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OUN, UPA COME CLOSER TO OFFICIAL RECOGNITION -- WHY NOW?

By Taras Kuzio

The bland statement issued on 11 July by the presidents of Poland and Ukraine, Aleksander Kwasniewski and Leonid Kuchma, respectively, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict in Volyn in 1943 did not go as far as Poland had insisted (see <http://www.kuchma.gov.ua/activity/173790009>).

One of the main issues that Poland pressured Ukraine on was to include in the joint statement a denunciation of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), and to seek to bring members of these organizations, who were allegedly involved in the massacres of Poles, to justice.

The statement fails to mention OUN or UPA. Instead, it condemns atrocities committed against both Ukrainians and Poles, thereby placing the 1943 conflict within the framework of a Polish-Ukrainian civil war (as both sides were Polish citizens). Poland had pressured Ukraine to define the 1943 events as "genocide" against Poles, using widely contradictory death tolls of between 30,000-100,000 (see RFE/RL Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report, "4 March and 8 July 2003).

The Volyn anniversary touched a raw nerve in Ukrainian society for four reasons.

First, criticism of Poles and Poland is a far less controversial issue in Ukraine than criticism of Russians and Russia. Russophile centrists and national democrats both insisted that Polish crimes against Ukrainians had to be condemned alongside any criticism of Ukrainian crimes. Ukrainians and especially Poles believe that they have only ever suffered at the hands of others, never themselves committing crimes against other peoples.

Ukrainians have been accustomed to being accused of serving in the German police in World War II. Poles meanwhile, have continued to harbor the myth that they alone within Europe did not collaborate with the Nazis. The 24 June 1+1 television channel's (controlled by the Social Democratic Party-united [SDPU-o]) weekly discussion

program "Podviynny Dokaz," which was devoted to the Volyn event, showed how the ranks of the German police in Volyn were filled by Poles after Ukrainian policemen fled to the UPA in 1942-1943.

The well known historian Yuriy Shapoval pointed out in the discussion that the ultimate root of the Volyn conflict lies in the fact that both Ukrainians and Poles looked upon Volyn as their territory. This meant that compromise was impossible, Shapoval believes.

Second, Poland overplayed its hand and was forced to ultimately backtrack. Prior to 11 July, Poland laid out a long list of demands to Ukraine, most of which Kyiv never agreed to. The manner in which Poland pressured Ukraine led to a counterreaction at the perception that Poland was attempting to revive its role as an "elder brother" toward its eastern neighbor by capitalizing on Kuchma's international isolation and domestic unpopularity.

Third, Volyn-1943 is only an issue for ideologically committed political parties on the left and right in Ukraine, with the former condemning the OUN and UPA (as in the Soviet era) and the latter calling for their rehabilitation and honoring them as "national heroes." Historical issues and national symbols are not an issue for ideologically amorphous centrists who will vote in parliament in any manner ordered to by President Kuchma (recent examples include parliamentary support for a CIS free-trade zone and condemnation of the 1933 artificial famine as "genocide").

The indifference of centrists to historical issues can be seen in the educational system. Long-time Minister of Education Vasyl Kremen is a high-profile member of the SDPU-o. Kremen has promoted the domination of the Mykhaylo Hrushevskyy school of Ukrainian history throughout the educational system. Hrushevskyy was denounced in Soviet propaganda starting in the 1930s and continues to be by the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU).

Ukraine's school textbooks adopt an inclusive approach to the most controversial period of Ukrainian history, World War II. In school textbooks Ukraine's war effort has been expanded to include the UPA which, it is now accepted, fought both the Nazis and Soviets. The UPA, whom Poland wished Ukraine to condemn for the 1943 Volyn events, has long been rehabilitated in Ukraine's educational system and in patriotic inculcation in the armed forces.

Fourth, the Ukrainian state could not agree to join Poland in condemning the OUN and UPA when it itself had still not made up its mind about these two organizations. Another complicating factor was that the OUN and UPA were not organizations that represented the Ukrainian state (unlike the Home Army [AK] which represented the Polish government in exile).

The Volyn-1943 commemoration, completing unfinished business before the end of the Kuchma era, and the need to obtain western

Ukrainian votes in the 2004 presidential elections are three factors that have spurred the momentum in the Ukrainian state's recognition of the OUN and UPA. The National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS) presidential think tank recently obtained a directive from Kuchma to prepare a presidential decree "On steps to establish the rights of fighters for the freedom and independence of the Ukrainian state." NISS Director Anatoliy Halchynskyy said that the decree would finally establish "political and historical justice towards those individuals -- members of the OUN and UPA fighters, who struggled for the freedom and independence of the Ukrainian state in the 20th century."

In early 2003, the Ministry of Justice and the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences signed an agreement to research the "scientific analysis of documents and preparation of proposals to outline an official position on the activities of the OUN and the UPA." A collection of documents is to be prepared by a special governmental committee led by Institute of History Director Stanislav Kulchytsky, which has been given a budget of 250,000 hryvni (\$47,000).

These steps, coupled with the need to dent Viktor Yushchenko's unquestioned popularity in western Ukraine before next year's elections, make it likely that the OUN and UPA will be officially recognized (and thereby de facto "rehabilitated") by presidential decree and by parliament, which is controlled by a slim pro-presidential majority. Opposition is only likely to come from the Communists and, in relation to OUN, from the Socialists. As in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the 1933 famine, Kuchma is once again able to divide the left and right opposition.

(This report was written by Dr. Taras Kuzio, a resident fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto.)