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## The “Union for the Liberation of Ukraine” (“SVU”) Trial: Fabrication, Mechanisms, Consequences

Since Gorbachev’s “Perestroika”, several publications have appeared about the SVU<sup>1</sup> trial<sup>2</sup> and those who were convicted,<sup>3</sup> and the testimonies of

- 1 SVU – an abbreviation for *Union of the Liberation of Ukraine* (comes from Ukr. *Spilka Vyzvolennia Ukrainy*).
- 2 See for example: Olexandr Abdullin and Vasyl Basarab, ‘Sprostuvannya entsiklopedii’, *Robitnicha gazeta* (November 19, 1989); Serhii Bilokin, ‘Repetitsiya bezzakonnia: Sudovii protses nad “Spilkoyu vizvolennya Ukraini”, yakoi ne bulo ta iogo naslidki’, *Ukraine*, 37-8 (1989); Vitold Kirilyuk, ‘Protsey SVU – stalins’ka fal’shyvka’, *Literaturna Ukraina* (December 7, 1989); Volodymyr Savtsov, ‘Zlochyn, yakogo ne bulo’, *Radians’ka Ukraine* (September 12, 13, 16, 19, 26, 27, 1989); ‘Reabilitovana Pravda’, *Radians’ka Ukraine* (September 12, 1990); Helij Snegir’ov, *Naboi dlya rozstrilu (Nen’ko moya, nen’ko): Liriko-publitsistichna rozvidka* (Kiev, 1990); Olexandr Sydorenko, “Pidlishogo chasu ne bulo ...” Yak i chomu bulo sfabrykovanu spavu tak zvanoi Spilky vyzvolennia Ukrainy’, *Vechirniy Kyiv* (May 15, 1991); Serhii Bilokin, ‘SVU – Opera GPU?’, *Nash Chas*, 12 (1992); Yuri Shapoval, *Ukraina 20-50-ky rokiv: storinky nenapysanoi istorii* (Kiev, 1993), 64-81; Anatolij Bolabol’chenko, *SVU – sud nad perekonannyamy* (Kiev, 1994); Hiroaki Kuromiya, ‘Stalinskii “velikii perelom” i protsess nad “Soyuzom osvobozhdeniya Ukrainy”’, *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 1 (1994), 190-7; Volodymyr Prystaiko and Yuri Shapoval, ‘Sprava “Spilky vyzvolennia Ukrainy”: nevidomi dokumenty i fakty’, *Naukovo-dokumental’ne vydannia*, (Kiev, 1995); Yuri Shapoval, ‘Nevidomi dokumenty pro YuAPTy u zv’yazku iz spravoyu “Spilky vyzvolennia Ukrainy”’, *Lyudyna i svit*, 11-2 (1996), 13-7; Fedir Shepel’, “Zaplyamovani” tr’oma bukvamy: Trahediya “SVU”- tse trahediya ne til’ky inteligentsii’, *Den*, 132 (August 2003); Yuri Shapoval, ‘Teatral’na istoriya’, *Dzerkalo tyzhnya*, 9 (March 12-18, 2005) and others.
- 3 See: Georgii Kas’yanov, ‘Dolya akademika Efreмова’, *Pid praporom leninizmu*, 19 (1989), 75-8; Anatolij Bolabol’chenko, ‘Kryvavy verlibr’, *Vitchyzna*, 11 (1990), 112-9; Yuri Shapoval, ‘Akademik Serhij EfreMOV: khronika zahybeli’, *Rada*, 40 (1992); ‘Lytsar dukhu’, *Kyivs’ka starovyna*, 1 (1992), 38-51; Yuri Khorunzhiy, *Lyudyam myla: Opovidi pro Ljudmylu Staryts’ku-Chernyakhivs’ku* (Kyiv, 1993); Serhij Vodotyka, *Akademik Mykhailo Eliseiovich Slabchenko: Narys zhyttya ta tvorchosti* (Kyiv-Kherson, 1998); Vik-

their contemporaries have been released.<sup>4</sup> The authors of those publications succeeded in refuting the old official narrative of the SVU trial, according to which nobody suffered in vain and all forty-five representatives of the Ukrainian intelligentsia were convicted on reasonable grounds at the show trial, which took place from March 9 to April 19, 1930 in the Kharkiv Opera House. Western historiography has tended to uphold the belief in the existence of the SVU,<sup>5</sup> and this view still finds defenders among some researchers in Ukraine. This can only emphasize that a “broader view of the case demands some reconsideration of our own interpretations and understanding of events”.<sup>6</sup>

This article represents an attempt to reflect upon key questions surrounding the topic and seeks to identify both potential areas of controversy and those which merit further investigation. Firstly, however, it might be best advised to briefly recall the history of the SVU case. Having begun the process of setting the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (further referred to as the Ukrainian Academy) to run along communist lines at the end of the 1920s, the Bolsheviks encountered quite significant passive resistance and opposition. One of the symbols of this resistance was Serhij Efremov, a preeminent scholar (the list of his published works ran to over 3,000 items by the mid-1920s) and the recognized leading authority in Ukrainian literary criticism. As an academic and vice-president of the Ukrainian Academy, he was considered “the conscience of the Ukrainian intelligentsia”. He had a somewhat difficult, yet resilient character. He was especially incapable of scheming, as opposed to, for example, the former leader of the Ukrainian Central Rada (National Council), the academic Mykhailo Hrushevs’kii, with whom he remained at loggerheads; the party authorities and the State Political Directorate (GPU) skilfully encouraged and sought to stoke up this conflict.<sup>7</sup> What’s more, Efremov did not hide his critical view of the Bolshevik regime.

tor Danylenko, ‘Odyn z 45-ty. V. Durdukivs’kii’, *Z arkhiviv VUChK-GPU-NKVD-KGB*, 1/2 (1998), 253-62 and others.

- 4 See, for example: *Opera SVU – muzyka GPU: Spogady svidkiv: Zbirka*, compiled by Khoruzhnyi Yu (Kam’yans’k-Shakhtyns’kyi, 1992), 152; Borys Antonenko-Davydovych, ‘SVU’, *Neopalyma kupyna: Narodoznavstvo, istoriya, arkhivy*, 1 (1994), 31-66; Hryhorij Kostyuk, *Stalinizm v Ukraini: Geneza i naslidky: Doslidzhennya i sposterezhennya suchasnyka* (Kiev, 1995); Serhij Efremov, *Shchodennyky: 1923-1929* (Kiev, 1997) and others.
- 5 See: Yaroslav Bilyns’kii, ‘Spilka Vyzvolennya Ukrainy (SVU)’, *Entsiklopediya Ukrainoznavstva: Slovnykova chastyna*, vol. 8, (Paris-New York, 1976), 3005-6; James E. Mace, ‘Union of the Liberation of Ukraine’, in Danylo H. Struk (ed), *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, vol. 5, (Toronto-Buffalo-London, 1993), 491-2.
- 6 See: Serhij Bilokin, ‘SVU – Opera GPU’, *Nash chas*, 12 (1992).
- 7 See also: Volodymyr Prystaiko and Yuri Shapoval, *Mikhailo Hrushevs’kii i GPU-NKVD: Trachne desyatylittya: 1924-1936* (Kiev, 1996).

But it should be added that Efremov was not a supporter of an independent Ukraine, and for a long time advocated the idea of a Russian federal system with a place in it for Ukraine.

From 1923, Efremov kept a personal diary, which was published in Kyiv in 1997. This diary, in which he recorded his life, his reactions to social developments and even his jokes, was disseminated among senior Ukrainian SSR leaders after his arrest in July 1929. He recorded his clashes with the government and its representatives and his particular antipathy towards Mykola Skrypnyk, the People's Commissar of Education for the Ukrainian SSR, who was a key figure in the Communist "siege" of the Ukrainian Academy; towards Stanislav Kosior, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (CK KP [B]) of Ukraine, and the chairman of the Kiev provincial executive committee; towards Panas Lyubchenko, the Secretary of the CK KP (B). These were the main though not the only names on his "list of dislikes".

It was in Efremov, a former deputy chairman of the Ukrainian National Council, that the government saw the symbol of the old Ukrainian intelligentsia. An aggressive propaganda campaign was launched against him in 1928. The formal reason for this was his publication in the "foreign press": that is, in the Lviv newspaper *Dilo*, his defence of the management policy of the Ukrainian Academy. At the same time, the GPU of the Ukrainian SSR was carefully gathering information about the attitudes and opinions of people in contact with him. However, it was part of a broader *chekist*<sup>8</sup> monitoring operation of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, representatives of which were perhaps not as openly acutely critical of the regime as Efremov, critical as they nonetheless may have been. The rising tide of criticism ebbed somewhat after the XII Congress of the Russian Communist Party in the spring of 1923, in accordance with the decisions to implement the policies of "indigenisation" and "Ukrainisation". The gist of it was that if the Bolsheviks wanted to develop Ukrainian culture further, then Ukrainians would cooperate with them.

However, the *de facto* government and secret service deployed a kind of underhand counter-Ukrainisation policy against this particular set of intellectuals. The Bolshevik authorities, distrustful of them, tried to shove them aside and replace them with more trustworthy, pro-Communist members of the intelligentsia. At a certain point, the sheer volume of "incriminating evidence" began to pile up. After the 1928 Shakhty trial, the result of which saw the old technical intelligentsia "blacklisted", and after Stalin's call to root

8 *Chekist* comes from the abbreviation of *Chrezvychnaja Komissija* 'Extraordinary Commission' (Soviet Secret Service) and refers to the person who works for this body.

out “Shakhtintsy” in all spheres of public life, it was the turn of the old Ukrainian intellectuals. By their very existence they were living reminders of the former Ukrainian “samostijnytska paradigm”.<sup>9</sup> They had to be taught a comprehensive lesson in “reconciliation” once and for all, which would render the very thought of resisting the Bolsheviks impossible in any real or even hypothetical sense.

The fabrication of the SVU case came about at the time of the “great turning point” – the attack on the peasantry, or the so-called “kulaks”. The obsessive search for “class enemies” was to be permanently fuelled by various kinds of “revelations”, whereby the political shortcomings of the authorities and the catastrophic socio-economic situation resulting in the famine of the early 1930s, for example, could all be explained away by “hostile sabotage”, “Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism” or whatever else happened to pop into the febrile minds of Kremlin propagandists. The SVU trial was to serve as confirmatory evidence regarding the veracity of these revelations.

It is no coincidence that the newspaper *Bilshovyk Ukrainy* (The Bolshevik of Ukraine) published an editorial which said, “In the SVU trial, the Ukrainian Proletariat’s court is not only examining the case of the counter-revolutionary detritus of Petlura’s supporters and his policies, but is also retrospectively judging Ukrainian nationalism as a whole: the nationalist parties, their treacherous policies and their unworthy ideas for the bourgeois independence of Ukraine”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, according to the organisers of this witch-hunt, it was not specific individuals who stood to be judged, but rather the whole period of national struggle for the liberation of the Ukrainian people. The individual defendants, carefully chosen by the Ukrainian SSR’s Political Directory, were seen as symbols of this period, its philosophy and ideological foundations.

It is no wonder that, as one of the defendants, Borys Matushyevskij, recalled, investigator Solomon Bruk (the designated expert on Ukrainian affairs) repeated during the interrogations: “We need to bring the Ukrainian intelligentsia to its knees. This is our task, and it will be done. Shoot those who do not deliver!”<sup>11</sup> This was said behind closed doors, and there were other such disclosures of purpose made at that trial. For example, as the hitherto unprinted part of the trial transcript discloses (the first part was published in Kharkov in 1931), one of the officially selected defendants, Mykola Pukhtynskij, stated, “If a naive man were to suggest that they are trying the Ukrainian intelligentsia, it would mean that he in no way understands

9 The political paradigm that aimed to establish a state sovereignty of Ukraine.

10 ‘Ukrains’ka kontrevolyutsiya pered proletars’kim sudom’, *Bil’shovyk Ukrainy*, 5-6 (1930), 9.

11 Snegir’ov, *Naboi*, 110.

the current trial. The Ukrainian intelligentsia cannot be brought to justice because it is intertwined with the working class, and the working class itself, unlike those who have broken away from the current Ukrainian intelligentsia, shall not be tried".<sup>12</sup>

Some forty-five individuals appeared as defendants before the court, among whom were two academics of the Ukrainian Academy, fifteen professors, two students, one high school director, ten teachers, one theologian, one priest of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (hereafter UAPC or Ukrainian Orthodox Church), three authors, five editors, two co-operative workers, two lawyers and one librarian. Fifteen of the defendants worked at the Ukrainian Academy. Thirty one of these people were, at some point or other, involved with various Ukrainian political parties: one had been prime minister, two were ministers of the government of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR),<sup>13</sup> and six had been members of the National Council. Two of the defendants, the historian Josyp Germauze and the lawyer Zynovij Morgulis, were Jews, and three of them – Lyudmyla Starytska-Chernyakhivska, Lyubov Bidnova, Nina Tokarevska – were women. The defendants were collectively found guilty as charged. The court found that the SVU existed from June 1926 to July 1929, its stated purposes being "to overthrow Soviet rule in Ukraine by means of an armed uprising with the help of foreign bourgeois governments and to restore capitalist order in the form of a 'Ukrainian People's Republic' (UNR)".<sup>14</sup>

It was also stated that the SVU acted in collaboration with the Petlurist centre in exile, and had declared itself the government of the UNR. Cast as a constituent part of the SVU, the Ukrainian Youth Association (SUM)<sup>15</sup> was alleged to have planned a terrorist campaign against the All-Union and Ukrainian Soviet party-governmental leaders. The Ukrainian Academy and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church were declared to have been clandestine SVU cells.

Only five witnesses were summoned to attend the court hearing and the guilt of the defendants remained unproven; sentences were passed all the same. The maximum sentence was ten years' imprisonment; no death sentence was passed, though most of those convicted died later, primarily

12 *Haluzevyj derzhavnyj archive Sluzhby bezpeky Ukrainy (HDA SBU)* (Branch State Archive of The Security Service of Ukraine [HDA SBU]), Kyiv. – Case 67093 FP, vol. 186, 102.

13 UNR – an abbreviation from *Ukrainska Narodna Respublika* (Ukrainian People's Republic).

14 *Spilka vyzvolennya Ukraini: Stenografichniy zvit sudovoho protsesu* (Union of the Liberation of Ukraine), Verbatim record of the trial, vol. 1, (Kharkiv, 1931), 14.

15 SUM – an abbreviation of *Spilka Ukrainskoi Molodi* (Ukrainian Youth Association).

during the “Great Terror”. There were forty five primary figures in the dock at the SVU trial. A further seven hundred (not four hundred, as was formerly believed) were arrested shortly afterwards in direct connection with the case.<sup>16</sup> According to some estimates, more than 30,000 people in total were arrested, executed or deported during or after the SVU trial.<sup>17</sup>

Panas Lyubchenko, one of the public prosecutors at the trial, wrote in his preface to the SVU trial’s published transcripts: “The transcript of the SVU trial ought to be in the hands of the working class as a powerful weapon for exposing the deceitful conspiratorial work, which was and still is being carried out by Ukrainian nationalists against the Soviet nation. The transcript of the SVU trial will tell everyone, in the very words of the defendants themselves – yesterday’s leading figures in Petlurism and the Ukrainian People’s Republic – for what and for whom the Ukrainian bourgeoisie and Ukrainian nationalists are working; what sort of ‘independent’ Ukraine they are fighting for.”<sup>18</sup>

The State Political Directorate of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (GPU USSR) began prospecting the “for what and for whom” message long before the SVU trial. This is confirmed by memoranda that were sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine (KP[B]U) by Vsevolod Balitsky, the head of the GPU of the Ukrainian SSR, on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of June, 1929. These were the first documents to feature the future SVU trial defendants. One cannot help but draw attention to Balitsky’s haste: evidence against the young people allegedly belonging to the SUM, who were arrested in May 1929, had yet to be received, but it was already considered to be “firmly established that [...] Efremov formed and inspired the political mood of this anti-Soviet organisation [...]”.<sup>19</sup>

The investigators still hadn’t managed to squeeze any admission of the SVU’s let alone the SUM’s existence<sup>20</sup> out of Borys Matushevskiy, a student, by June 10, 1929, and, according to a memorandum of June 11, that day Mykola Pavlushkov (Efremov’s nephew) tried to defend Serhij Efremov and Volodymyr Durdukiivskiy,<sup>21</sup> which was also the day on which Durdukiivskiy was said to have been arrested. But the existence of the SVU was strongly as-

16 *Dokladnaya zapiska o rezul'tatakh roboty po vskrytiju ukrainskogo kontrrevolyutsionno-go podpol'ya v svyazi s delom "SVU"* HDA SBU, Kyiv. – Case 67093 FP, vol. 238, 1.

17 Prystaiko and Shapoval, *Sprava "Spilky vyzvolennya Ukrainy": nevidomi*, 44.

18 *Spilka vyzvolennya Ukraini: Stenografichnii zvit sudovogo protsesu*, 1.

19 *Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv ob'ednan' Ukrainy (TsDAGOU)* Central State Archive of Public Organisations of Ukraine (TsDAGOU). – F. 1. – Op. 20. – Case 2994, 29.

20 HDA SBU, Kyiv. – Case 67098 FP, vol. 80, 77-9.

21 *Ibid.*, vol. 70 – Arch. 59-62.

served in that memorandum. All this adds to the evidence that the course of the trial had been script-written by Ukrainian SSR GPU officers in advance.

One of the key roles in the fabrication of the SVU case was played by the investigator, Solomon Bruk. From 1929 to 1931, he was the “Senior Attorney” of the GPU’s Kiev district operational sector with special responsibilities for combating Ukrainian counter-revolution.<sup>22</sup> Bruk received a glowing citation in an honours list for his active role in prosecuting and eliminating the Kiev-based “Union for the Liberation of Ukraine” branch, “an all-Ukrainian insurgent organisation that sought to incite an armed uprising to overthrow the Soviet authorities with the military support of foreign powers, and by organising terrorist attacks against party leaders and representatives of the Soviet authorities”.

Bruk received recognition for his outstanding role in eliminating the SVU: this may have been quite easy given that there was nothing to eliminate in the first place, but only he knew that. Thus, he was commended for his perseverance and determination, and his skilled use of “sophisticated agent-operative combinations”, which led him to succeed in exposing the central figures in the SVU plot: the academic, Efremov; the SVU centre member, Durdukivskij; and the head of the youth terrorist combat unit, Pavlushkov, along with several other notable members of the organisation, which put an end to the insurrectionary core of the organisation.<sup>23</sup> For his “outstanding role”, Bruk was awarded the Order of the Red Banner in 1929, and in 1938 (in period of the “great terror”) he was shot by NKVD.

More than 250 SVU case files were studied from 1988 to 1989 by the then Ukrainian SSR’s KGB. The key findings were that although the existence of the SVU’s programme and charter were put on record in the indictment and the verdict, about which members of the organisation were allegedly informed (albeit orally), fourteen defendants showed they knew nothing of any of this during the preliminary investigation, and twenty-one defendants weren’t even cross-examined on these issues. Specific organisational links between the SVU and émigré forces from without, as referred to in the indictment and the verdict, did not figure in the case materials.

As can be seen from the testimonies, a number of people (who were convicted but managed to survive) were subjected to psychological and physical pressure during the preliminary investigation. In this regard, it is worth quoting a section of the statement written in March 1957 by Vsyevolod Gantsov, addressed to the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, Kliment Voroshilov: “In total, I spent more than twen-

22 HDA SBU, Kyiv. – Case 2472, vol. 2, 2.

23 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 24-5.

ty- two years in prison and banished to the far North. I was given this severe punishment for my ‘crimes’ and for belonging to the SVU organisation [...] As I have already mentioned, I did not belong to the SVU and did not know about the existence of such an organisation, but in my testimony during the investigation, I assumed that the SVU existed and that I was the only one who did not know about it. It was only after the trial, from conversations with friends and my co-defendants, that I learned that the SVU had never in any way existed, that it was fictitious. Everyone convicted in the trial, including those who were credited as leaders such as Efremov and Nikovskij, said without exception that the SVU did not exist, and they only confirmed the aspersions cast upon them because they were forced into doing so by the false testimonies of other prisoners; they gave their testimonies under pressure from the investigating authorities.”<sup>24</sup>

In fact, during the so-called investigations into those arrested, some pressure was exerted on the students Boris Matushevskij and Mykola Pavlushkov. They were the first to testify to the existence of the SVU and SUM. The testimonies of others were then employed to denounce others. The available source materials make it possible to assert that the so-called organized structures of the SVU did not actually exist: there was no SUM, nor were there any “medical”, “academic”, “educational”, “pedagogical”, “institute asset editorial”, “publishing”, “autocephalous”, “cooperative” divisions, or, for that matter, any Poltavskiyi, Dnipropetrovskiyi, Chernihivskiyi, Vinnytskiyi, Odessian, or Mykolaevskiyi branches.

In response to protests regarding the SVU case, by decree of the Supreme Court of the Ukrainian SSR of August 11, 1989, the case was closed with full exoneration of those convicted due to the absence of any *corpus delicti*.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the question of the Stalinist show trials arises, which any researcher of the events of the 1920s and 1930s could hardly ignore: was there any actual (as opposed to mythical) resistance to the Bolshevik authorities, and is it therefore impossible to speak about any SVU or SUM?

Among those forced into roles as actors in this lethal political farce staged in the Kharkov Opera House (the SVU trial was played out on its very stage, which contemporaries sarcastically referred to as “the theatre in the theatre”), were several well-known personalities – real patriots, people with convictions who did not wish to bow to the new political regime. But why did they – the majority of them being older, authoritative (and intelligent) figures – agree to play such roles? It is obvious that many of them did not accept, or acknowledge, communist rule. This still doesn’t constitute a solid basis for

24 Prystaiko and Shapoval, *Sprava “Spilki vizvolennya Ukraini”: nevidomi*, 348-9.

25 See: ‘Protest’, *Literaturna Ukraina*, (August 31, 1989).

confirming or unravelling the absurd schemes they were said to have devised by the organisers of the trial.

For a start, it is worth noting that there is no doubt that there was resistance to the Bolshevik regime. The documents confirm this, although the topic in question – resistance to Stalinism – still requires skilled analysis, not quasi-patriotic lament. Here, for instance, the priest Volodymyr Khutoryanskyj of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church gave testimony. He was arrested as a member of the SVU on January 1, 1934. Sentenced to five years in prison, he served time in Solovki, and, on November 3, 1937, was shot dead, like many other Ukrainian prisoners. An informant's report of a conversation has survived, in which Khutoryanskyj said that “despite the arrests of Ukrainians [...] there are many people in Ukraine who are still working. There are many more of our Ukrainian brothers who will carry out their work whenever the opportunity arises. We consolidated our forces with the help of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church, and I myself worked in the former county of Bratslav, and then I was transferred to the Polish border [...]”.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, the hypothesis on the actual existence of the SVU and SUM hardly stands up to scrutiny in light of the documents and facts. There is no reason to say that opposing or harmful structures had been created in the way the employees of the GPU of the Ukrainian SSR would have liked to have seen in 1929 and 1930. This is also confirmed by many secret official GPU documents which were previously unavailable, and which allow for a much deeper understanding of the SVU affair.

It all started with the arrest of a group of young people in Kiev, between May 18 and June 18, 1929, who were accused of belonging to an illegal organisation. Among these young people were also those who had been working with the GPU since 1928, trying to make contact with nationalistically minded people and to pass on important information to security officers.<sup>27</sup> The “evidence” extracted from these people was then used to break the students Pavlushkov and Matushyevskyj, and to get them to testify in accordance with the party line (primarily against the academic Efremov as the supposed leader of the SVU). Then came the arrests.

26 *Regional'noe upravlenie Federal'noi Sluzhby Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii po Arkhangel'skoi oblasti* (Regional Office of the Federal Security Service [FSB] of the Archangelsky District). – Case P-14799 P. 6.

27 It might be added that, during the Second World War, some of these individuals were abroad and already found themselves as part of the forces opposed to the communist regime. This immediately politicised the problem of examining SVU and SUM cases: it was said to be unpatriotic to slander Ukrainians who did not obey the Bolshevik regime, but fought against it.

It should be acknowledged that the investigators skilfully wielded bespoke methods of blackmail, which did not necessarily involve physical pressure. To take the case of Sergij Efremov as an example, in the course of his interrogation on June 25, 1929, shortly after his arrest, he said that he “did not know about the existence of a counter-revolutionary organisation and had not heard of it from anyone.”<sup>28</sup> But, by September 10 he was confessing to “the existence of a ‘Union for the Liberation of Ukraine’, a counter-revolutionary organisation, which he belonged to”.<sup>29</sup> So what actually happened in the space of those three months?

Borys Matushyevskij asked Efremov about this some years after the SVU trial, when they met by chance during a walk in the Yaroslavl prison exercise yard. The answer was as follows: “I was told at the interrogation: you, and people like you, should leave today’s Ukrainian cultural scene and social life, because you attract hidden potential enemies of the Soviet system. Ukrainian culture and science will continue to develop, but without you. New Soviet specialists of the Ukrainian intelligentsia who are not prejudiced in their work, have grown up and will replace you. So, you must choose: either you give us the SVU in line with our offer, and in that case you and others will undergo a public trial, where there will be no executions and the sentences will be quite soft, or, you will not have a trial and it will all take place under OGPU (United State Political Department) diktat, and the whole of Ukraine will be tainted with the blood of the so-called ‘willing Ukrainians’. We can do this – I’m sure you of all people understand.”<sup>30</sup>

This is how Efremov described their behaviour. There was also a personal motive. In 1992, Tatiana Ilchenko from Kiev wrote a letter to the newspaper “Rada” that she had had contact with Efremov in her childhood. He lived with Volodymyr Durdukivskij, whose sister, Onysia, was in fact Efremov’s wife. Ilchenko had visited Onysia Durdukivskaia with her mother during the Nazi occupation who said that Efremov was threatened that if he did not sign the falsified papers necessary to the investigation, then she would be arrested. Knowing that torture would kill her, he signed everything.<sup>31</sup>

One more valuable witness account of Sergiy Efremov has survived. The GPU had planted an informant in the cell in which he was being held, who gave detailed reports about his cellmate’s moods, what he said, and how he behaved. Thanks to these unique reports dated November 1929 (which I managed to track down in the archive of the Security Service of Ukraine), it

28 HDA SBU, Kyiv. – Case 67093 FP, vol. II, 37.

29 *Ibid.*, 96.

30 Cited after: Antonenko-Davydovych, ‘SVU’, 51.

31 *Rada*, (March 27, 1992).

is possible to understand the “mechanics” of the fabrication of the SVU case. Here are some examples:

“16. II. Efremov continued to write the ‘forced confession’, as he himself put it, about that which didn’t exist. He was nervous, forever repeating – ‘abominable existence’. To my question about whether he had a lot more left to write, he answered ‘a little’, and that he would not and could not write at length like the others because there was nothing to write [...]”

“18. II. Efremov returned very agitated from the interrogation and replied to my question of ‘Well, how was it?’: ‘I have never once been in such an abominable, pitiable and foolish state. It would have been much better to have taken me away and finished me off, than to torment me every day with these interrogations [...] I would even be glad if there really were an organisation with all these people and the specifics which are now being tied to it. Then I would come clean about everything and that would be the end of it. Then I would confess all of the details, because I myself would know them, but to tell now of details I don’t know [...] And besides that, the results are being made extremely one-sided and (they) have no interest in ascertaining and identifying actual truths, but rather only in confirming the existence of this organisation [...] An investigator told me that he expected more from me. He wants me to write 500 pages like the others, more if possible, because I am considered the ringleader. But what is there to write? If they would let me read the witness statements of those who had created this mythical organisation, I would simply confirm it [...]”

“It should be noted that during this conversation, Efremov was very agitated and dead on his feet, and he was choking up as he spoke with tears in his eyes.”

“19. II. Efremov started to write a response to the investigator’s questions recorded yesterday and again started to become agitated and angry [...] ‘Write, but write what? The investigator says that I am only writing what they already know and I am trying to conceal what is, in my opinion, unknown to them [...] He seems to be a nice person and sympathises with me and my fate, but in no way understands me [...] I tell him that when I’ve already confessed to some ‘facts’, then I cannot tell any official person that it is simply not the case; I only speak totally openly to him alone, telling him that I’m confessing to something which doesn’t exist.

He, however, doesn't believe me, saying that we both know that it exists. Although 'they' have clearly told me what I should write ...'.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, that's what happened: the academic was “encouraged” to write over 120 pages of information about his crimes, and did so with his own hand. It was a real human tragedy that was not only experienced by Sergij Efremov but also by the other SVU trial defendants.

The size of this document does not give detailed evidence about who were at Kharkov Opera House during the SVU trial. The general assessment of those who were able to comprehend what they saw is that it was a theatre of the absurd, and that the calmness with which the defendants admitted to their dark, treacherous intentions made one wonder if they were quite in their right minds. Mind you, there were also some “technical” problems. Whenever any defendant began to stray from the script and say something unexpected, the session would be adjourned, and the next session would resume when the defendant was sure to know his lines.

Mykola Pavlushkov, who was declared the leader of the SUM, tried particularly hard. The writer Boris Antonenko-Davidovich, who witnessed the SVU trial first-hand, wrote that Pavlushkov, “looked in court as the leader of an operetta, deprived of his troupe”.<sup>33</sup> But his sister, who was abroad, and some others, sought to make a hero of him, as one who supposedly used the platform of the trial to stir up Ukrainian youth against the authorities.

One of the defendants who managed to survive (he emigrated to the United States, where he died in 1979), Kost' Turkalo, wrote: “There are still Ukrainians who consider the ‘Union for the Liberation of Ukraine’ affair of the 1920s as discrepant: that is, they don't know and it is not clear whether or not this organisation actually existed. But there are those Ukrainians [...] who claim that there was an SVU in the 1920s, and thus justify the Moscow Bolshevik regime that executed the completely innocent elite of the Ukrainian scientific intelligentsia. As one of the defendants, I personally reject the inconsistency in this matter and with full moral responsibility resolutely state that there was no formal SVU organisation. It was the Moscow GPU's deliberate ruse – with the help of two of the defendants in the case – to create a legal basis for the destruction of the top Ukrainian scientific intelligentsia of the time. When I spoke to all those defendants at court, those who were treated as my friends and acquaintances, they told me that they

32 Cited from: Yuri Shapoval, *Ukraina XX-ho stolittya: osoby ta podoi v konteksti vazhkoi istorii* (Kiev, 2001), 430-1.

33 Cited from: Antonenko-Davydovych, ‘SVU’, 47.

learned about the ‘existence’ of the SVU from the examining official during the pre-trial inquiry.”<sup>34</sup>

Efremov and Pavlushkov were the “two defendants”. The latter pointed out exactly where Efremov had hidden his diary, which served as virtually the only evidence of his “counter-revolutionism” (there wasn’t even a hint to suggest the existence of some kind of underground network in the text, although given the “intimate nature” of the diary genre, there could have been). Incidentally, after the verdict was passed, Efremov said to Vsevolod Gantsov, “I will never forgive Mykola. Mykola is dead to me. I trusted him even more than Durdukivskij. He is the only one who knew the hiding place of my diaries.”<sup>35</sup>

Oleksander Semenenko, one of the contemporaries who was also obliged to attend the same trial in the Kharkov Opera House, left some interesting memoirs that once again highlight the orchestrated nature of the SVU case:

“The defendants were brought from the prison not in a ‘Black Maria’ but in ordinary buses, as though on an outing. During recesses, they took tea and biscuits to the defendants on the stage. The organisers blatantly overplayed their roles as humanitarian students of Dzerzhinskii. The remarkably large sweets in particular were somewhat out of place there, though, to be sure, confectionary did represent the good life at the time. However, I suppose that Sergey Efremov, a man of great dignity, could not discard them or push them away, and nor could the others, just as they could not withdraw their previous testimonies, given in Kiev, exhausted as they were by the long days and nights without sleep. The confessions and the theatrical sweets – everything was included in the pre-designed ritual, and the defendants had to comply.”<sup>36</sup>

An important step towards the clarification of the historical truth about the SVU was made in 1970 by filmmaker, writer and human rights activist Geliĭ Snegirev, who wrote the book *Ammunition for Execution*, which was published abroad and then for the first time in Ukraine in 1990. Using only the materials available to him at the time – press reports of the 1930s and the memoirs of some of the defendants in the SVU case – he convincingly demonstrated its fabricated nature. Such memories and publications as exist tend to suggest that the chief of the secret department of the GPU of the Ukrainian SSR, Valerii Gorozhanin, and the chief of the second branch of the secret department, Boris Kozelskii, were always present on the stage of

34 Kost’urkalo, *Spohady* (New York, 1978), 4.

35 Cited from: Snegir’ov, *Naboi*, 108.

36 Olexandr Semenenko, *Kharkiv-Kharkiv ...* (Kharkiv-New York, 1992), 97.

the Kharkov Opera House and directly supervised the course of the trial. It is precisely these two men who are believed to have been the real orchestrators of the SVU affair; their signatures are on the bill of indictment,<sup>37</sup> as well as on the documents with which the SVU case was opened.

Ultimately, this was the extensive “Report on the results of the work to expose the underground counter-revolutionary resistance throughout Ukraine relating to the SVU case”, the “Memorandum on the case of the Odessa branch of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine”, the “Report on the activity of the medical division of the SVU”, the “Provisional list of those arrested in Kiev who are on trial”, and some other documents. The contents of these documents are astounding in that not one actual crime was registered as having been committed by those who were persecuted for their affiliation with the SVU. This seems paradoxical, but such is the case. Specific “criminal” intentions and conversations about certain mutinous schemes are discussed, but not one actual action is cited.

Another salient feature of the documents put together by the Ukrainian GPU at the end of 1929 is their absolute Ukrainophobia. Once one has become acquainted with their contents, it is impossible not to come to the conclusion that the fabrication of the SVU case and the preparation of the open trial for this case constituted key steps in the concerted drive to discredit the politics of “Ukrainianisation”. Practically everything Ukrainian in these documents is described as “Petlurian”, “nationalist”, “harmful” and so on.

The “Report on the results of the work to expose the underground Ukrainian counter-revolutionary resistance throughout Ukraine relating to the case of the SVU” typifies the method. This is a fairly exhaustive document summing up the work of the GPU in Ukraine’s district centres and provides convincing evidence that the SVU case organisers focused their primary assault against the Ukrainian intelligentsia, and not just at the older members of Ukrainian society. Virtually all associations and unions dedicated to the study of the Ukrainian language in Vinnytska Oblast, for example, were branded as “nationalist”.<sup>38</sup>

“Counter-revolutionary chauvinist factions” of Ukrainian language teachers, who created “associations of Ukrainisers”, were exposed even in Luhansk. As it was said, “the group aimed to surround itself with Ukrainian chauvinists and influence teachers and students”.<sup>39</sup> The famous historian and academic, Mykhailo Slabchenko, was accused of forming a group of “future

37 *Spilka vyzvolennya Ukraini: Stenografichnyi zvit sudovogo protsesu*, vol. 1, 156-60.

38 HDA SBU, Kyiv. – Case 67093 FP, vol. 238. *Dokladnaya zapiska o rezul'tatakh roboty po vskrytiju ukrainskogo kontrrevolyutsionnogo podpol'ya v svyazi s delom “SVU”*, 57.

39 *Ibid.*, 60.

young professors” around himself, who were, as always, accused of “chauvinist work”.<sup>40</sup>

The question arises: who determined the degree of “chauvinism” or “nationalism”, and by what criteria? Were they the undereducated investigators of the GPU, who were in fact strangers to the Ukrainian environment and culture? Everything “indigenous”, i.e. Ukrainian, was automatically taken to be “nationalistic”. At the same time they were quite sure that they weren’t mistaken in doing their paymasters’ bidding; they did what they believed the authorities expected of them. So, in developing the SVU case, the GPU laid the foundation for the subsequent holocaust that was visited on Soviet Ukraine in 1932 and 1933.

Another feature of these documents was the desire to discredit the UAPC and pave the way to its destruction. It is not by chance that what was to incriminate members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UAPC) was planned in detail in one of these documents from December 1929, one of its primary features being the allegation of “atheism of most Autocephalists”. The question arises here again: by whom and by what criteria should the extent of atheism be determined? Next, it’s the “Petlurist past of most Autocephalists”, the use of UAPC SVU members as “tools to exert clandestine anti-Soviet influence on the masses”, the “Ukrainisation of the church and religion as a means of fulfilling the purpose of the SVU”.<sup>41</sup> Members of the GPU went to great lengths to “decipher” these details.

Osyp Zinkevich, in his study “The Case of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in the trial of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine and its elimination in 1930”, suggests that the investigators of the GPU, having realised in advance that they would be unable to secure the compliance of UAPC members in the course of the investigation, decided to resort to the device of convening an “emergency council” of the UAPC on January 28 and 29, 1930.<sup>42</sup> This “council”, which was held on the eve of the SVU trial, adopted a resolution on the UAPC’s connections with the SVU, on the “counter-revolutionary spirit” of the UAPC and, of course, on its self-liquidation. The “council” itself was simply the Ukrainian SSR GPU’s stratagem designed to attest to the “collapse” of the UAPC.

These documents contain not only the names of those who found themselves in the dock, but also of the ad-hoc defendants who were softened up in preparation for the trial. The handwritten corrections made to these documents are particularly noteworthy. So, in the “indicative list” (that is to

40 Ibid., 4.

41 Ibid. *Dokladnaya zapiska GPU USRR V.A. Balitskomu*, 8.

42 Osyp Zinkevich, ‘Sprava Ukrainskoi Avtokefal’noi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvy na protsesi Spilky vyzvolennya Ukrainy i ii likvidatsiya u 1930 r’, *Suchasnist’*, 7-8 (1988), 219.

say, the scenario under which they were designed SVU), Lyudmila Starytska-Chernyakhivska was included in the “SVU Committee”, that is, among the primary leaders, along with Mykhailo Slabchenko, who was later to take a more modest role as head of the Odessa branch.<sup>43</sup> Next to the four candidates on the “church list” it was unmistakably written: “a number of people will be taken from the periphery”.<sup>44</sup> Opposite “the candidates for the trial from the periphery”, plus signs were written next to the names of specific individuals, while no marks were made next to others; or, for example, the plus changed to minus next to the name of the teacher S. Gudz-Zasulskogo. Perhaps these marks were made personally by Vsevolod Balitsky, who carefully read and made notes on other documents.

The memorandum “on the activity of the medical division of the SVU” explains the reason why, in his cryptogram of January 1930, Stalin paid so much attention to “medical crimes” which were attributed to those accused of involvement in the SVU. In this regard, it is advisable to cite the entire text from Stalin’s cryptogram:

“Put Kosior and Chubar on trial as well. When can we expect the trial of Efremov and co.? We think that the trial should be extended not only to the rebellious and terrorist acts of the accused, but also to the medical tricks aimed at murdering senior officials. We have no need to conceal from the workers the sins of their enemies. In addition, let it be known to so-called ‘Europe’, that the repression of the counter-revolutionary group of specialists trying to poison and kill Communist patients is, in fact, completely ‘justifiable’ and pales into insignificance in comparison with the criminal activities of these counter-revolutionary scoundrels. Our request is that an agreement be reached with Moscow on a plan of how to conduct the trial in court.”<sup>45</sup>

Some of the Communist leaders were actually patients of the well-known doctor Andria Barbara, but during the investigation and the trial there was not a shred of evidence given to support the idea that he saw his Communist patients “not as patients, but as the enemy”, and there was not a single case of malpractice or poisoning. The charges were therefore based solely on his alleged intentions. Thus, the doctor quickly had to confess to these and other “sins”. These confessions were farcical in nature, but the verdict was far from

43 *HDA SBU, Kyiv*. – Case 67098 FP, vol. 238. *Orientirovochnyi spisok arestovannykh po Kievu, podlezhashchikh predstavleniyu na protsess* (Tentative list of arrested in Kiev which suppose to be present at the process), 1.

44 *Ibid.*, 2.

45 Cited from: Tatiana Zamyatina, ‘Iosif Stalin: “Vinovykh sudit” uskorenno. Prigovor – rasstrel’ Rassekrechen lichnyi arkhiv vozhdya narodov’, *Izvestiya*, (June 11, 1992).

funny. He was sentenced to eight years in prison, but executed in October 1938 for having allegedly continued “counter-revolutionary activities” in the labour camp where he was serving his sentence.<sup>46</sup>

As a matter of fact, Efremov and Pavlushkov began their “confessions” as though they were a farce. However, following the SVU trial on the stage of the Kharkov Opera House (or the “theatre in the theatre” as it was described by contemporaries), where they were forced to act in strict accordance with the script and play their roles to the full, a tragic fate was to befall them. Both men remained behind bars and eventually died in prison, as did the vast majority of the other individuals involved in the SVU case.<sup>47</sup>

Highlighting the political motives of the SVU trial, Gerhard Simon noted that it is harder to resolve the issue that the indictment “was true, but only in the minds of the OGPU members”.<sup>48</sup> Based on research into GPU internal documents, it can be argued that the SVU was not the organisation it was alleged to have been in 1929-1930.

At the same time, it is worth emphasising that the fact of the nonexistence of the SVU, resembling in any way the picture painted by the GPU, in no way rules out the fact that anti-communist sentiment and resistance existed. In fact, the fight was led by the academics Efremov and Grushevskii, though in the *groves of academe*, rather than by trying to overthrow the regime by armed struggle, the murder of communist leaders, the organisation of “imperialistic intervention” or the poisoning of communists and so on.

In summary, one can ascertain that in the years which have passed since the SVU trial, knowledge of the case’s causes, progression and consequences has increased, which, in turn, has undermined a number of myths and unsupported claims. However, it is quite clear that there is still much to be done to overcome the politicisation of this topic and to bring it fully into the orbit of scientific taxonomy. As such, the reconstruction of a full picture of the events associated with this high-profile case must still remain something to come.

A comparative analysis with parallel cases in other regions of the former USSR (for example, the “Union for the Liberation of Belarus” case) is still notable by its absence. The processing and publishing of the as yet unpublished part of the verbatim report of the SVU trial, with a corresponding commentary, is long overdue. It might be worth conducting a project to

46 HDA SBU, Kyiv. – Case 67098 FP. *Kontrol’no-naglyadova sprava po kriminal’nii spravi A. O. Barbara*, 18.

47 See also: Prystaiko and Shapoval, *Sprava “Spilki vizvolennya Ukraini”*: nevidomi, 85-9.

48 Gerhard Simon, *Nationalismus und Nationalitätenpolitik in der Sowjetunion: Von der totalitären Diktatur zur nachstalinischen Gesellschaft* (Baden-Baden, 1986), 599.

republish, in the form of several volumes, the first volume of the transcript along with these unprinted fragments of commentary and academic articles.

To this day, the fate of many defendants in the case remains to be established. After all, there are still unprocessed documents which reveal those in charge of putting together the case and the show trial on behalf of the central party authorities in Moscow and GRU officials. This is why a joint project with Russian researchers is being pursued. The hope remains that these questions will be answered in the years to come.