

THE SLOVO BUILDING IN KHARKIV

A SYMBOL OF SOVIET REPRESSION AGAINST THE UKRAINIAN INTELLIGENTSIA

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The Slovo Building in Kharkiv is a symbol of the tragedy of the Ukrainian intelligentsia in the 1930s — a black hole into which some of the nation's most talented figures were erased one by one. On 7 March 2022, the building was damaged after being shelled by Russian forces, yet another act of aggression against Ukrainian cultural heritage. Today, the Slovo Building remains not only an architectural monument but also an enduring reminder of the dangers posed by totalitarian regimes.

The Slovo Building at 9 Kultury Street in Kharkiv is a symbol of the tragedy of the Ukrainian intelligentsia in the 1930s. The very fact that so many representatives of the creative elites were gathered in one place is unprecedented. In examining their fates, it becomes apparent that Slovo was a kind of black hole into which the nation's most talented representatives disappeared one by one. Stalin's repressions affected the residents of 44 out of the 66 apartments.¹ Built in the late 1920s, ostensibly as a means to improve the living conditions of the intelligentsia, the Slovo Building very quickly became a trap for an entire generation of outstanding artists and writers, now known as the Executed Renaissance.

In the early 1920s, Kharkiv's cultural life was in full bloom, facilitated by the city's acquisition of the status of capital of the Ukrainian SSR in December 1919 and the Bolsheviks' policy of Ukrainization. In April 1923, the 12th Congress of the RCP(b) announced the party's official policy of korenizatsiia, which involved replacing Russian with the languages of national minorities in all areas, including administration, education, and culture. The Ukrainization campaign fostered the development of literature during a time when dozens of literary and artistic associations were established.

1. OLGA BERTELSEN. SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF SOVIET REPRESSIONS IN THE 1930S: THE HOUSE OF WRITERS (KHARKIV, UKRAINE). THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY, JULY 2013. P. 497
[HTTP://EPRINTS.NOTTINGHAM.AC.UK/13390/1/SPATIAL_DIMENSIONS_OF_SOVIET_REPRESSIONS_IN_THE_1930S.PDF](http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/13390/1/spatial_dimensions_of_soviet_repressions_in_the_1930s.pdf) (ACCESSED ON: 17.11.2025).

With the city's growing importance as an administrative center and the development of industrialization in Kharkiv, the population continued to grow. The number of residents increased from 285,000 in 1920 to 423,000 in 1927². Luxuries such as separate apartments were unattainable for many and most were forced to live in overcrowded communal apartments.

Writers lived in the same conditions. The poet Pavlo Tychyna, who moved from Kyiv to Kharkiv in 1923, lived in the editorial office of the newspaper "Visti" in a small space that had previously served as a shower room. There was no room for a bed, so Tychyna slept on a pile of old newspaper issues and covered himself with a blanket³. In such conditions, one's own private space became an impossible dream, so the very idea of improving living conditions was met with great enthusiasm.

CONSTRUCTION

The initiator of the construction of the Slovo Building was the chairman of "Plug" literary association Serhiy Pylypenko. On his initiative, a group of writers from Kharkiv formed the "Slovo" cooperative in February 1927 with the aim of building a new housing complex for writers. The cooperative was chaired by Ostap Vyshnya and the construction work paid for from the monthly contributions of the cooperative's members (it was planned that the writers would pay off the full value of their apartments within 15 years).

The project was implemented by the All-Ukrainian Joint-Stock Construction Association "Ukrpaybud", which was established and operated under the auspices of the NKVD. The first stage of construction was financed by the writers themselves. The design and drawings of the building were commissioned from the Kharkiv-based architect Mitrofan (Mykhailo) Dashkevych. The building resembles the printed Cyrillic letter "С", has 5 floors, 5 stairwells, and 66 apartments of either 3 or 4 rooms each. Two additional apartments on the ground floor of the first stairwell were intended for the building's manager (kerbud) and the caretaker with their families.

The design combined two architectural styles: modernism and constructivism. The Slovo Building became the first structure of its kind associated with a social organization, purpose-built as a residence for the Ukrainian intelligentsia, not only within the Ukrainian SSR but across the entire Soviet Union⁴. The building, constructed from high-quality materials, provided numerous amenities such as baths, recreation rooms, a solarium, a kindergarten, a dining room, and an air-raid shelter.

Originally, "Komungosp" and "Ukrpaybud" planned to complete the construction of the Slovo house within a year, but they ran out of money. The construction of the building had to be suspended indefinitely, and it was eventually completed with the aid of government funding⁵. On 25 December 1929, the newspaper "Ukrainski visti" published a note about the house being opened for residents. There was one year and three weeks left until the first arrest in the Slovo Building.

2. DIDENKO, K. V. ZHYTLOVYY BUDYNOK «SLOVO» (1927-1930) IN "ARKHITEKTURNYY VISNYK KNUBA: NAUK.-VYROB.ZBIRNYK". (ED.) KULIKOV, P. M. KYIV, KYIIVS KYI NATSIONAL NYY UNIVERSYTET BUDIVNYTSTVA I ARKHITEKTURY, 2018. VOL. 14-15, PP. 262-274.
[HTTPS://REPOSITORY.KNUBA.EDU.UA/SERVER/API/CORE/BITSTREAMS/61643BCF-B3F2-42B6-8F35-04A0E0E23B01/CONTENT](https://repository.knuba.edu.ua/server/api/core/bitstreams/61643bcf-b3f2-42b6-8f35-04a0e0e23b01/content) (ACCESSED ON: 17.11.2025)

3. BERTELSEN, O. P. 48.

4. DIDENKO, K. V. PP. 262-274.

5. BERTELSEN, O. PP. 55-66.

REPRESSION

Although the policy of Ukrainization, announced by the Party in 1923, formally continued, a campaign to combat what were termed “bourgeois nationalism” and “nationalist deviation” was launched in the second half of the 1920s.⁶ The circular from the State Political Directorate dated 4 September 1926, titled “On Ukrainian Separatism”, marked the beginning of systematic de-Ukrainization. The head of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (Bolsheviks), Lazar Kaganovich, initiated a campaign against “nationalist deviations”. The principal figures accused of these tendencies included the then People’s Commissar of Education of the Ukrainian SSR, Oleksandr Shumskyi, the economist Mykhailo Volobuyev, and the writer Mykola Khvylovyi.

Mykola Khvylovyi (born Fitilov),⁷ the originator of the slogan “Away from Moscow!”, was a founder and active member of several literary organizations, including “Gartu” (1923), “Urbino” (1924), VAPLITE (1926), VUSPP (1927), and “Proletfront” (1930). All of these organizations were either dissolved under pressure or formally liquidated following the resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of 23 April 1932, titled “On the Reorganization of Literary and Artistic Organizations”.

Khvylovyi published a series of articles and pamphlets, including “On ‘Satan in a Barrel,’ or on Graphomaniacs, Speculators, and Other Prosvita-types”, “Quo Vadis?”, “Apologists of Pisarism”, and “Ukraine or Little Russia?” These works initiated a major literary debate between 1925 and 1928. Soviet authorities regarded Khvylovyi as a counterrevolutionary figure and a proponent of Ukrainian nationalism.

At a meeting of the “Slovo” writers’ housing cooperative in April 1929, Khvylovyi was sharply criticized as a counterrevolutionary.⁸ However, during the party purges of 1929, he was considered “dependable”.⁹

Khvylovyi’s letters of repentance and self-criticism likely played a role in this. He wrote several articles condemning the nationalist counter-revolutionary views of the Ukrainian intelligentsia and also agreed to appear as a public prosecutor in a show trial against the “Union for the Liberation of Ukraine”.¹⁰

In the meantime, arrests at the Slovo Building began. The first victim was actress, writer, and teacher Halyna Orlivna (Mnevskva), who was taken away on the night of 19 January 1931. However, the real misery at the Slovo Building began with the arrest of Mykhailo Yalovyi on the night of 11 May 1933. This Ukrainian prose writer, poet, and playwright wrote under the pseudonyms Yulian Shpol and Mykhailo Krasny and was unknown to the general public for a long time. Even the contemporary commemorative plaque on the Slovo Building contains an error by listing Yulian Shpol and Mykhailo Yalovyi as separate people.

6. SHAPOVAL, YU. I. KORENIZATSIYA IN “ENTSYKLOPEDIYA SUCHASNOYI UKRAYINY”. (ED.) DZYUBA I. M., ZHUKOVSKYY A. I., ZHELEZNYAK M. H. ET AL.; NATSIONALNOYI AKADEMIYI NAUK UKRAYINY, NAUKOVE TOVARYSTVO IM. SHEVCHENKA – KYIV: INSTYTUT ENTSYKLOPEDYCHNYKH DOSLIDZHEN NAN UKRAYINY, 2014. [HTTPS://ESU.COM.UA/ARTICLE-3553](https://esu.com.ua/article-3553) (ACCESSED ON: 18.11.2025)

7. MEL NYKIV R. MYKOLA KHVYL OVYY: SHTRYKH DO PORTRETA, HISTORIANS, 13.05.2013. [HTTPS://WWW.HISTORIANS.IN.UA/INDEX.PHP/EN/DOSLIDZHENNYA/697-ROSTYSLAV-MELNYKIV-MYKOLA-KH VYLOVYI-SHTRYKH-Y-DO-PORTRETA](https://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/doslidzhennya/697-rostyslav-melnykiv-mykola-khvylovyi-shtrykhy-do-portreta) (ACCESSED ON: 18.11.2025)

8. DAKHO, FOL. P-15, COLL. 1, FILE 62, PP. 27–28.

9. DAKHO, FOL. P-15, COLL. 2, FILE 11, P. 30.

10. DAKHO, FOL. P-15, COLL. 2, FILE 11, P. 30.

In the literary circles of the 1920s, Yalovyi was known not so much as an author, but primarily as the first president of the VAPLITE association, which opposed the All-Union Union of Proletarian Writers (VUSPP). The State Archives of the Kharkiv Oblast (DAKHO) hold three files concerning Mykhailo Yalovyi (DAKHO, fol. R-6452, coll. 4, files 1843, 1844, 1844a), including materials relative to his rehabilitation. Before his arrest, Yalovyi was expelled from the party for having "come to the territory of the Soviet Union and joined the party in order to create a counterrevolutionary, fascist organization whose task was to overthrow Soviet power through an armed uprising".¹¹

A former member of the Borotbists, Yalovyi was accused of belonging to the "Ukrainian Military Organization" (UVO), which had been fabricated by the secret police. Soon, under pressure from investigator Proskuriakov, he began to give extremely extensive and detailed testimony. The Yalovyi case is one of the largest in terms of volume among the criminal cases stored in the Archives: the first part alone contains 414 pages, most of them handwritten on both sides. Most of the case consists of Yalovyi's handwritten autobiography, written in pencil and full of self-incriminating confessions.

These manuscripts are filled with details of his connections with the Borotbists, accounts of "forbidden" conversations with Shumskyi, Khvylovyi, Dosvitnyi, and other political and cultural activists. In his testimony, Yalovyi strives to distance himself from VAPLITE and Khvylovyi, calling his ideas nationalist and counterrevolutionary. He calls almost all the participants in the literary era conspirators against the Soviet authorities. The Slovo Building was described as a meeting place for the most dangerous counter-revolutionaries, where secret meetings were held in order to plan attacks on members of the government.

Yalovyi was accused of espionage (contacts with the Polish consulate), "Shumskyi-ism", and, above all, of preparing an assassination attempt on the secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine (KP(b)U), one of the main organizers of the Holodomor in Ukraine, Pavel Postyshev.

The names of the numerous "counter-revolutionaries" mentioned in the Yalovyi case gave investigators the opportunity to "reveal" a large-scale "conspiracy" among the Ukrainian intelligentsia and obtain a basis for future purges and mass repression. Thanks to forced false confessions, several dozen representatives of the Ukrainian intelligentsia ended up in the basements of the State Political Directorate on Radnarkomovskaya Street.¹² By decision of the judicial troika at the collegium of the State Political Directorate of the Soviet Union on 23 September 1933, Yalovyi was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment under Articles 54-4, 6, and 11 of the Criminal Code.¹³

11. BERTELSEN, O. PP. 230-231.
12. DAKHO, FOL. R-6452, COLL. 4, FILE 1843, P. 5.
13. BERTELSEN, O. PP. 165-188.

THE CASES OF LES KURBAS AND MYKOLA KULISH

Among the “conspirators” in the Yalovy case were the names of the outstanding Ukrainian director, actor, and founder of the Berezil Theater, Les Kurbas, and the playwright Mykola Kulish. Writers, playwrights, and directors had to regularly present creative reports both to representatives of the party and to the proletariat, mainly factory workers. Kurbas, forced to report at meetings organized by the party secretariat in Kharkiv, was constantly accused of counterrevolutionary performances, excessive creativity, nationalist errors, and a penchant for complex forms that were incomprehensible to the average viewer.¹⁴

On 5 October 1933, Les Kurbas was declared a “Ukrainian nationalist” who was unable to “occupy an appropriate place in the creation of Ukrainian Soviet art”, stripped of his title of People’s Artist and dismissed from his position as artistic director and director of the Berezil Theater. He was later arrested on 25 December 1933 on charges of belonging to the UVO and attempting to assassinate the secretary of the Central Committee of the KP(b)U, Pavel Postyshev, and was sentenced to five years in prison.

His best friend, playwright Mykola Kulish, whose plays constituted the lion’s share of the Berezil’s playbill, also faced relentless criticism from Bolshevik literary scholars and folk reviewers. Kulish’s work was deemed anti-Soviet, and he was accused of nationalism and hostile propaganda. At a meeting of the commission for the purge of the writers’ party organization on 14 June 1934, a decision was taken to expel Mykola Kulish from the party on the grounds that he was “a person with an absolutely clear nationalist ideology”.¹⁵

Mykola Kulish was arrested in December 1934 and sentenced to 10 years in the Solovki prison camp for belonging to a nationalist terrorist organization of fighters and for his connections with the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. He was shot in Sandarmokh on 3 November 1937, along with 1,111 people from the so-called “Solovetsky stage”, including Mykhailo Yalovy, Les Kurbas, and other “Slavs”.

THE KRUSHELNYTSKYI FAMILY

The fate of the Krushelnytskyi family from Galicia clearly illustrates the tragedy of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, which could not survive in the Soviet system of the time.

The head of the family, Antin Krushelnytskyi, was born on 4 August 1878, in Łańcut, Poland, in the west of the Tsarist Empire. In addition to literature, his name is inextricably linked with pedagogy and social activism. In 1919, he became the head of the Ministry of National Education of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UPR). After the defeat of the UPR, he emigrated to Vienna, then moved to Uzhhorod, and then to Lviv.

During his forced emigration, Antin became increasingly pro-Soviet, admiring the Bolshevik policy of Ukrainization. In 1934, Antin applied for emigration to Soviet Ukraine. After obtaining permission, the large Krushelnytskyi family (Antin’s wife Mariya, their sons Ostap, Bohdan, Taras with his wife Stefa) moved to Kharkiv between May and July 1934 with all their belongings, including furniture and a huge library. Antin’s son Ivan and daughter Volodymyra had been living in Kharkiv since 1932.

14. DAKHO, FOL. R-6452, COLL. 4, FILE 1844, P. 2.
15. DAKHO, FOL. P-5, COLL. 1, FILE 65, P. 14.

On the night of 5 November 1934, Antin, Ivan, and Taras Krushelnytskyi were arrested and imprisoned in Kyiv on charges of belonging to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.¹⁶

Antin's son, Taras, confessed to the crime, while Ivan did not, but both were executed on 17 December 1934. Along with them, 26 other people were executed in connection with this case, including writers Kost Burevii, Oleksa Vlyzko, Hryhorii Kosynka, and Dmytro Falkovskyi. Antin was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in Solovki with confiscation of property. In December 1934, Bohdan¹⁷, Ostap¹⁸, and Volodymyra were arrested.¹⁹ Their criminal files are kept in the State Archives of the Kharkiv Oblast.²⁰

Like her two brothers, Volodymyra was sentenced to five years in the camps as a member of a counterrevolutionary terrorist organization and sent to a camp on the White and Baltic Seas, and then to Solovki, where her father was already being held. In 1937, the cases were re-examined and, by order of the NKVD troika in the Leningrad Oblast, the family was declared Ukrainian nationalists and shot. Antin was killed on 23 October 1937, and Bohdan, Ostap, and Volodymyra on 3 November 1937, in the Sandarmokh wilderness.

Their father's political activities played a major role in the sentencing of the younger members of the family. An extract from the troika's decision reads: "Krushelnytskaya Volodymyra Antinova, born in 1903, citizen of the USSR, born in Poland, Polish, civil servant, higher education, daughter of Minister Petliura".²¹

The tragic history of the residents of the Slovo Building continues to engage contemporary artists and researchers. Documentaries, feature films, and exhibitions have been created in response to their fate. In 2018, the building was entered into the State Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine. Its symbolic significance has endured into the present day. On 7 March 2022, the building was damaged as a result of bombing by Russian troops, representing another act of aggression against Ukrainian cultural heritage. In the 21st century, the Slovo Building remains not only an architectural monument, but also a lasting reminder of the dangers posed by totalitarian regimes.



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16. DAKHO, FOL. P-99, COLL. 3, FILE 35, P. 20.
17. BERTELSEN, O. PP. 304–312.
18. DAKHO, FOL. R-6452, COLL. 2, FILE 2808.
19. DAKHO, FOL. R-6452, COLL. 6, FILE 46.
20. DAKHO, FOL. R-6452, COLL. 2, FILE 1720.
21. DAKHO, FOL. R-6452, COLL. 2, FILE 1720, P. 9.
22. DAKHO, FOL. R-6452, COLL. 2, FILE 1720, P. 72.