

Marieluise Beck (ed.)

Understanding Ukraine

Tracing the Roots of Terror and Violence

With a foreword by Dmytro Kuleba

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Collected by Andreas Umland

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Preface to the New Edition April 2022

Marieluise Beck

We are creating a new edition of the book. On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine under the completely absurd pretext that it had to protect the Russian population in the Donbas. Putin stated the “denazification” and demilitarization of Ukraine as the war’s goal. This is a cynical euphemism for the destruction of Ukraine’s national independence. For months, the Russian military had encircled Ukraine watched by world public opinion. However, the West would not believe the warnings that Putin was serious.

The Ukrainian president’s almost pleading requests to equip Ukraine militarily so it could withstand an attack have been met hesitantly. This creates the feeling of being left alone in Ukraine.

In this sense, the historical review of this booklet is extremely helpful.

The experience of the Holodomor has entered the DNA of the Ukrainian nation. So have the Soviet occupation and the terror under Stalin. Friendly recommendations that Ukraine submits to Putin’s demands and remains neutral – and thus unprotected – are blind to history.

For Germans, it is necessary to realize the scale of the immense campaign of extermination that the Wehrmacht, SS and police battalions wrought, especially on the soil of Ukraine. If this Germany does not now stand by Ukraine and give the Ukrainians all the support they need to defend their freedom, it will cause great disappointment and bitterness.

This war is not taking place in a history-free space. Anyone who wants to understand the Ukrainians and their struggle for freedom and self-determination will better understand what is at stake after reading this volume.

Berlin, March 2022

Preface

Marieluise Beck

We want to go to Europe! This call of the Maidan was one of the most powerful driving forces of the democratic awakening in Ukraine. Europe stood for democracy, the rule of law, freedom of travel and a better life. Historically, geographically and culturally, Ukraine belongs to Europe. This fact was forgotten after the division of Europe in Yalta. This division into East and West, which Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin sealed in the Crimea, lasted over half a century. Thus, our common history was forgotten. Forgotten were the old affiliations, the old names, languages were suppressed and the knowledge of geographical coordinates.

With the Iron Curtain, the national self-determination of Eastern Europe was also lost. Attempts to shake off the Soviet empire were bloodily put down in Budapest, Prague and Warsaw.

Following the establishment of the European Economic Community and eventually the European Union, a European community limited to the West emerged. The people in the East were increasingly lost from sight. People were ready to come to terms with the division of Europe. It was forgotten that Central Eastern Europe was multicultural, that the Memel was considered a Jewish river, that there was once a powerful Lithuanian-Polish kingdom, that the Hanseatic League stretched from Lübeck to Riga, that the nobility in St. Petersburg spoke French, that Odesa was a place of Italian master builders, gifted musicians and German piano makers. It was also forgotten that Armenia, like Georgia, saw itself as part of Christian Europe.

The fall of the Iron Curtain gave us the unexpected opportunity to rediscover this Europe as a whole. We encounter the forgotten and the repressed, the misuse and distortion of historical facts, and many taboos. We meet peoples long denied appearing on the map as independent nations and whose languages were systematically suppressed in favor of Russian. Monstrous acts of vio-

lence associated with the name of Stalin drove millions of people to their deaths through starvation, forced labor, and shootings. With inconceivable crimes, the SS and Wehrmacht systematically exterminated the Jewish population and treated the Slavs as “subhumans.” Timothy Snyder has called the stretch of land from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea the “Bloodlands” — the earth there is soaked in blood.

The powerful call for freedom and the end of the corrupt rule of the few over the many, for the end of arbitrariness and violence, was the Maidan of 2013/14, which put Ukraine back on the cognitive map of Europe. Nearly seventy years under the umbrella of the Soviet Union made the country almost invisible.

Deeply burned into Ukrainian DNA is the experience of the Holodomor: starvation by the millions in the land of fertile black earth, starvation, especially in the countryside, where even the seeds were confiscated. We do not know exactly how many millions fell victim to this deliberately brought about mass death. The fact that Stalin had the intelligentsia and the Ukrainian cadres of the Communist Party murdered in addition to the peasants’ points to all the characteristics of systematic genocide. Those who do not know this history may ask why most Ukrainians so vehemently reject Moscow’s supposed protection. They have a keen sense that the masters of the Kremlin are striving to restore the Russian Empire. An independent, sovereign Ukraine stands in the way of these ambitions.

The imperial mania of Hitler’s Germany hit the “Bloodlands” particularly cruelly. World War II began in the West with the invasion of Poland by the German Wehrmacht on September 1, 1939. Just 17 days later, Stalin’s Red Army joined them from the East. Stalin and Hitler had concluded a devil’s pact, the implementation of which destroyed Poland and made Galicia the site of cruel nationalist excesses. Among the followers of Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera, the German attack on the Soviet Union created the devastating illusion that the Germans would free them from the Soviet yoke.

Unimaginable crimes against the Slavic population were committed by the German Wehrmacht. Germans should know Kori-

ukivka, where the Wehrmacht murdered almost 7000 civilians in two days in retaliation for partisan attacks. Adolf Hitler offered Transnistria, Bukovina and southern Ukraine to Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu as a reward for his cronyism. Thus, they murdered together. Romanian troops wiped out the Jewish population in Chernivtsi. German troops stood outside Odesa and left the killing to their Romanian allies. In October 1941, at least 25,000 Jews were burned to death in military barracks where they had been herded beforehand. The dimension of this crime is reminiscent of Babyn Yar.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews were deported to ghettos in Transnistria, where they perished miserably. In Ukraine, according to Yahad-In Unum, there were 2000 execution sites where SS, police battalions, soldiers of the Wehrmacht and local auxiliary police murdered mainly Jewish people. Slav partisans and French prisoners of war were also among the victims. The “Shoah by bullets” preceded industrial extermination camps such as Auschwitz.

This history of double tyranny by the two imperial superpowers, the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, gives rise in Ukraine, as in other Eastern European countries, to a deep-seated unease with Berlin when it concludes treaties at the expense of third parties, as it once did with Moscow.

It is time to face this history. Its long lines continue to have an effect. It will only lose its destructive power if the historical experiences, the violence experienced and the traumatic experiences of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe are brought to the fore. Only the truth makes reconciliation possible.

We thank all those who made it possible for us to rediscover the forgotten and thus also to understand our history anew. Germany, Ukraine and 47 other countries: together, we are Europe. My special thanks go to the authors of this book and the editorial team of the Zentrum Liberale Moderne, especially Saskia Heller, Julia Eichhofer, Valeriya Golovina and Mattia Nelles.