Citation style


First published: Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas / jgo.e-reviews, JGO 67 (2019), 4

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Olena Petrenko
Unter Männern. Frauen im ukrainischen nationalistischen Untergrund
1944–1954

Building on the work of Oksana Kis and Marta Harvyshko, this dissertation book explores the lives, times, and representations of women in the Ukrainian national underground during and after World War II. Seven substantial chapters explore the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists’ (OUN) stance on the gender question (chapter 3), women’s agency (Handlungsspielräume) in the underground (chapter 4), the treatment of both their “own” and “enemy” women by the OUN’s military wing, the UPA (chapter 5), sexual relations, violence and power within the underground (chapter 6), the approach towards “enemy women” (chapter 7), life after the underground (chapter 8), and the discursive construction in both Soviet and post-Soviet media since the 1970s (chapter 9). Despite occasional lapses into jargon and notwithstanding the obligatory preliminaries of the genre (chapters 1 and 2), this is an incredibly well-written and eminently readable account.

The book’s literary qualities are matched by its research. Olena Petrenko has not only tapped a vast literature of published primary and secondary sources. She has also delved into archives in Ukraine, Russia, and Canada, including the relatively recently opened KGB archive in Kyiv. Moreover, she has flanked her written sources with oral history interviews as well as movies and photographs. The result is a history which combines cultural, social, military, and gender history in a compelling tapestry.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the historical and historiographical background. They discuss the question, the method, the sources, and the more general history of OUN/UPA. The actual study begins with chapter 3, which explores both the ideological discourse and the practice of the OUN with regards to the “women’s question.” Ideologically, the Ukrainian nationalists were anti-feminists who saw the place of women in the home, the bedroom, and the kitchen. Reproduction of the nation was supposed to be their main role. Bringing new fighters for the cause into the world, not fighting themselves, was to be their mission. In practice, however, the scarcity of cadres for the underground fight soon opened the ranks of the UPA to women, who joined in significant numbers. If local tallies are any indication for the overall pattern, women made up about a third of illegals in the 1940s (p. 98).

Chapter 4 explores the roles women could take in the underground and the extent to which they could control their own fate. Like in other military organizations at the time, women were assigned, in the first instance, to supporting and caring roles: nurses, propagandists, couriers, or food delivery personnel. Soon, however, they also acquired access to work in the OUN’s internal security services (the SB). Women also served as contact persons and scouts.

Chapter 5 then explores several case studies of women who had contact with the UPA, either as participants or as enemies. These examples show not only the complex interactions between coercion, choice, and chance which marked the biographies of these women; it also exemplifies that the neat delineation of gendered spheres which ideologists imagined could not be maintained in practice. Women were not just helpmates of the male fighters or victims of either the UPA or the
Soviet security services. They were also actors in their own right, who participated in violence as much as the men.

Chapter 6 continues the exploration of the theme of violence by concentrating on power relations and sexuality. Both sides of this unequal fight – the Ukrainian nationalists and the Soviet security forces – subjected women to sexual and other violence; and both sides also exploited their power positions for more or less consensual intimacy. Men on both sides, finally, tended to mistrust women as potential spies and traitors.

Chapter 7 investigates the contest between OUN and Soviets over women in the borderlands as a resource in their respective struggle over controlling the Ukrainian countryside. A particular target were teachers, usually sent from “old” (pre-1939) Soviet territories to spearhead Sovietisation in the villages. They became a major “soft target” for UPA violence. At the same time, the nationalist resistance tried to turn them into allies if at all possible, which of course further heightened the interest of the Soviet security organs in surveillance of these potential traitors. Teachers thus found themselves in the middle of the frontlines of the insurgency, in a “triangle between rebels, representatives of the state, and the civilian population” (p. 233). This was not an enviable position and many tried to leave as a result.

Chapter 8 concentrates on life after the underground. We follow UPA women into the Gulag and, after Stalin’s death, back to Ukraine, if they survived. We follow others into emigration and see them interact in the changing centres of the Ukrainian diaspora – from Bavaria to Canada and the US (Australia, another major destination, is not represented among the case studies).

To this reviewer, the most intriguing chapter is the final one, chapter 9. It deals with media representations of OUN/UPA women. Soviet adventure novels and feature films of the 1970s and 1980s sometimes treated the topic of women in the underground with surprising complexity. Although Petrenko’s focus is more on the way women were treated as appendices to men and deprived of their own agency, what she describes is indeed much more nuanced than one might expect. Likewise, post-1991 Ukrainian prose and films on the UPA in many cases do not follow simple ideological lines. Instead, they often show civilians stuck between the hammer of the UPA and the anvil of Soviet security forces (as, indeed, was the experience of the majority).

No doubt, this book will become one of the standard works on women in the Ukrainian underground. It also contributes to the growing literature on women in the Soviet Union during and after World War II. Highly recommended.

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