

THE GALICIA DIVISION

They Fought for Ukraine



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Lubomyr Y Luciuk

with a foreword by Professor Paul Robert Magocsi



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Lion shield of the *Galicia Division*, worn by soldiers on the left arm

Foreword

“Canada’s Parliament applauds someone who fought for the Nazis.”

“Why were such persons not vetted beforehand?”

“The Speaker of Parliament should resign. The Prime Minister should issue a formal apology.”

“Shame and disgrace on Canada.”

Such blaring television and media headlines began to appear almost immediately following a special session of Canada’s Parliament, held on 22 September 2023, in conjunction with a state visit of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. During that session the Speaker of the House of Commons singled out for a warm greeting one of his Canadian constituents who was sitting as a guest in the public gallery. The honoree was Jaroslav Hunka, a 98-year-old veteran of a Ukrainian military unit, known as the *Galicja Division*, that served within the framework of the German military during the last months of World War II.

The brief visit of President Zelensky to the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa and his appearance at a large public gathering in Toronto later the same day would, in normal circumstances, be considered a major public relations success for the Ukrainian visitor’s host, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his Liberal Party supporters. Instead, the day’s events were turned into a scandal by the Canadian government’s political opponents and unsuspecting Canadian citizenry.

Since that late September day, allegations that Jaroslav Hunka was a Nazi and that the *Galicja Division* was complicit in the Holocaust of Jews and the killing of Polish civilians have continued to appear in print, broadcast, and social media not only within Canada but also in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia.

Scholars who specialize in Ukraine were also deluged with requests to comment and explain the historical background of Canada’s international scandal. In that regard, the Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Toronto turned to one of its senior research fellows, Professor Lubomyr Luciuk, with the request to provide information on the *Galicja Division* and its activity in Europe and North America. As a specialist on the Second World War, the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, and as an accomplished scholar and pedagogue at the Royal Military College of Canada, Professor Luciuk is ideally suited to enlighten the public on this matter. The following are his insightful observations.

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THE GALICIA DIVISION

They Fought for Ukraine
Вони воювали за Україну



What happened to Ukraine during the Second World War?

Known from ancient times as “the breadbasket of Europe,” Ukraine became a *Golgotha*, the “place of the skull,” during the Second World War. Some 4.5 million Ukrainian civilians were killed or went missing, the highest losses of any country in Nazi-occupied Europe. Another 4.1 million Ukrainian soldiers died in battle, perished in German POW camps, or succumbed to their injuries. Ukraine was the epicentre of the *Bloodlands*.

Unlike other countries under Nazi occupation, there was no collaborationist government in Ukraine - as was the case, for example, in Vichy France or under the Quisling regime in Norway.

Over 2 million Ukrainians were rounded up for slave labour and sent to the Third Reich. At war’s end those identified as “Soviet citizens” were forcibly repatriated to the USSR by American, British, Canadian and French troops. These “victims of Yalta” were often murdered or exiled to the Gulag.



How did Ukrainians experience Soviet rule?

Attempts to establish an independent Ukrainian state in 1917-1921 were thwarted by predatory neighbours. Ukrainian lands largely came under Soviet rule, suffering Stalinist repression most particularly during the genocidal Great Famine of 1932-1933 (the *Holodomor*).



A victim of the *Holodomor* in Soviet Ukraine's first capital city, Kharkiv, 1933
(source: Alexander Wienerberger, *Red Album*)

Western Ukraine's inhabitants, who languished under Polish control throughout the interwar period, first experienced the brutality of Soviet occupation in mid-September 1939, when Hitler and Stalin conspired in the dismemberment of the Polish Republic, starting the Second World War. After this Nazi-Soviet alliance collapsed, on 22 June 1941, and as Hitler's legions attacked, the retreating Soviets mercilessly slaughtered over 20,000 political prisoners throughout the region. The horrors witnessed by Ukrainians in the early summer of 1941 motivated many who later volunteered to join the *14th Waffen-SS Grenadier Division* (Дивізія Галичина).



Together Hitler's Third Reich and Stalin's Soviet Union dismembered Poland and started the Second World War (September 1939)



Identifying victims of the NKVD massacre in Lviv, early July 1941 (source: Author's private collection)



Did Ukrainians welcome the Germans?

Not surprisingly, many Ukrainians initially welcomed the German invaders, believing they had come to liberate them from an oppressive Soviet rule. They had no idea that Nazi intentions for Ukraine

included a *Hungerplan* that foresaw a third of the population being starved to death with another third to be deported far eastward “beyond the Urals,” the remainder left as slaves for their German masters. Once the Third Reich’s ruthless settler-colonial agenda became apparent, Ukrainian resistance to the Nazis escalated. Concurrently an anti-Soviet struggle, lasting for over a decade after the war in Europe ended on 8 May 1945, was carried on by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

An estimated 6-7 million Ukrainians fought in the ranks of the Red Army. Large numbers of Ukrainians also contributed to the victory over Nazism as soldiers in the Polish, Czechoslovak, Canadian and American armed forces.



Company No. 67 of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) gathering intelligence from a villager



Why was the Galicia Division formed and why did Ukrainians join it?

Following the catastrophic defeat of the *Wehrmacht* at Stalingrad, in February 1943, the Red Army began advancing westward. As the Soviet armies came ever



The Ukrainian Catholic Bishop Josaphat Kotsylovsky blessing the *Galicia Division* (4 July 1943). Arrested by the Polish secret police in 1945, and again in 1946, he was turned over to the NKVD and died in a prison near Kyiv, 17 November 1947. A martyr for the faith, he was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 27 June 2001

closer to Ukraine, the Germans, desperately needing manpower, began recruiting Ukrainians into what came to be known as the *Galicia Division*. It was agreed its troops would fight only on the eastern front and would have Ukrainian officers, as well as chaplains to attend to their religious needs. These soldiers did not subscribe to the racist and anti-Semitic ideology of the Nazis. Instead many joined the *Galicia Division* hoping to acquire military skills and weapons, anticipating that, just as during the First World War, their formation might constitute the nucleus of a Ukrainian army capable of freeing Ukrainian lands

from foreign domination. Under the leadership of Professor Volodymyr Kubijovyč the Cracow-based Ukrainian Central Committee - which provided social, educational and welfare services to Ukrainians in the Generalgouvernement - supported the creation of the *Galicia Division*, as did Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky and the hierarchy of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, while the nationalist movement was originally opposed. The Germans, aware of what the Ukrainians hoped to make of the *Division*, tried unsuccessfully to purge its ranks of Ukrainian patriots.

Overall those who were in the ranks of the *Division* sincerely believed their service and sacrifices would help secure Ukraine's independence. They fought for Ukraine.



How did the Galicia Division become part of the SS?

The two main branches of the *Schutzstaffel (SS)* were the *Allgemeine SS* (General SS) and the *Waffen-SS* (Armed SS), the former responsible for policing and enforcing Nazi racial policies whereas the *Waffen-SS* consisted of combat units. Another smaller element, the *SS- Totenkopfverbände* (Death's Head Units), ran the concentration camps.

Altogether there were 38 *Waffen-SS* military formations, ranging from full divisions to brigade-sized or even smaller groups. Hundreds of thousands of recruits from countries across occupied Europe joined the *Waffen-SS*, including men from France, Belgium (Walloon and Flemish), Albania, Hungary, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, Sweden, Finland, Britain, Norway, Russia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

For example there were those who fought in the ranks of France's 33rd Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS "Charlemagne," Belgium's SS Volunteer Grenadier Division "Wallonia," and the 20th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (1st Estonian). Fervent anti-Communists enlisted in what they believed was an anti-Bolshevik crusade, defending European civilization. All non-Germanic units, including the *Galicia Division*, were subordinated to the SS for administrative purposes.



Were members of the Galicia Division "Nazis"?

By definition, no, because no Ukrainian could ever be a "Nazi" (meaning a member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, NSDAP). In the Nazi worldview Ukrainians were *Untermenschen* (subhumans). Nevertheless, this racist ideology did not preclude recruiting Ukrainians and other non-Germanic peoples into the *Waffen-SS* once the need for soldiers became acute.

Everyone who served in any branch of the armed forces of the Third Reich was required to swear an oath to Adolf Hitler, including members of the *Galicia Division*. Doing so did not make any of them a "Nazi."



What was the record of the Galicia Division in battle?

As of June 1944, the *Division* included 15,299 soldiers. Of that number, some 11,000 were deployed during the Battle of Brody (13-22 July 1944). Several thousand fell in combat, were captured, or escaped to join the UPA. About 3,800 returned and were combined with a training reserve of 4,300 troops. Together these soldiers formed a reconstituted *Division*, expanded by the addition of

10,000 men press-ganged into service by the Germans between March and August 1944.

In October 1944 a divisional battlegroup, soon followed by the entire *Division*, was deployed against a Soviet-backed uprising in Slovakia, then subsequently moved to Slovenia to fight against Yugoslavia's leftist underground, led by Josif Tito. In April 1945 the *Division* was sent against the Red Army on the Austrian front, suffering significant casualties.

On 25 April 1945, the *Division's* soldiers swore a new oath of loyalty, to Ukraine and the 1st Division of the Ukrainian National Army, under the command of General Pavlo Shandruk. On 10 May 1945, approximately 9,000 of them surrendered to the British in Austria, from where they were relocated to northeastern Italy as Prisoners of War (POWs). A further 1,200 found themselves in American captivity or took shelter in camps for Displaced Persons (DPs) set up across Western Europe.



General Pavlo Shandruk, commander of the Ukrainian National Army



Did the Galicia Division collaborate with the Nazis by murdering Jews or Poles?

Recruitment to the *Galicia Division* started in the late spring of 1943. The *Division* played no role in the suppression of the Warsaw Jewish Ghetto Uprising (April 1943) or of the Warsaw Uprising (August 1944).

Several units deployed for policing and anti-partisan operations in Poland, and specifically the 4th and 5th SS Police Regiments, working under the direct command of German officers, also wore Galician insignia. These units *were not* part of the *Galicia Division*. At the end of the war some who served in these police regiments attached themselves to the *Division*. Compelling evidence of criminal behaviour by specific individuals who served in these regiments has not been produced. None of these men is known to remain alive today.



Soldiers of the *Galicia Division* awarded the Iron Cross for bravery on the eastern front, April 1944



Adapted with permission from Paul Robert Magocsi, *Ukraine: A Historical Atlas*

Ukrainian lands during World War II





Reverend Father Yov Skakalskyj concelebrating a *moleben* (prayer service) for interned veterans of the *Galicia Division*, Rimini, 1946.



Church parade at the Rimini internment camp



One of several visits made by Bishop Ivan Buchko, the Apostolic Visitor for Ukrainians in Western Europe, to the Rimini camp (source: I Buchko archives, photo album dated 8 April 1947)



Flight Lieutenant G R Bohdan Panchuk and his wife, Anne (*née* Cherniawsky) visiting the Rimini camp, 13 April 1947



Were members of the Galicia Division screened by the Allies?

Yes. While held as POWs near Rimini, in Italy, many of the *Division's* soldiers were screened by American, British, Canadian and even Soviet interrogators, who determined the *Galicia Division* was not complicit in war crimes. Eventually, these Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEPs) were relocated to the United Kingdom as agricultural labourers, "civilianized," and allowed to resettle throughout the West.



Is there any evidence of war crimes by the Galicia Division?

Allegations about the *Galicia Division* were investigated by Canada's *Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals*, headed by Mr Justice Jules Deschênes. To quote the 1987 report:

- (1) the *Galicia Division* should not be indicted as a group;
- (2) members of the *Division* were individually screened for security purposes before admission to Canada;
- (3) charges of war crimes against members of the *Division* had never been substantiated, either in 1950 when they were first preferred, or in 1984 when they were renewed, or before the Commission;
- (4) in the absence of participation in, or knowledge of specific war crimes, mere membership in the *Galicia Division* was insufficient to justify prosecution.

The Commission also confirmed:

5) no case could be made against members of the *Division* for revocation of citizenship or deportation since the Canadian authorities were fully aware of the relevant facts in 1950 and admission to Canada was not granted because of any false representation, or fraud, or concealment of material circumstances.

While the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg declared the *SS*, including the *Waffen SS*, to be a “criminal organization,” this finding was directed against persons whom, as Justice Deschênes noted, “either had knowledge of, or were personally involved in, the commission of war crimes.” Membership in the *Waffen SS* did not, in itself, amount to a crime under international law, with the burden of proof resting on the prosecution to offer evidence that an individual had knowledge or, or was personally implicated in, the commission of crimes.

Representatives of the Jewish and Ukrainian communities in Canada welcomed these findings when they were made public (12 March 1987).

In 1988 a War Crimes Inquiry was also established in the United Kingdom, co-chaired by Sir Thomas Hetherington and William Chalmers. In respect to the *Division* and similar formations, this Inquiry observed:

“Many of the people who came to this country after the war had fought, at some stage, for the Germans against the Russians. Sandwiched between two oppressive states they had reason to do so. Some of these fighting units were designated *SS* units, but were used simply as

part of an army... Thus it may be possible to identify many people in this country who served the Germans, or who are 'SS men,' 'Nazis,' 'collaborators,' or 'traitors.' This does not, however, make them war criminals or imply that they have done anything reprehensible however much some media coverage may imply."



What is the Canadian Ukrainian connection to the Galicia Division?

An estimated 35,000 Ukrainian Canadians volunteered to serve overseas with the Canadian army, air force, navy and merchant marine during the Second World War, among them Saskatchewan's G R Bohdan Panchuk. An officer with the Royal Canadian Air Force, he played an instrumental role in setting up the Ukrainian Canadian Servicemen's Association (UCSA) and later the Central Ukrainian Relief Bureau (CURB), determined to save Ukrainian DPs from forcible repatriation to the Soviet Union. Based out of London, these Canadian soldiers, who helped defeat the Nazis, rescued thousands of Ukrainian political refugees, including soldiers of the *Galicia Division*. Their relief and resettlement activities were supported by the Winnipeg-based Ukrainian Canadian Committee.



Why were veterans of the Galicia Division allowed to come to Canada?

Responding to understandable, if unsubstantiated, concerns raised by the Canadian Jewish Congress about the proposed immigration of *Galicia Division* veterans, the Cabinet directed inquiries about this unit's wartime record to the British government. In

September 1950, the High Commissioner of Canada to the United Kingdom, Mr L Dana Wilgress, described Soviet narratives about these alleged “war criminals” and “quislings” as nothing more than “Communist propaganda.” Members of the *Galicia Division* were then allowed to emigrate to Canada. They did so legally.



Why is there still a controversy about the Galicia Division?

The controversy over the *Galicia Division* is the result of a concerted Soviet disinformation effort, regurgitated since the 1991 collapse of the USSR by agents of the Russian Federation and fellow-travellers in the West. Intended to provoke discord between the Jewish and Ukrainian diasporas, the KGB’s *Operation Payback* even took credit for forcing the US and Canadian governments to establish agencies tasked with investigating the alleged presence of “thousands” of supposed “Nazi war criminals” in North America, claims eventually dismissed as “grossly exaggerated” and unfounded. Having always regarded veterans of the *Galicia Division* as their steadfast foes, the Soviets and, more recently, Russian Federation propagandists, have repeatedly circulated claims portraying these soldiers as “Nazi collaborators” and “traitors.” Since 24 February 2022, they have done so to distract public attention from Russia’s genocidal war against Ukraine and Ukrainians.



Are there “Nazi monuments” in North America?

No. While memorials honouring veterans of the *Galicia Division* are found in Edmonton (Alberta), Oakville (Ontario), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) and elsewhere,

none is inscribed with any “Nazi” symbols. Often featured on them is the “Ruthenian Lion.” Depicted in profile, and standing erect with forepaws raised, this “rampant lion” is the official crest dating from the 13th century Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia, a successor state to medieval Kyivan Rus. It was also displayed by the Ukrainian Sich Rifleman during the First World War and on the coat of arms of the Western Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1918-1919.

All these monuments hallow the memory of the men and women who fought for Ukraine’s independence. Paid for by public subscription and located on private property, they commemorate the sacrifices of those who struggled to achieve an independent, sovereign and united Ukrainian state in Europe. No one should call for, excuse, or endorse criminal vandalism against these cenotaphs.



What should be done about war criminals?

No war criminal should ever find a haven in the Free World. If compelling evidence of wartime criminality by any person exists then, regardless of who that individual might be by nationality, gender, faith group or ideology, that information must be communicated to the proper authorities. An investigation and, if merited, prosecution in a criminal court of law should follow. Justice should never be selective but must be evidence-based. That has *always* been the principled position of the Ukrainian diaspora.



An NKVD member of the Soviet Repatriation Commission at Rimini. The Stalin poster proclaims "Comrades, your homeland is waiting for you!"

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Departing the Rimini camp for resettlement in the United Kingdom, 29 April 1947



A recruiting poster: "Stand in the battle against Bolshevism in the ranks of the Galicia Division"

