

Historians Wendy Goldman, Lewis Siegelbaum, other academics and workers demand freedom for Bogdan Syrotiuk

Our Reporters
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Letters demanding the release of the Ukrainian socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk continue to arrive at the Pervomaik City District Court and the Mykolaiv Court of Appeal from historians, workers and opponents of war on four continents. Bogdan, the 27-year-old leader of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, was sentenced on August 10 to 15 years in prison for “high treason.” The sole evidence against him consisted of six articles he wrote for the *World Socialist Web Site* calling on Ukrainian and Russian workers to unite against the war.

Among the most recent letters is one from Wendy Z. Goldman, the Paul Mellon Distinguished Professor of History at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Goldman is one of the foremost historians of the Soviet Union in the United States. Her books include *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936*; *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression*; *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia* and, with Donald Filtzer, *Fortress Dark and Stern: The Soviet Home Front during World War II*. Her letter to the court reads in full:

To the Pervomaik City District Court,

I am the Paul Mellon Distinguished Professor of History at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States. I am writing to express my deep concern at the recent sentencing of Bogdan Syrotiuk. Mr. Syrotiuk has been convicted of treason and given a harsh and long sentence. He has done nothing but express anti-war sentiments and his opposition to the rehabilitation of certain controversial historical figures like Stepan Bandera. Ukraine repeatedly presents itself, in contrast to Russia, as a democratic country. If it truly upholds the values of democracy, it should not criminalize free speech. In the United States, we have our own fierce debates over various historical figures, who many see as racist. No one, however, has been imprisoned for expressing their opinions about these figures. Ukraine

has presented itself to Europe and to the United States as a beacon of democracy. How is it possible to advance this image and, at the same time, imprison people for expressing views that differ from those of the state?

Please dismiss the charges against Bogdan Syrotiuk. No one should be imprisoned for their ideas.

Respectfully yours,
Wendy Z. Goldman

Goldman is joined by another leading American historian of the Soviet Union, Lewis H. Siegelbaum, the Jack and Margaret Sweet Professor Emeritus of History at Michigan State University. Siegelbaum is the author of *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941*; *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918–1929*; *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* and, with Leslie Page Moch, *Broad Is My Native Land: Repertoires and Regimes of Migration in Russia’s Twentieth Century*, and is a co-creator of the widely used online archive *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*.

Siegelbaum wrote to the court in Ukrainian. His letter, translated into English, reads:

I join other historians of Ukraine, Russia, and the former Soviet Union in condemning the prosecution of Bogdan Syrotiuk for “high treason.” Mr. Syrotiuk was a principled opponent of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Calls for an end to the war on behalf of both Ukrainian and Russian workers should not be grounds for prosecution. Moreover, his condemnation of the Ukrainian state’s actions to restore the reputation of Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera is commendable, not grounds for prosecution.

Like other authors, I call for his immediate release in the name of freedom of speech, compassion, and justice.

Sincerely,
Lewis H. Siegelbaum

Jack and Margaret Sweet Professor Emeritus of History
Michigan State University

From Britain, Dr. Paul Cowdell, an honorary senior research associate at Bristol University, wrote to the Mykolaiv Court of Appeal that he has “been following this case closely since it began” and that “it has become very clear that the charges are utterly groundless.” He continued:

Bogdan was accused of being an agent of the Russian government, but no act of espionage, sabotage or collaboration was even alleged. The sole evidence against him was six articles and speeches he wrote for the World Socialist Web Site, but these articles themselves disprove the charge.

His articles are a denunciation of war, fascism and nationalism. Far from supporting the Russian government, Bogdan condemned the invasion of Ukraine and opposes the Putin government, calling on Ukrainian and Russian workers to unite to end the war. When details of this explicit opposition were presented in evidence, the court ignored it. The same articles that were used to justify the verdict contain evidence disproving it!

The court order for the destruction of Bogdan’s literature, and the proscription of the *World Socialist Web Site*, indicate that this verdict was actually delivered to suppress his socialist opposition to the war. He has been convicted for his political ideas. That is a judgment against the right of any Ukrainian to hold or express political ideas.

Cowdell noted that “even supporters of the current Ukrainian government have expressed unease at the blatantly anti-democratic measures taken against Bogdan,” while the government “is rehabilitating Nazi collaborators like Andriy Melnyk and Yevhen Konovalets.” He pointed to the conditions Bogdan faces: “Ukraine’s prisons are overcrowded and deaths in custody are rising. Bogdan, like many others, has been denied necessary medical care.”

Many others have sent letters to the court. Wesley Parish wrote that “the horrifying absurdity of trying and imprisoning a socialist for asking Russians and Ukrainians to work together to stop the stupid, unjust war, would no doubt make Franz Kafka stop rolling in his grave and start taking notes.” The verdict, he continued, “ranks amongst the greatest European absurd literature, such as Franz Kafka’s works and *The Good Soldier Schweik*, except for the incidental detail that it is not fiction. Surely when a court makes a judgment that brings the institution of the court itself into disrepute, that judgment would then be overturned.”

Noran Elbana submitted a statement that placed Bogdan’s case in the context of the sentiments of the Ukrainian population itself:

And who, except those who create and pursue war, could genuinely support the suffering, destruction, loss of life, and devastation that war brings? War does not create winners among ordinary people. It leaves families grieving, communities destroyed, and generations carrying its consequences. ...

Polls have found that 66 percent of Ukrainians want a negotiated end to the war. ... Surely, for countless ordinary people, the answer would be simple: they want the war to end. They want peace. They want to return to living their lives without fear, loss, and destruction.

Bogdan is a socialist and for this reason he has been condemned to fifteen years imprisonment.

Elbana added: “There is also an urgent humanitarian concern. Bogdan’s health has deteriorated while he has been in custody, and he has reportedly not received adequate medical treatment. His right to appropriate medical care and humane treatment should not be compromised.”

We urge all readers to sign the petition at FreeBogdan.org, to use the site’s letter-writing tool to send a letter in Ukrainian and their own language to the Pervomaisk City District Court (inbox@pm.mk.court.gov.ua) and the Mykolaiv Court of Appeal (inbox@mka.court.gov.ua), copying freebogdan@wsws.org, and to make as substantial a donation as possible to the campaign to free Bogdan Syrotyuk.



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