

Topic Area: Ukrainian Nationalism, the OUN and the UPA

Key enquiry questions and learning from topic study.

- Understand the role of Ukrainian nationalists in the Second World War
- Understand who the OUN/UPA were, and what their main aims were.
- Explore the role of national partisans in atrocities committed against ethnic groups, including Ukrainian Jews

Historical Background to Ukrainian Nationalism, the OUN and the UPA

The history of the Ukrainian people spans several centuries, dating back to at least the ninth century. However, with the exception of the brief period from 1918 to 1920 when Ukraine gained statehood, Ukrainians did not have their own nation-state from the time of Kievan Rus' until 1991. Instead, the Ukrainian community was connected through shared religion, geographical location, and language; something that was strengthened throughout the nineteenth century. Nationalist movements, including the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), fought for the creation of an independent Ukrainian state. The OUN was active principally in what is now Western Ukraine from 1929 until the 1950s.

In 1938, the OUN split into two factions, the OUN (M) led by Andriy Melnyk and the OUN (B) led by Stepan Bandera. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) was a partisan paramilitary organization active from 1942 to 1949. The OUN and the UPA should be seen as two separate, albeit interrelated, entities, with OUN units actively participating in the military operations of the UPA. The attitude of Ukrainian nationalists towards Jews during the Second World War is one of the most contentious and politicized issues and historians disagree widely on the facts. This history is also misused in Russian propaganda against Ukraine in the context of the current war.

By the 1930s, antisemitism had become a significant feature in the ideology of the OUN. The assassination of Simon Petliura, the head of the Directory of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR), in May 1926 by Samuel Schwarzbard (who was Jewish), was a catalyst for the deterioration of Ukrainian-Jewish relations. After the Soviet troops occupied Western Ukraine in the fall of 1939, the stereotype formed of the USSR as a "Jewish commune". The perceived dominance of Jews in Soviet law enforcement agencies only strengthened this attitude in parts of Galicia (now Western

Ukraine). Responsibility for a wave of arrests of OUN members was again attributed to Jews.

At the Second Congress of OUN-B in 1941, the position of Ukrainian nationalists regarding Jews was formulated. The political resolutions of the congress noted that “Jews in the USSR are the most devoted supporters of the dominant Bolshevik regime and the vanguard of Moscow imperialism in Ukraine.” Soon after the start of the Soviet-German war in 1941, the first Jewish pogroms began. In June-July 1941, they occurred (with varying degrees of cruelty) in 26 cities in Galicia and Volhynia.

In September 1939, over 200,000 Jews lived in Lviv, a city in what is now Ukraine. This included 100,000 refugees from German-occupied Poland. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, they occupied Lviv. Subsequently, Ukrainian nationalists, encouraged by German troops, committed violent acts against the Jewish population, leading to the mass murder of approximately 4,000 Jews in July 1941. Another pogrom, known as the ‘Petliura Days,’ occurred later that month and resulted in the murder of over 2,000 Jews. In November 1941, the Germans established a ghetto in Lviv, where more than 65,000 Jews were deported and murdered by August 1942. The ghetto was destroyed in June 1943, and its inhabitants were sent to forced labor camps or deported to Belżec.

The bloodiest massacre occurred on 6-7 November 1941, when 15-18 thousand Jews were shot by the Nazis and Ukrainian collaborators in the Sosenki forest near Rivne/Rovno. The remaining 5,000 Jews, who possessed skills needed by the occupation administration, were gathered with their families and placed in the Rivne Ghetto, established in December 1941. On the night of 13 July 1942, an “action” was conducted in the ghetto by SS units and Ukrainian police squads. SS brigades and Ukrainian police divided into small groups, invaded homes, forcibly expelled residents, and herded them into freight trains. They were transported to Kostopil and shot. 5000 Jews were murdered in this event.

On 28 April 1943, the creation of the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (1st Galicia) was announced – a division of the German SS made up principally of volunteers with a Ukrainian ethnic background. In Galicia, this was seen as an indication of a shift in the Third Reich's policy towards Ukrainians. Consequently, thousands of volunteers, including some members and sympathizers of the OUN, joined the division. Officially, the OUN-B did not support the creation of the division; however, the OUN-M actively participated in its formation. In the winter of 1943, the OUN-UPA ceased to

cooperate with fascist Germany and set its main goal as fighting against both the Soviet Union and fascist Germany.

One of the most famous figures of the OUN-UPA was Stepan Bandera, who is often referred to as the leader of the OUN-UPA army. Initially imprisoned in a Polish prison from 1934 to 1939, Bandera later survived imprisonment in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp from 1941 to 1944. His eloquent speeches during court hearings, where he demanded Ukraine's independence, made him an ideological leader and symbol of the movement. In the post-war period, Soviet propaganda played a role in popularising Bandera's name by portraying him as an enemy. Consequently, Stepan Bandera became synonymous with the struggle for Ukrainian independence, initially against the Soviet Union. With the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014, Bandera's figure began to symbolise resistance against Russia as well.

Testimony of William Loew describing the roundup of Jews during the August 1942 deportation from Lvov to Belzec

Pappapol was located on Zółkiewska Street. The main entrance was from Drokevska Street, which was the main route between north and south. [...] I recall the time that akcya [Aktion/action] came about. It was in the shayni [second] ghetto and it was close to evening. And somebody rushed into the factory, one of our workers. "They're moving them now through the street." We went out. I went out immediately to the gate to see what we wanted to see. And we, that's what we didn't want to see, thousands and thousands and thousands of ghetto people were moving, going, going to Drokevska Street. And I looked and I saw some of my friends. My friends, dear friends, that I used to play with. Uh, some acquaintances. I was looking for my mother. I didn't see her, didn't find her. There were maybe 20 rows and miles of people. They were slowly marching. They were guarded by Ukrainian militia. I didn't see any Germans. Maybe in the back, but I didn't see them. Mostly Ukrainians on each side. I didn't see the front either. [...] I didn't see the beginning of the march, I didn't see the end of the march. I just kept on seeing the area where it was visible to me from that narrow gate. We were not, I didn't, they didn't see me, I saw them, because the gate was actually locked, the Pappapol, uh, gate. And it was going on for hours and hours because there was a slow march. Finally it ended. People were looking from the windows, uh, because that whole Drokevska was inhabited by Ukrainians and Poles, second, third stories, they're all look at them. It was a very grim sight.

Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



Lviv, 1941. Image taken by unknown Wehrmacht Soldier, in public domain.



Shoes of victims in the Janowska camp were found by Soviet forces after the liberation of Lviv. Image from declassified Soviet State Archives, USSR and in public domain.

Summary of Key Dates

- The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) aimed for an independent Ukraine and was primarily active in Western Ukraine from 1929 to the 1950s. In 1938, it split into two factions: OUN (M) led by Andriy Melnyk and OUN (B) led by Stepan Bandera.
- The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) operated as a partisan paramilitary organization from 1942 to 1949. While separate, the OUN and the UPA were closely connected, with OUN units actively involved in UPA's military operations.
- After the Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine in 1939, the USSR was seen as a "Jewish commune," particularly in Galicia. Jewish prominence in Soviet law enforcement agencies furthered this perception, often placing blame on them for OUN members' arrests. At the Second Congress of OUN-B in 1941, Ukrainian nationalists reinforced their view of Jews as

loyal backers of the Bolshevik regime and Moscow's imperialism in Ukraine.

- In the winter of 1943, the OUN-UPA ceased to cooperate with Nazi Germany and set its main goal as fighting against both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.
- The formation of the SS Division "Galicia" in 1943 was perceived by some residents of Galicia as a change in the Third Reich's policy towards Ukrainians. Although OUN-B officially did not endorse the division's creation, OUN-M actively contributed to forming the 14th SS Grenadier Division "Galicia" in 1943.
- Stepan Bandera, often seen as the leader of the OUN-UPA army, wasn't directly involved in its creation or command due to long imprisonment. Yet, his defense of Ukrainian independence in court hearings made him an ideological symbol.
- The bloodiest massacre occurred on 6–7 November 1941, with 15–18 thousand Jews killed by Nazis and Ukrainian collaborators in Rivne.
- In Lviv, violent acts against Jews increased after German occupation, resulting in mass murders and ghetto establishment. Over 65,000 Jews were deported and murdered in the Lviv ghetto by August 1942, with survivors sent to labor camps or Belżec.

Key Resources for Teacher Subject Knowledge Development

John-Paul Himka, and Andreas Umland, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA's Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941–1944* (Columbia University Press, 2021) A very useful resource for further research on the OUN and UPA's involvement in the Holocaust. A longer text and aimed at a mature audience.

John-Paul Himka, "Ukrainian Collaboration in the Extermination of the Jews During World War II: Sorting out the Long-Term and Conjunctural Factors". In *The Fate of the European Jews, 1939–1945: Continuity or Contingency?*, ed. by Jonathan Frankel (1998). [An online version of this article can be found at this link.](#)

Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps Revised and Expanded Edition* (Indiana University Press, 2018)

[Rare Historical Photos, Lviv Pogroms: Jewish people chased and brutally murdered by men and youth armed with clubs, 1941.](#) Article including several graphic images of the Lviv Pogroms. To be used in the classroom at the teacher's discretion.

Björn Alexander Düben, ["There is no Ukraine": Fact-checking the Kremlin's Version of Ukrainian History.](#) This article was published by the London School of Economics in 2020 and discusses the history of the people of Ukraine and the relationship between Russia and Ukraine prior to the invasion in 2022.

[Mariana Tsymbalyuk, Who was Stepan Bandera, Ukraine's controversial nationalist figure?](#) This article discusses the background to the modern support of Stepan Bandera mentioned briefly above.

Existing Resources for the Classroom

- Yad Vashem, [Ukraine: Historical Background during the Holocaust](#). Short introduction to the background of the Ukrainian experience during the Holocaust.
- Holocaust Encyclopedia. [Belzec](#).
- Holocaust Encyclopedia. [Janowska](#).
- Holocaust Encyclopedia. [Lvov](#).
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [Oral history interview with Yahad-In Unum interviewee 737U](#). Oral history about the shooting of Jews at the Yanovskiy cemetery by Germans and Ukrainian police; public hangings in Lvov; and an on-camera visit to a Lvov Street bordering the former ghetto and the shooting site at the Yanovskiy cemetery.
- Yad Vashem, [Lvov pogrom](#). Photos, testimonies. books and movies about Lviv pogrom
- Yad Vashem, [Rovno ghetto](#). Photos, testimonies. books and movies about Rovno ghetto
- The National WWII Museum, [The 1941 NKVD Prison Massacres in Western Ukraine](#). This article discusses the mass extermination of western Ukrainians by the Soviet Union in 1941.

