

Colloquy: Russia's war on Ukraine
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The 20th century

Preamble: late 19th century changes: modernization

- Growth of capitalist agriculture in Ukraine and southern Russia. Ukraine as “breadbasket of Europe”. Large estates worked by former serfs as day laborers. Peasant discontent.
- Early industrialization. Donbas coal-iron-steel complex. Spread of socialist ideas. Donbas and other cities attract workers from the countryside and from other regions.
- Infrastructure, particularly railways, connecting cities and regions and countries.
- Spread of education, literacy, and newspapers. Most peasants, the majority in Ukraine and in Russia, remained illiterate. By 1900, most city people could read and write. Newspapers and political propaganda leaflets circulated widely. Censorship was inefficient (another Russian characteristic, currently ineffective internet control).
- Among the intelligentsia, nationalism. Everybody's nationalism. For the rulers of the Empire, “Great Russian chauvinism.” For “nationalisties”, cultural self-assertion and radical nationalist anti-imperial political organizations. Poland led the list in the Russian empire. Also Georgians and Armenians. By the early 20th century, Ukrainian nationalist ideas as one major strand within the intelligentsia. Other strands were socialist- Marxist and pro-peasant populists. Spread of national consciousness to the population. Zionism (Jewish nationalism) as another contemporary variant.
- Heightened rivalries of Great Powers and Empires. Cult of military glory combined with industrial-age weaponry and mass armies, whose effect no one understood. Formation of the two opposing alliances that led to the Great War: Russia-France-Britain and Germany-Austria-Italy. In the Great War of 1914-18, Italy switched sides and Turkey joined Germany-Austria.

WWI , collapse of empire, the Russian revolution, the civil war (1914-23)

Trying to make sense of what happened in Ukraine during these years is almost impossible.

When the Great War begins in 1914, Poland is part of the Russian Empire and what became Western Ukraine is part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Military campaigns of 1914-16: Germany advances across Poland into Belorussia, Russians advance against Austria-Hungary and Turkey. Germany covets control of Ukraine and its agricultural lands.

1917: key year in world history – the Russian revolution, and entry of the US into European war and European affairs. The Tsar abdicates, February 1917, after bread riots in St. Petersburg and other cities. In Kyiv, Ukrainian nationalists form a republic based on the Rada – the Ukrainian national assembly – and led by Prof. Hrushchevky, historian and nationalist leader.

October 1917: Bolsheviks take power in St. Petersburg and move the capital to Moscow. They advocate an end to the Great War and a world uprising of all peoples against capitalism and empires and military nationalism. March 1918: as Germans advance into Russia, the Bolsheviks sign the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, essentially ceding control of Poland and Ukraine to Germany in return for an end to German advances. The Germans move their armies to the Western front, now being reinforced against Germany by the arriving Americans. In Kiev, Hruschevsky's government is superseded by Hetman Skoropadsky, a pro-German dictator/military leader, and then by Stepan Petliura, a cossack general who led the Ukrainian People's Army after Ukraine declared independence. The UPR perpetrated a massacre of Jews in 1919. Democratic nationalists, Petliura's army, Bolsheviks, and peasant revolutionaries all competed for power.

Fall 1918: Germany loses in Western Europe; ; Ukraine declares independence. Bolsheviks try to retake Ukraine; White (anti-Bolshevik) Russian armies form in the Baltic countries, in Siberia, and in Ukraine. In the course of the civil war (see Isaac Babel's stories in *Red Cavalry*) the Red Army defeats the White armies in southern Russia and Ukraine. Crimea is the last White stronghold; from there ships take refugees and the remnants of Denikin's army to Constantinople, then occupied by the British. In all the contested regions peasant grain is requisitioned by both sides and peasants are reduced to famine. As the Bolsheviks defeat the Whites a massive peasant rebellion led by socialist/anarchist Nestor Makhno takes over southern Ukraine. Other serious peasant rebellions occurred in Russia. Makhno and the other peasant rebellions are eventually put down by very harsh and violent Bolshevik military repression. One result is a great famine in 1922-23 in central and southern Russia: Lenin's regime is saved by American grain brought as famine relief under the auspices of Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration.

During this time of troubles, people who lived in Ukraine were split among shifting factions: democratic nationalists; rival cossack militias and leaders, Russian Whites, Bolsheviks, and peasant rebels. They were variously, pro-Russian, pro-German, Russian White, Bolshevik Red, or peasant-anarchist Green. The most famous leader who came from Ukraine was Trotsky (Lev Davidovich Bronstein, from a town near Odesa) , orator of the revolution, brilliant ideologist, fanatical Bolshevik, and organizer of the Red Army.

The national question

The Red Army reconquered as much of the old Empire as it could, including Ukraine. Poland, the Baltic countries, and Finland got away. Poland defeated the attacking Red Army and eventually became the dictatorship of General Pilsudski. Strongman General Mannerheim held power in Finland. These were not inter-national wars. There were plenty of Poles and Finns and Balts among the Bolsheviks, who advanced under the banner of world revolution, not of Russia. The leader of the Cheka, the secret police and revolutionary enforcers, was "Iron Felix" Dzerzhinsky, a Pole. Latvian riflemen were the most loyal of Lenin's soldiers.

So how to organize the new Soviet state? Lenin, advised by Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, decided on national Republics within an ostensibly federal Soviet Union. Understand the worldview: all peoples of the world should and could eventually join that Union. It was based in Russia by historical circumstance; it was not "Russian" in the old cultural-imperial sense. Bolshevism was a universal religion which, like all religions, conquered only some of the world.

Over time, as communism took hold, national differences were to fade away with the creation of a "new Soviet person" with a distinct socialist morality. Differences of language and culture might remain, but as ancillary, not fundamental to identity. This would come about through education and propaganda and the creation of an integrated newly industrialized classless economy based on workers' equality. Nationalism as a fundamental identity was an enemy, to be crushed.

This was inevitable but would take time. Best to let the "nations" continue to exist but within the framework of a centralized Communist Party of the Soviet Union tasked with the "socialist construction" that would meld the Republics together into common socialist whole. Hence the first line of the Soviet national anthem : "unbreakable union of free Republics/ bound together forever by Great Russia". Huh? The same ambiguity permeates Putin's ideas of "the Russian world."

So in 1922 Ukraine became a national Republic, with the southern Ukrainian lands ("novorossiia") added to the 17th century core in central and eastern Ukraine and the Donbas. People became Ukrainians in their Soviet passports, which indicated nationality. Putin denounces this as Lenin's sellout of the unity of the three-part Russian people. Stalin, who Putin praises, probably had more to do with it.

1920s: New Economic Policy and cultural relaxation

During the few short years between the civil war and Stalin's "shock" program of industrialization, collectivization, and savage repression Ukraine, along with other Republics, enjoyed cultural autonomy and agricultural recovery. Putin argues the freedom to indulge in "national" culture was a mistake. Education spread to rural areas. Tech schools churned out thousands of "engineers". (The Soviet engineer was someone with the equivalent of a community college tech degree, but these were the "new men" who would build socialism. Khrushchev was one of them, enrolled a Rabfak (Workers' Faculty) in Yuzovka (Donetsk) in 1922. By then he was already a Communist Party official, running the Party organization at the technical university and on the Party committee for the city.

Stalin's great push – industrialization and the *holodomor*

In 1927 Stalin took over the Communist Party, pushing Trotsky and his allies aside (almost all were later killed in the great purge). He then proceeded to implement what was essentially Trotsky's plan of crash industrialization and collectivization of agriculture. One rationale for "socialist construction" at any human cost was national security – without a modern industrial base and defense industries the capitalist powers would crush the USSR.

Ukraine was central to Stalin's plans and to the Soviet economy. It had the iron-coal-steel complex in Donbas and the richest agricultural land.

The first five year plan (1928-32) began construction of the Azovstal works in Mariupol, a huge steelmaking complex. (It was defended to the death by surrounded Ukrainian soldiers in 2022.) Also the automotive factory at Kharkhiv, then the capital of Ukraine, which began churning out tanks. Also the huge dam on the Dnipro river at Dniepropetrovsk (Russian spelling, now Ukrainian Dnipro), where Brezhnev worked in early career, and another at Khakovka north of Kherson. (Captured by the Ukrainians in fall 2022: it was blown up by the retreating Russians to flood the region.) Lenin had said that communism = electrification plus Soviet power; these dams were carrying out his vision. (Note that the electrification of rural America under Roosevelt's REA took place at the same time.)

The five year plans with their unattainable quotas and expectations of superhuman labor had to have heroes, *udarniki* or shock-workers, to serve as role models. The most famous was a coal miner named Stakhanov, who mined a prodigious amount of coal in one day (with lots of help: this was a propaganda exercise) in the Donbas mines. Shock workers then became known as Stakhanovites. Ukraine began making planes in the 1930s; in the

1970s the Antonov airplane factory near Kiev would make the world's largest aircraft. Ukraine wasn't, and isn't, an industrial backwater – rather the opposite. Ukraine is now producing its own drones.

Key to Stalin's industrialization plans was the mobilization of peasant labor from the countryside, to take the construction and factory jobs at rock-bottom wages and almost impossible living conditions. For that, and to finance "socialist construction," you needed to expropriate the grain produced by the peasant majority, to feed the cities and to sell abroad.

The Bolsheviks had always had, from before 1917, the idea of collective farms. They would bring modern organization to the poor, mute, religious, backward, and politically reactionary countryside and kick the peasant majority into the modern proletarian world. Lenin had touted the alliance of the workers, the revolutionary vanguard class, with the peasants seeking liberation from feudal conditions. In a refinement, peasants were divided into rich peasants or *kulaks*, middle peasants who were unreliable, and poor peasants, those without enough land to support themselves, who were objectively on the Bolshevik side. This was all theory – in reality almost all the Russians and Ukrainians living in rural villages just wanted to be left alone to grow and sell their crops without being pushed around by city slickers and cops.

In 1928 Stalin declared that all agriculture would be collectivized. Peasants would "donate" their land to the *kolkhoz* (collective farm) and work for wages-in-kind. Each *kolkhoz* would have the use of machinery from a central machine tractor station, which served as an outpost of Party officials and the police (then the NKVD, later KGB, now FSB, originally Cheka). Each *kolkhoz* would have a quota to meet, and only after that quota was met could the peasants, now *kolkhozniki*, keep grain to eat and to plant in the spring.

Massive resistance to collectivization occurred when it was first attempted. Stalin backed off, then came back with strengthened Party cadres and NKVD and local collaborators and a massive propaganda barrage. He declared "the liquidation of the kulaks". Kulak meant a richer, and often more enterprising and successful, peasant family, but in practice anyone who resisted was branded a *kulak*. Liquidation meant, usually, getting expelled from your home, packed into a cattle car, and sent off to the rapidly constructed Gulag labor camps in Siberia and Kazakhstan and the far north.

Grain production plummeted. Anything that was grown was confiscated, taken to government-guarded storehouses, and shipped off to the cities. As starvation came, the land emptied. In 1932-33 perhaps 5-7 million Ukrainian and Russian peasants died of starvation, probably the majority in Ukraine. Hundreds of thousands more became the Gulag mass labor force, in effect slaves producing lumber and minerals for "socialist construction."

This was the Holodomor, or hunger-death.

Coping, at the time, with the Great Depression and bombarded with Soviet propaganda about the heroic progress of socialist construction under Stalin's genius leadership, the West paid little attention.

Was the *Holodomor* a policy that targeted Ukraine specifically? That is a controversy among scholars. I think not – the enemy were peasants of whatever nationality, a class enemy, not a national one.

Stalin did crack down on Ukrainian cultural expression, and indeed on all the non-Russian Republics. His critics accused him of Great Russian chauvinism, although he was himself Georgian, not Russian. He brought the entire intelligentsia of the Soviet Union under his thumb, herding them into bureaucratic organizations run by Party flunkies and censors. He regarded intellectuals as “engineers of human souls” whose art and thought must serve the state and socialist construction. Isaac Babel, among many others, was arrested and died in the Gulag in 1938. Pasternak barely survived, keeping his *Dr Zhivago* manuscript in a desk drawer.

Stalin's Great purge of the security services, the military, and the Communist Party itself followed collectivization and the five year plans. Ukraine was hit hard, losing most of its top communist leaders and many of its industrial managers. During the purge, the NKVD in each city and district had quotas too – so many arrests, so many sent to the Gulag and so many executions per month. Who was denounced and purged, and who was spared, depended on whom you knew, or was just arbitrary – who was denounced first. Lazar Kaganovich, who had been First Secretary in Ukraine, survived and thrived as one of Stalin's favorites. Nikita Khrushchev, a protégé of Kaganovich, was transferred from Stalino to Moscow before the famine and the purge and soon became Moscow Party First Secretary, a very important job. Khrushchev was only forty – one of the new generation of tough Stalin loyalists who rose rapidly as those above them, the experienced “old Bolsheviks”, intellectuals with their quaint old ideals of revolution, were arrested and sent to the camps or shot. In 1938, as the purge was winding down, Khrushchev at age 44 was sent back to Ukraine as First Secretary – Ukraine's big boss – to clean up after the disasters.

The Hitler-Stalin deal

In the 1930s, Stalin aided the rise of the Nazis in Germany. He commanded German communists to cooperate with Hitler's movement against the German social-democrats. All communist parties were subordinate to the Comintern in Moscow and were expected to put the interests of the Soviet Motherland ahead of any local objectives. During the great Purge, Stalin purged foreign communist parties along with the CPSU. After Hitler took power, Stalin betrayed the German communist leaders to Hitler, who executed them, saving Stalin the trouble.

In 1934-39, the NKVD went after Poles in Ukraine and Belarus, who were rounded up and executed or gulaged. Poland was a hostile foreign power on Russia's borders and Poles were enemy agents.

It is worth understanding the Hitler-Stalin deal that partitioned Poland and started WWII in September 1939. Here's the short version

Stalin was a total realist in world politics. He believed *all* the capitalist powers would do in the Soviet Union if they could (and he was probably correct). Hitler's Germany was just the newest in the game. So his strategy was to play them off against each other.

Hitler claimed that all German-speaking people should be part of his Reich. (Sound familiar? Putin's "Russian world" uniting all Russian-speakers, whether they like it or not?)

When in October 1938 Hitler demanded that Czechoslovakia cede its German-speaking Sudeten territory, Stalin floated the idea of a Soviet alliance with the British and French against Germany. This would recreate the military situation of 1914 and, Stalin believed, the same sort of trench warfare in the west. Neville Chamberlain turned him down. The British elite were at least as anti-Soviet as anti-fascist, maybe more so, and no one in Britain wanted war. So Chamberlain met Hitler at Munich and returned to London a hero for averting war. The calculus was that Hitler would turn his attention east, and Britain and France could watch as the Nazis and the Soviet communists tore each other apart.

For Stalin, this was a no-brainer. He would make a deal with Hitler and turn him back west again, and that's exactly what he did. The Hitler-Stalin deal, officially the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact after the two foreign ministers, was signed in Moscow in August 1939. The secret appendix to the non-aggression treaty divided eastern Europe between them: Poland would disappear (as in the 1790s), German influence would be prominent in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria; Stalin would get the Baltic countries along with eastern Poland and Germany would not intervene against Soviet advances in Finland. And, he calculated, invasion of Poland by the Nazis would create the war in the west that Stalin wanted, leaving him to recover from the purge, continue his military buildup, and pick up the pieces later.

Today, Putin suppresses all mention of this deal. It is unpatriotic and possibly treasonous to mention the Hitler-Stalin alliance. It has been airbrushed out of the new history books for high school students. Nazis and anyone called "nazis" (the Ukrainians) are totally evil, and Soviet behavior is totally blameless, heroic, and successful. Stalin is a national hero comparable to Peter the Great. His policies of forced "socialist construction" and collectivization saved Russia and were fully justified by Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War. And it is only right and necessary to suppress "enemies of the people" who might

collude with foreign powers, although perhaps Stalin's methods were a bit harsh. End of discussion.

From 1939 to June 1941 Stalin kept sending grain and raw materials to Germany, as agreed, as German armies overran France and attacked Britain. Stalin like most others miscalculated the military situation (as most did in February and March 2022, in Ukraine), expecting a long war which didn't happen. ("Fighting the last war" and not understanding how new technology and tactics have changed the battlefield is a common military problem. Today everyone is scrambling to adjust to drones and missiles which have made tanks and surface ships obsolete sitting ducks and have driven soldiers back underground.) Like other dictators, Stalin apparently indulged in wishful thinking. He brushed off the many reports from his own military and from the Americans and British of an imminent German invasion, leaving Soviet defenders unprepared when the attack finally came. This too has been airbrushed out of the current myth of the Great Patriotic War.

The Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust in Ukraine

This is shorthand, just surfacing a few controversial matters.

The Soviet Union lost 27 million souls in the war. 20 million were civilians. Most of them died in Ukraine and Belarus. William Taubman, biographer of Khrushchev and Gorbachev, estimates one of every six Ukrainians died.

One of the key objectives of Germany was control of the Ukrainian agricultural region. If Germany had won, Hitler's plan called for starvation or expulsion of the population and resettlement of Germans in Ukraine.

During the war, Stalin emphasized historical *Russian* patriotism, quite distinct from "Soviet internationalism." He allowed Churches to open and changed the name of Soviet organizations from "peoples commissariat" to "committee" and "ministry".

"The Ukrainians welcomed the German invaders." Some did, just as some had preferred a German-dominated Ukraine to a Soviet-dominated one in 1918, or just as some Cossacks had sided with Poland against Russia in the 17th century. When the German armies arrived, the *holodomor* and the purges were still fresh in survivors' minds. As the SS arrived behind the troops, Nazi methods took hold in occupied Ukraine, including the mass murder of Jews. By most accounts, whatever welcome the invaders had received soon wore thin. (One common mistake is to over-politicize the behavior of occupied people in wartime. Mostly, they just do what they have to do to survive and want it all to end. This is probably true in Donbas today.)

There was nothing new about antisemitism in Ukraine (or in Russia or Poland). Ukrainian cossacks had been among the most fervent antisemites in the *pogroms* of Tsarist times.

For what happened in Ukraine, read Snyder's *Bloodlands*: essentially, everyone identified as Jewish was shot, dumped in mass graves and shoveled into ravines where they were covered over by Soviet POWs. The policy of extermination was organized by Nazi officials working with local collaborators. More Jewish people were killed in Ukraine and Belarus – the regions of the former Pale - than further west, including Poland.

I am not a scholar of the Holocaust. Read Timothy Snyder and other expert sources.

The Nazis conflated Jews with Communists, and shot the communists too. A myth that persisted among Russian and Ukrainians, particularly peasants, was that the Bolshevik revolution had been a Jewish plot. Like most myths, it had some truth at its core: a disproportionate number of the early Bolshevik leaders - Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Sverdlov,, Kaganovich, others - were Jewish. The two heads of the NKVD shot in the purges after they had purged others, Yagoda and Yezhov, were Jewish. Many of the Soviet police and intelligence officers who survived the purges were Jewish. So Jews = Communists; shoot them all.

Volodymyr Zelensky's family is Jewish on both sides, from Kryvyi Rih (Krivoy Rog), an industrial city north of Donbas. Zelensky's great-grandparents and all their siblings were killed in the holocaust. His grandfather, Semyon Zelensky, was an infantry colonel in the Red Army, and survived, although three brothers who also served did not. His mother's family was evacuated to Central Asia as the Germans arrived, then returned. This was an educated, professional, Russian-speaking Jewish family – most Jewish families were probably not so lucky.

Stepan Bandera and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN, "Banderists")

Stepan Bandera, b. 1909, grew up in what was Polish territory, now western Ukraine. He joined the OUN, a violent, terrorist organization seeking Ukrainian liberation from Polish and Soviet rule, and became its propaganda head. He plotted the murder of the Polish Foreign Minister. His death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. When they occupied Poland, the Germans helped him organize the Ukrainian National Army, hoping to use Ukrainian nationalism against the Soviets. When the Germans occupied Ukraine, Bandera's radical wing of the OUN declared an independent Ukrainian state (under German auspices). Bandera's men helped the Nazis to round up and kill Poles and Jews in western Ukraine and tried to organize against the Soviets in the east. Accounts differ as to whether Bandera himself approved the killing of Jews; his men clearly participated. As the occupation continued, Bandera turned against the Germans, who saw him as a dangerous Ukrainian nationalist (which is exactly what he was). Bandera was imprisoned by the Nazis, but they continued to talk with him about organizing against the Soviets. On the outside, his followers rejected working with the Nazis and tried to contact western governments. In 1943 and 1944 the OUN organized partisan warfare against the advancing Red Army. After

the war Bandera took OUN headquarters to West Germany. The OUN partisans continued guerrilla war against the Soviets in western Ukraine, now helped by the CIA. The Soviets conducted “cleansing” operations in much of Western Ukraine, sending much of the population to camps, to defeat them. Bandera was assassinated by the KGB in Germany in

Nazi tool? Ukrainian nationalist hero? Both? Neither? Bandera is regarded as a hero by nationalist followers in independent Ukraine, a leader who fought Poles and Russians in the cause of Ukrainian independence – he shows up on stamps and monuments. Putin uses the Bandera story as the basis for his claims that today’s Ukrainian regime and all anti-Russian Ukrainians are “nazis.”

Khrushchev and Ukraine

After the war Stalin reinstated the repression of the 1930s, then died in 1953. The Politburo members fought among themselves until a leader from Ukraine took over the top job.

Nikita Khrushchev

Born 1894 in Kalinovka, a village in Kursk oblast, son of poor peasants.

(Truly of poor peasant origins, unlike the Lenin generation Bolsheviks who were intelligentsia. Kalinovka is about 7 miles from the Ukrainian border and a bit north of the part of Kursk recently invaded by Ukrainian forces.)

1908, family moved to Yuzovka (now Donetsk). Nikita worked as a metal fitter’s apprentice and then in a factory and repairing machinery in a mine. Married in 1914.

(Tens of thousands of peasants moved to the Donbas to get industrial jobs. Nikita was a “proletarian” of the sort the Bolsheviks favored.)

1917, elected to the local soviet; 1918 joined the Bolshevik party. Fled back to Kalinovka when the Germans occupied Donbas in 1918.

(At this time the political situation in Ukraine was a confused mess, with multiple parties and groups.)

1919, joined the Red Army as a political commissar. His wife died of typhus during the civil war.

1921, became the political director at the mine where he had worked.

1922 attended the *rabfak* (technical school for workers) in Yuzovka. Became the head of the school party organization. Became the partner of Nina Kukharchuk, daughter of rich peasants (a kulak!); three children, not formally married until 1965.

(The early Bolsheviks decried marriage as a bourgeois institution.)

1925, became Party secretary in a district near Yuzovka. Was picked up as a coming Party talent by Lazar Kaganovich, a close associate of Stalin throughout and one of the few leading “old Bolsheviks” to escape the purge.

(You rose in the Party by becoming part of a personal faction. If your leader survived, you did too. If he didn't you ended up shot or in the Gulag.)

1929, age 35, became organization secretary of the Ukraine Central Committee, the #2 man in Ukraine. Then went to Moscow with Kaganovich.

(He just escaped being in Ukraine during the Holodomor and the Great Purge. Lucky break.)

1932: Kaganovich's deputy in the Moscow party organization; 1934 First Secretary in Moscow city at age 40. Supervised construction of the Moscow subway. Then 1935 First Secretary of the Moscow region. Meteoric rise to the top ranks of the Party. Met Stalin, who apparently liked him.

1936-38. In the Great purge most of Khrushchev's associates were shot or sent to the camps. He signed off on the arrests and escaped himself.

(In his “secret speech” of 1956, as Soviet top leader, he denounced Stalin for purging loyal Communist Party members. Hypocrisy? Remorse?)

1938: returns to Ukraine as First Secretary. The purge continued, savagely, after his return to Ukraine, then tapered off. In 1939 Khrushchev started talking about protecting innocent communists. The hard job was trying to get grain production going again.

(Khrushchev is a perfect example of the second Communist generation, Stalin's hard new men who rose so quickly because almost all their seniors were purged.)

1939. When the Soviets occupied Poland after the Hitler-Stalin deal, Khrushchev was sent to manipulate Poland's southern territories to vote to join the USSR, which they did. This extended the Ukrainian Republic to include today's western Ukraine.

(Rigged elections and coercion to annex territory did not begin with Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, and it continues today in Russian-occupied Ukraine.)

(Khrushchev was responsible for two extensions of Ukrainian territory, not just Crimea in 1954.)

During the Great Patriotic War Khrushchev was the top political commissar attached to the southern Soviet armies – still in Ukraine. He claims he protested Stalin's orders to defend Kiev at all costs – as a result in 1941 500,000 Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner. Marshal Zhukov claims Khrushchev encouraged Stalin's orders. In 1942 a Soviet offensive aimed at Kharkiv (Kharkov) failed. Stalin recalled Khrushchev to Moscow and fired military

commander Timoshenko. Then he sent Khrushchev to Stalingrad, where came under fire but played only a minor role. Then he was attached to the Soviet armies that reconquered Ukraine.

(Soviet war correspondent Vasily Grossman wrote dispatches from Stalingrad. In his novel Life and Fate – modeled on Tolstoy's War and Peace – Grossman excoriates the do-nothing and self-serving Commissars behind the lines. The generals don't get off easily either. Grossman's novel, extolling courage and patriotism but puncturing myths, was never published in the USSR, even under Gorbachev, and I doubt you can find it in Russian bookstores today.)

1945-49: Khrushchev was Party boss in Ukraine, overseeing reconstruction and the revival of agriculture. He pushed the *kolkhozniki* to greater efforts, denouncing the slackers. He was in charge of collectivizing western Ukraine and clearing it of the partisans of Bandera's Ukrainian National Army. Famine loomed in 1946. Khrushchev begged Stalin to relax quotas and send food aid, but Stalin refused. Fortunately the harvests of 1947 and 1948 were good ones, and the third famine in 30 years was averted.

1949: returns to Moscow as First Secretary. Starts building new 5-story apartment buildings – *khrushchoby*, a play on the word for slums - to alleviate the terrible housing crisis which had begun with the early 5 year plans. Describes in his later memoirs the drunken: March dinners at Stalin's dacha.

1953 March, Stalin dies. First demoted within the Politburo, then rising as he mobilizes colleagues to dispose of KGB head Beria, Khrushchev becomes unquestioned #1 boss by 1955.

1954: 300 year anniversary of Ukraine-Russia unity. Crimea transferred to the Ukrainian Republic.

1955-56: political prisoners freed from the Gulag.

1956: In his "secret speech" (text leaked to reporters) Khrushchev denounces Stalin for persecuting and killing loyal communists and others loyal to Party and government.

(The Holodomor, the Gulag, the persecutions of non-communists, the deportation of nationalities to Central Asia during the war, the Hitler-Stalin pact and the military blunders were not mentioned at all.)

(Khrushchev was trying to win the loyalty of the Party – I won't do this to you.)

From this time on, Khrushchev's story is that of the entire Soviet Union. But that's the point: the entire country was led by someone who was from Ukraine, or Ukrainian-Russian. Khrushchev's passport said Russian, but so what.

In the "time of plenty" of the 1950s and 1960s, Ukraine benefited as much as Russia. The Antonov airplane factory started in Kiev in 1952 and by the 1970s made most Soviet military transport aircraft. The ZAZ factory made Zaporozhets cars. The Kharkiv machinery factory churned out tractors. Azovstal's blast furnaces ran on Donbas coal. The Khakovka dam, destroyed by the retreating Russians in 2023, opened in 1956. The first reactor at Chernobyl came online in 1978, and at the Zaporozhzhya nuclear plant in 1985. All this was entirely integrated with, part of, the overall Soviet economy.

Sovietization continued, but Ukrainian language was not suppressed. Russians and Ukrainians vacationed in Crimea. The intelligentsia strained against censorship and laws against criticizing the Soviet Union, but that was the case throughout the USSR.

Leonid Brezhnev, Khrushchev's successor and originally Khrushchev's protégé, was also from Ukraine, although his passport, too, said "Russian." Brezhnev grew up in Kamianske (Kamenskoye) on the Dnipro river, went to technical college there, joined the Komsomol (Communist Youth League) in 1923 and the Communist Party in 1929. He worked as a metallurgical engineer in Donbas, then transferred to full time Party work in Dnipro (Dniepropetrovsk). He met Khrushchev in 1931, owed promotions to him, and served as a political commissar under Khrushchev during the war. He became Party boss in newly acquired Moldova after the war, then returned to Dnipro, then went to Moscow with Khrushchev, eventually replacing him in a Politburo coup in 1964. During Brezhnev's long tenure, from 1964 to 1980, Brezhnev's cronies from postwar days in Ukraine, now in top jobs, were called "the Dniepropetrovsk mafia". They presided over the "era of stagnation" as the Soviet Union gradually declined from world-competitive power with the US toward economic and technological decrepitude and the Communist Power lost its moxie and its legitimacy.

The point is that it is very hard to make an argument about repression of Ukraine, or of Ukrainians, in the later Soviet Union. Outright nationalists were few and far between. People from Ukraine held their share, or more than their share, of power and of the funds spent on development, including military production. Western Ukraine was less Soviet, less culturally Russian, but the regional east-west division did not matter much either. Ukrainians were happy, or unhappy, in ways reflecting the Soviet population as a whole.

Now turn to Serhii Plokhyy's *The Russo-Ukrainian war* and pick up the story from the late 1980s and the Soviet breakup, and Ukraine's independence.