

# An Introduction on the Relationship between Poland and Ukraine in Memory Politics: Controversy over the Film “Wołyń” of Wojciech Smarzowski

Kenshi Fukumoto

## **Abstract**

This is an abstract of the paper, which I prepared for the participation at the 8th East Asian Conference on Slavic-Eurasian Studies (June 3-4, 2017) at Chung-ang University in Seoul. The aim of the paper was to sketch the contemporary relationship between Poland and Ukraine in memory politics through a review on the film “Wołyń” (hereafter, the film) of Wojciech Smarzowski.

On October 20, 2016, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland and the Supreme Congress of Ukraine jointly accepted “the Declaration of Memory and Solidarity”. Obviously the Declaration was drafted in a political context beyond both countries, because it explicitly criticized Russian policy since 2014 toward Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, making an analogy representing the policy like as an occupation of “two of totalitarianism regimes”, which mean Nazis Germany and the Soviet Union. At first glance, Poland and Ukraine seems to enter into an alliance on the common front toward Russia, but one can easily find that serious disputes happened between Poland and Ukraine over the film that was released in the almost same time with the Declaration. Paradoxically, Kremlin positively evaluated the film, because it represented Ukrainian nationalists as ‘fascists’ for their collaborations with Nazis German. It means that the Volhynia massacres (hereafter, the massacres) are involved in the complicated process of rebuilding a memory order. Moreover, the fact that Russia declared with China that they were against revisionism and distortion of historical “truth” indicated that such process is developing on the whole Eurasia. Thus, disputes over the massacres can be located in “Eurasianized” memory conflicts, and this is why I am motivated to study this topic. Since the film won “the Eagles Polish Film Award” and “the Krzysztof Krauze

Award”, we can find in that film the most recent and common memory in Poland on the massacre. Therefore, analysis on disputes over the film between Poland and Ukraine is appropriate to our aim.

In this paper, firstly, I located the massacres in the historical contexts, which started in 1894 when Mykhailo Hrushevsky who invented Ukrainian national history moved from Kiev to Lviv (Lwów), and ended with the Wisła operation in 1947, which forcibly banished Ukrainians out of the rebuilt Poland. Simply said, the massacres could be summarized as that incident that Ukrainians organized by The Ukrainian Nationalists’ Organization (in Ukraine, Orhanizatsiia Ukrain’skykh Natsionalistiv) and its Militant Organization, Ukrainian Insurgent Army (in Ukraine, Ukrayins’ka Povstans’ka Armiya) (hereafter, the OUN-UPA) killed Poles including children and women during the Second World War. But, during this period, Volhynia had been covered by various violence and conflicts which happened under the influence of the Polish-Ukrainian War, ethnic policies of the Second Republic of Poland, the terrorism of OUN-UPA, pogroms of Jews in 1941, the Volhynia massacres in 1943, and the Polish revenge toward Ukrainians in 1947. From this viewpoint, I think we can recognize Volhynia in this period as the ‘palimpsest’<sup>1</sup> of violence. Thus, one violence was covered and concealed by new or other violence.

Consider to the palimpsest, it becomes much clear that the massacres are commemorated in the short-term context in Poland and the long-term in Ukraine. Generally, in Poland, the memories on the massacres are focused only during 1939-1945. On the other hand, in Ukraine, the massacres are located in historical exchanges of violence starting from the Polish-Ukrainians War, or sometimes very essentially from the medieval age. The periodization is related with the terminology. Last year, the Polish Sejm declared the massacres as “genocide (ludobójstwo)”, and the demand for Ukraine to apologize for the massacres seem to become more intensive. On the other hand, the Ukrainian government recognizes the massacres as a “tragedy (трагедія)” between both nations which struggled with each other

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<sup>1</sup> I borrowed the concept “palimpsest” from, Wiktoria Kudela-Świątek i Adam Świątek, “W pułapce kolonializmu... Ukraińcy w Galicji wschodniej – kolonizowani czy kolonizatorzy?,” *Historyka*, XLII (2012), s. 191-213.

since the medieval age.

In addition, there is the third focal point between Poland and Ukraine whether the massacres happened spontaneously or not. In Poland, the ideology and intention of the OUN-UPA to eliminate Poles are emphasized to legitimize the demand for Ukraine's apology. However, in Ukraine, the influential discourse is that the OUN-UPA had been too small to achieve the ethnic cleansing of Poles without support from peasantry, and this meant that the massacres resulted from the peasants' spontaneous actions to revenge Polish colonizers. Additionally, I want to note that Jewish problems are often lacking from the discourses in both countries.

From the viewpoints of periodization and terminology, the film of Smarzowski shows the typical memory on massacres in contemporary Poland. We should pay attention to the famous phrase inserted in the film of Jan Zaleski, a survivor of the massacres. The phrase states: "People in Kresy were killed twice: first with the edge of sickles, and second by silence". Considering that Jan Zaleski's son is an Armenian Catholic priest, Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, a famous opinion leader who demands that Ukraine apologize for the massacres as "genocide", this citation has a clear meaning. That is to say, the film recognizes the massacres as "genocide".

After the film was released, one million tickets were sold in just two weeks. Grzegorz Motyka, a specialist on the history of Polish-Ukrainian relationship, positively regards the film because it entirely described 1) the deportation organized by the Soviets, 2) the Nazi extermination of the Jews, and 3) the organized (not spontaneous) operation of the OUN-UPA to murder Poles. Of course, there is severe criticism toward the film, and Adam Balcer, a scholar of Warsaw University criticized the film for it is full of stereotypes.

I think the film successfully described that the norm over age, gender, and ethnicity, which had been considerable in peacetime, disappear in the revenge actions, though it happened broadly in local violence in East and Central Europe, in other words Poles were not the only victims of such violence. In addition, although Smarzowski did not describe Polish collaborators, embedding of Jews in the narrative is another valuing aspect of the film. However, I generally agree with Balcer's opinion, as the silence of the film on the process of how Ukrainians began to hate Poles functions to enforce the Polish stereotype of Ukrainians as Cossacks.

In contrast with Poland, contemporary Ukrainians received the film negatively. The Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs asked the Polish Institute in Kyiv not to release the film for the sake of “public order”. This shows the distance in opinion between Poland and Ukraine on the massacres. As I have already mentioned, the OUN-UPA fought against not only the Poles, but also against the Soviet Union, although at first the OUN-UPA tried to make an alliance with Hitler. Therefore, it is easy to understand that for many Ukrainians, the film is so one-sided and anti-Ukrainian. A Ukrainian commenter in Lviv represents the film as even a kind of horror film with zombies. On the other hand, in reflecting on the Ukrainians’ response to the film, a younger historian, Sandra Błażejewska argued that Smarzowski did not resort to cheap sensationalism in the film, but that there was need to brutally represent the murder of the Poles by the OUN-UPA in keeping with the exactness of “historical truth”.

Poland and Ukraine seems to enter into an alliance on the same front against Russia, but both countries still do not succeed in reaching a dialogue on the Volhynia massacres. Their memories seem to be organized along the framework of each country’s national interest, and even scholars cannot stand on a higher dimension regarding such conflict. I think that the situation in East Asia is very similar, because here also dialog on histories and memories is difficult and nationalistic views on past gain popular support, although there are many alternative opinions differentiated with nationalistic ones in each country. In my opinion, it is productive to narrate the Volhynia massacres through a meta-structure like the palimpsest of violence. Such meta-structure will lead us to recognize that it was not only the Poles, but also the Jews, the Ukrainians and even the Russians who experienced war suffering. One national memory tends to focus on only experiences that are very suitable to itself and overlook the experiences of others. I think historians can contribute to resolution of memory conflicts through reconstruction of the palimpsest of violence and suffering experiences that can be a framework to compare and connect various narratives.