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## The Rehabilitation of Stalin's Victims in Ukraine, 1953–1964: A Socio-Legal Perspective

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The death of Josef Stalin on 5 March 1953, coming at a point of great tensions in the Cold War, accentuated the urgent necessity to modernise the ruling communist regime. The aspiration to reform the Stalinist system, to transform it into a more vital public organism, capable of reacting adequately to the challenges of the time, encouraged the new leaders to abandon terrorist methods, mass political repression and hypertrophied ideological control. The rejection of state terrorism by the political *nomenklatura* on the grounds that it was dysfunctional initiated a series of complex and contradictory attempts to modify the totalitarian structures of the Soviet Union, not least of which was the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinist terror. In this chapter, I shall show that the rehabilitation process in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was held back by a number of problems, some of them specific to Ukraine, and some of them relating to Soviet-wide barriers to the restitution of social and legal rights to all citizens (and foreign nationals) who had been wrongly deprived of their jobs, homes, property and liberty during the Stalin era. In particular, attention will be drawn to the paradoxes inherent in attempts to rehabilitate former members of the NKVD who had been both perpetrators and victims of the Stalinist terror system, and to the challenges presented by particular groups of deportees and prisoners hoping to return to Ukraine after being released from long spells in the Gulag or internal forced migration, including former members of the anti-communist Ukrainian national liberation movement arrested in the post-1944 period, and Crimean Tatars expelled from their homeland during the Second World War.

### Amnesties in Ukrainian SSR, 1953–1955: course, scale and consequences

After 1953, an intense power struggle ensued among leading party representatives, as Stalin had left no designated successor. A short-term compromise was struck in the form of a so-called collective leadership, in which the key roles were played by Georgii Malenkov, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Nikita Khrushchev, Secretary of the party's Central Committee, and Lavrentii Beria, Minister of Internal Affairs. One of Stalin's closest companions-in-arms, Beria attempted to break the unstable political balance and to strengthen his own position by undertaking the first steps towards the liberalisation of the public sphere and political life. In a memorandum addressed to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 26 March 1953, he informed his colleagues that Soviet prisons, colonies and corrective labour camps held a total of 2,526,402 inmates, including 22,145 persons considered to be dangerous.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, the Presidium was presented with the draft decree 'On Amnesty', which was approved on 27 March 1953 and published in the daily newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*. According to the decree, 1.2 million people sentenced to five years' imprisonment or less were to be amnestied. Article 2 of the decree anticipated the release of all those convicted of economic and military crimes, regardless of the term of punishment. The decree covered pregnant women and women with children aged under ten; juveniles less than 18 years of age; men over 55 and women over 50 years of age, as well as persons who suffered from serious incurable diseases. However, the amnesty did not include those convicted of counter-revolutionary activities or anti-Soviet agitation.<sup>2</sup>

The publication of the decree met with a patchy response from the Ukrainian population. Along with expressions of approval for the actions of the Soviet government, some citizens noted certain negative aspects of the amnesty; for example, the categorical statement of intent to keep in force strict punitive measures against 'criminal-recidivists' or the proposals to establish probation periods for amnestied persons at construction sites. At agitational meetings held in enterprises, establishments and collective farms in the Kharkiv region, for example, there were cases of people expressing disappointment at the absence, in the regulatory document, of any reference to those who had been convicted on political grounds.<sup>3</sup> Despite these contradictory popular reactions to the amnesty, the First Secretary of the Ukrainian party, L. Melnykov, in a letter to the Central Committee dated 1 April 1953, assured the Kremlin

of the positive attitude of wide sections of the republic to the actions of the government.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of the 'On Amnesty' decree, the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice recommended that 69,921 persons should be released from camp colonies and corrective labour camps, including children's camps, located on Ukrainian territory. On 5 May 1953, Colonel Podobedov, chief of the First Special Department of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), confirmed that 19,892 persons had been liberated from prisons, corrective labour colonies and pre-trial detention centres.<sup>5</sup> The majority were prisoners accused of hooliganism, speculation, theft and other economic crimes, but eventually a small number of those convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and family members of 'traitors to the Motherland' and Nazi accomplices were also included. By the end of May 1953, almost 70,000 inmates had been set free.<sup>6</sup> However, additional tens of thousands of released prisoners returned to Ukraine from other parts of the Soviet Union: by 21 July 1953, 165,566 ex-convicts had been registered in the republic, most coming to the Donbas and its adjacent industrial regions. The figure had grown to over 172,000 by early August.<sup>7</sup> The scaling down of the Gulag system and the release of its inmates, both launched soon after Stalin's death, continued with a series of governmental decrees in the years 1954 and 1955 and with the re-examination of cases against persons convicted of counter-revolutionary crimes. According to the Ukrainian MVD, between 1953 and 1955 over 330,000 people arrived in cities and villages from places of confinement and correctional facilities.<sup>8</sup>

The logistics of the amnesty process were undertaken mainly by camp administrations at the place of confinement. They passed injunctions, which were approved by the regional public prosecutor, for all amnestied individuals: each received a certificate of release and permission to settle in a new place of residence. Moreover, the amnestied were provided with travel documents at the expense of the camp authorities (except for those with 'no right to leave', who were allowed to live outside the camps but were obliged to remain in exile or at least away from major settlements in the western parts of the Soviet Union for years, sometimes decades after their release). This complex arrangement involved many camp employees, who, together with railway administrators and militia officers, organised the departure of ex-prisoners, avoiding crowding and disruption at railway stations and water quays. As archival documents certify, the social adaptation of hundreds of thousands of former convicts was far from easy, often because central and local authorities underestimated the sheer volume of work and preparation that was required.

In the capital city, Kiev, some militia departments, invoking spurious loopholes, refused to register the released.<sup>9</sup> Similar issues arose in the provinces, specifically relating to the registration of juveniles. Despite the deficit in the labour force, directors of enterprises and establishments categorically refused to employ amnestied persons, and hence by June 1953, only 108,224 of registered ex-prisoners (74.8 per cent of the total number) had found gainful employment.<sup>10</sup> As late as February 1956, 22,813 amnestants were still unemployed and were thus under the purview of militia authorities and employment departments of regional councils.<sup>11</sup>

Another major bone of contention was the confiscation of property. Following the amnesty of March 1953, the number of petitions from ex-prisoners requesting the return of confiscated property significantly increased. Prior to the amnesty, such petitions had been sent to the Presidium of the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet on an individual basis, but after promulgation of the decree, their number mushroomed to approximately 300–350 per month. Most were rejected on the grounds that confiscation was a *fait accompli*. Only in relatively few cases – when confiscation was still pending and when families of an amnestant could demonstrate gross social deprivation by the seizure of property – were confiscation orders cancelled. Ex-convicts also petitioned the authorities to free them from payment of the financial losses caused to state enterprises and other public organisations by their release, but most requests suffered the same fate – they were, as a rule, rejected.<sup>12</sup>

A most unwelcome outcome of these financial and social burdens was that some of the amnestied turned to criminal activity. Official statistics testify that 6,696 crimes were registered in Ukraine between 1 April and 20 June 1953. Of these, 1,196 crimes (17.9 per cent) were committed by amnestied persons, and 1,383 individuals were prosecuted as a result. Most of these crimes were observed in Kiev and in the Stalin, Voroshilovgrad, Zaporozhe and Odessa regions.<sup>13</sup> The rising crime rate among the amnestied was an ongoing problem for the Ukrainian authorities, as witnessed by a letter from the Deputy Head of the Department of Propaganda and Agitation, B. Shulzhenko, to the First Secretary of the Ukrainian party, O. Kyrychenko, on 1 February 1956. Shulzhenko expressed concern about the fate of amnestied people, many of whom were treated with indifference, even rudeness, by enterprise managers and other officials, who regularly refused to offer them employment. The resultant dissatisfaction and exasperation meant that some turned to crime: 'According to data compiled by the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, 49,994 persons ... released from places of confinement during 1953–1955 have been re-arrested, including 592 persons for

murder, 2,636 for banditry and robbery, 16,619 for various thefts, and 16,260 for speculation and other crimes.' The highest numbers of recidivist criminal offences were in the Stalin and Voroshilovgrad regions: 9,891 people in the former and 4,049 in the latter.<sup>14</sup>

Unacceptably high crime levels and relatively low rates of employment among ex-prisoners induced the Ukrainian Council of Ministers to adopt the decree 'On the Removal of Shortcomings in the Employment of Amnestied Citizens', issued on 6 June 1953. In doing so, the government paid attention to the disappointing statistics emanating from the Mykolayiv and Volyn regions, where only 55 per cent of amnestied people were employed. Figures in other areas were only slightly better: 58 per cent in Voroshilovgrad and Dnipropetrovsk, 62 per cent in Sumy, 65 per cent in Chernihiv and 66 per cent in Odessa. In response to this, the Ukrainian Council of Ministers obliged directors of enterprises and construction sites to recruit, without fail, people discharged from imprisonment, and to provide them with requisite accommodation and living conditions. The Ukrainian judicial authorities were ordered to monitor the observance of these directives. In order to accelerate the adaptation process for amnestied citizens, executive committees of district and city councils sponsored 'study circles' for persons who had been unable to find regular work, and employees of passport offices acquainted them with lists of vacant positions at local enterprises. Thanks to these actions taken by the Ukrainian government, by 1 September 1953, 86 per cent of the 169,000 amnestied were employed, over 76,000 of them in the main cities.<sup>15</sup>

An acutely sensitive subject was the release of those sentenced for collaboration with the wartime Nazi invaders. This issue was first officially broached by the decree of the Supreme Soviet on 17 September 1955, 'On the Amnesty of Soviet Citizens who Collaborated with the Occupiers during the Great Patriotic War', which created quite a stir within Ukrainian society. The resolution affected 1,818 prisoners in Ukraine with convictions for serving in the German army, security police and special military groups. By 20 October 1955, slightly over 800 had been released from the camps, colonies and prisons of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, and a further 150 collaborators had had their sentences reduced.<sup>16</sup> The arrival of former village elders, policemen and Nazi accomplices resulted in a veritable wave of popular anger. In the autumn of 1955, it was reported that a number of the amnestied had been beaten and their houses set on fire. Other material damage had been inflicted and local authorities were refusing to employ the returnees.

It is extremely difficult to calculate the exact number of people convicted of collaboration who returned to Ukraine from the Gulag under the terms of the Supreme Soviet order of 17 September 1955. Documents located in the First Special Department of the Ukrainian MVD, a body whose main task during the Khrushchev 'Thaw' was to resolve issues affecting these 'special' residents, contain information about the return of wartime collaborators to territories in western Ukraine. On 1 January 1961, it was reported that 6,824 people (Nazi accomplices and those who had served in fascist armies) had settled in the Volyn, Zakarpattia, Lviv, Stanislav, Ternopil and Chernivtsy regions after their release from imprisonment, 4,679 of whom were now employed in industrial jobs.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, the amnesties implemented during the initial period of de-Stalinisation had both positive and negative socio-political consequences. On the one hand, the release of certain categories of ex-prisoners from the threat of further punishment and criminal proceedings strengthened the authority of the post-Stalinist leadership. On the other hand, the act of amnesty did not, in my estimation, significantly reduce the existing antagonisms in state-society relations. Rather, the social re-assimilation of large numbers of amnestied people into Ukrainian society was complex, contradictory and long drawn-out, as the evidence cited above suggests.

### **The rehabilitation process in Ukraine: prerequisites, stages and peculiarities**

The process of large-scale rehabilitation, as opposed to amnesty, started in September 1953 when the Soviet Supreme Court, following interventions from the General Prosecutor, was granted the right to re-examine the judgements of the former collegiums of the State Political Directorate (GPU – secret police), *troikas* and NKVD 'special councils'. Unsurprisingly, given the tensions inside the political leadership of the country, the first reviews and revisions were cautious: rehabilitation only affected certain party and state luminaries and their families. But by May 1954, the release of illegally repressed citizens and foreign nationals began to acquire a relatively mass character with the adoption of the decree by the USSR Council of Ministers, 'On the Re-examination of Criminal Cases of Persons Convicted of Counter-Revolutionary Offences'. The decree anticipated the establishment of central and local commissions which would be granted the right and power to undertake rehabilitation and release prisoners directly at their places of confinement.<sup>18</sup> Ukrainian territorial and regional commissions were entrusted

with the re-examination of cases of persons repressed by local NKVD *troikas*, as well as special courts, and the decisions of the central and local commissions regarding these extra-judicial bodies were considered final. The revision of cases against persons convicted by judicial or extra-judicial bodies was generally carried out by the appropriate legal authorities in the wake of applications by local prosecutors.<sup>19</sup> The Ukrainian commission included M. Pidgornii, Secretary of the Central Committee, D. Panasiuk, the republican prosecutor, and I. Golynnyy, a departmental deputy head and member of the Central Committee.<sup>20</sup> As a result of the activities of 26 regional commissions, the Ukrainian Prosecutor's Office and Supreme Court, and various district military courts, approximately 15,000 illegally repressed citizens were released in the period from 1953 to early 1956, of whom 1,801 were fully rehabilitated.<sup>21</sup>

As is well known, an important milestone in the rehabilitation process, both in the USSR as a whole and in Ukraine, was the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in late February 1956. Following Khrushchev's unprecedented attack on key aspects of Stalin's terror, legal and public rehabilitation was extended to several leading Ukrainian party, state, military and cultural figures who had been unjustly repressed: S. Kosior, M. Kulish, P. Postyshev and I. Yakir, among others. Many lower-ranking communists were also rehabilitated and had their party membership restored. In the years 1956–1961, party control commissions and regional and territorial committees throughout the Soviet Union rehabilitated 31,000 communists, including 3,693 former executive party and Komsomol workers, 4,148 Soviet officials, 6,165 economic functionaries, and 4,394 commanders and political workers in the army and navy.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, within three months of the 20th Congress, decrees were passed by the USSR Council of Ministers and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet releasing and rehabilitating large numbers of former convicts: deportees, family members of Ukrainian and Belorussian nationalists and 'political criminals'. In total, during the period 1956–1959, around 250,000 people<sup>23</sup> were rehabilitated in Ukraine, most of them posthumously, and tens of thousands of Gulag prisoners were returned to their native homes.

### **The KGB and mass rehabilitation campaigns for victims of political repression**

It should be recognised, however, that many top party-state officials regarded de-Stalinisation and the entire rehabilitation process as acutely troubling. In particular, Ivan Serov, chairman of the renamed Committee

for State Security (KGB), considered the advent of de-Stalinisation measures not a crucial overhaul of the Soviet order, but merely a limited set of actions directed at removing the most grotesque abuses of the totalitarian system. In a letter dated 1 April 1957 to General Prosecutor Rudenko, Serov suggested that judicial reviews should be restricted to cases from 1937–1938, and no other period. He insisted that ‘a number of undesired consequences of a political, legal and economic character’ would result from large-scale revisions, not least the fact that ‘real enemies’ of the Soviet state could be rehabilitated. Moreover, those ‘wrongly’ rehabilitated would receive compensation for the cost of property confiscated by the state and could be granted various rights and privileges attendant on rehabilitation.<sup>24</sup> Serov’s argumentation harked back to the Stalinist 1930s and, supported by his subordinates in the KGB, served to delay the rehabilitation process, clearly displaying its incompleteness and limited horizons.

Nevertheless, in the years 1953–1955, Serov and his ilk could not prevent ongoing investigations into the activities of the security organs, many of which revealed blatant infringements of legality. These overt irregularities were often brought to the attention of the law enforcement bodies on the orders of the Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs. One such directive, dated 1 April 1953, was signed by Beria himself and stated that the MVD had established the existence of serious breaches of the law, such as large-scale falsification of evidence and the widespread use of torture, as well as the arrest of innocent Soviet citizens. The order anticipated the categorical prohibition of ‘physical methods’ and raised the possibility of the criminal prosecution of perpetrators of torture.<sup>25</sup> These examinations, even ‘purges’, of the organs of internal affairs and state security were also carried out on the initiative of the party-state authorities. For example, in February 1954, the USSR Council of Ministers recommended that the MVD establish a special commission to assess the statement of A. Dedov, a former ministry employee, who had provided factual evidence on the unwarranted arrest of citizens, and on errors in the selection and appointment of security staff.<sup>26</sup> Across the USSR, 18,000 employees were dismissed from the KGB in the period March 1954 to June 1957 as a result of such investigations, including 2,300 for infringements of Soviet legality, abuse of official position and amoral deeds.<sup>27</sup> Between May 1954 and March 1956, tens of Ukrainian secret service officers were brought to justice for falsifying investigative materials and applying physical force to the arrested. Of them, 15 were subject to disciplinary measures, three to criminal charges and eight were dismissed from the KGB.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, the implementation of party decisions, notably the Central Committee decree of 19 January 1955, 'On Further Actions for the Consolidation of Socialist Legality', was delayed by covert resistance on the part of KGB operatives. Interestingly, an internal report from the summer of 1959 provides some insight into the obfuscation and stalling tactics adopted by certain KGB departments and employees:

Several registration offices of the KGB, special departments and transport agencies still delay the examination of applications and complaints, adopt superficial and formal attitudes in their work, and refuse unjustifiably to meet the legitimate property claims of rehabilitated citizens or their relatives. When considering citizens' applications on property issues, some organs of the KGB, instead of conducting investigations into why rehabilitated persons have lost property, all too often reject their petitions because of a lack of relevant documents or for other formal reasons.<sup>29</sup>

### **Paradoxes in the rehabilitation of Cheka-NKVD operatives**

Even today, we have no exact figures on the number of state security operatives repressed under Stalin. In 1988, the chairman of the Ukrainian KGB, M. Golushko, declared that during the Great Terror, 'a total of 1,199 executive workers of the Ukrainian People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs [NKVD], who had borne the burden of struggle during the Civil War and were faithful warriors of the party, perished'.<sup>30</sup> He did not, however, specify the number of repressed Chekists who had directly engaged in the illegal purges of 1937–1938. As for the organisers of terror, the so-called 'Yezhovites', there is still the mistaken belief that they received their just desserts for crimes against Soviet citizens. It is true that in 1939–1941, some lower-ranking Chekists were convicted for infringements of socialist legality. However, the overwhelming majority of the NKVD victims of the purges were condemned not for falsifying criminal cases, but for participating in mythical anti-Soviet plots against the ruling Stalinist clique. Hence, the rehabilitation of infamous Chekists during the 'Thaw' often had a dubious character, both from the legal and moral point of view. Figures who themselves had been heavily implicated in the Great Terror, such as K. M. Karlson and Z. B. Katsnelson, former deputies of the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs, and P. G. Sokolov-Shostak, ex-head of the Counter-intelligence Department of the Ukrainian NKVD, together with hundreds of other secret police functionaries, were posthumously

rehabilitated at the climax of the rehabilitation campaign for victims of Stalinist repression.<sup>31</sup>

It appears that during the 'Thaw', there were no standard legal procedures for quashing the convictions of perpetrators of the Great Terror. On occasion, there were even disagreements among judicial representatives when assessing the guilt of a given person involved in a criminal case. So, for example, when in the 1950s the former Major of State Security Ya. Z. Kaminskii submitted a petition for rehabilitation (having been sentenced to eight years' imprisonment in 1938) the chairman of the Kiev Military District (KMD) court, General-Major Arkhypovych, tried to have him recognised as criminally responsible for infringing socialist legality. The reasoning was based on an investigation that eloquently testified to the fact that 'Kaminskii ... performed arrests, personally interrogated prisoners and was involved in the falsification of investigative materials [as a result of which] many persons were repressed'. However, the military prosecutor of the KMD, General-Major I. Budargin, rejected Arkhypovych's arguments as 'insufficient' and Kaminskii was duly rehabilitated.<sup>32</sup>

It is well known that during the Stalinist mass repressions, extra-judicial bodies were created at the regional level, the so-called *troikas*; these were composed of the local NKVD Head of Department, the First Secretary of the local party committee and the regional prosecutor. Often, members of the *troika* themselves later became victims of the Stalinist terror system. It is noteworthy that during the rehabilitation campaigns after the 20th Congress many prosecutors and party secretaries, despite having participated in the Stalinist 'conveyor belt of death', had their 'good name' restored and a few were even given posthumous honours. Yet other leading figures in the NKVD were not so fortunate, some being portrayed as the truly culpable ones who had committed terrible crimes or breaches of socialist legality at Stalin's bequest. The investigation of Isak Shapiro – a top state security official and member of the *troika* in the Kiev region in 1938 – reflects the dual nature of Khrushchev's 'Thaw'. In 1957, the prosecutor's office of the Kiev Military District determined that Shapiro and other former NKVD agents had committed gross infringements of Soviet legality, as a result of which innocent people had been executed; however, the case was dismissed, citing the statute of limitations. Nevertheless, on 30 May 1958, the bureau of the Kiev regional committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party decided to expel Shapiro from the party 'for breaching socialist legality and groundlessly convicting large numbers of people in 1938'.<sup>33</sup>

'The Case against I. Shapiro' indicates that the purge of the state security organs during the 'Thaw' touched only the most notorious commanders of the Great Terror. The majority of security officers justified their criminal activities by arguing that they had been merely following orders and directives 'from above', and as a rule their punishment as 'intentional violators of socialist legality' was less severe – loss of position, transfer to another job, expulsion from the party. That such self-serving excuses could influence the attitude of party and state representatives towards those who had perpetrated the mass terror of the 1930s and beyond testifies to the unwillingness of Khrushchev and his entourage to fully confront the 'blank spots' of Soviet totalitarianism.

### **Peculiarities in the rehabilitation of inhabitants of Western Ukraine**

Some party leaders believed, and feared, that the release and rehabilitation of Stalinist victims would strengthen oppositional tendencies in Ukraine. They were particularly concerned about the liberation and return of deported members of the anti-communist Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), which was active from the 1940s to the early 1950s. Between 1944 and 1952, 203,662 persons had been deported to remote districts of the Soviet Union, including 182,543 participants in the OUN, their followers and family members.<sup>34</sup> Family members of the so-called Ukrainian and Belorussian nationalists were released from deportation under the terms of the Council of Ministers' decree of 15 May 1956. In 1961, deportation restrictions were lifted on those 'former participants in the nationalist underground and armed nationalist gangs' convicted for actions committed while under the age of 18. Similarly, 'supporters, former heads and participants of the nationalist underground and armed nationalist gangs' were released from deportation according to decrees issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet dated 19 May 1958, 7 January 1960 and 6 December 1963. These categories of deportees were permitted to return to their original places of residence only with the approval of regional soviets, but the established rules were often infringed.<sup>35</sup> For instance, at the beginning of the 1970s, approximately 60,000 ex-deportees relocated to the western regions of Ukraine without prior permission from the local authorities.<sup>36</sup>

As the top echelons of power predicted, the return of a significant number of deportees to the western regions of Ukraine reinforced oppositional tendencies in the area. The Secretary of the Stanislav regional

party committee, P. Shcherbak, informed his political bosses in Kiev of several cases in which former 'nationalists', having returned from the camps, tried to renew their lost contacts and continue their anti-Soviet activity.<sup>37</sup> This situation made the Ukrainian party leaders more determined to implement a range of preventative measures, first mooted at a meeting on 3 January 1957, which anticipated the transportation and distribution of former deportees to eastern districts of the republic and even their return to the Gulag and other places of deportation.<sup>38</sup> On 11 October 1958, the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party appealed to Moscow to criminalise such 'anti-Soviet' activities.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the First Secretary of the Ukrainian party, Pidgornii, persuaded Khrushchev to bolster the decree passed by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet on 9 November 1956 prohibiting former activists of the Ukrainian nationalist underground from returning to the western regions of the republic.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the liberation of Ukrainian nationalists and their supporters was a very slow and partial process. The cases of deportees were re-examined only 'on an individual basis' and, following their return to the Motherland, the families of participants in the Ukrainian nationalist movement experienced various forms of official discrimination. Released prisoners were not entitled to reclaim confiscated property or receive pensions, and they were barred from certain forms of employment.

### **Crimean Tatars: the twisted road to rehabilitation**

At the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s, the Crimean Tatars, who like several other Caucasian peoples had been forcibly deported during the Second World War, held out hope for liberation. Declarations by Soviet leaders and documents adopted by the party and government gave some grounds for optimism. In particular, at the 20th Congress, Khrushchev had for the first time openly condemned the wartime mass deportations of nations as shameful and irrational. However, several aspects of the Soviet leader's speech elicited concerns among democratically inclined sections of society. For example, having described in detail the tragic fate of the Karachai, Kalmyk, Chechen, Ingush and Balkarian peoples, Khrushchev omitted to mention the victimisation of the Crimean Tatars. The omission probably reflected the deep divisions at the apex of political power on key issues related to the fate of the repressed peoples. This lack of consensus was also evident in the content of a decree passed by the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet

on 28 April 1956, 'On Removing Restrictions on the Special Settlement of the Crimean Tatars.... Relocated during the Great Patriotic War'.<sup>41</sup> Although the directive stipulated the de-registration of the deportees and their release from administrative supervision, they were deprived of the right to compensation for confiscated property, and – most importantly and painfully for the victims – they were barred from returning to their historical homelands.

Consequently, hundreds of Crimean Tatars resident in Uzbekistan and other Soviet republics openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the Supreme Court decision and insisted that significant changes should be inserted into the decree. Many categorically refused to acknowledge the terms of the ruling, and 233 individuals formally requested the return of confiscated properties and the right to enter Crimea.<sup>42</sup> The initial response to these claims was the decree of the Soviet Presidium issued on 24 November 1956, which stated, *inter alia*:

in light of the fact that the former Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic [ASSR] was not only composed of Tatars but constituted a multinational republic in which Tatars represented less than one fifth of the entire population, it is inexpedient to grant national autonomy to the Crimean Tatars.... Nevertheless, taking into consideration the aspirations of some former Crimean Tatars for national unity, it is recognised that *all who wish* have the right to settle in the territory of the Tatar ASSR.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, the November 1956 decree completely rejected the self-determination of the Crimean Tatars and their right to national autonomy. Moreover, the restriction on Crimean Tatars settling in Crimea was extended to other regions of Ukraine. On 15 December 1956, the Ukrainian Council of Ministers decided that the deported Crimean Tatars, Germans, Greeks, Bulgarians and Armenians should not be permitted to relocate to the Kherson, Zaporozhe, Mykolayiv and Odessa regions.<sup>44</sup> However, regardless of the deficiencies and contradictory nature of these decrees, they did attract the attention of the wider community to the unresolved problems of the Crimean Tatars and helped to consolidate the emergence of the Tatar national movement. As a result, in the mid-1950s, the struggle of the Crimean Tatars for the return of their historic homeland acquired more significant and organised forms. Even those Crimean Tatars who were loyal to the regime, such as Old Bolsheviks and veterans of the Civil and Great Patriotic Wars, did not give up the fight. Their representatives, visiting Moscow in the summer

of 1956, insisted on being received by the Central Committee and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, but despite their best efforts, the mission turned out to be unsuccessful.

In September 1956, a group of communists made up of former party and government workers of the Crimean ASSR wrote to Presidium member Mikhail Suslov, urging him to consider the issue of the Crimean Tatars in line with the decisions of the 20th Congress of the CPSU and Lenin's original emancipatory approach to the nationalities question. The authors of the letter decisively condemned the practice of MVD officials, who were demanding that all Crimean Tatars should renounce in writing their right to return to Crimea and to reclaim their former properties. These and other actions by veterans of the revolutionary movement and by Crimean Tatar intellectuals and youth spurred a mass campaign of protest in the second half of the 1950s. In particular, in 1957, activists of the Crimean Tatar national movement prepared and sent a collective application, signed by 14,000 of their compatriots, to the Central Committee.<sup>45</sup> Simultaneously over 10,000 individual appeals requesting the restoration of justice to the Crimean Tatars were dispatched to the top political leaders of the country. But the petition drive, essentially ignored by those in power, came to naught, causing disillusionment among Crimean Tatars and raising doubts that their problems could ever be resolved. The result was a partial scaling back of the campaign and a reduction in the number of collective and individual applications addressed to leading party and state bodies.

However, Khrushchev's removal from power in October 1964, which active members of the movement blamed partly – not without reason – on his ignorance of the acute problems of the Crimean Tatars, brought to life a further wave of protests. These actions eventually had a measure of success. On 5 September 1967, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, in an attempt to ameliorate the negative mood among Crimean Tatars, passed a resolution quashing the Stalinist charge of Tatar treason during the Second World War. At the same time, the Presidium adopted a decree asserting the right of citizens of Tatar nationality, like all citizens of the USSR, to reside in the territory of the Soviet Union, assuming that they abided by the provisions of existing employment legislation and the internal passport regime. However, what was presented as an end to discrimination and an effort to equalise relations among the peoples of the USSR in practice curtailed the resettlement rights of the Crimean Tatars once again, this time in line with the notorious 'residence permit' (*propiska*), which artificially restricted the free movement of all Soviet citizens.

## Conclusion

The rehabilitation process undertaken in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and early 1960s had a rather limited and indefinite character. Most of those convicted of political ‘crimes’ did not receive complete rehabilitation, and their rights (re-employment at former places of work, return of confiscated property, compensation for material losses) were not realised in full. Although many of those purged in the late 1930s had their sentences reviewed and revised (including a not inconsiderable number of former NKVD officials who had themselves been part of the terror system before their arrest), the criminal cases of persons involved in the fabricated political trials of the late 1920s and early 1930s, nationalist activists, party leaders and intellectuals repressed due to accusations of ‘Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism’, were not subject to re-examination. A whole series of party and Supreme Soviet decrees issued in the years 1954 to 1967 failed to meet the hopes of the repressed peoples, notably the Crimean Tatars. Indeed, the entire rehabilitation process was effectively halted in the early 1960s, the number of re-examined cases was reduced annually and revisions were undertaken only on the basis of individual applications by citizens or their relatives.

## Notes

1. R. Pikhoia, ‘Medlenno taiushchii led (1953–1958 gg.)’, *Mezhdunarodnyi istoricheskii zhurnal*, no. 7 (2000). <http://ricolor.org/history/rsv/aft/led/1>.
2. *Sbornik zakonov SSSR i ukazov Presidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR, 1938–1975*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1975), pp. 409–11.
3. Central State Archive of Public Organisations of Ukraine (TsGAGOU), f. 1, op. 24, d. 2833, l. 22.
4. *Ibid.*, ll. 19–21.
5. Branch State Archive of the Security Services of Ukraine (GDASBU), f. 42, file 92, ll. 10–11.
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