

Why Did Nazi Germany Fail to Create a Ukrainian Puppet State In 1939? The Role of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)

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In 1939 the German military commanders had plans to create a Ukrainian puppet state inside Poland. Today's article will discuss why this never happened.

On the eve of WWII the [Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists \(OUN\)](#) was a key terrorist group the Nazi secret services put stakes on while preparing an assault on Poland. That group was carrying out subversive operations against both Polish and Soviet interests and was given a substantial role to play in Germany's offensive plans.

On June 13, 1939, Colonel [Erwin von Lahousen](#), the chief of Abwehr Section II (primarily responsible for carrying out sabotage), instructed a representative of the OUN, Roman Sushko, to train 1,300 officers and 12,000 ordinary Ukrainians for an attack on Poland. In a report dated July 15, Lahousen noted that in preparation for the [Fall Weiß operation](#), the Abwehr was training a group of Ukrainian nationalists to commit sabotage under the command of Roman Sushko, which was code-named [Bergbauernhilfe](#) and consisted of approximately 600 people by mid-August 1939.

Along with the Bergbauernhilfe unit, OUN militants inside Poland were also gearing up for an anti-Polish uprising. At the order of the OUN's regional leader in Western Ukraine, Vladimir Tymchy (Lopatinsky), the members of that organization began their military training as early as July 1939 in secret camps in Polesia and the Carpathians. According to Ukrainian historians, by late August about a thousand militants had been trained and were ready to shoulder their duties as the core of the anti-Polish insurgent forces.

The OUN's combat units were not only assigned to carry out sabotage, but also to seize power. The contemporary Ukrainian historian Ivan Patrylyak [speaks](#) about this openly, "*Lopatinsky envisioned partisan units leaving their hideouts and, having seized power in their locality, then proclaiming the restoration of the Ukrainian state and creating their own administration.*"



Erwin von Lahousen

Meanwhile, the Abwehr's sabotage division was resolving the supply issues - by providing them with weapons, ammunition, and explosives. On Aug. 18, 1939 there was a remarkable entry in Lahousen's journal ([a copy can be found in the archives](#) of the Hoover Institution on

War, Revolution, and Peace): *“The training of the Bergbauernhilfe members should be continued. They will presumably be dispatched in the region on Aug. 22 ... Ukrainian military personnel are receiving instructions via Major Stolze, according to which the leader of the Ukrainians, Melnyk, must be ready to engage in armed hostilities if the situation in Poland so demands.”*

On Aug. 22, OUN saboteurs from Bergbauernhilfe were supposed to be dispatched to the Polish border. Like the other Abwehr detachment – the special Ebbinghaus battalion that was trained for action in Polish Silesia – they were to become the basis for an anti-Polish uprising. However, these plans were frustrated by the [Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact](#).

The Soviet-German nonaggression treaty was signed on Aug. 23 in Moscow. For Hitler, it was a guarantee that the Soviet Union would not enter the upcoming war on the side of Poland. For Stalin, it was a guarantee that German troops would not make an appearance in the Baltics, Western Byelorussia, or Western Ukraine anytime soon.

“This pact with Moscow will eventually come back to haunt National Socialism,” wrote the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg in his diary on Aug. 25. *“If we are also forced to relinquish Polish Ukraine to the Soviet Union, then that will be the second blow we will have inflicted, after Carpatho-Ukraine, on the strongest force opposed to Moscow.”*

By *“the strongest force opposed to Moscow,”* Rosenberg meant the OUN. His prediction was accurate – as soon as word came from Moscow about the signing of the Soviet-German agreement, the Abwehr was no longer permitted to use Ukrainian saboteurs. *“In my apartment I received a call from Secretary of State Keppler who said that instructions had come from Schloss Fuschl (the residence of the minister of foreign affairs), according to which the ‘action’ (i.e., the ‘launch’ of the Ukrainian underground movement) should not be begun,”* wrote Lahousen in his diary.

Over the next few days he tried to challenge that decision, but only managed to win the right to use the Bergbauernhilfe for defensive purposes inside Slovakia (which is where the unit was being trained).

On Aug. 28 Lahousen recorded this decision in his diary, *“With regard to the Ukrainians, I am issuing the following instructions. In the event of peace: the Bergbauernhilfe members should be hired as general workers. In the event of war: no action will be taken at first. After consultations with the General Staff, a decision will be made about whether it is possible to use these disciplined people as an intergal unit.”*

Meanwhile, the OUN underground in Poland continued to train for an armed insurrection, in accordance with the earlier plans. A mobilization of OUN supporters was scheduled for Aug. 28 – they were to go to the forest and sort themselves into combat units.



Ebbinghaus fighters

On Sept.1 German troops invaded Poland. On Sept. 5, the Ebbinghaus battalion, joined by Silesian Germans, seized the Katowice railway junction prior to the arrival of the Wehrmacht divisions. General Busch, the commander of the VIII Army Corps, congratulated the Abwehr

staffers overseeing the Ebbinghaus battalion on this achievement.

On Sept. 11 the Abwehr tried once more to come to a decision regarding the use of the Bergbauernhilfe to support the Ukrainian anti-Polish uprising, but this initiative was again stymied. Nonetheless, OUN detachments in western Ukraine attacked outposts of the Polish government, the police, and even small military units. Polish civilians also fell victim to the nationalists. The number of militants totaled at least 3,000.

Meanwhile, Berlin realized that the war in Poland had been won. Polish troops were retreating under the onslaught of the German divisions, generating genuine euphoria, in the wake of which Hitler threw caution to the winds and decided to set up a puppet Ukrainian state within the ruins of Poland. This was a violation of the Soviet-German agreement of Aug. 23: according to a secret protocol, western Ukraine was considered to be within the Soviet sphere of influence.

The leaders of the Abwehr were informed of the decision on Sept. 12. Lahousen's diary entry for that day was extremely laconic: *"A trip with the head of the department to Oppeln via Breslau. Purpose: a discussion of the Ukrainian question."* Lahousen gave more details about this decision in his testimony at Nuremberg: *"This order or directive ... Ribbentrop also giving it to Canaris during a brief discussion, was in reference to the organizations of National Ukrainians with which Amt Abwehr cooperated along military lines, and which were to bring about an uprising in Poland, an uprising which aimed to exterminate the Poles and the Jews ... When Poles are mentioned, the intelligentsia especially are meant, and all those persons who embodied the national will of resistance ..."* That decision, which Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop communicated to the heads of the Abwehr, had been made in consultation with Hitler.

Thus, the Abwehr was given permission to make use of the Bergbauernhilfe unit and the support of OUN's anti-Polish armed uprising. The Ukrainian nationalists were also tasked with destroying any "disloyal element." The Abwehr did not protest, as this was nothing unusual: the above-mentioned Ebbinghaus battalion also committed mass murders of Poles.



Andriy Melnyk, 1940

On Sept. 15, the Abwehr chief, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, along with Lahousen met with the leader of the OUN, [Andriy Melnyk](#), in Vienna. Melnyk advised them as to the likelihood of creating a pro-German, Western ("Galician") Ukraine. Afterward, Melnyk gave orders for a "coalition government" to be assembled for Galicia. Lahousen, in turn, began to take concrete steps toward the use of Ukrainian troops. His diary shows this entry: *"Ukrainian military staff are being immediately transferred to the command of the XIV Army (Dehmel). Notify Heeresgruppe Süd via Abwehr Section II ... Melnyk should continue to remain at the disposal of head of the department ... Abwehr Section II must provide a replacement for the Bergbauernhilfe."*

However, these plans were thwarted on Sept. 17. On that day Soviet troops entered western Ukraine and western Byelorussia. According to Walter Warlimont, deputy chief of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, when Gen. Alfred Jodl received a message stating that Red Army troops were entering Poland, he asked in horror, "Against whom?" This attempt to create a Ukrainian state, in accordance with the plan approved by Hitler, would result in

Germany being forced into a war against the Soviet Union under the worst possible conditions. And so Berlin abruptly began backpedaling.

In the following weeks, Canaris, Lahousen, and one of the leaders of the OUN, Richard Yary, worked to save “what they could,” arranging for OUN members to pull back into the parts of Poland controlled by Germany as well as into Hungary.

The Bergbauernhilfe division was disbanded and some of its personnel transferred to a team of police units in occupied Poland. However, the assistance provided by the Ukrainian nationalists to the Reich did not go uncompensated. The OUN gained legal status, and its members were assigned to serve in Werkschutz units (guarding factory sites). The Ukrainian population of the Nazi-created “Governorate General” received many privileges; in particular, the Ukrainians were given homes and shops that had been confiscated from Jews.

The plans to create a Ukrainian puppet state were briefly put on hold, only to be revived in the spring of 1941, on the eve of the attack on the USSR. The Act of Proclamation of Ukrainian Statehood would be announced by the leaders of the OUN on June 30, 1941 in Nazi-occupied Lvov ... The games the Nazis played in occupied Ukraine would prompt the [Volyn' massacre](#) and other crimes against the Polish and Russian people. As a result, the USSR worked until the late 1950s to eradicate the nationalist underground in western Ukraine.

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Ukrainian cavalymen on parade in front of Hans Frank, Nazi Governor-General of the occupied Poland’s “General Government” territory (Sept 1939, Lviv, Ukraine).

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