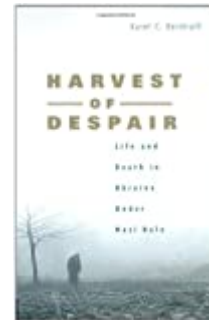


Karel Berkhoff. *Harvest of the Despair: Life and Death in the Ukraine under Nazi Rule.* Cambridge / London: Harvard University Press, 2004. 463 S. \$29.95 (broschiert), ISBN 978-0-674-01313-1.



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Ukraine Is Being Liberated from the Ukrainians

“Ukraine Is Being Liberated from the Ukrainians”

Within the past decade, the historiography concerning German-occupied Europe has greatly expanded.[1] This expansion is especially true of the former Soviet Union.[2] While studies devoted to the latter topic have painstakingly described the evolution and practice of German policy, the victims of these measures have received less attention. This relative neglect, however, has been rectified in regards to the population of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine by Karel C. Berkhoff's *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*.

In a comprehensive study that addresses a broad range of topics from religion and popular culture to policies of mass murder, Berkhoff focuses on three major areas of contention in occupation historiography: first, the goals and policies of the Germans; second, the level of social cohesion among the occupied population; and third, the formation and importance of identities to the natives of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine. His examination proceeds under the assumption “that most people, when finding themselves in an extreme situation, try first of all to survive, rather than die as heroes or martyrs” (p.

5). This view leads Berkhoff to reject loaded words such as “collaboration” or “resistance,” whose polemical baggage, he believes, prevents a full understanding of events. While the author should be commended for his refusal to tar indiscriminately everyone who assisted the Germans as a collaborator, this approach does lead to some problems (to be discussed below).

The author writes that “the fundamental ethos” of German authorities in Reichskommissariat Ukraine was to prepare the region for eventual German colonization (p. 306). According to the author, all policies, including Jewish, urban, and agricultural measures, were designed to turn Ukraine into a German settlement following the war. Berkhoff argues that the ideological quest for *Lebensraum* was the driving force behind German actions in the occupied Soviet Union; all other motives, including economic determinism, were by-products of this ideology. He convincingly details the evolution of German policy from May 1941, when the first starvation plan was introduced by Herbert Backe, State Secretary of the Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture, up through the “Second Sweep” in late Summer 1942, when Himmler or-

dered the SS and police units to “clean the territory of Ukraine for the future settlement of Germans” as part of this process (p. 46). While historians of the Holocaust have long recognized the nature of the “Second Sweep,” Berkhoff persuasively argues that as part of the notorious *General Plan Ost*, it was directed against all non-ethnic German natives of the Ukraine. Berkhoff’s conclusions regarding the goals of German policy in Ukraine are judicious and well-reasoned, though a more direct engagement with opposing historiographical viewpoints would have been fruitful.[3]

Berkhoff’s discussion of how German policies affected different social groups within the Reichskommissariat Ukraine constitutes the heart of his study. In separate chapters on the fates of Jews and Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, and the inhabitants of Kiev, the author chillingly describes the fate of groups deemed by the Germans to be dangerous, superfluous, or both. The Holocaust in Ukraine was essentially completed by the end of 1942 and the overwhelming majority of the region’s Jews “died at the edge of or inside their graves,” executed by German as well as Ukrainian units (p. 62). Berkhoff offers an especially poignant description of the events of the Babi Yar massacre, as his reliance on accounts by Jewish survivors and Ukrainian witnesses forces the reader to grapple with the terror of Nazi actions.

A similar genocidal mentality led to the deaths of millions of Soviet prisoners of war during the first two years of war. Racism, and the related fear that all Russian soldiers were infected with Bolshevism, “drove the deliberate mission of destroying most of the ‘Russian’ POWs” (p. 90). While dismissing situational factors as the cause of mass mortality among the POWs does not constitute a novel argument, Berkhoff does offer compelling evidence that the starvation of the prisoners could have been avoided if the Germans had allowed Ukrainians to feed the captives.[4] Basing his argument on numerous memoirs as well as on archival materials, the author concludes that the German policies of confiscating food intended for the prisoners and of shooting those trying to help the POWs, derailed what otherwise would have been a successful effort to keep the prisoners alive. Berkhoff’s mastery of source materials again allows for moving descriptions of the horrors of the POW camps as well as the death marches of prisoners to camps further in the rear.

Jews and Soviet prisoners of war have long been recognized by historians as the primary groups targeted for destruction by Nazi Germany. Recent research, however, has also shown that the urban populations of the Soviet

Union were deemed superfluous by Nazi demographers and were systematically decimated. In an excellent chapter devoted to starvation in Kiev, Berkhoff describes a city in which ration levels were even lower than those in the besieged city of Leningrad by December 1941. German authorities enacted a total ban on bringing food into the city, closed all city markets, and instituted draconian punishments for anyone caught hoarding. A city that had over 840,000 inhabitants in July 1941, was reduced by evacuations, massacres and starvation to a mere 220,000 by December 1943 (appendix, p. 317). Berkhoff argues that Kievans recognized that the Germans were behind the famine in 1942, and this recognition “bred a fierce hatred of the Germans as a people” (p. 186). It did not, however, lead to massive resistance; resistance was provoked by the forced deportations of workers to Germany.

Over one million people were forcibly deported from the Reichskommissariat Ukraine to Germany between 1942 and June 1943. According to Berkhoff, “from the standpoint of popular opinion in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, the roundups and the deportations were the Nazis’ biggest mistake” (p. 273). After the pool of volunteers all but dried up in mid-1942, the Germans forced local elites to provide adequate numbers of workers and, when this strategy failed, began to raid marketplaces and other public places to meet their quotas. The increasing frequency of brutal raids led some inhabitants to claim that “Ukraine [was] being liberated from the Ukrainians” (p. 264). Berkhoff argues that resistance in the Ukraine had been effectively snuffed out by German and Hungarian forces by the end of 1941, and it was only the deportations, and not calls from Moscow, that reignited it. The deportations brought the scourge of partisan warfare to Ukraine, in which German forces left a wide swath of burning villages and dead inhabitants throughout the region. Ukrainian nationalist forces, however, seemed more intent on engaging in their own “ethnic cleansing” than in fighting German troops. In 1943, a minimum of fifteen thousand Poles were killed by forces of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, who were attempting to create their own ethnically homogenous state during the confusion of the German retreat. In his discussion of this relatively unknown event, Berkhoff highlights one of the numerous localized conflicts that sprang up during the Second World War.

German administration was not the first attempt at totalitarianism in Ukraine. Soviet rule in the years preceding the German occupation had, according to Berkhoff, several significant effects on the population during the war. First, the majority of Ukrainians, espe-

cially among the peasantry, welcomed the invaders as liberators from Bolshevism. The enormous numbers of prisoners captured by the Germans were directly related to the population's rejection of Communist rule. Many soldiers believed that a Soviet Ukraine was not worth fighting for and looked forward to the end of Moscow's authority. Second, after being force-fed Communist ideology for such a long period of time, Nazi propaganda fell upon an exhausted and apathetic population. Outside of a small stratum of both active Communists and collaborators, the majority of Ukrainians displayed what Berkhoff terms "non-attitudes," eschewing any political affiliation and merely trying to survive (p. 312). Third, and this contention rests on thinner ground, twenty years of rule from the Kremlin had extinguished any semblance of civil society, making it much more difficult for the population to resist German authority in any significant way. Berkhoff does, however, make the important point that the "culture of denunciation," which assumed a critical importance during the 1930s, carried over into the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, and this played an important role in keeping the population divided (p. 54). By 1943, the starvation policies, massacres, kidnappings, and general contempt displayed by the Germans towards the Ukrainians led to a resurgent nostalgia for Soviet times. When the Red Army entered villages during their offensives of 1943 and 1944, Khrushchev reported to Moscow that they were welcomed by the inhabitants as "our people" (p. 304). Nazi terror made the hated Soviet system seem relatively benign.

While his narrow focus on the Reichskommissariat Ukraine allows Berkhoff to present a comprehensive examination of the region, this exclusivity also constitutes a weakness. Outside of several references to the neighboring General Government and its Ukrainian population, Berkhoff does not place the Reichskommissariat Ukraine into a comparative context with other regions under German occupation. The reader is never sure if Ukraine's experience of occupation was unique among other areas of the Soviet Union or if it fit into a more general pattern. His assertion that the majority of the population attempted to remain outside of the fray by reaching some form of accommodation with the German authorities seems convincing, but his complete rejection of the term "collaboration" is problematic. It is indisputable that various segments of the Ukrainian population worked closely with the Germans and this segment of the population and their motivations require some discussion. Berkhoff mentions the members of the native administration only in passing, and this is surely a topic

that deserves more analysis. His primary explanation that those who assisted the Germans, be they executioners at Babi Yar or low-level bureaucrats, did so purely out of material considerations, is rather simplistic. From a purely technical viewpoint, the inclusion of several more maps would be extremely beneficial to those not intimately familiar with the geography of Ukraine.

Aside from these points, Berkhoff has presented the most detailed analysis of an Eastern European population under Nazi rule to date. By integrating previously unused German security service reports from Ukrainian archives with an imposing collection of Ukrainian source material, both archival and in the form of memoirs, the author has produced an important book that would benefit both upper-division students and specialists alike. While he makes a strong contribution to the historiography concerning German goals and policies in the occupied Soviet Union, his focus on the people at the sharp end of these policies constitutes his outstanding achievement. Instead of merely describing the bureaucratic nature of Nazi occupation, Berkhoff has allowed the victims to speak. They have painted a vivid picture of the terror at the heart of Nazi rule.

Notes

[1]. Several of the more prominent examples include Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941-44* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); on France, see Julian Jackson, *The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans: Collaboration and Compromise* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

[2]. Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weissrussland, 1941-1944* (Duesseldorf: Droste, 1998); Andrej Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord: Die Einsatzgruppe D in der suedlichen Sowjetunion, 1941-1943* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003); Hamburger Institut fuer Sozialforschung, ed., *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002); Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die Deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999).

[3]. Here I am thinking of Chiari and Gerlach (see note 2).

[4]. See the seminal work by Christian Streit, which

first appeared in 1978, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht Dietz, 1997).*
und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941-1945 (Bonn:

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