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Soviet Injustice in Soviet Ukraine – a Historical Approach

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Introduction

The Soviet Union was an autocratic dictatorship that denied its citizens the basic democratic rights. In practice, there was no freedom of speech, assembly, or religion, no free press and only limited freedom of movement for its citizens. Political dissidents were at great risk of punishment. Moreover, at certain times, anyone could end up in the wheels of state persecution, as the use of violence was seen as a legitimate method of ensuring the cohesion and stability of the regime. This regime of state violence affected each Soviet republic severely from the October Revolution of 1917 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Coming to terms with this aspect of the Soviet past, especially with the mass crimes committed by and in the Soviet Union, is of vital importance, as it contributes significantly to the social peace in a post-Soviet country. The following paper will discuss political violence under the Soviet regime in Soviet Ukraine from a historical perspective. This is easier said than done in the current war situation, where Ukraine is being ruthlessly attacked by Russia and innocent people are once again being killed. But once this war ends, Ukraine will have to deal not only with the recent war but also with the Soviet crimes.

This paper deals with the repressive measures taken by the Soviet Union specifically on Ukrainian territory to provide the factual material for a legal assessment. Therefore, an overview of the mass crimes committed by the communist regime in Soviet Ukraine will be presented. It begins with the October Revolution in 1917 and the purges and forced collectivization of the 1930s, followed by Soviet war crimes during the Second World War, the persecution of dissidents after Stalin's death, and the delayed evacuation of the population after the Chornobyl nuclear disaster.

Statistical data on the number of victims also come into play, but these are only estimates, and we must be very careful with them. Nevertheless, they give an idea of the huge scale of the violence and should therefore be part of the overall picture, even if they are by no means precise.

There is another remark that should be made at the outset: This overview will mainly refer to mass crimes with many victims, although these were not the only crimes during the Soviet period. Moreover, the consequences of these mass crimes were even more severe when we think of the families and relatives of those killed, who suffered the loss of their beloved ones. This is also a characteristic part of political crimes but can as such only be mentioned here.

1. Red Terror in Ukraine after the First World War

Soviet violence took its start when the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd in a coup d'état in 1917. In order to consolidate their still fragile political power, they unleashed a civil war on the vast territories of the Russian empire. In Ukraine, the anarchy of those years was worse than anywhere else. Various military formations fought for land, people, and property—white Tsarist troops, green agrarian troops, foreign intervention troops, and anarchists— while republican governments in Kyiv tried to put the independence of a Ukrainian state into reality. They were all too weak in the face of the superior Red Army, which was particularly ferocious in Ukraine, mercilessly executing those who opposed the Bolsheviks, not only the White Army and other military groups but also many civilians.¹

If we look at just a few months in 1919, the “Red Terror” in Ukraine was outrageous against those who were considered to be representatives of the old order:² In June 1919, an unknown number of civilians were shot in Kharkiv prisons before the Red Army left the town as the Whites marched in; from June to August, an estimated 2,200 civilians were shot in Odessa. During the provisional occupation of Kyiv from February to August 1919, 3,000 people were killed.³ Another practice of the Red troops was to take prisoners and extort protection money from “bourgeois” families. They also systematically searched homes, looted valuables, clothing, and food, and raped “bourgeois” wives. Such acts of terror and executions were openly lauded in the local Communist press as a means of eradicating the “class enemies.”⁴ This was a clear signal to their opponents not to offer any form of resistance to this new emerging regime. When nevertheless workers’ strikes and extensive peasant uprisings broke out in 1921, they were ruthlessly suppressed by the Red Army.

The harsh economic policies introduced by the Bolsheviks as “war communism” during the Civil War, including forced labour mobilization, food rationing, and the nationalization of industry, led to the first famine in 1921–22, causing the death of hundreds of thousands of people. Nevertheless, in 1922, the Soviet Union, the first socialist country in the world, was founded. Ukraine became a part of the USSR as a socialist republic, marking the end of the Ukrainian independent statehood. At the

¹ See: Stephen Velychenko, *Life and Death in Revolutionary Ukraine. Living Conditions, Violence, and Demographic Catastrophe, 1917–1923*. Montreal, Kingston, London, Chicago 2021.

² Nicolas Werth, *Crimes and Mass Violence of the Russian Civil Wars (1918–1921)*, <http://bo-k2s.sciences-po.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/crimes-and-mass-violence-russian-civil-wars-1918-1921> [accessed 25.06.2024]

³ Vladimir N. Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War. Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918–1922*, Princeton, New Jersey 1994, pp. 122–125.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 121–123.

same time, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Finland, the Yugoslav Kingdom, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania succeeded in becoming independent states after the First World War.

This period in question, the early years of the Soviet Union, is indicative of the broader historical context. It is evident that the Bolsheviks were willing to utilize their military strength, terror, and violence without hesitation to reach power, to stay in power and to achieve their political objectives. It was under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union, that the Bolsheviks developed their instruments of executive power. The Cheka, an abbreviation for the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission, was one such instrument. The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (*Vserossiiskaia chrezvychainaia komissiiia*), subsequently renamed GPU, OGPU, NKVD, and KGB, was of particular significance throughout the Soviet Union's existence, and continues to be so in the present era. In numerous instances of mass repression, the Cheka or its successor organizations were the executive organs responsible for the implementation of terror, coercion, and other forms of repression. In the early days of the Soviet Union in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Extraordinary Commission (UCheka) was set up at regional and local levels with the goal of “implementing the policy of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, eliminating the widespread insurgent movement and ensuring the uninterrupted flow of food and coal from Ukraine to Russia.”⁵ From its inception, the UCheka established a network of agents and an apparatus for the collection of information among social groups and individuals deemed to be a threat.

2. The Ukrainians within the Soviet Union

In the Soviet Union, the Federative Russian Soviet Republic was the most important and largest entity, but Ukraine came second, as a *secunda inter pares*. Anyone willing to follow the communist ideology and the Kremlin's orders could have a military or political career, including non-Russians, i.e. Ukrainians. Throughout the 1920s, the Bolsheviks systematically appointed local people to cadre positions in all the non-Russian Soviet republics. This policy of “rootedness” (*korenizatsiia*) also aimed to promote national cultures, languages, schools, theatre and literature including, in the case of Ukraine, the Ukrainian language. However, the Bolsheviks did not rely on the old upper class which was to be eliminated in every way possible, but created new national elites. These were the so-called “national communists”, non-Russians who pledged themselves to the Bolsheviks. Thus, in the 1920s, national communists were the leaders of the Ukrainian Socialist Republic, willingly carrying

⁵ Roman Podkur, *Huberns'ki terytorial'ni aparaty VCHK u radjans'kij Ukrajinі na pochatku 1920-ch rr.*, in: *Z arkhiviv VUCHK-HPU-NKVD-KHB*, no. 2 (58) 2022, pp. 89–135, here p. 90 (doi: <https://doi.org/10.15407/vuchk2022.02.089>).

out Moscow's orders. But the ranks of the Communist Party in Ukraine were also steadily filled with Ukrainians. The following statistics show the growth in membership over the years:

Membership growth of the Communist Party in Ukraine:⁶

1918	4.301
1922	73.804
1933	555.433
1936	241.330
1940	505.706
1945	164.743
1954	795.559
1959	1.159.207
1966	1.961.408
1971	2.378.789
1976	2.625.808
1981	2.933.564
1986	3.188.854
1989	3.302.221
1990	3.294.038
1991	2.500.000

Ukrainian membership peaked in 1989, two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the total number of the population was almost 50 million.

However, in times of extreme state repression, membership of the Communist Party did not provide any personal protection. Party members also became victims of state repression, especially when Stalin made his way to the top after Lenin had died in 1924. Stalin was notorious for his fear of personal enemies, and he found them also in Ukraine, especially when he introduced the collectivization of agriculture and established collective farming in the kolkhozes in the years between 1928 and 1933. This was the background to the terror of the 1930s.

⁶ Taras Kuzio, Andrew Wilson, Ukraine: *Perestrojka* to Independence. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London 1994, p. 43.

3. Stalinist Terror during the 1930s

The 1930s saw the continuation of political violence, as Stalin's industrialization policies combined his fear of enemies with the spread of terror against the masses. Actually, the Great Terror began in Soviet Ukraine, when Stalin wanted to drop off the 'national communists' who might have become too independent from Moscow. So, one by one, they were stripped of their political duties and then either sent to prisons and camps or murdered for simple political reasons. Also, the representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church, which had been founded in Kyiv in 1920, became victims of state persecution by the early 1930s at the latest. This decapitation of the Ukrainian Communist elite was never atoned for, nor were any of the Stalinist and other Soviet state crimes.

But this was only the beginning of the Stalinist terror in Ukraine. At the end of the 1920s, the collectivization of agriculture, a social revolution in the countryside, was designed to support the industrialization of the Soviet Union and to increase food production in general. Ukraine, with its fertile soil, became a particular target for these radical measures. However, many peasants were reluctant to voluntarily enter into the collective farms (*kolkhozy*) and to hand over their land, possessions, houses, and livestock to the communist forces that were carrying out collectivization in the countryside. Thus, state pressure was applied and the collectivization was carried out by force.

The traditional peasant structure came under even greater attack when Stalin discovered the most stubborn peasants, the "kulaks." To speed up collectivization, the Bolsheviks decided in 1929 to "liquidate the kulaks as a class". They were declared the special enemy of collectivization. A "kulak" was a peasant who had managed to achieve a certain level of prosperity. This image of the enemy could be extended at will to people who did not appear to be loyal — and whose property was then appropriated by the Bolsheviks. Kulaks were either immediately deported or executed, according to the NKVD's secret operational order no. 00447 of 30 July 1937 ("On the Punishment of Former Kulaks, Criminals and Other Anti-Soviet Elements"). This decree targeted in particular "former kulaks who had been deported in previous years and who had escaped from labour settlements," but also "members of anti-Soviet parties, former tsarist officials," church representatives, and criminal elements. The order led to countless arrests and executions of citizens throughout the Soviet Union, including a disproportionate number of Ukrainians. In Ukraine, the victims of this wave of repression were mainly peasants, priests, former members of the White Movement, and members of political parties. Many were accused of involvement in counter-revolutionary groups or other activities aimed

at planning a coup. Often enough, the accusations were completely unfounded and based on fabricated evidence. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands were shot or sent to camps.⁷

The destruction of traditional agriculture in Soviet Ukraine was also one of the causes of the great famine of 1932–33, the Holodomor. Stalin deliberately provoked this famine by depriving the peasants of their last grain. In the end, the Holodomor cost the lives of millions of people. The number of deaths during the Holodomor varies between four and ten million.⁸ By breaking the last resistance of the Ukrainian peasants to his collectivization, Stalin wanted to strengthen his own political position and regain control over Ukraine, which he feared he was losing through the nationality policy. Thus, Ukrainization was stopped by cleansing the patriotic Ukrainian cadres and replacing them with Russians. A purge of the Ukrainian Communist Party affected almost half of its members (see table above). At the same time, half of the leading politicians in the regions and three-quarters of the party leadership were dismissed.

In 1933, Moscow launched a purge of the Ukrainian elite, the like of which had never been carried out against other non-Russian elites. In addition to those Ukrainians who had played a leading role in promoting Ukrainization —such as the People’s Commissar for National Education Mykola Skrypnyk, who eventually committed suicide in 1933, and the writer Mykola Khvylovy, also in 1933—masses of Ukrainians in the fields of culture, education, and agriculture were attacked and dismissed. Many Ukrainian intellectuals and artists, as well as popular folk singers (*kobzary*), were either deported to the east of the Soviet Union or killed, suspected of being “agents of the Ukrainian secret services” and “ideologists of a Ukrainian fascist movement” aimed at what was called a “Ukrainian national counterrevolution”.⁹ Interestingly, Moscow’s accusation against alleged “fascists” in Ukraine originated in the 1930s. The context for this new kind of threat to the Soviet government was the rise of the Nazis in Germany and also the help for Germans in the USSR during the famine of 1932/33 by charity and religious organizations in Germany and the German Government. The Soviet security services therefore began to persecute numerous “fascist conspiracies” and people suspected of, or simply accused of, having links with Germany, beginning in 1932.¹⁰ Immediately after the

⁷ Oleh Bazhan, Kurkul’s’ka operatsija NKVS SRSR 1937–1938 rr. na Kyjivshchyni: tsil’ovi hrupy ta mashtaby represij, in: Z arkhiviv VUChK-HPU-NKVD-KHB, no. 2 (54) 2020, pp. 47–65 (doi: <https://doi.org/10.15407/vuchk2020.02.047>); Velykyj teror v Ukrajinі. „Kurkul’s’ka operatsija“ 1937–1938 rr. U dvokh chastynach. Kyjiv 2010.

⁸ Anne Applebaum, Roter Terror. Stalins Krieg gegen die Ukraine. München 2019, p. 440. See also: O. M. Veselova, V. I. Marochko, O. M. Movchan, Holodomory v Ukrajinі 1921–1923, 1932–1933, 1946–1947. Zlochyny proty narodu. 3. vyd. Drohobych 2008.

⁹ Andreas Kappeler, Kleine Geschichte der Ukraine. 6th ed. München 2022, p. 203.

¹⁰ Barry McLaughlin, Mass Operations of the NKVD, 1937–8: A Survey, in: Stalin’s Terror. High Politics and Mass Repression in the Soviet Union. Ed. by Barry McLoughlin, Kevin McDermott. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, New York 2004, pp. 118–152, here p. 120.

Second World War, the accusation of Ukrainian-German collaboration experienced a revival, especially in Western Ukraine, to discredit the Ukrainian national resistance internationally, and in the immediate present, the intention to depose the “fascist government in Kyiv” became a pretext for Moscow’s attack on Ukraine in 2022. Thus, the narrative of alleged “fascists in Kyiv” roots deeply in the memory of the NVDK/KGB/FSB and has constituted to this very day the justification for state crimes as the current Russian war against Ukraine like killing innocent children (Mariupol’ and other places), bombing maternity hospitals, torturing civilians (Bucha and other places), kidnapping children and destroying civil infrastructure.

To sum up, the aim of the mass terror in Ukraine in the early 1930s was to weaken the national forces among the Ukrainians, to decimate the Ukrainians as a nation and as independent peasants, and to prevent any form of political resistance in Ukraine. At the same time, these mass repressions in Ukraine had been initiated some time before the “official” beginning of the Great Terror throughout the Soviet Union, marked by the assassination of Leningrad party leader Kirov in 1934. The persecutions in Ukraine can thus be interpreted as the overture of Stalin’s Great Terror, which swept the whole Soviet Union in 1937–38, when the entire party elite, the economy, and the military were purged. Then the terror became great because it was extended to the masses.

“National Operations”

During the Great Terror, so-called “national operations” were also carried out against supposedly hostile nations. In Ukraine, they mainly affected Poles and Germans, causing 105,485 deaths among the Polish and 75,331 among the German communities.¹¹ These were German workers working in the Soviet Union with German passports, but also ethnic Germans with Soviet citizenship and Soviet citizens in general who had connections with Germans or Germany, be they former prisoners of war in Germany, former employees of German companies, or others. Between July 1937 and February 1938 alone, almost 62,000 people were arrested in the whole of Ukraine during the national round-ups.¹²

¹¹ Lynne Viola, *Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial. Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine*. New York 2017, p. 15.

¹² Der „Große Terror“ in der Ukraine. Die „Deutsche Operation“ 1937–1938. Berlin, Boston 2021, pp. 611–614.

From August 1937, the operation was directed against Poles and a fabricated “Polish military organization” and extended to Polish emigrants and Soviet citizens in contact with Polish diplomats. Of the nearly 144,000 people arrested in the union-wide “Polish Operation”, over 111,000 were executed.¹³

Deportations were a part of “national operations”. The deportation of “unreliable” ethnic groups from border areas was intended to secure these areas militarily. As early as 1936, some 45,000 Poles and Germans were deported from the Ukrainian-Polish border to Kazakhstan. In 1937–38, other ethnic groups were resettled into Central Asia: More than 1,000 Kurdish and 2,000 Iranian families were deported from areas bordering Iran and Afghanistan to Soviet territory. When Japan attacked Northern China in July 1937, the Soviet government displaced all Koreans from the Far East Province to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in August 1937. In total, almost 350,000 people were arrested during the “national operations”, 247,157 were sentenced to death, and 88,356 were sent to camps or prisons.¹⁴

Deportation to Kazakhstan, Siberia, and other Eastern regions was also the fate of Germans throughout the Soviet Union during the Second World War. As a result of the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was abolished and the Volga Germans were deported. It was claimed that the Germans were only waiting for Hitler’s orders to carry out sabotage against the Soviet government. No evidence of this claim has yet been found in any German archive.¹⁵ About a quarter of the Black Sea Germans were deported internally. The remaining 300,000 Germans in Ukraine initially fled with the retreating Wehrmacht, but were later repatriated and deported by Soviet troops.

For historians working on state crimes during the Soviet era, research conditions in Ukraine are generally much more favourable than in Russia. In Russia, the archives of the secret services are virtually closed to academic research, whereas Ukraine conducts a policy of opening them up for both private use and research. It is precisely for this reason that several remarkable investigations into the mechanisms and protagonists of Stalinist crimes have been carried out based on the archival material of the Ukrainian secret services. In many cases, they are also relevant to events in Russia, partly because they contain copies of correspondence with Moscow that are not accessible in Moscow archives. Examples of studies of Stalinist crimes based on Ukrainian archival material include an account of

¹³ Marc Jansen, Nikita Petrov, *Stalin’s Loyal Executioner. People’s Commissar Nikolai Ezhov, 1985–1940*. Stanford/California 2002, pp. 95–99.

¹⁴ Jansen, Petrov, *Stalin’s Loyal Executioner*, p. 99.

¹⁵ J. Otto Pohl, *The Years of Great Silence. The Deportation, Special Settlement, and Mobilization into the Labor Army of Ethnic Germans in the USSR, 1941–1955*, Stuttgart 2022, p. 91.

middle-ranking NKVD personnel who carried out orders from above and passed them down, offering a gallery of criminals of all kinds.¹⁶ Another study provides details of the 1930s terror machinery in a region around Kyiv, examining case studies discovered in the SBU archive in Kyiv.¹⁷ For research into the perpetrators, the Nikolaev files provided insights into that wave of Stalinist repression when the NKVD henchmen who had served under NKVD chief Nikolai Ezhov were themselves caught up in the mills of persecution and purged.¹⁸

4. The Second World War

The Second World War was another extraordinary catastrophe for the Ukrainians, as Ukraine became a major theatre of war that rolled over the country. For the Ukrainians in Eastern Poland, the war began when, according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Poland was invaded by the Wehrmacht on 1st September 1939 and by the Soviet army on 17th September 1939 on the Eastern border.

Under Soviet occupation, a massive campaign against perceived “enemies of the state” began in Eastern Poland, and thousands of suspected political opponents were arrested, imprisoned, and deported to Siberia or Kazakhstan, or executed en masse between February and June 1940. It is estimated that on the eve of Operation Barbarossa, almost 140,000 political prisoners were being held in confinement throughout the Soviet-occupied territories. When the German army began its invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, Stalin ordered the Soviet secret service to “eliminate” the prisoners rather than allow them to fall into German hands. This was largely achieved through the mass murder of prisoners at various locations in Western Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, and Lithuania. Most of the mass executions took place in Western Ukraine. Exact figures are impossible to determine, but historians estimate that the NKVD killed between 10,000 and 40,000 people in dozens of prisons over the course of eight days. 70 percent of the victims were Ukrainians, 20 percent Poles, and the rest Jews and other nationalities.¹⁹

Under German occupation, the fate of the civilian population was often inhuman: the Germans exploited the country and its people, deporting many young Ukrainians as forced labourers to perform

¹⁶ See: Laboratories of Terror. The Final Act of Stalin’s Great Purge in Soviet Ukraine. Ed. by Lynne Viola and Marc Junge. Oxford 2023.

¹⁷ Lynne Viola, Stalinist Perpetrators on Trial. Scenes from the Great Terror in Soviet Ukraine. Oxford 2017.

¹⁸ Marc Junge, Stalinistische Modernisierung. Die Strafverfolgung von Akteuren des Staatsterrors in der Ukraine 1939–1941. Bielefeld 2020.

¹⁹ Available at: <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/1941-nkvd-prison-massacres-western-ukraine> [12.07.2024].

slave labour in the West and murdering most of the Jews during the Holocaust. The Germans committed numerous war crimes, including the mass shooting of Jews in Kyiv at Babin Yar: over 33,000 people were shot on 29th and 30th September 1941, and the deliberate starvation of countless prisoners of war.

During the Second World War, Western Ukraine in particular, which became part of the Soviet Union after 1944/45, became an arena of war atrocities, due to the brutality of the occupying German army, but also the Red Army and the troops of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs, and also due to the fight between the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Polish Armia Krajowa. Each of these armies had its military objective and tried to conquer as much territory as possible, turning the battlefields into “bloodlands.”²⁰

If we look at the first half of the 20th century, excluding the Second World War, the estimates of the death toll of the Ukrainian population under Soviet rule and caused by Soviet rule are immense. A very moderate and conservative calculation leads to the following horrific conclusion:²¹

First World War: 0.5 million;

Russian Civil War: 1.5 million;

Famine 1920/21: 250,000;

Famine 1932/33: 4 million (at least);

Stalinist terror and Gulag: 1 million;

Famine 1946/47: 100,000.

This means that over 6.5 million Ukrainians were killed by Soviet violence, not counting those killed in the Second World War. For that war, the calculation yields at least the following figures:

Ukrainian victims of the Second World War:

Civilian population: 4 million, including 1.5 million Jews;

Military: 2.7 million, including 700,000 prisoners of war.

²⁰ This is the telling title Timothy Snyder chose for his book: *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. New York 2010.

²¹ Compiled from various publications and sources.

While the entire Soviet Union lost approximately 25–30 million lives during the Second World War, i.e. 13–15% of its population, Ukraine lost 40% of its population.²²

5. Ukraine after the Second World War: Stalinism 2.0

Stalinist repression did not end after the Second World War. According to a later calculation by Beria, head of the secret police during the Second World War, almost half a million people were arrested, killed, or deported in Western Ukraine between 1944 and 1953.²³ The background to this was that Moscow was making up in Western Ukraine for what it had achieved in the “old” Soviet territories in the previous decades by introducing a forceful Sovietization.

First and foremost, however, the Soviet authorities had to overcome the military resistance of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which tried to prevent Soviet occupation and Sovietization although this was almost impossible for an underground army. Thus, by the summer of 1946, the Ukrainian insurgents were increasingly weakened, with a number of their soldiers either killed in action, executed, or deported with their families to the Eastern regions of the Soviet Union. According to documents in Ukrainian archives, more than 170,000 Ukrainians were deported to special settlements in 1953, where they had to perform forced labour. It was not until Khrushchev’s thaw that they were allowed to leave these settlements.²⁴

Another group of deportees from Western Ukraine was sent to the Eastern regions of the Soviet Union: bishops, priests, and believers of the Greek Catholic Church, which had been “liquidated” in Galicia in 1946 and Transcarpathia in 1949.²⁵ This church, too —headed by the Pope in the Vatican— was seen as a Ukrainian nationalist opposition to the Soviets. Under the Soviet constitution, it theoretically had the right to exist in the Soviet Union. However, every Soviet government persecuted the members of any church suspected of forming a political opposition. The representatives and members of the Greek Catholic Church suffered the most severe repression. More than 2,000 priests, monks, and nuns were sent to labour camps where many of them died only a few years after the Second World War. Meanwhile the believers in Western Ukraine were forced to go underground. Nevertheless, this did not prevent them from forming the largest anti-Soviet network ever after Stalin died in 1953.

²² Susanne Schattenberg, *Geschichte der Sowjetunion. Von der Oktoberrevolution bis zum Untergang*. München 2022, p. 61.

²³ Boeckh, *Stalinismus in der Ukraine*, pp. 366–367.

²⁴ Katrin Boeckh, Ekkehard Völkl, *Ukraine. Von der Roten zur Orangen Revolution*. Regensburg 2007, p. 134.

²⁵ Bohdan Rostyslav Bociurkiw, *The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Soviet state (1939–1950)*. Edmonton, Alberta 1996.

The Polish-Ukrainian Population Transfer

After the war, the Soviet Union ordered a population exchange with Poland in order to homogenize the Western frontier and retain a workforce that would be seen as loyal. The transfer of Ukrainians in Poland into the Ukrainian SSR and of Poles and Jews in Ukraine who had had Polish citizenship before 17th September 1939 (the date of the Soviet invasion of Poland according to the Hitler-Stalin treaty) into post-war Poland was regulated by a treaty of September 1944. Again, this transfer was not voluntary, the population was not asked for its consent, and it affected several hundred thousand persons who had to leave their homes at short notice. By October 1946 alone, more than 480,000 Ukrainians had been forced to leave Poland for Ukraine, while almost 800,000 Poles in Ukraine had left for Poland.²⁶

Khrushchev

In fact, it was never Stalin alone who was responsible for political terror, for he had a loyal entourage, including Nikita Khrushchev, for many years the leader of the Ukrainian Communist Party. He obediently carried out Stalin's orders for purges in the 1930s. After the Second World War, he handled the Sovietization of Western Ukraine and he also proposed practical solutions to increase labour discipline among the workers. According to a government directive of 1948, so-called "parasites" in the kolkhozes could be deported to labour camps. In Ukraine alone, under Khrushchev's leadership nearly 12,000 people were deported by 1950, accused of maliciously avoiding agricultural work and leading parasitic, antisocial lives. This order was interpreted arbitrarily, as many of those deported were war invalids, sick and elderly, as well as people who had been denounced by others for whatever reason. This episode alone shows a blatant contradiction to Khrushchev's later policy of de-Stalinization during the so-called thaw period, for he was very willing to denounce the mistakes and crimes of others during Stalinism while sweeping his personal involvement and active participation under the carpet.

²⁶ Boeckh, *Stalinismus in der Ukraine*, p. 377.

6. Repressions After Stalin until the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Dissent

After Stalin died in 1953, the mass repression came to an end, but the individual repression of persons who refused to toe the Kremlin line did not. Only during Khrushchev's thaw, and then under Brezhnev, did dissident groups emerge, small in number and membership. Still, the regime felt compelled to ban them, even if their actual sphere of activity was very limited.

In Western Ukraine, clandestine dissident groups were organized in the late 1950s and early 1960s. When they were discovered by the authorities, the members received harsh sentences in closed trials. One such group was called the “Jurists’ Group”, led by the lawyer Levko Luk-ianenko (1928–2018).²⁷ He demanded Ukraine to leave the Soviet Union on a legal basis. This „separatism” was, of course, unacceptable to the Soviet government. Luk-ianenko was arrested together with colleagues in 1961 and sentenced to death. This sentence was later commuted to 15 years imprisonment.

Other ideas of intellectual freedom spread in Ukraine, and the so-called *shistdesiatnyky* (“Sixtiers”) formed a cultural opposition to Moscow, that is, they wanted to stop the Russification of Ukraine, while in the 1970s the Helsinki movement for human rights appeared on the scene. Both were met with harsh reactions in Ukraine. Many members were sent to labour camps and also to psychiatric hospitals — a new form of political punishment.

In 1972, the repression of dissidents reached a wider audience when the new Ukrainian party secretary Shcherbytsky, in collaboration with the Ukrainian KGB, launched a massive attack on the dissident intelligentsia. As a result, hundreds of dissidents and suspected political opponents were arrested in university faculties, research institutes, and editorial offices. Their sentences were much harsher than in the 1965–1966 wave: “This wave of persecution, reminiscent of the Stalinist era, traumatized a whole generation of Ukrainian intellectuals and led many [...] to recant or abandon their dissident activities.”²⁸

²⁷ Heorhij Kas’janov, *Nezghodni: Ukrajins’ka intelihentsiia v rusi oporu 1960–80-kh rr.* Kyiv 1995, pp. 35–40. See also: Borys Zakharov, *Narys istorii dysydents’koho rukhu v Ukraini (1956–1987)*. Kharkiv 2003; Vasyl’ Danylenko (ed.), *Politychni protesty j inakodumstvo v Ukraini (1960–1990): Dokumenty i materialy*. Kyjiv 2013.

²⁸ Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine. A History*. 3rd ed. Toronto, Buffalo, London 2000, p. 517.

In 1980, the 37 members of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group were in a desperate situation: 25 were in prison, two were in exile, six were allowed to leave the Soviet Union for the West, one was in a psychiatric hospital and one had committed suicide. The wave of repression against dissidents did not end until 1985.

Non-Glasnost during Perestroika: Chornobyl

The last incident that affected larger parts of the Soviet population, causing great harm to innocent civilians and demonstrating the regime's ignorance of the value of human life, was the nuclear disaster at Chornobyl, some 130 km north of Kyiv, on 26th April 1986. This incident was of a wide European significance as it resulted in widespread radiation throughout the region. Nevertheless, the Soviet leadership in Moscow and Kyiv downplayed the significance of the danger, declaring it to be a fake story of Western propaganda. It should be noted that this happened under the leadership of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who was trying to introduce a policy of reform called glasnost' and perestroika.

To avoid political responsibility and criticism of the sloppy approach, the affected population was evacuated far too late. So-called “liquidators” were sent into the damaged reactor to put out the fire without proper protection, and many lost their lives as a result. It is difficult to say how many people were directly and indirectly affected by the disaster, and the death toll varies widely: The WHO recorded 4,000 deaths, while at the other end of the scale, Greenpeace estimated the death toll at 90,000.²⁹

This deliberate endangerment of the population by the Soviet leadership which had no regard for the lives of others, made Chernobyl a political warning sign. It mobilized broad sections of the population and increased the overall politicization of the population. It became one of the signals for the final collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁰

²⁹ Boeckh, Völkl, Ukraine, p. 187.

³⁰ Oleh Bazhan, Volodymyr Birchak, Hennadij Boriak (eds.), Chornobyl's'ke dos'je KGB. Suspil'ni nastroi. ChAES u postavarijnij period. Zbirnyk dokumentiv pro katastrofu na Chornobyl's'kij AES. Kyjiv 2019; Oleh Bazhan, Andriy Kohut, Hennadij Borjak (eds.), Chornobyl's'ke dos'je KGB. Vid budivnytstva do avariji. Zbirnyk dokumentiv pro katastrofu na Chornobyl's'kij AES. Kyjiv 2020.

Conclusion

It is difficult to draw a conclusion from the depressing statistics of death, murder, and suffering of Ukrainians during the Soviet period. The Soviet victims, numbering in millions, represent a profound tragedy in the annals of 20th century European history. Nevertheless, it has become clear that Ukrainians paid a huge price in the 20th century in a system of lack of freedom and political arbitrariness.

Despite the enormity of the suffering and loss, there has been a conspicuous absence of legal accountability for the perpetrators of these atrocities. This lack of legal consequences underscores a broader failure to confront and acknowledge the full extent of the crimes committed. The historical and moral implications of these unpunished crimes continue to resonate and shape Ukraine's collective memory and also the Ukrainian national identity. Addressing this historical injustice remains essential for the reconciliation of Ukrainian society and the establishment of a truthful historical record.

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