



Albin Głowacki

***W tajdze i w stepie. O deportacjach
obywateli polskich w głąb Związku
Sowieckiego w latach 1940–1941***

***[“In taiga and steppe. Deportations of Polish citizens
deep into the Soviet Union in 1940–1941”]***

**Białystok 2022, Sybir Memorial Museum
[“Sybir” editorial collection]**

On 16 May 1995, the Section for the History of Central and Eastern Europe of the 19th and 20th Centuries, part of the Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Sciences, hosted a discussion on the number of Polish citizens deported to the Soviet Union. Prof. Albin Głowacki, one of the leading Polish researchers in this area, stated: “The progress in historical research, especially with regard to the most recent history, makes it natural and even imperative for historians to attempt to verify previous findings and interpretations, especially when new source material of fundamental importance appears. We are dealing with such a situation now, for example in the case of Poles in the USSR during the Second World War. Until recently, the number of Polish citizens forcibly deported to the depths of the Soviet Union in the years 1939–1941 could, by necessity, only be estimated. We owe those estimates to émigré Polish researchers. For political reasons, domestic research on this subject remained a great ‘missing page’ for half a century (leaving aside the ‘Brotherhood of Arms’ at Leningrad). It could not be openly discussed; examining the Polish ordeal in the East allegedly undermined the Polish alliance and official friendship with its powerful neighbor. Thus, it was extremely difficult, if not practically impossible, to respond substantively to the numerical estimates of émigré historiography regarding the manner in which they were determined and to their source. For this reason, we simply accepted them in good faith. It must also be admitted that we did not have sufficient historical material to comprehensively attempt our own findings responsibly. [...] Of course, our knowledge of Polish exiles in the USSR from the initial period of the Second World War was drawn in abundance from memoirs and diaries disseminated in exile in the West, from published works such as ‘Zeszyty Historyczne’, or from the free Polish-language press. Since the end of the 1980s, many memoirs have also been published in Poland, and hundreds

of accounts by *Sybiraks* have been collected and made available. This catalog of source material is invaluable in illustrating the everyday life of exiles, but it can only be used for statistical calculations in a fragmentary way. [...] For historians, however, it is above all the new post-Soviet archives that are of paramount academic value. Grasping this overwhelming legacy requires time, perseverance, a professional approach and the efforts of many researchers. Unfortunately, we Poles are still using this opportunity presented by history to an insufficient extent..." (Głowacki, Korzon, Boćkowski et al., 1996, pp. 117–118). This statement was undoubtedly characterized by optimism stemming from newly-granted access to Russian archives, and at the same time by a sense of the enormity of the consequent work and challenges facing Polish historiography. Almost thirty years have passed since then. This inevitably begs the question: where are we today? There has been no surge in the number of available documents from post-Soviet archives since that time. Russia and Belarus have gradually closed their archives, and today they are completely inaccessible, while Ukraine has opened them wide (especially the SBU archives). Kazakhstan, too, has opened theirs recently, where some two million files on repressed persons have already been declassified in connection with the activities of the State Commission for the Full Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression and Famine.

Nevertheless, a huge amount of work has been carried out in Poland itself by, among others, Prof. Głowacki. The text *W tajdze i w stepie* is a summary of this work that, it must be noted, is accessible to readers outside the narrow circle of specialists via its popular science edition. The publication of this work was undertaken by the Sybir Memorial Museum in Białystok, one of the most modern museums in the country, which also conducts research and educational activities. It is all the more important that this conscientiously published work, with its interesting graphic design, tables and lists, also contains extracts from memoirs and photographs of artefacts in the museum's collections. All of these constitute valuable additions and enrich to the author's theses.

What new contributions does Prof. Głowacki's work make to our knowledge of Soviet deportations? Undoubtedly, its most valuable section is the reconstruction of "the decision-making processes and the reconstruction of the conceptual and logistical work of the apparatus of repression" (p. 7) on the basis of documents from Russian archives. As the author describes in the introduction: "Until recently, the details of the preparations for the deportations were squirreled away in secret orders, directives and reports of the NKVD and in the archives of the Communist Party. For this reason, the start of the deportations is generally associated with night-time banging on doors or windows, incursions and searches by the NKVD, chaotic packing of luggage by residents and drives to the nearest railway station. But these were only the final stages of a complicated operation prepared in deep secrecy over the course of

several weeks both in Moscow and in the field. The enormous scale of the successive resettlement operations required the involvement of various power structures, institutions and organizations” (p. 7). Prof. Głowacki takes as the starting point of this decision-making process Beria’s directive of 10 October 1939 for the NKVD to place the families of military settlers in Poland’s Eastern Borderlands under registry and permanent observation. The next stage was the plan, approved on 4 December of that year by the Political Bureau of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), to deport this group in its entirety from the territories of “Western Ukraine and Belarus” and place them at the disposal of the People’s Commissariat for the Timber Industry as a labor force for logging. The settlers were to be deported by 15 February 1940 and placed in purpose-built special settlements (*spetsposelki*). This operation required profound logistical preparation and the involvement of a huge number of people (almost 40,000 for “Western Ukraine” alone). Preparations for it were, of course, made in the utmost secrecy. The author precisely describes the further decision-making processes and division of duties, as well as the course of the operation itself, taking into account many organizational details such as lists of loading stations, numbers of wagons, plans for medical and sanitary services (which in practice did not exist at all, as it later turned out, with tragic consequences in many cases), etc. The book gives an equally thorough account of continuing deportations, including a little-known case concerning prostitutes (exactly 737 of whom were deported from “Western Ukraine” and 307 from “Western Belarus,” together with their 35 children). The NKVD of the Kazakh SSR, where some of them were sent, later reported to Moscow that they were evading work and continuing to engage in prostitution.

In conclusion, Prof. Głowacki states that the decisions surrounding the mass deportations “were [...] a conscious implementation of the state’s repressive course toward selected groups of Polish citizens from areas annexed by Moscow in 1939–1940. This policy can be regarded as a continuation of extermination activities, the most prominent manifestation of which was the NKVD’s ‘Polish operation’ of 1937–1938. [...] The scale of this form of repression is striking. Its goal was to dispose of people and their families who were considered dangerous to the Stalinist regime [...]. In organizational terms, the deportation machine worked very efficiently and decisively. [...] Each time, tens of thousands of people were involved in the deportation operation: Communist Party functionaries, the repression apparatus, social activists and soldiers, as well as railway and health care workers” (p. 75). The author also mentions by name the main culprits: high-ranking officials of the state-party apparatus and NKVD officers responsible for supervising the operations and their course. These criminals never suffered any consequences of their actions.

Both the author himself and the Sybir Memorial Museum deserve great credit for this publication. It is an excellent example of the direction in which the educational and publishing activities of museums of this type should be heading in Poland.

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