

“BOYS, BOYS, AS YOU CAME, SO YOU WILL LEAVE HERE”

The beginning of the war and the Nazi occupation of Kharkiv in memoirs and oral histories

by Gelinada Grinchenko

<https://doi.org/10.25355/2yqg-9j18>



Photo credit: The bodies of six civilians hang from the balcony of a school on Sverdlov Street where they were executed by German troops of the 50th Army Corps. The signs around their necks read "punishment for blowing up an explosives storehouse." Copyright: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Provenance: David Mendels Second Record ID: Collections: 2006.145. [Free access - no reuse](#)

Zitierempfehlung

Gelinada Grinchenko: "Boys, boys, as you came, so you will leave here". The beginning of the war and the Nazi occupation of Kharkiv in memoirs and oral histories. In: Copernico. History and Cultural Heritage in Eastern Europe. URL: <https://www.copernico.eu/en/link/63f3ce1af10020.43203355> (2025-12-08)

License

Published under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#) (illustrations see picture credits)

To the german language version: <https://www.copernico.eu/de/link/63f3ce1af10020.43203355>

Permalink of this page

<https://www.copernico.eu/en/link/63f3ce1af10020.43203355>

During the Second World War, Ukraine was the largest Soviet republic, with Kharkiv as the second big Ukrainian city to be fully occupied by the Germans. Kharkiv belonged to the so-called military occupation zone under the Wehrmacht's control. Those who survived this occupation (still not well investigated) remember fear, pain, and extreme violence over the civil population.

During the Second World War, Ukraine was the largest Soviet republic, with Kharkiv being the second big Ukrainian city to be fully occupied by the Germans. Kharkiv belonged to the so-called military occupation zone under the Wehrmacht's control. Those who survived this occupation (still not well investigated) remember fear, pain, and extreme violence among the civil population.



And we stand with my grandmother near the window and look out the window. We were on the first floor. At this time, the Germans were coming from the center of Kharkiv towards Gorky Park. A bunch of Germans. They walk quietly, no one touches them, and they walk. A few people, a little ...

And here we are standing with my grandmother near the window, the Germans are coming, and my grandmother was then old. And says: "Boys, boys, as you came, so you will leave here."

Historical note

On the eve of the German-Soviet war, about one million people lived in Kharkiv. It was a well-known economic and cultural center in the country, with plants and factories, many primary, secondary, and higher education institutions, museums, theaters, and libraries. After Kyiv, it was the second largest Ukrainian city in terms of size and population, a huge Ukrainian

industrial center located at the crossroads of many transport routes. After the German invasion in June 1941, the city was quickly reoriented for military production. But the rapid advance of the German army very soon led to the hasty evacuation of enterprises, equipment, and personnel. A few days before the retreat of the Red Army, by order of the Soviet leadership, the city's water supply, heat, and sewage systems were destroyed, and transport services were stopped. There was almost no fighting in the town, and the Nazis entered Kharkiv on October 24, 1941. With only a short one-month break, the city's occupation lasted until August 23, 1943.

The beginning of the war: bombing, evacuation, anarchy

The entire occupation of Kharkiv is a history of violence and abuse of the civilian population: direct and indirect, physical and moral, mass and individual, immediate and delayed. This violence and abuse in space and time preceded the Nazi occupation because a few months before German troops entered Kharkiv, the townspeople experienced the horror of bombings, the panic of evacuation, and the chaos of a city abandoned by the authorities. The Soviet disregard for human life should also be mentioned: the top priority was the evacuation of industrial equipment, but not people – the civilian population where forbidden from escaping Kharkiv – and abandoning the city of almost a million people and deliberately destroying civilian infrastructure: no water, no heat, no communications.

Bombing

The abuse of the civilian population began before the occupation with a systematic and targeted three-month bombardment of the city. Kharkiv was bombed for the first time on July 27, 1941; from August, the raids occurred daily and continued until the occupation of the city at the end of October 1941. The bombings – devastating, relentless, and senseless – became one of the most terrible memories for city residents. The famous Kharkiv anthropologist and anatomist Professor Lev Nikolaev wrote in his diary:

"October 16

Yesterday and today, the Germans are bombing Kharkiv from the air. Many losses among the population. I am glad that I began to treat these bombings quite calmly. The heartbeat only slightly accelerates when a German plane flies somewhere very close and low... I feel incredibly calm when my wife and children are in a bomb shelter.

October 17

It is said that a major raid by German aircraft is expected. I need help understanding the purpose of this event. After all, Kharkiv will, nevertheless, be surrendered, if not tomorrow, then in two weeks or a month. Why destroy the city that will belong to them? ... The last

communists are leaving. Probably the Germans are very close, as the carts are dragged through the city in an easterly direction. If only Kharkiv had been surrendered without bloodshed. After all, there is a lot of space between cities, and it is convenient to arrange battles there. Why is it necessary to fight in the city itself? After all, this is completely useless cruelty! It's five o'clock now. There is no light. The windows are boarded up and covered. I am writing by the light of a flickering candle. Cold! Due to the lack of electricity, the electric fireplace is inactive. The temperature in the room is not higher than +5 C°."

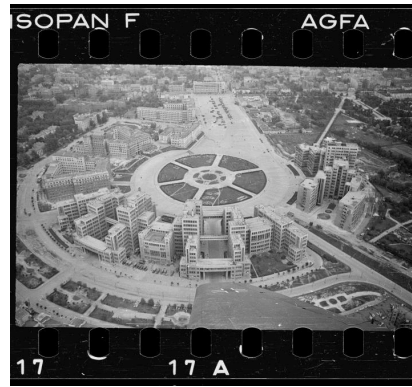
Those residents of Kharkiv who survived the city's occupation as small children carried the memory of the bombing throughout their lives. Anna Popova, an 11-years old girl at the beginning of the war, recalled in 2020:



"The bombings were terrible. Like a triangle, a trench was dug in the garden, and all the neighbors ran and hid there. And it was terrifying as if a bomb would fall on you right now. And then, for the first time in my life, I learned what fear is, and this feeling of fear remained for the rest of my life. That's what fear is."



Aerial photographs taken by Johannes Hähle, a photographer in the Wehrmacht's propaganda company, clearly show the destruction caused by the bombing. In the picture: Kharkiv central railway station and Pryvokzal'na Square with the Southern Railway Department and General Post Office. Archive of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research / Johannes Hähle Collection. [Free access - no reuse](#)



One of two main Kharkiv squares, Freedom Square, with Derzhprom building as a masterpiece of constructivist architecture. In 1942 the square was named German Army Square. Archive of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research / Johannes Hähle Collection. [Free access - no reuse](#)



The Annunciation Cathedral (the main orthodox church in Kharkiv) and the river Lopan embankment. Archive of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research / Johannes Hähle Collection. [Free access - no reuse](#)

Evacuation

Following the daily bombings, the mass evacuation from the city of enterprises and residents began. For the most part, it was carried out hastily, the Soviet leadership gave preference to enterprises and equipment, not to people. Those who remained in Kharkiv tried to leave on their own; people literally stormed the trains, saving themselves and their children.

Inna Havrylchenko, a Kharkiv writer, who stayed in the city for the entire occupation, and whose father died from starvation in 1942, recalled in 2020: *"There, at the station, I saw, for the first time in my life, and for the last time in my life, too, how a man walked over the crowd passing across their heads. Can you imagine this? He stepped in these "Kersey boots"*

"Kersey boots"

Soviet-style leather military boots.

(how did he hold himself?), stumbled (the heads are round), stumbled on the shoulders, but walked over the heads! In the end, he fell, fell ahead. How he fell, whether he got up - I did not see. But I still dream: Kersey boots walking on the heads... You didn't move by yourself. The crowd carried you. I remember such a wild picture: there was an old carriage where some windows were raised, and some were down. One woman ahead of us with a small child

rushed to such a window with a child and shoved it into this lowered window. And she says: 'At least take the baby!' It was impossible to break into the wagons. Some clung to buffers, you know. Some got out on the roofs here. And she, unable to climb onto the roof or ride on the buffer, shoved the child: 'At least take him!' Not knowing to whom! You know, just take the child. Because Kharkiv was already heavily bombed."

Those who left the city with an organized evacuation also suffered on the road; there for months, half-starved in the cold and unsanitary conditions. Anna Popova was evacuated from Kharkiv to the Urals in October 1941, with one of the last echelons. She remembered her way into evacuation: *"Soon, my father's factory was leaving for the Urals. We were in an escort car, and there were workers, fitters, and employees. There were cattle wagons. On the floor of the car there were 40 people, on the right side men, on the left women, in two tiers. If you got up at night, this does not mean that you will lie back down because this place was quickly taken... Children were dying from dysentery. They were buried there in the field. It was a terrible thing. We left, and two weeks later, the Germans occupied the city. The whole car sobbed. We traveled for a month. In terrible conditions. Only in Penza, we stopped to shower, and were taken to the bathhouse. Here, also, there were awful conditions; there were lice. Well, everyone had them, it was the norm of life."*

Powerlessness

From Lev Nikolaev's diary:



"October 22. My prediction yesterday did not come true: the Germans have not yet entered the city. Artillery firing can be heard somewhere very close but still outside the city. There are no more police in the city. In some places, the front is being watched by the military. But in general – the city is dominated by the mob. A lot of drunks. I saw hooligans wearing top hats stolen from somewhere (isn't it in the theater?) and bawling songs of obscene nature."

On October 22, the last locomotive left Kharkiv, while city transport had not functioned since

October 19. Later, during the Soviet era, these few days before the arrival of the Germans were rarely mentioned because the city was in grip of chaotic uncertainty and lawlessness. The famous Soviet actress, a native of Kharkiv, Lyudmila Hurchenko, wrote publicly for the first time about this short but intense period, which the city residents later called "grabilovka" ("robbery") in her memoirs *Applauses*. She recalls the looting of the city's confectionery factory and the episode when a man drowned in a large container of molasses at the factory, trying to fill a basin with this mixture.

A similar story is told by Inna Havrylchenko, who claimed that the city management permitted the people to appropriate products during the retreat: *"We hear: 'The headquarters of the defense of the city of Kharkiv is speaking! Comrades, all food warehouses will be opened within the next few hours. Stock up on water and food for six days!' We wondered why six, why not a week, not five? That's why I remember it for the rest of my life. For some reason, they said six days. They may have planned to recapture the city. Probably. But now I remember that everything was opened, and the time began, which was called robbery. That is, people took everything... From 'KOFOK' – a confectionery factory near the Blagoveshchensky Bazaar – our neighbor brought, firstly, a bag of sugar. And perhaps the bag was leaky because behind it was like a flurry of sugar sand. This neighbor, Uncle Kolya, was drunk and very upset. Why? Because there, it turns out, the warehouses of 'Kofok' were opened, and there were such containers ... of alcohol, and here several people drowned drunk. Someone had containers, buckets, or cans, but Uncle Kolya had no containers and only dragged sugar. He was drunk, he got drunk there, but he was distressed that there was no container to take with him ... We didn't take anything, but on the first floor (we lived on the second floor), a family lived below us. They brought eight bags of flour and pasta."*



River Lopan. Archive of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research / Johannes Hähle Collection. [Free access - no reuse](#)

The beginning of the occupation: a show of force, terror, hunger

Establishment of a "new order"

The day before the capture of Kharkiv, the commander of the 55th Army Corps, General Vierow, issued an order for the treatment of the civilian population. It stated that *"all the*

means of the victors are correct if they contribute to the establishment of peace and order in Kharkiv." And also, "extreme cruelty in the treatment of the local population is necessary and mandatory."

The first man was hanged in the city on October 25, 1941, the day after the capture of Kharkiv. The Germans used crowded places in the city, in particular, for these intimidations – squares, central streets, bazaars – and did not remove the bodies for several days. During the first month of occupation, the Nazis hanged 116 people in the city. From the first days, these executions were public: the military command gathered residents in the central square and literally forced them to watch the hangings, using the balcony of the building which housed the regional party committee. This action had a symbolic meaning, as the Nazis announced the "new order" and showed their power.

Kharkiv resident Mykhailo Usyk, who kept a diary during the occupation, made the following entry on October 30, 1941: *"I again went to Dzerzhinsky Square to listen to the radio. Rain. The people stand in groups. Some hid under the entrances and on the stairs of the houses from the annoying autumn rain. Are waiting.... The mass stirred and moved closer to the balcony of the building. And suddenly... a picture appeared before my eyes: two hefty Germans in helmets, with police badges across their entire chests, were throwing a rope around the neck of some man. I'm standing 70-75 meters away. I can't see the whole person. The balcony railing hides it. I see only his black, resinous head. Yes ... they are going to hang him, no doubt ... Frost on the skin. A rope around the neck. The Germans lift the man and, holding the rope draped around his neck, lower the man down. The rope is tied to the balcony beam... There is a murmur in the crowd... The hysterical cries of women. The man shuddered once or twice and hung dead. On his chest, he has an inscription in Russian and German: 'Partizan.'"*

In her memoirs, Lyudmila Hurchenko emphasizes that children were forced to stand in the front rows at these show executions, to see and remember. She, six years old, was a witness to such execution, which took place in the central market of the city. When she got scared, she turned away and hugged her mother. Then a German officer turned her face by force: look, remember!

Torture by hunger

Along with the direct physical violence which lead to instant death, at the beginning of the occupation the Germans began to implement another kind of personal abuse, this one long-lasting and no less terrible. This delayed, or rather prolonged violence, became the famine that engulfed the city directly after the beginning of the occupation.

All storytellers who remained in the city and lived through 1941 remember the famine that

began almost immediately after the city's occupation. Lev Nikolaev wrote in his diary on November 9, 1941:

"I was passing by the Sumy Bazaar and returned in horror: death from starvation is apparently inevitable. It may be possible to delay this period for several weeks, but our family will not be able to avoid this inevitable outcome during the winter of 1941-1942... Today I saw a disgusting scene: a German soldier gutted the carcass of a bull. About twenty nurses and employees of the Institute gathered around him and begged him to give them a piece. They looked like little dogs, sitting on their hind legs around their dining master. The German just brushed them aside. Finally, he cut out the lungs and larynx and presented them to one attendant, who thanked him for this with an obsequious look ... Vile! Do I have to fall so low for my children too? Such phrases sound somehow strange: 'Professor Timofeev's wife is fortunate: very kind Germans stayed in her house. Not only do they not rob her, but they even supply her with surpluses of food.' It is strange: to rejoice at the leftovers which an intelligent woman, a teacher, gets from the table of the Germans! And such phrases are spoken with envy..."

These *leftovers* often appear in the memories of those who survived the occupation as small children. They remember these for a lifetime. Lyudmila Pysanenko recalls how she was given to smell a can of fish in tomato sauce. The Germans ate it and threw away the tin can. Children found it and licked and sniffed it for a long time. The woman from Kharkiv also remembers sausage skins and trimmings, the smell of which is firmly etched in her memory. Historians write that about one hundred thousand people died of hunger during the city's occupation. Because of hunger, people lost their minds, went to crime, and committed suicide. The dead were not buried for a long time, especially in the winter of 1941-42: the bodies lay either in apartments or in the open air for weeks. Witnesses speak of cases of cannibalism and the sale of parts of human bodies in the bazaar, which the Germans punished by hanging.

The murder of Kharkiv Jews

The culmination of Nazi violence against the city's civilian population was the mass shooting of prisoners of the Kharkiv ghetto in Drobitsky Yar on the outskirts of the city. Over 10,000 Kharkiv Jews were killed there in a few days at the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942. The "action," as the Nazis called it, was interrupted several times due to raids by Soviet aircraft, after which the members of the *Einsatzgruppe* (paramilitary death squads) continued the shooting. Eyewitnesses recall that during the liquidation of the ghetto, a 'Dushegubka' was also used, a special car with an exhaust pipe, turned inside the vehicle, and with sealed doors. People suffocated from the gas and died in agony within minutes.

Those lucky enough to escape from the ghetto talk about the terrible conditions of their stay

there, about abuse and murders. Alexander Gorbonos recalls: *"Living conditions were the worst. In the room we entered, there was no place to lie down or sit on the floor. People were just standing there. Imagine, there were about 4 thousand people in each barrack. No supplies, no water, no amenities. There was a severe curfew. Forbidden time - all dark time from 4 pm to 8 am, this in December, short days. We were observed most severely. In our barracks, some boy – older than I was then – jumped out in the morning, it seemed like it was already 8 o'clock because it was all night, there were so many people, and there were no amenities, and right on the porch of the barracks he was shot dead ..."*

During the post-war Soviet era, the memory of the mass murder of Kharkiv Jews (as well as other Jews in the country) was carefully erased from the city's public space. The murdered and shot Jews were called "victims of fascism", and the memorial signs contained an inscription about peaceful Soviet citizens. However, the memory of the tragedy of Kharkiv Jews has been preserved in urban legends, the most famous of which is the story of "Yosya with the kettle". In the fall of 1941, Yosya lived with his parents on one of the central streets in Kharkiv. Immediately after their arrival, the Nazis occupied their apartment and hanged Yosya's parents on the balcony. His mother managed to send Yosya for milk several minutes before the tragedy, she gave him a kettle in which she put money. The six-year-old boy stood near the store and saw his parents executed. Until the end of the occupation, his neighbors hid him, and when it ended, Yosya started coming to the store every day. He looked at the balcony of this house and cried, holding an old kettle in his hands. He lost his mind and forever remained a child waiting for his mother near the milk shop. All district residents knew him and his story, supported him, and did not insult him. He came and stood with his kettle like this almost every day until the early 1990s, a tall, neatly dressed, gray-haired, and thin Jew. Yosya, who had been six years old all his life.

I cannot say for certain, but it seems to me that I also saw him near that milk store when I was little girl...

This text is based on Gelinada Grinchenko's forthcoming book and series of accompanying short films titled "On Kharkiv and Ourselves: the City's Fates and Experiences in its Inhabitants' Oral Histories". The work on the book and films started in 2021 and was interrupted by the Russian war against Ukraine. Her research includes the diary of Lev Nikoaeiev from Kurganov's archive as well as eyewitness accounts from the project "[Voices ↗](#)" (2018-2021) of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. You can watch the first episode of this documentary series, about the beginning of the war in Kharkiv in 1941, here:



To the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULvheWN7pvw>

The film was made with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Ukraine (Kharkiv office).

Note: When this article was first published, we had included historical photographs from occupied Kharkiv, the author of which was assumed to be the Wehrmacht photographer Johannes Hähle. In fact, however, the photographer was Hermann Hoeffke, also a member of the Wehrmacht propaganda company. We have therefore removed the images from the article, as long as the rights of use of the images have not been clarified.

Literature

Skorobohatov, Anatolij: Charkiv u časy nimec'koї okupacii. (1941 - 1943). Charkiv 2004.

Usyk, Michail A.: Den' za dnem. Khar'kov 20.11.41–23.2.43 gg. In: Gorod i vojna. Khar'kov v gody Velikoj Otechestvennoj vojny

Hurčenko, Ljudmila: Mojo vzrosloje detstvo. Moskva 1982.