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THE NAZIS AND THE SS VOLUNTEER DIVISION "GALICIA"

BASIL DMYTRYSHYN

IN THE NAZI SEARCH FOR *Lebensraum* the Ukraine was assigned a highly important role. Nazi leaders viewed the abundance of Ukrainian raw materials as a valuable source of supply for German industry. They considered the Ukraine's fertile soil not only as a significant food base for the Third Reich, but also as an indispensable area for future German agricultural settlement. Finally, they envisaged the Ukraine's strategic location as an excellent starting point for further German economic and political penetration into Central Asia, the Near and the Middle East.

The significance of the Ukraine in this grand strategy of *Lebensraum* was clearly elaborated by Hitler,¹ and by some of his close associates.² The unsettled political status of the Ukraine also figured quite prominently in the pre-World War II Nazi diplomatic maneuvers. This was particularly true in their dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, as well as in their negotiations with Poland, in their acquisition of control over Hungarian and Rumanian puppet leaders, and in their dealings with the Soviet Union. However, while outwardly the Nazis demonstrated eagerness to exploit the Ukrainian problem, documents which have become available since the end of World War II reveal that they had no understanding of the problem. Their inability to comprehend it was the end product of a dilemma they themselves had created. It was the outcome of their own expansionist philosophy which made no allowance for the existence of other nations. It was also the result of policy decisions based on obsolete and nostalgic notions about the Ukrainians. At the same time it was the product of Nazi eagerness to utilize a limited amount of Ukrainian manpower and to exploit fully the Ukrainian hatred of foreign

¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (München, 1940), pp. 750-55. See also Hitler's statement of September 12, 1936 at the Nürnberg Party gathering, as fully reproduced by Norman H. Baynes, ed. *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922—August 1939* (London, 1942), I, 929.

² Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Zukunftsweg einer deutschen Aussenpolitik* (München, 1927), pp. 97-98. For a valuable analysis of Nazi expansionist philosophy and methods in Eastern Europe based on documents brought to light at the Nürnberg trials, see Norman Robert Rich, *Nazi Expansion: Its Creed and Realpolitik* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1949), pp. 250-90; see also George Fischer, *Soviet Opposition to Stalin. A Case Study in World War II* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 7-18. For a sound study of various phases of Nazi policies toward and treatment of Ukrainians during World War II, see John A. Armstrong, *Ukrainian Nationalism 1939-1945* (New York, 1955), pp. 73-129.

domination without allowing Ukrainian nationalism to enter the picture. Some light on the nature of that dilemma is contained in documents found among Heinrich Himmler's papers, especially those dealing with the SS Volunteer Division "Galicia," which was organized in 1943, and, after seeing action on the Eastern Front and in the Balkans, surrendered to the British in 1945.³

The decision of the Nazis to create the "Galicia" was not without precedent. In their intensified exploitation of the Ukrainian problem since 1938, they had employed on various occasions small Ukrainian military detachments whenever the need arose. Thus, following their grant of the Carpatho-Ukraine to Hungary in March, 1939, they had offered asylum to many Ukrainians who fled before the Hungarian occupation. From these and many others who during the summer of 1939 had fled from Poland, the Nazis organized small military groups. After the destruction of Poland in September, 1939, these units became the nucleus of the police force for the parts of German-occupied Poland inhabited by the Ukrainians. In this way the Nazis had attempted to demonstrate to the leaderless and politically ignorant Ukrainians their "concern" for the Ukrainians.

Between 1940 and 1941, when it became clear that war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was imminent, the Nazis heightened their efforts in the creation of Ukrainian military groups. This time the core of recruits came mainly from those Ukrainians who had escaped from Soviet rule. In order not openly to violate the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August, 1939, these groups were disguised as *Arbeitsdienst* battalions. They received part of their training in the Carpathian Mountains, and the remainder in Germany. In such fashion the Nazis were able to produce thousands of well-trained men, most of whom they then dispersed throughout various industrial establishments in occupied Poland to act as guards. They retained only a handful of these trainees in regular military uniform. Following the outbreak of war with the Soviet Union in June, 1941, the Nazis utilized them as "morale builders" for the population of the Ukraine and as a "stimulus" to desertion from Soviet ranks.⁴

For various tactical advantages, this kind of limited utilization of Ukrainians was supported by some Nazi military commanders at the front. It lasted as long as parts of the Ukraine remained under Soviet

³ The documents pertaining to the SS Division "Galicia", upon which this paper is based, are contained in the Orange Folders, Drawer #7, Folder #263. The originals were photographed by the 7771 Document Center, APO 742A, and loose copies, uncatalogued and unorganized, are held in the Hoover War Memorial Library, Stanford, California.

⁴ For a rather naive Ukrainian nationalist justification of the existence of these units, see the foreword to the *Druzhyny Ukrainskykh Nacionalistiv u 1941-1942 rokakh* (Munich, 1953), pp. 3-7.

control. However, with the complete Nazi occupation of the Ukraine, and with the entry of political considerations into the picture, the usefulness of Ukrainian military units ended. As a result these units were either transferred to the rear to fight the guerrillas, or discharged, or arrested. The manner of their disposition depended upon the degree of their belated realization of the Nazi objectives in the Ukraine. By the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, these objectives became clear even to the naive. By that time too, the Nazi military machine, because of its over-extension and the stability of the front, began to suffer a series of defeats, very costly in manpower, the heaviest being at Stalingrad.

The defeat at Stalingrad at the end of 1942 on the one hand, and on the other the Nazi mistreatment of the population, their utter disregard of peasant interests, and their suppression of national forces, placed the Nazi henchmen in charge of policy direction in the Ukraine in a dilemma. They were eager to utilize Ukrainian manpower that would be weak enough not to endanger the Nazi position, yet strong enough to replace their heavy losses. To attain this delicate balance, they were prepared to exploit fully the Ukrainian hatred of Bolshevism, but were unwilling to stimulate Ukrainian nationalism. At the same time they were anxious to prevent Ukrainian youth from joining the ever-expanding and dangerous underground movement. All this they hoped to accomplish without departing from the original Nazi objectives in the Ukraine. These were the major considerations which influenced the creation of the SS Volunteer Division "Galicia."

The initiator of the "Galicia" was Dr. Gustav Wächter, an SS *Gruppenführer*. As District Governor of Lvov he gained first-hand acquaintance with the national problem in that area. As Governor, he also acquired some understanding of the Ukrainian national movement—its aims, its strength, its weaknesses, its hate of all foreign domination, and its lack of far-sighted leadership. Having realized the implications of the Nazi defeat at Stalingrad, Wächter decided to exploit Ukrainian hatred of Bolshevism by organizing Ukrainian youth into a military formation. On March 1, 1943, a month after the surrender at Stalingrad, Wächter suggested this idea verbally to Heinrich Himmler, Chief of the German Police and Reichsminister of Interior.⁵ Four days later, on March 4, 1943, Wächter submitted for Himmler's approval the tentative text of an appeal he planned to make to the Ukrainian people of Galicia. Wächter proposed that in this appeal a minor modification of German agricul-

⁵ Wächter to Himmler, Lvov, July 30, 1943. This letter contains the only record of the March 1 conversation.

tural policy in Galicia be announced as a stimulus for the Ukrainians to join the defeated and retreating German armies. In a letter which accompanied the proposed appeal, Wächter stated that if Himmler approved the idea the program would have to be discussed with Ukrainian leaders to obtain their assurance of support, thus gaining the confidence of the population.⁶

In his delayed reply of March 28, 1943, Himmler consented to the idea of creating such a military formation. He added that Hitler, too, had expressed basic agreement with the idea. He suggested, however, that the organization of this military formation be developed in two stages: First, there should be released a statement on the land policy. All the farmers who had fulfilled their food deliveries in 1941 and 1942, and who had fully sown their acreage in 1943, were to be given the right to own their land. Those who failed to meet these requirements—and they were in the majority—were to be denied this privilege. Secondly, following this announcement, an appeal was to be issued to the able-bodied youth of Galicia inviting them to join the new military force. Financing of the division, Himmler said, was to be borne by the population of Galicia. Technical problems, place and date of training were to be considered later.⁷

Having these assurances from Himmler, Wächter proceeded with the solution of technical problems. On April 4, 1943, he discussed the entire matter with Walter Krüger, Police Chief and State Secretary for the Security and General Government of Poland. On April 6, Wächter discussed the matter with Gottlieb Berger, Head of the Policy Division of the Reichsministry of the Occupied Eastern Territories. Ignoring a warning from Himmler's office to proceed cautiously,⁸ he held a conference on April 12, which was attended by representatives of the SS, the police, and the party. It was at this conference that a detailed plan was worked out for the new military formation.⁹

At Wächter's suggestion the conference named the new military unit SS Volunteer Division "Galicia." Though its planners, who were police officials, considered it a police organization, they felt that for political and psychological reasons, it was desirable to omit the word "police" from its name. Members of the "Galicia" were to have a distinctive patch on their sleeve, as had all SS volunteers. It was to be the historic emblem of Galicia, which would represent the Ukrain-

⁶ Wächter to Himmler, Lvov, March 4, 1943; also April 2, 1943. Nothing in the Himmler files reveals what Ukrainian leaders the Nazis intended to consult.

⁷ Himmler to Wächter, Field Command Post, March 28, 1943.

⁸ Brandt (Himmler's secretary) to Wächter, Field Command Post, April 10, 1943.

⁹ See the eight-page long protocol on the discussion, dated April 12, 1943.

ian tradition of the area but could not serve the Great Ukrainian idea.¹⁰

As an infantry division, the "Galicia" was to have equipment similar to that of any German infantry division. Horses and wagons were to be supplied by the Galician population, though the planners expressed the opinion that, because of previous Bolshevik and German requisitions, no more than two or three thousand horses could be procured. They agreed that the cost of other equipment and of training should be shared by the native population and by the Reich.

Officer personnel of the "Galicia" was to consist of about 600 line officers, 50 physicians, and 20 veterinarians. Of those, 300 were to be recruited from among former officers of the Austro-Hungarian Army who were of Ukrainian nationality, 100 from Ukrainians who were former officers of the Polish Army, 100 from among Ukrainian intellectuals who had served in the Polish Armed Forces, but who, for political reasons, had been denied commissions, and 100 from former officers of the short-lived Ukrainian Army of World War I. Non-commissioned officers, about 2,000 strong, were to be recruited from among former members of the Polish Army, but preferably from the old Austro-Hungarian Army. No maximum figures were set for enlistments. The conference set April 28 as the date for the official inauguration of the program, to be held in Lvov. Representatives of the German administration of Galicia, the police, the party, and the army, as well as members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, and of the Greek-Catholic Church were to be invited. May 1 was set as the opening date for recruitment.

The inauguration of this program, however, depended on Himmler's final approval. This was not immediately forthcoming. On April 16, 1943, his office notified Wächter to hold up the plans, as Himmler was not yet ready to set a specific date.¹¹ On the same date, Berger, no doubt at Wächter's suggestion, reported to Himmler that preparations for the "Galicia" were nearing completion. Though he expressed fear of sabotage by the underground, Berger felt that the population was expecting the official announcement of the policy.¹² On April 19, 1943, Wächter, in a letter to Himmler's office, said he intended to publish the proclamation on April 28, to be followed by intensive propaganda, and urged Himmler to approve the issuing of the announcement.¹³

¹⁰ "... das zwar der ukrainischen Tradition dieses Landes zugehört, aber kein Symbol der grossukrainischen Bestrebungen ist."

¹¹ Grothmann (Himmler's Office Chief) to Wächter, Berlin, April 16, 1943.

¹² Berger to Himmler, Berlin, April 16, 1943.

¹³ Wächter to Grothmann, Lvov, April 19, 1943.

Faced with these demands, and aware of the ever-approaching war front, Himmler yielded. On April 28, 1943, as scheduled, the "Galicia" policy was publicly inaugurated with all possible pomp and publicity. In a proclamation which was distributed throughout Galicia, Wächter expressed gratitude for the help the population had rendered German soldiers. He also praised the peasants for their efforts and contribution toward feeding Europe. The proclamation declared that since the population had repeatedly expressed a desire [*sic*] to take an active part on Germany's side, Hitler had decided to give them that privilege by forming the SS Division "Galicia." Members of that division and their relatives were to have the same privileges as those enjoyed by the Germans. Though the proclamation spoke of the voluntary nature of the division, it stressed that preference was to be given to those young men whose fathers had served in the Austro-Hungarian Army, and concluded with an appeal to the youth to join in the struggle against Bolshevism, for country, for family, and for a new Europe.

Leaderless, misinformed, misguided, and unaware of Nazi objectives, many Ukrainian youths either overlooked or failed to grasp the meaning of "Galicia," and the significant absence of the word "Ukraine." They viewed the division not as "Galician" but as "Ukrainian." They reported in considerable numbers to the recruiting stations, some uncertain of the future, others afraid of being drafted for work in German factories, and still others immature and adventure-seeking. According to one report, by May 8, 1943, or one week after the start of the program, 32,000 had volunteered, of whom 26,000 were accepted. The influx was so great that it astonished even the Germans, who had to appeal to higher authority for instructions.¹⁴ As time went on, the initial influx decreased. On June 21, 1943, the numerical strength of the "Galicia" was reported to be 26,436 men.¹⁵ By July 2, 1943, it had reached 28,000, among whom were 300 officers, 1,300 non-commissioned officers, 800 graduates of secondary schools, and 48 doctors.¹⁶ According to Himmler's order, the latter four categories were to receive training in Germany.¹⁷

Although, publicly, the German press in occupied Poland was favorably inclined toward the "Galicia,"¹⁸ secretly, German officialdom in the Eastern territories viewed it with considerable suspicion.

¹⁴ Krüger to Berger, Cracow, May 11, 1943.

¹⁵ Berger to Himmler, Berlin, June 21, 1943.

¹⁶ Berger to Himmler, Berlin, July 2, 1943.

¹⁷ See cf. Himmler's Circular Order of July 5, 1943.

¹⁸ *Krakauer Zeitung*, April 29, 1943.

The opponents of the "Galicia," primarily those who believed in the infallibility of German arms, transmitted their critical feelings to Himmler. They argued that once the Ukrainians were rearmed they would turn their arms against the Germans, as they had done in 1918.¹⁹ It cannot be ascertained to what extent, if any, anti-Ukrainian sentiment among these Germans influenced Himmler, but on July 14, 1943, he issued an order to all company commanders in charge of the "Galicia" training, forbidding them "for all time to speak of a Ukrainian division or of a Ukrainian nation in connection with the division 'Galicia'."²⁰

The opponents of the "Galicia" received Himmler's order of July 14 with great satisfaction.²¹ Its supporters, however, found the order disturbing. Strong opposition to the order came from Wächter. In a six-page report, the instigator of the "Galicia" tried to persuade Himmler to rescind the order, arguing that denying use of the word "Ukrainian" in connection with the "Galicia" was politically, psychologically, and realistically unwise. Galicia, Wächter stressed, was a territorial and economic region, not a term to describe the population. In Galicia, he continued, there lived, in addition to some Germans, the Ukrainians and the Poles, people who were different in their language, their attitude toward Germany, and, above all, hostile to each other. It was neither Germany's task nor to her interest to reconcile the Ukrainians and the Poles by trying to make them "Galicians." Such a policy, he said, had Pan-Slavic overtones. Wächter pointed out that the attempt to remove national differences in Galicia and to proscribe the use of the term "Ukrainian" contradicted all German writings on the subject. Moreover, it conflicted with the previous official German policy toward the Ukrainians, a policy which had recognized the existence of Ukrainian committees, delegations, police, newspapers, etc. Wächter also maintained that any attempt to introduce the old terms "Galician" or "Ruthenian" (which had been used in the nineteenth century) would not produce satisfactory results, since the former term had become politically erroneous and the latter had come to connote sympathy for Russia. In addition, Wächter continued, the introduction of new terms would represent a German attempt to denationalize these people, which, he said, was not in Germany's interest, for it would weaken the resistance of these people to bolshevik revolutionary appeals. Fearing that Ukrainians would react against the use of a new term, Wächter pleaded with Himmler to

¹⁹ Härter to General Kommissar for Volyn and Podolia, Gorokhov, June 19, 1943.

²⁰ Himmler to all Company Commanders, Field Command Post, July 14, 1943.

²¹ Police Chief of Southern Russia to Himmler, Wolfsheide, July 18, 1943.

withdraw the order forbidding employment of the word "Ukrainian."²²

Wächter's efforts met with failure. Himmler displayed complete misunderstanding of Wächter's reasoning. He also voiced surprise at Wächter's change of opinion about the Ukrainian problem. Though Himmler promised not to take any punitive action against those who continued to use the word "Ukrainian" rather than "Galician," he declared emphatically that he stood by his original order. And, as if to point out some of the reasons for his anti-Ukrainian stand, Himmler charged that the Ukrainian intelligentsia from Galicia was responsible for the ever-increasing anti-German unrest in the Ukraine, Volyn, and Galicia.²³

In his reply to Himmler's undeviating stand, Wächter, while begging Himmler not to believe that any fundamental difference existed in their views on the "Galicia," again expressed the opinion that the old terminology which had once been applicable to the population of Galicia was now invalid. An entirely new generation, he said, had been brought up in the spirit of Ukrainian nationalism. Wächter also tried to clear the Ukrainian intelligentsia of responsibility for the unrest in the Ukraine. He said he had personally investigated these charges and found their origin in the District Commissariat at Dubno. Wächter insisted that the charges were completely without foundation, since the Ukrainian intelligentsia of Galicia had remained basically peaceful.²⁴

Throughout September and October Wächter endeavored to obtain a personal meeting with Himmler to explain his views more thoroughly.²⁵ He was not granted an interview. There is no information as to whether or not Wächter succeeded in changing Himmler's order.²⁶ The constantly nearing battle front, the intensified guerrilla activity, the pressing problems of evacuation, etc., overshadowed the question of the "Galicia." By the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944, not only had the "Galicia" seen action but, according to the private testimony of Field Marshal Walter Model, it had fought gallantly.²⁷

²² Wächter to Himmler, Lvov, July 30, 1943.

²³ Himmler to Wächter, Field Command Post, August 11, 1943. Copies of this letter went to Berger, Krüger, and Kaltenbrunner.

²⁴ Wächter to Himmler, Lvov, September 4, 1943.

²⁵ Wächter to Brandt, Lvov, October 13, 1943; Brandt to Wächter, Field Command Post, October 21, 1943; Wächter to Himmler, Lvov, October 30, 1943.

²⁶ Wächter's defense of Ukrainians and his attempt to persuade Himmler to change the order of July 14, 1943, contradicted Wächter's previous stand. It was he who had suggested the name "Galicia" at the April 12, 1943 conference, even though he was aware that only Ukrainians were to be enlisted.

²⁷ Wächter to Himmler, Lvov, May 3, 1944.

Perhaps because other problems became more pressing, Himmler's files contain no additional information on the "Galicia," except for a seven and one-half page report from Wächter to Himmler, dated May 3, 1944. In this report, Wächter, referring to the military performance of the "Galicia," stated that though the undertaking was initially uncertain, it had been worthwhile—if for no other reason than that it had prevented a considerable number of Ukrainian youths from joining the nationalist camp.²⁸ Wächter acknowledged that the Nazi retreat had a bad effect on the morale of the Ukrainian population of Galicia. He expressed the view, however, that the Ukrainian hatred of Moscow, their strong Western orientation and their nationalism, all factors which would have to be reckoned with in the future, had kept the morale of the population from sinking too deeply. Viewing in retrospect the misunderstanding that had arisen in connection with the "Galicia," Wächter cast blame on the one hand on the presence of vague and uncertain generalities, and on the other on the absence of a clear, firm and positive political program toward the conquered peoples. He expressed the belief that had the Nazis utilized national slogans against Soviet policies and practices among the Ukrainians, and among all other nationalities of the Soviet Union, the situation might have developed differently for Germany.

Wächter's realization of the Nazis' mistakes, some of which he had helped to make, came too late. By the time of the writing of his report, almost all the Ukraine had been reoccupied by Soviet troops. Galicia itself fell shortly thereafter. Wächter's private confession and acknowledgment of Nazi errors is interesting as well as instructive. Many of these errors resulted from the Nazi pursuit of a self-contradictory policy. Thus, they were ready and willing to utilize a limited Ukrainian military force to offset their own heavy losses; however, they did not allow Ukrainian nationalism to enter the picture because they hated and feared it.

Another branch of Nazi errors stemmed from their lack of understanding of the fundamentals of national problems and nationalisms in Eastern Europe. These errors were products of outdated information. The Nazis accepted, for instance, the assumption of Ukrainian sentimental attachment to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an assumption that was popular before World War I. This belief influenced much of the planning of the "Galicia"; it was also the source of much subsequent misunderstanding and suspicion.

²⁸ In contrast to this argument it must be stated that through the "Galicia" the Ukrainian underground had access to Nazi military storehouses, depots, documents, etc., which otherwise would not have been as easily possible.

The third source of Nazi errors stemmed, of course, from their own philosophy. To correct these errors would have meant to alter drastically Nazi objectives: to abandon their search for *Lebensraum*; to reduce their intolerance; to surrender their assertion of racial superiority; to appreciate the existence of other systems and other peoples. Such fundamental changes the Nazi leadership was neither willing nor prepared to make.

It is instructive, however, that the Nazis erred seriously in tactics, and that this error was the product of historical ignorance on the part of the high leadership. They based their policy decisions upon obsolete and nostalgic notions as to foreign peoples' social and political attachments. Such errors of historical obsolescence can be costly to any nation in the decision-making process.