

A Ukrainian story from the Reader





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UKRAINE

COMMUNIST REGIME

During the war of 1918-1921 the Soviet Red Army conquered most of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was established as a part of the Soviet Union in 1922. Western Ukraine was ceded to Poland after the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1920) and joined to the Ukrainian SSR after the defeat of Poland in 1939. Soviet policies destroyed the Ukrainian society. Among them the ideologically motivated forced collectivisation and industrialisation beginning in 1929 (1.2 million victims), repressions against intellectuals known as "the Executed Renaissance" and the Great Purge (300,000 victims). In 1932-1933 a famine followed, known as the Holodomor, causing more than 4.5 million deaths from starvation. In 1939-1941 deportations from Western Ukraine followed (300,000 people). During the Soviet retreat in 1941, nearly 24,000 political prisoners were killed.

NAZI OCCUPATION

Ukraine was under German occupation in 1941-1944. During this period, up to 4.5 million Ukrainian residents were killed, up to 900,000 Jews among them. The territory was divided into so-called "Distrikt Galizien", which became a part of the General Government, and the Reichskommissariat Ukraine. Ukraine was an area of active armed resistance. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Polish Armia Krajowa and the Soviet-supported red partisan units fought against the Germans but also against each other. Ukrainians also served in units formed by Germans, the SS division "Galizien" among them.

COMMUNIST REGIME

During 1944-1991 the Ukrainian SSR was a part of the Soviet Union again. The mass repressions continued, but also population transfers. Deportations took place in 1944 (150,000 Crimean Tatars), 1944-1953 (up to 203,000 members of the national resistance) and later. Between 1944-1946, more than 800,000 Poles were deported to Poland and half a million Ukrainians to Ukraine. Although the Ukrainian SSR was among the founding nations of the United Nations in 1945 its independence was proclaimed only during the disintegration of the Soviet Union in August 1991.



OLEKSANDRA RADCHENKO (1896-1965) worked as a teacher in Ukraine for most of her life. She and her three children survived the Holodomor famine in 1932-1933. She wrote about those times in her diary, documenting the horrors of what was essentially deliberate starvation of the people. In August 1945 she was arrested and accused of anti-Soviet propaganda. Her diary was presented as evidence at her trial. She was sentenced to ten years in a Communist concentration camp. Oleksandra returned to Ukraine in August 1955 after completing the full term of her imprisonment. As a result of her poor health, she lived as a free person for only ten more years.



DIGITAL ARCHIVE
OF THE UKRAINIAN
LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Oleksandra Radchenko

Persecuted for her Memory

written by Volodymyr Viatrovych

Ukraine's historical past under Communist rule is similar to other post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike other former eastern bloc countries, totalitarian rule arrived in Ukraine much earlier – not following World War II, but several decades earlier. The most horrible crimes of the Communist regime – mass murders, deportations, *Holodomor* – were committed prior to World War II. Ukraine became a “laboratory” for the Communist regime: proven methods of oppressing opponents and the tools of a totalitarian system, which were later used in other countries “liberated” by the Red Army from Nazi occupation.

After the fall of the Ukrainian National Republic in 1921 Communist rule came to Ukraine as a result of the Bolshevik Red Army occupation of most of the territory of Ukraine. Among the Communist activists there were many Ukrainians, but the formation of the regime was possible only after the Bolshevik army conquered Ukraine with support from Moscow. Because of massive anti-Communist resistance, numerous rebellions lasted until the end of the 1920s.

UKRAINIANISATION

In order to control the territory, Communists had to compromise with the Ukrainian national movement. They began the policy of “ukrainianisation” – the Ukrainian language became official in government institutions, and Ukrainian theatres and universities were opened. These favourable conditions resulted in a renaissance of the Ukrainian culture giving rise to a new generation of poets, writers, artists, and cinema and theatre directors. A new economic policy, announced by the Communists, allowed peasants to be land owners and upgrade their farms. But ten years later, following the Communist take-over, a famine would ravage the countryside, and the reborn “intelligentsia” would become part of the “Executed Renaissance”.

The Bolsheviks understood that the cultural and economic concessions for the rebellious Ukrainians could only be temporary, and in the late 1920s, after the final consolidation of Stalin's rule, a major offensive was initiated against everything Ukrainian. This attack was called the “Soviet genocide of Ukrainians” by the world-renowned lawyer, and author of the term “genocide”, Raphael Lemkin. The genocide included

repressions (i.e., executions and imprisonment) of the intelligentsia, and the “liquidation” of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the genocide led to mass deaths of Ukrainian peasants – who constituted the main source of national identity. The artificial famine brought about during 1932-1933 took the lives of millions of people (estimates range from 4 to 7 million). This heinous crime became known as the Holodomor (from the Ukrainian words *holod* [hunger] and *mor* [death] or “Death by Hunger”), which is not only a part of Ukrainian history but world history as well.

During the early 1930s, the collectivisation of Ukrainian villages was ended, and its residents were driven forcibly onto collective farms. As a result of this policy, the farmers and peasants became totally dependent on government subsidies. Using mass deportations and repression, the Communists were able to eliminate wealthy and independent landowners – *kulaks* – who could form the basis of a national movement. But even after this repressive period, local anti-Soviet rebellions continued. To destroy the resistance movement definitively the government decided to punish uncooperative peasants with hunger and starvation.

SYSTEMATIC STARVATION



Famine victims, Kharkiv region, 1933
COLLECTION OF CARDINAL THEODOR INNICIR

First, the government established unreasonably high quotas of grain procurement. The anticipated failure was declared as sabotage and resistance to the government. After that, forced requisitions began, and special brigades were sent off to the villages. They confiscated all the grain that was found. The government violently punished anyone who tried to hide grain, which was declared government property.

In August 1932, a special law was adopted that became known as the “law of five ears of wheat”. Violators of this law were punished with imprisonment or even execution for so called “plundering of socialist property”. In reality it

was an attempt to prevent people from keeping for themselves even enough grain for a meal, or from finding scraps of grain after the crop was gathered. An alternative method for the starving of peasants was the establishment of so-called “natural fines”: peasants who did not meet the expected quota of grain delivery had all their food confiscated. Responsibility for “sabotage” was also laid on whole villages, which were registered on so called “black lists”. Such villages were completely isolated from the outside world and deliveries of any goods or provisions were stopped. Ultimately, the entire territory of Ukraine became a “ghetto of hunger”; its borders were surrounded by an army that did not allow hungry people to escape.

Deprived of any food and the possibility to leave the region impacted by the famine, millions of people died, including whole villages. The dead peasants were buried in large pits near their villages, because there were too many dead to be buried in single graves. Sometimes even living people were buried, because those who gathered the bodies were so weak that they could not come back to the same place twice.

This tragic death of millions of Ukrainians was hidden from the world. It was prohibited to talk about the famine in Ukraine. Censored newspapers wrote about the great successes of the Soviet government, and any news regarding the famine was interpreted as anti-government propaganda and was severely punished.

Some of the famine victims were certain that the famine was the result of criminal activities by local authorities, and all they had to do was to inform the central government in order to stop these crimes. People wrote letters to Stalin, in order to “open the national leader’s eyes” regarding the horrors of the famine. The Communist government listened to such letter writers attentively and then arrested them.

Nevertheless, survivors of the Holodomor tried to preserve their memories and pass them down to their descendants. Mykola Bokan from the Chernihiv region took photographs of his family in those horrible years.

Some time later, these photographs became evidence in the criminal case against him. As a result, he was sentenced to eight years of imprisonment. But Mykola Bokan never came back from the Gulag concentration camps and died in a distant foreign land.

A WITNESS TO HORROR

Oleksandra Radchenko was one of the millions of witnesses of the deaths by starvation. She worked as a teacher in the Kharkiv region at that time.

She had a food ration, and it helped her and her family to avoid starvation. But the “ration” that she received from the state couldn’t isolate her from the surrounding terror. It was hard to be isolated, because as a teacher she had to



Armed guard at a grain storage facility, village of Vilshany in the Kharkiv region

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Mykola Bokan with his remaining children during the funeral for his son Kostya, who died of starvation on 10 July 1933

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look into her students' hungry eyes and see the number of her students decreasing constantly. She knew that any attempt to spread information about the situation in Ukraine would result in her imprisonment, and death for her children, who would be left to fend for themselves. Oleksandra Radchenko understood what risks she took by entrusting the truth of what she saw to her diary, and what awaited her should her diary be discovered. But she could not refrain from writing in her diary:

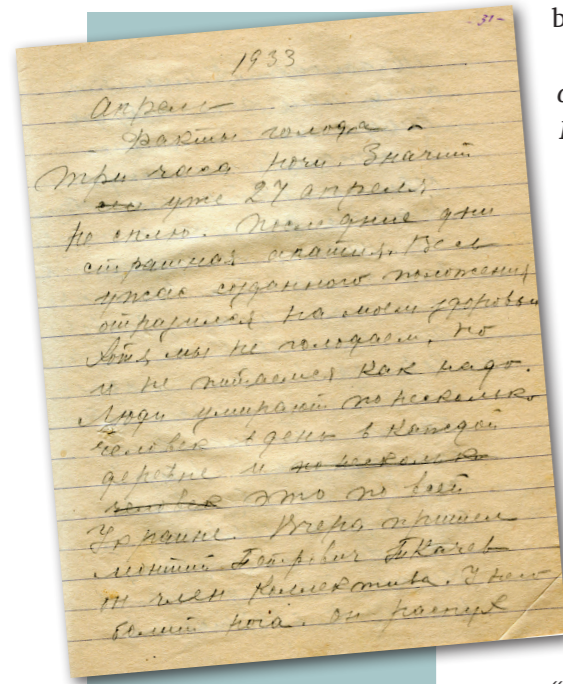
"Tuesday, 5 April 1932. Hunger, an artificial famine, is taking on a monstrous character. Why are they taking the last grain of bread? No one understands why. And they continue to take everything down to the last kernel, seeing full well what the results are. The children are tortured by starvation, and have worms from eating raw beets, which will not last them through to the next harvest in four months. What will happen then??"

"Wednesday, 6 April 1932. Sometimes I am seized by uncontrollable anger and feel ill. I read about 'Soviet speed' (reported in the Communist newspaper 'Pravda'), about the opening of the first blast furnace in Europe, about the completion of the dam in 'Dniprostroy' and much more. This is all good, but what good is this speed compared to the swollen children and men due to hunger and starvation? Generally the hunger begins to fly into a rage and brings with it all our troubles, anything that you can imagine. Crime develops with special speed... Thoughts about the swollen, starving children torture me and the rage is growing..."

"Thursday, 2 June 1932. It's difficult to survive and getting desperately harder. It is an unusual time, never before seen in history. Everyone is suffering because of malnutrition or starvation and a destitute existence. Moreover, the impersonality is terrible and depressing."

"Sunday, 20 November 1932. The old man, who worked at the rabbit hutch, was 'robbed by the authorities', as he said. This means that everything like grain and vegetables were taken away from him. He has been dispossessed for two years, almost a beggar, except that he does not beg. He is 70 years old, his wife is 65 and their disabled daughter lives with them. And now, miserable, what little they had that could have lasted them until February, was taken away."

"Monday, 9 January 1933. The horrors of the hunger are spreading in Kharkiv. Children are being kidnapped and sausage made from human meat is being sold. Healthier adults are being tricked and kidnapped by individuals supposedly selling shoes. This was reported in newspapers, asking people to be calm, because measures are being taken... but children are still disappearing."



A page from the diary of Oleksandra Radchenko

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"Thursday, 23 March 1933. On this day I saw an incredible amount of human suffering. I returned home with burdensome impressions. On the way to the village of Zarozhne, in the field close to the road, we saw an old man, who was thin, clothes tattered, and without boots. Perhaps he fell down emaciated and exhausted, and then froze to death, or just died and fell...and someone took his boots. When we returned from the village we saw him again. No one needed him..."

"Departing from Babka, we caught up to a seven year old boy. My companion called out to him. However, the boy continued walking unsteadily, and it appeared that he did not hear us. When the horse caught up to him, I cried out, and the boy turned unwillingly away from the road. I was drawn to look into his face. The expression on his face made a horrible, terrible and unforgettable impression on me. Probably such an expression in the eyes occurs in people when they know that they are approaching death. Yet, they don't want to die. But this was a child! I couldn't control my emotions: What for? Why children? I cried silently, so that my companion would not see. The thought that I can't do anything, that millions of children are dying because of hunger, the inevitable horror, led me to despair..."

"Several days earlier a stableman came over – his face and arms were all swollen. He says that his legs are heavy, and he is ready to die. 'It is a pity for the children – he says. – They don't understand anything – they are not guilty.'"

Oleksandra Radchenko and her three daughters, the youngest of which was born in 1931, survived the Holodomor. They were not impacted by the wave of repressions of the Great Terror in 1937-1938. But quite a bit of misfortune was still to befall them.

In 1940, the Radchenko family moved to Bukovyna, which had recently been annexed by the Soviet Union. In the summer of 1941, they were caught up in the beginning of the German-Soviet War. Oleksandra and her husband, Vasyl, were arrested by the Romanian military, which, as the allies of the Third Reich, occupied this Ukrainian territory. They were in the prison camps together for a few weeks, until they were liberated by her husband's colleagues – forestry engineers. After getting out of prison, Vasyl Radchenko continued to work as a forester.

FALSE HOPE

In the first days after the change of power many local people, including Oleksandra Radchenko, believed in the "German liberation from the Communists". That's why she told a German official, who had worked as a correspondent back home, about her diaries. He proposed publishing them. German propaganda routinely used information about Communist crimes (this was the case with information about the mass execution of prisoners in the summer of 1941, and about the discovery of buried Polish officers in Katyń). But the diary about the Holodomor was not published in the press by the new regime. Soon Radchenko understood that this new regime was no better than the previous one. That's why in her notes from 1941



Oleksandra with her husband and daughter
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and 1942 she wrote about the crimes of the Nazi regime. In 1943 a cruel occupation policy directly touched her family – her 17-year-old daughter Elida was forcibly taken to work in Germany.

The return of Soviet power to Ukraine in 1944 resulted in another loss for the Radchenko family. Vasyl, Oleksandra’s husband, was taken to the front in a penal battalion, because he had “served under the Germans as a forester”.

In 1945 the war was over. Prior to that Elida returned home from Germany. In August Vasyl Radchenko returned, having been awarded a “Medal for Battle Merit”. The Radchenko family was finally together again.

But the good times were short lived and the totalitarian regime intervened in their lives again. On 7 July 1945, the investigator of the Kamyanets-Podilsk regional office of the NKVD signed a warrant for the arrest of Oleksandra Radchenko. During the search in her apartment they found seven of her diary notebooks covering the period of 1926-1943. The diaries became the primary evidence in the indictment of Radchenko in “anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation”.

Her daughter Elida remembers that tragic moment in her family history: *“Mother never hid her diaries. They found the box where the diary notebooks lay. I was able to hide five or six other notebooks under a pillow. When mother was arrested we started reading them and discovered so many horrors written about the Holodomor that we were afraid that the whole family would be executed and so we burned them...”* But the information found in the notebooks seized by the NKVD was enough to convict the teacher.

INVESTIGATION

The investigation lasted almost half a year. Oleksandra immediately admitted that she was the author of the diaries. But that was not enough. The investigator tried to force her to admit that the notes were lies, that they were written to discredit the Soviet regime. “The investigation was deeply preconceived,” she wrote some time after in her complaint to the prosecutor. “I was threatened with a long, drawn out investigation unless I signed a confession where it was already written that in the early 1930s I was keeping a diary with counter-revolutionary contents. My impressions of prison, fear and poor health were the reasons why I signed the confession.”

Once the investigation was finished the case went to trial court in Proskuriv on 14 December 1945. In her remarks before the court, Oleksandra Radchenko practically denied the evidence recorded in the case by telling the judges: *“The main aim of my writings was to devote them to my children. I wrote because after 20 years the children won’t believe what violent methods were used to build socialism. The Ukrainian people suffered horrors during 1930-1933...”*

Of course the judges didn’t listen to her, which is why in the accusation it was written that Oleksandra Radchenko *“was hostile to the Soviet regime during 1930-1933, and wrote a diary with counter-revolutionary contents, which condemned the actions of the Communist party for organising collective farms in the USSR and described the difficult living conditions of the working people”*. Despite the absurdity of the accusation, the punishment was very real and cruel – ten years in a Gulag concentration camp. Once in the camp the former teacher continued to fight for her release, writing complaints and protests; however it did not change her destiny.

RETURN TO UKRAINE

Oleksandra Radchenko returned to Ukraine in August of 1955 after completing the whole term of her imprisonment. As a result of her poor health, she lived as a free person for only ten more years.

Several weeks prior to the breakup and collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991, Radchenko was “posthumously rehabilitated”. The Soviets admitted that she was imprisoned unjustly. Her diaries (unfortunately not the complete set – three notebooks were burned during the investigation because they “did not have useful information”) were stored in the KGB archives, and no one knew of their existence. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Secret Service of Ukraine (SSU) inherited these archives, which contained the remaining Radchenko diaries.

It was not until 2001 that the archived documents, including the diaries which described the Holodomor atrocities, were discovered. *“Just by chance, I heard on the radio that it was possible to review the archival documents of Oleksandra Radchenko,”* remembers her daughter Elida, *“that were kept by the Secret Service of Ukraine. I was touched and started crying. Mother’s time in prison was not in vain, and her work did not disappear. She wrote the truth...”*

In 2007, fragments from the diaries were published in the book *Declassified Memory*. Today, this book is an important historical source for investigating the events of the 1930s in Ukraine. The sincere words of a caring teacher, the Radchenko diaries, ruin the Soviet regime’s propaganda myths about a “happy Soviet life” and describe the horrible truth about the events in Ukraine during 1932-1933.

In the end, Oleksandra Radchenko accomplished her mission: she kept and handed over for her descendants the memory about the tragedy of the Holodomor.

CONTRIBUTED BY THE CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON THE LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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