

# Study of the Phenomenon of “Performers” During the Great Terror of 1937–1938

ROMAN PODKUR

Doctor, Senior Researcher Fellow

National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine,

Institute of the History of Ukraine,

Department of History of State Terror of the Soviet Era

(Kyiv, Ukraine)

✉ 5roman@ukr.net

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1043-7535>

**ABSTRACT.** The article examines the phenomenon of “performers” during the Great Terror of 1937–1938 in Ukrainian historiography of the mid-1990s–2020s.

Research methodology and methods. Exploring the principles of historicism, systematization, objectivity, comprehensiveness, and continuity, the author reveals their dependency on the origin of historical knowledge. The factor of subjectivity (the researcher’s personality) is particularly determining and obstructing objectivity of the research. The author employed historiographical analysis, synthesis, typology of research directions, and comparative analysis.

Conclusions. The study of the phenomenon of the “perpetrator” of the Great Terror became possible only after the complete declassification of the documents of the communist special services. The study of the phenomenon had a certain dynamic – from the role of the “general director of terror” Joseph Stalin, his closest entourage, the people’s commissars of Internal affairs of the USSR and Soviet Ukraine to the activities of specific investigators of the regional Ukrainian NKVD, heads of district apparatuses, direct executors of death sentences. The researchers were able to outline the overall portrait of the performer: Chekist-organizer, Chekist-investigator, Chekist-executioner.

Researchers have identified some patterns of Chekists’ behaviour when accused of “violating socialist legality” by the top political leadership. The patterns indicate attempts to avoid or reduce punishment, to not openly accuse Stalin and the higher party-Soviet leadership of forcing them to commit the crime. This shows that criticism of the Communist Party was inadmissible in their corporate worldview. Such a tendency was characteristic of the Soviet security organs throughout the life of the communist regime.

**KEYWORDS:** performer, perpetrator, Great Terror, historiography, NKVD, biographical studies.

Decommunization of the worldview area became one of the elements of reforming Ukrainian society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this context, the detection and disclosure to the general public of the crimes of the communist regime has become one of the leading research topics.

The study of the Great Terror of 1937–1938 and its consequences for Ukraine began in the mid-1980s during the so-called *perestroika* (“restructuring”) announced by Mikhail Gorbachev and the rehabilitation of victims of “Stalinist political repressions.” At the same time, the process of declassification of documents of the materials of the highest party-Soviet leadership of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR) began. This stimulated academic studies<sup>1</sup>.

Marc Junge carried out a preliminary analysis of the historiography of the 1990s to the first decade of the 2000s and noted that the study of “punishers” (as he called the perpetrators during the Great Terror) until 1991 was limited to the figure of Joseph Stalin – the “general director of terror”. Sometimes, in the context of the implementers of Stalin’s directives, researchers mentioned the heads of the Union and Republican People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (rus. *Народный комиссариат внутренних дел*, NKVD). In general, chekists (Officers of the Internal Affairs) were considered as an element and at the same time an impersonal tool of the state and party system. The main sources for such research were documents such as those of Communist party and state bodies, separate materials of archival and criminal cases, and memories.

According to Junge, several directions were formed in Russian historiography during the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. Oleg Mozokhin can be considered a typical representative of one direction (mostly historians who are related to the Federal Security Service (rus. *Федеральная служба безопасности*, FSB) of the Russian Federation or to educational institutions of the FSB system. He seeks, first of all, to save the “honour of the uniform” of the communist special services, which is quite natural, looking at the obvious trend in Russia – the trend of rehabilitation of NKVD employees convicted, punished or dismissed for “violations of socialist legality” from the state security bodies in 1937–1941 and 1954–1961. He emphasised the fact that state security bodies received their “extrajudicial powers” from the supreme legislative bodies of the state. Thus, Mozokhin reduces the role of state security agencies to an “executive” role. It seems that representatives of the party apparatus created appropriate conditions, deceived and forced chekists to violate “socialist legality”. Junge emphasised that the representatives of this direction ignored their own interest in the state security leadership in conducting massive repressive

<sup>1</sup> *Politychni represii v Ukraini (1917–1980s): Bibliografichnyi pokazhchyk*, compiled by Serhii Kalytko [et al.], Kyiv, Zhytomyr: Polissia, 2007.

operations, denying the responsibility of the chekists for the torture and mass murders of citizens<sup>2</sup>.

Russian researcher Vladimir Danilov claimed that the NKVD resisted mass repressions. From the fact of the arrest in July 1937 of certain high-ranking employees of the NKVD, he concluded that the reason for these arrests was the "spirit of resistance." It seems that some chekists have not forgotten the negative experience of collectivisation and industrialisation in 1928–1933. But, in their opinion, these chekists could not oppose the instructions of the party leadership and departmental operational orders<sup>3</sup>.

The third direction was represented by Aleksei Teplakov and Nikita Petrov. They tried to study topics such as psychology, customs, behaviour patterns, different levels of clientele and corruption. The researchers studied the formation of the terror mechanism through the institutional activities of the state security agencies, the willingness of chekists to compromise with their own conscience, and efforts to avoid responsibility for crimes. According to these scholars, the political loyalty of these chekists to the communist regime was based on a system of privileges in combination with a fear of quickly becoming a victim<sup>4</sup>.

But with the introduction into scientific circulation of the declassified materials of the communist special services in the Baltic states and Georgia, researchers discovered many names of direct perpetrators during the Great Terror<sup>5</sup>. The question arose as to how, on the basis of their biographies, it would be possible to study both the general collective and specific portraits of state security service personnel who participated in mass repressive operations. It was important to identify the general and individual features of a chekist leader who organised the immediate implementation of operational orders, a chekist investigator, on whom the fate of the subject depended, and a chekist executioner who carried out a judicial or extrajudicial sentence.

In Ukraine, similar studies were associated with certain difficulties. Historians had access to documents of party and Soviet bodies. Instead, a significant part of the documents of the communist special services at the beginning of the 21st century was not available to researchers. The departmental instructions of the Security Service of Ukraine forbade scientists to research and publish information about the personal affairs of state security employees, agents, operational and investigative measures of the Soviet era. Information was selectively published in scientific and documentary collections published within the

<sup>2</sup> Marc Junge, "Sovetskie 'karateli'. Istoriohrafiiia, metody i istochnikovaia baza", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2015, no. 1, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–23.

framework of joint international scientific projects<sup>6</sup>. This should have indicated the openness of the state security archives. However, when researchers tried to get access to personal files of chekists, archivists cited the impossibility of providing them to the reading room due to secrecy. The latter were not declassified for a long time, apparently due to the lack of a sufficient number of personnel.

The leadership of the Ukrainian special service was "USSR-made", where the personal data of state security employees, even criminals, were a state secret. In private conversations with researchers, discussions with representatives of civil society, they stated that "the perpetrators of mass repressions are no longer alive." Publicising the criminals of the communist regime can provoke tragic consequences for their descendants. Sometimes they even referred to the well-known stereotype "those were the times", that is, the communist regime forced these people to commit criminal acts under the threat of punishment or possible marginalisation in Soviet society due to dismissal from the "organs".

### **Biographical studies as the first step to studying the phenomenon of the "executor"**

Biographical studies of state security personnel began in Ukraine in the mid-1990s. This related to the publication in 1993 of the scientific and documentary series of books *Rehabilitated by History* (*Реабілітовані історією*), which included, in addition to the publication of lists of victims of political repressions by the communist regime, the study of the mechanism of the formation and functioning of state terror during 1917–1991. One of the elements of the policy of state terror was state security agencies. Therefore, research attention was focused on their employees.

In the questionnaire for a repressed citizen, which was developed by the main editorial board of the scientific documentary series of books *Rehabilitated by History*, there was an item indicating the surname of the investigator. In the future, it was planned to identify units of state security (special, secret political, transport, etc.), investigators of the republican apparatus, regional NKVD administrations, which were maximally involved in mass operations. However, the head of the Security Service of Ukraine began to insist on preventing the publication of the names of state security officers. The main argument was the possible danger for the family members of these employees of the communist special service. The main editorial board was forced to agree to such a compromise, since otherwise access to archival and criminal cases would be limited for employees of regional academic and editorial groups.

However, researchers began to collect biographical data from the inspection reports on chekists involved in "violations of socialist legality" (torture, falsification, manipulation

<sup>6</sup> *Velykyi teror v Ukraini: 'Kurkulska operatsiia' 1937–1938*, editors: Serhii Kokin, Marc Junge, Kyiv: Vyd. dim "Kyievo-Mohylianska akademiia", 2010.

of documents), which were contained in some archival criminal cases of rehabilitated citizens. Such certificates were added as an evidentiary basis of the groundlessness of the repression of a particular citizen. A lot of biographical information was contained in the documents of party bodies (the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine (CP(b)U), regional party committees). Biographical certificates of the personnel department of the NKVD–Ukrainian NKVD were submitted for review by the members of the Politbureau and the Bureau of the Party Regional Committee for approval for the position.

At the end of 1997, extensive biographies of the heads of regional offices, middle management of the State Political administration (rus. *Государственное политическое управление*, GPU) and the NKVD of Soviet Ukraine were published<sup>7</sup>. A few years later, Vadym Zolotariov published a series of extensive biographies of the middle rank management of the GPU–NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR and the entire USSR. The documents from the archive of the communist special service were the minimum number due to their inaccessibility<sup>8</sup>.

Initially, the biographical essays were similar in structure. Zolotariov studied the social background, the family of a chekist, as this was one of the determining factors of his further career in the state security agencies at the end of the 1930s. He described in detail his training, first life experience, participation in social-democratic political organisations, the Ukrainian Revolution and the civil war in Russia on the side of the Bolsheviks. Biographies testified that the vast majority of middle-ranking leaders joined the state security agencies in 1920–1921, that is, during the Russian occupation of the Ukrainian People's Republic. This related to the formation of chekist bodies within the Russian occupation administration. For the most part, they were sent from units of the Red Army or from special departments of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (VChK, or ChK) of the divisions occupying the territory of Ukraine. Their appointment was agreed directly with the management of ChK.

Subsequently, in the biographical essays by Vadym Zolotariov, Oleh Bazhan and Yurii Shapoval<sup>9</sup> new details appeared. It is about identifying certain clientele that spread their influence in Soviet Ukraine. These people were connected by common service, su-

<sup>7</sup> Yurii Shapoval, Volodymyr Prystaiko, Vadym Zolotariov, *ChK-GPU-NKVD v Ukraini: osoby, fakty, dokumenty*, Kyiv: Abris, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Vadym Zolotariov, "Vyprovuvannia sovistiu. Storinky biohrafii komisara derzhbezpeky 3 ranhu S. Mazo", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2000, no. 2/4, pp. 374–389; Vadym Zolotariov, "Svoiak Stalina (storinky biohrafii komisara derzhbezpeky 1 ranhu Stanislava Redensa)", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2004, No 1–2, pp. 210–249.

<sup>9</sup> Vadym Zolotariov, *Sekretno-politychnyi viddil DPU USRR: spravy ta liudy*, Kharkiv: Folio, 2007; Vadym Zolotariov, Oleh Bazhan, "Arkhitektori 'Velykoho teroru' na Poltavshchyni: Oleksandr Oleksandrovych Volkov", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2017, no. 2, pp. 5–59; Vadym Zolotariov, *ChK-GPU-NKVS na Kharkivshchyni: liudy ta doli. 1919–1941*, Kharkiv: Folio, 2003.

zerain, similarity of life path, common danger, rivalry with other clientele, etc. Members of Nikolai Yezhov's clientele were the first ones noticed. Another one who immediately started to form his own clientele was the Commissar of NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR Aleksandr Uspenskyi. These were employees who worked with him in Novosibirsk and Orenburg. At his request, they were transferred to the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR.

Having conducted a large-scale comparative analysis of biographies, a study of interpersonal relations, Zolotariov managed to identify the formation and personify several more clients in the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR. These are "Lytvyn", "Zak" or "Leningrad" groups, "Ukrainians", "North Caucasians" and "neutrals"<sup>10</sup>.

The biographical essays of the leaders and employees of the republican NKVD apparatus, and some of the heads of the regional NKVD administrations were published during the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s. These testified that their past participation in the civil war in Russia or the struggle with the insurgent movement in Ukraine did not save them from accusations of "violation of socialist legality" between 1930 and 1936. Their participation included political opponents of the Bolsheviks, the organisation and participation in political and economic campaigns, carrying out mass deportations of peasants, Poles, Germans and politically hopeless citizens during the Great Terror. Belonging to a certain group also did not offer protection from various kinds of punishment.

Historians and publicists focused on the liquidation of the "perpetrators of the Stalinist crime" as early as the late 1980s up to the 1990s. At that time, a superficial conclusion was made about the destruction of the perpetrators as witnesses to the crime.

The author believes that the deep reason for the gradual "purging" of the NKVD of the USSR was the need to change personnel in the central and territorial apparatuses of the NKVD. It was a segment of the general "personnel revolution" carried out during the second half of the 1930s. It aimed to form a new elite in the conditions of the Soviet reality from young, educated, politically and ideologically loyal people, ready to fulfil any task of the country's leadership. In this context, Nicolas Werth rightly noted that the repression against the Soviet elite formed the public perception of terror necessary for the Kremlin leaders. The demonstrative Moscow trials and hundreds of local trials against Party-Soviet leaders, performed according to Kremlin-written script, had to discipline the new leaders. This was a clear signal to the bureaucracy and society in general about their "prospects" in case of non-compliance with the government's demands<sup>11</sup>.

The concept of Stalin's "personnel revolution" in the subdivisions of the NKVD of the USSR was to a certain extent confirmed in the studies by Zolotariov. He conducted a so-

<sup>10</sup> Vadym Zolotariov, *Oleksandr Uspenskyi: osoba, chas, otochennia*, Kharkiv: Folio, 2004, pp. 94–106.

<sup>11</sup> Nicolas Werth, *Ystoriya stalynskoho GULAGA. Konets 1920 – pervaia polovyna 1950*, vol. 1, Moscow: „Rossyiskaia polytycheskaia entsyklopedyia" (ROSSPEN), 2004, p. 72.

cio-statistical analysis of 90 senior officers of the NKVD of the USSR in the mid-1930s<sup>12</sup>. The results were the following:

- Age: 71% of chekists of the central apparatus of the USSR were aged 36 to 45 years (50% – 36 to 40 years, 21% – 41 to 45 years). In general, these were people not so young, they had some life experience and were able to critically evaluate the political and economic steps of the country's leaders.
- Nationality: 66.67% were Jews, 15.55% were Russians, 6.67% were Ukrainians. Such a national structure of state security bodies was likely to cause dissatisfaction to Stalin, known for his anti-Semitic and Russophile views.
- Social status: 60.22% had a “socially alien” origin. Although chekist leaders demonstrated political loyalty, the human factor played a primary role in the “social engineering” planned by Stalin. The chekist executor should not doubt the need of destroying a person based on social, gender, national or religious characteristics. Therefore, the communist leadership tried to fill the apparatuses of the NKVD with people who would feel hatred for “foreign origin”, religion, “enemy nation”, etc.
- Partisanship: 64.45% joined the party in 1905–1920. Thus, considering themselves “old communists”, they could potentially be in opposition to the established dictatorial system in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Stalin could not at the same time drastically change the social parameters of the human resources of the NKVD bodies of the USSR. Taking advantage of the moment, in 1936 to 1939, the Communist leader carried out a personnel “purge” of the NKVD of the USSR twice – first from the “Yagoda group” and then from the “Yezhov group”. As a result, he almost completely destroyed the extensive clientele of the central, republican and regional apparatus of the NKVD of the USSR.

He saw the potential danger of a conspiracy in the existence of clients in the Soviet Party apparatus, state security agencies, the prosecutor's office and the army. The periodic transfer of personnel only temporarily destroyed the stability of personal relations. Instead, the destruction of overlords of various levels, individual vassals loyal to them, stopped the restoration of old ties or the formation of new clientele for a long time. At the same time, it ensured the organisational and hardware stability of his dictatorial regime.

### **Research on “desk murderers” and death penalty executors**

New approaches to the study of the phenomenon of “perpetrators” have been formed during the implementation of the academic research project *Echoes of the Great Terror: NKVD Employees on the Dock (1938–1941)*. Its discussion began between scientists from Ukraine, Germany, the USA, Canada, Moldova, Georgia and the Russian Federation back

<sup>12</sup> *Ukraina v dobu “Velykoho teroru”. 1936–1938*, editors: Serhii Bohunov et al., Kyiv, 2009, pp. 60–83.



in 2010. In the discussions, one of the German colleagues called this project "punishers" (direct translation from Ukrainian *каратели*, a common term in English is *perpetrators*). This caused an ambiguous understanding of Ukrainian scientists. This term was applied to servicemen of the *Wehrmacht*, the Security Police and the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), who participated in war crimes during the World War II.

The author was aware that open use of the term "punishers" would completely stop access to archival documents of the communist special services, when pro-Russian politicians were in power in Ukraine. The latter supported the course of rehabilitation of the "Soviet past", where the chekists played one of the positive roles. Therefore, the term "executors" was proposed at the beginning of the project.

Canadian researcher Lynne Viola mentioned the possibility of using the term "perpetrator" in relation to state security officials of the communist regime. At a conference in Leeds (Great Britain) in 2010, she gave a talk on the "perpetrator" (in the sense of "punisher") in the context of the Great Terror. A comprehensive study was published in 2013<sup>13</sup>. She later noted that this term was not used in the historiography of the Stalin era. It is necessary to note the translation of the term "perpetrators", as Viola understands it, because the English-language counterpart could not have been used during Stalin's time. Since, for various reasons (obviously political, ideological), some researchers had no desire to look for culprits other than Stalin. But the main reason, in her opinion, was the combination of the traditional scheme of studying Soviet society "from top to bottom" and individual social groups, the bureaucracy, which were oppressed by state terror. This approach was also due to the limitation of access to archival documents. Instead, researchers studying the crimes of the Nazis and the Holocaust devoted a lot of work to the "perpetrator" phenomenon. The semantic meaning of this term varied from "banal bureaucrat", "desk murderer" to "vicious, hardened killer" and "hardened ideologue", with significant nuances between these extremely strong terms.

Yet, according to Viola's position, there was no trial of communism in the USSR, no equivalent of Nuremberg. This did not allow the archives to be fully opened and, by reconstructing communist crimes, to comprehend and condemn them<sup>14</sup>. This would lead to significant worldview progress in post-Soviet republics, primarily the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus. Unfortunately, the process of condemning communist ideology has stopped in Russia and Belarus. Public historical and educational organisations, in particular "Memorial", were gradually isolated and their activities ceased. In Ukraine, the "perpetrator" research slowly unfolded and has gained momentum since 2018, with the start of the publication of the results of the international scientific and publishing project *Echoes of the Great Terror*...

<sup>13</sup> Lynne Viola, "The Question of the Perpetrator in Soviet History", in: *Slavic Review*, Spring, 2013, no. 1, vol. 72, pp. 1–23.

<sup>14</sup> Lynne Viola, "Vvedenye", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2015, no. 1, p. 7.



The central scientific questions of this collective research were:

- the motivation of the top political leadership in arrests and trials of chekists;
- criteria for selection of NKVD employees for punishment;
- “purging” of NKVD employees as a way of shifting the blame to the regional apparatus, searching for scapegoats for groundless arrests, torture during mass operations;
- the presence of conflicts among related people in the NKVD and Soviet Party bodies as a factor in another “purge” in the NKVD<sup>15</sup>.

The solution of the research questions was determined by two directions of research. The first was to identify the specifics of the relationship between the regional party committees and the regional administrations of the Department of NKVD (Rus. *Управление Народного комиссариата внутренних дел*, UNKVD). The second is to find out the direct “executors” at the level of the district departments of the NKVD, the regional NKVD administrations and the main NKVD office. The patterns of their behaviour in the conditions of accusations by the top political leadership of state security employees of violating “socialist legality” would be studied; this would determine the algorithms of their protection during official investigations and court sessions of military tribunals.

The first step was the publication of transcripts of meetings of party branches and operational meetings of regional UNKVD administration employees. This type of source provided interesting information about interpersonal relations in the regional administration, existing regional clientele, their connections with the Union and Republican people’s Commissars of Internal Affairs. It was also possible to reconstruct certain elements of daily management and ordinary employees, and problems with food supply, housing and material support<sup>16</sup>.

The researchers recorded the dynamics of the chekists’ understanding of the essence of the accusations of the top political leadership and the change in their behaviour patterns. At first, neither the heads of regional offices nor ordinary employees understood why they were being accused since, from their point of view, they were carrying out party directives in good faith. According to the traditional model of behaviour, after receiving the directive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) (CPSU(b)), operational meetings or party meetings were held immediately, where the next tasks of the political leadership were discussed. The heads of the Ukrainian NKVD who, out of inertia, decided to immediately hold operational meetings, did not know how to respond to accusations of “violation of socialist legality.” Thus, on 25 November 1938, Ivan Korablev, head of the UNKVD in the Vinnytsia region, had already held a meeting on working out one resolution: that of the USSR Central Committee and the Central Com-

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Vidlunnia Velykoho teroru*, vol. 1, compiled by Valerii Vasyliiev, Lynne Viola, Roman Podkur, Kyiv: Vydavets Zakharenko V. O., 2017.

mittee of the All-Union Communist Party of Ukraine (b) “On Prosecutorial Supervision, Arrests and Investigations” dated 17 November 1938. His speech was quite standard – he described the main shortcomings of several departments of the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR, which he learned about at a meeting of the Central Committee of the CP(b)U from the speech of Nikita Khrushchev. This was on the identified shortcomings in the Ukrainian UNKVD in the Vinnytsia region, the punishment of individual employees for unjustified arrests in 1938, and provided instructions on improving agency and operational work, preventing “distortions and deviations in current work” for example. According to the researchers, Korablev acted within the limits of a typical reaction to identified shortcomings in everyday work. Instead, the party meetings of NKVD administration employees in the Vinnytsia region on 26 December 1938 were already being held in a fundamentally different scenario. Korablev admitted his own mistakes, condemning the shortcomings of management staff<sup>17</sup>. Viola rightly noted that the chekists immediately understood the level of possible discussion and the limits of criticism, starting with the sanction of the Politbureau of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Ukraine (b) for the arrest of Yezhov and his entourage. With the escape and staged suicide of Aleksandr Uspensky, the People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR, the articulation of his involvement in the entourage of the People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs of the NKVD of the USSR, this defined the primary circle for criticism. The chekists freely discussed the key aspects of state terror, the course and shortcomings of agent-operational work, on the condition that they were recognised as violations of “socialist legality”<sup>18</sup>. It was obvious to everyone that the heads of the Ukrainian NKVD, who were appointed with the approval of Uspensky, were also subject to criticism and punishment. The only thing that needed to be determined was the list of subordinates of the head of the regional administration, who should also be punished.

A preliminary analysis of the behaviour of state security officers at party meetings made it possible to identify several types:

- Not accepting accusations of violation of “socialist legality”; such employees were confident that the arrests were feasible on the basis of substantiated evidence or operative materials. They did not see anything wrong with the use of “physical methods of influence”, since the suspects are “enemies of the people” who do not want to give the necessary testimony. At the party meeting of the UNKVD administration in the Kharkiv region, state security officer Ivan Kriukov testified: “...in the 8 years of my work in the organs of the GPU-NKVD, I never considered it possible for me to interrogate those arrested for counter-revolutionary activities with white gloves.” He con-

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.18–24, 30–69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

sidered his reputation as a "tough investigator" to be the greatest asset of his work<sup>19</sup>.

- Recognition of individual mistakes in the investigation, but someone justifying their actions by the reluctance of the department/UNKVD management to listen to the investigator's arguments.
- Individual employees understood that they were violating "socialist legality", but certain circumstances did not encourage them to resist. These included the simplified investigation procedure, the demands of the UNKVD administration directors to provide "confession protocols" and the propaganda campaign initiated by the leadership of the Communist Party to search for "enemies of the people". They were afraid/thought this was the "correct line" and their steps would be seen as "defence of counter-revolutionaries".
- According to the usual scheme, the employees repented, admitted their mistakes and shifted the blame to the heads of the regional UNKVD and the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR. They claimed they conscientiously followed the orders of their superiors and did not engage in legal conflicts. They exposed the "hostile activities" of the heads of the UNKVD, calling them "minions of the enemy", talked about specific crimes and named their "accomplices". This behaviour was determined by the fact that they were conscientious executors of the orders of the leadership of the UNKVD.
- Other chekists regretted that, knowing about cases of violation of investigation procedure, torture of suspects or their murder, they did not inform the party committee. Of course, in reality, they did not intend to report on these cases, as they were informed about the departmental leadership's permission to beat the suspects and falsify criminal cases<sup>20</sup>. The chekists believed that the procedure of the simplified investigation and in general all their activities should be a departmental secret.

The open discussion of the chekists about the circumstances of the simplified investigation revealed the baseness and meanness of these people. The vast majority of them understood that they were sending innocent people to their deaths, but none of them wished to resign from the NKVD bodies and did not resist the orders of their commanders. They did their best to prove their political loyalty and to remain members of the "Chekist corporation".

An important aspect, which for some reason has been overlooked by researchers, is the presence of the secretary of the party's local regional committee at party meetings and operational meetings. For the party environment, this formally demonstrated the restoration of party control over the NKVD bodies. This historiographical trend continued from the late 1980s to the 1990s, when the idea of "the exit of the leadership and employees of

<sup>19</sup> Roman Podkur, Iryna Stavniuk, "Spivrobotnyky zvykly do sproshchenoho slidstva...: partiini zbory Ukrainian NKVD po Kharkivskii oblasti u konteksti prypynennia masovykh operatsii u lystopadi 1938", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2019, no. 1, p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

the NKVD from the control of the party” was the main explanation for mass unjustified arrests. In the Soviet era, this was confirmed even in some feature films, where the party “restored justice” to “unreasonably convicted citizens.”

In the study by Kokin and Junge, one of the paragraphs was entitled “Taming and Reorientation of Punitive Bodies”<sup>21</sup>. Junge called this tendency the “dictatorship of education”. Analysing the trials of state security officers and comparing them with the Moscow trials of 1936–1938, he declared the retreat of political “righteousness” to the background and the primacy of loyalty to the Soviet state. In his opinion, the ritual accusations of “Trotskism” or “right deviation”, brought to the point of absurdity and devoid of meaning in 1936–1938, were replaced by a more rational punitive practice, the main guide for which was the interests of the Soviet state<sup>22</sup>. To support this thesis, researchers often referred to the arrests of leaders at the all-Union, republican and regional levels, statements of individual chekists in private conversations<sup>23</sup>.

From the outside, the situation really looked like the state security officers were arresting officials of the Soviet Party apparatus according to their own desires. However, the study of Politbureau documents by Oleh Khlevniuk proved that the procedure for arresting a party member from the nomenclature of the Central Committee of the CPSU(b) was strictly regulated. He described in detail Yezhov’s relationship with Stalin and his entourage, and concluded that there is no known fact of Stalin losing control over NKVD. Yezhov was removed from his post at the moment when Stalin needed it to be done<sup>24</sup>. It is worth adding that the approval of the leadership and responsible employees of the republican and regional UNKVD administrations to the Politbureau of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (VKP(b)) – CP(b)U, the presence of party cells in the republican and regional apparatus allowed the strict control of the activities of the chekists.

Therefore, the widespread idea of some researchers about the alleged return of party control over the NKVD, their “taming” was calculated on the broad generality of the Soviet Party apparatus to explain “individual deviations”. By creating a distorted reality, manipulating facts, Stalin and his entourage were removed from criticism. Once again, the stereotype about the “good tsar and bad boyars” worked in the mass consciousness.

<sup>21</sup> Velykyi teror v Ukraini. “Kurkulska operatsiia” 1937–1938..., part II, p. 263.

<sup>22</sup> Marc Junge, “Kozly otpushcheniia” soprotivliaiutsia: protsessy nad narushyteliami ‘sotsialisticheskoi zakonnosti’ v Nykolaevskoi oblasti v 1939–1941”, in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2015, no. 1, pp. 74–75.

<sup>23</sup> Reports about intelligence-operational work of Ukrainian NKVD in Dnepropetrovsk oblast. 9 January 1939 – 7 December 1939, in: *Haluzevy derzhavny arkhiv slyzhby bezpeky Ukrainy* (hereinafter – HDA SBU), fond 16, op. 1, file 353, sheet 210; *Vidlunnia Velykoho teroru*, vol. 1, p. 170.

<sup>24</sup> Oleh Khlevniuk, Khoziain, *Stalin i utverzhdienie stalinskoj diktatory*, Moskva: Rossyiskaia polytycheskaia entsyklopedyia (ROSSPEN), 2010, p. 341.

At the same time, it is worth agreeing with Junge's thesis that the didactic concept of the campaign to restore "socialist legality" in a certain way "cooled" the layer of Stalin's young regional leaders, who came to replace the arrested officials and zealously "exposed the enemies of the people." They quickly realised that the hunting of "enemy people" is now not carried out in a mass order, but selectively<sup>25</sup>. Now the evidence base must be based not on silent accusations of political disloyalty, but on specific activities.

The researchers also stated that along with appeasing the Soviet Party apparatus and society through the review of individual criminal cases of former officials, the communist regime did not make any concessions to Soviet society. The course of radical restructuring of the economy and society, chosen by Stalin, was preserved without any corrections<sup>26</sup>. The author believes this is an important conclusion, since many researchers have interpreted the cessation of mass operations as a "Beria thaw" (like Khrushchev's thaw in the 1950s). Although it was recognised that the repressive actions continued, they took on a planned, point-like character<sup>27</sup>.

A logical segment of the study of the phenomenon of "performers" was archival criminal cases and transcripts of trials of state security officers who "violated socialist legality." Kokin and Rossman organised the transcripts of the trials of state security officers of the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR from October 1938 to June 1943<sup>28</sup>. Thanks to the publication of this historical source, researchers have humanised not only the victims of the Great Terror who testified at the tribunal. Junge rightly noted that the transcripts made it possible to reveal the immediate and long-term goals of the campaign to punish "violators of socialist legality." They contain new information about the mechanism of falsification of criminal cases, methods of conducting interrogations, cooperation of party committees, the police, the prosecutor's office and state security apparatus during the Great Terror. The political-ideological, legal, social-psychological factors of the implementation and results of the Great Terror have gained clear outlines.

The minutes of court sessions also provide quite rich material. They allowed the researcher to study some aspects of the self-perception of the fact of the crime both by the chekist himself and by the victim who participated in the trial<sup>29</sup>. Of course, judges, defendants and witnesses pursued different goals at these trials. However, not a single transcript recorded any criticism of a party figure or the communist system in general that allowed such flagrant crimes.

<sup>25</sup> Marc Junge, "Kozly otpushcheniia' soprotivliaiutsia...", p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>27</sup> Cf.: Valerii Vasyliiev, "Beriivska vidlyha' v URSR (kinets 1938–1939): politychni aspekty", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2009, no. 2, pp. 116–135; Marc Junge, *Chekisty Stalina: moshch i bessilie. "Beriivskaia ottepel' v Nykolaevskii oblasti Ukrainy*, Moscow: AIRO-XXI, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> *Vidlunnia Velykoho teroru*, in 3 books, vol. 2, editors: Serhii Kokin, Jeffrey Rossman, Kyiv: Vydavets Zakharenko V. O., 2018–2022.

<sup>29</sup> *Vidlunnia Velykoho teroru*, vol. 2, book 1, 2018, pp. 7–8.

Unfortunately, while dealing with these documents, the researchers neglected the important point of selecting the facts of "violation of socialist legality". Yet this is where the principles of Bolshevik justice lie – to punish for violating party directives and corporate instructions. That is, the use of psychological pressure and torture against "enemies of the people" was the norm for the USSR rulers. Stalin confirmed the possibility of using methods of physical influence in relation to the suspects in a cipher telegram on 10 January 1939<sup>30</sup>. The chekist was not punished for the beating. He was accused of not being able to prove the actual guilt of the suspect with the help of additional facts. The death of the subject during the interrogation was a flagrant violation of departmental directives – but not the very fact of death, but the loss of the opportunity to prove the criminal activity of the subject. The author believes that it is worth conducting a special study with the participation of historians and legal scholars to study the political background and all aspects of the application of selective justice, possible or impossible compliance with legal acts, departmental directives, etc.

A detailed study of a complex of documents – transcripts of court sessions, materials of official investigations, personal and archival criminal cases – made it possible to make and supplement certain outlines of the collective portrait of the chekist executive. Yet scientists paid the greatest attention to strategies for the protection of state security officers during official criminal investigations and court hearings.

Thus, the analysis of chekist appeals of various levels made it possible to identify three general strategies used by former employees of the NKVD of the USSR and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic for their defence. The first was the denial of personal responsibility for any violations of "socialist legality." Responsibility was transferred by the chekists to their commanders – to the head of the local administrations, to the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR, to each other, and in rare cases even to local party bodies. Yet the criticism concerned the initiation by party secretaries, demands for arrest and strict investigation of "enemies of the people" identified among party members.

Often, when admitting the fact of falsification of a criminal case, the chekists referred to their own incompetence or that of their colleagues or subordinates. They would also mention too limited an investigation period and the impossibility to check the available information in detail, demands of management to immediately complete the case; that is, they shifted the blame for the committed crime to others. They also noted that the suspects "stood by their first testimonies" throughout the entire period of the investigation; an element of this strategy was attempts to discredit witnesses and former suspects.

<sup>30</sup> *Lubianka. Stalin i NKVD-NKGB-GUKR "Smersh". 1939 – mart 1946*, edited by Vladimir Khaustov, Vladimir Naumov and Natalia Plotnikova, Moscow: MFD, 2006, pp. 14–15.

The second defence strategy consisted in denying or minimising the crimes committed, disputing most charges announced against them, primarily in the use of physical violence and falsification of investigative documents.

A common justification was the understanding of the difference in the conduct of mass operations by the NKVD in 1937 and 1938. Chekists actively defended their actions and methods used during the operation according to the operational order of the NKVD of the USSR No 00447 against "formers", "pests" or "enemies people". They readily admitted that under pressure from their superiors, they "violated socialist legality" during "national" operations. However, even here the employees noted that "the end justified the means." The chekists, repenting of minor violations of the law, generally did not question the good goal of fighting the "enemies of the people" and their own actions in pursuing this goal.

Therefore, the chekist officer on trial moved immediately to the next step in this strategy – minimising the crime committed. They denied the charges of physical violence and falsification of a criminal case and in excusing themselves, the chekist noted that the suspect behaved defiantly, "insulting the Soviet authorities." Therefore, in anger, they hit the subject on the cheek or cursed them obscenely; it must be noted that such a case happened only once.

At the same time, some chekists proved that they were the initiators of the fight against counterfeiters and "violators of socialist legality". They insisted that the fight against counterfeiters was the reason for the criminal prosecution.

The third defence strategy of chekists was the desire to demonstrate political loyalty, that they were, they are, and they will continue to be, despite everything, loyal "Stalinists" and people "socially close" to the Soviet government and communist regime. They appealed to their own chekist merits before the party and the state, and devoted service, despite the gravity of specific chekist work and threats to their personal safety "in the fight against the enemies of the revolution."

At the same time, attention was focused on proletarian origin, "blood, shed for Soviet power." Understanding the rules of the game, state security officers constantly emphasised their personal devotion to the "leader of the working people", Stalin. It is worth noting that the speeches, appeals, letters, complaints to the highest Soviet Party officials, heads of departments are written pathetically, emotionally, with the use of a significant number of epithets<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Roman Podkur, "Nasha partiia ye derzhavnoi partiiei, partiia, shcho keruie derzhavoiu...: vykonavets rishen Kompartii polkovnyk derzhbezpeky V. Maistruk", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2018, no. 1, pp. 5–71; Oleh Bazhan, Vadym Zolotariov, "Yakiv Fleishman. Neparadnyi portret nachalnyka osoblyvoho viddilu UDB UNKVS po Dnipropetrovskii oblasti", in: *Kraieznavstvo*, 2019, no. 1, pp. 83–99; Olena Lysenko, "Vorohy chy svidyky: pokarannia spivrobitnykiv UNKVS po Chernihivskii oblasti pislia zavershennia Velykoho teroru", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2019, no. 1, pp. 195–220; *Chekisty na skame podsudymykh*, compiled by Marc Junge, Lynne Viola, Jeffrey Rossman, Moscow: PROBEL-2000, 2017.



The departmental leadership and state security employees used the beginning of the World War II and the invasion of the USSR into Poland as one of the ways to escape from criminal prosecution. Since September 1939, many chekists, against whom an official investigation was opened, were sent as part of operational groups to the annexed regions of Western Ukraine. Andrii Zhyviuk analysed in detail the personnel composition of the Western Ukrainian departments of the NKVD and People's Commissariat for State Security (rus. *Народный комиссариат государственной безопасности*, NKGB). He drew a valid conclusion about the use of the experience of the Great Terror during the "cleansing of the anti-Soviet element" in the newly annexed regions. The result of his research proved that the employees who started their service in 1939 quickly adopted the corporate rules of dealing with the "enemies of the people" from the "old" chekists.

The direct executors of repressive actions were employees who distinguished themselves in conducting mass operations in 1937–1938. According to Zhyviuk, seven out of ten chiefs of the Ukrainian NKVD and five out of six chiefs of the Ukrainian NKGB of the western regions of the Ukrainian SSR took a direct part in the Great Terror. These managers appeared in official investigations. Since they were sent for the "sovietisation" of Western Ukraine, their participation in the "violation of socialist legality" was forgotten<sup>32</sup>. These conclusions were also confirmed by the analysis of the biographies of the heads of district, district departments and departments of the UNKVD/UNKGB administrations in 1939–1941 in the Rivne region<sup>33</sup>.

Oleh Bazhan and Vadym Zolotariov, who researched the biographies and professional activities of prison commandants, added some more important details to the collective portrait of the "performer"<sup>34</sup>. These people not only organised and managed the process of execution of death sentences, but also directly participated in executions. It is quite clear that a certain psychological readiness is required to carry out death sentences. Therefore, researchers tried to find the factors that caused a person's willingness to kill. In their opinion, this is service in the Red Army, primary education, dark spots in the biography.

These are valid considerations. In the Red Army, they learned to use weapons and kill enemies. They, for the most part of their service, took part in battles against rebels, the "clearing" of villages, seizure of weapons and grain, for example. In such conditions, the psychological type of an armed person who was sure of their impunity was formed. "Dark spots" in the biography were an aggravating circumstance and only forced a person to constantly prove their loyalty through the death of other people.

<sup>32</sup> Andrii Zhyviuk, "Kadrovyy sklad i diialnist orhaniv NKVD-NKHB pid chas 'pershoi radianizatsii' Zakhidnoi Ukrainy cherez pryzmu Velykoho teroru", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, no. 2, 2012, pp. 7–40.

<sup>33</sup> Andrii Zhyviuk, "Vykorystani ta vykynuti... na Zakhidnu Ukrainu: vykonavtsi Velykoho teroru yak 'radianizatory' Rivnenskoï oblasti (1939–1941)", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2018, no. 2, pp. 69–122.

<sup>34</sup> Oleh Bazhan, Vadym Zolotariov, "Ti, khto natyskaly na hachok'. Korotki biohrafii kerivnykiv komendatury NKVS URSR ta UNKVS Kyivskoi oblasti u chasy 'Velykoho teroru'", in: *Kraeznavstvo*, 2016, no. 3/4, pp. 251–282.

A low level of education influenced the willingness to kill. Intellectual limitation did not force anyone to think about the very fact of murder, which contributed to the lack of empathy. So, Naum Turbovsky personally shot more than 2,100 people. This became one of the determining factors for his career growth<sup>35</sup>.

Bazhan and Zolotariov also managed to reconstruct the process of execution of death sentences using the example of the UNKVD administration prison in the Kharkiv region<sup>36</sup>. They found that the strict regulation of the killing process did not deprive the executioners of the opportunity to mock the victims and engage in looting. As it turned out, looting among the direct executors of sentences was a typical phenomenon. Such facts were recorded in Uman, Kyiv and other prisons. Clothes and personal belongings of the shot were stolen. Later, they were sold in thrift stores or markets<sup>37</sup>.

## Conclusions

Thus, the study of the phenomenon of the "perpetrator" of the Great Terror became possible only after the complete declassification of the documents of the communist special service. The main sources were official investigation materials, archival criminal and personal files of state security officers, transcripts of party meetings, operational meetings and court hearings, and documents of the Soviet Party apparatus regarding the staffing of regional NKVD-NKGB apparatuses.

The study of the mentioned problem had a certain dynamic – starting from the study of the role of the "general director of terror" Stalin, his closest entourage, and the people's commissars of internal affairs of the USSR and Soviet Ukraine. It then moves to the activities of specific investigators of the regional UNKVD administrations, heads of district apparatuses and direct executioners of death sentences. The researchers were able to outline the overall portrait of the performer – chekist organiser, chekist investigator, chekist executioner. For this, scientists analysed their life path, behaviour patterns during the occupation of the Ukrainian People's Republic, the civil war in Russia, the fight against the insurgent movement, collectivisation and the Holodomor, party "purges", etc. Scientists managed to discover a lot of interesting facts about the formation of various clientele. These include the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR and Ukrainian SSR, the regional UNKVD administration, the intersection of the mutual influences of state security and party bodies, and the struggle for the promotion of the "necessary" people to the positions.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>36</sup> Oleh Bazhan, Vadym Zolotariov, "Smertni vyroky u period Velykoho teroru na terytorii Kharkivshchyny: statystyka, protsedura ta personalnyi sklad 'rozstrilnoi komandy', in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2019, no. 1, pp. 5–52.

<sup>37</sup> Lynne Viola, "Delo Umanskoho raionnoho otdeleniia NKVD", in: *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 2015, no. 2, pp. 180–223.

Researchers have identified some patterns of chekists’ behaviour when accused by the top political leadership of “violating socialist legality”; the mentioned models indicate attempts to avoid or reduce punishment. The chekists named different reasons for the “violation of socialist legality”, but they did not mention Stalin and the higher party-Soviet leadership. This shows that criticism of the party is inadmissible in the existing corporate worldview. As practice shows, this tendency was preserved in the state security bodies throughout the entire existence of the communist regime.

Roman Podkur

**1937–1938 m. Didžiojo teroro „vykdytojų“ fenomenas**

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas „vykdytojų“ fenomenas per Didįjį 1937–1938 m. terorą 1990-ųjų vidurio–2020 metų Ukrainos istoriografijoje.

Tyrimo metodika ir metodai. Nagrinėdamas istorizmo, sistemiškumo, objektyvumo, visapusiškumo, tęstinumo principus, autorius atskleidžia jų priklausomybę nuo istorinių žinių kilmės. Subjektyvumo veiksnys (tyrėjo asmenybė) turi ypač didelės reikšmės tyrimo objektyvumui. Autorius naudojo istoriografinę analizę, sintezę, tyrimo krypčių tipologiją, lyginamąją analizę.

Išvados. Didžiojo teroro „kaltininko“ fenomeno tyrimas tapo įmanomas tik visiškai išslaptinus komunistinių specialiųjų tautybų dokumentus. Reiškinių tyrimas turėjo tam tikrą dinamiką – nuo „generalinio teroro direktoriaus“ Josifo Stalino vaidmens, jo artimiausios aplinkos, SSRS ir Sovietų Ukrainos NKVD komisarų iki konkrečių tyrėjų regioniniuose Ukrainos NKVD padaliniuose, apygardų viršininkų, tiesioginių mirties bausmių vykdytojų. Istorikams pavyko nubrėžti apibendrintą vykdytojo – čekisto organizatoriaus, čekisto tyrėjo, čekisto budelio – portretą.

Tyrėjai nustatė kai kuriuos čekistų elgsenos modelius aukščiausiai politinei vadovybei apkaltinus juos „socialistinio teisėtumo pažeidimais“. Jie rodo bandymus išvengti bausmės arba ją sumenkinti, atvirai nekaltinti Stalino ir aukštesnės partinės-sovietų vadovybės vertus daryti nusikaltimus. Tai rodo, kad jų korporacinėje pasaulėžiūroje komunistų partijos kritika buvo nepriimtina. Tokia tendencija sovietų saugumo organams buvo būdinga visą komunistinio režimo gyvavimo laikotarpį.

**REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:** vykdytojai, nusikaltėliai, Didysis teroras, istoriografija, NKVD, biografinės studijos.

Роман Ю. Подкур

**Дослідження феномену «виконавців» під час Великого терору 1937–1938 рр.**

РЕЗЮМЕ

Досліджується еволюція феномену «виконавців» під час Великого терору 1937–1938 рр. в українській історіографії середини 1990-х – 2020-х рр.

Методологія та методи дослідження. Користуючись принципами історизму, системності, об'єктивності, усебічності, наступності, автор усвідомлює, що вони мають специфіку, зумовлену особливостями генези історичних знань. Зокрема, домінування суб'єктивного фактору (власне особи автора тексту, що досліджується) робить неможливим досягнути абсолютної об'єктивності. Автор застосував методи історіографічного аналізу, синтезу, типологізації наукових напрямів, порівняльного аналізу.

Висновки. Дослідження феномену «виконавця» Великого терору стало можливим лише після повного розсекречення документів комуністичної спецслужби. Вивчення феномену мало певну динаміку – від вивчення ролі «генерального директора терору» Сталіна, його найближчого оточення, наркомів внутрішніх справ СРСР і радянської України до діяльності конкретних слідчих обласних УНКВД, начальників районних апаратів, безпосередніх виконавців смертних вироків. Вчені зуміли окреслити сукупний портрет виконавця – чекіста-організатора, чекіста-слідчого, чекіста-ката.

Вчені визначили деякі моделі поведінки чекістів під час обвинувачення вищим політичним керівництвом у «порушенні соціалістичної законності». Згадані моделі свідчать про спроби уникнути або зменшити покарання. Водночас вони відкрито не звинувачували Й. Сталіна і вище партійно-радянське керівництво у примушенні їх до здійснення злочину. Це свідчить про недовпустимість критики Компартії у їхньому корпоративному світогляді. Ця тенденція в органах держбезпеки зберігалася упродовж всього існування комуністичного режиму.

**КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА:** виконавець, Великий терор, історіографія, НКВД, біографічні студії.