

Ukraine's International Socialist League whitewashes crimes of Ukrainian fascism

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From June 24 through July 6, the Ukrainian section of the International Socialist League (ISL) published an eight-page document on its Facebook page in the name of its head and the leader of the Zakhyst Pratsi (Labor Defense) trade union, Oleg Vernyk. The post, which has now been published in English, Spanish, French and Ukrainian, was a response to exposures by the WSWS of the integration of the ISL into the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the promotion by its Ukrainian leader, Oleg Vernyk, of figures and documents of the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).

The post fully confirms the WSWS warnings of the pro-imperialist, pro-capitalist and extreme right-wing orientation of this petty-bourgeois nationalist tendency. At the beginning of its statement, the ISL openly states that it is guided by the “basic principle” of the “defense of Ukraine as a political subject” and “the struggle for the preservation of the integrity of the State.” These are the words not of a left-wing, much less revolutionary or socialist tendency, but of an organization that is consciously dedicated to defending the capitalist Ukrainian state—first and foremost, against the working class.

In a “Letter to a young Trotskyist in Russia,” David North, the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site*, exposed the reactionary nature of the political line of the ISL and elaborated on the principles of revolutionary internationalism and the historical continuity of Marxism, upon which the Trotskyist movement bases its opposition to the imperialist proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the Putin regime.

The politics of the ISL are directly opposed to these Marxist and internationalist principles. In an extraordinary amalgam of historical lies, omissions and distortions, the ISL and Vernyk effectively seek to whitewash the crimes of Ukrainian fascism and justify their present-day alliance with the far-right—the principal shock troops for the imperialist proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The fraud of the 1943 “democratization” of the OUN and the role of Petro Poltava

In the post, the ISL defends Vernyk’s promotion of materials by OUN-B and UPA members, writing:

He (Oleg Vernyk) never made propaganda in favor of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. On the contrary, he always proposed to make a deep analysis of the liberation and nationalist movement in Ukraine and the dynamics of its evolution, considering its branches both on the right and on the left, and advised against ignoring the complexities and problems that characterized these movements. In addition, Oleg Vernyk has always been very critical of the figure of Stepán Bandera, who had precisely been the leader of the ultra-radical right-wing branch of the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists), also expressing himself strongly against the democratization of the political figure of Bandera and against his conversion into leftist leader.

The entire post belies these claims. In fact, what the ISL presents is a revival of the same historical lies and myths that the OUN-B and UPA and their apologists have propagated for decades. Most strikingly, in the entire post, the terms “fascism,” “Nazism,” “genocide,” “pogrom,” “anti-Semitism” and “racism” are not used once in relation to the OUN or UPA. There is no discussion of the origins or ideology of the OUN, which was founded in 1929 as a fascist, terrorist organization with the explicit goal of destroying the social conquests of the October Revolution and founding an “ethnically pure” Ukrainian state.

Nor is there any mention of the fact that the OUN helped the German Wehrmacht prepare its invasion of the Soviet Union, and then helped instigate and perpetrate pogroms against Jews that resulted in an estimated 13,000 to 35,000 victims. While the OUN had split in 1940 into a wing headed by Andrei Melnyk (OUN-M) and one headed by Stepan Bandera (OUN-B), both collaborated with the Nazis. Even as leaders of the OUN-B were arrested by the Nazis, who had opposed the OUN-B’s proclamation of an independent Ukrainian state, the membership of the OUN as a whole was integrated into the Nazi occupation machinery and auxiliary police, which played a major role in the Nazi-led genocide of the Jews.

Completely ignoring the role of the OUN in the Second World War, the ISL and Vernyk seek to create the impression that there was a political and ideological separation between Bandera and the OUN from 1943 onward.

Defending Vernyk’s post of the pamphlet “What are the Banderites and what are they fighting for” by Petro Poltava (Fedun), a leading ideologist of the UPA and OUN-B, the post claims:

Mr. Petró Poltava narrates in that work how he had begun to propagate ideas that were absolutely opposed to the ideology of Stepán Bandera. Precisely those ideas that were proclaimed during the 3rd Regional Congress of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists in 1943 were described by Stepán Bandera as “Bolshevik” ideas, that the Congress had been organized by some “Bolsheviks” and that he (S. Bandera) would never accept the resolutions approved by that Congress. S. Bandera, who at that time was imprisoned in a German concentration camp called “Sachsenhausen,” had perfectly understood that a tendency towards democratization was beginning to appear within the ranks of the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists), towards the ideas of the left and the incitement to a simultaneous war against German national socialism and against Stalinism. Obviously, this position was firmly rejected by Bandera and by the other members of the right-wing branch of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

These are blatant lies. Despite Bandera's imprisonment in Sachsenhausen—where he lived under highly privileged conditions and was able to stay informed about the OUN's work—he remained the acknowledged leader (*providnik*, the Ukrainian translation of *Führer*) of the OUN-B.

And far from propagating “ideas that were absolutely opposed to the ideology of Stepan Bandera,” the pamphlet by Poltava proudly proclaimed that the Banderites derived “their name from the glorious son of the Ukrainian people, the long-term revolutionary fighter for the freedom and state independence of Ukraine, the leader of the revolutionary Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)—Stepan Bandera.” [1]

Indeed, historians have frequently cited this well-known pamphlet as an example of the propaganda efforts of the OUN-B and UPA to whitewash their own crimes during and after World War II, as it explicitly denied any genocidal massacres by the OUN and its collaboration with the Nazis. Its fraudulent “socialist” demagoguery was the result of the OUN's attempts to appeal to layers of the East Ukrainian peasantry, who were overwhelmingly hostile to the very idea of the restoration of capitalism, despite the immense crimes of Stalinism.

The ISL post stands in the tradition of this far-right propaganda. It presents the national socialist demagoguery of Poltava as “left-wing,” even “Bolshevik.” In reality, the political and ideological origins of the OUN-B's “national socialism” and its fascist violence lay in the reaction against the internationalist and Marxist program of the October Revolution. In a 1946 essay entitled, “The revolutionary elements of Ukrainian nationalism,” Poltava himself made this very clear, writing:

Ukrainian nationalism is also fighting against all those epigones of socialism of 1917-20 on Ukrainian soil, who stand on the position of internationalism, who fight for a class liberation that is elevated above the struggle for national liberation, without understanding that the destruction of social oppression in Ukraine can only come as a result of national liberation. [2]

It is this nationalist opposition to the October Revolution and Marxism that petty-bourgeois nationalist forces like the ISL and Oleg Vernykh share with Poltava and the OUN-B. Their insistence on 1943 as a turning point in the OUN-B's supposed evolution toward “democracy” and “left-wing” views is not only based on historical lies. It reveals, above all, their own political orientation toward an alliance with imperialism and readiness to tolerate and deny the crimes of fascism for the sake of the defense of the “Ukrainian state.”

The “democratization” of the OUN-B in 1943 was a political fraud, designed to lay the foundations for what has become a decades-long alliance of the Ukrainian far right with US and British imperialism. It was also the beginning of an ongoing cover-up and whitewash of the genocidal crimes of Ukrainian fascism.

Following the defeat of the German Wehrmacht at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942-43, the Ukrainian fascists realized that their only hope for the establishment of a Ukrainian capitalist nation-state lay in an alliance with the US and Great Britain. The OUN-B undertook certain changes to its program, but these were, as historian John-Paul Himka noted, “programmatically window dressing,” aimed at ensuring “American and British aid for their cause.” [3]

Thus, at its Congress in August 1943, the OUN publicly announced the recognition of equal rights for minorities and began to tone down its anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric. But just days before the Congress, the members of the SB (security organization) of the OUN-B received orders

“to annihilate all ‘enemies of UPA,’ which was to be understood as all Poles, Czechs, Jews, Komsomol members, Red Army officers, workers of the militia, and all Ukrainians who have even the slightest sympathy for Soviet power.” [4]

Most importantly, in the spring of 1943, the OUN-UPA had embarked on a genocidal campaign against the Polish population of Volhynia and Galicia, which claimed between 70,000 and 100,000 lives in 1943-44, the majority of them in 1943.

Entire villages were wiped off the map; their residents burned alive, shot or tortured to death. The UPA also frequently forced Ukrainians who had married Poles to murder their Polish spouses or children. The bodies of the dead were often mutilated horribly. Historian Gregorz Rossoliński-Liebe writes:

The UPA was the army that the OUN-B leaders expected to “cleanse” the Ukrainian race. Perhaps as a result of this conviction, acts of pathological sadism occurred frequently. In May 1943 in the village Kolonia Grada, for example, UPA partisans killed two families who could not escape as all the others had, after they realized that the UPA was attacking the neighboring village of Kolonia ?amane. The partisans killed all the members of these two families, cut open the belly of a pregnant woman, took the fetus and her innards from her, and hung them on a bush, probably to leave a message for other Poles who had escaped the attack and might come back to the village. [5]

The UPA was also systematically hunting down and murdering the few Jews who had so far managed to survive the Holocaust. There was even an order to kill anyone who had hidden Jews. By the end of the war, a shocking 98.5 percent of the Jews of Volhynia, the center of the OUN-B's activities, had been murdered, one of the highest death rates in all of Europe.

There is not a single note in the ISL's eight-page document even mentioning, let alone condemning, any of these horrific crimes. Instead, the ISL alleges that in 1943, that is, *at the height of its genocidal massacres*, the UPA had turned “towards the ideas of the left and the incitement to [of] a simultaneous war against German national socialism and against Stalinism.” This too is a lie.

While the UPA, which had been founded in 1942 independently from the OUN, had engaged in some partisan warfare against the Wehrmacht, in 1943, the UPA was violently taken over by the OUN-B. The organization's leadership now consisted, in the words of historian Per Anders Rudling, “of ruthless OUN(b) activists, most of whom were trained by Nazi Germany, and many were deeply involved in the Holocaust.” [6] Moreover, in spring 1943, an estimated 5,000 members of the 12,000 men of the Ukrainian auxiliary police, which had played a central role in the Holocaust, joined the UPA.

Throughout 1943, even as the formal alliance with the Nazis by the OUN was put on hold, agreements made between the two sides preempted attacks by the UPA on German forces, reducing them to a minimum. In 1944, the alliance with Nazi Germany was revived at the initiative of Bandera, and when the Nazis withdrew from Ukraine, “they left the OUN-UPA tons of arms and ammunition. The German army regarded this cooperation as a good investment in the war against the Soviet Union.” [7]

Following the end of World War II and the incorporation of West Ukraine into the Soviet Union, the OUN-UPA continued an insurrection against Soviet rule into the early 1950s, killing an estimated 20,000 Ukrainian civilians, most of them collective farmers and workers. In this civil war, the UPA and OUN relied on logistical support and weapons from the US and UK, whose secret services had established close relations

with Bandera and other OUN leaders.

The Soviet bureaucracy's response to this insurgency was both bankrupt and politically criminal: Fearing nothing more than a mobilization of the working class which would have also threatened its own rule and could have formed the basis for an international extension of the October Revolution, the bureaucracy resorted to violent bureaucratic measures of repression to thwart the insurgency. Hundreds of thousands of people were deported from Western Ukraine, and an estimated 150,000 people were killed by the NKVD.

This violent repression proved to be water on the propaganda mills of the Ukrainian right. Above all, it served to divide and confuse the working class. Over three decades later, when the Stalinist bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev moved to restore capitalism and destroy the Soviet Union in 1985, the latent Ukrainian far-right forces, both in the diaspora and within the Soviet Union, violently broke to the fore, becoming, yet again, a central prop for the intervention of imperialism in the region.

Using the crimes of Stalinism to whitewash fascism: The role of Danylo Shumuk and the 1953 Norilsk uprising

In the founding document of the International Committee of the Fourth International, James P. Cannon insisted that Trotskyists had to "know how to fight imperialism and all its petty-bourgeois agencies (such as nationalist formations or trade union bureaucracies) without capitulation to Stalinism; and, conversely, know how to fight Stalinism (which in the final analysis is a petty-bourgeois agency of imperialism) without capitulating to imperialism." [8]

The ISL turns this principle on its head. It cynically exploits the crimes of Stalinism to justify its alliance with the far right and imperialism. Central to this effort is the figure of Danylo Shumuk, a veteran of the UPA and leader of the 1953 Norilsk Gulag uprising.

As a youth, Shumuk had been a member of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine (CPWU), which then functioned as an autonomous organization under the control of the Polish Communist Party (CPP). In 1938, as part of the Great Terror in the USSR, in which tens of thousands of revolutionaries from across Europe were murdered, Stalin dissolved the CPP and the Communist Parties of Western Belarus and Western Ukraine along with it.

Using the crimes of Stalinism to justify Shumuk's turn to fascism, the ISL writes:

Danylo Shumuk waited until 1943, when the "UPA" (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) had begun its war on two fronts, that is, against German National Socialism and against Stalinism. That is when he enlisted in the ranks of the "UPA." Unfortunately, Stalin's executioners had taken Trotsky's life by 1943. Therefore, it is very difficult for us to predict what tactics and strategy Leon Davydovich might have proposed to the communists of western Ukraine, considering the complex context of that time. He left that question to future discussions among comrades.

It is difficult to think of a more brazen lie. Leon Trotsky not only led the Red Army's struggle against counter-revolutionary nationalist forces, not least of all in Ukraine, in a civil war from 1918 to 1921 to defend and extend the conquests of the October Revolution. The Trotskyist movement has historically always insisted on rooting the opposition to Stalinism in the defense of the internationalist principles of Marxism against the bureaucracy's counter-revolutionary and nationalist program of "socialism in one country." And far from promoting alliances with nationalist, let alone fascist forces, Trotskyists have fought to build an independent revolutionary leadership for the international working class.

Whatever the tragic elements of Shumuk's life and the crimes of

Stalinism, it must be stated clearly that he never had anything to do with Trotsky and his struggle for internationalism and the political independence of the working class. His memoirs, which were published in English in 1984, have long formed an important part of the historical myth-making about the OUN and UPA by the far-right Ukrainian diaspora in Canada and the US.

In his memoir, Shumuk fails to mention, let alone condemn, the Nazi-led genocide of over 1 million Ukrainian Jews, in which the OUN-UPA was deeply implicated. Instead, he justifies the (unspecified) crimes of the OUN-B as a "response to the crimes by the NKVD," the typical argument of the Eastern European far right. [9] Shumuk's glorification of the rank and file of the UPA and his insistence that he himself had always been motivated by nothing but "truth, kindness and love" squarely fall in the category of propaganda and myth-making. [10] By his own acknowledgement, he worked as a political instructor for the OUN-B's most elite and most violent unit, the SB, and led a large UPA unit with many OUN-B and SB members in a period when the UPA was engaged in genocidal massacres.

Despite Shumuk's sinister record, the ISL doubles down, with Vernyk posting about the memoirs of this unrepentant right-wing nationalist and his involvement in the 1953 Norilsk Gulag uprising. Trying to both defend Shumuk and create the impression that he worked closely with the "left," they write that "Trotskyist prisoners played a key role in the organization and execution of the plan" for the 1953 Norilsk Gulag uprising, which Shumuk co-led.

Again, the ISL resorts to historical distortions and amalgams for definite political purposes. Out of the two individuals it mentions to prove its claim about the alleged involvement of "Trotskyists," historical records indicate that one, Maria Shimanskaya, was not involved in the Norilsk but in another Gulag uprising a year later. [11] The other reference, to a certain "Klichenko," is also misleading. The historical documents published about this uprising do not contain this name, but rather mention a certain Ivan Pavlovich Kliachenko. And the only existing reference to a political conversation with Kliachenko by another prisoner indicates that his group was in a minority and "limited itself to the status of opposition" to the plans of the Ukrainian nationalists who dominated the strike committee. [12] In both cases, it is unclear whether either of them ever were members of Trotsky's Left Opposition, whose membership was murdered almost entirely during the Great Terror of the 1930s.

With these misleading references and statements, the ISL seeks to sow confusion about the character of the political forces involved in the uprising and blur the lines between left-wing and right-wing opposition to Stalinism.

The 1953 Norilsk uprising was the first in a series of Gulag uprisings that took place amidst a staggering crisis of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which was accelerated by the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953. After years of renewed repression in the Soviet Union, including openly anti-Semitic purges and a bloody crackdown on left-wing youth groups, a series of strikes and uprisings—most notably in East Germany in June 1953—now shook the Stalinist bureaucracies. The overwhelming majority of the Soviet working class and youth felt a powerful allegiance to the ideals and conquests of the October Revolution which they had just defended against fascism in World War II, and the dominant sentiment was to seek a return to the "real Lenin."

Fearing the development of a broader left-wing movement in the working class, the bureaucracy responded with extraordinary violence to these developments, including to the Gulag uprisings.

However, while the political forces involved in these uprisings were extremely heterogenous, ranging from genuinely left-wing and anarchist groups, as well as religious sects, to the far right, historical documents indicate that, tragically, it was right-wing and nationalist forces that managed to dominate and direct many of these uprisings, especially the

one in Norilsk. By 1953, the Ukrainian far right, in particular, had established a sophisticated underground network in many camps. This included a revival of the feared Banderite secret organization (SB), a general staff, as well as “combat groups and groups for the execution of the terrorist acts, political education and material provisions.” [13]

In Norilsk, where the prison population included a particularly large contingent of both Ukrainian and Baltic nationalists, Shumuk created a “self-help organization” composed of former UPA members years before the uprising. Along with other right-wing nationalist forces, among them Russian and Baltic Nazi collaborators, they managed to dominate the strike committee—often by thoroughly anti-democratic means—and picked a former official of the Nazi propaganda ministry to fulfill the role of “propaganda minister.” The hymn of the uprising was composed by a Belarusian nationalist to the tune of a UPA song and directed against the “tyranny of Bolshevism.” [14]

Principal responsibility for allowing the far-right to play such a major role, which by far outstripped its actual popular support, lies with Stalinism. Stalin’s Great Terror of the 1930s had resulted in the massacre of entire generations of socialists and revolutionaries, including the Trotskyist opposition to the Soviet bureaucracy. This mass murder, culminating in the assassination of Leon Trotsky in 1940, politically beheaded the working class not just in the Soviet Union but in Europe as a whole and created immense damage to the socialist and historical consciousness of generations of workers.

Anyone committed to the fight for socialism today would see it as his or her primary task to establish the true historical record of these events and the crimes of Stalinism in order to politically arm the working class. The ISL does the opposite: It employs the Stalinist methods of historical lies and amalgams in order to sow historical confusion and cover up the crimes of the far right.

As always, the historical lie serves the purpose of political reaction—in this case, it is the ideological cement for the ISL’s line-up behind imperialism and the Ukrainian far right.

Indeed, just days after this document was published on the ISL’s Facebook page, on June 29, Vernyk took part in a Ukrainian program for a 45-minute discussion with Oles Vakhnyi, one of Ukraine’s most notorious neo-Nazi skinheads. Vakhnyi has publicly endorsed the fascist attacks by the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, who killed over 77 people, and made the “Heil Hitler” greeting in front of French TV cameras. In his “discussion” with this fascist thug in front of a Ukrainian flag, Vernyk expressed his support for the Ukrainian government’s ban on opposition parties and strikes.

The rapid shift to the extreme right of the ISL contains important lessons for workers everywhere. Its open promotion of Ukrainian fascist forces is only the most extreme expression of the rapid rightward lurch of the petty-bourgeois ex-left internationally, which the ICFI has been documenting for many years. The ISL and Vernyk’s trade union are connected to various organizations in Latin America, Turkey and Europe, as well as the Progressive International, which was co-founded by the Sanders Institute of Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders, who has voted in support of tens of billions of dollars for the arming of the Ukrainian army and fascists in the war against Russia.

But there is also another side to this class development: While the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left is being sucked into the capitalist war machine and is rallying to the defense of the bourgeois nation-state, the working class is being driven into an open struggle against imperialist war and capitalism on a world scale. This struggle will be waged in direct opposition to these nationalist forces on the basis of socialist and internationalist principles. The critical task now is to prepare the revolutionary leadership necessary for this struggle by building the sections of the Trotskyist International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution, including in Russia and Ukraine.

End Notes

[1] Petro Fedun (“Poltava”), “Khto taki banderivtsi ta za shho vony boriuts’sia,” in: Petro Fedun—“Poltava,” *Kontseptsiiia Samostiinoi Ukrainy, Tom 1: Tvory*, L’viv 2008, p. 323.

[2] Petro Fedun (“Poltava”), “Elementy revoliutsiinosti ukrayins’kogo natsionalizmu,” in: Petro Fedun—“Poltava,” *Kontseptsiiia Samostiinoi Ukrainy, Tom 1: Tvory*, L’viv 2008, p. 122.

[3] John-Paul Himka, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry, 1941-1944*, Stuttgart: Ibidem 2021, p. 368.

[4] Ibid., p. 372.

[5] Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist. Fascism, Genocide, and Cult*. Stuttgart: Ibidem 2014, pp. 268-269.

[6] Per Anders Rudling, *The OUN, the UPA and the Holocaust: A Study in the Manufacturing of Historical Myths*, Carl Beck Papers No. 2107, November 2011, p. 10. The paper is available online.

[7] Rossoliński-Liebe, *Stepan Bandera*, p. 284.

[8] James P. Cannon, “A Letter to Trotskyists throughout the World.” Available on the WSWS: <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/10/open-o21.html>

[9] Danylo Shumuk, *Life Sentence. Memoirs of a Ukrainian Prisoner*, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies: University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1984, p. 346.

[10] Ibid., p. 100.

[11] *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga. Konets 1920-kh—pervaia polovina 1950-kh godov. Tom 6. Vosstaniia, bunty i zabostvki zakliuchennykh*, ed. by V. A. Kozlov, Moscow: ROSSPEN 2004, pp. 611, 626, 628. The volume is available online: <https://statearchive.ru/474>

[12] The reference by a camp official to Kliachenko as a “Trotskyist” involved in the Norilsk uprising can be found in a document published in: *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga, tom 6*, p. 325. The discussion with him is recounted by Hryciak, a former member of the OUN’s youth branch, who co-led the Norilsk uprising, in his memoirs, which were published by a OUN-affiliated publishing house. Yevhen Hryciak, *The Norilsk Uprising. Short Memoirs*, Institut für Bildungspolitik in München, Munich 1984, p. 23.

[13] *Istoriia stalinskogo Gulaga*, p. 81.

[14] Shumuk, *Life Sentence*, p. 213; “Gimn noril’skikh povstantsev”. Available online under: <https://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/?t=page&num=7564>



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