

REHABILITATION OF UKRAINIAN NATIONALIST GROUPS STIRS FURTHER
CONTROVERSY.

By Taras Kuzio

The announcement on 12 July that the Ukrainian government had prepared a draft bill on honoring the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its partisan force, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), as "fighters for freedom and independence of Ukraine" has stirred another controversy within both Ukraine and Russia. The government commission, which is chaired by Russophile Deputy Prime Minister Volodymyr Semynozhenko, now believes that from 1939 to the mid-1950s, the OUN and UPA organized a "resistance movement" "for the purpose of uniting and creating a unified [independent] Ukraine."

The main academic research that has led to this conclusion was undertaken by the Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences, under its prolific head, Stanislav Kulchytskyy. The institute recommended, and the commission accepted, that OUN and UPA veterans should finally be classified as having been subjected to repression and therefore should fall under the law on the rehabilitation of victims of political repression in Ukraine. This would then allow them to obtain social and other privileges accorded to other Soviet veterans.

At the same time, only OUN-UPA veterans will be scrutinized under this law to see if they committed "crimes against humanity." This one-sided application of the law to only nationalist forces is in line with post-Soviet and international custom since the Nuremberg trials of Nazis where the victor, e.g. the USSR, has never been investigated for "crimes against humanity." After 1939, NKVD units in western Ukraine committed wholesale atrocities against civilians (a mass grave containing 130 NKVD victims, including children, was uncovered in a western Ukrainian monastery this month). Investigation of Soviet archives by Ukrainian historians in the 1990s found evidence that the NKVD dressed in UPA uniforms and committed atrocities against civilians in order to turn the local population against nationalist groups. The commission headed by Kulchytskyy found evidence of unpleasant actions undertaken by both nationalist and "chekist," i.e. NKVD, forces, but only veterans of the former will be investigated.

The reaction of the Russian authorities was swift. As with the rehabilitation of nationalist partisans in the three Baltic states, Moscow has adopted Soviet-era rhetoric in attacking the OUN-UPA. The Russian media charged Ukrainian nationalist groups with fighting alongside Chechens against Russian forces in the 1990s in Chechnya. In the March parliamentary elections in Ukraine, Russia

deliberately stoked an antinationalist campaign, with the support of the Ukrainian executive, to blacken Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine among eastern Ukrainian voters (see "RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report," 9 April 2002).

The seriousness with which the Russian Foreign Ministry looks at this question can be seen from its immediate and angry response to the draft government bill. The ministry demanded that the Ukrainian government condemn the activities of the "so-called UPA" and not rehabilitate its members. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Anatoliy Zlenko replied that this was "Ukraine's internal matter."

This move by the Ukrainian government is in many ways not surprising. It is taking place immediately after parliamentary elections, a period when western Ukrainian voters are traditionally courted by Kuchma. (The more numerous eastern Ukrainian voters are traditionally passive between elections and are only courted during elections.) The government move came after the city of Lviv wrote to Kuchma demanding that the OUN-UPA be rehabilitated. The newly elected parliament is also the least leftist of any elected since March 1990 and therefore opposition to the rehabilitation of Ukrainian nationalist groups is likely to be less difficult. In addition, Kuchma has little to lose in the rehabilitation of the OUN-UPA because he will not be standing again for re-election and may want to end his second term on a populist note. These reasons also allowed Kuchma to adopt the radical step of declaring Ukraine's goal of working toward NATO membership.

In late March, the then-head of the presidential administration and currently parliamentary speaker, Volodymyr Lytvyn, called for a "balanced approach" to the UPA. "We understand how painful this issue is not just for Russia, but also for part of Ukrainian society. We must study all aspects of the matter," Lytvyn said. Then parliamentary speaker Ivan Plyushch also announced his support for moves to rehabilitate OUN-UPA.

Within Ukraine, the government's draft bill has arrived after a decade of gradual public rehabilitation. School textbooks and the military media have not had the luxury of waiting a decade to research this question and they have included the OUN, and particularly the UPA, alongside other forces that fought for Ukraine on different military fronts. They therefore have placed them on an equal footing with Soviet (as well as Polish and Canadian) veterans. Rehabilitation of the Galicia Division has not taken place, and is far less likely to. The UPA has therefore long been described in textbooks and newspapers such as "Narodna Armiya," an organ of the Defense Ministry, as fighting on a "second front" in World War II.

Among the oligarchic Social Democratic Party-united (SDPU-o) and the former pro-presidential For a United Ukraine (ZYU), now divided into six factions, there is no opposition to the government's move. One major reason is that centrist groups lack any ideology and this is therefore simply not an issue for them. SDPU-o Chairman Viktor Medvedchuk, now head of the presidential administration, claimed to be the author of the draft government bill, which he had hoped would attract western Ukrainian voters in the March elections.

The malleability of the ideologically amorphous SDPU-o was

seen when Medvedchuk denied to Crimean voters that his party supported the rehabilitation of OUN-UPA, and SDPU-o-controlled Inter Television fanned the antinationalist campaign against Yushchenko. The irony is that Medvedchuk also at the same time played up the claim that his family was expelled to Siberia because his father was a member of OUN in Zhytomir Oblast. A book published during the election campaign titled "Nartsys" (Narcissus) by Our Ukraine member Dmytro Chobit told a different story. It unearthed controversial documents that Medvedchuk's father had actually served in the German police, not the OUN.

The only opposition to the government draft bill within Ukraine has come from the Communist Party and the nationalist Russian Bloc. These groups continue to use the same Soviet-era rhetoric denouncing the OUN-UPA as still used in Russia. The Socialists (SPU) have evolved toward accepting that the OUN-UPA can be rehabilitated and that the struggle against them was a Ukrainian "civil war." Nevertheless, the SPU rejects any equality between Soviet veterans and the OUN-UPA and maintains that those who allegedly committed "crimes" should be weeded out.

Dr. Taras Kuzio, resident fellow and adjunct professor, Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto.