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# How a century of political violence in Ukraine is linked to the atrocities of today

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May 15, 2022

Troops shot in the legs screaming in pain. Others dying from blood loss and shock. With no one around to provide medical assistance. A Russian soldier crucified on an anti-tank barrier, chained to a metal 'hedgehog' and then burned alive...

For many, graphic footage of Russian servicemen tortured and killed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and nationalist battalions, came as a real shock. But this did not surprise those who are familiar with the 'traditions' of Ukraine's 'fighters for national freedom', as they have more than a century of history in this sort of thing.

## Europe's First Concentration Camps

The first concentration camps in Europe - Terezin and Thalerhof - were established in Austria-Hungary in the fall of 1914, not to hold prisoners of war, but the empire's own citizens. This is how Vienna, then the 'sick man of Europe', tried to protect its eastern border areas from members of its population which sympathized with neighboring Russia. Fighting between the two countries had broken out just before

the beginning of the First World War. Austria-Hungary's last emperor, Charles I, confessed in his edict of May 7, 1917, "*All the arrested Russians are innocent, but they were detained to prevent them becoming guilty.*"

People from Galicia who did not want to call themselves Ukrainians, as the Austrian authorities insisted, and continued to use the name 'Rusyns', were arrested and incarcerated in two places - in a garrison fortress in Terezin and in a valley near Graz, the capital of Styria. While the prisoners in Terezin were held in the vaults and dungeons of the fortress, with the support of local Czechs, the concentration camp later known as Thalerhof was little more than a bare field fenced in with barbed wire.

Today, most of Galicia is in Western Ukraine and the largest city is Lviv, which was known as Lemberg by the Austrians and Lvov by the Soviets and Polish.

The initial prisoners were brought there in September of 1915, and the first barracks began to be built only at the beginning of the following year. Prior to that, the people were forced to lie in the open in the rain and cold. According to US Congressman Joseph McCormick, the prisoners were often beaten and tortured. (*Terrorism in Bohemia; Medill McCormick Gets Details of Austrian Cruelty*. 'New York Times', December 16, 1917)

According to the memoirs of those who survived the inhumane conditions (about 20,000 prisoners passed through the camp), 3,800 people were executed in the first half of 1915 alone, and 3,000 people died from the horrific conditions and diseases in a year and a half. Vasily Varvik, a writer, poet, literary critic, and historian who endured Thalerhof's hell describes the atrocities in the internment camp as follows: "*In order to intimidate people, to prove their power over us, the prison authorities drove poles into the ground all over Thalerhof Square, on which brutally beaten martyrs often hung in unspoken torment.*"

What do the Ukrainians have to do with it? The fact is that Ukrainian nationalists were specially recruited to guard the Thalerhof camp. According to numerous testimonies, the arrested, which comprised nearly the entire Russian intelligentsia of Galicia and thousands of peasants, were also escorted to the camp by the Ukrainians.

Indeed, descriptions given in the [Thalerhof Almanac](#) detail how Ukrainian *Sichoviki* in the Carpathian village of Lavochnoye tried to bayonet the prisoners, among whom there was not a single Russian, but only their fellow Galicians.

It was the Ukrainian nationalists who were the concentration camp guards' crudest torturers and murderers. *"In the end, the atrocities committed by the Germans do not equate to the victimization of your own people. A soulless German could not get his iron boots so deeply into the soul of a Slavonic Rusyn as well as a Rusyn who called himself a Ukrainian,"* wrote Vasily Varvik.

## **From the Volyn Massacre to 1954**

At the end of February 1943, the 'revolutionary' wing of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), headed by the current idol of many Ukrainians, Stepan Bandera, decided to create the so-called 'Ukrainian Insurgent Army' (UPA) to 'fight the advancing Red Army', which was driving the Nazis from the country. But the first detachments that emerged in March and April, of the same year, began to fight not the Soviets, whose troops were still waiting for the Nazis to strike near Kursk, but Polish peasants in territory that had belonged to Warsaw up until 1939. These events, which lasted for more than six months, were called the 'Volyn Massacre'. UPA detachments and units from the SS Galicia division, which was made up of locals from the eponymous area, killed from 40,000 to 200,000 people, according to various estimates. The Polish Sejm and Senate put the number of victims at approximately 100,000 people, and July 11 is recognized as a 'National

## Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Genocide of Polish Citizens by Ukrainian Nationalists'



Corpses of Polish victims of the massacre brought for identification and burial, March 26, 1943. Photo: Wikipedia

The Polish 'Association of Memory of Victims of Crimes of Ukrainian Nationalists' (*Stowarzyszenie Upamiętnienia Ofiar Zbrodni Ukraińskich Nacjonalistów* (SUOZUN)) is engaged in reconstructing the course of events surrounding the Volyn Massacre. The materials collected by SUOZUN reveal shocking details with respect to the cruelty with which Ukrainian nationalists dealt

with even babies and pregnant women. Polish researchers have uncovered 135 methods of torture and murder practiced by Ukrainian nationalists. Among them are:

- Running children through with stakes
- Cutting a person's throat and pulling their tongue out through the hole
- Sawing a person's torso in half with a carpenter's saw
- Cutting open the belly of a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy, removing the fetus, and replacing it with a live cat, before sewing up her abdomen.
- Cutting open a pregnant women's abdomen and pouring in broken glass
- Nailing a small child to a door.

According to Polish historians, it came to the point that even the German butchers, having been shocked by these atrocities, began to protect the Poles from the Ukrainian *Sokirniki* (from the Ukrainian word *sokira*, meaning 'axe').

All this, including the ingenuity employed in conducting torture and executions, continued after the Nazis had been expelled from Ukraine. Only now the victims of the nationalists were citizens of Soviet Ukraine - specialists like agronomists, engineers, doctors, and teachers who had been sent from the eastern part of the republic to restore western Ukraine after the war. Though the vast majority of these were ethnic Ukrainians, the nationalists killed not only them, but even their own fellow villagers who had cooperated with the Soviets.

These acts were carried out in accordance with instructions given by the head of the UPA and former Wehrmacht hauptman Roman Shukhevich, who is now an idol for many Ukrainians: "*The OUN should act so that all those who recognized the Soviet government are destroyed. Not intimidated, but physically destroyed! Do not be afraid that people will curse us for cruelty. Let half of the 40 million Ukrainian population remain - there is nothing terrible in this,*" he wrote. (Tchaikovsky A.,

Nevidoma viina, K., 1994, p. 224). According to the KGB of the USSR, in 1944–1953, the irretrievable losses of the Soviet side were 30,676 people. Among them are 697 employees of state security agencies, 1,864 employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 3,199 military personnel, 2,590 fighters of destruction battalions; 2,732 – representatives of authorities, 251 communists, 207 Komsomol workers, 314 – chairmen of collective farms, 15,355 collective farmers and peasants, 676 workers, 1,931 – representatives of the intelligentsia, 860 – children, old people and housewives.

## **Maidan of Hate**

With the return of the nationalists to Ukraine's political scene, after the Soviet collapse, the violence resumed as well. The existence of torture rooms in Kiev City Hall, which was seized by 'peaceful protesters' at the end of 2013, has been [reported](#).



Anti-government protesters clash with police in Independence Square on February 19, 2014 in Kiev, Ukraine.

A lot of video footage from the 'Revolution of Dignity' has been preserved showing the bullying captured police officers suffered at the hands of 'peaceful protesters'. Some doctors working on the Maidan had to protect wounded officers that had been captured from being massacred. Shots from the Hromadske.tv TV channel also captured a Maidan medic categorically prohibiting people from calling an ambulance for a policeman who had lost an eye on the grounds that he served in the Berkut special unit, which was trying to suppress the uprising.

Here is how Kiev journalist Sergey Rulev describes his experience in the torture chamber: *"Four people beat me. There was a woman in a headscarf with them, who*

*kicked me in the groin without saying a word. Then they dragged me to the occupied Ministry of Agriculture, where they searched me, took away my documents, a press pass, accreditation to the Verkhovna Rada, business cards, two phones, and two cameras. When they dragged me back to Khreshchatyk, I started screaming and calling for help. I fell to the ground and was kicked again, but no one reacted. At about 12:00, I was dragged into the burned-out House of Trade Unions. In the lobby, I was immediately beaten up. In the courtyard, unknown people in camouflage fatigues bound my hands, stripped me to my underwear, and continued to beat me... After that, the four of them pinned me to the floor, injected something into my arm again, and said, 'Now you're going to talk to us, bitch! Which special services do you work for?'"*

Once he was tied up, an unknown woman began to rip out Sergey's nails with pliers. Subsequently, he identified this sadist as Amina Okuyeva, a medic in the '8th hundred' Maidan Self-Defense unit, who later fought in the 'ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) Zone' as part of the neo-Nazi Kiev-2 and Dzhokhar Dудayev Battalions. She was awarded the title People's Hero of Ukraine for her efforts.

## **The Ukrainian State and the Nazis**

It would be surprising if the Ukrainian nationalists, who were part of the troops operating in the so-called 'Anti-Terrorist Operation' (ATO) in the east of Ukraine, were to abandon their propensity for violence and stop bullying, torturing, and murdering their enemies, as this is the legacy of the totalitarian ideologies they have inherited from the last century. Andrei Ilyenko, a member of the neo-Nazi Svoboda party who is one of Ukrainian nationalism's modern ideologists, admits, "*Italian fascism, German nationalism, Croatian Ustashism, authentic Ukrainian nationalism, Spanish Falangism, and other integral movements doubtlessly share a single ideological basis.*" (Patriot of Ukraine organization, *Ukrainian Social Nationalism: a collection of ideological works and program documents*, Kharkov - 2007).



Young participants in a nationalist march marking Stepan Bandera's 109th birthday, in Lviv. Photo: Sputnik

And this has not happened. Literally from the first days of the 'Anti-Terrorist Operation', information began to arrive about atrocities committed by nationalist battalions in the Donbass. After all, in addition to radical nationalists brought up to hate everything Russian, many of the participants were criminals convicted of violent crimes. Usurper Oleksandr Turchynov, who does not hide the fact that he threatened MPs with physical violence if they did not vote for his appointment as acting president, recalled: *"I remember one meeting at the front with volunteer units where one of those present, who was covered in tattoos, asked: 'Boss, will there be amnesty or not? The guys are interested in us there.' I asked, 'What do they want with you?' 'Well, for stuff like... murder, robbery...'"*

The crimes committed by nationalist battalion members went ‘unnoticed’ by the authorities for a long time, but when international human rights organizations began to scream about the most egregious cases, some facts regarding their atrocities finally reached the courts. Several leaders from the nationalist Aidar Battalion were convicted. For example, they created a prison in a sausage shop’s smokehouse and [placed](#) prisoners there in unheated cells measuring 80×150 cm, where people had to crouch for several months.

A lot of people got away with serious crimes on the grounds that they were ‘Patriots of Ukraine’, and this was shown to be a government policy in practice. For example, Sergey Sternenko, a nationalist from Maidan’s Right Sector, escaped punishment for [protecting drug trafficking](#) and [murder](#) on the basis of ‘patriotism’. Though Sternenko was sentenced to a prison term of 7 years and 3 months for abducting a pro-Russian deputy from Odessa named Sergey Shcherbich, his punishment was [reduced](#) to one year of probation after just three months. Given this policy, it is not surprising that none of the participants in burning 49 people alive in the Odessa House of Trade Unions on May 2, 2014, have yet been brought to justice.

Criminal cases have been initiated against Ukrainian nationalist Nikolay Kokhanovsky more than once. This ATO participant and OUN battalion commander is also a member of the Azov Regiment, which has been [recognized](#) by the US Congress as a neo-Nazi organization. He has been accused of attacking opposition TV channels, Moscow Patriarchate churches, Russian diplomatic missions, and Russian banks, as well as committing an [armed assault](#) on a nationalist like himself without a weapons permit. After his supporters [smashed up](#) the court, Kokhanovsky was set free.

Perhaps the most horrific crime committed by Ukrainian nationalists was the creation of a [prison](#) in the refrigerator at the airport in Mariupol in June of 2014, which the jailers called the ‘library’. There, Mariupol residents were subjected to

beatings, death by torture, and rape for even the suspicion of harboring sympathies for Russia or the unrecognized eastern republics. The 'library' was headed by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), whose chief, Valentin Nalivaichenko, was a friend of the leader of the Right Sector, Dmitry Yarosh. And Nalivaichenko's assistant, Yuri Mikhalkishin, a member of the nationalist Svoboda party who goes by the pseudonym 'Nahtiga88' (in honor of a sabotage battalion that was part of the Third Reich's counterintelligence division and the letters 'NN' denoting Heil Hitler), was responsible for the ideology of the special service. Mikhalkishin openly asserts that *Mein Kampf* [has been his guidebook](#) since the age of 16. After being dismissed from the SBU, he went to fight as part of the Azov Regiment.

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The ideology of racial superiority has a long criminal history grounded in hate. When its bearers get their hands on power, national pride invariably turns into ruthless violence, and the radicals reveal their willingness to employ bestial cruelty and exterminate 'outsiders'. The true foundations of their worldview will be seen more than once until this lesson in history is finally learned.

[\*Olga Sukharevskaia is an ex-Ukrainian diplomat\*](#)



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