



The image of the invader. Soviet and German soldiers in the eyes of local communities based on oral history studies.

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Part 1. A German soldier through the eyes of Poles from rural area in Rzędowice, Lesser Poland

- German soldiers invaded Poland in 1939 and started period of occupation on the territories of Poland
- Nazi occupation was characterised by difficult living conditions for the representatives of Polish nation, terror introduced by Gestapo and generally strict way of ruling territories of Poland
- Despite general knowledge of atrocities committed by Nazis there is a certain amount of testimonies that present German individuals, who decided to treat Poles in more respectful, human way



Stereotype and individual testimonies - comparison

- ❖ German soldiers consider Poles as subhumans
- ❖ “My cousin Mirka was one of the most *handsome* girls in the village. And this one german officer fell madly in love with her. He was coming to our house with flowers and they were talking and talking [...] He was trying to protect her from the others [...] Once, I remember that they (Germans - A.O.) were shaving heads of girls in the village, I don't remember why, but they were doing it. And Mirka had such beautiful hair and this officer didn't let anyone touch her, even though his mates were bashing him [...]
- ❖ **It can be seen that German soldier could not treat this girl as a subhuman, since he had feelings for her. Moreover, he was protecting her despite the fact that such behaviour was against the protocole**



Stereotype and individual testimonies - comparison

- ❖ Children hated German soldiers
- ❖ “I remember seeing these german officers in the village in a very vivid way, because they were so elegant these men. Shiny shoes, clean uniforms, standing straight. They were nothing like mates from the village[...]. I thought that they were beautiful people and kind of liked them[...].”
- ❖ **Children did not see soldiers as enemies, rather as something new and interesting. This woman considered them “beautiful” and thought of them better than about habitants of her village**



Stereotype and individual testimonies - comparison

- ❖ German doctors only inflicted pain and did not treat non-German patients
- ❖ “Once my sister Stefa was doing something in the barn and hurt herself, cut her finger off. We didn’t know what to do, she was bleeding and screaming[...] My aunt just took her and went to Książ. There was a german doctor there and she begged him to do something, to help the child. And he did it. He even said few nice words to Stefa. It was almost like miracle[...]”
- ❖ **In this case, german doctor broke the protocole, because he wanted to help the child. This shows that not every doctor was evil and some of them wanted to just exercise their profession**



Part 2. Russian soldiers in the eyes of the inhabitants of former East Prussia

Based on the research
conducted by Marta Frączkiewicz
in the years 2016-2018

- ▶ The **Province of East Prussia** was incorporated into Poland after the end of World War II (the modern region of Warmia and Małopolska)
- ▶ The Soviet soldiers who came to "liberate" these areas from German occupation in January 1945 were **not saviors at all, but invaders**
- ▶ Soviet soldiers committed many **acts of symbolic revenge against the local population**, whom they (as representatives of the German nation) blamed for causing World War II
- ▶ There are many examples (oral histories, archives) of the behavior of Soviet soldiers towards the indigenous peoples and their property (including architects) in the first post-war years.
- ▶ Many actual events function in collective memory as **local tales** already



Russian soldiers divided in: the wild ones and the civilized ones in the eyes of indigenous people :

- ▶ Because the worst were the Ruskies with **slanted eyes, the wild ones**. After all, they knew neither the clock nor anything. Because they came from somewhere in Siberia, from the wilds. And they were the most dangerous, because they didn't know any culture.

[A12-K]



- ▶ Because Rusek, it was Rusek. He wasn't angry. He knew human life. **The worst of it were only those from the east**. They murdered, shot, didn't look. He was a terrible man. They had such slanted eyes. Because they probably were not conscripted by the Russian government into the Army, but volunteered. And that's why they went to the first front. And that's why they were on the prowl.

[A13-M]



Soviet soldiers as rapists:

- ▶ **They are like cattle.** They didn't know anything about the world. Only they would rape on alarm. My sisters were older, they hid in the well from the Russians, because they were gathering girls and took them away. One by one. It wasn't one Rusek, but three stood over the girl. When she did not survive, they threw it out and took the other one. "Come on," they said. It was the tragedy with those Russians.

[A10-K]



Soviet soldiers as looters:

I heard Soviet soldiers walking around the houses and asking **how many small watches there would be from one large, standing one**. They thought that when such a large clock was disassembled, these parts would be enough for a few or several dozen of them for a hand.

[A11-M]

Well, Russians even **wore watches on their legs and several on each hand**, because they did not know what it was for. They wanted to show how rich they were that they had so many watches. They thought it was such jewelry and everyone wanted to have as much as possible. Or they wanted to get rich. Sell it later when they come back to each other or give to the family. And one day one came to us and wanted to take such a large clock, because he thought he would have a profit, that he would convert it into smaller ones. They were so dark.

[C7-K]



Denial and explanation of the behavior of soldiers by the members of local community

- ▶ This is how the Russians **did not harm** anyone, **they only came to rape** during the day. I remember at my aunts these young girls, when they knew them, they ran away. We were observing from the attic, because those Russians used to ride carriages. They took the hosts. And to the west from the attic one had to look and shouted, "Oh! The Russians are going ", it was these girls who fled to the forest. And whoever did not make it, I remember one such girl, he took her to the attic. And that Rusek raped her. I still remember how she was leaving this attic so broken. It was a dark mass, the Russkie ones.

[A16-M]



Russian soldiers as allies:

- There was even one such Rusek, who came first and said: "Little girls are hiding, because our people are coming!" There were also some Russians who thought. He must be around here somewhere. These Russians from this wild west, from these states, they were terrible. They were from this Siberia, this venison. They had no idea about anything. When they saw the bike, they wanted to go for a ride and it would tip over. They saw a bicycle for the first time in their life.

[A2-M]

- Later, Russians were here, they had toes, grandfather says, because some of our neighbors have returned, he tells them that we need a doctor or some medicine. It was the Russians who said, "There is no medicine for the Germans". And they sent a soldier to shoot me while I was lying in bed. And this soldier also had children. He came and looked. I slept, I didn't hear anything, but my grandfather told them. And they told me. They all left, and he was supposed to shoot me, because there was no help for me. And he came out crying and says "if they want to, they will take me and kill me".

[A17-K]



Conclusion:

- ▶ 1. The stereotypes of “the other” regarding Russian soldiers in territory of former East Prussia (which was incorporated into Poland after World War II) **regard both: a. social b. physical features.** These, who looked less alike indigenous people and spoke in non-untestable language were more likely to be seen as vicious and uncivilized. They were more distant to the locals.
- ▶ 2. The stories from that period still function in the collective memory of local community (even though most of them now are post-war settlers). Over the years, the stories have gained many **variants and protagonists.**
- ▶ 3. There are various ways of dealing with trauma among representatives of local socialists can be identified, such as **denial or taming the trauma.**

Part 3. A German soldier through the eyes of Belarusians



In 1921 **Belarus** was divided into Eastern and Western parts. The eastern Belarus with Minsk became a part of the **USSR**, the western Belarus (Brest, Grodno) became the territory of **Poland**.

The inhabitants of Western Belarus first met the Germans in **1939**, when Germany invaded Poland. Eastern Belarus became the arena of hostilities in **1941**, when Germany attacked the USSR.

German and Soviet soldiers in 1939

- Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union)
- Germans are officially friends
- local people perceive the Germans as very neat soldiers, in polished boots and beautiful uniforms



- Accession of Western Belarus to the USSR
- Soviet soldiers are called the liberators (but not from the German invaders, but from the Polish Pan)
- local people noted that Soviet soldiers were dressed much worse than the Germans, in the dirty uniform, torn foot wraps

Germans during the War

Official narrative

- ▶ murderers
- ▶ rapists
- ▶ thieves
- ▶ arsonists
- ▶ executioners
- ▶ marauders



Oral history

- ▶ Some German soldiers saved children
- ▶ Treated children with sweets
- ▶ The partisans were sometimes worse than the Germans, they could take the last things from the house

Germans after the War

Official narrative

- ▶ Frau lost her husband and brother
- ▶ Karl lost his leg
- ▶ Adolf lost his uniform and everything looted during the retreat
- ▶ Colonel lost his regiment at Stalingrad



Oral history

- ▶ We defeated the Germans, but for some reason they live better than us
- ▶ I hate the Germans, because their grandfathers killed ours
- ▶ The Germans sent us humanitarian parcels and took our children for recovery

Today's Memory



Conclusions

- ▶ In the **collective memory**, **soldiers who committed crimes are attributed non-human features** („they are nothing like us”. Ascribing inhuman characteristics to the tormentors allows the victims to tame the invaders, to reconcile with them.
- ▶ Despite the stereotypes established over the years (the German soldier - cruel, stiff, even inhuman, impeccably dressed; Soviet – poor, drunk, wild, looters), there are **many testimonies of helping the local population by German and Soviet soldiers**, which stand in opposition to the functioning of the official/collective stereotype and narrative.
- ▶ **Official narrative often stands in the opposite to oral history** - highlighting the crimes of foreign soldiers in political purposes.
- ▶ **The official narrative influences collective memory** – the oral history and official narrative melts.
- ▶ However, all stories about the compassion and help of the local community by soldiers assume that they will **oppose their own army**.
- ▶ The **stories** from that period **still function in the collective memory** of local community (even though most of them now are post-war settlers). Over the years, the stories have **gained many variants and protagonists**.
- ▶ Growing several variants of the stories and bringing soldiers, who committed crimes to stereotypes helps the community **deal with the trauma**.