

Reflections of War: Diaries from the German-Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union, 1941-1944

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Research Abstract:

My work seeks to use the lens of gender to study the German occupation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic during World War Two. Specifically, my dissertation seeks to consider how conflicting Nazi and Soviet constructions of masculinity and femininity and their attendant roles affected the lived experiences of Soviet civilians remaining on German-occupied territory. The range of choices available to local men and women from resistance to collaboration was circumscribed not just by the Nazi racial hierarchy, but also by the assumptions inherent in the gender constructs of both regimes. While local women often had more room to maneuver because they were largely considered non-combatants, those who transgressed Nazi gender norms were often violently punished.¹ Likewise, local women who, for various reasons, fraternized or collaborated with the enemy were held to a higher moral standard by Soviet authorities than their male counterparts after the war. Ultimately, this work seeks to consider how the interplay of race and gender constructs affected the lived experiences and choices of local women during the German occupation.

Research Goals:

I was initially granted a nine-month scholarship to conduct research in Russia and Ukraine beginning in June 2015. My original plan consisted of first traveling to Kiev, Ukraine where I intended to conduct research in the Central State Archive of Supreme Bodies of Power and Government of

¹ Soviet female front-line troops were considered to be a “Communist perversion of the natural order” and were “shot out of hand” in the summer of 1941. See Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 142.

Ukraine (TsDAVOV), the Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine (TsDAHOU), and the State Archive of the Ukrainian Security Services (SBU Archive). After staying in Kiev for four months using various collections housed in these archives and taking Ukrainian language courses at my host university, I planned to then travel to oblast level archives throughout present-day central Ukraine. Then, after having spent roughly six months in Ukraine, my intention was to travel to Moscow, Russia for three months starting in January 2015 to look at collections housed in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). However, due to the ongoing events in Ukraine, I was advised by American Councils' staff to first postpone my trip and then to revise my timeline to first travel to Moscow and then, if the political situation were to improve, to travel to Ukraine. Unfortunately, due to the political and security situation in Ukraine I was only able to complete the Moscow portion of my trip before returning to the United States.

My primary research goal, prior to my departure, was to examine collections of personal and official documents detailing the occupation regime and the lived experiences of civilians. I hoped to find, among other things, evidence of local fraternization and collaboration to consider under what conditions locals chose to engage in such behavior and how local views of such behavior changed as the German occupation progressed and became increasingly more brutal. To accomplish this goal, I planned to look at documents pertaining to the Extraordinary State Commission to Investigate German-Fascist Crimes (ChGK), which was created in 1943 to collect testimonies and evidence that were used during the Nuremberg Trials as well as numerous Soviet warcrimes tribunals. While ChGK documents, especially the reports composed by Soviet investigators, must be read with extreme caution, they nevertheless represent the largest collection of testimonies and personal documents relating to World War Two and the German occupation of the Soviet Union. In addition to the all-Soviet ChGK, whose documents are located in GARF, more than 100 auxiliary commissions operated throughout the

occupied zones in the republics and oblasts of the Soviet Union.² With this in mind, my goal was to look at not only the collections of the all-Soviet commission, but to also work with the republic level ChGK documents housed in Kiev as well as the records of several oblast level commissions that operated throughout the central regions of what had been Soviet Ukraine.

In addition to looking at ChGK documents for instances of fraternization and collaboration and to get a better sense overall of what had transpired in various locations in Soviet Ukraine, I also intended to look at partisan records from the Ukrainian front. My hope was that some of the partisan reports would not only help provide another window onto what was happening on occupied territory, but that they would also comment on the popular mood of civilians. It is well documented that in some areas of the former Soviet Union locals welcomed the advancing German army. Although such sentiments were most common in the western borderlands of the Soviet Union, specifically those areas that had been annexed as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, they were also witnessed within the pre-1939 borders. Using partisan records I hoped to find, among other things, observations about local sentiments regarding the new regime as well as locals' views of the Soviet regime now that they had been exposed to German propaganda and an alternative way of structuring society.

Finally, I also intended to look at occupation newspapers and propaganda leaflets issued by the German occupation regime in order to get a sense of the propaganda to which locals were being exposed. What were the arguments being put forward in favor of the moral and cultural superiority of Nazi Germany over that of the Soviet Union? How were the German occupation authorities and their local collaborators trying to win the hearts and minds of locals? Were such efforts gendered and, if so, what effect, if any, did such efforts have on the local population? While the propaganda literature itself could not answer the latter of these questions, I hoped that the other collections I intended to consider

² Marina Sorokina, "People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, 4 (Fall 2005): 801.

would provide some clues regarding the efficacy of such propaganda efforts.

Research Activities:

Although I was ultimately unable to travel to Ukraine, my time in Moscow was very useful for my research and my dissertation. In addition to working with the ChGK collection in GARF, I also accessed and worked with collections located in the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), the Russian State Library, and the Archive of the International Memorial Society during my time in Moscow. Using various collections in these repositories, I was able to partially complete all of my original research goals, although I did have to slightly alter my focus in the course of my research. Rather than focusing specifically on those areas that were incorporated into the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, I decided to cast a wider net as the possibility of my traveling to Ukraine became less likely.

After contacting the Russian State University for the Humanities, my host university, and obtaining letters of introduction, I was able to register and begin working in all of my targeted archives within a week of my arrival. Since I had three months in Moscow, I decided to split my time between GARF, RGVA, and the Russian State Library during the first month. Using the electronic shelf-list, I was able to identify the *opisi* within the ChGK collection (*Fond 7021*) that I planned to examine prior to my departure. However, the Soviet-era descriptions are fairly obscure and, as a result, I spent approximately one week narrowing down the *delos* containing eye-witness testimonies that I wanted to investigate. This was exacerbated by GARF's policy to only allow researchers to order five ChGK *delos* per day rather than the ten that is usually allowed for other collections. Once I had discovered the correct *delos*, I found the ChGK documents to be quite useful. While some of the testimonies were rather formulaic, consisting simply of lists of names of victims or those that were sent to Germany for forced labor, other testimonies were surprisingly descriptive providing not only the names of local

perpetrators, but also testimony about how German actions were carried out. In addition to the ChGK collection, I also looked at Soviet Prosecutor Records (*Fond* 8131) for information about the state of affairs in newly liberated zones in 1943 and 1944.

In the Russian State Library and RGVA, I looked at collections of German propaganda literature captured by the Red Army during its advance. Both repositories mainly hold Russian-language material that circulated on German-controlled territory of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Although there were several items published in Ukrainian and other native languages, especially in RGVA, it became apparent that most examples of newspapers and propaganda leaflets from German-controlled Soviet Ukraine were located in Ukrainian repositories. It was while working with these collections that I decided that it would be best if I were to widen my scope, especially given the uncertainty surrounding my future plans. Doing so, I was able to find several incomplete newspaper collections in the Russian State Library's Collection of Russian Literature Abroad that will be useful for my dissertation. Likewise, I was able to find a number of useful propaganda pamphlets that attempted to convince their readers of the benefits of work in Germany among the trophy documents that make up the Special Archive in RGVA.

During my second month, I began working in RGASPI with the records of the General Staff of the Partisan Movement (*Fond* 69). In looking at these records, I was particularly interested in finding reports from 1941 that would shed light on the first months of the occupation. While I was able to find several debriefings from individuals who had managed to cross from enemy territory or escape encirclement, most of the records within this collection dated from the summer of 1942 when the General Staff under the command of Ponomarenko was formed. From previous experience working in Ukraine, I have found that the Ukrainian records of the partisan movement contain more material that was not always sent further up the chain of command. Nevertheless, despite there being a limited amount of information from 1941, I was able to find records that reflect an overall shift in the mood of

the civilian population beginning in the winter and spring of 1942. Furthermore, I was able to find reports that contained useful details that helped contextualize and fill in the gaps in the ChGK documents and that testified to the prevalence of sexual violence on occupied territory.

During my last month in Moscow, I continued working in GARF, while also making several trips to the Hall of Dissertations of the Russian State Library and the Archive of the International Memorial Society. In the Archive of the International Memorial Society I hoped to find testimonies of individuals that were repressed after the war for real and imagined crimes that they committed during the occupation. Since the Memorial Society does not post its shelf-list online, I was unable to determine whether or not they would have anything within their History of Political Repressions Archive that would be useful for my dissertation prior to my arrival in Moscow. The staff of the Memorial Society were quite helpful and gave me access to several memoirs and oral interviews that will be quite useful for my dissertation. Ultimately, while the material that I was able to access in Moscow was not exactly what I was looking for, casting a wide net enabled me to find material that addressed each of the questions that I intended to investigate.

Important Research Findings:

My research shows that the German occupation authorities went to great lengths to win the hearts and minds of locals, especially as the war began to turn against them. Hundreds of newspapers were printed throughout the occupied zones in the native languages of the civilian population. The content of these newspapers and the various propagandistic pamphlets that were issued throughout the occupation can be generally divided into two categories: articles that espoused anti-semitic sentiments and those that compared various aspects of life in the Soviet Union to that of Nazi Germany in an effort to make the case for the moral and cultural superiority of Nazism over Communism. While much of the content was directed at a general audience, some of the publications attempted to specifically engage

local women. These works compared the lived experiences of Russian and Ukrainian women under Communism to that of German women under Nazism. They argued that only in Nazi Germany were women able to work while still remaining women. In contrast, Russian and Ukrainian women, according to the propaganda, were forced by the Communist leadership to take masculine jobs that were detrimental to their feminine nature and blurred the lines between them and their male counterparts. This was particularly the case with female Red Army soldiers who were the subject of various articles in the occupation press and seem to have been a favorite example of the allegedly harmful blurring of the lines between the sexes that was taking place in the Soviet Union. All of this was meant to convince local women to support the occupation regime through their work both on occupied territory as well as in Germany, where millions of local women were sent as forced laborers during the war.

While it is difficult to determine how effective such propaganda was, locals often engaged in comparisons of the occupation regime with that of the Soviet Union. My research suggests that initially such comparisons did not always favor the Soviet Union. Although historians do not know how widespread pro-German sentiments were on occupied territory, the prevalence of instances in which locals welcomed the German army suggests that most locals adopted a wait-and-see attitude towards the German occupation. Such a conclusion is supported by partisan reports and debriefings, many of which note a marked change in local attitudes in the winter and spring of 1942 in favor of the partisans and the Soviet Union. As was shown by Alexander Dallin, this change occurred in part because of the failure of the German occupation authorities to disband Soviet-era collective farms in favor of private farming, which was promised but only began to be implemented in the latter part of the war following Germany's setbacks at Stalingrad.³ All of this suggests that whereas some locals may have been inclined to believe in and agree with some of the German propaganda, the discrepancy between what

3 Alexander Dallin, *German rule in Russia, 1941-1945; a study of occupation policies* (London: Macmillan, 1957).

was written and reality combined with the increasing brutality of the occupation and a policy of forced labor turned most locals against the occupation regime.

In terms of local collaboration, my research suggests that many local men and women operated within a moral gray area where the lines between victim, bystander, and perpetrator became blurred. Much like *Hitler's Furies*, some local women crossed lines either willingly or forcibly that turned them into much more than just innocent bystanders.⁴ While local women had less room in which to become perpetrators and few actually killed Jews and others deemed unfit to live by the German occupation authorities, some local women participated in the Holocaust in their administrative duties. Working as secretaries and translators either in the Gestapo or local police departments created by the German occupation authorities, local women provided clerical assistance by creating lists of those who were to be killed or deported to Germany for forced labor. Furthermore, local members of the village intelligentsia, including female teachers, were sometimes co-opted to provide clerical assistance as well. Finally, local women seem to have also been recruited by both sides as spies and saboteurs. Both German and Soviet officials were aware of the assumptions inherent in the way their men viewed women largely as noncombatants and attempted to use these assumptions to undermine the enemy.

While some local women participated in the new regime in these various roles, the vast majority of local women became the victims of various forms of violence during the occupation. My research suggests that local women experienced gender-specific violence at the hands of German forces and their local collaborators. Rape was ubiquitous during the occupation. At the same time, local women were recruited into specially-created officer brothels that operated in many large cities throughout the occupied zones. Fraternization both coerced and voluntary was also widespread and was harshly treated after the war. My research shows that local women who had relations with German soldiers during the

⁴ Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

war were ostracized by their neighbors. Even in the gulag, those women who had had relations with German men were held in contempt by other female prisoners who were sentenced for real or imagined crimes that they committed during the occupation.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

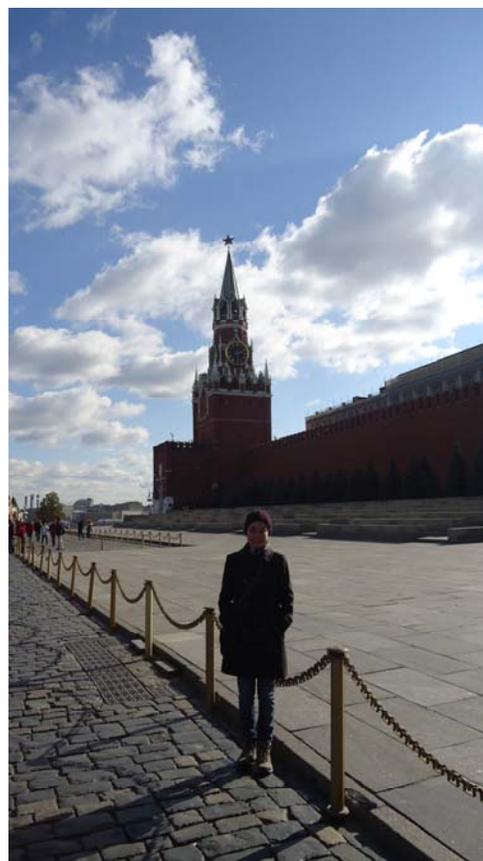
The events of the past year in Ukraine have demonstrated just how powerful the memories and legacies of the Great Patriotic War, as it is known in the former Soviet Union, still are today. Unlike in the United States and much of Western Europe, many aspects of the war and the intervening years remain unresolved. Not only do these issues continue to have the power to mobilize populations, but they continue to be utilized by politicians to advance their political goals. My research, like that of historians working on Western Ukraine, underscores the complexity of this subject and the need for a more pluralistic history that takes into account the multiplicity of lived experiences in Ukraine. A reappraisal of the Soviet history of the war was sorely needed in Ukraine and other former Soviet republics. However, the tendency to replace one highly problematic narrative of the war along with its heroes with another equally problematic one does not resolve the issues nor does it help to foster national dialogue. Rather than favoring one narrative over another, a more inclusive history is needed, one that takes into account the multiple roles that individuals played during the war. Ultimately, while the current crisis makes this difficult to undertake, a national dialogue centering around the multiple histories and narratives prevalent in Ukraine today is necessary for future nation building.

Plans for Future Research:

I intend to continue doing research for the next half year, while also beginning to write my dissertation. While I still plan to travel to Ukraine in the course of this year, if the political and security situation in Ukraine allows, I am also planning to travel to Washington D.C. to use collections located in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Holocaust Memorial Museum holds partial

microfilm collections of Russian and Ukrainian warcrimes trial proceedings. Due to archival restrictions and Russian privacy laws, I was unable to access these documents while in Moscow. Instead, I had intended to do so in Ukraine where these records are more readily available for researchers. However, with a trip to Ukraine this year remaining difficult at the present, the records available at the Holocaust Memorial Museum along with their collection of Holocaust testimonies will help fill in the gaps in my current research. In the long term, I plan to submit my dissertation in the spring of 2016 and remain in academia upon completion. Despite my being unable to travel to Ukraine, the work that I was able to accomplish as a Title VIII scholar has been very useful and will inform a large part of my dissertation.

Photos:



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