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„Our Law is the Rifle”. The Red Army in the Pomeranian Voivodeship in 1945

Abstract

The Red Army pushed the Germans out of the Pomeranian Voivodeship from January to March 1945, ending the German occupation. The occupier incorporated Pomerania and Kuyavia into the Third Reich in the autumn of 1939, which influenced the policy towards the local Polish population. In the last months of 1939, the Germans carried out mass executions of Poles. Throughout the war, they used terror and repression: displacements, arrests, deportations for forced labor, and conducted brutal Germanization campaigns. As a result, in the winter of 1945, part of Polish society welcomed the Red Army with joy. They called its entry “liberation”.

The Soviet army created its own administration in the occupied territories – military commands – which were the most important centres of power in the first half of 1945. In this way, the Soviets enabled the Polish communists to take over power in the area and supervised their work. At the same time, from the very first moments of their presence, they carried out a systematic dismantling of industrial plants and the seizure of animals and equipment in villages. They also began arresting members of the local underground and civilians, including women and youth. Those arrested were deported as free labour to labour camps in the Soviet Union. It is estimated that over 15,000 people were deported from Pomerania, of whom about 2,500 died.

Poles were also exploited for slave labor by the Soviets locally. In the first weeks, they worked on fortifications, trenches, and bridge construction, and in the following months, they worked on the land and provided transport services. The Polish population and local administration bore the high costs of quartering Soviet units in towns throughout the province. The army did not pay rent and utility bills. In addition, they carried out devastation and destruction in buildings and infrastructure, and in the villages, the drive of Soviet cattle and horses through the province caused huge losses.

Throughout the year, Red Army soldiers committed crimes and offenses against the local Polish population: theft, looting, assaults, rapes and murders. They were committed by ordinary soldiers and officers. The Soviet command did not take appropriate steps to curb the crimes committed by the Red Army soldiers. Often, they were not interested in fighting them at all. However, the local administration and security apparatus, due to the mass nature of the crimes and lack of resources, were unable to prevent them. Currently, it is impossible to present

statistical data on the crimes and offenses committed. Nevertheless, it is clear from the source materials and reports that they were common.

All these actions caused huge losses in the economy, industry and agriculture, made it difficult to provide food for the population, as well as the daily work of the local administration. Moreover, under their influence, the attitude of the local population towards the Red Army was very negative. While the army was initially welcomed with joy, after a few weeks or months, there was a huge disappointment among the society. The Poles referred to the Soviet presence as a “second occupation”. There were open acts of resistance, such as the destruction of materials promoting the Red Army, including so-called monuments of gratitude. The communist authorities, using propaganda – speeches, the press, radio and various types of printed matter – promoted a positive image of the Soviets as “liberators”, but these actions did not improve the public mood.

The entry of the Red Army into the lands of the Pomeranian Voivodeship in 1945 marked the end of the German occupation. At the same time, it enabled Polish communists to seize power and led to the establishment of a regime under the dictates of the Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin.