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UKRAINE 1943-1944: DECISIONS DURING THE RETREAT OF THE GERMAN ADMINISTRATION AND ARMY

Abstract. In this article author introduced project about Ukraine in the period of retreat of the German administration and army during World War II. At first author giving an introduction into his interest and research questions which he combined with a multidimensional approach of various perspectives. Further more, a short introduction in his different sources is given.

In the second part author presenting some examples of an important aspect of his research: the relationship between German army and administration, partisans and the population in Ukraine. As a last step researcher introduced some of temporary results.

Keywords: Ukraine, World War II, occupation, partisans, the German administration.

ШПОРЙОХАННЕС

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УКРАЇНА У 1943-1944 рр.: РІШЕННЯ ПІД ЧАС ВІДСТУПУ НІМЕЦЬКИХ ВІЙСЬК

Анотація. У даній статті автор представив проект про Україну у період відступу німецької адміністрації та армії під час Другої світової війни. Спочатку автор вводить до сфери його інтересів і дослідницьких питань, які вичаються ним у поєднанні з багатовимірним підходом різноманітних точок зору. Також подається огляд використаних джерел.

У другій частині автор висвітлює деякі приклади важливого аспекту його дослідження: відносини між німецькою армією й адміністрацією, партизанами та населенням в Україні. У якості останнього кроку дослідник навів опис отриманих результатів.

Ключові слова: Україна, Друга світова війна, окупація, партизани, німецька адміністрація.

ШПОРЙОХАННЕС

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УКРАИНА В 1943-1944 гг.: РЕШЕНИЯ ВО ВРЕМЯ ОСТУПЛЕНИЯ НЕМЕЦКИХ ВОЙСК

Аннотация. В этой статье автор представил проект об Украине в период отступления немецкой администрации и армии во время Второй мировой войны. Вначале автор дает введение в его интерес и исследовательские вопросы, которые он изучает в сочетании с многомерным подходом различных точек зрения. Более того, дается обзор использованных источников.

Во второй части автор, представляет некоторые примеры важного аспекта его исследования: отношения между немецкой армией и администрацией, партизан и населения в Украине. В качестве последнего шага исследователь представил некоторые из временных результатов.

Ключевые слова: Украина, Вторая мировая война, оккупация, партизаны, немецкая администрация.

I take a close look at the time in which the Germans retreated from Ukraine in World War II (WW2). There is a number of phenomenons which can be seen as special for this period of the war, which are striking and therefor need to be analyzed as such. These phenomenons include the evacuation and deportation of great parts of the population, robbery and destruction of goods and equipment (industry and agriculture), furthermore the struggle against partisans and within this means of terror and “vengeance” against the biggest part of the population, which above consisted of burning down villages.

At the same time the partisan movement [In this article I am focussing on Soviet and communist partisans] in Ukraine was growing rapidly. In the organizations and groups that cooperated with and worked for the Germans such as the Schutzmannschaften, the Polizei and the Hiwis (Hilfswillige) desertion, sabotage and escape became widespread. Further more, the leftover population was less and less willing to support the Germans with delivering goods [5, s. 97].

Speaking of the situation of retreat of the Germans and it's specific aspects, it's important to stress that these are in many terms different than those in 1941. The first years of WW2 until now have been researched more often, while there is no single monograph about the time of german retreat itself in german or english language. For nowadays public in Germany we can claim that there is very little knowledge about the dimensions of destruction and war crimes in former Soviet Union and today's Ukraine.

First of all, it's not always easy to be sure what is being talked about when we speak of “Ukraine”. While doing this, I refer to the state territory of Ukraine today. My research, though, is concentrated on one administrative unit of what the german occupiers called “Reichskommissariat Ukraine”, the former “Kreisgebiet Shitomir”, which more or less consisted of what is today Oblasts Vinnica and Zhitomir.

For the Wehrmacht defending the *Dnieper-Line* was highly important [8, s. 47-49, s. 269; 10, s. 1041]. Basically after the defeat of Stalingrad winning the war was hardly something to be expected. During the second half of 1943 by the so called “Operation Zitadelle” the Germans carried out “one of the last tries to protect the threat of defeat by an offensive in the southern section of the eastern front” [15, s. 90]. When it became clear that this plan did not succeed and the Red Army was crossing the Dnieper, we can talk of a retreat more than ever. The Wehrmacht as well as the civil administration at this point did not doubt fulfilling the measures that were connected to this. In this situation many territories again became areas of operations of the Wehrmacht and therefor were ruled by the army. In my considerations I focus on the turn of the year 1943/44, because during this phase an increase of certain war measures can be observed. Still, the course of action of the Germans can not only be characterized as “panic”. In the average they tried to fulfill an exact plan, with sometimes more and sometimes less success. This plan consisted among other things of the so called “ARLZ-Maßnahmen” (Auflockerung, Räumung, Lähmung, Zerstörung). These were tactical and strategical means that resulted from a direction of the *Wirtschaftsstabs Ost* and summarized those means, that were to be carried out in case of eviction. The aim was to leave the enemy as little work force, potential soldiers, groceries, raw materials and industrial facilities [11, s. 389].

I approach this situation by using various different historical sources regarding *intention, situation and reception* of the events. I find these in several German (Bundesarchiv, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, Institut für Zeitgeschichte München and others) as Ukrainian (regional archives of Vinnica and Zhitomir Region, TsDAGO, TsDAVO and others) archives. Further more, I research in villages of the Oblasts Vinnica and Zhitomir, conduct interviews with witnesses and ask to see local documents.

In my analysis I emphasize on the relationship between intention and situation during the situation described. I look at decisions of various players considering their different backgrounds (experience and history of the societies they come from).

Within the German civil administration as in the army major disagreements regarding the relation to the Ukrainian population occurred during all years of the occupation and corresponding conflicts that were often led openly. The voices of those who, out of tactical considerations, had doubts about the brutality of the occupation, however almost completely lost their relevance under the primacy of alleged necessity of the army. In a fundamental order regarding the “*Bandenbekämpfung*” [struggle with bandits], the general staff officer of *Heeresgruppe Sūd* on 30th of April 1943 demands “drastic action also against supporters of bandits [Partisans]” [7, bl. 41]. Erich Friderici, general in command of the security troops and commander in the *Heeresgebiet Sūd*, on 1st of August 1943 ordered regarding the desertion of *Hilfswilligen* (Hiwis) and members of “state-owned units” and targeted murder of German Soldiers, that as means of vengeance “5-10 times the amount of Russian blood” to be flown. For this not only persons were to be prosecuted, who participated in assaults, but also those “who considering their behavior are being seen as potential fulfillers of such deeds”. “Narrow minded legal considerations” must, says Friderici, “step back behind the absolute necessity to make an example on the spot [...]” [6, s. 24-28]. With this he made clear that it was potentially the whole population could be targeted by repressions, if the commander felt this to be a necessity. In many cases the Wehrmacht adjusted a behavior that followed these instructions.

Within the German institutions which dealt with the war situation and security policies, one partially spoke a very clear speech that hardly tried to cover up the precarious situation of the Germans. In these reports – and compared to propaganda leaflets and speeches – a rather realistic view was asked for in order to accordingly adjust the warfare. To stretch one example, Oskar Müller, representative of the *Reichsministeriums für die besetzten Ostgebiete* at the *Oberkommando* [high command] *der Heeresgruppe Sūd*, on November 1st 1943 states:

“The situation regarding bandits is alarming. Night after night assaults take place in areas that so far have been absolutely pacified. We have to reckon with the bandits will spread activity further on. [...]”

The mood of the population is [...] depressed due to the military events and the hard means of evacuation. Since during the ruthless evictions of territories threatened by the enemy villages, economic businesses and supplies that could not be taken back must have set on fire and cattle been shot, the population in some places took side against us. The afflux to the bandits though this was not insignificant. Also during the repatriation due to insufficient guard of the civil population, ongoing defect of the bandits could be determined. A greater part of the population, even *Volksdeutsche*, [...] deprived from evacuation. [...]

In general in the current *Heeresgebiet* we can determine, that the rural population neither clearly supports the Bolsheviks nor the German occupation force. Their orientate their behavior only by estimating by whom they would have to expect less inconveniences in case they do not deliver their products to the other side. [...]” [4, s. 92-95].

It appears here that within the Wehrmacht a quite realistic view on the war situation indeed existed: In fact it was more it less desperate, also the changing mood of the population can be comprehended by various other documents. Finally, the means of terror, which affected a big part of the population, are a possible reason for the support of partisans. The observation of the rural population sticking to whomever to expect less repressions of, is remarkable. Even though this is an invalid generalization, correlating statements can be found especially in several interviews with former (and nowadays) peasants conducted recently in central Ukraine.

An interviewee who was born in 1934 from Zarichani, a small village north of the city of Hvitomir, reports about compulsorily hosting three Germans she remembers as “Hans, Jopseph and Rudi”, while her family would have lived in a nearby hut. In the house the Germans, to whom she had lively contact, would have cleaned weapons. During the night Partisans would have come to pick up potatoes and bread, one time she would have hidden three injured partisans in the attic. When the Germans would already have been escaped from the Red Army, the village elder would have denounced them, whereupon Ukrainians would have shot the partisans [1].

Also among those who joined the partisans, several different considerations influenced their decisions. Commonly, the concrete experience with realities of the German occupation had its impact, likewise there was a certain percentage of convinced communists, who wanted to take revenge for their killed relatives and friends. However, many sources deliver evidence of rather pragmatically calculated decisions that in a first way aimed for simple survival. An Ukrainian, whom the Germans supposedly wanted to recruit, is being quoted in a report on partisans in Vinnica: "You know, I have to go underground and into the partisan unit, else they will eliminate me" [12, s. 82-83].

With whom the local population got in contact with strongly depended on their place of residence. In many areas the Germans were not present permanently, but made local Ukrainians realize their policies. In some cases the Germans only showed up, when they confiscated groceries and other goods. In these areas the chances for a development and support of local partisan groups were bigger than elsewhere. In some places a strong identification with the partisans developed and can be experienced until today in interviews. In other cases today's memories of the partisans are rather negative, mostly because of the confiscation of groceries and other goods, which sometimes took place in a brutal manner.

Reading the post-war-reports and memories written for the Soviet officials, one gets the picture of the partisan activities as a *struggle of the people* (Народная борьба): "Literally the whole population supported the partisans and joined them, they gave them all sorts of support" [13, s. 36-37].

This kind of description corresponds to the heroisation and mystical stylization of partisans in Soviet Union especially from the 1960s on. However, with sources available today it is possible to draw a multi-faceted and -dimensional picture of their realities that includes many difficulties and problems they faced.

The commander of the 2nd partisan brigade "Stalin" writes on intensified partisan activities in the forests in late 1943: "It was not an easy task... The activities were isolated and sometimes doubled, which demonstrates the lack of one single center. The idea of united forces developed in 1943, but the Gestapo became a brutal regime that sent out provocateurs in all organizations, in which only a small number of people worked. In this way a unification was virtually impossible" [12, s. 91-103].

Here the missing central coordination of the partisan struggle as well as the repressions by the Gestapo are being named. In another report ongoing difficulties to collect products are being mentioned. Also, the relationship with the population is being described as partially bad: "The population didn't support us. It's hostile part helped the Germans to beat us, to shatter the dream [...]" [14, s. 1].

The partly complex and not always clear relationship between the population and the partisans is expressed in accounts from Pen'kivka, a village that was burned down by the Germans after a partisan attack, and in which dozens of people were killed.

During different interviews in Pen'kivka, people often – and quite prideful – stress being a "partisan village". The partisans, however, who had carried out this attack, would have been "other" partisans then "ours". The "own" partisans would have come from the village Pen'kivka. They would not have participated on this action, but part of the partisan division "Lenin", which was active in the region [2]. Behind the village Brusliniv would have been a forest, the so called black forest, where a partisan camp made of clay houses would have existed. The division between "our" and "other" partisans among the inhabitants of the village is important also because it finds its continuation on type and of actions and how they have been carried out: "Our partisans did not attack. [...]. They have printed some leaflets and spread information, also they beat the village elderly. [...] But they did not take such radical steps" [2].

One interviewee states out that there was harsh critique of inhabitants regarding the mentioned attack on the Germans. She quotes one of them that she herself once interviewed and who was in

direct contact with members of the partisan unit, because they would have settled in their and the neighbor's apartments to prepare the attack. She directly would have spoken to the partisans: "Why do you want to attack the Germans right here? Attack them in another place!" She would have pleased to no not attack the Germans out of the village, because she would have known that afterwards something terrible would happen. She would have been offered then to become a partisan herself and come along, but would have denied because of her children she had to take care of. They would not have listened to her, and so many inhabitants would have been very angry and disappointed about the partisans. Also, a partisan commander would have been killed during the attack [2].

Despite these difficulties the knowledge of the Red Army approaching provided courage and strength. The development of the war situation confirmed the fighters many times to have taken the right decision, even though ambivalences were under no circumstances forgotten: "The heart was filled with pleasure and fear. The struggle stopped. The Germans had retreated far, until Vasil'kov. The retreat of the Germans went so quick they did not manage to burn down neither our nor other villages. [...] It seemed as if we were born again, risen to new life" [3, s. 18].

During a long period the relationship between the Germans and the population in Ukraine was to a certain extent ambiguous – except for it's big jewish part especially in nowadays Western Ukraine, which was extinguished in great parts in 1941 and 1942 already. During the situation of retreat this relationship came to certainty rapidly in a process of brutalization of the warfare. Hence a disambiguation of fronts and accompanying decisions took place as well. "The syndrome of time pressure, strategic failure, problems of supply, disdain of the population, antisemitism and increasing resistance broke in a rapidly developing radicalization within a few weeks", as the historian Ulrich Herbert puts it [9, s. 36]. The desperation of the situation of the Germans itself didn't make them give in, but increase means of destruction. Internalized ideology made the members of german units think of what was still to be done, and after their defeat might never be possible to do. Therefore especially those, who had a rather realistic view of their own defeat did not necessarily get to act in a more rational way, but in contrary partly pushed a radicalization and brutalization. As mentioned before, the terror during this phase was directed against a big part of the population that did not actively cooperate with the Germans.

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