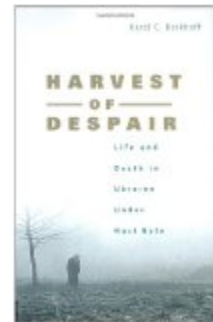




**Karel Berkhoff.** *Harvest of the Despair: Life and Death in the Ukraine under Nazi Rule.* Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press, 2004. 463 S. \$29.95 (broschiert), ISBN 978-0-674-01313-1.

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## Life in Nazi-Occupied Ukraine: The View from Below

Of the recent studies on Nazi rule in the occupied Soviet Union, *Harvest of Despair* will surely occupy a prominent place not only because of its content, but also because of its form and style. In comparison to the prevalent “occupier-driven” approach, Karl Berkhoff offers a fresh view “from the bottom,” exploring the responses, sentiments, and aspirations of the Soviet people under German rule.[1] Based on numerous archival materials, secondary sources, and interviews with eyewitnesses, *Harvest of Despair* is a unique and highly readable account of everyday life in the so-called *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* (RKU)—the largest German colony in occupied Europe.

Berghoff explores a variety of topics in this text, including life in the city and countryside, popular culture, religion, and Nazi genocidal policies towards the Jews and Romas. The Nazi leadership perceived Ukraine merely as a “clean slate,” or a bread-basket, a pool for a cheap labor force, and geographical space for future German settlers (p. 306). Nevertheless, many Ukrainians and Russians initially greeted the German army with great relief, haunted by the horrible memories of the earlier Soviet collectivization campaign and the purges of the 1930s. The brutal Soviet policy was further amplified by the “scorched-earth” policy and the murder of thousands of “unreliable elements” as the Red Army made their chaotic retreat in the wake of the German Wehrmacht. Initially the Soviet population’s “great expectations” were confirmed by the relatively tolerant attitude of Ger-

man troops (p. 115). They re-opened churches and allowed for the appearance of seemingly independent Ukrainian newspapers, portending a relatively benevolent character of the new regime. In the countryside the peasants celebrated the good harvest of the fall of 1941 by disbanding the hated collective farms, *kolkhozy*, forming their own cooperatives and selecting the most trusted and respectable individuals as village elders. Such latitude of action was facilitated by the fact that in some areas of central and eastern Ukraine the German administrators arrived only in the late fall of 1941 in the wake of the advancing army.

The initial euphoria towards the occupiers was, however, short-lived. Acting in accordance with Nazi plans for the occupied Ukraine, the German civil administration headed by the brutal Reichskommissar Erich Koch embarked upon a campaign of undisguised exploitation of the region’s economic resources. Local German officials ruled their districts and rayons in a “colonial” fashion, treating the population as “sub-humans.” Since the Ukrainians and Russians were only to “serve and provide,” Koch forbade schooling in the RKU above the fourth grade. In contrast to more restrained German policies in East Galicia, by the late fall of 1941 freedom of the press in the RKU had been curtailed, and Ukrainian political activists—initially tolerated as an expedient political tool in the struggle against the Soviets—were persecuted, arrested, or shot. Consequently, popular attitudes began to change from hopes for a better future to

gloom, despair, and eventually hatred towards the Germans. As mass deportations to forced labor in Germany gained momentum, more and more people took to the forest joining the nascent resistance movement. Still, argues Berkhoff, the overwhelming “silent” majority tried to adjust to rapidly deteriorating life conditions by means fair and foul, largely trading goods for food or visa versa.

The Holocaust and the mass murder of Soviet POWs also made a deep impression upon the RKU population. While anti-Semitism was a widespread phenomenon in the Soviet Union before the war, and some Ukrainians and Russians welcomed the Nazi anti-Jewish policies of exclusion and ghettoization, the annihilation of thousands of defenseless men, women, and children shocked many people, some of whom suspected that they could well be next on the Nazi target list. Nevertheless, twenty years under the Soviet regime had created a peculiar psychological climate poignant with mutual suspicion and distrust, encouraging mutual denunciations that flourished under the Germans. Therefore, there was no lack of individuals willing to denounce Jews and alleged communist sympathizers for personal aggrandizement.

While the Nazis prioritized the annihilation of the Jews, Berkhoff asserts that high mortality among Soviet POWs was also the end result of deliberate policies. German perceptions of the Soviet soldier as a “Bolshevik” held sway among various echelons of the German military, which calculatingly starved to death hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers and officers. Similarly, the combination of racism and economic expediency paved the road for the deliberate reduction and withholding of food rations for Kiev residents. As a result, the population of the city dropped from 400,000 in October of 1941 to 295,600 in the summer of 1943. By the end of German occupation, many local residents saw Soviet rule as the “lesser of two evils.”

Berkhoff convincingly demonstrates that despite the limited choice of action, the population of occupied Ukraine was not left without any power of its own. While some individuals took advantage of the socio-economic opportunities created by the murder of Jews, others joined various German-controlled organizations and institutions such as the notorious *Schuma*—the auxiliary police. In addition, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) that strove to build an independent Ukraine, found that what was impossible before the war seemed within reach in wartime. Initially the OUN collaborated with the Germans, but after the failure to establish an independent Ukrainian state, many OUN ac-

tivists went underground. In 1943, they used the rapidly changing situation on the front to “Ukrainize” the multi-ethnic regions of western Ukraine and launched a brutal cleansing campaign against the Polish minority in Volhynia (and later in East Galicia, a part of Ukraine integrated into the General Government), killing thousands of people and forcing many more to leave their homeland for the west.

Given the scope of *Harvest of Despair*, it is only natural that the author concentrated on the issues he deemed most important for his study. Thus, readers would be advised to consult other sources to compare the situation in the RKU with other Ukrainian territories occupied by the Germans and their allies.[2] Some aspects of the popular responses to German rule in the RKU require more investigation. For example, the size of the *Schuma* formations—more than 50,000 men by November 1942—and their conspicuous role in the German machinery of suppression beg the important question: what factors informed the actions of low-ranking policemen—the *politsai*—which ranged from guarding *kolkhoz* barns to direct participation in the murder of Jews and pacification of restive regions? In comparison to highly motivated OUN members who penetrated the local administration and the auxiliary police, some recruits tried to avoid forced labor in Germany, or looked for steady jobs, while others were driven by conformism, anti-Semitism, or the unique opportunity to exercise power over their co-nationals. The examination of such incentives as well as more extensive analysis of the optimum choices under foreign occupation would certainly help readers better understand the varieties of popular attitudes in the RKU.[3]

On the whole, however, *Harvest of Despair* is a remarkable, meticulously researched, and detailed book about the relationship between occupied and occupiers, no less significant for the fact that at a time when so many historical studies are written in highly convoluted language, Berkhoff’s story is an enjoyable read despite its grim subject. As such, it is accessible not only for scholars and students, but, and perhaps more importantly, to the general public.

#### Notes

[1]. For example, Timothy Patrick Mulligan, *The Politics of Illusion and Empire: German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1998); Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weisrussland 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999); Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-*

*Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[2]. For the Romanian-occupied Transnistria, the reader may consult Alexander Dallin, *Odessa, 1941-1944: A Case Study of Soviet Territory under Foreign Rule* (Portland: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998); for Galicia, see Józef Rudnicki, *Ziemia Czerwieńska pod okupacją niemiecką..., czerwiec 1941-czerwiec 1943* (Warsaw: Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego,

2001).

[3]. See Marin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941-1944* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); and Jan Gross, "Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration," in *The Politics of Retribution: World War II and Its Aftermath* eds. István Deák, Jan Gross, and Tony Judt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 15-35.

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