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## Problems of researching the history of exile of Ukrainians and of the Baltic peoples in the USSR

**Abstract.** This study investigated the conditions of exile and interaction between Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners in Soviet camps in the post-war period. The scientific relevance of the subject lies in the investigation of the cooperation of political prisoners of diverse national groups, which led to the camp uprisings of 1953-1954. The purpose of this study was to determine the nature of the conditions of exile and the opportunities for contacts between Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners in the context of protest formation using evidence from the camp departments of Vorkuta, specifically Rechlag. To fulfil this purpose, the methods of comparative and retrospective analysis, historical and psychological reconstruction were used. The study identified common and distinctive features inherent in the Vorkuta camps. It was found that the basis for interaction between Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners was their common situation and attempts to improve living conditions in the camp. Therewith, it was stated that the same cultural and educational level and participation in the anti-Soviet resistance improved the establishment of interethnic contacts. The socio-psychological characteristics of Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners of the postwar era distinguished them from others. It was found that the unification into national groups was facilitated by the self-identification of prisoners as captives with a national worldview and experience that opposed Soviet ideology. The main goal was to improve the conditions and release prisoners from places of captivity, and active attempts to achieve this came after Stalin's death. It was proved that political uncertainty and chaotic actions of the camp administration became a catalyst for uprisings that accelerated the transformation of places of captivity. A key role in organising the protests belonged to strike committees representing groups of prisoners on ethnic grounds. Specifically, Ukrainian, and Baltic prisoners took an active part in them. This shows the place and role of these nations in the camp uprisings. The practical significance of this study lies in highlighting the little-studied issue of the ways in which Ukrainian and Baltic political prisoners interacted and the impact of these contacts on the fight against the Soviet repressive apparatus in prison

**Keywords:** deportations; repression; special settlements; political prisoners; camps

### Introduction

The problem of Soviet deportations of the local population of Eastern Europe occupies a special place in the broader context of Stalin's repressive policy of the 1940s and 1950s. These deportations were particularly large-scale in Ukraine and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The emergence of a substantial number of political prisoners from these countries in the Soviet camp system provoked their crisis as an instrument of punitive policy, through the formation of interaction between prisoners of diverse nationalities, which culminated in the uprisings in the camps of Vorkuta, Norilsk, and Kengir in 1953-1954. The historical problematic of this study lies in the understudied interaction of different national groups of prisoners within the camp system and how this influenced the growth of protest sentiments from within the

camp system. Admittedly, at the present stage, the study of Soviet deportations and punitive policies, apart from purely historical issues, is also of great social relevance due to the processes of rehabilitation, restoration of historical justice, and comprehension of the past.

The problem of deportations and exile of Ukrainians and Baltic peoples to places of captivity in the USSR has repeatedly attracted the attention of researchers of the Soviet Main Administration of Camps (Gulag). In monograph E. Epplbom (2006) drew attention to the Rechlag in the context of the camp uprisings that swept the system after Stalin's death. Researcher observed that this was facilitated by both external circumstances that fuelled prisoners' hopes for amnesty and the specific conditions of the internal regime at the time.

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In his study of the prisoner uprisings in the Vorkuta camps, Finnish historian Yu. Ryslakki (2015) also examined the influence of prisoners from Ukraine and the Baltic states on the start of the strikes. According to researcher, in the post-war period, a new type of prisoner came to Vorkuta, who began to undermine the foundation of the camp regime from within. A considerable role in this process was played by the emergence of a sense of solidarity between prisoners of different nationalities in captivity. Both scholars noted the impact of camp uprisings on the transformation and decline of the Gulag system.

Some aspects of the history of Soviet deportations and camps have also been found in the studies of Ukrainian researchers. Specifically, I. Pater (2014) investigated the general features of repressions against the population of Galicia. In this context, Pater also mentioned the exile, special settlements, and camps in the far north of the USSR, which were used to imprison various categories of prisoners of the Soviet regime. In his research on post-war deportations, based on archival materials, researcher A. Kogut (2020) examines in greater detail the large-scale deportations of the population, specifically Operation West in 1944-1946. Apart from the course of the operation itself and statistics on the number of deportees, the author pays attention to the historical and legal analysis of Soviet regulations related to this operation. In addition, the legal foundations of the USSR state security agencies often fall into the field of research interests. Thus, L.T. Prystash (2017) describes the formation of the special settlements' regime in connection with the economic complex of the Gulag and the Sovietisation in western Ukraine. In her monograph on Ukrainian women in the Gulag camps, researcher O. Kis (2017) focuses on the situation of women political prisoners according to their memoirs. The study focuses on the everyday survival practices of women in camps and places of exile, including the camps in Vorkuta. The author gives a prominent place to the mechanisms of survival and the formation of ties between Ukrainian women prisoners and women prisoners from the Baltic States, despite ethnic or cultural differences.

From time to time, different researchers address the topic of camp uprisings. For instance, N. Girna (2021) provides an overview of the camp uprisings through the lens of the heroic narrative created by the diaspora tradition, which assigned the main role in organising and leading these uprisings to Ukrainian prisoners from the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). However, this is an overly simplistic approach that does not consider the massive number of interconnections between Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners and their interaction. This approach needs to be correlated through the wider use of sources and testimonies of former prisoners and materials by researchers from the Baltic States.

The purpose of this study was to examine the interaction of political prisoners from Ukraine and the Baltic states during their exile to the Gulag camps. Identification of the specific features of this interaction will help to qualitatively establish the role of certain groups of prisoners during the camp uprisings of 1953-1954.

## Materials and Methods

The study used such methods of scientific cognition as analysis and synthesis. The study analysed contemporary publications on the Soviet system of Gulag camps in the post-war period. Due to the considerable amount of published materials and scientific literature on this topic, the study focused on the analysis of the Rechlag camp (Vorkuta) as one of the centres of exile for Ukrainian and Baltic political prisoners. Accordingly, the history of this camp and the conditions of prisoners' exile to it are the object of this study.

The subject of this study is the problematic issues of interaction between prisoners from Ukraine and the Baltic States in the works of contemporary historians. The choice of methods was dictated by the purpose, subject, and object of this study. For this, the analysis method identified key facts and events that had an objective impact on the formation of protest moods, the development of interaction and mutual support between Ukrainian political prisoners and prisoners from the Baltic States. Using the method of periodisation and retrospective analysis, the main stages, and trends in the formation of interethnic contacts were characterised using data from the historical scientific literature.

The study used the historical and comparative method to highlight the specific features and differences inherent in the camps of Vorkuta, which became one of the epicentres of prisoners' protests, inside places of detention and exile, based on historical research. The individual facts and features inherent in the entire system of Stalin's camps identified in scientific studies by the method of comparative analysis were compared with analogous data inherent in places of captivity that became the focus of protests.

Using the historical-typological approach and the method of historical and psychological reconstruction, the study noted common and different explanations of phenomena and processes in historical works on this topic in the context of the post-war period and its impact on the social atmosphere in the camps, and the changes that occurred in the psychological and social type of prisoners at that time. Special historical methods were also used to better understand these issues. Specifically, a comparative analysis of historical facts and evidence from scientific literature from different countries to determine the main approaches to periodisation and description of the phenomena under study.

A retrospective analysis of the typical phenomena of the Gulag camp system during the period of growing crisis in the second half of the 1940s – first half of the 1950s to identify common and distinctive features in the interpretation of research approaches. A historical and psychological method for reconstructing the experience of political prisoners and their expectations, recorded by researchers based on published testimonies, to compare data in the representation of various scientific studies. Specifically, the studies by L. Latkovskis (2015a; 2015b), J.A. Caniglia (2021) and others were extremely useful from this standpoint.

The studies of other researchers and scholars have become materials for research and analysis. Given the poor knowledge of Ukrainian historiography on this topic, the situation and experience of prisoners from the Baltic States, the works of researchers from these countries were

used, and data collected and published by them. The study also used general works on the history of the Gulag camp system, which raise the issue of exile of Ukrainians and Baltic peoples and discuss theoretical and practical issues of research on this topic (Popelyuk, 2021).

## **Results**

After the end of World War II, the USSR not only retained control over the territories of western Ukraine and Belarus, the Baltic states, and Bessarabia, which had been annexed at the beginning of the war as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, but also expanded its influence in several countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The new territories, according to the Soviet leadership, had to be cleared of all potential real and imaginary enemies. This was a standard part of the Sovietisation of new territories, which was supposed to include not only radical transformations in the economic sphere, but also a fundamental breakdown of the social structure. Entire social classes, declared enemy, were to disappear. In practice, repressions in the new territories were intended to ensure the loyalty of the local population to the new government by eliminating undesirable elements, in the opinion of the Soviet state security authorities, who could potentially become organisers of anti-Soviet resistance (Prystash, 2017).

Particular attention was paid to the new western territories of the USSR, specifically western Ukraine, and the Baltic states. The first wave of Sovietisation hit them immediately after the annexation, in 1939-1941, but was interrupted by the outbreak of the German-Soviet war. This pause allowed the formation of local anti-Soviet nationalist forces. Among the most massive groups are the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in western Ukraine and the "Forest Brothers" in the Baltic States (Latkovskis, 2005a; Latkovskis, 2005b). What they had in common was a nationalist outlook and anti-Soviet orientation. Another common feature was the use of small-scale warfare and guerrilla warfare tactics, which made it difficult to establish Soviet order and attract the local population to the side of the communist government. Therewith, anti-Soviet resistance actions relied on the support of the local population, which facilitated their activities.

To deprive anti-Soviet resistance groups of support from the population, the Soviet state security agencies actively used methods of terror and repression. Their scale was supposed to compensate for the low awareness of the real participants in the anti-Soviet movement by increasing the number of arrests of real or potential opponents (Prystash, 2017). Family members, relatives or friends of already identified members of the anti-Soviet underground often became victims of repression. These measures culminated in mass deportations, which had a dual purpose. On the one hand, to break down resistance to Sovietisation measures in the new territories, and on the other hand, to eliminate entire segments of the population that supported anti-Soviet resistance forces. Thus, the deportations were intended to deprive the nationalist guerrillas of their resource base and sources of replenishment.

The methods of fighting the anti-Soviet underground were quite similar. Their obligatory element was to provoke

social and class conflict within the national group. Given that the structure of society in western Ukraine and the Baltic states had signs of a traditional agrarian society, Soviet propaganda tried to foster division by contrasting poor peasants with rich, so-called "kurkuls" (Pauksens, 2020). The same propaganda served as an ideological cover for deportations. At the end of the war, in 1944, the first deportations in western Ukraine began, mostly of family members of insurgents (Kogut, 2020). These deportations culminated in Operation West, when more than 77,808 people were forcibly deported from western Ukraine at the end of October 1947 (Vronska, 2022). The deported population was moved to special settlements in remote areas of Central Asia or Siberia. Analogous in nature was Operation Priboi (25-28 March 1949), which was aimed at suppressing nationalist resistance in the Baltic States. During its implementation, over 90,000 people from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were deported (Streikus, 2022). In implementing deportations, the Soviet state security authorities paid special attention to identifying direct participants in the anti-Soviet resistance and their relatives. These groups were considered particularly dangerous. Instead of special resettlement, they were sentenced to serve long prison terms in Gulag camps (Pater, 2014). Similarly, detained insurgents and persons arrested for anti-Soviet activities were sentenced to imprisonment and detention in camps. Including in cases where links to the anti-Soviet underground were not proven and the investigation materials were fabricated. These deportations increased the number of women and adolescents among the total number of prisoners in the camps (Sagatiene, 2022).

A feature of the functioning of the Gulag camps in the postwar period was the expansion of their structure. Despite the expectations of a part of Soviet society, including prisoners, the authorities were not going to grant a mass amnesty or revise the conditions of detention. The expectations of millions of prisoners for a better life after the war were not met (Epplbom, 2006; Ryslakki, 2015). On the contrary, the opposite trend was the strengthening of the repressive apparatus, an increase in average prison terms from 10 to 25 years, and harsher conditions in camps. The reason for these measures was Stalin's desire to loosen control over society during the war and the annexation of new territories with populations with different social backgrounds. Another reason for the intensification of repression was the ongoing anti-Soviet national liberation movements in western Ukraine and the Baltic states.

The post-war expansion of the Gulag camps affected, specifically the network of correctional labour camps in Vorkuta. According to Order No. 416-159ss of the Council of Ministers of the USSR of 21 February 1948, seven special camps were to be established to which "particularly dangerous" anti-Soviet elements were to be transferred from ordinary temporary detention centres and prisons. This transfer applied to prisoners under Article 58 of the USSR Criminal Code who were recognised as persons posing a particular threat due to their anti-Soviet ties and activities. New convicts on this charge were immediately transferred to newly created special camps (Order of the Ministry..., 1948). According to this order, in August

1948, Special Camp No. 6, known as Rechlag (also known by the service names “Rechnoi” and “Reka”), was established on the territory of the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Komi ASSR) based on the Vorkuta CLC (Ryslakki, 2015). The Rechlag special camp was structurally divided into camp departments. As the number of prisoners increased, the number of these departments grew.

The new, harsher regime of detention in special camps such as Rechlag allowed the state security authorities to strengthen their control over the most anti-Soviet strata of prisoners. Proceeding from their pre-war experience, the camp authorities considered the prisoners’ ability to unite to be low. The mechanisms for preventing consolidation were the intensification of internal contradictions on ethnic and social grounds. The use of one group of prisoners against another was still a widespread practice. Most often, these were criminal prisoners who cooperated with the administration and were kept together with those convicted of anti-Soviet activities as a counterweight. In addition, in the post-war period, convicts for collaboration with the Nazis were used for the same purpose (Ryslakki, 2015).

The harsh conditions of the camp regime and the arbitrariness of criminal prisoners, encouraged by the administration to put more pressure on the rest, created the preconditions for the consolidation of prisoners convicted of anti-Soviet activities (Klements, 2019). At first, the prisoners from the Baltic states were too weak to withstand the abuse of the criminals. When they arrived at the camp, they had personal belongings, such as warm clothes, which often made them victims of robbery and extortion. At the same time, the separation from other prisoners allowed them to unite on a national basis (Humenyuk, 2018). Due to a certain cultural proximity, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians tried to stick together. Ukrainian prisoners united with each other. First of all, to resist pressure from thieves (Caniglia, 2021). This common interest created a basis for understanding between prisoners from the Baltic states and western Ukraine, who constituted the largest national groups. Grouping by nationality was a protective mechanism for prisoners (Pater, 2014). They were undesirable to the camp authorities, and therefore they could exist only in conditions of secrecy.

In addition, one of the areas for cooperation between prisoners of diverse national groups was the organisation of smuggling – the manufacture, storage, and supply of items prohibited by the administration. Smuggling could be both internal within the camp and external when things had to be supplied from outside. In the latter case, prisoners had to take the risk of mediation by unconvicted prisoners or guards. Food and alcohol were universal means of exchange or barter. The latter were in high demand among criminal prisoners who could steal something from camp warehouses or provide a service in exchange for alcohol (Trendafiloff, 2022). Admittedly, in the special camps, to which Rechlag belonged, with their stricter regime and periodic searches, the opportunities for smuggling and bartering were more limited, but they were still possible on occasion.

Another problem for the prisoners was protection from informers who were actively infiltrated by the camp administration. Ukrainian prisoners who had experience of

underground struggle knew how to keep a secret, so it is no coincidence that they were particularly intransigent towards enemy agents. While prisoners from the Baltic states could punish identified informers by beating them, Ukrainian prisoners killed the informers (Ryslakki, 2015). Such radical methods helped to improve the internal atmosphere inside the camps. The administration, without the help of active informers, had less information about the processes within the prison population. The absence of denunciation increased prisoners’ trust in each other and improved opportunities for horizontal solidarity (Savchyn, 2016).

Geographical and social isolation was also used as a tool to control prisoners (Kazulenias, 2011). Rechlag was in the far north, with harsh climatic conditions. The extremely cold Arctic climate with short summers was unfamiliar to the vast majority of prisoners, making escape difficult (Epplbom, 2006). The absence of free settlements outside the control of the camp administration also did not help. Moreover, they were located at great distances (Anstett, 2011). Contacts with the outside world were limited to sending one or two letters during the year. These letters were subject to camp censorship (Popelyuk, 2021). The receipt of correspondence and parcels from the outside was also strictly controlled. The slightest manifestation of disloyalty led to restrictions on correspondence.

News sources included the camp radio, excerpts from correspondence, occasional newspaper articles, and camp rumours. The prisoners were held under an information blockade, which increased their geographical isolation. Searching for and sharing information became another way of interaction between prisoners. Notably, many prisoners from the Baltic states had little or no knowledge of Russian, which was the official language of the Gulag, and thus had fewer opportunities to receive information. In these conditions, Ukrainian prisoners became intermediaries and interpreters. Furthermore, a considerable proportion of prisoners from both the Baltic states and western Ukraine were intellectuals, had a prominent level of education, and spoke one or more foreign languages, which facilitated communication (Latkovskis, 2005a).

The forced labour of prisoners and the related distribution of food became another means of control by the administration. The usual diet was poor in vitamins, proteins, and fats, which led to exhaustion (Pater, 2014). Under these conditions, a reduction in food rations for failure to meet production targets could lead to death due to dystrophy, which was tantamount to another means of punishing prisoners. In turn, the forced labour of male prisoners of Rechlag played a significant role in the mines of Vorkuta, and female prisoners – at the local brick factory (Ryslakki, 2015). The low efficiency of this labour and the unprofitability of the enterprises was clear to the Gulag authorities at that time, but it did not affect the involvement of prisoners in large-scale work. Working and production conditions were harmful to the life and health of prisoners (Burkiciak, 2013).

Prisoners from the Baltic States, who were known for their conscientious attitude towards work, often suffered from exploitation. The heavy labour standards undermined their health. At the same time, the responsibility

and reliability of the work inspired sympathy from the Ukrainian prisoners. The work facilitated contacts between diverse national groups outside the camp, creating opportunities and risks. The attitude towards work and the related distribution of food also revealed the values of the prisoners. Unlike Russian prisoners, Ukrainians and Balts showed more solidarity within the community, the labour norm was fulfilled to preserve the rations for the brigade, but overfulfilment was not welcomed, as it served the interests of the camp and only exhausted the prisoners (Latkovskis, 2015a; Latkovskis, 2015b).

Among other prisoners, prisoners from western Ukraine and the Baltic states were distinguished by their religion. This was officially banned in Rechlag, as well as in other Gulag camps. Religious gatherings, as well as gatherings of more than 3 people, were not allowed. However, this was difficult to control, which allowed the prisoners some space. Religion, precisely because of its forbidden nature, became another means of opposing the camp system. For some, it was a source of hope, for others – a means of opposing the Soviet system (Kis, 2017). Modern research shows that conversion to religion has become part of a defence mechanism for processing the trauma of repression and overcoming post-traumatic stress disorder. This was especially true for female prisoners who were under double pressure (Kolodziejska, 2022). Furthermore, it was a part of the native culture, a reminder of home. This element, as well as the Christian worldview, became another means of understanding between Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners.

Spiritual needs opened another avenue for establishing contacts – cultural exchange. In the camp, prisoners had few opportunities for leisure or artistic reflection. Formally, under the supervision of the camp administration, there was a so-called “amateur artistic activity” and a cultural section. But such structures were permeated with propaganda and included loyal groups of prisoners. For Ukrainian and Baltic political prisoners, involvement in these events was unacceptable for many reasons, exposing them to the scrutiny of the administration. Oral and musical creativity was a kind of outlet. It aroused less suspicion among the guards and was invisible. In case of exposure or denunciation, the accused could deny that the song or melody had any anti-Soviet content. To prove the opposite, one had to understand the context and be familiar with the work itself. Prior to their imprisonment and exile in camps, representatives of the insurgency in the Baltic states and western Ukraine had already created a wide repertoire of their own song and oral art. Modern studies note that songs of various genres were popular among Lithuanian political prisoners in the Vorkuta camps. Singing had a therapeutic value for them, bringing the community together, calming and reassuring them in difficult moments (Zarskiene, 2021). Comparable paths and experiences of exile led to borrowings and the emergence of similar song plots. The common motif is the longing for the homeland, the glorification of struggle, the sacrifice for freedom, the fate of the persecuted exile (Liugaite-Cherniauskiene, 2021). Performing or listening together fuelled cultural exchange, encouraged empathy and understanding between national groups.

The largest manifestation of prisoner interaction was the Vorkuta uprising of 19 July – 1 August 1953, which was centred on the Rechlag. After Stalin’s death, as well as after the end of the war, hopes for an amnesty or the abolition of the camps grew. However, the amnesty affected only a small proportion of prisoners, and did not change the predicament of political prisoners. At the end of June, leaflets were distributed among prisoners at the Kapitalnaya mine, calling for a halt to coal mining until amnesty. A strike broke out at the mine. The mention of these leaflets by eyewitnesses testifies to the existence of an underground organisation among the prisoners of Rechlag. The administration saw it only as an act of sabotage (Burkiciak, 2013).

The arrival of the Ukrainian prisoners in a stage from Karaganda in early July was the catalyst for the protest. On 19 July, they joined the strike at mine No. 7. Soon, this movement covered 6 branches of the Rechlag out of the 17 that existed at the time. As of 29 July, more than 15,000 people were taking part in the protests (Epplbom, 2006). Their actions were coordinated by an underground strike committee consisting of representatives of various ethnic groups. Its existence is evidenced by the nature and sequence of actions, but its organisation and composition are still a matter of debate. Specifically, the role of each member. As members of the committee, Soviet sources listed Felix Kędzierski, a Pole, Yurii Levando, a Ukrainian, Henrikas Jazskunas, a Lithuanian, Helmut Tarandas, an Estonian, Alfons Berzyns, a Latvian, Johannes Urwih-Feri, a German, and Musayev, a Chechen (Ryslakki, 2015). Each of the committee members represented each of the prisoners’ ethnic groups (Fig. 1). The role of the nominal chairman of the committee, Russian Viktor Kolesnikov, is still controversial. Most likely, his representation was necessary for negotiations with the administration to neutralise the argument about the anti-Soviet content of the strike if one of the Ukrainian or Baltic prisoners was appointed as the chairman.

National composition of the Rechlag prisoners (1951)

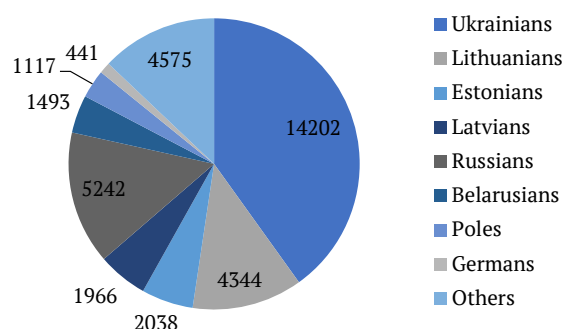


Figure 1. National composition of the Rechlag prison population (data for 1951)

Source: developed by the author on the basis of research Yu. Ryslakki (2015)

At the beginning of the strikes, the prisoners managed to get some concessions from the administration, including the possibility to reduce the working day from 12 to 9

hours, to receive permission to write letters to their families monthly, to remove the numbers from their clothes, etc. These first successes motivated them to continue the protest. At the same time, the administration started trying to isolate the most rebellious prisoners. The 77 people who were isolated by the guards in the punishment cell were liberated by the others. The continuation of the strikes forced the administration to pass on the prisoners' demands to the management. This resulted in the arrival of the commission of General Ivan Maslennikov of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs on 28 July. Members of the strike committee put forward demands to the government commission for an amnesty for political prisoners and the abolition of special camps. The Commission only confirmed the benefits already granted and demanded that the strike be stopped (Barenberg, 2014). The prisoners continued it.

After the negotiations with the strikers reached a deadlock, the camp administration moved to suppress the protests by force. On 31 July, the leaders, and active participants of the strike in the 2nd camp department were arrested. On 1 August, internal troops attacked the 10th camp department and mine No. 29. According to various estimates, between 42 and 53 people were killed in the shootings, and another 135–138 prisoners were injured (Epplbom, 2006; Popelyuk, 2021). Most of those killed were of Ukrainian origin, which is not surprising given their active role in the strikes. Moreover, Ukrainians accounted for 40% of the prisoners in Rechlag (Ryslakki, 2015). According to eyewitness accounts, the number of victims was higher, with hundreds of dead and wounded (Pater, 2014).

Despite the defeat, the Rechlag prisoners' protest prompted the transformation of the camp system. This and other uprisings in the Gulag camps during 1953–1954 proved that the creation of particularly harsh conditions for political prisoners had exhausted the possibilities of control. Even in the harshest conditions of the special camps, which became the highest stage in the development of the Gulag, prisoners of diverse nationalities were able to find ways to cooperate and protest. This factor, in the context of the crisis of the efficiency of the economic opportunities for forced labour of prisoners and the gradual easing of the political regime in the USSR, led to the transformation of the Gulag and the release of a considerable number of political prisoners (Girna, 2021). Thus, objectively, the strikes and protests of the Baltic and Ukrainian political prisoners accelerated the decline of the camp system, demonstrating its inefficiency and vulnerability from within.

## Discussion

The problem of interaction and connections between prisoners of diverse nationalities has attracted the attention of many researchers. This topic was of interest in studying the processes that led to the crisis and transformation of the repressive system of the Gulag camps. Many studies have focused on comparing the similarities and differences between prisoners of the pre-war and post-war periods. In his monograph on the Vorkuta camps, Finnish historian Yu. Ryslakki (2015) argues that the psychology

and experience of post-war prisoners differed significantly from that of their predecessors. If one generalises this idea with the research materials used, then the social portrait of a Rechlag prisoner looks as follows: a young man in his 20s or 30s, originally from Eastern Europe, with a secondary education and experience of the Second World War. It is no coincidence that Ann Epplbom uses the term “outsiders” to describe this new type of prisoner, as the vast majority of them were born and lived outside the USSR (Epplbom, 2006). This influenced their personalities, making them more resistant to Soviet propaganda and manipulation by the camp authorities.

Unlike the Russian prisoners who were formed under the Stalinist regime, Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners in special camps such as Rechlag did not consider themselves Soviet citizens. The Lithuanian historian L. Latkovskis (2005a) rightly cites the testimony of Lithuanian prisoners who noted the paradox of being convicted of treason against the homeland. However, at the time of the acts in question, they were not citizens of the USSR. Thus, for them, the question arose as to what they were actually being tried for. Similarly, for most prisoners from the Baltic states or western Ukraine, the closed nature of court hearings and the inability to defend themselves or appeal were unacceptable. All these features of totalitarian justice caused rejection and protest.

The Soviet system of repression and methods of fighting insurgencies in the Baltic states were quite similar to those used in western Ukraine. Researcher K. Pauksens (2020) rightly points out the methods of provoking a split within national groups by creating an internal social conflict – between the poor and the rich peasantry (*kurkuls*) – on the example of Latvia. Or between the proletariat class and the bourgeoisie class in general. The instigation of these social conflicts served to disguise the occupation nature of the Soviet regime. Deportations and exile were justified as helping the exploited classes to fight the exploiters. At the same time, the incitement of the conflict was intended to disrupt social ties within national communities, which, according to the Soviet state security authorities, would deplete and deprive the anti-Soviet resistance movement of support. Her allegations about the creation of artificial social hostility within communities are quite comparable to Soviet policy in western Ukraine. In the conditions of camp life and communication, exchanging life experiences, it was not difficult for the Baltic and Ukrainian political prisoners to establish the identity of the repressions they had experienced and to conclude that the methods of the Soviet authorities towards their homeland were similar. Awareness of these facts increased the sense of injustice and encouraged solidarity with each other, creating the preconditions for cooperation.

Furthermore, a considerable number of Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners of the post-war period belonged to insurgent groups that fought against the Soviet regime in their respective countries. This was the main reason for their persecution and repression. Due to these factors, prisoners from Eastern Europe perceived themselves as prisoners rather than unjustly convicted criminals. R. Popelyuk (2021) focuses on this in her article on the Vorkuta uprising, citing

testimonies from participants in the events. For instance, for Ukrainian prisoners from the UPA, the camp environment was another field of confrontation with the system.

While the prisoners from among Soviet citizens defined their imprisonment as a mistake of Soviet justice, trying to behave as conformists in the camp to adapt and improve their conditions, the Baltic and Ukrainian prisoners knew that the repression against them was targeted. They were placed in the camp because they supported anti-Soviet resistance or had the potential to do so (Kis, 2017). This circumstance and the cultural barriers between them and the prisoners, which were formed personally in the conditions of Soviet society, created obstacles to interaction. The overwhelming majority of Soviet prisoners perceived prisoners from the Baltic states and western Ukraine as strangers, did not understand their values, motivations, and views. Some people, following Soviet propaganda, believed that this category of prisoners was sentenced fairly. This attitude alienated both groups from each other. On the other hand, this very circumstance contributed to the rapprochement between Ukrainian and Baltic political prisoners.

Opposition to Soviet rule, rejection of the occupation and annexation of their home countries, and repression were the sources of rapprochement. In this process, the researchers O. Kis (2017) and R. Popelyuk (2021) note the role of shared values, specifically the Christian worldview and religious practices in the camp. These manifestations of faith existed despite the camp administration, which is why they attracted prisoners as an opportunity to express inner protest. Furthermore, there were many priests of various denominations among the prisoners, as the Soviet authorities considered them to be the ideological inspirers of the resistance (Prystash, 2017). The presence of church ministers in the camp created an opportunity to observe some religious rituals and maintain contact with their own culture. For prisoners from western Ukraine and the Baltic states, faith and Christian values played a vital role in their lives, were part of their upbringing, and in the camp, it was one of the ways to preserve their identity.

A separate, not yet fully covered aspect in the study of the interaction between Baltic and Ukrainian political prisoners is their camp folklore. It combined, on the one hand, insurgent creativity and national culture brought by prisoners, and, on the other hand, included elements that had already emerged in places of captivity, including those related to cultural borrowings. This aspect is important for the study both in terms of the process of forming cooperation between political prisoners of different national groups and in terms of understanding the values, experience, and psychology of their creators. Furthermore, the flexibility of oral art ensured that her works penetrated beyond the camps, later influencing public reflection in Ukraine and the Baltic states on Stalinist repression and the trauma of repression. Estonian folklorist Tiit Jaago focuses on this fact. He approaches this from the perspective of the theory of literary trauma, which reflects the trauma of individuals and social groups. The trauma is reflected in the laconic description of the situation, the restraint of emotions, and the distance between the narrator and the

event. Distancing often takes place through rumours or urban legends (Jaago, 2021).

The importance of researching the literature on the Gulag and using phenomenological methods to understand it is also noted by L. Anden (2021). It highlights the fact that the authors of the first testimonies and works about the Soviet camps were often forced to strike a balance between censorship and self-censorship in their attempts to create a narrative about events that had been erased from public and historical memory. Only its gradual formation made it possible to expand the possibilities of telling stories about the trauma experienced, survival practices, which include the cooperation of prisoners from diverse national groups.

Research on camp life often relies on Soviet regulations and later survivor memoirs, which creates a barrier to understanding what really happened. The material heritage of political prisoners is mostly what has survived, rather than typical items. Household items, personal belongings in the context of the camp acquire dramatic significance, bearing the imprint of their owner, becoming points of memory, says Lithuanian historian D. Budryte (2021).

However, the limited number of material monuments and their low informational value in terms of aspects related not so much to everyday life as to the communication of national groups of political prisoners forces researchers to return to oral history materials, testimonies of victims of repression, former prisoners, and camp folklore. The importance of this approach is evidenced by the attention of Lithuanian researchers R. Zarskiene (2021) and M. Liugaitė-Cherniauskienė (2021) to the study of song folklore and the impact of repression on it. They note similar motifs and themes in insurgent songs, which could be the result of both similar experiences and cultural borrowings in the interaction between national groups during exile in the camps. Camp folklore is an interesting and important source for studying the interaction between Baltic and Ukrainian political prisoners, as it indirectly attests to communication between national groups through the identification of borrowings.

Many researchers pay attention to the specifics of special camps and their emergence. The economic feasibility of the Gulag economic complex and its importance in the development of remote areas of the USSR is still a rather controversial issue. While the historian Barenberg focuses on the impact of forced labour in the development of Vorkuta, he suggests that it was the exhaustion of the camps' profitability that led to the transformation of the system (Anstett, 2011). On the contrary, Yu. Ryslakki (2014), E. Epplbom (2006), and others note that the economic factor in the existence of the camp system played a secondary role from the very beginning. The purpose of establishing special camps like Rechlag in the post-war period in such harsh conditions as in Vorkuta was to completely isolate prisoners and strictly control the administration. The Stalinist regime believed that the boundary between prisoners and the outside world had become smaller during the Second World War, and therefore the system had to regain control.

R. Carmack (2009) points out that in the postwar period, there was a synergy between repression based on

class and national factors. G. Toews & P.L. Vezin (2020) emphasise the long-term consequences of repression. Statistically speaking, political prisoners in special camps were distinguished by a higher level of education and general cultural level. Their exclusion from the national community correlates with the intention to deprive it of potential leaders. After their release, the prisoners faced administrative restrictions from the Soviet state that prevented them from returning to their home communities. This forced them to stay in towns and settlements near their former places of detention. This achieved two goals: the isolation of past and potential insurgents and the settlement of remote areas of the far north of the USSR. The boundary between these motives was rather arbitrary, and in the case of Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners they were closely intertwined. These statements are confirmed by the statistics provided. The number of prisoners of Ukrainian origin was quite high in Rechlag, followed by Lithuanians. In general, the share of Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners in the special camps of the Gulag was disproportionately higher (Ryslakki, 2015). At the same time, paradoxically, it was the excessive concentration of prisoners of national groups that facilitated their cooperation. The psychological factor also played a significant role, as excessively harsh conditions and long sentences encouraged people to seek ways to get out.

The strikes and uprising in the Rechlag reached a certain peak of interaction between national groups. Researchers still debate whether these protests were the result of the existence of underground national organisations among prisoners or were provoked by external factors. E. Epplbom (2006) supports the idea that both factors are combined. Yu. Ryslakki (2015) and R. Popelyuk (2021) note this as a result of the long-term consolidation of prisoners, while external factors such as the confusion of the camps' management in the face of political change only created a favourable background for the outbreak of strikes. It is also possible that the camp leadership sought to present the strikes as evidence of the crisis and inefficiency of the camp economy to the government. However, prisoners tried to use this trend to improve their situation. The ultimate purpose was to achieve liberation.

A. Barenberg (2014) believes that the prisoners sought to achieve reintegration into Soviet society. However, this claim is unfounded regarding prisoners from national groups who did not identify themselves as Soviet citizens. Therefore, it is more correct to suggest that the main purpose was unconditional amnesty, regardless of its external form. There are also contradictory assessments of the consequences of the Vorkuta and other camp uprisings, in which Ukrainian and Baltic people played a key role. Some researchers, such as A. Barenberg (2014), believe that the liquidation of the camp system was caused by Stalin's death. Others, such as the Lithuanian researcher Latkovskis (2005a; 2005b), attribute the leading role in this process to the camp uprisings that shook the system. They proved that isolation and the strict regime of special

camps do not fulfil their purpose of breaking prisoners and losing their self-identity. In general, this issue is still controversial in scientific studies.

## Conclusions

The study found that high-security camps, such as Rechlag in Vorkuta, were set up to further isolate prisoners from western Ukraine and the Baltic states. These prisoners perceived their exile in the camp as a form of captivity, and their main desire was to regain their freedom. This fact contributed to their separation from the rest of the prisoners and consolidation into national groups. Solidarity developed through support of fellow citizens, defence of common interests before the administration, and protection from the arbitrariness of criminal prisoners, as identified in this study. It was found that the highest level of interaction between national groups was reached when organising strikes and uprisings in the camps. The study stated that Ukrainian and Baltic prisoners played a driving role in the protests, the main purpose of which was to demand a review of the terms of imprisonment and release. It was established that the political disorientation of the camp authorities after Stalin's death contributed to some concessions, such as negotiations between the administration and the prisoners. The national groups represented by the strike committee saw these concessions as a way towards freedom, as found in the study. However, the investigation found that the subsequent protest was suppressed by force, resulting in the deaths of at least 42 to 53 prisoners, most of whom were Ukrainians. This fact suggests the active involvement of this group of prisoners in the Vorkuta uprising. The study found that performances in special camps like Rechlag, where Ukrainian and Baltic political prisoners were held, demonstrated the crisis of the Gulag camp system. It was established that communication and interaction between prisoners of diverse national groups accelerated the transformation of the camp system, which resulted in the release and partial rehabilitation of victims of repression. At the same time, the existence of the Ukrainian and Baltic national underground in the camps and its influence on the formal strike committees of prisoners is still understudied. The prospect of further investigation of this problem is to find the role and place of underground organisations in shaping the protests of political prisoners. It will be useful to describe their reaction in comparison with the actions of the camp administration. Further research should be related to a more detailed study of the memoirs of political prisoners and camp folklore, which will help to identify more aspects of communication between diverse national groups.

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## Conflict of Interest

None.

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## Проблеми дослідження історії заслання українців та прибалтійських народів в СРСР

**Анотація.** У статті досліджено умови заслання та взаємодію українських і прибалтійських в'язнів у радянських таборах у повоєнний період. Наукова актуальність теми полягає у дослідженні співпраці політичних в'язнів різних національних груп, яка призвела до табірних повстань 1953-1954 років. Метою даного дослідження є визначення характеру умов заслання та можливостей контактів між українськими та прибалтійськими в'язнями в контексті формування протестного руху на матеріалах табірних підрозділів Воркути, зокрема, Речлагу. Для досягнення цієї мети було використано методи порівняльного та ретроспективного аналізу, історичної та психологічної реконструкції. Дослідження дозволило виявити спільні та відмінні риси, притаманні таборовам Воркути. З'ясовано, що основою взаємодії між українськими та прибалтійськими в'язнями було спільне становище та намагання покращити умови життя в таборі. При цьому констатовано, що однаковий культурно-освітній рівень та участь в антирадянському опорі сприяли налагодженню міжнаціональних контактів. Виявлено соціально-психологічні особливості українських та прибалтійських в'язнів повоєнної доби, які відрізняли їх від інших. З'ясовано, що об'єднанню в національні групи сприяла самоідентифікація в'язнів як бранців з національним світоглядом і досвідом, що протистояли радянській ідеології. Головною метою було покращення умов утримання та звільнення в'язнів з місць несвободи, а активні спроби досягти цього припали на період після смерті Сталіна. Доведено, що політична невизначеність і хаотичні дії табірної адміністрації стали каталізатором повстань, які прискорили трансформацію місць несвободи. Ключова роль в організації протестів належала страйковим комітетам, які представляли групи в'язнів за етнічною ознакою. Зокрема, активну участь у них брали українські та прибалтійські в'язні. Це свідчить про місце і роль цих народів у табірних повстаннях. Практичне значення дослідження полягає у висвітленні маловивченого питання про шляхи взаємодії українських і прибалтійських політв'язнів та вплив цих контактів на боротьбу проти радянського репресивного апарату в місцях позбавлення волі

**Ключові слова:** депортації; репресії; спецпоселення; політичні в'язні; табори