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The call of blood

Government propaganda and public response to the Soviet entry into
World War II

*L'appel du sang. La propagande gouvernementale et la réponse de l'opinion
publique à l'entrée de l'Union soviétique dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale*

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THE CALL OF BLOOD

Government propaganda and public response to the Soviet entry into World War II

On Thursday, September 7, 1939, as a shell-shocked Major Henryk Sucharski, the commander of the Polish garrison of Westerplatte, surrendered the embattled fortress to numerically superior German forces, and Hitler's mechanized divisions rushed eastward, encircling Łódź, approaching Warsaw, and crossing the Narew River, Joseph Stalin summoned his military commanders to the Kremlin. On the agenda was Soviet entry into the war, which had already become global. Among its declared participants were Germany, Poland, Britain, France, and South Africa. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, signed only two weeks earlier with Stalin's active participation, assigned parts of Poland east of the Narew to the Soviet sphere of influence, but the Soviet leaders were more than cautious about claiming their prospective booty. On September 5 Viacheslav Molotov, chairman of the USSR Council of People's Commissars and people's commissar for international relations, responded evasively to the German appeal of two days earlier to send the Red Army into Poland, saying that the time was not yet ripe. Now, with the Germans advancing, the Poles retreating, and the British and French doing little more than formally declaring war, Stalin wanted his military brass to speed up preparations for hostilities. The partial mobilization of reserves ordered the previous day was already taking effect. Soviet forces would cross the Polish border and seize the USSR's portion of war booty. But how to justify an act of open aggression against a neighboring state?

Stalin had his answer ready. Immediately after meeting with his commanders, he received in his Kremlin office the leader of the Communist International (Comintern), the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov. Also present were Viacheslav Molotov, the chief party propagandist, Andrei Zhdanov, and the chief Soviet representative in the Comintern, the Ukrainian communist Dmytro Manuïlsky. Stalin told his visitors that the Soviet Union would take advantage of

the world conflict to help the capitalist countries exhaust one another. He shared none of the admiration lavished by earlier generations of revolutionaries on Poland, which he characterized as a fascist state that was oppressing fellow Ukrainians and Belarusians. “The annihilation of that state under current conditions would mean one less bourgeois fascist state to contend with!” asserted Stalin. “What harm would result from the rout of Poland if we were to extend the socialist system to new territories and populations?” he asked his visitors, according to Dimitrov’s diary. One part of Stalin’s argument was based on a Bolshevik-style class analysis and the logic of world revolution that had failed to materialize in the 1920s. Another had to do with national minorities — the non-Polish inhabitants of eastern Poland, which had been “allocated” to the USSR by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Indeed, it was the Ukrainian-Belarusian nationality card that would be used most broadly both at home and abroad as catchall justification for Soviet aggression. It would outlive the early days of the conflict, serving as the basis of the Soviet authorities’ claim to their newly acquired territories until the end of the war.¹

This essay looks into the development of the ethnic justification of Soviet aggression against Poland on three levels: diplomatic, propagandistic, and popular. It examines how the theme of ethnic minorities developed in Soviet-German negotiations in the weeks leading up to Soviet entry into the war and the signing of the Soviet-German Boundary and Friendship Treaty of September 28, 1939; discusses the use of the nationality card in Soviet domestic propaganda; and, finally, takes a close look at the impact of the nationality theme on Soviet public opinion. There are two questions of broader significance that I seek to engage in this essay. The first deals with the relationship between Soviet foreign and domestic policy, especially with the formulation and articulation of nationality policy. The second concerns the variety of responses to government policy available to the Soviet public under Stalinism. I shall argue that 1) Stalin’s vacillation on the new Soviet borders and the propaganda effort accompanying the Soviet invasion of Poland demonstrate that the Soviet leader and his advisers were surprised by the German offer of August 23, 1939 to divide Poland into spheres of influence/occupation and did not fully formulate their position on the scope of their territorial expansion until a month later, when the military campaign was all but over; 2) the Soviet authorities’ view of the world not only as a community of states but also as a conglomerate of nationalities, as well as their understanding of the principle of national self-determination as possessing broad international legitimacy, had a profound impact on the formulation of Soviet foreign policy and defined the extent of Soviet territorial expansion in September 1939; 3) in the first weeks of the war, changes in Soviet foreign policy led to a change in government rhetoric on the nationality question, also opening the door to subsequent changes in nationality policy; 4) the change of

1. A.A. Chernobaev, ed., *Na prieme u Stalina: Tetradi (zhurnaly) zapisei lits priniatykh I.V. Stalinym (1924-1953 gg.)*, (M., 2008), 272–273; *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, vol. 22, bk. 2 (M., 1992), 25–28; Mykola Lytvyn, Kim Naumenko, *Stalin i Zakhidna Ukraïna, 1939-41* (Kyiv, 2010), 10–12; Ivo Banac, ed., *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov* (New Haven, 2003), 115-116.

nationality rhetoric helped the regime co-opt a sector of public opinion previously hostile to its policies both at home and abroad and prompted some segments of the Soviet public to formulate their relation to government policy in a way that does not fit the categories of resistance and compliance, which have received considerable attention in the recent literature on the subject.

The geopolitical crossword

Three days after Stalin's conversation with the Comintern leaders, one of the participants in the meeting, Viacheslav Molotov, was ordered to try the nationality argument for Soviet entry into the war on none other than the German ambassador to the Soviet Union, Friedrich Werner von der Schulenburg. On September 10, 1939, after telling Schulenburg that "the Soviet Government was taken completely by surprise by the unexpectedly rapid German military successes" and needed more time to prepare its own army for the invasion, Molotov mentioned to him a possible justification for the Soviet Union's prospective invasion of Poland. "[T]he Soviet Government," wrote Schulenburg, reporting the words of the Soviet foreign commissar to Berlin, "had intended to take the occasion of the further advance of German troops to declare that Poland was falling apart and that it was necessary for the Soviet Union, in consequence, to come to the aid of the Ukrainians and the White Russians 'threatened' by Germany. This argument was to make the intervention of the Soviet Union plausible to the masses and at the same time avoid giving the Soviet Union the appearance of an aggressor."²

The class analysis and export-of-revolution argument given by Stalin to Dimitrov had been dropped in Molotov's presentation to Schulenburg, while the nationality justification had survived, admittedly in somewhat different form. It was no longer the Polish state's poor treatment of the Ukrainians and Belarusians but their possible mistreatment by the Germans that was supposed to justify the Soviet invasion. On September 14, Schulenburg reported to Berlin about his next meeting with Molotov. The Soviet foreign commissar was again preoccupied with the question of legitimacy. "For the political motivation of Soviet action (the collapse of Poland and protection of Russian 'minorities') it was of the greatest importance not to take action until the governmental center of Poland, the city of Warsaw, had fallen," reported Schulenburg on the new Soviet position. "Molotov therefore asked that he be informed as nearly as possible as to when the capture of Warsaw could be counted on."

To be sure, the Soviets were not simply awaiting the fall of Warsaw. They began to prepare their own population for war, and the ethnic explanation of the impending invasion played an important role. On September 8, the day after Stalin's meeting

2. Schulenburg to the German Foreign Office, September 10, 1939, in Raymond James Sontag and James Stuart Beddie, eds., *Nazi-Soviet Relations, 1939-1941: Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office* (Washington, 1948): 91.

with his military commanders and Dimitrov, the Polish military attaché in Moscow attended a public lecture in Gorky Park on the German-Polish war. The speaker asked whether his audience was prepared to observe impassively the sufferings inflicted by nobiliary Poland on Ukrainians and Belarusians. The audience responded with cries of “March, march on the evil Germans!” On September 11, the Red Army formed two fronts tasked with the invasion of Poland. They were based on the Kyiv and Minsk military districts but received “nationalized” names — Ukrainian and Belarusian. They also introduced the minorities theme in the public propaganda. A few days later it appeared in the print media. Schulenburg concluded his report of September 14 by stating: “I would direct your attention to today’s article in *Pravda*, carried by DNB [Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro — German Press Agency], which will be followed by a similar article in *Izvestiia* tomorrow. The articles serve [to prepare] the political motivation mentioned by Molotov for Soviet intervention.”³

The two articles mentioned by Schulenburg ascribed the defeat of Poland to its mistreatment of its ethnic minorities and provided detailed information on the sorry status of Ukrainians and Belarusians in the prewar Polish state. The potential German threat was not mentioned, but Ribbentrop finally became alert to the problem that might arise as a result of Molotov’s desire to explain Soviet action against Poland by pointing a finger at the Germans. To forestall it, Ribbentrop wanted a joint Soviet-German statement stressing the desire of the two powers to “restore peace” in Poland. On September 15 the Reichskommissar cabled his ambassador in Moscow:

We assume... that the Soviet Government has already given up the idea, expressed by Molotov in an earlier conversation with you, of taking the threat to the Ukrainian and White Russian populations by Germany as a ground for Soviet action. The assignment of a motive of that sort would be out of the question in practice. It would be directly contrary to the true German intentions, which are confined exclusively to the realization of well-known German spheres of interest. It would also be in contradiction to the arrangements made in Moscow and, finally, would — in opposition to the desire for friendly relations expressed on both sides — expose the two States before the whole world as enemies.⁴

When Schulenburg presented these arguments to Molotov at their meeting on September 16, the day before the Soviet invasion of Poland, the Soviet commissar found himself on the defensive. Despite Ribbentrop’s warning, he insisted on

3. Schulenburg to the German Foreign Office, September 14, 1939, *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, 92–93; Czesław Grzelak, ed., *Wrzesień 1939 na kresach w relacjach* (Warsaw, 1999), 41–42; Natalija Liebediewa, “Wrzesień 1939 r.: Polska między Niemcami a Związkiem Sowieckim,” in Sławomir Dębski and Michail Narinski, eds., *Kryzys 1939 roku w interpretacjach polskich i rosyjskich historyków* (Warsaw, 2009), 437–475, here 447–448.

4. “O vnutrennikh prichinakh porazheniia Pol’shi,” *Pravda* (14 September 1939): 1; Ribbentrop to Schulenburg, September 15, 1939, *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, 94.

including a statement in the Soviet declaration on the causes of intervention arguing that

the Soviet Union considered itself obligated to intervene to protect its Ukrainian and White Russian brothers and make it possible for these unfortunate people to work in peace.

According to Schulenburg's report, Molotov

conceded that the projected argument of the Soviet Government contained a note that was jarring to German sensibilities but asked that in view of the difficult situation of the Soviet Government we not let a trifle like this stand in our way. The Soviet Government unfortunately saw no possibility of any other motivation, since the Soviet Union had thus far not concerned itself about the plight of its minorities in Poland and had to justify abroad, in some way or other, its present intervention.⁵

As always, Molotov was acting on Stalin's instructions and was not at liberty to change anything in the declared position of the Soviet government. His superior, however, took Schulenburg's warning very seriously. At 2:00 a.m. on September 17 Stalin summoned the German ambassador to the Kremlin not only to tell him that the Red Army was about to attack Poland but also to read him the note to the same effect that would be given to the Polish ambassador. "The draft read to me contained three points unacceptable to us," reported Schulenburg to Berlin. "In answer to my objections, Stalin with the utmost readiness so altered the text that the note now seems satisfactory for us." The note, which appeared in Soviet newspapers the next day, presented the defense of the Ukrainians and Belarusians as the main reason for the Soviet intervention, with no mention of a German threat. The relevant parts of the note were included almost verbatim in Molotov's address to the Soviet people, which was broadcast by radio a few hours after the invasion. In both cases, the Ukrainians and Belarusians were simply declared to have been left unprotected by the collapse of the Polish state.⁶

The main problem with their explanation of the invasion as an act of fraternal assistance to the Ukrainians and Belarusians was that, according to the secret protocol signed by Molotov and Ribbentrop in Moscow on the morning of August 24, 1939 (and dated the previous day), the Soviet sphere of influence extended beyond territories settled predominantly by Ukrainians and Belarusians. The Soviet catch also included millions of Jews and Poles. If Jews were dispersed all over Polish territory, nowhere constituting a majority and consequently unable to claim a

5. Schulenburg to the German Foreign Office, September 16, 1939, *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, 95.

6. "Rech' po radio predsedatelia Soveta narodnykh komissarov SSSR tov.V.M. Molotova 17 sentiabria 1939 g.," *Pravda* (18 September 1939): 1; "Nota pravitel'stva SSSR, vruchennaia pol'skomu poslu v Moskve utrom 17 sentiabria 1939 goda," *ibid.*; Schulenburg to the German Foreign Office, September 17, 1939, *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, 96.

homeland of their own, the Poles had such a claim. They constituted an absolute majority of the population on the territories between the Buh and Vistula rivers that were to be forcibly brought into the Soviet sphere. Well aware of this, Stalin made preparations for dealing with the Polish question. On the eve of the invasion, the commander of the newly formed Ukrainian front, Semen Tymoshenko, received instructions on how to facilitate the election of deputies to three popular assemblies — those of western Ukraine, western Belarus, and Polish regions east of the Vistula. These assemblies were to adopt resolutions requesting the incorporation of their territories into the USSR. Western Belarus and Western Ukraine would thereby join the existing Belarusian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics, while the Polish territories would join the USSR as a separate Polish Soviet Socialist Republic. On September 15 Lavrentii Beria, the people's commissar of internal affairs (NKVD), included a reference to the Polish assembly in the order he sent his subordinates in Ukraine and Belarus. The orders reflected current thinking at the very top of the Soviet pyramid of power.⁷

Beria's instructions to NKVD officers in Ukraine and Belarus and the instructions to Tymoshenko show that on the eve of the Soviet invasion Stalin had no plans for creating a Polish buffer state between Germany and the USSR, an idea earlier entertained by the Soviet leadership. On September 19, Molotov said as much to Schulenburg, who reported to Berlin on his conversation with the Soviet foreign commissar: "Molotov hinted that the original inclination entertained by the Soviet Government and Stalin personally to permit the existence of a residual Poland had given way to the inclination to partition Poland along the Nissa-Narew-Vistula-San Line." That was the line defined by the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 23. Within the next few days, Stalin further developed his thinking on the issue. On September 25 he told Schulenburg that he wanted to avoid "anything that in the future might create friction between Germany and the Soviet Union" and "considered it wrong to leave an independent Polish rump state." According to Schulenburg, Stalin proposed the following:

From the territory to the east of the demarcation line, all the Province of Lublin and that portion of the Province of Warsaw which extends to the Bug should be added to our share. In return, we should waive our claim to Lithuania.⁸

What was the logic of Stalin's new proposal? His desire to claim Lithuania might suggest that he wanted to regain a former Romanov possession. Besides, by swapping Polish territories for Lithuanian ones, Stalin straightened the line of his

7. V. Kovaliuk, "Novi arkhivni dokumenty pro Narodni zbory Zakhidnoi Ukraïny (zhovten' 1939 r.)," *Arkhivy Ukraïny*, no. 5-6 (1991): 88; *Radians'ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky u 1939-cherвні 1941 r. Dokumenty HAD SBU Ukraïny*, comp. Vasyl' Danylenko and Serhii Kokin (Kyiv, 2009), 46-49, here 48.

8. Schulenburg to the German Foreign Office, September 20, 1939, *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, 101; Ribbentrop to Schulenburg, September 23, 1939, *ibid.*, 102; Schulenburg to the German Foreign Office, September 25, 1939, *ibid.*, 102-103.

future defenses, moving the border farther away from Leningrad and eliminating the bulge in the south along the future western borders of Ukraine and Belarus. That is as far as the Lithuanian argument takes us, but Stalin's offer of the Lublin and Warsaw provinces to Germany clearly does not fit such an explanation, as those territories had largely belonged to the Russian Empire prior to 1917. Besides, Stalin was not willing to pass on the former Habsburg Galicia, which fell into the Soviet sphere of influence even though German representatives had expressed interest in the region in unofficial talks with the Soviet ambassador in Berlin in July 1939. If the proposal was not solely an attempt to reclaim tsarist possessions or improve military defenses, what was it? A close reading indicates that the Soviet desire to recover lost territory and improve the geostrategic position of the state were adjusted to take into account ethnic boundaries and national identities of borderland populations. By getting rid of the ethnic Polish territories, Stalin was also bringing the new Soviet-German border into line with his propaganda thesis that Soviet forces had entered Poland primarily in order to liberate their fellow Ukrainians and Belarusians. He could thus explain the new border to the Soviet and foreign public much more effectively than the original one.⁹

There is also no reason to doubt the sincerity of Stalin's claim that he wanted to avoid anything in the new territorial arrangement that might make future German-Soviet relations more difficult. Getting rid of the Polish buffer state was one step in that direction. Getting rid of the Lublin and Warsaw provinces, settled largely by Poles, was another. Stalin had good reason for concern that Germany might use the cause of Polish reunification as a pretext to interfere in Soviet affairs and eventually go to war against the Soviet Union. A few months earlier, the world press had been full of suggestions that Hitler was going to use Transcarpathian Ukraine — the Czechoslovak province of Ruthenia — as a base for starting a war with Stalin for control of Soviet Ukraine. In March 1939 Stalin declared from the podium of the Eighteenth Party Congress that he did not trust Western insinuations in that regard. Many regard Stalin's assertion as a signal to Hitler and Ribbentrop that he was prepared to make a deal. The deal he was negotiating now precluded the creation of a new "Transcarpathia," either Ukrainian or Polish. The proposed new Soviet-German boundary was to follow the Sian and Buh rivers, roughly corresponding to the ethnic boundary in the region as defined by the Allied Supreme Council in Paris in December 1918, later known as the Curzon Line.¹⁰

9. On the German interest in Galicia, see Michael Jabara Carley, *1939: The Alliance That Never Was and the Coming of World War II* (Chicago, 1999), 192-193.

10. A *New York Times* correspondent reported from Paris on September 17: "Some people here think that Russia intends to take that part of Poland that was offered to her in the plan for settlement of Marquess Curzon of Kedleston. This went to a considerable distance west of the Soviet's present legal border. Then, it is presumed, the Russians would declare that they had a logical basis to claim this territory on the ground that even so extreme an opponent of the Bolsheviks as Lord Curzon had been willing to concede the Soviet's right to it." See Harold Denny, "Paris Sees Stalin in Betrayer Role," *New York Times* (September 18, 1939): 6. The *London Times* published a map of Poland including the Curzon Line and the new Soviet-German boundary in its issue for September 18, 1939. On the origins of the Curzon Line,

On September 28 Joachim von Ribbentrop, who had flown to Moscow the previous day, signed the German-Soviet border agreement, which recognized the new line proposed by Stalin. In the course of negotiations, Ribbentrop tried to acquire the oil-rich Drohobych region of Ukrainian Galicia for Germany, but Stalin stood firm, agreeing to ship oil to Germany but not to give up the territory. He emerged from the negotiations not only as a protector of Ukrainian territory but also as a leader concerned about Ukrainians and Belarusians beyond the territories that were about to become part of the USSR. Molotov and Ribbentrop signed a confidential protocol that committed the Soviet government to raise no obstacle to the voluntary transfer of German inhabitants from the Soviet sector of partitioned Poland to the German sector. The German government promised to reciprocate with regard to Ukrainians and Belarusians. This privilege was not extended to Poles or Jews. Another protocol obliged each government to suppress Polish propaganda directed against the other party. In transferring Polish territories to Hitler, Stalin wanted to ensure that his new partner would not use the Polish card against the USSR.¹¹

If the map accompanying the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 23, 1939) was largely the result of proposals made by Ribbentrop, the amendments made to it on September 28 originated with Stalin. Ribbentrop's proposal was based mainly on historical precedent and on the assumption that Stalin wanted to restore the old imperial borders in Eastern Europe. Stalin's amendments, by contrast, were based on ethnic criteria that dominated the thinking of the post-World War I era. In a mere three weeks — a brief period extremely rich in events and decisions — Stalin's nationality argument, which was first formulated, as far as we know, at his meeting of September 7 with Molotov, Zhdanov, Dimitrov, and Manuilsky, had developed from a theme intended to undermine the legitimacy of the Polish state into a propaganda tool and, finally, an important principle for determining the extent of Soviet territorial expansion and establishing the border with the Soviets' new German neighbor. Stalin's uncertainty with regard to that border and his vacillation between creating a Polish buffer state, setting up a Polish Soviet Socialist Republic as part of the USSR, and transferring Polish territory to Germany indicate that he and his advisers were caught unprepared, first by the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and then by the rapid advance of the German panzer divisions into Poland. It was in the process of the September consultations and negotiations with Germany that they found a way not only to sort out their messy territorial relations with Germany but also to work out a language in which they could explain their actions both at home and abroad.

see Jerzy Borzecki, *The Soviet-Polish Peace of 1921 and the Creation of Interwar Europe* (New Haven, 2008), 79-104. On the significance of Stalin's speech at the Eighteenth Congress of the Communist Party, see Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War* (New York, 1989), 110-111.

11. See Ingeborg Fleischhauer, "The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: The German Version," *International Affairs* (Moscow) 37, 8 (August 1991): 1141-29; For the texts of the documents signed by Ribbentrop and Molotov in the early hours of September 29 (but dated the previous day), see *Nazi-Soviet Relations*, 105-109.

The word “nationality” proved highly compatible with the words “borders,” “security,” “legitimacy,” and “propaganda,” linking them in a diplomatic crossword that preoccupied Stalin in the weeks leading up to the Soviet entry into World War II.

Soviet propaganda

Of the two partners who signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, it was the Soviets who were most concerned about its possible impact on public opinion in their country. When on the morning of August 24 Ribbentrop became too enthusiastic about the prospects of German-Soviet friendship, Stalin cautioned his guest with reference to public opinion.

Do you not think we have to pay a little more attention to public opinion in our two countries? [he asked the Nazi visitor]. For many years now we have been pouring buckets of shit over each other’s heads and our propaganda boys could not do enough in that direction. Now all of a sudden, are we to make our peoples believe all is forgotten and forgiven? Things do not work so fast.

Stalin knew what he was talking about. When news of the pact broke in Germany, many in the Nazi leadership blamed Ribbentrop for betraying party principles by making common cause with the Bolsheviks. While most ordinary Germans eventually overcame the original shock and accepted the pact as a means of avoiding war on two fronts, many Nazi Party members found their deeply held anticommunist beliefs traduced. Some expressed their concerns to Hitler; others resigned from the party in protest.¹²

News of the sudden about-face in Soviet-German relations left the population of the USSR no less bewildered than that of Germany. People did not dare to resign from the Communist Party or voice their dissatisfaction publicly, but the NKVD registered mass disillusionment among the population, which had been fed for years on antifascist propaganda. Nikita Khrushchev, then first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, later remembered the embarrassment caused by the pact:

We could not even discuss the treaty at party meetings. For us to have explained our reasons for signing the treaty in straightforward newspaper language would have been offensive, and besides nobody would believe us. It was very hard for us — as communists, as antifascists, as people unalterably opposed to the philosophical and political position of the fascists — to accept the idea of joining forces with Germany. It was difficult enough for us to accept this paradox ourselves. It would have been impossible to explain it to the man on the street.

12. For Stalin’s remark to Ribbentrop, see Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (New York, 2003), 311. On negative reaction to the pact among the Nazi anti-Bolshevik core, see Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-45: Nemesis* (London, 2000), 205-206.

Molotov admitted the problem caused by the Soviet public's reception of the pact in his speech to the Supreme Soviet on August 31. Now the regime was faced with the task of explaining an even more treacherous move — the invasion of a neighboring state that had resisted a fascist attack.¹³

The Soviet use of the nationality issue to justify the invasion of Poland began in earnest with a publication in *Pravda* for September 14 that attracted the attention of Schulenburg and was picked up by the German Press Agency (DNB). It was in fact an editorial entitled "On the Internal Reasons for the Defeat of Poland." With regard to the fresh German victories on the Polish front, the editorial said: "It is hard to explain such a swift defeat of Poland solely by the superiority of Germany's military technology and military organization and the absence of effective assistance to Poland on the part of England and France." It was an implicit reference to an article that had appeared in *Pravda* only three days earlier. On September 11, in an essay entitled "The German-Polish War: A Survey of Military Operations," E. Sosnin enumerated four reasons for the collapse of Polish defenses: lack of fortifications on the country's western borders, German superiority in air power, the Wehrmacht's superiority in artillery, and lack of support from Poland's Western allies. Now the Soviet leaders were making an important corrective to Sosnin's assessment. The editorial stressed the "internal weaknesses and contradictions of the Polish state." It stated that

Poland is a multi-ethnic state. In the composition of the population of Poland, Poles make up only 60 percent, while the other 40 percent are made up of national minorities, mainly Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews. It suffices to note that there are no fewer than eight million Ukrainians in Poland, and about three million Belarusians.

The Jews thus were relegated to the secondary status. The editorial was really about the Ukrainians and Belarusians.¹⁴

The problem with the Polish state, according to the *Pravda* editorial, was not simply its multinational character but the way in which the Polish ruling circles treated their minorities — the subject broached by Stalin in his conversation with Dimitrov a week earlier.

Western Ukraine and Western Belarus, wrote *Pravda*, regions of predominantly Ukrainian and Belarusian population, are the objects of the most flagrant, shameless exploitation on the part of the Polish landlords. The situation of the Ukrainians and Belarusians is characterized by a regime of ethnic oppression

13. *Khrushchev Remembers*, introduction, commentary and notes by Edward Crankshaw, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (New York, 1971), 133; Viacheslav Molotov, *Soviet Peace Policy: Four Speeches* (London, 1941), 16. For NKVD reports on public reaction to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and Molotov's speech at a session of the USSR Supreme Soviet explaining the reasons for signing, see *Radians'ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky*, 968-985.

14. "O vnutrennikh prichinakh porazheniia Pol'shi." Cf. E. Sosnin, "Germano-pol'skaia voina (Obzor voennykh deistvii)," *Pravda* (11 September 1939): 4.

and lack of rights. The ruling circles of Poland, flaunting their supposed love of liberty, have done all they could to turn Western Ukraine and Western Belarus into a colony without rights, consigned for plunder to the Polish lords.

The authors of the editorial went on to describe in detail the discrimination of the non-Polish nationalities on the legal and administrative levels. Special attention was paid to the sorry state of Ukrainian and Belarusian culture and the Polonization of the minorities. While the editorial allegedly dealt with the reasons for Poland's defeat, its implicit message was hard to miss: the Ukrainians and Belarusians were suffering under Polish rule and needed Soviet protection.¹⁵

The political significance of the editorial was not lost on foreign observers, and Schulenburg was not the only one to take note of it. With the benefit of hindsight, *Time* magazine (September 25) linked the *Pravda* editorial with the panic that Stalin and Molotov must have felt as they watched the German advance into Poland. In an article entitled "Dizziness from Success," which reminded the reader of Stalin's piece of 1930 about excesses in the collectivization of agriculture, the *Time* magazine writer argued that the editorial had been drafted by Stalin himself. "As the Germans reached Bialystok last week Comrade Stalin came out with his answer," went the article. The *Time* magazine author quoted liberally from the *Pravda* editorial on the mistreatment of Ukrainians and Belarusians and concluded with the following statement: "Thus with great circumspection the Dictator told the people what part of Poland Russia intended to get — i.e., the Polish Ukraine, the northeast area south of Lithuania." In general terms, the argument used by the *Pravda* editorial was already familiar to observers of the European scene. Czechoslovakia had been dismembered in 1938-1939, ostensibly to guarantee the rights and freedoms of minorities. The mistreatment of the German minority in Poland had served as a pretext for Hitler's attack on Poland only two weeks earlier, and Hitler had no qualms about exploiting Ukrainian nationalists either in Carpatho-Ukraine or in Poland to destabilize the situation and achieve his goals. If anything, Stalin was now taking a leaf from Hitler's book.¹⁶

When Viacheslav Molotov addressed the Soviet people on the radio in the late morning of September 17, explaining why the country had entered the war, the nationality question was front and center in his argument. The Soviet foreign commissar began by claiming that the Polish state had collapsed, rendering existing treaties between Moscow and Warsaw invalid. The collapse of Poland had also created a vacuum on the borders of the USSR, threatening the security of the Soviet state.

The Soviet government, continued Molotov, also cannot be expected to take an indifferent attitude to the fate of its blood relatives, Ukrainians and Belarusians residing in Poland who previously found themselves in the position of nations

15. "O vnutrennikh prichinakh porazheniia Pol'shi."

16. "Russia: Dizziness from Success," *Time* (September 25): 1939.

without rights and have now been completely abandoned to the vagaries of fate. The Soviet government regards it as a sacred obligation to extend a helping hand to its brethren Ukrainians and brethren Belarusians residing in Poland.

The importance of this ethnic justification of the invasion was further stressed in a statement later in the speech:

The Soviet government has directed the General Staff of the Red Army to order its troops to cross the border and take the lives and property of the population of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus under its protection.

The “blood brothers,” it seemed, had to be saved from the Polish government, even though it allegedly did not exist. There was no mention of the German threat or, for that matter, of the Jewish minority in Poland. The former had been edited out of the text of the Soviet note to the Poles by Schulenburg. Reference to the latter was probably omitted by the Soviets themselves.¹⁷

While lamenting the fate of national minorities was nothing new in European politics of the day, the *Pravda* editorial of September 14 and Molotov’s speech of September 17 marked a major change in the Soviet use of nationality rhetoric at home and abroad. It was a shift from treating cross-border national minorities as a threat to the security of the Soviet Union to a rhetoric that allowed the regime to take advantage of those communities not only to advance Soviet interests in the international arena but also to extend Soviet borders at the expense of neighboring states. In a certain way it was a return to the policies of the 1920s, marked by the original optimism of the new communist regime, which had not yet abandoned its dreams of world revolution. The policies of the 1920s, defined by Terry Martin as the “Piedmont principle,” were designed to “exploit cross-border ethnic ties to project political influence into neighboring states.” They were first formulated and promoted by the Ukrainian national communists who wanted Soviet Ukraine to serve as a beacon of hope for Ukrainians in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. Ukrainians abroad, went the argument, would be attracted to socialism and the USSR by the flowering of Ukrainian culture and society in Soviet Ukraine. This policy was ended during the Great Famine of 1932-1933, which resulted in millions of innocent deaths. The beacon was extinguished. Ukrainian communists were accused of nationalist deviation and instigation of peasant resistance to the Soviet regime. The policy of cultural Ukrainization was curtailed and the “Piedmont principle” nullified.¹⁸

The new era became known for a different set of foreign-policy priorities and a different rhetoric that reflected a “besieged fortress” mentality. Ukraine and Belarus were now viewed as bulwarks of the Soviet state that were

17. “Rech’ po radio predsedatelia Soveta narodnykh komissarov SSSR tov. V.M. Molotova.”

18. See Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca – London, 2001), 8-9, 225-227, 292-293, 312-319, 351-352.

threatened by the capitalist West. The imperialists, argued the regime, were trying to exploit cross-border ethnic ties to spur non-Russian nationalism in the Soviet borderlands and create a fifth column in the USSR so as to prepare for a future invasion. The task of turning Ukraine into a “true fortress of the USSR” was formulated by Stalin himself in the months leading up to the Great Famine. Moscow’s representatives in Ukraine were eager to oblige. “Comrades,” said the newly appointed first secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Nikita Khrushchev, to delegates at the party congress in June 1938, “we shall bend every effort to ensure that the task and directive of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) and Comrade Stalin — to make Ukraine a fortress impregnable to enemies — is fulfilled with honor.” Khrushchev blamed the “difficulties that Ukraine underwent in the course of collectivization” — an indirect reference to the Great Famine — on the intrigues of the foreign enemies of the USSR, including Józef Piłsudski of Poland. Khrushchev’s other references to Poland were intended to illustrate Soviet achievements in education and assert that the Ukrainian toiling masses would never tolerate the rule of the Polish lords. The rhetoric was defensive rather than offensive. The “Piedmont principle” was long gone. The “besieged fortress” mentality remained dominant until the appearance of the *Pravda* editorial on September 14 and Molotov’s speech three days later.¹⁹

Molotov’s speech was broadcast on Soviet radio at 11:30 a.m. on 17 September, less than seven hours after the two Red Army fronts crossed the Polish-Soviet border and began their offensive against dispersed and disoriented Polish troops. Since the broadcast was scheduled to coincide with the lunch break at government institutions, factories, and collective farms, hundreds of thousands of industrial and office workers, peasants, and students all over the Soviet Union gathered around radio transmitters to listen the speech. They then participated in government-sponsored meetings featuring speakers who recapitulated Molotov’s statements made a few minutes earlier and called on those present to give their full support to the newest party policy and the war effort. The next day *Pravda* published a photo of a meeting attended by thousands at the Red Proletarian machine-tool factory in Moscow. It also ran an article on a gathering of professors and students of Moscow State University, reportedly with an attendance of six thousand, who welcomed the address delivered by a professor of party history, Vladimir Yudovsky. The professor characterized the invasion as “a sage act of world-historical significance.”²⁰

In Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, *Pravda* correspondents registered an especially high level of political activity and rising popular enthusiasm. “Thousands of

19. See Joseph Stalin to Lazar Kaganovich, August 11, 1932, in Oleg Khlevniuk et al., eds., *Stalin i Kaganovich: Perepiska, 1931-1936* (M., 2001), no. 248; “Iz otchetnogo doklada pervogo sekretaria TsK KP(b)U N.S. Khrushcheva XIV s’ezdu KP(b)U,” in V.Iu. Vasil’ev, R.Iu. Podkur, Kh. Kuromiia, Iu.I. Shapoval, and A. Vainer, comp., *Politicheskoe rukovodstvo Ukrainy 1938-1989* (M., 2006), 35-47.

20. “Akt vsemirno istoricheskogo znacheniiia,” *Pravda* (18 September 1939): 2.

Kyivans crowded around transmitters on streets and squares,” reported *Pravda* from the capital of a republic directly affected by the invasion and the change in the party’s nationality rhetoric.

With strained attention, they listen everywhere to the speech of Comrade V.M. Molotov. When Comrade Molotov speaks of the Soviet government’s decision to offer assistance to Ukrainian and Belarusian brethren, stormy applause and shouts of “hurrah” resound. Comrade Molotov’s words are lost in cries of “Long live Stalin!” “Long live the Party!” “Long live the Red Army!” Someone intones the proletarian hymn, and its sound carries far along the streets. In those minutes, two hundred draftees at the Stalin quarter recruitment office raised a fervent ovation in honor of the party and government. A meeting sprang up spontaneously. Someone took a red towel from a table, and in the hands of a draftee it turns into a scarlet banner under which the draftees swear to do their duty with honor to their homeland and to the proletariat of the whole world.²¹

Pravda and other Soviet newspapers were full of reports on public meetings at which workers, peasants, and representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia were encouraged by the regime to express their support for the intervention. Given the official nature of these meetings, it is not surprising that the language used by speakers and authors of resolutions was taken directly from Molotov’s speech and other official pronouncements. Emphasis was placed on the national liberation of Ukrainians and Belarusians and the social liberation of the entire population of Poland’s eastern provinces. Rhetoric that had characterized the “besieged fortress” mentality was abandoned almost overnight in favor of the language of national (and social) liberation. Not only was the fortress no longer besieged, but its walls were extended westward, necessitating a new terminology. The “national liberation” paradigm fit the bill. The Soviet authorities’ claim that they had entered the war on behalf of their Slavic blood brothers, abandoned by their erstwhile Polish rulers, had limited impact on world opinion at best.

If one judges by Soviet media reports, Stalin and Molotov scored a major public-relations coup. But should one trust reporting in the Soviet media? The London *Times* wrote on September 18 regarding the events of the previous day in Moscow:

At 8 o’clock the Russian wireless broadcast a summary of the contents of the Note [to the Polish government], which stated that Soviet action was necessary to safeguard her own interests and to protect the White Russian and Ukrainian minorities in Eastern Poland. [...] It has been noted that the Soviet arguments bear a family resemblance to those invariably adopted by Hitler and as often demolished by the Soviet Press as pretexts for aggression. Accordingly, it was a bewildered Soviet population which listened to M. Molotoff’s broadcast this morning.

21. “Krasnaia armiiia neset schast’c narodu,” *Pravda* (18 September 1939): 3.

G.E.R. Gedye, the *New York Times* Moscow correspondent, reported on September 17 from the Soviet capital:

[T]he Moscow population, recalling the reiterated declarations of leaders headed by Joseph Stalin that they did not desire a foot of anyone else's territory, went about today asking: "What has happened now?" "Are we at war; with whom and why?" "What do we want in Poland?" "What has gone wrong with the neutrality pact signed with the express purpose of keeping us from war?"²²

In the West, the Red Army's invasion of Poland was considered a stab in the back of a victim of Nazi aggression. Even politicians like Winston Churchill in Britain, who gave limited support to the Soviet action, did so on the basis of arguments different from those invoked by Stalin and Molotov. But what was the impact of national-liberation rhetoric at home? Did it work, or did it fail? To answer this question, one has to deal with the difficult task of assessing Soviet public opinion. In the last few decades, popular attitudes toward international politics and, in particular, questions of war and peace have attracted a fair amount of attention from scholars of the Second World War. Public opinion was an important factor in the formulation of foreign policy by democratic governments and an important consideration in the efforts of dictatorial regimes to mobilize public support for warfare. The Soviet Union certainly falls into the latter category, which creates additional problems in the acquisition and assessment of relevant data. It is difficult but not impossible to track major trends in the mood of the population under dictatorial regimes, partly because the regimes themselves allocated significant resources to monitoring those trends and changes.²³

The NKVD pollsters

Throughout Soviet history, the Communist Party leadership regularly received top-secret reports assessing the attitudes of the Soviet public to party policies. The reports came from two sources: party organs and the secret police. Whatever the circumstances, both types of reports always stated that the vast majority of the

22. "Red Army in Polish territory. Molotoff excuses Soviet action. Protection of 'blood-relations.' A stab in the back," *The Times* (September 18, 1939): 6; G.E.R. Gedye, "Soviet 'Neutrality' Stressed in Move. Moscow Assures Other States on Invasion — Molotoff Gives Talk to Bewildered People," *New York Times*, (September 18, 1939): 1.

23. Carley, 1939: *The Alliance That Never Was*, 216–26. On the relation between ideology and *realpolitik* in Stalin's foreign policy of the period, see Amir Weiner, "Saving Private Ivan: From What, Why, and How?" *Kritika* 1, 2 (Spring 2000): 305-336, here 309-313. For research on public opinion during World War II, see Sarah Davies, *Soviet Public Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent* (Cambridge, 1997); Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (New York, 2001); Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France* (Farnham, UK, 2011).

Soviet people welcomed, accepted, and endorsed the latest initiatives, thereby echoing newspaper coverage of those events. They then turned to the opinions of those who were doubtful of party policies or expressed opinions characterized as blatantly anti-Soviet. In that regard, both types of reports differed profoundly from the Soviet media. The party reports tended to give less coverage of anti-Soviet activities, while the secret-police reports largely focused on just such activities. There was good reason for the difference. Emphasizing negative responses would not be in the interest of party officials preparing the reports, since it could be interpreted as an indication of deficiencies in their own propaganda efforts. Secret-police officials, on the other hand, could only benefit from focusing on negative responses. Dealing with existing or imagined opposition to the regime was the *raison d'être* of the secret police, and the reports provided, among other things, additional justification for maintaining an extensive and costly secret-police apparatus.²⁴

The credibility of secret-police reports was at the core of the discussion about compliance and resistance under Stalinism in the first issue of *Kritika* (2000).²⁵ There is good reason to question the reliability of the information included in the reports, especially when they are mined exclusively for manifestations of opposition to the regime. There seems to be general agreement, however, that when it comes to “negative” statements — those critical of government policy — they certainly cannot be regarded as expressions of the only authentic feelings of the population but can be used to assess the range of responses offered by the Soviet public to a given initiative on the part of the Soviet state. But what about expressions of support for the regime and its actions? Should they be taken at face value or ignored? One way to deal with this question is to distinguish between two kinds of the endorsements of official policy — those expressed in Bolshevik parlance of the period and those that did not mirror official pronouncements. Expressions of approval for Soviet entry into the war that used a vocabulary different from that of party declarations and media reports are of special interest. An added benefit of focusing on such expressions is the possibility of identifying sources of support for government policy beyond the party’s own organizational base. The unexpected change of rhetoric in the Soviet media’s justification of the coming military campaign is a case in which such a strategy may be applied to good effect.

I shall try to reconstruct the variety of positive and negative responses to the Soviet invasion of Poland on the basis of thirty-three reports about the reaction of the Soviet public to the outbreak of the war filed by officials of the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs of Ukraine between August 27 and October 15,

24. On the peculiarities of Soviet secret-police reports as a historical source concerning the state of public opinion, see Davies, *Soviet Public Opinion in Stalin’s Russia*, 9-14.

25. See Jochen Hellbeck’s exchange with Sarah Davies in the reprint of the *Kritika* polemics: Michael David-Fox, ed., *The Resistance Debate in Russian and Soviet History*, (Bloomington, 2003). For the continuation of the debate, see Hiroaki Kuromiya, “How Do We Know What the People Thought under Stalin?” in Timo Vihavainen, ed., *Sovetskaia vlast’ — narodnaia vlast’?* (SPb., 2003), 1-16.

1939. These reports have only recently become available to scholars as part of a publication project undertaken by historians from the Institute of Ukrainian Archaeography in Kyiv in cooperation with archivists of the Security Service of Ukraine, and with the support of a number of German governmental and public institutions. Most of the reports were prepared for Nikita Khrushchev, then first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, and for Lavrentii Beriia, people's commissar of internal affairs of the USSR, by the people's commissar of internal affairs, Ivan Serov, and his deputy, Mykola Horlynsky. They were based in part on reports that Serov and his assistants were receiving from the various regions of Ukraine and from NKVD officials in Red Army units posted in Ukraine. These, too, are included in our analysis.²⁶

On September 17, the date of the Soviet invasion of Poland and Molotov's speech to the Soviet people, Mykola Horlynsky sent an urgent request to his subordinates:

I propose that all heads of operational sections of the NKVD of the USSR with a secret service and intelligence in Kyiv present secret-service reports on the reaction of the population to Comrade Molotov's speech on the entry of our forces into Poland to the head of the Second Department of the NKVD of the USSR by 2:00 p.m. today. Thereafter draft versions of such reports are to be presented to Comrade Pavlychev every three hours.

By the end of the day, Horlynsky had filed two reports assessing the mood of the Ukrainian population for Nikita Khrushchev. The first was based on the reactions of Kyivans, while the second was a follow-up memo including data telephoned to Kyiv from NKVD offices in the regions. Two more reports followed on the next day, and reporting continued on a regular basis until the very end of the campaign.²⁷

What did the people of Soviet Ukraine think about the war? To begin answering this question, I shall present a spectrum of both "positive" and "negative" responses without trying to establish how popular they may have been among the Soviet Ukrainian public in September 1939. In general, the NKVD reports agreed with the Soviet media, claiming that official efforts to convince the population of the legitimacy of government action had been largely successful. "A number of passages of Comrade Molotov's speech were accompanied by applause," wrote Mykola Horlynsky on September 17. The reaction of students was particularly enthusiastic. "At Kyiv University, Comrade Molotov's speech was met with shouts of 'hurrah' by students," reads the report. The following report suggested that young people in the provinces were just as enthusiastic: "A number of incidents have been noted of voluntary reporting to military recruitment offices, with requests for enlistment in the ranks of the RKKA [Workers' and Peasants' Red Army]. A group of students of the Mykolaiv Pedagogical Institute made a collective appeal to be enlisted as volunteers in the Red Army." While rank-and-file NKVD agents

26. *Radians'ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky*, nos. 431-456, 998-1073.

27. *Ibid.*, 49.

and their superiors were under pressure not only to find and record but also to fabricate positive responses to Communist Party initiatives, the episodes described above could hardly have been fabricated, as they were easily verifiable.²⁸

What aroused such enthusiasm on the part of students? The information about Mykolaiv students volunteering for the Red Army was preceded in Horlynsky's report by the statement that "The action of the USSR is being assessed as a step in the direction of starting a world revolution and active struggle against the fascist aggressors." A student of the Vinnytsia Medical Institute named Benadsky allegedly told an NKVD informer that "our Soviet government will have to bear the red banner of revolution farther west. The defeat of Poland shows that one of the links of fascism has been broken." One might assume that the new crop of Soviet youth, born after 1917 and raised on notions of revolutionary romanticism, was welcoming an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of participants in the October Revolution and heroes of the Spanish Civil War, lionized by Soviet propaganda, in order to carry the torch of revolution to Central and Western Europe. The references to "fascist aggressors" and "the breaking of one of the links of fascism" echo Soviet anti-fascist propaganda of the years leading up to the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which disappointed and disheartened idealistically inclined Soviet students. It appears that the students were prepared to see the Soviet invasion of Poland as a reversal of the policy initiated by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.²⁹

The report forwarded by Horlynsky to Lavrentii Beria on September 19, included information from the regions indicating that not only students but also young workers and peasants were eager to take part in the war. In the city of Osypenko (present-day Berdiansk), "immediately after Comrade Molotov's radio address, eighty men presented themselves, twenty of them with their wives, and asked that they be directed to the Red Army to take part in military operations." Recruits in the Chernihivka region of Zaporizhia oblast "began to demand their speedy enlistment in the army so that they might be in time to take part in military operations together with the whole Red Army." It was not entirely clear to the population whether the Soviet troops would simply occupy Western Ukraine and Belarus without military action, fight the Poles, or engage the German army as well. R.P. Sheiner, the author of a letter intercepted by the NKVD, anticipated a war with Germany. "We had to take this action," he wrote about the invasion of Poland, "for the Germans would have attacked us in any event, so it is better to strike them on Polish territory than on ours." Some Red Army officers crossing the Polish border on the morning of September 17 believed that they were going to fight the Germans. "I thought that this was the beginning of war with Germany," remembered one of them later, "and many other officers thought the same."³⁰

28. *Ibid.*, 998, 1001.

29. *Ibid.*, 995, 1001, 1054.

30. *Ibid.*, 1009-1011, 1015, 1049; Harvard University, Widener Library, The Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, Schedule B, vol. 6, case 193, 4.

Most of the initial criticism to the Soviet invasion of Poland recorded by NKVD agents came from the ranks of the intelligentsia. Svitozor Drahomanov, the son of Ukraine's most influential political thinker of the nineteenth century, Mykhailo Drahomanov, and a translator at the Art Publishing House in Kyiv, allegedly stated in the presence of an NKVD informer:

In essence, this is the fourth partition of Poland, carried out by arrangement between Stalin and Hitler. [...] All that is going on may be called the victory of Hitlerism, which is the highest stage of the development of capitalist society.

Drahomanov expressed his critique of official actions in language borrowed from recent Soviet propaganda and Vladimir Lenin's writings on the nature of imperialism. He was not the only one to attack the regime from the standpoint of Marxist orthodoxy and anti-fascism. A graduate student at the Institute of Folklore of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences named Lanovy reportedly declared in the presence of a government informer:

And what will the whole world say? They will say that we are dividing Poland together with fascist Germany. England and France will declare war on us, which means that we will be fighting them together with Germany. What will the Western communists and the workers of the world say then?³¹

The sudden U-turn embodied in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact certainly undermined the Soviet regime's credibility among many of its international and domestic supporters. For years the regime had attacked fascist Germany as the main threat to peace, prepared the population for a possible alliance with the Western democracies, and placed heavy propaganda emphasis on communist and proletarian solidarity in the world-wide fight against fascism. The USSR was at the forefront of that struggle — the greatest hope of all peace-loving peoples. Now all that was suddenly over. In the eyes of those Soviet citizens who linked the pact with the invasion of Poland, the regime stood condemned of complete disregard for its own political and ideological commitments. The Soviet Union was now making a mockery of its peace-loving rhetoric, becoming an aggressor, and betraying not only Britain and France but also its communist allies in the West — such were the themes of “negative” responses recorded by NKVD agents. There was also a good deal of criticism of the government's action from the viewpoint of *realpolitik*. Quite a few people from a variety of social backgrounds believed that Hitler would outsmart the Soviet leadership and eventually start a war with the USSR. These sentiments, widespread in Ukraine, were shared by many inhabitants of Leningrad, as indicated by the research of Sarah Davies.³²

31. *Radians'ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky*, 999.

32. See Davies, *Soviet Public Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, 97-99.

The apparent hypocrisy of the Soviet regime also drew strong criticism from students, who were the most enthusiastic supporters of the regime. “The shift in our policy has been too abrupt,” said a student from Kyiv named Rybchinsky. “Only a month ago we were proposing assistance to Poland against the aggressor, and now we are condemning it at every turn and have even taken over part of its territory.” Some students resorted to irony. “Our papers cast fascism and Hitler in the darkest colors. Now it turns out that those were all lies. Hitler is conducting the war in most humane fashion; he is not devastating the population or cultural treasures,” said a student of the Kyiv Construction Institute named Velednytsky. Also questioned was the social component of the Soviet liberation paradigm. “It would have been better not to liberate the people of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus from the lords’ oppression, for things are no better among us. They will feel that in a while,” opined the medical student Gomerberg. Even the least controversial claim, that of fraternal ties with the peoples of the newly occupied territories, was ridiculed. “It is very strange to hear assertions about our brethren in the West,” said the Kyiv student Zalizniak. “Now we call them brothers, but if that brother had written you a letter earlier, you would have suffered for it.” True believers from the ranks of the Red Army could also be quite critical. They were dissatisfied that their commanders had canceled a sharpshooting exercise known as “Shooting the fascist.”³³

During the first few days of the invasion, Horlynsky reported to his superiors that there were no negative responses recorded among workers. Nor were there any reactions, either positive or critical, attributed to peasants in the reports. But soon reports began to arrive from the regions, and while they also focused largely on critical opinions attributed to the intelligentsia, there were growing references to critical statements by workers and peasants alike. Some of these repeated arguments noted in reports on the mood of the intelligentsia, but there were also new themes and arguments. Their underlying motives were protest against economic hardship, refusal to fight for Soviet rule in case of a German-Soviet conflict, and readiness to exploit the war in order to settle scores with the regime. A worker from Odesa named Tsukanov allegedly said in the presence of an NKVD informer:

Hitler is attacking Poland and will go on to attack our communists. The war is only a few days old, and we already have nothing.

A peasant named Hustovydyn in Sumy province allegedly tried to disrupt a meeting on the occasion of Molotov’s speech, saying,

The Soviet government has stripped me bare and reduced me to poverty. Not a single idiot will go to the front.

33. *Radians’ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky*, 1055; Vladyslav Hrynevych and Oleksandr Lysenko, “Ukraina na pochatkovomu etapi Druhoi Svitovoi viiny,” in *Ukraina: politychna istoriia, XX-pochatok XXI stolittia* (Kyiv, 2007), 675.

Kalynychenko, a peasant from Kirovohrad province, told his fellow collective farmers:

The war will solve everything. We suffered for a long time; now there is less time to wait. Soon we will live without collectives.

His attitude was shared by another peasant named Krosalo, who stated:

Even if the Germans take us over, we will be none the worse for that. On the collective farm, you are still hungry and threadbare. In 1933, Soviet power was guilty of starving many people to death.³⁴

We cannot assess the popularity of either positive or critical opinions among the Soviet public presented in the NKVD reports. Many objects of NKVD surveillance managed to survive into the late 1930s precisely because they were able to keep their mouths shut or make neutral or pro-Soviet pronouncements when they suspected that they were dealing with an NKVD informer. A 48-year-old Ukrainian woman who came from a dekulakized family and worked on the Soviet railroads commented as follows to interviewers of the Harvard Refugee Interview Project:

[G]enerally, people in the Soviet Union worked hard and were silent; they were afraid to talk too much or to ask for some information because of the common terror and because many Soviet agents and spies were among the people. Especially former 'kulaks,' people like my husband and me, were silent and worked hard.

Whether genuine or not, both positive and negative statements contained elements of people's real thinking, not constructed for the sake of the informer.³⁵

What we do know, both from the reports and from other sources, is that resentment among the peasantry based on the outcomes of collectivization and the Great Famine of 1932-1933 was an ongoing concern, and that the urban population, including that of Moscow, Leningrad, and capitals of the republics, suffered from shortages of food and manufactured goods that grew worse in August and September 1939. The public was generally confused by the recently signed Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, not understanding on which side, if any, the Soviet Union was entering the war. Some of the people "polled" by the NKVD were concerned about what Britain and France would say regarding the Soviet invasion of an independent and embattled state.

34. *Radians'ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky*, 1012, 1018, 1021, 1032.

35. Like many others interviewed by the Harvard Project, this particular interviewee did not trust the Soviet media. She stated in that regard: "I read the newspapers very rarely because I knew that in the newspapers there was only Soviet propaganda." See Harvard University, Widener Library, The Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, vol. 34, case 148/(NY) 1398, 30.

The nationality card

The NKVD reports divided Soviet citizens into a number of categories, most notably class/social status and nationality. Judging by these reports, the strongest anti-Soviet statements were expressed by peasants and members of “other nationalities,” which, according to the NKVD, generally meant Poles and Germans. Among the social groups, it was the intelligentsia, not the peasants or workers, that received most attention. If workers and collective farmers were allotted one category each, the intelligentsia had two: many reports included separate sections on “office workers and intelligentsia” and “academic circles.” The special interest of NKVD officials in the opinions of the intelligentsia was also reflected in the number of statements quoted in NKVD reports. The sections on the intelligentsia were two to four times longer than those on the working class or collective farmers. Some members of the intelligentsia quoted in the reports were under surveillance as part of ongoing investigations into the activities of illegal political organizations. Such people were already surrounded by informants, and it was relatively easy for NKVD agents to obtain information about their attitudes. Judging by the reports, it was the intelligentsia that provided the most sophisticated appraisal of changes in Soviet foreign policy, and it was the same group that reacted most actively to the dramatic change in Soviet nationality discourse on the eve and in the course of the Soviet invasion of Poland.

What was the intelligentsia’s reaction to the changes in party rhetoric? If one trusts the NKVD reports, it was overwhelmingly positive. If one looks at statements and comments that did not reflect Molotov’s address and media pronouncements, it appears that the national-liberation theme did indeed strike a chord with the intelligentsia. It was interpreted in two ways. The first was the old imperial view that regarded Ukrainians and Belarusians as part of a greater Russian nation and thus as Russians; their liberation meant the reunification of the Russian people and the return of the imperial borderlands to Russian control. The second approach was closer to the official government line, as it postulated the liberation and unification not of the Russian people but of the Ukrainian and Belarusian lands and peoples. Both approaches, the old imperial and the new national one, were reinforced by the class interpretation expressed in the official pronouncements: the Russians (alternatively, the Ukrainians and Belarusians) were to be liberated not only from national but also from social oppression.

The sentiments of those who subscribed to the old imperial vision of the Russian state and nation but were prepared to adapt it to the new official terminology were expressed by a professor of the Kyiv medical school named Romankevych, who allegedly stated in the presence of an NKVD informer: “The Soviet Union should restore the Russian lands — the Kholm region, Western Ukraine, and Western Belarus.” A worker from Odesa named Liubchenko went even further in his claim to the lost imperial territories. “The Soviet government has acted properly,” he said to an informer. “Western Ukraine and Belarus are settled by our people and constitute our territory. We should restore Bessarabia — it is ours too, after all.”

The treatment of Western Ukraine and Western Belarus as lands settled by “our people” was quite common in statements recorded by the NKVD, as were calls for the annexation of Bessarabia, the former imperial province that was annexed by Romania in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution and allocated to the Soviet sphere of influence by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Interestingly enough, all these statements were quoted in the sections of reports devoted to positive responses. They were certainly in keeping with the notions of ethnicity held by the authors of the reports, who assigned the responses of Ukrainians and Russians to the sections on social categories but dealt with the reactions of “Galicians”—that is, Ukrainians who came from Galicia, formerly under the rule of Austria-Hungary—in the sections entitled “Among other nationalities.”³⁶

The old imperial interpretation of the invasion of Poland recorded in NKVD reports from Ukraine was apparently popular in Russia as well. G.E.R. Gedye reported for *New York Times* from Moscow on September 18:

Privately, some confess confusion as to how the invasion is to be reconciled with Joseph Stalin’s declaration that he did not want a foot of others’ territory. Others again rationalize this casuistically, saying, “But, of course, this was ours, inhabited by our kin, and torn from us by Poland in 1920.”

The academician Vladimir Vernadsky, one of the leaders of the Constitutional Democratic Party in the Russian Empire, the first president of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in 1918, and a major figure in the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow at the start of World War II, belonged to the latter group. He recorded in his diary for October 3:

The seizure of (Western) Ukraine and Belarus is approved by all. The course of history is amazingly spontaneous. The Poles are crazy. And the Czechs (incomparably milder in that regard) have also suffered because of it. But the policy of Stalin and Molotov is realistic and, it seems to me, correct—a Russian policy of state. In Poland, social revolution is a military force.

Vernadsky considered the takeover of Western Ukraine and Belarus a manifestation of Russian policy and apparently had no problem with Stalin’s export of revolution to Poland. His views were shared by other members of the all-Union Academy. On October 18 Vernadsky wrote that his colleague, the geochemist Aleksandr Fersman, was “constantly under the influence of the takeover of Ukr[aine]—a Russian policy.”³⁷

36. *Radians’ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky*, 1001, 1011, 1047, 1060.

37. G.E.R. Gedye, “Moscow Outlines Polish Partition,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1939, 1, 5; V.P. Volkov, ed., V.I. Vernadskii, *Dnevniky, 1935-1941*, 2 vols. (M., 2006), 2: 56, 67. On the revival of Russian national themes on the official and popular levels in the years leading up to World War II, see David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 43-114.

If intellectuals in Moscow saw the Soviet invasion of Poland as a manifestation of Russian policy, most of their colleagues in Ukraine interpreted it as evidence of the regime's Ukrainian policy. On October 19, Vernadsky recorded in his diary a summary of his discussions with Leonid Yasnopolsky, a member of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences who had moved to Moscow in 1931.

Yasnopolsky, wrote Vernadsky, apparently like the overwhelming majority of those who find themselves here, sympathizes with Stalin's policy. Not so much because of the Germans as because of the restoration of the country's political significance and the 'liberation' of the Ukrainians and Belarusians from Poland.

Vernadsky's observations on Yasnopolsky's views are echoed by the NKVD reports sent to Nikita Khrushchev and Lavrentii Beria from Ukraine in September-October 1939. If one trusts those reports, most Kyiv academics subscribed to the modern, "Ukrainian" interpretation of the national- and social-liberation paradigm.³⁸

Very few leading Ukrainian intellectuals refused to be swayed by official propaganda about benefits to the Ukrainian nation. Among the most critical was the renowned Ukrainian poet Maksym Rylsky, who was regarded by the NKVD as a Ukrainian nationalist. Rylsky argued that the invasion of Poland

runs counter to the humanity and justice about which we have always made so much noise. [He continued:] And so I write verses every day praising the valiant Soviet forces and the wisdom of our policy, but there is no enthusiasm in my heart. We attacked the weak, after all, and it is very hard for an honest poet to justify such an action.

The authorities refused to grant Rylsky permission to visit Western Ukraine in the fall of 1939. His opinion was shared by other Ukrainian writers. Semen Skliarenko told an NKVD informer:

In our time, you cannot believe anyone or anything. The strong falls upon the weak — that is an eternal law of life. Just yesterday we shouted that the Germans were barbarians, plunderers, and scoundrels, but now we are almost trading kisses with them. Such striking hypocrisy.³⁹

If Ukrainian writers and poets were troubled by the injustice of the invasion and the duplicity of Soviet foreign policy and propaganda, academics took a much more forgiving attitude toward the regime. Some of them were genuinely excited about the new turn of events. Professor Mykola Hrinchenko of the

38. Vernadskii, *Dnevniky, 1935-1941*, 2: 68.

39. *Radians'ki orhany derzhavnoi bezpeky*, 1030.

Institute of Folklore at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences allegedly told his colleagues:

I do not know whether there is any other foreign-policy measure of the Soviet authorities capable of arousing such joy among Ukrainians as this one. Ukrainians have reason to rejoice.

Hrinchenko explained his excitement by noting that, with the Soviet takeover of eastern Poland, “the age-old hopes of the people of Western Ukraine, starving and suffering under the Polish yoke, have come true.” It was a politically correct explanation of the enthusiasm generated by the realization of the principal goal of Ukrainian irredentism — the unification of the Ukrainian lands, to which the Ukrainian national movement had aspired since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Similar ideas were expressed by other Ukrainian intellectuals. An analysis of responses to the Soviet invasion of Poland recorded by NKVD agents in Ukraine allows one to conclude that the regime’s use of national-liberation rhetoric to justify its entry into World War II succeeded in extending its power base and co-opting dissenting views by appropriating nationalist discourse and presenting itself to society as a benefactor of the national cause. By and large, the Ukrainian intelligentsia was prepared to follow the government’s lead in regarding the Red Army’s invasion of Poland as a campaign of national liberation and unification of their native land, and not as their country’s entry into global military conflict.⁴⁰

Conclusions

The Soviet leadership’s decision to justify its attack on Poland by invoking the liberation of that country’s Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities helped mobilize support for the Soviet entry into World War II not only among those of its citizens who considered the Red Army’s invasion of Poland justified in geostrategic and military terms, or were eager to promote world revolution, but also among those who considered it a just restoration of the old Russian imperial boundaries, a step toward the reunification of the Russian people and, last but not least, the unification of the Ukrainian and Belarusian nations. The broadening of popular support for Soviet foreign policy thus benefited the regime at a time when deteriorating economic conditions and a falling standard of living coincided with a sharp turn of Soviet propaganda away from its established anti-fascist attitude, which increased the number of critics of the regime.

An examination of the NKVD reports makes it quite clear that the Soviet people were not limited to clear-cut compliance or resistance in their dealings with the Soviet state under Stalinism. They were not merely “objects” of state policy but “subjects” in their own right who used their “subjectivity” not only to embrace

40. *Ibid.*, 998-999, 1021-1022.

the regime or learn how to “speak Bolshevik” in order to survive but also to lend or withdraw support from the state, depending on its policies. That was certainly true in the 1920s, and it appears to have been true for the late 1930s as well. The dictatorial state remained concerned about the attitudes of the population, classified along social and national lines. As the reaction of Ukrainian intellectuals to the Soviet invasion of Poland demonstrates, representatives of individual peoples were prepared to lend conditional support to the regime if it offered the realization of their objectives in return. The initiative came from the state, but it was ultimately up to the particular group to accept or reject the government’s offer. Besides, it was the members of Ukrainian intelligentsia who prepared historical, demographic, and other data on the newly acquired territories for the Soviet government and were thus in a position to influence the official position on a variety of issues. It is easy to assume that lengthy presentations to NKVD agents by the intellectuals under their surveillance were intended not only as manifestations of loyalty but also as attempts to influence party policy.

The Soviet regime had co-opted national-liberation discourse and policies in the 1920s. It embarked on a policy of co-opting Russian public opinion in the 1930s. Now it used similar tactics to co-opt those battered by its policies of the 1930s — the Ukrainian and Belarusian intellectual elites. Unlike in the 1920s, the government was prepared to offer them not only concessions at home but also opportunities abroad. The introduction of the ethnic theme into Soviet foreign-policy pronouncements initiated a change in Soviet nationality policy, documented in the Ukrainian case by the studies of Serhy Yekelchyk and Vladyslav Hrynevych. It was an obvious case in which foreign-policy considerations led to a shift in nationality policy at home. If the “Piedmont principle,” as Terry Martin has argued, was seen by the authorities as “an exploitable benefit of a domestically driven policy,” and the “besieged fortress” mentality arguably reflected the regime’s domestic and foreign-policy concerns alike, the “national-liberation” paradigm was formulated and implemented first and foremost in response to foreign-policy considerations. We see no attempt on the part of Soviet officials to employ national-liberation rhetoric or implement related policies either at home or abroad before the Stalin-Dimitrov meeting of September 7, 1939.⁴¹

Adopted quite unexpectedly in a desperate attempt to find justification for the coming aggression, the new national-liberation paradigm turned out to be a useful tool for the Soviet government in the course of World War II. It helped mobilize support for Soviet entry into the war in September 1939. For the next two years it helped promote the Sovietization of Western Ukraine, Western Belarus and, in 1940-1941, Bessarabia and Bukovyna. It also helped the Soviet leadership reclaim those territories in 1944-1945. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, neither President Roosevelt nor Prime Minister Churchill was able to refute Stalin’s claims

41. Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 9; Serhy Yekelchyk, *Stalin’s Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination* (Toronto, 2004), 13-62; Vladyslav Hrynevych, “Viina z Hitlerivs’kou Nimechchynoiu (1941-1945),” in *Ukraina: politychna istoriia*, 736-756.

to Lviv and Drohobych, which were presented in ethnonational terms. It was only with the start of the Cold War that the Soviet authorities were forced to abandon the national-liberation paradigm. Once again, as in the 1930s, ethnic contacts began to be regarded not as an opportunity to export Soviet influence abroad but as a channel through which the imperialist powers could corrupt the Soviet nationalities. From the late 1940s on, campaigns were launched against local nationalism, and contacts with cross-border ethnic communities and diasporas were severely curtailed. Once again, as in the 1930s, diasporas and compatriots abroad were condemned as enemies of the Soviet state and people.⁴²

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42. Jan Tomasz Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton, N.J., 2002), 71-114, 125-143; S.M. Plokhy, *Yalta: The Price of Peace* (New York, 2010), 166-182; Viktor Koval', "Borot'ba za mizhnarodne vyznannia ukrains'koho vidtynku novoho Zakhidnoho kordonu SRSR (1941-45)," in *Ukraina: politychna istoriia*, 814-848.