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978-0-521-76833-7 - The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands

Alexander Statiev

Excerpt

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Introduction

When Soviet partisans made their first deep raids into western Ukraine in early 1943, they met thousands of nationalist guerrillas. Some of them had rifles, often without sights or magazines; others carried only sabers, pikes made out of scythes, axes, or dummy rifles fitted with window bolts imitating a rifle bolt, so they looked real from a distance. They also had a few dummy machine guns with rattles and wheelbarrows equipped with tin funnels amplifying the sound of a rifle shot. The latter were meant to create the impression of artillery cannonade.¹ Although the Soviet partisans scorned the weaponry of these guerrillas, they were surprised by the numbers of nationalists and their support from the local population. The partisans had orders to maintain neutrality toward the nationalists; they also had to urge any independent guerrilla force to fight the Germans. The nationalists, however, rejected any cooperation with the Soviets; the armistice between them only lasted for several months.² After the Red Army reoccupied the territories the USSR had gained in 1939–1940, the Soviet administration faced an armed resistance in all western regions but Moldova. The two arms of the Soviet police, the NKVD and NKGB,³ quickly wrecked the urban nationalist underground, but they could

¹ General Vasilii Begma, head of Rovno Partisan HQ, “Spravka o sotoianii garnizonov vruga na territorii Rovenskoï oblasti [Information on Enemy Garrisons in Rovno Province]” (September 1943). Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads’kykh ob’iednan’ Ukraïny [Central State Archive of Public Organizations of Ukraine, hereafter cited as TsDAHOU], f. 1, op. 23, d. 585, ll. 52, 53; Volodimir Serhiichuk, ed., *Desiat’ buremnykh lit* (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1998), p. 13; “OUN i UPA u druhii svitovii viini,” *Ukraïns’kyi istorychnyi zhurnal (UIZh)* 4:96, 1994; V. I. Klovov, *Kovel’skii uzel* (Kiev: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1981), p. 198.

² Vasilii Sergienko, deputy head of the Central Partisan HQ, to Pavel Sudoplatov (12 December 1942). Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, hereafter cited as RGASPI], f. 69, op. 1, d. 747, l. 165; A. V. Kentii, *Ukraïns’ka povstans’ka armiiia v 1942–1943 rr.* (Kyiv: 1999), p. 198.

³ After February 1941, the Soviet police consisted of two major branches, People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs, *Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del* (NKVD), and People’s Commissariat of State Security, *Narodnyi komissariat gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti* (NKGB). The NKVD dealt predominantly with internal threats to security, whereas NKGB dealt with external ones, although in practice their authority overlapped. In July 1941, the NKGB was merged with

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not control rural areas for several years. The guerrilla war remained the major obstacle to the sovietization of these regions until the early 1950s.

This book examines the Soviet fight against anti-Communist resistance in western Ukraine, western Belorussia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in the period following their incorporation into the USSR after the Nazi-Soviet pact (Figure I.1).

Insurgency is defined in this study as a large-scale popular armed resistance – a people’s war – and *counterinsurgency* as a complex of military, security, and social policies aimed at terminating such a war.

This book is not a history of the Soviet police force. The reactions of the Soviet state to other types of resistance, such as strikes, riots, political conspiracies, isolated cases of political terrorism, and campaigns of civil disobedience, are beyond the scope of this study. My goal is to investigate the Soviet counterinsurgency model employed in the western borderlands and assess its rationality in the context of a totalitarian state that faced armed resistance during the apocalyptic fight on the Eastern Front and the dawn of the Cold War.

Frontier regions have a unique social environment. They are populated by people with diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural identities that may be ranked in different ways. Ethnic identity may be either the dominating identity or subordinated to citizenship. I will call the former *simple* and the latter *nested* identity.⁴ The simple identity presumes clear-cut boundaries among ethnic, racial, and religious groups. It is *exclusive*; for instance, one either is a Galician Ukrainian or not. The nested identity is *inclusive*; persons with such an identity see themselves as belonging to one group at one level and to another at a different level. In the other words, a person regarding himself or herself as Galician Ukrainian still can identify at different levels with other West Ukrainians, with all other Ukrainians, with the East Slavic community that along with Ukrainians also includes Russians and Belorussians, and with fellow citizens regardless of ethnic background (Figure I.2). For such people, one or another level may be operative in different contexts; these individuals readily change one identity for another in response to circumstances. For a person with a simple identity, the circle of people perceived as “us” is far narrower. A multiethnic state usually supports the nested identities of its people, thus establishing citizenship as the identity of the highest rank.

Many of the borderland people cherish their simple identities as a vital part of self that distinguishes them from the rest of the world; the identities of others are blurred by intermarriages, daily interaction with their multi-cultural neighbors, or the temptation to present themselves as members of

the NKVD. In April 1943, they were again separated. In March 1946, the NKVD and NKGB were renamed the Ministry of Internal Affairs, *Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del* (MVD), and the Ministry of State Security, *Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti* (MGB).

⁴ O. M. Mladenova, “Etnonimii i natsional’noe samosoznanie,” *Voprosy onomastiki* 5: 66–70, (2008).

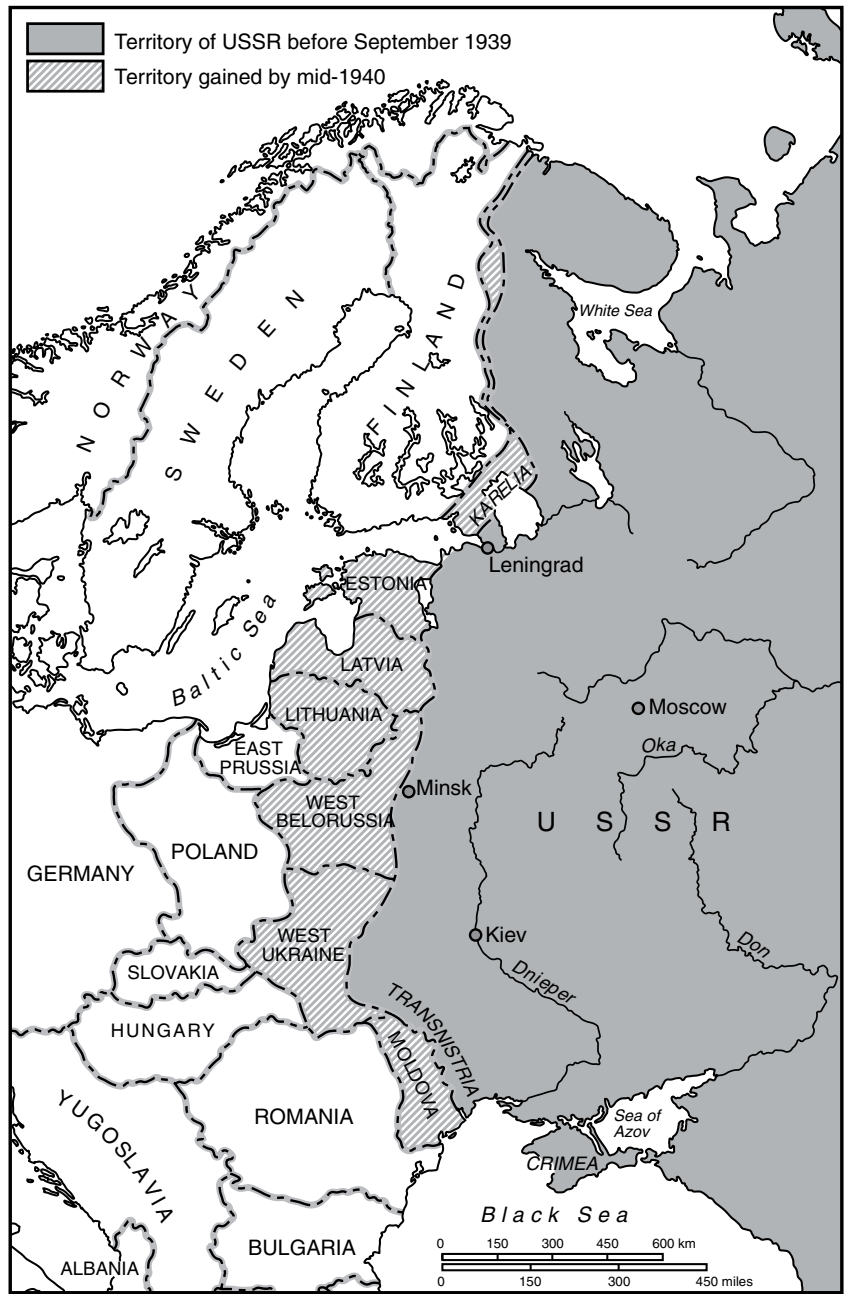


FIGURE 1.1 The western borderlands. Based on a map appearing in Thurston and Bonwetsch. *The People’s War: Popular Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union* (2000).

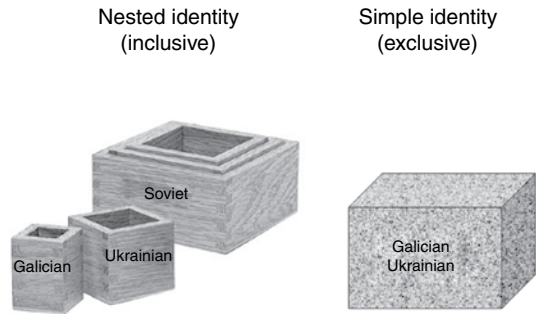


FIGURE 1.2 Nested and simple identities in Galicia, western Ukraine.

social, ethnic, or religious groups favored by the state. Borderland people maintain close ties with relatives abroad, and some of them have lived in neighboring states with different social systems. Since information about the outside world is more easily available to those residing near frontiers, people living in the borderlands tend to mistrust government propaganda and question the value system adopted by mainstream society as well as the notions it accepts as absolute truths. With their less-than-perfect loyalty to the state, frontier communities are receptive to separatist ideas and resist the government's effort to fully integrate them into the dominating culture. People of the Basque Country, Alsace, southern Tyrol, Transylvania, Kashmir, and Tibet stubbornly maintain their simple identities despite efforts by the Spanish, French, Italian, Romanian, Indian, and Chinese governments to assimilate them. Yet sizable parts of every borderland ethnic community affiliate with their state; they seek integration into the majority and dislike the unrest stirred by their neighbors with a simple identity. The integration proceeds more smoothly in countries with a tolerant political culture and high living standards, but poverty and oppression tend to perpetuate the simple identity.

When the Soviet state annexed neighboring lands in 1939–1940, the living standard of their populations dropped, and they found the Soviet system far more authoritarian and interventionist than previous governments had been. Stalinists sought to crush any dissent, to establish an exact copy of the Soviet system with total control over the local societies, and to foster loyalty to the state by replacing simple with nested identity. These policies, implemented frantically and savagely, provoked popular resistance that emerged in the spring of 1941 and continued until the early 1950s. This struggle cost roughly as many lives as the United States lost in the European military theater during World War II. This conflict cannot be reduced, as was usually done during the Cold War, to a straightforward confrontation between nationalist resistance and Soviet security forces. Rather, it was a multidimensional and complex phenomenon, and for some groups involved, the fight between pro- and anti-Soviet forces was secondary to the conflict's other components.

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Any insurgency consists of a relatively small group of hard-core militants and a much larger group of active supporters who join for various motivations not necessarily coinciding with those of their leaders. An even larger number of people give the rebels passive and conditional support without joining them. Even if insurgents offer an attractive agenda, they can enlist only a small minority of the population and secure at best the passive support of the majority. Some local people actively oppose the guerrillas, and many, usually most, prefer to stay neutral in the conflict. Both guerrillas and government deny them this option, forcing them to choose sides.

Suppression of rebellion by force alone costs many bystanders' lives and is often counterproductive. Pacification theories state that counterinsurgents should balance political and military measures, giving primacy to the former. The government has to identify the causes of the unrest, develop reforms targeting its roots, and simultaneously apply coercion to its manifestations. It should coordinate civilian and police agencies toward the desired goals. The correct proportion of stick, carrot, and pro-government propaganda should pull guerrilla fish from the water in which they swim, attract the passive part of the local population, and intimidate rebel supporters into neutrality. The state ought to offer amnesty combined with relentless pressure so as to make most insurgents feel that surrender involves less risk than continuing the resistance. It also should raise paramilitary forces from beneficiaries of its policy to perform routine defensive missions, thus relieving security troops for offensive operations. This militia also helps the authorities to internalize the conflict by involving local people in the fight on the government side. The army should adjust its strategy, organization, and weaponry to counterinsurgency, rejecting conventional military doctrine. Finally, the government must monitor the operations of the security forces closely, promptly punishing random violence that may frustrate the best strategy.

Most counterinsurgents have understood these postulates, but the friction of pacification has not allowed them to follow the ideal script. Some governments have misinterpreted the cause of unrest, and their reforms intended to undermine the appeal of the insurgents have been irrelevant. Others have abstained from reforms because they conflicted with the interests of ruling elites or seemed economically unwise. Civilian institutions, army, and police have failed to coordinate their actions and have thus hindered each other. State agencies have not been able to establish communication with the population, and their propaganda therefore has remained futile. The fine balance between repression and clemency has been hard to define. Armies have tended to view counterinsurgency merely as a limited conventional war; consequently, a reluctance to take casualties and reliance on firepower has made civilians the major victims of counterinsurgency operations. The raising of a pro-government militia always has been tricky because the state could not assess the loyalty of recruits. Security forces have engaged in random violence that only undermined the government's policy. Usually states have tilted toward coercion far beyond the rational limits and neglected nonviolent means of

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pacification because military actions and repressions seemed to be the simpler solution. They have focused on destruction of the insurgents rather than their civilian infrastructure and neglected to control the civilian population that supplied guerrillas with reinforcements exceeding their casualties.

This study examines how the Soviet government tackled these problems. It begins with the origins of the Soviet counterinsurgency doctrine and identification of its major components, followed by an analysis of the borderland societies on the eve of the Soviet invasion and the impact of the brief Soviet presence in 1939–1941, the German occupation in 1941–1944, and the Soviet reconquest in 1944. Afterward, I proceed to a survey of the anti-Communist resistance movements. The resistance occurred predominantly in the countryside, and most insurgents were farmers; this is why I primarily address relations between the state and farmers rather than other social groups. Since, in this type of warfare, political strategy matters more than military actions, I focus not on combat itself but on the pacification doctrine and the major means chosen to enforce it. I show how the state system and ideology shaped the Soviet counterinsurgency and discuss the causes for its successes and failures. In conclusion, I contrast the Soviet experience with that of other states.

Since this study compares the evolutions of unique societies, insurgencies, and pacification methods in four distinct historical periods (the interwar years, the first Soviet occupation in 1939–1941, the German occupation in 1941–1944, and the Soviet reconquest after 1944) and five distinct regions (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, western Belorussia, and western Ukraine), it is more convenient to structure the text by blending chronologic and thematic principles rather than working within a strict chronologic or thematic framework. I introduce readers to each stage of the conflict by analyzing all concomitant resistance movements in a given period and then proceed to the next period. Every counterinsurgency strategy, however, is examined only once, from the beginning of the conflict to its end. This methodology preserves the narrative unity of both individual social conflicts and the strategies used to solve them across all these regions.

It was the Soviet Communist party alone that formulated the counterinsurgency strategy. Except for a few senior police officials, who simultaneously belonged to top party agencies, the security forces had no say in strategy. Their authority was limited purely to tactics. In order to ensure that regional party committees would follow Moscow's directives, in November and December 1944, the Politburo established watchdogs in the Baltic republics in the form of bureaus responsible to the Communist Party Central Committee [VKP(b) CC bureaus]. These bureaus, headed by trusted officials from the old territories, monitored the work of the regional Communist parties and reported to Moscow. The pacification strategy in the Baltic region stemmed from permanent clashes between local leaders, who attempted to moderate the policy dictated by the center, and the bureaus given the task of enforcing it. Moscow presented the bureaus as mere intermediaries between regional leaders and the Politburo, but usually the bureaus had more real power than did the first

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secretaries of regional Communist parties. The resistance of Baltic administrators delayed rather than altered the implementation of policies directed by the center. By 1947, Moscow overcame the resistance of the Baltic leaders, and in March of that year it dissolved the bureaus. Nikita Khrushchev and Panteleimon Ponomarenko, the first secretaries of the Ukrainian and Belorussian Communist parties, had well-established reputations and high prestige in the party hierarchy. They had greater freedom of action in pacification matters than their Baltic counterparts, yet this freedom usually was limited to tactics. The uniform pacification strategy formulated by the Politburo had to be implemented in every republic.

While the party set the strategic pacification objectives, the security forces had to develop tactical means to meet those objectives. The Red Army rarely fought guerrillas. Regulations dating back to the collectivization in the old territories prohibited the use of regular forces against insurgents.⁵ The two major security agencies engaged in counterinsurgency were the Head Directorate for Struggle against Banditry [*Glavnoe upravlenie po bor'be s banditizmom* (GUBB)] and the Head Directorate for NKVD Security Troops [*Glavnoe upravlenie vnutrennikh voisk NKVD*]. The GUBB, organized on 1 December 1944, was the major police counterinsurgency agency. It developed police tactics, gathered intelligence, launched covert operations, supervised the militia, and coordinated the efforts of security troops, police, and militia. The GUBB ran “struggle against banditry” sections [*Otdely po bor'be s banditizmom* (OBB)] in every Soviet republic. While people’s commissars of internal affairs in the western republics were responsible for the pacification routine, the OBBs were the primary bodies developing police tactics at the regional level.

The basic law enforcement agency in the countryside was the district police force. One officer, assisted sometimes by a few privates, ran the police station responsible for law and order in several villages.⁶ He maintained a network of informers, delivered intelligence to the police section in the district center that processed it, and called in NKVD security troops for larger operations. These security units were the major regular armed force employed against guerrillas. However, during the war, they had to perform many other missions as well: securing the rear of the Red Army from cutoff German units and saboteurs, apprehending deserters, conducting deportations, and guarding prisoners. Until the end of the war, most security troops moved behind the Red Army and took no part in counterinsurgency. In 1944–1945, the total number of security troops available for counterinsurgency was below 70,000, excluding the frontier guards who occasionally participated in such operations.⁷ During the war, the security troops were formally organized into divisions of

⁵ Document No. 105 in Hilda Sabbo, ed. *Võimatu vaikida*, Vol. 1 (Tallinn: 1996), p. 260.

⁶ Every district policeman had to monitor two villages; Anatolii Rusnachenko, *Narod zburenyi* (Kyiv: Pul'sary, 2002), p. 258. However, because of personnel shortage, policemen often monitored three or five villages.

⁷ In 1945, their total number was 167,000 men, and it had dropped to 128,800 by 1946 and to 73,700 by 1947. These numbers embrace all soldiers subordinated to the NKVD and include

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about 6,000 soldiers armed only with light weapons. Usually NKVD divisions operated dispersed in companies, platoons, or sections performing independent missions. After the reoccupation of the western borderlands, the security forces found themselves overstretched. These were large areas: Lithuania, a medium-sized western republic, is as big as Ireland, but only 18,497 security troops and frontier guards stayed there by 1947.⁸ The government hoped, however, that the political means it planned to use in the framework of counterinsurgency would compensate for the lack of security forces. It underestimated the strength of the opposition in the borderlands and overrated the positive impact of the populist reforms it planned to enforce in the framework of counterinsurgency.

This study presents several key arguments. The first chapter shows how the Soviet counterinsurgency doctrine and its major components – the class principle and the strategic means stemming from it, such as repressions against “class enemies,” agrarian reform, deportations, amnesties, and volunteer militia – emerged during the Civil War. This doctrine, modified in response to the Stalinist innovations to communist theories and the increasing totalitarianism of the Soviet state, was later applied to the pacification of the western provinces.

The second, third, and fourth chapters present the historical and social contexts of the confrontation between the nationalist insurgents and the Soviet regime. These chapters compare the rural societies of Eastern Poland and the Baltic region on the eve of World War II, outline the strains they experienced in the interwar period, and discuss how the Soviet and German occupations affected these societies. Each of these chapters presents an overview of anti-Communist resistance groups and their development between 1939 and the early 1950s: their goals, ideology, social basis, strategy; the methods they used to attain their objectives; their strengths and weaknesses; and their relations with the population. The Soviet leaders perceived Russian reality through the prism of class theory. When the Soviet Union incorporated the borderlands in 1939–1940, its government launched a series of populist reforms, seeking to exploit local tensions, win the poor majority over and simultaneously repress the wealthier classes. Although poor farmers benefited from some Soviet reforms, other aspects of the Soviet occupation provoked fear and resentment. Many people in these regions met the German invasion with relief, only to be soon frustrated with the “new order.” When the Soviets returned in 1944, a large part of the borderland societies resisted them. Many fought because of ideological reasons, or because they had collaborated with the Germans and feared Soviet reprisals, or because they hated collectivization, but others were

those located within the pre-1939 borders and GULAG camps but exclude the frontier guards. “Spravka o boevoi i operativno-sluzhebnoi deiatel’nosti vnutrennikh voisk [Report on Actions of Security Troops]” (1947). RGVA, f. 38650, op. 1, d. 313, l. 8.

⁸ Kruglov to Stalin (4 January 1947). Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv RF [The State Archive of the Russian Federation, hereafter cited as GARF], f. 9401, op. 2, d. 168, ll. 4–6. Document

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drafted by the guerrillas or found themselves among insurgents accidentally while hiding from German and Soviet conscriptions. The primary target of every major resistance group was not the security forces, but local civilians perceived as Soviet collaborators and, in some cases, ethnic minorities. With time, those who benefited from the Soviet populist policies, those impressed with the might of the Red Army and victims of nationalist terror, as well as opportunists, gave the government a conditional support. The nationalist resistance gradually lost steam after its members realized their struggle was futile and the civilians became tired of endless violence.

The following seven chapters reveal the methods the Soviet government used to suppress insurgency and the problems it had to overcome. Each chapter makes a conclusion about the effectiveness of every such method and its rationality in the given context. Agrarian reform was the most important political measure to attract borderland peasants. However, ideology prevented the Soviets from choosing obvious pacification solutions within the framework of this reform, such as distributing land among peasants as private property, abandoning the collectivization project and building economic relations with the peasantry on free market principles. Instead, Soviet leaders engaged in unprovoked repressions on a class basis and enforced collectivization as a means to transform the conservative “petty bourgeoisie” into a progressive rural proletariat. While the Communists succeeded in splitting the rural society by aggravating existing social tensions and creating new ones, collectivization nullified the benefits provided by the agrarian reform and thus undermined the pacification. This policy left those labeled as kulaks no alternative but to fight or be deported; it also caused many of those whom the communists regarded as class allies join their enemies. By driving apolitical wealthier peasants into a corner, the Soviets created an insurgency of their own imagining.

The commitment of Stalinists to class struggle and the adherence to the principle of collective responsibility ensured the Soviet regime would use mass deportations as a tool of security policy. The Soviets deported those perceived as probable supporters of resistance and other potential troublemakers, but they never planned to implement ethnic cleansing in the borderlands, except for the expulsion of the diaspora nationalities. Given the absence of any constraints in using this method, most deportations were rational means toward attaining the desired goals: they helped secure the territorial integrity of the Soviet state, eliminated the civilian basis of guerrilla support, and forced unmotivated insurgents to surrender.

Peasants constituted the majority of the guerrillas. The class perception of the conflict in the borderlands made the communists assume most peasants could be won for the Soviet cause if their class consciousness was awakened. Social reforms and propaganda targeting peasant guerrillas were to boost their

No. 16 in P. Sokhan’l et al., eds., *Litopys UPA, Nova Serii*, Vol. 7 (Toronto: Natsional’na Akademiia nauk Ukrainy, 1995–2003), p. 147.

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class consciousness, while generous amnesties allowed unmotivated fighters and army draft evaders to return to civilian life. Amnesties, combined with severe pressure applied on relatives of insurgents, succeeded in draining the pool of resistance manpower.

The Soviet leaders viewed the volunteer militia as a vital element of a strategy that would help them transform counterinsurgency into a class war. A minority of militia fighters joined because of ideological considerations while most did so out of self-interest or because guerrilla terror forced them to side with the state. Militias helped the authorities internalize the conflict; furthermore, they outnumbered the guerrillas and thus undermined the resistance's claim to represent the aspirations of their nations.

Although the primary subject of this book is Soviet strategy, one chapter investigates the tactical tools police used against insurgents: NKVD security units, informant networks, interrogation techniques, intimidation of civilians, and covert operations. Most other states also employed these tools, but the Soviet versions had some unique features stemming from ideology, political culture, previous experience, and the specific borderland social environment. The police showed remarkable flexibility in adapting its tactics to the changing nature of guerrilla war. While initially regular security units carried the brunt of counterinsurgency, later the police increasingly relied on more sophisticated methods. Having created a vast informant network and widely employing converted guerrillas for covert operations, the police shattered the morale of the rebels and provoked the nationalist counterintelligence agencies to launch self-exterminating purges that killed many loyalists, driving a wedge between the resistance and civilians horrified by the chaotic guerrilla terror. Given the unlimited coercive capacity of the Soviet state and its determination to suppress the insurgency at any cost, the ruthless methods used by the police in fact reduced the "collateral damage."

The employment of the church in the pacification of the borderlands was a new component of Soviet strategy. The reversal of the religious policy Soviet leaders had pursued after the Bolshevik Revolution occurred mainly due to geopolitical considerations about the post-World War II status of the borderlands and the East European countries, rather than because of concerns over nationalist resistance. However, once the state began regarding the church as its servant, it left the clergy no option but to accept this role and back government orders with its moral authority or be purged. This policy brought mixed results across the borderlands, although most clerics, prompted by state pressure, Christian ethics, and sincere desire to terminate the civil war among their countrymen, complied with the government's requests and called upon the guerrillas to stop fighting.

As would any other state engaged in counterinsurgency, the Soviet regime had to struggle against random violence committed by its police, local officials and militia. This violence was exacerbated by the savage fight on the Eastern Front, the thirst for revenge against those perceived as Nazi collaborators, and the social revolution imposed from above as a chosen counterinsurgency