

In the World of Stalinist Crimes: Ukraine in the Years of the Purges and Terror (1934–1938) from the Polish Perspective. By Robert Kuśnierz, Trans. Tomasz Krzysztof Blusiewicz. Peter Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Research, no. 10. Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2020. xxviii, 404 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Illustrations. Index. Photographs. Tables. \$34.95, paper.
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This study of the Ukraine is based on two Polish archives: those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of military intelligence collected by the Second Department (Dwójka) of the Main Staff of the Polish Army. Despite numerous obstacles, Polish officials managed detailed reportage of the dramatically changing political landscape in Ukraine. A key witness is Jan Karszo-Siedlewski, the head of the Polish Consulate in the capitals of Soviet Ukraine, Kharkov and then Kiev. Rather than joining the academic debate about the nature of Stalinism, the author uses their accounts to give a dramatic picture of its impact on everyday life.

They give a gripping analysis of post-Holodomor (famine) life in the Ukrainian countryside. Although technically over by 1933, famine continued, with evidence of deaths through starvation—and even cannibalism—into 1934 and 1935. The author puts the final death toll at 3.5 million, while some other historians double that number. He has no doubt that the famine and its consequences were manufactured by Moscow. In part this was economic. Ukraine had long been celebrated as “the bread-basket of Europe” and its grain was used to feed Soviet citizens and as the major Soviet export of the 1930s, used to fund industrialisation and military expansion. But Stalinist politics were also at the core of this decision.

The murder of Sergei Kirov (December 1934) was the starting-point of extensive repression and show trials within the Communist Party, as Stalin imposed his monopoly over the ruling apparatus. A campaign against “Trotskyism” came to dominate political discourse, even though Lev Trotskii himself had been exiled in 1929. The book’s central chapter records how secret police repression under Nikolai Ezhov (until the end of 1938) was extended to national minorities, including Poles, and to ordinary citizens, variously accused of connections to the tsarist *ancien régime*. Mass terror made the work of foreign diplomats ever more perilous as previous informants withdrew their contact with “alien” officials.

A further chapter surveys the annihilation of Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Jewish leaders and their institutions in Ukraine. Polish diplomats reported the persecution of Catholic Poles and sought to mobilize their relief. The book also provides a detailed analysis of the campaign against non-Russian nationalities in Ukraine. Its focus is particularly on the fate of Poles who emigrated to Soviet Ukraine from Galicia, part of the interwar Polish state. The diplomats gave less attention to the suggestion that Stalin was eliminating the “fifth column” of national minorities, immigrants, and former opposition members in preparation for a Second World War. Stalin saw Poland, along with Germany and Japan, as the likely belligerents, even though when Germany did invade he disappeared shell-shocked for several weeks.

The writer has eight other books, as author or editor, in this area. This study is wonderfully translated by Harvard-trained scholar Tomasz Blusiewicz and skillfully edited by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies. The result is a remarkable history of Stalinist crimes in Ukraine that have an alarming sequel in the present-day.

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