

The Ukrainian Nation in the Time of Lenin, Hitler, and Stalin

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As many other nations, Ukrainians hoped to use the disintegration of the imperial order in the aftermath of World War I to establish their own state. Although Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Poles managed that task, and other East European nations formed federations (Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia), Ukraine failed to gain independence. But there was what one might call a historical consolation prize. The leader of the Bolsheviks, Lenin, insisted, against the will of the majority of his party, that Ukrainian national aspirations had to be recognized. This recognition came about in the form of a Soviet Ukrainian republic. Lenin also insisted on indigenization, which in Ukraine, of course, took the form of ukrainization.

Ukrainization did not last long, about a decade, but it was a time of immense cultural productivity. Already before the war and revolution, the Ukrainian national culture had taken great strides, though limited to Galicia. A very professional Ukrainian daily press had emerged, gems of world literature were being translated into Ukrainian, original literature in the Ukrainian language flourished, a feminist movement appeared, and the equivalent of an academy of sciences was founded in Lviv.

But the intense creativity of Soviet Ukraine in the 1920s was simply stupendous. The historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky continued work on his magnum opus, a multivolume history of Ukraine that has recently been translated in its entirety into English. He and other prominent Ukrainian scholars in the Ukrainian academy of sciences produced numerous and valuable volumes on Ukrainian ethnography, linguistics, and history. The scholarship was of the highest quality, and Ukrainianists still consult these studies with regularity. But there was so much more, including avantgarde literature, film, theater, and visual art. The cultural excitement generated by ukrainization made a great impression on Ukrainians in Galicia, which was at that time incorporated into Poland. Sovietophilism was a major trend in 1920s Galicia, and many of its educated Ukrainians migrated to Soviet Ukraine to find employment and creative outlets. It would have been nice if this could have continued.

Instead, Stalin solidified his control over the party, reversed Leninist nationality policy, and repressed the Ukrainian renaissance with an unprecedented brutality. Almost without exception, the Galicians who had come to Soviet Ukraine were executed. So were the overwhelming majority of the writers, artists, and scholars active in the 1920s as well as the party members who had facilitated their work. Some shot themselves rather than wait for arrest. Members and clergy of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, a radically democratic and humane reinvention of Eastern Orthodoxy, were executed or sent to labor camps. Many other Ukrainians, defined as “kulaks” or “enemies of the people,” were deported to the gulag or special settlements. Although already a dead letter, ukrainization was officially terminated in 1933. A reckless and ruthless project of collectivization produced a famine in 1932-33 that resulted in the death of some four million

inhabitants of Ukraine. Although the famine affected other regions of the Soviet Union as well, Ukraine was singled out for particularly harsh treatment as part of the repression of Ukrainian aspirations.

Stalin's crimes snuffed out sovietophilism in Galicia entirely. There were still Ukrainian leftists in the region, but they no longer sought unification with the real-existing Soviet Ukraine. And the right was growing. The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) was founded in 1929. It particularly appealed to the frustrated veterans of the Ukrainian struggle for independence and to student youth and graduates who suffered discrimination in interwar Poland. At first these nationalists looked to fascist Italy for inspiration, but in 1933 they looked more to Germany, where the national socialists had just come to power. Hitler was anti-Soviet and anti-Polish, clearly the enemy of their enemies. Fascination with this potential ally led to intense antisemitism and xenophobia in OUN, as well as fantasies of violence and conquest.

After Stalin made an alliance with Hitler in 1939, he was able to annex "Western Ukraine" to the Ukrainian SSR. The ferocious violence and mass deportations of the twenty-one months of Soviet rule in Galicia, which included the murder of about ten thousand political prisoners, doused any embers of pro-Soviet sentiment in the Ukrainian population. All the preexisting Ukrainian associations - the scouting organization, credit unions, musical societies, whatever - were dissolved. So too was the entire preexisting Ukrainian press and all political parties. The only Ukrainian organization to survive this tsunami of repression was the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, whose cadres could draw on two decades of underground conspiratorial experience. When OUN's putative ally, Nazi Germany, invaded the USSR in 1941, the Organization put its murderous plans into practice, playing a substantial role in the Holocaust and ethnically cleansing non-Ukrainians, including tens of thousands of Poles.

The Red Army reconquered all of Ukraine by summer 1944. They faced an anti-Soviet insurrection led by OUN that took them years to crush, and of course they crushed the insurgency with all their wonted cruelty and excess. The anti-Soviet rebellion drew in many new recruits to OUN, most of whom were to spend at least the next several years of their life in the gulag.

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