

THE POLISH OPERATION OF THE NKVD 1937–1938

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Front panel photograph: Róża Rappel. She was wrongfully accused of participation in a counter-revolutionary terrorist organisation and put before a firing squad on 10 September 1937.
Photo: "Memorial" Research and Information Centre in Moscow.



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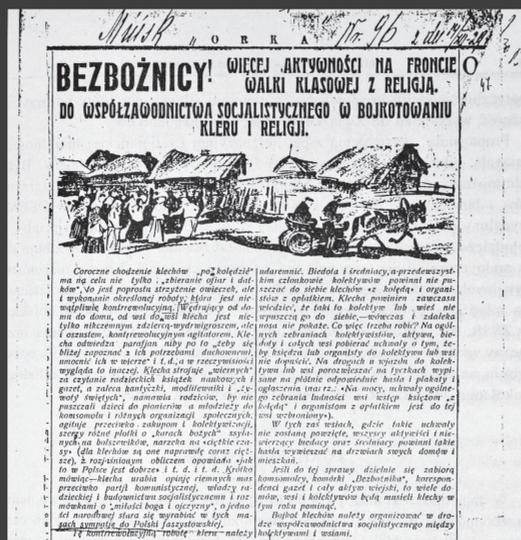
POLES IN THE USSR



Around 1,200,000 – 1,500,000 Poles stayed in the USSR after the Treaty of Riga was signed on 18 March 1921, ending the Polish-Soviet War. 60 per cent of them lived in Ukraine, 20 per cent – in Byelorussia and the rest in other regions of the country. Initially, the authorities granted them relative autonomy, but the resistance the Poles mounted to collectivisation and atheisation caused the experiment to fail: the Polish regions were disbanded, and the authorities resorted to repression.

Poles from Jabłonne near Dovbysh in the Ukrainian SSR. Men from the village were murdered by the NKVD during the Polish Operation, and the majority of women and children were deported. Photograph from the collection of Maria Zajjnczowska.

Orka, a newspaper in Polish, Minsk, 14 July 1929. From the collection of Rev. Roman Dzwonkowski S.A.C.



There were two Polish National Districts in the Soviet Union: Marchlewszczyzna created in 1925 in the Ukrainian SSR and Dzierżyńszczyzna created in 1932 in the Byelorussian SSR. They were supposed to be a starting point for the future Polish Socialist Republic and to prepare communist personnel for the new region.



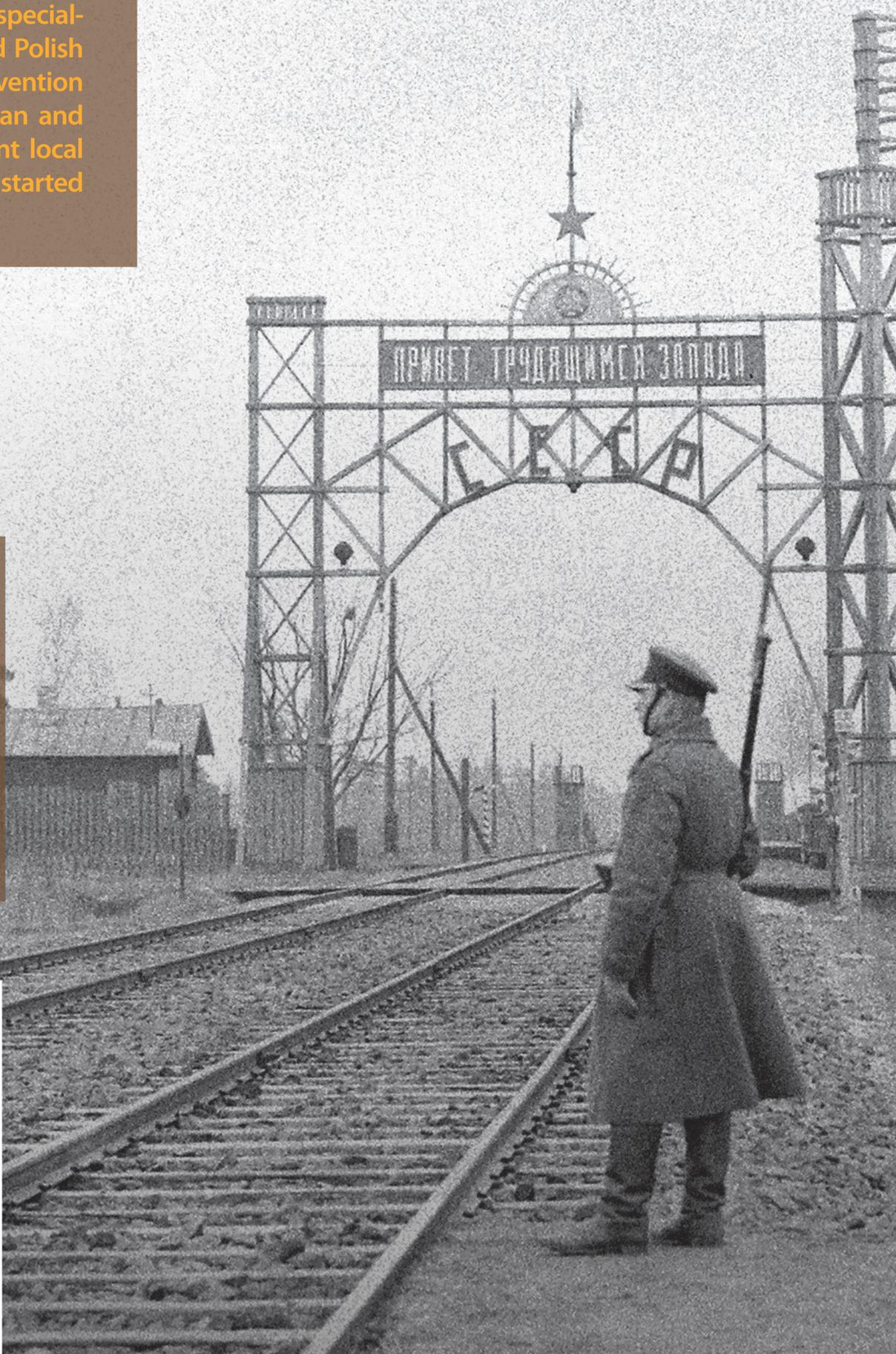
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POLES AS A THREAT TO THE USSR

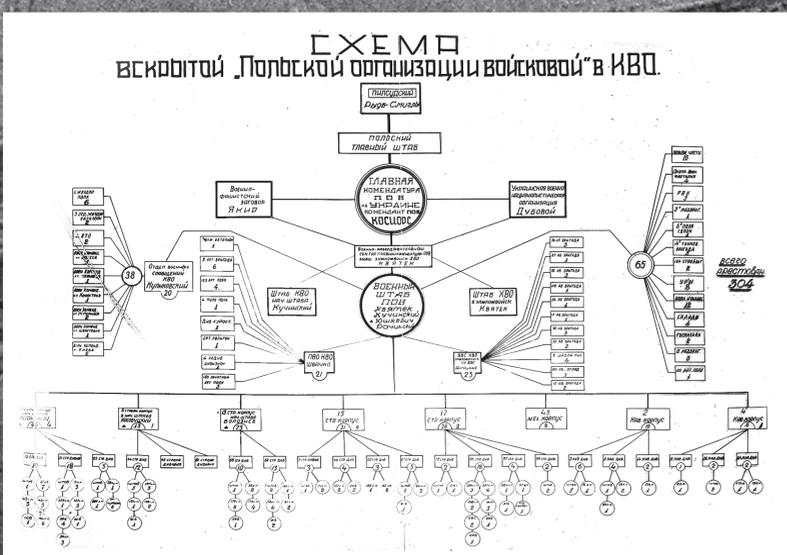
After their defeat in the Polish-Soviet War, the Soviets had to set back their plans to force communism on Poland. Stalin considered Poland as his main enemy in the West and Poles in the USSR as an "uncertain element", especially those living in areas bordering on the Second Polish Republic. He was afraid of a Polish military intervention supposedly aimed at incorporating the Ukrainian and Byelorussian SSRs to Poland. In order to prevent local Poles from serving as foreign agents, the NKVD started deporting them to distant parts of the country.



A Polish family living in exile in Kazakhstan, 1936. Photograph from the collection of Piotr Hlebowicz.



Polish-Soviet border in Stolpce in 1934. Photo: Willem van de Poll, the National Archives of the Netherlands, Fotocollectie Van de Poll.



A diagram of the Polish Military Organisation (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa, POW). It was announced to have been uncovered by the NKVD. In fact, it did not exist at that time. Józef Piłsudski dismantled it in 1918, but it was resurrected for propaganda reasons in the USSR to crush the Poles, 1937. Photo: the State Archive of the Ukrainian Security Service.



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THE GREAT TERROR 1937-1938

The Great Terror was a campaign of class, political and national repression against USSR citizens aimed at eliminating the remaining “enemies of the Soviet authorities” organised in 1937–1938. Among its operations was the Polish Operation carried out under the operational Order No. 00485 issued by Head of the NKVD Nikolai Yezhov on 11 August 1937. The Polish Operation of the NKVD was the largest Soviet operation against one national minority.

An NKVD firing squad near Dovbysh in the Ukrainian SSR.
Photograph from the collection of Stefana Kuriata.



The architects of the Great Terror, including the Polish Operation: Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVD in 1936–1938 (on the right), and Joseph Stalin strolling down the Volga–Don Canal. Photo: public domain.



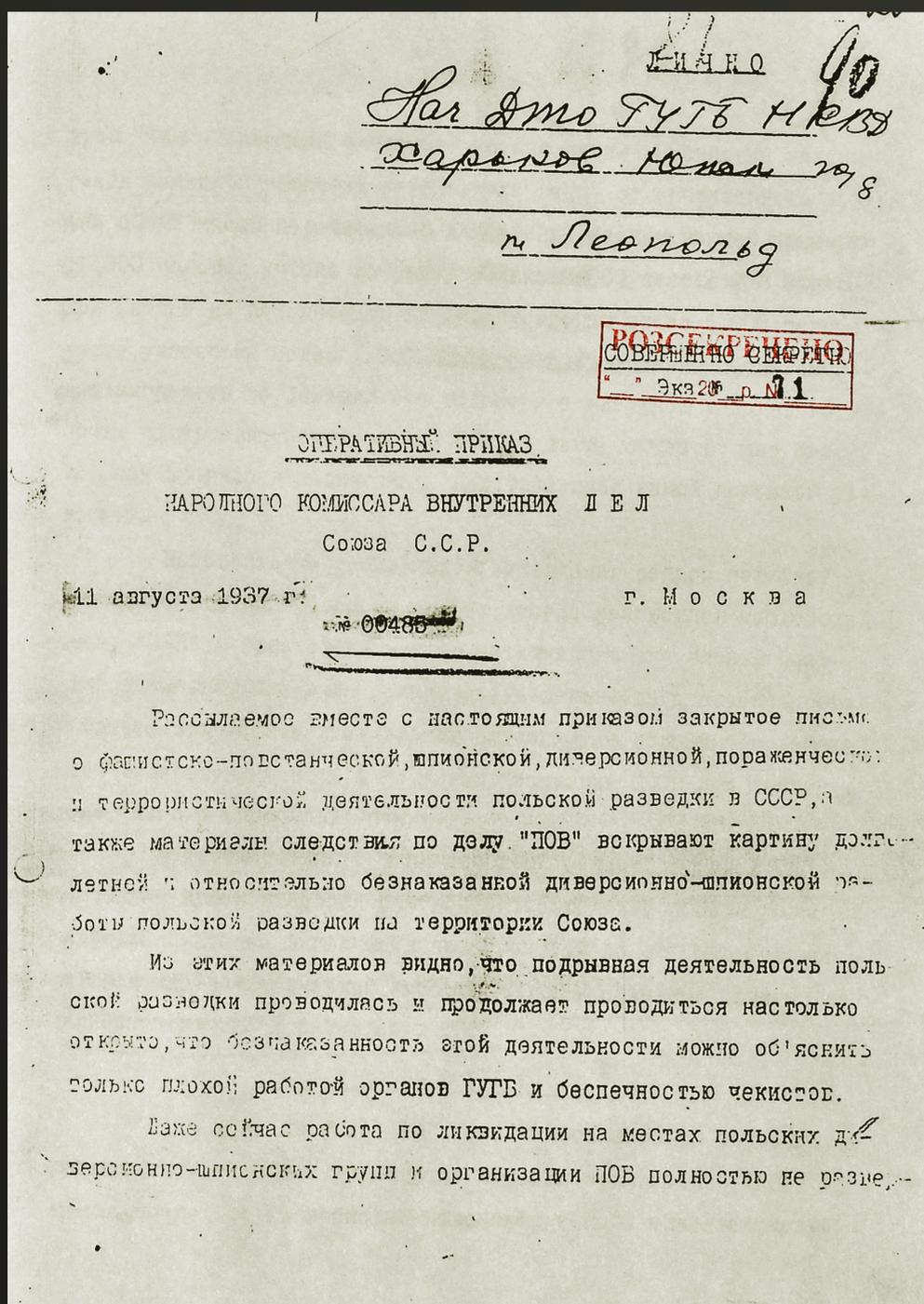
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ORDER NO. 00485

Following the Order No. 00485, NKVD officers were looking for their future victims in the whole USSR: in Moscow, Ukraine, Siberia, the Ural Mountains and the Caucasus. They selected them based on their Polish names appearing in phone directories, workplaces and registers as well as Polish birthplaces, regardless of their actual nationality. In fear of being considered enemies themselves, the officers obeyed the order eagerly and avoided showing any leniency. They were awarded for repressing the Poles.



Józef Czewski, a Pole born in 1910 in Kamianets-Podilskyi. He was accused of being a member of POW and of "conducting a counter-revolutionary campaign and preparing for acts of sabotage during the future war". He was shot under Order No. 00485 on 20 September 1938. Czewski was vindicated posthumously in 1958. After an analysis of the documents on his case, it was acknowledged that his accusation was a "fabrication of the then NKVD officers." Photo: State Oblast Archive in Khmelnytskyi.



**“Good job!
Keep digging
and removing
the Polish filth!”**

Joseph Stalin, 1937

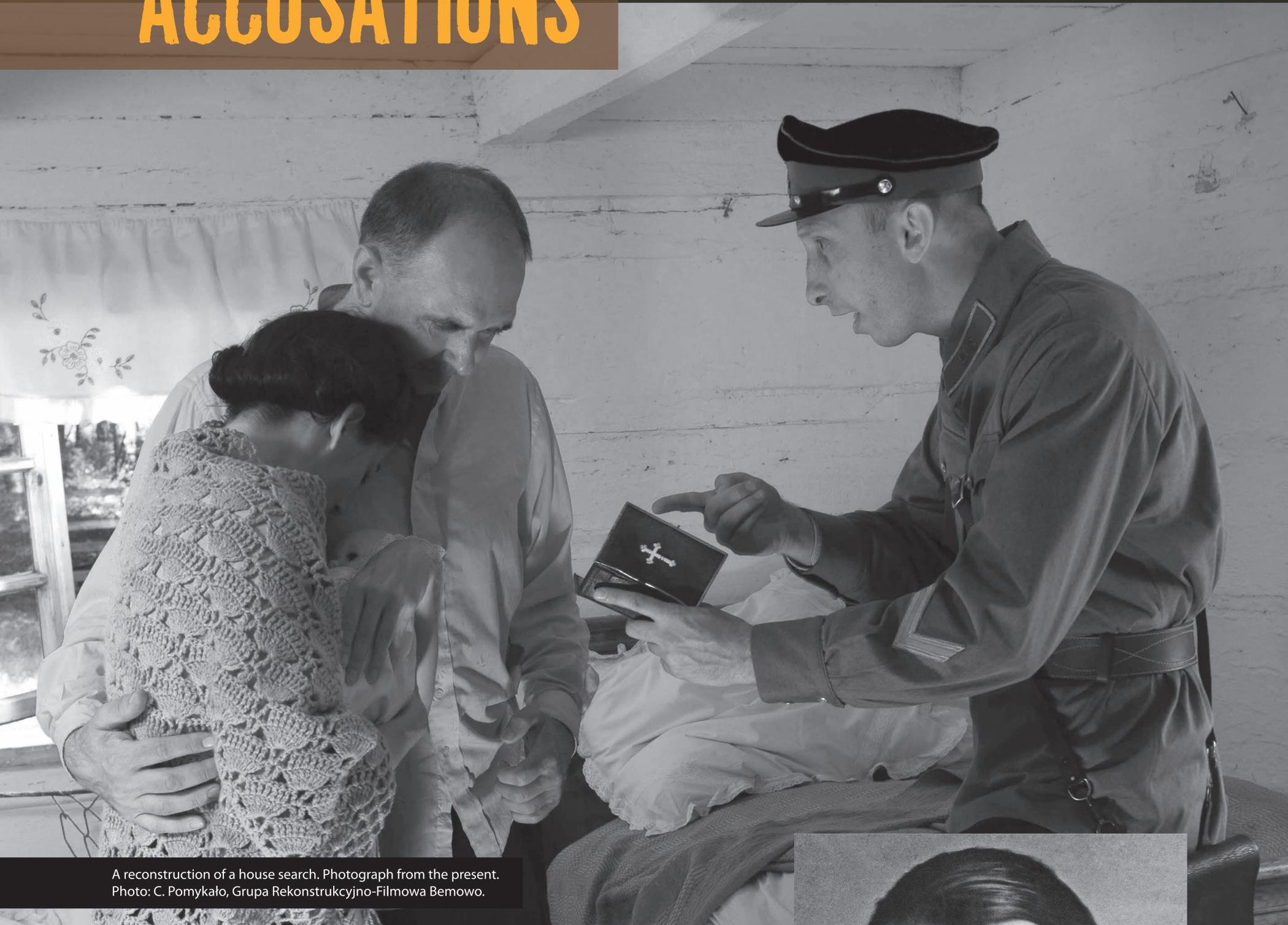
The first page of Order No. 00485 signed by Nikolai Yezhov, the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs. The order began the Polish Operation of the NKVD on 11 August 1937. Photo: public domain.



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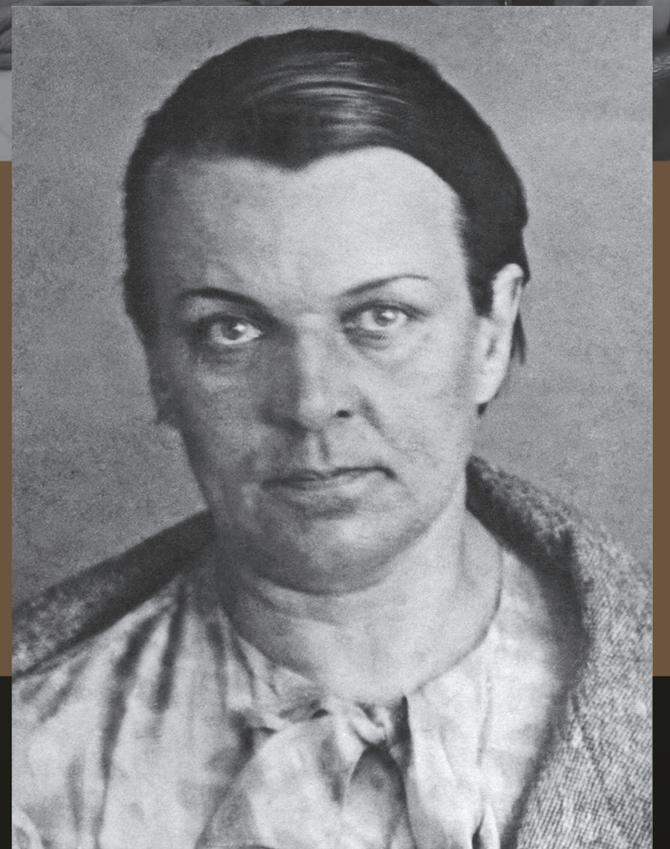
ОБВИНЯЕТСЯ:

ACCUSATIONS



A reconstruction of a house search. Photograph from the present.
Photo: C. Pomykała, Grupa Rekonstrukcyjno-Filmowa Bemowo.

According to the NKVD Order No. 00485, people were arrested on a charge of being members of the fictional POW and anti-Soviet political parties. Among the most suspicious ones was also "the most active part of local anti-Soviet nationalist element from Polish regions". Being a very broad category, the latter allowed repressing a large number of people. Poles were accused of "counter-revolutionary activities" such as espionage on behalf of Poland, enlisting agents and sabotage.



Agnieszka Radecka-Wantke, a housewife born on 24 August 1894 in Warsaw. She was arrested on 17 May 1937 and shot on 21 August 1937.
Photo: "Memorial" Research and Information Centre in Moscow.



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INVESTIGATIONS



A reconstruction of an interrogation. Photograph from the present.
Photo: C. Pomykała, Grupa Rekonstrukcyjno-Filmowa Bemowo.



An NKVD isolation cell in the Rabati Castle in Akhaltsikhe, Georgia, where the victims of the Polish Operation were held. Photo: Stanisław Koller.

Suspicion, which was often exaggerated, was enough for the NKVD officers. They could bring charges against Poles for hostile activities. Interrogation reports were falsified on the grounds that it was “obvious that the prisoner does not tell us everything and what they do not say should be added by the interrogator”. Words they had never uttered were often added to the prisoners’ testimonies. “Physical coercive measures” were also allowed to force them to speak. False self-accusations made under torture became rightful evidence.



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VICTIMS' FATE

CEZAR PIOTROWSKI

Немноговину

"I confess to counter-revolutionary and nationalist activities. I joined POW under pressure [...] of nationalist political views that had not been eradicated from my consciousness."

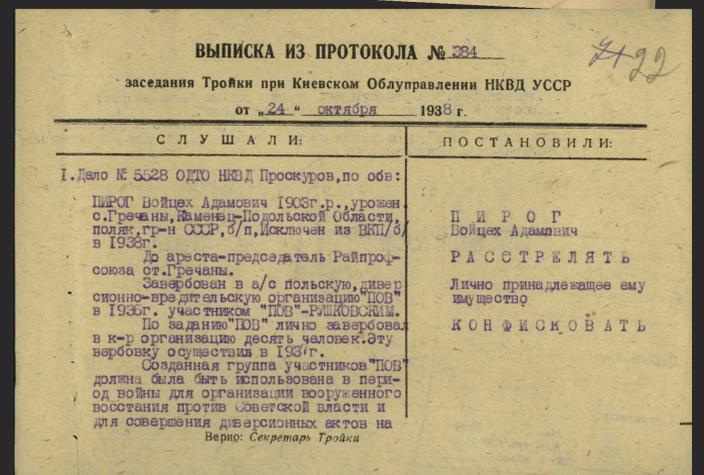
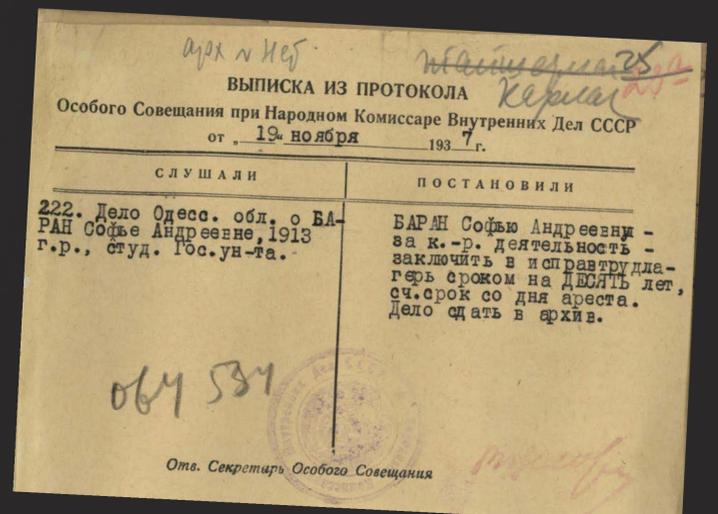
Forced remorse for his alleged activities for POW expressed by Cezar Piotrowski, a Pole born in 1905 in Khmilnyk, Ukraine. Arrested in April 1938, he confessed to what he had been accused of. He was shot by the NKVD on 14 October 1938. During his vindication process, it was concluded that his testimony raised "doubts as to its credibility due to the inappropriate investigation methods used against him". He was vindicated on 6 February 1960.



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Cezar Piotrowski's ID photograph. Photo: State Oblast Archive in Khmelnytskyi.

SENTENCES



Documents issued by the NKVD sentencing Poles to work in labor camps or to death by firing squad. Photos: State Oblast Archive in Odessa (above) and State Oblast Archive in Khmelnytskyi (below).

A reconstruction of an execution by firing squad. Photograph from the present. Photo: C. Pomykała, Grupa Rekonstrukcyjno-Filmowa Bemowo.

The NKVD Order No. 00485 provided for two types of punishment: death by firing squad and from five to ten years in a labor camp or in prison. It is estimated that 80 per cent of the accused were sentenced to death. Although according to the Order, the Polish Operation should have lasted three months, the deadline was in reality too tight because of the huge number of people arrested during the repression of the Great Terror and the complete paralysis of state structures. In the end, the Polish Operation lasted 14 months.



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VICTIMS' FATE

ZOFIA WITKOWSKA-LANDA

Zofia Witkowska-Landa, a housewife born on 31 March 1895 in Żyrardów. She was arrested on 2 March 1937, accused of "participation in a counter-revolutionary terrorist organization" and put before firing squad on 2 September 1937. Photo: "Memorial" Research and Information Centre in Moscow.

"Being a Pole in the USSR during the Great Terror meant the same as being a Jew in the Third Reich."

Helena Trybel, a Pole, witness to genocide, mother to Yuriy Yekhanurov, Prime Minister of Ukraine from 2005 to 2006.

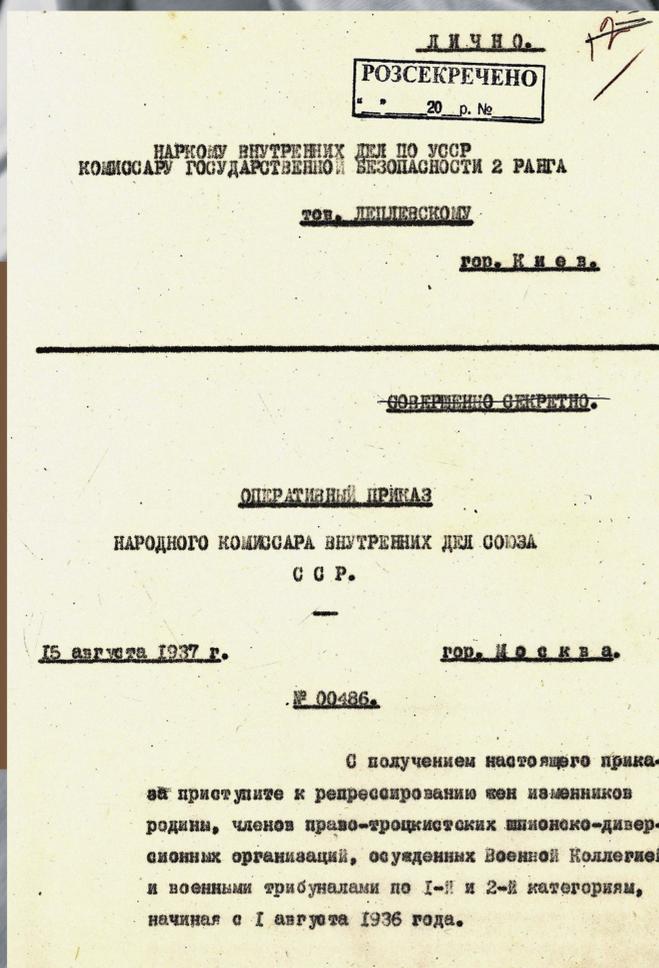


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ORDER NO. 00486



A reconstruction of an arrest. Photograph from the present.
Photo: C. Pomykała, Grupa Rekonstrukcyjno-Filmowa Bemowo.



On 15 August 1937, Head of the NKVD Nikolai Yezhov issued the operational Order No. 00486 on repression against “the family members of traitors to the country”. Women were sentenced to from five to eight years in a labour camp or in exile. Children were taken away from their parents, sent to orphanages with their names changed and subjected to brutal re-education. In such places they faced hunger, diseases and violence that led to high mortality. Away from their parents, the children often committed suicide.

The first page of the operational Order No. 00486. Women who were victims to the order served their sentences in regular camps, but there was also one camp created specially for them: the Akmol Labour Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland (ALZHIR). There was also a special Gulag system for children which consisted of nurseries, kindergartens, camps and labour camps. Photo: public domain.



Maria Tokarska, sent to Kazakhstan for five years on 28 August 1938 as a “socially dangerous element”. Photo: State Oblast Archive in Odessa.



Maria Reus, sent to Kazakhstan for three years on 8 June 1938 as a “socially dangerous element”. Photo: State Oblast Archive in Khmelnytskyi.



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VICTIMS' FATE

KAZIMIERA NOWAKOWSKA

Новаківської

"I will repeat it again: I do not know anything about my husband's counter-revolutionary activities. There were no counter-revolutionary discussions in my presence."

This is how Kazimiera Nowakowska, a Pole born in 1889 and living in Koto-vsk, Ukraine, defended herself against false accusations. She was accused of "not informing of her husband's crime". She was sentenced to five years in exile in Kazakhstan under Order No. 00486. She was vindicated in 1957 due to "lack of features of a crime".

Police photograph of Kazimiera Nowakowska.
Photo: State Oblast Archive in Odessa.



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THE END OF THE POLISH OPERATION OF THE NKVD



Polish exiles in a Molotov Sovkhoz in Kazakhstan, May 1940.
Photo: Ośrodek Karta.

The Polish Operation of the NKVD and other Great Terror mass operations ended on 26 November 1938 under the operational Order No. 00762 issued by Lavrentiy Beria, the new head of the NKVD. It was officially due to “serious irregularities and distortions in the NKVD work”, but the real reason was different, The genocide was stopped because the goals were achieved: social bonds were broken, the country was paralysed with fear, there was chaos and change of staff, and the state was inefficient because of too many operations. For the Poles, however, the end of the Great Terror did not mean the end of persecution.



Repression against them continued in the form of deportations from the Eastern Borderlands far into the USSR in 1940–1941, the Katyn massacre... The photograph shows belongings of murdered Polish officers found by the Germans in 1943. Photo: Katyń Museum. Martyrdom Division of the Polish Army Museum.



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MEMORIAL SITES

The cross in Sandarmokh near Medvezhyegorsk in the Republic of Karelia, Russia, is a memorial to Catholic Solovki prisoners. Photo: "Memorial" Research and Information Centre in Saint Petersburg.

Our knowledge about the sites where victims of the Great Terror, including the Polish Operation, were buried is increasing every year. There are many memorial sites in the lands formerly belonging to USSR, for example in Kurapaty, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Tomsk, Irkutsk, Karelia, Kiev, Khmelnytskyi, Kamianets-Podilskyi and Kazakhstan. New plaques, monuments and graves are built to commemorate the victims.



A commemorative plaque to the victims of the Polish Operation of the NKVD funded by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance and unveiled in 2018. Father Adam Studziński Square in Kraków. Photo: Paweł Zechenter.



A monument to the victims of Stalinist repression in the Polish Cemetery in Bar, Ukraine. Photo: Sergiusz Kazimierzuk.



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THE POLISH OPERATION OF THE NKVD IN NUMBERS

A monument of a labour camp inmate. Bykivnia Graves State Historical and Memorial Reserve in Kiev. Photo: Piotr Życieński.

ACCORDING TO THE CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH,

AT LEAST **143,000 PEOPLE** WERE ARRESTED BY THE NKVD DURING THE POLISH OPERATION

MORE THAN **111,000** OF THEM WERE SENTENCED TO DEATH

AROUND **30,000** WERE SENT TO LABOUR CAMPS

240,000–280,000 POLES WERE REPRESSED IN THE 1930s IN THE USSR,
INCLUDING **200–250 TYS.** PEOPLE WHO WERE SHOT OR TORTURED TO DEATH OR DIED DURING DEPORTATIONS, IN LABOUR CAMPS OR DURING PACIFICATION ACTIVITIES, ESPECIALLY

IN BORDER REGIONS. REPRESENTATIVES OF OTHER NATIONALITIES DIED DURING THE POLISH OPERATION AS WELL, INCLUDING UKRAINIANS, RUSSIANS, BELARUSIANS AND JEWS, AND POLES WERE KILLED ALSO IN OTHER ACTS OF REPRESSION OF THE GREAT TERROR. WE STILL DO NOT KNOW THE NUMBER OF REPRESSED WOMEN AND CHILDREN. IT IS ESTIMATED AT SEVERAL HUNDRED THOUSAND.



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