

# Robert Kuśnierz. In the World of Stalinist Crimes: Ukraine in the Years of the Purges and Terror (1934-1938) from the Polish Perspective

Trevor Erlacher

Volume 8, Number 2, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083571ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus682>

[See table of contents](#)

---

## Publisher(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

## Cite this review

Erlacher, T. (2021). Review of [Robert Kuśnierz. In the World of Stalinist Crimes: Ukraine in the Years of the Purges and Terror (1934-1938) from the Polish Perspective]. *East/West*, 8(2), 367–369. <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus682>



**Robert Kuśnierz. *In the World of Stalinist Crimes: Ukraine in the Years of the Purges and Terror (1934-1938) from the Polish Perspective.***

Translated from the Polish by Tomasz Krzysztof Blusiewicz, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies P, 2020. Peter Jacyk Centre for Ukrainian Historical Research Monograph Series 10. xxviii, 404 pp. Illustrations. Tables. Bibliography. Appendix. Index. \$34.95, paper.

**H**istorians have written much about Joseph Stalin's Great Terror (or Great Purge), but Robert Kuśnierz's book *In the World of Stalinist Crimes: Ukraine in the Years of the Purges and Terror (1934-1938) from the Polish Perspective* is the first monograph, to my knowledge, that centres on the views of Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MSZ, or Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych) and military intelligence (the Second Department of the Polish General Staff, or Dwójka) regarding this dark chapter in Soviet and Ukrainian history. Kuśnierz, a professor at the Institute of History and Political Science at the Pomeranian University and a seasoned expert on the foreign affairs of interwar Poland, has produced a rich and meticulously researched work that focuses on the Polish diplomatic mission to Soviet Ukraine of 1934-38. The book does not make substantive interventions in the existing historiography on Stalinism. Instead, it buttresses the long-established understanding of the totalitarian paradigm of this era as a combination of all-encompassing terror, police surveillance, inflexible ideological utopianism, deceitful propaganda, grinding poverty and exploitation, and the unfeasibility of popular resistance to, or sincere support of, the Soviet state and Communist Party. It does this by presenting a wealth of material drawn from the archives of the MSZ and Dwójka, including observations about Soviet everyday life, evaluations of the Soviet state's strategic ambitions and capacities, and policy proposals dispatched to Warsaw by Polish diplomats and intelligence officers.

If the book has a protagonist, it is Jan Karszo-Siedlewski, head of the Polish consulate in the capital of Soviet Ukraine (Kharkiv and then Kyiv). His pessimistic assessments of the Soviet state and society and his dire warnings about the threat that Russian Communism presented to European civilization were, in Kuśnierz's view, accurate, insightful, and prescient. The performance and intelligence analyses of numerous other Polish officials operating in Soviet Ukraine during these years receive a more mixed assessment, taking into account that many of them underestimated the dangers presented by Moscow on the eve of World War II.

Poland's diplomats and spies, however, were hardly themselves to blame. As chapter 1 shows (1-79), the operational conditions of the Polish embassy and consulates—the only possible conduits for intelligence work and espionage in Soviet Ukraine—were extremely adverse. The Soviet state

regarded Poland, alongside Germany and Japan, as a prime enemy and likely combatant in an inevitable and fast-approaching war. Thus, the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and other instruments of the Communist Party endeavoured to make the lives and work of Polish diplomats and consular workers as difficult and dangerous as possible. Subjected to constant surveillance, harassment, and attacks—up to and including coordinated acts of vandalism, robberies, burglaries, arrests, torture, and probable assassinations—the Polish consulates struggled to fulfill their missions. Gathering information from frightened, paranoid, and suspicious locals was almost impossible, as any encounter with foreigners was likely to result in interrogation—and worse. Polish countermeasures targeting Soviet officials in Poland provided little relief during the Great Terror. Karszo-Siedlewski interpreted the latter as a preparation for war against Poland and other European countries.

Chapter 2 (80-115) sheds light on a little-studied aspect of the Holodomor—the enduring socio-economic and psychological consequences of the famine in the Ukrainian countryside after 1933. Kuśnierz relates in grim detail what the Poles saw. They bore witness to a traumatized, morose, and still-malnourished population. The regime had thoroughly terrorized the Ukrainian people into submission using the tool of starvation. The few independent farmers who survived faced ongoing persecution and scarcity. In contrast to the assertions of Soviet propaganda, the situation on collective farms was little better and was characterized by low productivity and a low quality of peasant life.

Kuśnierz describes the everyday life of Soviet Ukrainian cities in chapter 3 (116-79). Classic scenes abound of the Soviet world at its worst: dilapidated housing; death trap mines and hazardous factories; hours-long queues leading to woefully understocked stores; crumbling roads and infrastructure; and poor wages and back-breaking labour. Kuśnierz devotes considerable attention to the widely resented Stakhanovite “movement,” which was, in fact, a top-down propaganda campaign designed to squeeze more productivity from an already overburdened and demoralized workforce.

The subject of chapter 4 (180-301), the book's longest chapter, concerns the Polish impressions of, and entanglements with, the Great Purge. The waves of mass arrests and executions horrified and appalled the Polish officials operating in Soviet Ukraine, who were largely powerless to do anything to stop them, even in the cases where ethnic Poles and Polish citizens were being victimized. Although Polish diplomats and intelligence officers overestimated the level of domestic opposition to Stalin, Kuśnierz shows that they were not fooled by the absurdities of Soviet show trials, forced confessions, and the propaganda about a Trotskyite-fascist

conspiracy. Here, too, Karszo-Siedlewski was the most astute Polish analyst commenting on the Purge. He wrote, "One is under the impression that Stalin was victorious in his campaign. He was able not only to expel some inconvenient people from the Party apparatus, but . . . also to replace them with new ones, young and fully submissive to his will. . . . Once again I believe that Stalin knows his people very well and he knows exactly what he can afford" (219; first ellipsis in source). Fear, passivity, and apathy defined Soviet society's reaction to the carnage, save for hushed expressions of discontent that posed no real threat to the state. Reportedly, the impending war against the capitalist world, which was a constant refrain in the Soviet press, became a harbinger of liberation from Soviet misery for average citizens. Kuśnierz also includes Polish observations on the concurrent terror in the countryside and the repression of Poles and other ethnic minorities in Soviet Ukraine.

Chapter 5 (302-26) surveys the annihilation of Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Jewish leaders and institutions in Soviet Ukraine. Poland's representatives in the country sounded the alarm about the persecution of Catholics and Poles, and they mobilized relief. However, all of this ultimately proved to be insufficient to save the Church in the USSR from ruin. Chapter 6 (327-47), the final chapter of the book, thoughtfully examines Polish reflections on the nature and effectiveness of official Soviet propaganda and its radical departure from domestic and international realities.

*In the World of Stalinist Crimes* is a valuable and substantive contribution to our understanding of Soviet Ukraine in the time between the Holodomor and World War II. The book is a must-read for scholars interested in the social, diplomatic, political, and economic history of interwar Ukraine, and particularly for those concerned with Polish-Soviet relations of the late 1930s.

Trevor Erlacher  
*University of Pittsburgh*