	98,1	119,1	237,3	7,5	–	3
Received according to records, request orders, receipts with name of the field mail	1 276,4	748,9	277,1	80,9	155,8	10	3,7	–
Received according to the protocol records	1 550,6	460,2	229,2	313,9	487,2	60,1	–	–
Received from six resettled communes	10 454	2 930,1	1 670	2 561,1	3 292,8	–	–	–
Received in total from all of the farms – products per district	14 060,6	4 453,8	2 274,4	3 075	4 173,1	77,6	3,7	3
War losses	17 892,1*	6 524,9	3 547,4	3 441,4	4 238,4	140	–	–

\* in original erroneously: 17 891,9

Specification of the documents	Potatoes	Vegetables	Meat (living animals)	Hay	Straw	Legumes	Eggs (pcs.)	Milk (l.)
Planned	8 000	1 000	884	1 300	5 000	–	–	–
Received according to division	1 155,1	2	–	57,9	490,8	–	–	1 610
Received according to records, request orders, receipts with name of the field mail	1 560	328,5	612,4	350,7	164	0,6	6 026	1 572
Received according to the protocol records	2 208,3	935,4	179,6	1 780,5	1 052,4	5	–	26 659
Received from six resettled communes	15 264	544,6	–	9 021	15 700	–	–	–
Received in total from all of the farms – products per district	20 187,4	1 810,5	729	11 210,1	17 407,2	5,6	6 022	29 841
War losses	28 532	1 144	–	9 149,5	16 907	–	–	–

Source: APS, SPS, 594, Damages made by Red Army in Sandomierz district. Protocol signed by representatives of civilian Polish authorities and military administration concerning quotas taken by Red Army, Sandomierz, 22 November 1944, pp. 1–2.

## Summary

The aim of this case study was to supplement the picture of daily life in bridgehead with a discussion of the phenomenon of “frontline oppression”. On the basis of the surviving testimonies, the author has tried to show its complexity, but also the impact that the individual elements of this phenomenon had on the Sandomierz region community. These forms of oppression included a whole range of negative behaviour – from all the individual transgressions and crimes committed by the Soviet soldiers to the social consequences of the actions carried out by the military authorities.

The forms of frontline oppression, together with the repressive policy pursued by the officers of the Soviet state security organs, created an atmosphere of uncertainty, threat and terror. Wincenty Sobolewski, a doctor from Sandomierz, and a resident of the bridgehead, wrote about these moods. In the diary he kept, on 25 November 1944, he noted:

Let me come back to the relations [between us and the Red Army] here; well, the Bolsheviks are looting everything they can. For example, a soldier robs a horse in one place and rides it to some distant village, and sells it there for money and moonshine, and after a few days a few soldiers come to this man, demand moonshine; if the farmer does not want to give it, they beat him, or kill him, they take his horse and whatever else they can (Sobolewski 2013, 191–192).

The attitude of some of the Soviet soldiers and the behaviour of the military authorities, which were part of this oppression, posed a political problem for the Communist authorities. This is because they violated the positive image of the “Red Army liberator” created by propaganda. The district governor of Sandomierz, quoted at the beginning of the text, wrote about this; in his opinion, the use of oppression by Red Army soldiers contributed to the emergence and gradual growth of feelings of resentment towards the Soviet troops – according to the euphemism he used, an “unpleasant atmosphere” (APS, SPS, 62, Situation reports 1944-5, Sandomierz district governor report for June 1945, Sandomierz, 20 July 1945, p. 31).

The negative economic and social effects of the frontline oppression during the second half of 1944 were exacerbated by the events that occurred in summer 1945. The reason for the further losses caused by



The monument of Col. Vasil' Fedorovich Skopenko, unveiled in Sandomierz in 1980 (in 1990 moved to Soviet War Cemetery in Sandomierz). Col. V.F. Skopenko (1912–1945) was a commander of 1180 Rifle Regiment of Soviet Army, and was credited with successful securing the bridgehead on the western bank of Vistula River near Sandomierz in July 1944, and subsequent capture of Sandomierz without causing significant damages (for which he was honoured with the title of the Hero of the Soviet Union). Fallen in fight against German forces in Lower Silesia, Col. V.F. Skopenko was interred in Soviet War Cemetery in Sandomierz. The personality of Col. V.F. Skopenko was used in a post-war Communist propaganda as a role model of the 'Soviet liberator'.

Photo: A. Łokaj, KAW photo agency (1981), State Archive in Przemyśl, collection Fotokronika województwa przemyskiego, ref. no. 56/877/0/-/1172

the Red Army in these areas was that some of the routes followed by the Soviet troops returning to the USSR passed through municipalities in the Sandomierz region. Significant economic damage was recorded, especially during the cattle drives. That time saw another wave of theft, massive and non-consensual grazing of cattle on the fields and meadows, and the destruction of crops by herds of cattle. This is how the district governor of Sandomierz wrote about the events of summer 1945 in his correspondence with a Soviet commander:

Detachments of the Soviet Army, arbitrarily and without obtaining the permission of the local district governor, take away fodder for the horses and cows being driven from Germany to Russia; they cut down

oats which are growing and still unripe, take away dried rye, clover and hay; they trample and graze the growing cereals and roadside fodder, cut down trees and destroy fruit orchards. (APS, SPS, 595, War damage caused by the Red Army's drive of cows, Letter from the Sandomierz district governor to the Soviet commander of the city of Sandomierz, Sandomierz, 27 July 1945, p. 12).

Due to the effects of the 'frontline oppression', and the subsequent mass march of Soviet troops, the post-war reconstruction process took much longer in the Sandomierz area, and required the involvement of much greater resources. This was confirmed by Józef Myjak, who described the history of the Lipnik commune in the second half of 1944. He drew particular attention to the long-term effects of the destruction of farms and the basic elements of the rural & commune infrastructure, including the road network. He noted that in the case of forestless communes (where there was a lack of easy-to-obtain and cheap building material in the form of timber), such as Lipnik, the subsequent reconstruction was more difficult and, due to the lack of raw materials, took much longer. The "disruption of the agricultural calendar", forced by warfare and the stationing of Soviet forces, made it impossible to carry out harvesting, digging and other autumn field work in 1944, and also had negative economic consequences (Myjak 2013, 124-125). The following year, farmers faced new challenges that made their work even more difficult: problems related to the scale to which the fields had been mined, and the effects of the devastating marches of the Red Army as they returned to the USSR in the summer and autumn of 1945.

The level of destruction is confirmed by archival documents, which sometimes also includes unexpected audio-visual material. In 1946, an extract of the Polish Film Chronicle newsreel was devoted to the living conditions in the areas of the former Sandomierz bridgehead. Less than two years after these events, viewers could still see the destroyed buildings and people living in earthen dugouts. These images were preceded by the words: "This is the Sandomierz bridgehead, a desert in the heart of Poland" (*Polska Kronika Filmowa* 7/46). Unfortunately, today we are still slowly discovering that the Red Army formations stationed at the bridgehead in the second half of 1944 also had a significant share in this "desertification".

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## Erklärungen

