

JOURNAL OF SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Special Sections:

Issues in the History and Memory
of the OUN IV

A Debate on “Ustashism,”
Generic Fascism, and the OUN I

Guest editors:
Andreas Umland & Yuliya Yurchuk



Vol. 7, No. 1 (2021)

ibidem

JOURNAL
OF
SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET
POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Vol. 7, No. 1 (2021)

Grzegorz Motyka

**NKVD Internal Troops Operations
against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army
in 1944-45**

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

Cover picture: Monument for OUN soldiers, UPA. Mount Fyodor, Buchach. © Бучач-Львів via Wikimedia Commons. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 (s. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>).

DOI: 10.24216/97723645330050701_02

© *ibidem*-Verlag / *ibidem* Press
Stuttgart, Germany 2021



Lizenziert unter / Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

s. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

You are free to:

- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

Under the following terms:

- Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.
- NonCommercial — You may not use the material for commercial purposes.
- NoDerivatives — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

NKVD Internal Troops Operations against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in 1944–45*

Grzegorz Motyka

***Abstract:** The Internal Troops of the Soviet People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (the NKVD) were a special-purpose unit established to fight guerrilla movements and “internal enemies.” Documents declassified following the collapse of the USSR indicate that “pacifications” carried out by the NKVD Internal Troops were brutal and very extensive. Analysis of activities targeting the Ukrainian underground movement in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in the final period of World War II and immediately after its end suggests that once the front had moved through these regions large-scale dragnet operations to eliminate major Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) units were immediately launched. In time, these operations covered the entire region. What followed were operations carried out by smaller pursuit groups which constantly operated in the field. The NKVD repression targeted not only members of the underground movement but also large groups of civilians. In principle, collective family responsibility was observed; there were numerous instances when defenseless individuals were killed—in reports they were described as armed “criminals.” The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the UPA enjoyed genuine support on the part of the local Ukrainian population, which is why, despite huge losses, they continued their underground fighting activity until the mid-1950s. However, as early as the turn of 1945 and 1946, due to the activity of the NKVD, large guerrilla fighter units were demobilized and adopted the tactics known as “deep underground.” In this period, nearly four hundred thousand residents of this region, i.e., almost every family, were affected by Soviet repression. The memory of these acts of repression*

* This research was funded by the National Science Centre (Poland) (decision no. DEC-2012/06/M/HS3/00284).

has contributed to the emergence of the cult of the UPA in present-day Ukraine.

Key words: NKVD Internal Troops, OUN and UPA, Stalinist-era repression, dragnet operations targeting guerrilla fighter movements, Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, deportation.

The Internal Troops of the NKVD (the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) were an important element of the Soviet repressive apparatus. This unit was formed back in 1918 (as the Military Corps of the VChK (the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission)) and from its early days was viewed as the armed wing of the communist party, intended to perform special tasks. The assumption was that it should be composed of soldiers who were particularly enthusiastic about communist ideals and ready to carry out repressions against anyone considered an enemy of the revolution.

The NKVD troops began to play a special part following Germany's attack on the USSR. Pursuant to a Sovnarkom decision of 25 June 1941, these troops were responsible for ensuring security to the rear of the Red Army. To this end, the NKVD troops were expected to fight the enemy's sabotage and disruption groups and criminal groups, track down spies, protect transportation routes, organize patrolling activities, and finally, prevent marauding and desertion. However, when the Red Army launched a counteroffensive, the NKVD troops were tasked with fighting the national guerrilla movements and carrying out acts of repression, i.e., arrests and deportations, targeting any "reactionary elements" in the areas under communist rule.¹ Archival materials declassified following the collapse

¹ The following publications on the NKVD Internal Troops are worth mentioning: *Vnutrennie voiska v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine 1941–1945 gg. Dokumenty i materialy* (Iuridicheskaia literatura, 1975); *Ispytannye voinoi. Pogranichnie voiska (1939–1945 gg.)* (Granitsa, 2008); T. Cariewskaja, A. Chmielarz, A. Paczkowski, E. Rosowska, and S. Rudnicki (eds.), *Teczka specjalna J. W. Stalina. Raporty NKWD z Polski 1944–1946* (Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Instytut Historyczny UW, Oficyna Wydawnicza RYTM, Archiwum Państwowe Federacji Rosyjskiej, 1998); "Osobyte papky" *Stalina i Molotova pro natsional'no-*

of the USSR indicate that the pacification of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia was particularly bloody. It affected as many as several hundred thousand individuals, including those killed, arrested, and deported. Despite its magnitude, until the end of the twentieth century this operation remained practically unknown to a wider public.

In the pre-war period, Volhynia and Eastern Galicia were parts of the Polish state. They were inhabited by more than five million Ukrainians and one and a half million Poles (as well as around seven hundred and fifty thousand Jews, most of whom were murdered during the Holocaust). In September 1939, these areas were seized by and illegally annexed to the USSR; from 1941 they were occupied by the German army; and at present they make up the western part of the Ukrainian state. These areas saw the operation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) which was formed in 1943 and was subordinate to the Banderite wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B). Its purpose was to fight for the creation of an independent, united, and de facto mono-ethnic Ukrainian state.

Immediately after the German attack on the USSR, Ukrainian nationalists counted on the emergence of an independent state similar to Croatia ruled by Ustaše, and therefore they supported the attacking Wehrmacht by organizing a series of diversions. They also took part in numerous anti-Jewish pogroms.² However, the members of the body established in Lwów/Lviv by the OUN, which

vyzvol'nu borot'bu v Zakhidniy Ukraini u 1944–1948 rr. Zbirnyk dokumentiv (Piramida, 2010); Grzegorz Motyka, *Na białych Polaków oblawa. Wojska NKWD w walce z polskim podziemiem 1944–1953* (Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2014); and A. Kokurin, N. Petrov, and R. Pikhov (eds.), *Lubianka VChK–OGPU–NKVD–NKGB–MGB–MVD–KGB 1917–1960. Spravochnik* (Mezhdunarodnyi Fond Demokratsiia, 1997).

² For more on this subject, see John-Paul Himka, “The Lviv Pogrom of 1941: The Germans, Ukrainian Nationalists, and the Carnival Crowd,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* LIII, no. 2–4 (2011): 209–43; Dieter Pohl, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941–1944: Organisation und Durchführung eines staatlichen Massenverbrechens* (Oldenbourg, 1997); and Dieter Pohl, “Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Western Ukraine,” *Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941*, ed. Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve (Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 305–31.

proclaimed itself to be the Ukrainian government, was interned. Hitler decided to include Eastern Galicia in the Generalgouvernement—the German administrative unit for those parts of Poland which had been not annexed by Germany in 1939, whereas Volhynia became a part of “Reichskommissariat Ukraine.” In this situation, the Bandera followers also joined the anti-German underground. At the beginning of 1943, OUN-B created numerous partisan units called the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). They began to fight against the German police forces, though in a limited way (which did not prevent the UPA making an agreement with German intelligence in 1944) and they started an open war with the communist partisans.

One dark episode in the history of this organization is the “anti-Polish operation” launched on 9 February 1943 with the intention of physically eliminating (by killing or expelling) the Polish population in all areas which—according to the OUN and the UPA—were to become parts of the future Ukrainian state. Brutal, genocidal purges lasted until the beginning of 1945, and as a result about 100,000 Poles were killed. At least 1–2 thousand Jews in hiding also fell victim to the OUN and the UPA.³

³ The “anti-Polish operation” carried out by the UPA between 9 February 1943 and 18 May 1945 covered several voivodships of the Second Polish Republic, an area that was inhabited by at least one and a half million Poles. The actions of the Ukrainian guerrilla movement resulted in a total of around a hundred thousand individuals being killed. Another between three hundred thousand and four hundred thousand individuals were forced to flee to save their lives. Particularly important publications on the Volhynia-Galicia crime include: Ryszard Torzecki, *Polacy i Ukraińcy. Sprawa ukraińska w czasie II wojny światowej na terenie II Rzeczypospolitej* (Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1993); Andrzej Leon Sowa, *Stosunki polsko-ukraińskie 1939–1947* (Towarzystwo Sympatyków Historii, 1998); Władysław Siemaszko and Ewa Siemaszko, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na ludności polskiej Wołynia 1939–1945*, vol. 1–2 (Wydawnictwo von Borowiecky, 2000); and Grzegorz Motyka, *Od rzezi wołyńskiej do akcji “Wisła.” Konflikt polsko-ukraiński 1943–1947* (Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011). For more on the history of the region see: Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010).

However, the leadership of the OUN and the UPA viewed the USSR as the biggest threat to Ukrainian independence aspirations. Mindful of the experience of the 1930s, when in Ukrainian lands belonging to the USSR the communists provoked artificial famine as a result of which three million people died, the leadership feared that Ukrainians living in Volhynia and Galicia might suffer the same fate. This is why the activity of the Ukrainian underground movement increased considerably once the front had moved through these areas. Local residents were called on to boycott the Red Army mobilization and prohibited from providing the obligatory in-kind contributions. UPA members killed local activists and attacked the newly-created village councils. The guerrilla movement spread into vast wooded areas and in both regions met with massive support on the part of the local Ukrainian population.

In mid-1944, the UPA reached the peak of its development. More than a hundred sotnias (the equivalent of a company or a squadron) had between twenty-five thousand and thirty thousand guerrilla fighters. When this number is increased by groups of conspirators organized in units covering a major portion of Ukrainian villages and by numerous supporters, it can be assumed that UPA units were able to mobilize up to a hundred thousand individuals. The spirit of resistance was reinforced by rumors being spread suggesting that the Soviets intended to “physically annihilate” the Ukrainian nation and planned to displace all Ukrainians from the two regions to Siberia.

Although as early as the beginning of 1943 the communists were aware of the fact that the UPA existed (they knew it for example from reports provided by their own guerrilla movement), initially they tended to disregard or at least to underestimate the UPA’s strength and influence.⁴ One breakthrough moment was when

⁴ The literature on the UPA is extensive. During the Cold War, the following studies were written from the perspective of OUN members: Lev Shankovs’kyi, “UPA,” in *Istoriya ukraïns’koho wïys’ka 1917–1995* (Svit, 1996); and Petro Mirchuk, *Ukraiïns’ka Povstans’ka Armiya 1942–1952. Dokumenty i materialy* (Cicero, 1953). As a rule, the crimes of the UPA were ignored in these works. The history of this formation was presented in a similar way by many books written in Ukraine after 1991, see e.g. Petro Sodal, *Ukraiïns’ka Povstancha Armiia*.

General Nikolai Vatutin, a hero of the Battle of Stalingrad, was seriously wounded in an ambush laid on him by the UPA in February 1944 (he died of his injuries several weeks later in a hospital in Kyiv). In March 1944, the activity of the UPA was examined by the State Defense Committee of the USSR. A decision was made to boost forces responsible for fighting the guerrilla movement on the one hand, and carrying out large-scale repressions against members of the underground movement and their relatives, on the other. Recommendations were issued for example to organize public executions and to displace “criminals” and their families.⁵ To tarnish the image of the resistance movement, from the beginning in official language guerrilla fighters were referred to as “Ukrainian-German nationalists,” which was intended to suggest that the OUN and the UPA had close ties to the Nazis.

Dovidnyk (Proloh, 1994); Ivan Patryliak, *Vstan i borys', slukhay i vir. Ukrains'ke natsionalistychne pidpillia ta povstans'kyi rukh 1939–1960 rr.* (Czasopys, 2012); and Anatolii Rusnachenko, *Narod zburynyi. Natsional'no-vyzvol'nyi rukh v Ukraini i natsional'ni rukhi oporu v Bilorusiyi, Lytvi, Latviyi, Estoniyi u 1940–1950-kh rokakh* (Universytets'ke vyd-vo “Pulsary,” 2002). Attempts to reconcile the history of the UPA with liberal-democratic values can be found in Iurii Kyrychuk, *Ukrains'kyi natsional'nyi rukh 40-50-kh rokov XX stolittia: ideolohiia ta praktyka* (Dobra sprava, 2003); and Yaroslav Hrytsak, “Tezy do dyskusiyi pro UPA,” in *Strasti za natsionalizmom. Istorychni ese* (Krytyka, 2004). Among works published outside of Ukraine one should point in particular to: Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist. Fascism, Genocide, and Cult* (ibidem Verlag, 2014); Alexander Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in Western Borderlands* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Alexander Statiev, “The Strategy of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists in Its Quest for a Sovereign State, 1939–1950,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 443–71; Řepa Tomas, *Banderovci. Politické souvislosti následky zneužití tématu komunistické propagandy, návaznost na hybridní konflikt v současnosti* (Academia, 2019); and Serhiy Kudelia, “Choosing Violence in Irregular Wars: The Case of Anti-Soviet Insurgency in Western Ukraine,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 27, no. 1 (February 2013): 149–81.

⁵ For more on the topic of post-war deportations in western Ukraine see Tamara Vrons'ka, *Upokorennia strakhom: simeyne zaruchnytstvo u karal'niy praktytsi radians'koi vlady (1917–1953 rr.)* (Tempora, 2013); and Stanisław Ciesielski, Grzegorz Hryciuk, and Aleksander Srebrakowski, *Masowe deportacje ludności w Związku Radzieckim* (Adam Marszałek, 2004).

In Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, activities targeting the Ukrainian underground movement were commanded by People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR Ivan Ryzanyi, his deputy Tymofiy Strokach, and People's Commissar of Security Affairs of the USSR Sergei Savchenko. In October 1944, the Soviets managed to reconstruct the network of Soviet security bodies, i.e., the NKVD/NKGB, to which the NKVD Internal Troops were operationally subordinate.

It was to some degree natural for the NKVD Internal Troops to bear the main responsibility for carrying out operations targeting guerrilla fighters. By 25 March 1944, the 9th Ordzhonikidze Division and the 10th Sukhumi Division of the NKVD Internal Troops arrived in Volhynia and Podolia. They had just finished the deportations of the Chechen and the Kalmyk populations. Apart from that, eight Motor Rifle Brigades of the NKVD Internal Troops⁶ were ordered to go to Volhynia, alongside the 18th cavalry regiment and a special armored battalion from the 1st Feliks Dzerzhinskii Division. According to official statistics, each brigade was supposed to be composed of five battalions with a total of 4,050 soldiers,⁷ however, in fact the NKVD units were numerically smaller than this. According to Anatolii Kentii, Ukrainian historian and expert on the history of the UPA, as at 9 October 1944, 26,304 soldiers of the NKVD Internal Troops were involved in the fight against the underground movement in Western Ukraine.⁸ In October 1945, the NKVD Internal Troops were reorganized to form the 62nd, 65th, 81st, and 82nd divisions of the NKVD Internal Troops. According to official plans, each division was to be composed of four regiments, each comprising 1,450 soldiers; however, in fact hardly any of these units had as many soldiers. As at 1 February 1946, 22,907 soldiers of the NKVD Internal

⁶ The 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st, 23rd and 24th Motor Rifle Brigades.

⁷ Dmytro Viedienieiev and Oleksandr Lysenko, "Proiavy teroru i teroryzmu v protystoianniadians'koi vlady ta OUN i UPA v zakhidnoukrains'komu rehioni pisliavoennoi doby," in V. Lytvyn and V. A. Smolii (eds.), *Politychnyi teror i teroryzm v Ukraini. XIX-XX st. Istorychni narysy* (Naukova dumka, 2002), 753.

⁸ Anatolii Kentii, *Ukrains'ka povstans'ka armiiia v 1944-1945 rr.* (Institut istorii Ukrainy NAN, 1999), 155.

Troops were involved in the fight against the underground movement in Western Ukraine.⁹

Immediately after the front had moved through this area, the NKVD troops launched “chekist-military” operations which guerrilla fighters referred to as the “red broom.” Major forces encircled big wooded areas alongside the villages situated there, and combed them one by one. During these operations all armed guerrilla fighter groups were destroyed and all men aged sixteen to sixty were detained and checked. Operations of this type brought considerable results, especially in the initial period.

The Soviets decided to carry out one of the first such operations following the ambush in the Kremenets Forest in which General Vatutin was fatally wounded. The action carried out on 21–27 April involved four brigades of NKVD troops, a cavalry regiment, an armored sub-unit (15 tanks) and light air force. The Soviet forces were composed of a total of more than fifteen thousand individuals.¹⁰ More than four thousand guerrilla fighters from the UPA-North and UPA-South command groups were encircled, however, only between two and a half thousand and three thousand of them carried any weapon; the remainder were fighters who had recently been forcibly recruited. Alongside these fighters, at least around a thousand civilians were encircled. The heaviest fighting happened on 23 and 24 April when the Soviets started to comb the forests simultaneously from all sides. On 24 April, near Hurby (now a small village in Rivne oblast’), guerrilla fighters managed to repulse three consecutive attacks by the NKVD. However, due to the fact that the situation was difficult, the UPA decided to break out of the encirclement at night, leaving the entire heavy equipment, the wounded fighters, and the civilians behind. On the morning of 25 April, following a brief clash, UPA units, split into three groups, broke out of

⁹ Ivan Bilas, *Represyвно-karal’na systema v Ukraini 1917–1953*, vol. 2 (Viis’ko Ukrainy, 1994), 482, 488.

¹⁰ Oleksandr Vovk, “Do pytannia pro naibil’shu bytvu UPA pid Hurbamy,” in *Drohobyt’s’kyi kraeznavchyi zbirnyk. Spetsvypusk do 60-richchia UPA* (Kolo, 2002), 125–37; *Vnutrennie voiska v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine*, 627–628; and Ihor Marchuk and Oleksandr Tyshchenko, *Hurby: kviten’ 1944-ho* (Mizhnarodnyi Poligraficznyi Tsentr, 2002), 5–18.

the encirclement and separated themselves from the enemy. Despite this, on 25–27 April the Soviets continued to comb the forests near Kremenets (Ternopil’ oblast’) and to spot small groups of remaining fighters hiding in the forest. If we were to believe Soviet reports, as a result of this operation 2,018 individuals were killed and another 1,570 arrested. The following pieces of equipment were seized, among other things: a U-2 plane, seven guns (mainly 45 mm guns), fifteen mortars (2–120 mm), forty-two light machine guns, thirty-one sub-machine guns, and 298 rifles. In their clashes with the guerrilla fighters, the NKVD Internal Troops lost eleven soldiers who were killed and another forty-six who were wounded. A different account of the events can be deduced from figures provided by the guerrilla fighters. They reported 136 fighters killed and another seventy-five wounded; apart from that the NKVD reportedly murdered around a hundred civilians.¹¹ The figures provided by the NKVD regarding the losses suffered by the enemy should be contrasted with the number of items of weaponry seized: it is worth noting that these would not be sufficient to arm the individuals killed, not to mention the prisoners of war.

By August 1944, the dragnet operations covered the entire Volhynia, and subsequently, as the Red Army moved on, they covered consecutive regions of Eastern Galicia. On 7 August 1944, having received intelligence information from “active participants in the UPA,” the Soviets found out that a major UPA group was operating in the Kariv Forest and in Piddubtsi (now in Volyns’ka oblast’)—it was composed of up to 1,400 individuals including around four hundred who were well-armed and dressed in German uniforms. At dawn on 29 August, a specially formed operational group of at least seven hundred NKVD soldiers (from the Internal Troops and the Border Troops), additionally backed by Red Army units, encircled the Kariv Forest.¹² Heavy fighting lasted all day. When fighting was discontinued overnight, the guerrilla fighters used the opportunity, splitting into small groups and “permeating” through the Soviet lines. In the morning, the dragnet operation was

¹¹ Vovk, “Do pytannia pro naibil’shu,” 125–37.

¹² *Litopys UPA*, vol. 39 (“Litopys UPA,” 2003), 41.

resumed, but only very small groups of guerrilla fighters remained in the encircled area; these were eliminated one by one. The Soviets estimated the Ukrainian losses at 625 individuals killed. They themselves admitted to having lost as many as thirty-two soldiers killed and another forty-eight wounded, with one soldier missing.¹³ The estimates provided by the guerrilla fighters were totally different. According to figures provided by the UPA, a mere ten guerrilla fighters were killed and around twenty wounded. Two UPA fighters were taken prisoner.¹⁴

In November 1944, the Soviets decided to modify the principles of their anti-guerrilla operations and to adopt a new method, the so-called “blocking” method (*blokada*), against the guerrillas. From then on, the entire area covered by a dragnet operation was to be divided into ten to fifteen sections, each containing two to three villages. Each of these sections was to be “taken care of” by a company of NKVD troops responsible for fighting the underground (comprising 80–120 men). The operation was to be launched in all locations simultaneously. First, all residents were to be gathered in one place and anyone who might have “wronged the Soviet authorities” was categorically requested to identify themselves. Next, the NKVD soldiers were to thoroughly search all houses and outbuildings one by one. They were instructed to look for any potential entries to shelters and hide-outs. A single farmyard could even be searched several times. The soldiers were accompanied by party activists, who organized propaganda meetings and collected outstanding in-kind contributions. Show trials and executions carried out on the spot were to boost the propaganda message. A dragnet operation of this type was to last uninterruptedly for five to seven days.¹⁵

Between 29 December 1944 and 4 January 1945, most likely the first such operation according to the new scheme was carried

¹³ Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), f. 38724, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 136–37. A description of combat activities of an independent unit for fighting UPA band formations, 29–30 August 1944.

¹⁴ *Litopys UPA*, vol. 39, 44–45.

¹⁵ State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. 9401 [Stalin’s so-called Special Files], op 2, d. 92, ll. 248–53.

out by the 19th Brigade of the NKVD Internal Troops, which “cleansed” the Rohatyn area in Stanislav oblast’. The success of the experimental use of the blocking method in Ukraine encouraged the Soviets to use it in other republics of the USSR as well, including the Baltic states. Official recommendations regarding the use of this method came from Lieutenant General Moisei Sladkevich, deputy commander of the NKVD Internal Troops. His order no. 19/10-00114 issued on 17 February 1945 contained detailed instructions as to how such operations should proceed.¹⁶

At the beginning of 1945, Soviet dragnet operations reached the Carpathian Mountains. Between 18 January 1945 and 10 February 1945, in Stanislav oblast’ 1,678 “criminals” were killed and 1,716 were captured, 4,820 emerged from the underground, having appeared before special amnesty committees, ninety-nine farmers were subject to repression for offering support to the guerrilla movement, and 1,115 bunkers were destroyed. Between 24 January and 2 February, the Soviets carried out an operation in Halych district, which involved the 19th brigade backed by eighty-five activists. Seventy-five mass meetings were organized, among other actions. They were attended by ten thousand individuals. One hundred and five guerrilla fighters were killed and another 674 taken prisoner.¹⁷

Between 12 and 24 March 1945, the 19th Brigade carried out a chekist-military operation in the raions of Tlumach and Tysmenytsia (Stanislav oblast’). Starting at dawn on 12 March, 850 soldiers divided into thirteen combined companies thoroughly searched around seventy villages and khutors (small villages). Concurrently, political officers spread their propaganda message during meetings with the local population organized by the NKVD. During the operation, 266 guerrilla fighters were killed and another 798 captured; 269 individuals were accused of supporting the underground movement and arrested. Three deserters were detained alongside 207 individuals evading military service. Another 1,347

¹⁶ *Ibid.* NKVD reports indicate that 115 “criminals” were killed and another 281 captured, in addition, more than seventy-four individuals evading military service and four deserters were captured.

¹⁷ RGVA, f. 38778, op. 1, d. 6, ll. 17-18, 20.

individuals identified themselves voluntarily as wrong-doers. Fifty-nine “criminal” families—a total of 142 individuals—were displaced. Four hundred and thirty-eight shelters containing food and other provisions were found (some of them had been set up by farmers in order to hide their produce and assets so as to avoid the obligation to provide the required in-kind contribution) alongside fourteen shelters with arms. During the operation, there were ten minor clashes with UPA fighters in which the NKVD lost three soldiers killed and another four wounded.¹⁸

The operation carried out on 21 March 1945 near the village of Sadzhava in Bohorodchany raion, Stanislav oblast’, was a major success for the Soviets. It involved a violent confrontation of an UPA kuren (the equivalent of a battalion) known as “Smertonostsy” with an NKVD unit. 110 insurgents were killed. Another operation in Stanislav oblast’ was carried out between 17 and 29 April 1945. It covered the difficult mountainous areas of Zhabe, Yabluniv, Kuty, Zabolottya, Kolomyia, Yaremche raions. Two UPA kurens were stationed there (including the one led by “Nedobity”) together with nine training sotnias (squadrons). According to the Soviets, the operation triggered panic among the guerrilla fighters. The units scattered and moved on in small groups. 547 “criminals” were killed, 2,502 were captured, and 1,745 individuals identified themselves. The Soviets lost two soldiers killed and another twenty-six wounded.¹⁹

The operations carried out by the Soviets in winter 1945 decimated the Carpathian UPA units. They were also intended as a signal that the Soviet leadership was not going to leave even the most remote areas unattended. Once a wave of major cleansing and blocking operations swept through the region, the NKVD tried to “saturate” the area covered by guerrilla fighter activity with Reconnaissance-Pursuit Groups (RPG) which patrolled the area, organized ambushes in locations where guerrilla fighters were likely to

¹⁸ RGVA, f. 38698, op. 1, d. 14, ll. 14–15.

¹⁹ GARF, f. 9401, op 2, d. 95, ll. 361–62.

appear, and also covered those officers who contacted their spy network. Deployment of small garrisons of NKVD troops in bigger towns enabled the pursuit groups to chase guerrilla fighters whenever these carried out their actions; some of these groups were specially appointed to fight specific units. The use of dogs was recommended during such pursuit. Throughout this period, based on information provided by spy networks, targeted operations to eliminate the spotted guerrilla fighters were being carried out as well.

Frequent NKVD dragnet operations forced the guerrilla fighters to remain constantly vigilant. They made some fighters doubt in the prospects of victory. In addition, they forced the fighters to operate in small groups only—this, in turn, enabled the Soviets to send smaller sub-units, which were constantly maneuvering in this area, to carry out operations against guerrilla fighters. Although most of these operations (and there were literally thousands of them) failed to bring any positive results, they triggered constant tension in the areas “infected with criminal activity.”

During combat activities, units of NKVD troops were accompanied by at least one or two officers representing operational security bodies. They contacted the spy network, made decisions regarding operational deployment of specific soldiers, and carried out interrogations of captured guerrilla fighters and members of the underground movement on the spot immediately after the clashes. Although no monograph discussing the NKVD’s investigative methods has been published, one thing is certain: these methods were surprisingly effective. Available materials indicate that Soviet officers were capable of pressurizing a major portion of arrested individuals into speaking. Heroic attitudes were rare. What is the most surprising is the speed at which members of the underground movement cracked under interrogation—and it was frequently the speed that determined whether the information obtained was useful (there were cases when the detainees disclosed the hiding place of their closest family members within one or two hours). Perhaps the answer to this puzzle can be deduced from a medical report compiled regarding the last commander of the Lithuanian underground movement, Adolf Ramanauskas, who was captured on 12 October

1956. Three days later, he was taken to hospital unconscious and the doctors described his condition in the following way:

The right eye is covered by a hematoma, six wounds on the eyelid have been found ... they were most likely inflicted on him using a thin wire or a nail which was inserted deep into his eyeball. Numerous hematomas on the abdomen, the middle finger of his left palm has been cut off ... a major bloody scar was revealed on the right-hand side of his scrotum ... both testes and both deferent ducts have been removed.²⁰

There is no reason to think that the NKVD operating in Ukraine was more lenient than its equivalent operating in Lithuania.

In addition, the NKVD troops used all sorts of tricks. One of such tricks involved provoking the UPA to attack in locations where ambushes had been set up. On routes which were particularly frequently attacked by the UPA, situations were staged involving for example a car breakdown. A portion of soldiers remained hiding in a truck filled with weapons ready to fire, whereas several others were busy mending the vehicle. Sometimes a poorly protected car “broke down” in a location where another group of Soviets had already secretly assumed their positions. In addition, ambushes were set up for example in the vicinity of village grocery stores immediately following the delivery of goods, and near trucks with supplies whose drivers were “thoughtless” enough to leave them in the village overnight. The Soviets also set up ambushes near the bodies of killed guerrilla fighters and near the agent who stayed in the village overnight. For example, on 4 December 1945 an NKVD operational group killed three UPA members in the village of Ustya in Ternopil oblast'. Their bodies were left where they were killed, however, an ambush was secretly set up in the vicinity of this location. On the

²⁰ Rafał Wnuk, *Leśni bracia. Podziemie antykomunistyczne na Litwie, Łotwie i w Estonii 1944–1956* (Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 2018), 331. Ramanauskas survived the torture, however, a year later he was sentenced to death and executed on 29 November 1957. It is worth noting that such cruel torture was still being used at a time when the underground had already been extinguished.

same night, another three guerrilla fighters were killed in this ambush.²¹

One important method of fighting the guerrilla movement involved forced displacement of the civilian population. In line with recommendations issued by Beria, the deported individuals included not only those who were suspected of contacting the underground movement but also entire families of identified members of the underground. These measures effectively intimidated the local residents and discouraged them from supporting the activity of the underground movement. Although they were unable—for example, for technical reasons—to displace entire nations, the communists focused their repressive measures on families of individuals linked to the guerrilla fighter movement and the underground movement. The lists of names of individuals to be deported were compiled by an NKVD/NKGB officer.

The first transport of displaced persons departed on 7 May 1944. It carried around two thousand individuals. In the initial period, fifteen to twenty individuals were placed in one car. This triggered protest from Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR Chernyshev, which resulted in thirty to thirty-five individuals being placed in one car "in conformity with the standards." In this way, the already difficult travel conditions got even worse as winter came. In some transports no stoves were available. Due to freezing weather, in transport no. 49339, which departed from Ternopil', twelve children died and many other individuals fell ill. The displaced persons were transported for example to the Komi Republic and to Irkutsk oblast', where they were used as labor during tree felling and in mining. In 1944–45, a total of more than thirty thousand individuals were displaced and transported deep into the USSR.²²

Numerous party members frequently criticized the NKVD Internal Troops for their ineffectiveness. NKVD commanders refuted these accusations, arguing that many of their failures resulted from

²¹ RGVA, f. 38690, op. 1, d. 22, ll. 83–84; d. 19, l. 75.

²² Grzegorz Hryciuk, *Przemiany narodowościowe i ludnościowe w Galicji Wschodniej i na Wołyniu w latach 1931–1948* (Adam Marszałek, 2005), 293–99.

the lack of reliable information received from the NKGB and within the NKVD itself. During a meeting in Rivne oblast', defending himself against these claims, General Bragin astutely reminded the employees of the party obkom that without the involvement of the Internal Troops the party would not have been able to operate in the field and that his soldiers fight "and at the same time they endure many hardships, eat too little, have too little sleep and risk their necks."²³ Bragin argued that the NKVD troops showed... excessive "humanism."²⁴ He said:

Sometimes we are afraid to burn down a house, whereas it is absolutely necessary to burn it down without any hesitation. I don't mean to say that our goal should be to burn houses down—the Soviet man never resolves any problems in such a manner, however, whenever this is necessary, when the right moment comes, then this is what we should do.²⁵

He went on to say that should such facts emerge, "I'm not talking about [instances of] large-scale arson / then please take into account that the right moment had come and that it was necessary to do this."²⁶

The example of the above-mentioned statement by General Bragin shows that during the clashes the Internal Troops units were merciless towards their enemy: killing the wounded fighters was a common practice, and the soldiers did not bother about accidental victims. Another common practice was to break the guerrilla fighters' resistance by setting fire to farms in which they were given shelter. This happened even in the situation when their presence was reported by the farm owner himself. The Soviets were entering areas in which, according to their propaganda, they could expect a warm welcome. Meanwhile, in reality, they met with distrust on the part of the local population, and they were constantly at risk of being attacked by guerrilla fighters. Frequently, the response of the NKVD Internal Troops was to treat all inhabitants of areas where the UPA

²³ Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine in Kyiv (TsDAHOU), f. 1, op. 23, d. 924.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

was active as “criminals.” As a consequence, during their dragnet operations they often killed innocent people and later, in their reports, presented these victims as killed guerrilla fighters. For example, on 21 October 1944 fifteen NKVD soldiers came to the village of Kryvenke in Probizhna raion in Ternopil oblast’ to displace “families of criminals.” They were attacked by guerrilla fighters, lost three soldiers, and withdrew. On the next day, a unit commanded by major Polyaski and lieutenant Moldovanov arrived and carried out “a wild pogrom of the village.”²⁷ Ten villagers: men aged between sixty and eighty, were shot dead (apparently the younger ones managed to escape), and forty-five farms were burnt. Five of the individuals who were killed were family members of Red Army servicemen.

Soviet documents contain descriptions of many such cases of lawlessness and abuse. It is likely that many more were never discovered by inspection bodies, and that this is why no accounts of these events can be found in the archival materials. In its resolution of 10 January 1945 even the Central Committee of the Ukrainian branch of the party admitted that “unacceptable incidents” had happened when the NKVD and the NKGB burnt down houses and killed individuals who had no links with the guerrilla movement, as a result of which they “discredited both themselves and the Soviet authorities.”²⁸

The almost blatant violation of the USSR’s official legal norms by Soviet officers likely indicates that this was a common practice. The situation could not have been different—on the one hand, the Soviets were forced to maintain “the Soviet rule of law,” but on the other, they were expected to deliver immediate results in their fight against the guerrilla fighters and the underground movement. This meant that the number of individuals killed and arrested was expected to increase month by month. Reports sent to the headquarters were carefully read and thoroughly analyzed. Any decline in combat activity was immediately noticed and condemned. When faced with the choice whether to be “law-abiding and humanitarian”

²⁷ Bilas, *Represyvno-karal’na systema*, vol. 2, 576.

²⁸ *Litopys UPA. Nova seriia*, vol. 3 (“Litopys UPA,” Natsional’na Akademiia Nauk Ukrainy, Derzhavnyi Komitet Arkhiviv Ukrainy, 2001), 120.

and expose oneself to the risk of being accused of ineptitude (or in the worst case—of supporting nationalists) or to break the law and expose oneself to the less likely risk of being accused of abuse, most people chose the latter option.

This behavior was welcomed by the Soviet leadership. On 10 January 1945, in Lviv, during a meeting of party activists and officials responsible for economic affairs in Lviv oblast', the 1st secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine Nikita Khrushchev explained the rationale for the repression in the following way:

They simply won't respect us if we don't take relevant measures, all members [of the resistance movement—GM] should be arrested, those who deserve it should be tried, or perhaps hanged, the remaining ones should be sent (read: deported—GM) and this will be the time when we will know that everything is OK and the people will know that we will take a hundred in exchange for a single individual... They need to be afraid of our revenge.²⁹

It should be noted that the Soviets were aware that this type of behavior discouraged the local population from supporting the communist rule. Moreover, the local residents likely had the feeling that they were under occupation. This is why, at least from 1945, the Soviets tried to reduce the scale of lawlessness and abuse in order to win over a portion of residents of Volhynia and Galicia and engage them in the fight against the OUN-B and the UPA.

Although in 1944–45, the Soviets did not manage to eliminate the guerrilla movement, they did force the Ukrainian leadership to disband the bigger units. In the end, in 1946 the leadership of the OUN and the UPA decided to abandon the “insurgent-guerrilla fight against the superior strength of the communist regime”³⁰ and switch to deep conspiracy. The authorities continued to fight these small groups of underground activists until the mid-1950s.

In 1944–45, the activity of the OUN-B and the UPA in the USSR was at its most intense. Over that period, according to Soviet statistics, the Ukrainian guerrilla movement carried out 6,600

²⁹ Quoted after: Yuriy Kyrychuk, *Narysy z istoriyi ukrains'koho natsional'no-vyzvol'noho rukhu 40–50 rokiv XX stolittia* (Lvivskii Natsional'nyi Universytet imeni Ivana Franka, 2000), 139.

³⁰ Quoted after: Kentii, *Narys borotby OUN-UPA v Ukraini*, 22.

armed operations. The strength of the UPA is confirmed by the fact that its units were capable of waging regular battles with the NKVD Internal Troops. According to official information, in 1944–45 the Soviets carried out 39,773 “chekist-military” operations against the OUN and the UPA. They killed 103,313 members of the underground movement and guerrilla fighters, detained 110,785 individuals, and 50,058 members of the OUN and the UPA emerged from the underground, having appeared before amnesty committees. In addition, 13,704 deserters and 83,284 individuals evading military service in the Red Army were arrested. These figures, plus the thirty thousand deported individuals, give a total of a staggering more than 390,000 people (it should be noted that around five million Ukrainians lived in the two regions).³¹

There is no doubt that the NKVD troops delivered the Ukrainian underground movement and the guerrilla movement a series of heavy and painful blows. Operations carried out by the NKVD Internal Troops contributed to a reduction in the scale of activity of the guerrilla movement, and most importantly they offered some degree of protection to the government apparatus built by the communists. This is why the activity of the NKVD Internal Troops should be viewed as an important factor that facilitated the post-war Sovietization of western Ukraine.

However, what is shocking is the scale of the acts of repression which accompanied the actions of a purely anti-guerrilla nature. They affected nearly every family in the western oblasts of Ukraine.

There is no doubt that the Soviets applied the principle of collective responsibility, repressing thousands of innocent people, often with only a loose or non-existent connection to the nationalist underground. Such ruthless treatment of the inhabitants of Eastern Galicia and Volhynia was not a result of the cruel methods of combat used by the OUN and the UPA. The Soviet troops showed similar brutality during counter-guerrilla operations conducted at that time in the Baltic states, and even in Poland, where in July 1945, during the operation in the Augustów Forests, at least 592 local

³¹ Viedienieiev and Lysenko, “Proiavy teroru i teroryzmu,” 770–71.

inhabitants were arbitrarily declared “bandits” and subsequently executed without trial.³² It should also be noted that the involvement of such large forces and resources in Galicia and Volhynia by the Soviet repressive apparatus contradicts the popular thesis about the lack of social support for the OUN and UPA. Certainly, the underground could not have survived for so long without the broad support of the local population, who saw it as the only force resisting communist violence.

This is why in these regions the memory of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army is the idealized memory of an organization fighting above all else for Ukraine’s independence. When in 1991 Ukraine declared independence, following the collapse of the USSR, honoring the memory of the UPA was allowed in private ceremonies and at the local government level. Following the Revolution of Dignity, pursuant to a special law passed by the Verkhovna Rada in 2015, the UPA was recognized as a pro-independence organization at the state level. It is worrying that the official narrative most frequently “omits” the dark pages in the history of this organization and the crimes it committed against the civilian population. However, it should be remembered that the underlying motivation behind such an attitude is closely bound up with the memory of Soviet crimes.

³² On the so-called Augustów round-up, see further *Miotła Stalina. Polska północno-wschodnia i jej pogranicze w czasie oblawy augustowskiej w 1945 roku*, ed. Łukasz Adamski, Grzegorz Hryciuk, and Grzegorz Motyka (Centrum Polsko-Rosyjskiego Dialogu i Porozumienia, 2019).