

Reviews

Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, 463 pp.

A woman wrapped in a long black coat, a kerchief pulled in her face, stands in the middle of a large field of exhumed bodies, a skeleton-like tree in the background. What she stares down at, utterly stunned, are the remains of the Nazi concentration camp Syrets in Ukraine. The dismal photograph is on the cover of Karel C. Berkhoff's *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*, a topically arranged history of Nazi-occupied Ukraine (the so-called *Reichskommissariat*), a geographic area encompassing Western Volhynia and Dnjeper Ukraine. Berkhoff's narrative is not for the faint of heart. The approximately 300 pages of text contain countless episodes of human cruelty, the gruesome nature of which turns out to be profoundly unsettling. For life in Nazi Ukraine, even in its most mundane aspects, was pervaded by death.

Tracing the brief but devastating history of the *Reichskommissariat*, which lasted from July 1941 into the early months of 1944, the author, an Associate Professor at the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, provides a nuanced analysis of common people's attempt at survival in dark times. His focus is the daily life of 'ordinary' Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, and Roma as it was lived in the office, the street, the market, the church. Consistently resisting the urge to judge, Berkhoff approaches the horrific with admirable objectivity and empathy. Above all, he seeks to understand, not to moralize or to condemn. To be sure, there is much in this devastating period of Eastern European history that begs understanding and seems to invite rash condemnation. The author's multifaceted inquiry shows, for example, that anti-Semitism in Soviet Ukraine was pervasive and allowed Ukrainians to welcome Nazi measures to crush the Jewish 'menace', at least initially. Individual attempts at rescue, though they did occur, were rather rare, partly no doubt on account of the draconic punishment awaiting the rescuer. For unlike German citizens who hardly endangered their career, let alone their existence, when extending a helping hand to Jews and other 'undesirables', Ukrainians risked their life if caught in the act. For fear of the consequences, no one dared

approach nine elderly Jews who had escaped the Babi Yar catastrophe and sat day after day near a Kievan synagogue in full view of the passers-by. One after the other they succumbed to starvation. When only two remained, a German guard shot them, seemingly out of mercy. A more harrowing tale of the failure of human solidarity would be hard to imagine.

What was the reason, besides the obvious one of suffering the presence of a hated occupation-force, that lent life in the *Reichskommissariat* such an utterly bleak quality? Berkhoff attributes the general callousness and indifference to the treatment Ukrainians had had to endure on the hands of the Soviets in the decades preceding the Second World War. The Soviet regime had bred an atmosphere of fear and suspicion that resulted in frequent denunciations and a general breakdown of trust and solidarity, a condition sociologists call 'atomization'. It is this erosion of social cohesion and resulting apathy that Berkhoff identifies as the key to the stagnation in mentality and political orientation that in many cases seemed to inhibit resistance and sympathy. Moreover, the unthinking brutality of the Nazis and occasionally the *Wehrmacht*, the frequent hangings and shootings of racially 'inferior subhumans', mass deportations of workers to the West under truly appalling conditions, and other equally counterproductive measures quickly quashed the enthusiasm with which people had greeted the arrival of the supposed liberator in 1941.

Harvest of Despair is a cogent, concise, magnificently written account of one of the worst periods in Ukrainian history. Berkhoff knows what he wants to say, and he says it with poise and poignancy. Readers relishing academic jargon and the esoteric realm of theory will undoubtedly be disappointed by the virtual absence of either. The author's goal in writing this history has been both more simple and more formidable than merely expanding on theoretical debates — namely 'full understanding', pure and simple. Drawing on a wide variety of German and Soviet archival sources, interviews conducted by the author himself, and survivors' memoirs, Berkhoff infuses the pages of his book with a sense of immediacy that is nothing less than gripping. His analysis of the motives of the native auxiliaries charged with carrying out the most gruesome acts of murder; of the members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) responsible for the mass killing of Poles in Volhynia (August 1943); and of the prison guards who shot at the women throwing food

to starving POWs reveal a brilliant if chilling understanding of the psychology of the perpetrator. Consistently refraining from a preoccupation with the graphic details of death, the author concentrates on the humdrum pursuits of 'normal life' instead, i.e. popular piety, entertainment, education, etc. Originally a doctoral dissertation, *Harvest of Despair* has grown into a rich tapestry of life that is essential reading for scholars of Holocaust Studies and Eastern European history and for anyone desirous of gaining a sense of death and life as they were experienced in all their tragic dimensions in Nazi Ukraine.

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James Cracraft, *The Revolution of Peter the Great*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003.

James Cracraft's *The Revolution of Peter the Great* is a fine, short (190-page) synthesis of scholarship on the extraordinary era of Peter the Great. It sets out to meet the needs of students and general readers. Cracraft has succeeded admirably. Student readers are better rewarded, for instance, by Cracraft's brief themes than the excessive details of diplomacy in Mathew Anderson's *Peter the Great* (1978, 1995) or Paul Bushkovitch's *Peter the Great: The Struggle for Power, 1761–1725* (2001) or of state policy in Evgenii Anisimov's *Reforms of Peter the Great* (1989, 1993). General readers might still prefer, however, their Peter fleshed out in biographies, such as those by Robert Massie (1980) or Nikolai Pavlenko (1994).

The Revolution of Peter the Great joins a field alive with exciting scholarship. Cracraft's core purpose is to show the scale and intent of the 'cultural revolution' (p. vii) that Peter set in train. Cracraft's new contribution differs from some other important recent works in Petrine studies. He develops only six case studies: Peter's social life and values; military and naval affairs; cameralist reforms towards a bureaucratised state; a transformed culture — visual, architectural and verbal; resistance to all these changes, and, the wonder of St. Petersburg.