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The Social Consequences of the Deportation of Polish Citizens Deep into the USSR in 1940–1941

Summary: As a result of four mass deportations carried out by the NKVD officers in 1940–1941, over 320,000 Polish citizens were deported into the USSR from the eastern territories of the Republic of Poland annexed by Moscow (according to NKVD sources). They were considered to be the most dangerous to the communist regime. At that time, families of military men, foresters, those arrested or held in prisoner-of-war camps, and war refugees (mainly Jews) who refused to accept USSR citizenship, as well as the families of participants in the 'counter-revolutionary Ukrainian and Polish nationalist organisations' were resettled in cattle railway cars.

The journey to exile lasted 2–4 weeks. People were settled in the northern regions of the European part of Russia, in the Urals, Siberia, and Kazakhstan. There, they performed very hard physical work in the logging of forests, in mines, agriculture, and construction – in a harsh climate, without training, without knowledge of the local language, without the right tools, without holidays, and without proper medical care and medicine. They commonly lacked food, workwear, shoes, and hygiene products. They lived in primitive barracks, in ruined farm buildings, in pit-houses, or rented mediocre accommodations from the locals. The constant struggle for survival taught them cunning, theft, and accelerated their acquisition of various professional qualifications. They had to adjust to life in extreme poverty, knowing that they could not break down or give in to doubt. The living conditions encouraged the development of various diseases and resulted in accelerated mortality. The exiles rarely decided to marry or expand their families, which increased demographic losses. The most common and lasting effects of the stay in exile concern the mental and physical condition of the victims of deportation. Their psyches were dominated by anxiety, fear, inferiority complex, and hostility. They feared war, hunger, inhumane living conditions, terror, and violence. Frequently, only religion gave them

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some consolation and helped them survive. Yet, the dramatic fate of living in exile cemented family ties, and mothers became the main characters. The children grew up prematurely and hardened themselves,mastering the rigid rules of life early. Since they did not have the opportunity to learn at school, their academic development was limited, if any, and they did not pursue its amendment even when they returned to their homeland. After the war, not all exiles returned to Poland – many lie in nameless graves in Siberia and Central Asia. Some Polish citizens (Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians, Lithuanians) were denied the right to repatriation in 1945. In many cases, those who left the USSR in 1942 with General W. Anders's Polish Army chose life in the free world of the West. From the depths of the USSR, people returned physically and mentally exhausted, sometimes as invalids. In the material sense, they had nothing, as their pre-war property was lost to the Soviets. In exile, they strengthened their love for their homeland and appreciated its existence. At the same time, they learned the realities of the socialist system, which they not only hated but also strongly rejected.

Keywords: Poland-USSR, World War II, deportations, effects of exile

Wars have always been associated with the movement of not only troops but also the displacement of civilians. Some people ran away from the aggressor, others were driven out of their homes. It was no different in the case of World War II. In this paper, I will focus on the fate of those people who, after 17 September 1939, found themselves – mostly against their will – under the rule of the Bolsheviks in the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic annexed by the Kremlin, and then were forcibly deported from there to the depths of the Soviet territory.

The history of those who managed to survive in the USSR until the moment of their repatriation in 1946 can be divided into three main stages:

- the first stage (the most difficult), which lasted from the deportation in February 1940 until the formal release from exile as a result of the 'amnesty' after the signing of the Sikorski-Mayski agreement in 1941;
- the second stage, which ended with the interruption of Polish-Soviet relations in the spring of 1943; and
- the third stage, which lasted from the establishment of the Union of Polish Patriots (Polish: *Związek Patriotów Polskich*) until the moment of returning to Poland in 1946.

Although in each of these successive stages the situation of the overall group of deportees discussed in this paper improved somewhat, given their previous experiences, the exceptionally difficult provisioning situation in the USSR, the realities of wartime, and the fact that they were forced to stay abroad, the social effects of deportation were not overcome. This leads us to the formulation of certain statements and assessments that refer to the entire period of exile in the USSR.

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The occupation authorities' desire to unify and Sovietise the captured eastern part of the Republic of Poland as quickly as possible resulted in the decision to effectively neutralise those groups of Polish citizens whom they considered the most dangerous in terms of introducing the new order. Thus, the officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR pre-emptively began individual arrests of people they classified in the capacious category of 'counter-revolutionary element', in which they included, among others, important personalities of the Polish state, local government, and economic administration, leaders of political, social and cultural life, and judicial, police, gendarmerie, intelligence, and military personnel. After the formal annexation procedure of the occupied lands was completed and temporary authorities were installed, the Soviets' repressions against their actual and potential opponents intensified. This was evidenced in December 1939 by secret decisions of the party-administrative authorities of the USSR to forcibly deport families of military settlers and foresters from the western regions of the Ukrainian and Belarusian SSR[1] since, according to the Soviet authorities, they supposedly constituted a potential basis for the resistance movement and sabotage-espionage activities against the occupation regime. The deportees were to be transported to isolated special settlements under the supervision of the NKVD, located in the northern regions of the European part of Russia, in the Urals, Siberia, and Kazakhstan. They were to be sent to perform hard physical work in logging forests, in mines, and in construction. The deportees' property was confiscated and seized by the state.

The resettlement operation implementing the above-mentioned orders began at dawn on 10 February 1940, on a very cold night. Operational groups rushed to the houses and flats of the completely surprised people, announced the decision to expel the families, ordered them to pack their belongings quickly, and transported them under convoy to the nearest railway station, where deportation transports escorted by NKVD troops were already waiting. Bunk beds made of boards, an iron stove, and a container for fuel were installed in every cattle railway car; a hole would be cut in the middle of the floor to serve as a toilet. Thirty or more people were placed in each car. Their journey to their destinations in exile took place in dramatically difficult conditions. The enormously cramped conditions meant that for long hours people had to lie in an uncomfortable position on bunks or sit on luggage and bundles. As there was no water, it was impossible to wash or clean clothes, so the air was suffocating. There was a penetrating cold. It was almost impossible to prepare a hot meal.

1 The deportations of Polish citizens are extensively discussed nowadays in the very rich memoir literature, source publications, and historical studies. Among the latter, the following publications should be mentioned: Boćkowski D. 1999; Ciesielski S. 1996; Ciesielski S. et al. 2004; Głowacki A. 2022; Guryanov A.E. 1997.

Some people got sick and even died. Although there were medical and nursing personnel on board the transport, in practical terms medical care was nonexistent. It was hard to sleep at night. The children cried while their elders prayed and argued. No one knew where the train was going. People were depressed. At designated stations, the individuals on duty from each railway car, equipped with buckets, received their allocated food supply (soup, porridge) at the railway buffets and brought a ration of black bread and boiling water. Such stops were also used to relieve oneself near the train cars. All this was done under the guard of the NKVD convoy.

Depending on the location of the terminal station, the journey to exile took between 2 and 4 weeks. After reaching the destination, local NKVD officers took charge of the deportees sent them to remote special settlements (*спецпоселок*) supervised by the NKVD commandants using transport provided by the deportees' future employers. There, after hygienic and sanitary treatment, the deportees were housed in wooden barracks and other accommodations, where they were to live in very primitive and cramped conditions under the supervision of the NKVD services.

As a welcome, the deportees were then told by the overseers that Poland no longer existed and would never exist, and that they would remain in the settlement forever. The regulations of the special settlement provided for, among others, control of the presence of the settlers, and forbade them to freely leave the place of exile and establish contacts with the local population.

In total, as part of the first deportation, more than 140,000 Polish citizens were sent to exile, according to the NKVD data. In the NKVD documentation, this category of deportees was referred to as 'special re-settlers – settlers'.

After verifying their suitability for work, individuals were sent to various jobs for which they were paid. However, since the pay was conditional on the usually unachievable, inflated performance standards being met, it was usually very low. Children and invalids remained dependent on their families.

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Another group of exiles was designated by the central Soviet authorities on 2 March 1940. At that time, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was ordered, among others, to deport to Kazakhstan for 10 years 22–25 thousand families of repressed persons and of persons held in prisoner-of-war camps. The operation was to cover all families of officers of the Polish Army, the state police, the gendarmerie, the prison guard, intelligence agents, industrialists, landowners, and high-ranking government officials. Their real estate was confiscated, while other property could be cashed or taken with them (up to 100 kg per person). The deportation action began on the morning of 13 April 1940. In total, more than 61,000 people were deported. In the NKVD's nomenclature, they were called 'exiled in administrative mode'. The cohort of deportees was dominated by the Poles

(about 80%). These were mainly women, children, and the elderly (residents of cities); men accounted for only 20% of the adults. This category of deportees was not subject to employment obligations. However, due to economic conditions, they usually decided to take up work. Thus, ultimately 60.5% of the exiles went to the collective farms (*kolkhoz*), over 26.3% to the state-owned farms (*sovkhoz*), and the rest to the industrial workers' settlements. Here, they themselves had to ensure that they found some accommodation, i.e., a room with Kazakh families or in the ruined farm buildings of the sovkhoz (bathhouse, shed, barn, calf shed, etc.). Sometimes they camped in the forest, by the road, where they 'built' primitive barracks or pit-houses. They undertook all sorts of jobs that they had never done before.

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Meanwhile, on 29 June 1940, another group of Polish citizens was transported to special settlements in the northern regions of the European part of the USSR and to Siberia. Indefinitely deported there were those war refugees who refused to accept USSR citizenship and volunteered to return to German occupation, but who were not accepted by the Germans. According to the NKVD archives, a total of 80,653 people were deported at that time. This group of repressed individuals, referred to as 'special re-settlers – refugees', was distinguished by the fact that the vast majority were Jews (over 84% of the total); Poles accounted for slightly over 11%. They were forced to work in logging forests, in metal ore mines and coal mines, and in construction.

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The last wave of deportations of Polish citizens before the German invasion of the Soviet Union was organised in three stages. Its aim was to finally purge the 'socially alien element' from both the areas from which the 'undesirable element' had already been deported in 1940, as well as the area of the Vilnius region, which the Soviets had incorporated into the USSR after the annexation of the Baltic states in the summer of 1940. The order was to arrest and deport to a 20-year exile the family members of participants in 'counter-revolutionary Ukrainian and Polish nationalist organisations' and the family members of persons (from these underground organisations) who had been sentenced to death. The property of all displaced persons was confiscated by the state.

This action was first started on the night of 21/22 May 1941 in the western regions of the Ukrainian SSR. At that time, according to NKVD sources, 12,371 people were deported to settle in the regions of Arkhangelsk, Novosibirsk, Omsk, and Krasnoyarsk (RSFSR), as well as to the southern Kazakhstan region (these were not prisoners but people forced to settle in the above-mentioned areas). Formally, they were not subject

to NKVD surveillance, but restrictions were imposed on their movement and they had to periodically confirm their stay at the militia station. These deportees took up work in order to provide for themselves.

On 14 June 1941, the deportation was carried out in the Lithuanian SSR, including the Vilnius region, from which 3,924 Poles were deported. The majority of the fathers of the targeted families were isolated immediately at railway stations or detained at work. They were mainly sent to the Altai country, where they started working in forests, in the construction industry, and in tailors' workshops.

On the night of 19/20 June 1941, the deportation operation took place in the western regions of the Belarusian SSR. According to the NKVD files available, 2,059 people were arrested and 22,353 people were displaced for deportation to the interior of the USSR. Due to the outbreak of the German-Soviet war and the bombing and shelling of railway transports, it is likely that fewer people were deported, around 21,000. They were settled in the Altai, Krasnoyarsk, Komi ASRR, and in the regions of Arkhangelsk, Omsk, Novosibirsk, and Aktiubinsk.

In total, in May-June 1941, about 40,000 Polish citizens were arrested and deported from the eastern territories of the Republic of Poland annexed by the Soviets. This means that – according to NKVD sources – in total, in the years 1940–1941, more than 320,000 people were deported deep into the USSR in four large displacement waves. These actions were carried out according to the instructions, schemes, and methods tested during the deportation of settlers and foresters. With this form of repression, the occupier struck at 'bourgeois Poland', at the people who were pillars of the society – the patriotic element: the families of the military, policemen, state and local government officials, political leaders, landowners and factory owners, and entrepreneurs in various branches of the economy. All forcibly deported individuals experienced a harsh life, or rather a hard struggle to survive the next day.

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The social consequences of these deportations can be determined both on the basis of archival materials and, in particular, on the basis of the analysis of memoirs, diaries, accounts, and letters of the deportees themselves. These effects can be discussed on different levels. Some consequences were intended by the organisers and perpetrators, others were not; some concerned areas of displacement, and others areas of deportation; some affected primarily adults, others children. Here, we will briefly address the most important of these consequences.

Although the legal situation of the exiles had already changed in the summer of 1941, most had to wait until 1946 for their return to Poland. In that period, the key to their existence and survival was work. Due to the ongoing war and martial law, the deportees were essentially forced to take up employment on a compulsory

basis. To achieve the prescribed norm, they toiled from morning until dusk. Usually, they were not asked about their education or profession, but were simply assigned such tasks as were currently available. They performed very hard physical work in a harsh climate, without suitable training, without knowledge of the local language, without the right tools, without holidays, and without proper medical care and medicine. They lacked workwear and shoes and did not have any spare clothing. Fear for their children and family and even their own lives necessitated the constant acquisition of new behaviours and skills: it taught the deportees cunning, slyness, and thievery, and forced the hurried acquisition of new professional qualifications – be it in logging and timber floating, animal husbandry, farming, haying, mining, brick making, or construction.

The dramatic situation and living conditions – of which the widespread scarcity or even lack of food was a glaring manifestation in particular – meant that hunger was never satisfied. Wanda Andryka-Marchewka, sent away to the forests in the Altai country, recalled:

> We had nothing to eat in the taiga. They gave 500 g of bread [per day – A.G.] for each labourer and for non-labourer 200 g. [...] For all these years we have seen neither sugar nor meat, nor milk, nor butter. [...] We mostly ate nettles, various leaves, grasses, flowers [...] and in the summer there were berries, edible mushrooms.[2]

This created a sense of humiliation, causing desperate people to even feed on animal carcasses that they secretly dug from the ground and the meat of dogs and wolves captured by the settlers. The deficit of practically every daily necessity – a result of the war waged by the Soviets with the Third Reich – meant that people had to get used to it, learn to live in extreme poverty, and share with those even poorer than themselves. They acquired a new instinct of self-preservation: one could not break down and give in to adversity or doubt. In such situations, theft became commonplace, despite supervision, constant checks, and severe punishments. The moral aspect of such behaviour was disregarded as the instinct of life prompted people to use every means to get food. In the case of children, neither prohibitions nor corporal punishment could discourage them from stealing, because it allowed them (and others) to survive until the next day.[3]

For Polish citizens, the complete lack of cleaning products was shocking. Neglect of personal hygiene, malnutrition, exhausting physical work, and the harsh climate facilitated the spread of various diseases. Access to doctors and medicine was illusory, and epidemics of typhoid, malaria, scurvy, whooping cough, dysentery, avitaminosis,

2 Andryka-Marchewka W. 1991, 115.

3 For more information see: Głowacki A. 2008, 34–35.

anaemia, so-called 'night blindness', and other diseases took a deadly toll. Due to exhaustion and malnutrition, girls matured much later and few babies were born. Dramatically difficult living conditions and change of climate resulted in the disappearance of menstruation in all women and girls.[4] The deportees rarely decided to get married or to enlarge their families. Children who were born soon after their mothers arrived in exile usually died quickly.[5] For the deported communities, and in a broader perspective for Poland, this meant severe, irreversible demographic losses.

The most common effects of staying in exile concern the mental sphere and physical condition of the victims of deportation, leaving them with lasting negative effects.

The humiliating living conditions and extreme poverty, persistent uncertainty about what the next day would bring, and the prolonged autumn and winter made people depressed. Jerzy Koziński recalled the effects of the exile:

> The six-year stay in extreme conditions has had a negative impact on our health and psyche, which has had and continues to have an impact on our lives. To this day, every winter fills me with dread. The psychiatric examinations have confirmed the existence of the 'camp syndrome', which is manifested by a reluctance to be in a crowd, distrust of any authority figures, suspicion of other people and, the most troublesome of all, the stockpiling of worn-out belongings, as 'anything can come in handy', and hoarding of food supplies. People affected by this syndrome are not understood by those who do not know about their experiences and look with pity on the 'irrational' behaviour of former 'tourists' from inhumane land. And the most shocking thing of all: the fear of the future, the fear of the return of bad times – which does not leave even in the current period of good prosperity.[6]

This observation is confirmed by the words of Irena Dolińska-Głowacka, who recalled the following situation:

> My colleague [...], when it was said in 1981 that Soviet troops could enter Poland, and pacify and transport people to Siberia, told me that she had prepared two bottles of kerosene, one of which she would pour on those who would come for her, and the other on herself and that she would set everyone on fire. She could not imagine that she would have to survive exile a second time.[7]

Similar problems were experienced by Mirosława Chomów:

4 Dolińska-Głowacka I. 1997, 288.

5 Fudała T. 2000, 86–87.

6 Koziński J. 1999, 55.

7 Dolińska-Głowacka I. 1997, 295–296.

> I got depressed and scared. I was afraid to stay home alone. I was treated for a long time [...] After retirement, these symptoms reappeared [...], I was afraid to be alone at night. Unfortunately, those nightmares are coming back. In a dream, I relive the horror of the deportation and see myself being transported by a huge river and I see familiar landscapes. I wake up wet and sweaty with fear.[8]

The exiles knew injustice, violence, barbarism, and brutality in every aspect of life. It is therefore understandable that anxiety, fear, complexes, and hostility took hold in the psyche of these wronged people. They feared war, hunger, inhumane living conditions, terror, and violence. Is it at all possible for time to heal these wounds, for them not to harbour hatred, and transform their suffering into humility?

An interesting example in this case was given by I. Dolińska-Głowacka:

> My mother, no matter how long she lived in Russia, would never have learned Russian. I think it was because of her hatred of everything Soviet. This trauma arose in 1920, when, as a thirteen-year-old girl, she watched the advance of the wild, ragged Red Army toward Warsaw, and then their chaotic escape. My mother was irritated even by the similarity of the Russian language to Polish. [...] She couldn't look at the Red Army soldiers in their torn uniforms with red stars, stinking with tar and cheap perfume. In their behaviour, and even in their laughter, she saw only rudeness and vulgarity. It was only after we were taken to Siberia that she changed her mind a little, when she met simple, old people who from the old days preserved dignity, honesty, and manners.[9]

In this case, which aspects of mutual contacts of the deportees with the local population are worth noting? Well, even before the transports with the deportees arrived at places of their forced stay in the depths of the USSR, the local political and administrative authorities carried out, on the orders of their superiors from Moscow, an information and propaganda campaign among the residents of the planned settlement concerning the prospective newcomers 'from the western regions'. The authorities told the local inhabitants that soon 'enemies of the Soviet rule', 'bourgeoisie' (*буржуй*), 'Polish lords', 'criminals', and 'exploiters and oppressors' would arrive, which was supposed to form negative opinions on the new settlers and cause their isolation. This, of course, affected the process of their adaptation. However, over time, the shared misery of the war and the war times made the so-called 'ordinary people' see the deportees from Poland as normal people, wronged by Stalin's regime. They appreciated their personal culture, skills and professional qualifications, natural honesty,

8 Chomów M. 2003, 98.

9 Dolińska-Głowacka I. 1997, 288–289.

openness, and kindness. The events on the German-Soviet front brought the victims of the system closer – the locals understood the pain and despair of the Polish exiles. They also recognised that the deportees had been brought to exile from a different world to Stalin's USSR – a richer and happier one, where there was no widespread denunciation, terror or lies, where not everyone was afraid of everyone. Helena Prugar-Scheuring admitted: 'I have also met many good Russians, […] admiring their cordiality and courage, how did they manage to preserve these treasures of humanity in this cursed regime?'[10]

On the other hand, the exiles forced to travel through huge, completely unknown areas of Stalin's empire carefully observed and assessed everything that surrounded them at that time. They admired the beauty of nature and became familiar with the low standard of living, diverse cultures, customs and languages of the peoples with whom they lived and worked. They were astounded by the commonplace mediocrity, poor organisation, low productivity, and poor work discipline. Despite the war period, they could not understand the causes of the exasperating shortage of food supplies – the lack of even the most necessary goods for everyday use. Even the implementation of bread rationing turned out to be a huge problem.

It is therefore worth quoting here the very apt words of the teacher Janina Grochocka, who was sent to the Pavlodar region (Kazakh SSR). In 1943, she testified in Tehran that:

> […] even tiny children came to the [Soviet – A.G.] Union with a sense of deep pity for the state that had done them terrible harm. After a short period of observation, older children and young people developed a contempt for the overrated economic and cultural achievements that Polish children had heard about in Poland. Even the little-educated rural youth in Poland were widely aware of: 1) the misery in the Soviet Union, 2) the falsity of slogans about social justice, and 3) about its cultural superiority. These conclusions were based not only on the observations of the parents but on their own insight and analysis.[11]

This bore a very poor testimony to a system which, according to Stalinist propaganda, was supposedly the best in the world.

Only the strongest individuals survived the exile – those who turned out to be the most hardened by work, with a strong psyche and determination to stay alive. Survivors stress that their hope for a better tomorrow was based on deep faith. Wanda Arasimowicz stated explicitly: The hope that one day we would return to our homeland was based on our faith. Faith has kept many people alive […] We needed God so much.

10 Scheuring W., Prugar-Scheuring H. 2021, 385.

11 AOK, 1034.

How much easier it was to remain in exile with God in heart, in such a terrible, alien, remote, deprived of human rights, ravaged, and spiritually barren area.[12]

This is confirmed by those who managed to leave the USSR already in 1942 with the army of General Władysław Anders. Wiesława Saternus (Derfel) recalled:

> The Lord God allowed us to survive disease, hunger, squalor, humiliation, slave labour, living in poverty and filth, and an excruciating lack of religious service. [...] For every experience in exile, captivity, and wandering – thank God! It was hard, very hard, painful and bad. But these experiences enriched me, taught me, and gave proof of the existence of God and of God's mercy. With a greater and better understanding of life, I am on pilgrimage now and [...] I thank the Heavenly Father [...] for bringing our whole family of seven out of the 'house of slavery'.[13]

The dramatic fate of living in exile strengthened family ties. Families had to constantly mobilise together to, for example, get some food, and at least partially satisfy hunger. With great determination and superhuman effort, supporting and complementing each other, adults and children alike searched the forests for edible plants, fished and hunted fowl, stole and begged, and queued to buy their ration of bread, which was the staple food for all the families in exile. Zofia Siuzdak rightly noted that: almost all Polish children, without exception, became prematurely mature, hardened and responsible despite their young age.[14] But the daily struggle for the family's survival rested primarily on the shoulders of mothers (in many cases single parents), who were irreplaceable in this very difficult role.[15] This is aptly expressed in the words of Wiesława Saternus (Derfel):

> I will not forget the heroism, sacrifice, and immense kindness of my mother. [...] I owe her the sanity of my soul and body – everything! I see her superhuman efforts and dedication to us children, to our family, and to our neighbours. I see her sharing with people a spoon of green nettle gruel, a piece of bread, a potato, clothes or even a rag, because she had nothing else. [...] I can see her smelling the head of salted fish that I found in the rubbish bin. She had to sniff, carefully check that we would not poison ourselves before she split that fish head between us – the children. At evening prayer, she reminded us not to forget to thank the Lord God for 'today's fish'.[16]

12 Arasimowicz W. 2005, 21.

13 Łapo H. (ed.), 1996, 118–119.

14 Siuzdak Z. 2003, 193.

15 This topic is discussed, among others, in: Bazuń D., Kaźmierczak-Kałużna I., Pokrzyńska M. 2012.

16 Łapo H. (ed.), 1996, 118–119.

It is significant that after such hardships and experiences, people became more capable of making sacrifices and helping out – and not only within the family. Helena Prugar-Scheuring wrote: 'I remember most cordially those who, themselves mistreated by cruel fate, were able to find a spark of kindness and warmth in order to replace my lost family in this poverty and loneliness'.[17]

The government's enforcement of the schooling obligation meant that school-age children had to attend educational institutions under the Soviet system. However, this was only true in places where there were some school structures at all, because in remote settlements there were big problems with organising education. However, between 1940 and 1941 students did not study in their native language, but in Russian, and according to Soviet programs and textbooks. For the exiles, that system meant forced Russification and Sovietisation, that is, nationalisation and education in the spirit of Bolshevik ideology. Their children, who had been formed in the spirit of Polish patriotism and in a Christian culture, were subject to the intrusive propaganda of godlessness, dialectical materialism, celebrations of holidays and anniversaries from the Bolshevik calendar, and mockery of 'bourgeois Poland'. Only after the establishment of the Union of Polish Patriots in the USSR in mid-1943, did this situation significantly change.[18]

Where there were no schooling opportunities at all, children and young people lost several years and when they returned to Poland, being already adults, they did not always choose to catch up with their education. Barbara Powroźnik, née Bilewicz, admitted that in 1946, already in Poland,

> learning at [...] school gave us, the Sybiraks, great joy. There was eagerness, there was enthusiasm. We thought we could make up for 6 years of disrupted education in a few months. Unfortunately – it took too long, it took years before we caught up with our peers. Many children have never reached that level. The beginning was very difficult. We could not correctly formulate or write down a single sentence. Every second word was spoken or written in Russian. Our notebooks were red with spelling and grammatical errors. It was the biggest tragedy.[19]

Many people have come to terms with the fact that due to their stay in exile, they lost their race against time. Although there were exceptions, relatively few people in the group of deportees later became doctors, engineers, economists, or lawyers. But this was also due to the political repression of the Polish communist authorities against those who openly revealed that they had spent the war period in forced exile in remote regions of the eastern neighbour.

17 Scheuring W., Prugar-Scheuring H. 2021, 385.

18 Extensively on this topic, among others: Głowacki A. 2019; Trela E. 1983.

19 Powroźnik z Bilewiczów B. 1996, 93.

Unfortunately, after the end of the war, not all the deportees returned to Poland. Some of them have remained forever in nameless graves in the vast territories of Siberia and Central Asia.[20] Their families felt extremely humiliated, unable to provide their deceased relatives with a dignified burial (lack of coffin, clothing) and religious service.[21]

Some pre-war Polish citizens (Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians, Lithuanians) were denied the option and right of repatriation in 1945. Those who left the Soviet Union in 1942 with Władysław Anders's Polish Army in many cases chose to live in the free world of the West. It should also be mentioned that not all the exiled Jews returned to post-war Poland – information about pogroms in some Polish towns prompted some of them (though not many) to stay in the Soviet Union. In turn, another group of them returned to their homeland but treated it only as the first stage of their journey before leaving for Palestine, where the State of Israel was established.

From the depths of the USSR, people affected by the stigma of fear and servitude, degraded, physically and mentally exhausted, and sometimes even disabled, returned to their homeland. The forced labour, resulting first from their status as exiles, and later from the rigours of martial law and the need to secure legal sources of income, resulted in the fact that in 1946 people returned to their homeland also with new professional qualifications, since over a period of six years, they had to change their place of residence and type of work many times, which meant they had to retrain frequently. The activists of the Union of Polish Patriots also encouraged them to acquire or improve their professional skills, indicating, for example, the future demand for professionals in the process of the post-war reconstruction of the country.[22]

In exile, the harsh employment policy and the simultaneous lack of appropriate technical conditions (equipment, tools, tractive power), protective clothing and footwear, non-compliance with health and safety requirements, and the severe climate resulted in the deterioration of workers' health. Janusz and Henryk Czaiński mentioned: 'Siberia has greatly mutilated our family. Mother became completely paralysed, and the older son [...] returned to Poland as a cripple, barely able to move his legs, as a result of numerous frostbites, and then became severely disabled – a wheelchair user'.[23] Edward Wróbel described his family in the following words: 'They returned sick, poor, lost, without means of living and broken, not knowing where to start. The entire property remained in the Borderlands'.[24]

20 Drawing up a balance sheet of personal losses as a result of deportation is still not possible. See: Ciesielski S., Materski W., Paczkowski A. 2002, 19–21.

21 Mikulski T. 1995, 33.

22 Głowacki A. 1994, 30–31, 136–162.

23 Broda J. (ed.), 2004, 270.

24 Łapo H. (ed.), 1996, 474; Borderland – eastern part of the Second Polish Republic annexed into the USSR – editor's note.

The repatriates were ashamed of their appearance and their sanitary condition. In the material sense, they were left with nothing. Those who returned from the depths of the Soviet Union did not usually settle on their family land, as their pre-war property – the result of many years of toil by their families in the eastern lands of the Second Republic – was seized by the Soviets. Nevertheless, they were happy because the exile phase of their lives had finally come to an end, as the dreamed, longed-for return had become a reality. Abroad, they strengthened their love for and appreciation of their homeland, although the first post-war years (and longer) proved very difficult for them. In the new Polish reality created by the communist authorities, the repatriates did not feel like fully-fledged citizens. For almost half a century, they could not officially speak about their fate as exiles, about the realities of life in the 'proletarian paradise'; they could not demand an apology or compensation for wrongdoings. In the 1940s and 1950s, they had difficulty obtaining pensions due to their inability to document their length of service or the circumstances of their termination of employment during the chaos of war in 1939.[25] But the fear and terror that had accompanied them under the Bolsheviks' rule in the USSR resulted, among other things, in the fact that they did not openly fight the communist authorities in Poland. They wanted to enjoy their family life and look forward to a peaceful old age.

Wieńczyława Bystrzycka-Kozera later admitted:

> The cruelty of that time did not take away my faith in the meaning and value of life, in the good, in a man who, in the most inhumane situations, was not entirely evil, and even knew how to resist evil. I am convinced, however, that those who did not survive deportation and did not live in Siberia will never be able to comprehend the pain, suffering, the agony of hunger, which was our daily bread there. But those who lived there and survived this time know the whole painful truth.[26]

It should also be noted that avoiding deportation and remaining in place did not necessarily mean a better fate. After all, the occupation of the eastern borderlands of the Second Polish Republic by the Germans in mid-1941 meant annihilation for the local Jewish population, and the uprising of Ukrainian nationalists resulted in mass murders of the Polish population in Volhynia and Eastern Lesser Poland. Thus, paradoxically, the deportations into the depths of the USSR unexpectedly created a chance of survival and salvation.

Mass deportation was one of the basic instruments of the Kremlin's occupation policy. It meant a deliberate breakdown of social and economic structures and local communities. Deportation was supposed to weaken the patriotic element and hinder attempts to organise underground movements. It dispersed and weakened the Polish

25 Broda J. (ed.), 2004, 384.

26 Bystrzycka-Kozera W. 2001, 18.

and Jewish element and served to relocate and isolate in remote regions of the USSR the 'element' that the Soviets considered to be insecure and dangerous while providing cheap labour. At the same time, the consequence of the deportations was to intimidate those who were left behind. Although they were 'spared', they lived in an atmosphere of constant uncertainty about their own futures.

Deportations affected to varying degrees basically all social and professional groups, not only in towns but also in the countryside, children, young people, adults and the elderly, women and men, the poor and the rich, the politically committed and the indifferent, the educated and the illiterate. They resulted in the complete reconstruction of the social structure of the inhabitants of the annexed lands. Poles, who accounted for almost 60% of all deportees, were hit the hardest.[27]

The years in exile took a toll on the physical and mental health of the displaced persons and destroyed or hampered their opportunities to obtain a good education, a rewarding profession/job, personal affairs and family life.

For everyone, the stay in exile in a country whose party-state authorities declared the construction of a supposedly attractive system of social justice turned out to be a first-hand experience of the Communists' real intentions. The exiles got to know the realities of this process from the inside out and radically rejected such a path. This is reflected in the words of Wanda Nowakowska:

> I don't regret at all that six good young years were taken away from me. I saw the Soviet reality, which I was very curious about, I saw what an ideology, to which my attitude had been decidedly positive six years ago, looked like in contact with real life, and I saw the results of the collective economy. I have brought from my exile not a small achievement: the deepest peace, which is the sum of certain experiences, and the strengthening of faith in humanity. I want to bow here to the beautiful humanity of all those friends of mine who have nourished me during these bitter years with the most precious sweetness, the sweetness of the human heart.[28]

And finally, the thoughts of Maria Jadwiga Łęczycka, a teacher who, returning from exile in 1946, shared this reflection:

> If there are to be no more wronged people and wrongdoers in my homeland, there must also be a little bit of my work in it. [...] If I hadn't lived through those six years in Kazakhstan, I might never have had that little bit. [...] These were cruel years, but not wasted years.[29]

27 Hryciuk G. 2020, 173.

28 Nowakowska W. (Drozdowa W.) 1997, 114.

29 Łęczycka M.J. 1989, 302.

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