

**Defiance - Bielski Bros. from I**

selective, he eschews an ethno-nationalist slant and utilizes *all* available sources, including documents from Soviet archives opened to scholars only in recent years. Mark Paul also refers to pivotal events that most Western scholars have traditionally ignored, such as the massacre at Naliboki (in May 1943) and the destruction of the Polish partisan base near Lake Narocz (in August 1943). Their outcome was a Soviet-initiated conflict with the Polish Home Army, a national underground army fighting for the independence of Poland.

**The Massacre at Naliboki**

On May 8, 1943, Soviet partisans attacked Naliboki, a small, isolated town in the Naliboki forest (Puszcza Nalibocka), populated by Catholic Poles. Some 130 residents of the town, including women and children, were murdered in the onslaught. Their only "crime" was that the local self-defence group did not wish to subordinate itself to the Soviet partisan command. They had never attacked the Soviet partisans or Jewish fugitives in the area, nor were they planning to. There is no question that there were many Jews among the large Soviet forces that attacked Naliboki. What is in dispute is whether members of the Bielski group were among them.

**Were members of the Bielski group deployed in Soviet partisan operations at the time of the massacre in Naliboki?**

The Bielski group started to form as a partisan unit in the summer of 1942. It named itself the Zhukov Detachment and chose Tuvia Bielski as its commander. The group did not have a permanent base for the longest time. It was constantly on the move in the forests to avoid discovery and capture. In September 1942, faced with the threat of being destroyed, Tuvia Bielski subordinated his group to Lieutenant Viktor Panchenkov, a local Soviet partisan commander. After officially joining the Lenin Brigade, which was subordinate to the leadership of the Baranowicze Branch of the General Staff of the Partisan Movement of Belorussia, headed by Major General Vasilii Chernyshev (Chernyshov), known by his *nom de guerre* "Platon", the Bielski group became the Second Company of the October Detachment.

Despite some minor skirmishes with and raids by the Germans and the Belorussian police along the way, the group kept growing in number. By April 1943, it counted some 400 members, including about 100 armed fighters. The group established camps near the villages of Brzozówka (Stara Huta) and Jasionowo, just west of Stankiewiczze. This was approximately 50 kilometres (32 miles) west of the Naliboki forest, and not a distance of 100 kilometres, as frequently reported. However, the armed men, which were organized into fighting squads of eight to ten men each and included a cavalry reconnaissance team, were mobilized for various military tasks, as required by the Soviet partisan commanders. Traversing large distances for military operations was not unusual at a time when the Soviet partisan forces were thin and in a state of flux, as they then were.

In June 1943, the various groups under Bielski's command crossed over into the Naliboki forest where they consolidated. The Bielski group was split off from the October Detachment and received a new name, Ordzhonikidze. They were now a separate formation within the Kirov Brigade. The combat part of the detachment, numbering 140 men, was to remain in the Nowogródek district to wage partisan warfare. As a result of a large German blockade of the Naliboki forest, known as Operation Hermann, that lasted from July 13 to August 8, 1943, the entire Bielski group, except for the so-called Kesler unit, returned to their former base in Jasionowo, north-west of

Nowogródek. The entire group eventually returned to the Naliboki forest at the end of August and September 1943, and constructed a new base and family camp. Sergei Vasiliev became the brigade commander. The Bielski non-combatant detachment, which was severed from the much smaller combatant group, became the M. I. Kalinin Detachment. About half the Jewish combatants (around 100 partisans), however, made their way to the non-combatant group. Early in 1944 the Kalinin detachment was removed from the brigade structure and made an "independent" detachment that reported directly to General "Sokolov", the commander of the Lida Concentration of the Soviet partisans. The combatant group, Ordzhonikidze, counted 117 partisans on the eve of 1943. They engaged more often in "economic operations" (i.e., raids on peasants) than in face-to-face confrontations with the Germans or local Belorussian police.

**Investigation by Poland's Institute of National Remembrance**

Poland's Institute of National Remembrance arrived at the following findings in its preliminary report issued in May 2003, after an investigation was launched into the Naliboki massacre in 2001:

*Despite a concluded agreement [of mutual cooperation with the local self-defence], in the early morning of May 8, 1943 the Soviet partisans attacked [the town of] Naliboki. They pulled out of houses men who were actual members of the self-defence as well as those who were suspected of belonging to that formation, and shot them near their homes individually or in groups of several or a dozen or more. A portion of the buildings was set on fire and practically everything was taken from the houses – clothing, boots, food – and from the farms – horses and cattle. They [the Soviet partisans] also burned down the church, along with the parish records, school, county seat, post office, and coach house. The attack lasted two to three hours. In total 128 people were killed, mostly men, but the victims also included three women, a teenage boy, and a ten-year-old child. Those killed were buried in the local cemetery. Some members of the self-defence, who were taken by surprise by the attack, attempted to fight and killed a few Soviet partisans, but seeing no chance of success withdrew into the forest. It must be especially underscored that the vast majority of the victims were killed in executions, deliberately and with premeditation, and not by accident. ...*

*Soviet partisans from the Second Concentration of the Iwieniec zone, commanded by Grigorii Sidoruk [nom de guerre] "Dubov," were active in the region of the Naliboki forest. That concentration formed part of the Baranowicze Partisan Concentration.*

*Soviet partisans from the following detachments took part in the assault on Naliboki: "Dzerzhinsky," "Bolshevik," and "Suvorov," commanded by Pavel Gulevich, the commander of the Stalin Brigade, and Major Rafail Vasilevich. Jewish partisans from the unit commanded by Tuvia Bielski were among the assailants.*

In a more recent statement, however, the Institute reported that they have not been able to confirm that members of the Bielski group participated in the attack on Naliboki, on the basis of Soviet archival documents known to them. Understandably, the few surviving villagers do not know the names of the assailants as they did not leave calling cards. (Even though none of the residents of Koniuchy were able to identify by name the partisans who destroyed their village in January 1944, the participation of many Jewish assailants is undisputable.)

**Soviet reports**

A Soviet report, prepared by the previously mentioned General

"Platon" (Major General Vasilii Chernyshev) soon after the assault, gave the following version of this reputed "military operation".

*On the night of May 8, 1943, the partisan detachments "Dzerzhinsky" (commander Shashkin, commissar comrade Lakhov), "Bolshevik" (commander Makaev, commissar comrade Khmelevsky), "Suvorov" (commander Surkev, commissar comrade Klevko) under the command of comrade Gulevich, the commander of the "Stalin" Brigade, and its commissar comrade Muratov as well as the representative of the Iwieniec interregional peace centre, comrade Vasilevich, by surprise destroyed the German garrison of the "self-defence" of the small town of Naliboki. As a result of two-and-a-half hours of fighting 250 members of the self-defence group were killed. We took 4 heavy machine-guns, 15 light machine guns, 4 mortars, 10 automatic pistols, 13 rifles, and more than 20,000 rounds of ammunition (for rifles), and a lot of mines and grenades. We burned down the electrical station, sawmill, barracks, and county office. We took 100 cows and 78 horses.*

*I order the leaders of the brigade and partisan detachments to present those distinguished in this battle for state awards.*

This report is grossly exaggerated and embellished, like most Soviet accounts of their wartime exploits. In fact, there was no German garrison in Naliboki, and the local self-defence group had all of 26 rifles and two light machine guns.

Another Soviet document (dated June 2, 1943) refers to the fact that a Jewish resident of Naliboki by the name of Iosif Shimanovich led a group of partisans from the Dzerzhinsky detachment to Naliboki for the assault.

**Testimony of Boris and Sulia Rubin**

Boris Rubin, a member of the Bielski group, claims to have taken part in an attack on an unnamed village where 130 people were killed. This is an unmistakable reference to Naliboki, as that was the only such massacre in the area. Boris Rubin (then Rubizhewski) was part of a unit of the larger Bielski group, led by Israel Kesler. Both Boris Rubin and Israel Kesler were natives of the town of Naliboki, and Kesler's group was incorporated into Bielski's around December 1942. Sulia Rubin, also a member of that group and later Boris's wife, recorded the following embellished version of these events in a memoir she began to write in the 1960s:

*There was a village not far from the ghetto which escaping Jews would have to pass on the way to the forest, or partisans would pass on the way from the woods. These villagers would signal with bells and beat copper pots to alert other villages around. Peasants would run out with axes, sickles – anything that could kill – and would slaughter everybody and then divide among themselves whatever the unfortunate had had. Boris' group decided to stop this once and for all. They sent a few people into the village and lay in ambush on all the roads. Soon enough signalling began and the peasants ran out with their weapons to kill the 'lousy Jews'. Well, the barrage started and they were mown down on all sides. Caskets were made for three days and more than 130 bodies buried. Never again were Jews or partisans killed on those roads.*

Source: Sulia Wolozhinski Rubin, *Against the Tide: The Story of an Unknown Partisan* (Jerusalem: Posner & Sons, 1980), pp. 126–27.

The reason given by the Rubins for the assault on Naliboki is a fabrication intended to justify Boris Rubin's participation in the massacre. The townspeople did not engage in suicidal attacks on Soviet partisans or Jews. In fact, it was they who were robbed by Soviet partisans and other forest groups. As Soviet reports make quite clear, the

decision to launch the assault on Naliboki was entirely in the hands of the Soviet partisan command. It had nothing to do with these invented charges of villagers attacking fugitive Jews. Moreover, Sulia Rubin gives a markedly different version of those events in the documentary film *The Bielski Brothers: The Unknown Partisans*, produced by David Herman (Soma Productions, 1993; reissued in 1996 by Films for the Humanities & Sciences). Interviewed with her husband Boris Rubin by her side, Sulia Rubin claimed that the assault on Naliboki was carried out by her husband after he had learned about the alleged gruesome fate of his father at the hands of the villagers: "His father Shlomko ... was crucified on a tree ... Boris found out. That village doesn't exist anymore. ... 130 people they buried that day." Curiously, Sulia Rubin appears to have forgotten that, in her detailed memoir published in 1980, she maintained that Boris's father, Solomon Rubizhewski, had been killed by the Germans when they liquidated the ghetto in Naliboki: "The rest of the people were chased to the ghetto where the Nazis killed Solomon Rubizhewski and his son, Shimon." See Rubin, *Against the Tide*, 123–24.

The documentary *The Bielski Brothers* is nonetheless an endorsement of the participation of members of the Bielski group in the assault on Naliboki and belies the charge – itself inherently racist – that the participation of Jewish partisans in the massacre is simply an invention of Polish "nationalists" or "anti-Semites". The involvement of some members of the Bielski group was never questioned by any member of the group or any Holocaust historian until recently. Indeed, why would former partisans have agreed to appear in a documentary film with false information tying them to a massacre they had no part in? And if these two witnesses – the Rubins – are lying about the Bielski partisans' participation, how many other partisan testimonies are unreliable? The documentary also underscores the true source of the conflict with the local population. As one of the Jewish partisans interviewed in the film put it, "The biggest problem was ... feeding so many people. Groups of 10 to 12 partisans used to go out for a march of 80 to 90 kilometres, rob the villages, and bring food to the partisans." Moreover, if partisans often covered distances of 80 to 90 kilometres to obtain food, why couldn't they be dispatched to a military mission 50 kilometres away from their base in Jasionowo?

**Jewish oral tradition**

There is a strong oral tradition among Jewish partisans from this area, as well as their families, about these events. Among former Soviet-Jewish partisans, it was widely held that partisans from the Bielski group took part in the massacre at Naliboki.

Source: Jacek Hugo-Bader, "A rewolucja to przecież miała być przyjemność [And the Revolution Was Supposed to Be Fun]," *Gazeta Wyborcza, Magazyn Gazety* (Warsaw), November 15, 1996.

Zvi Bielski, the son of Tuvia's bother Zus Bielski, who was the leader of the combatant group, confided: "The Bielskis, if they had to, would wipe out an entire village ... these guys were vicious killers when they had to be."

Source: James M. Glass, *Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust: Moral Uses of Violence and Will* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 10.

**Polish eyewitnesses**

Residents of Naliboki who survived the attack make it clear that the assailants did not simply target the organizers of the local self-defence, who were few in number, but also the civilian population and burned down half the town in the process.

*Defiance - Bielski Bros. To page 15*