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# The Tragedy of Artists' Fates: The Correspondence Between Mykhailo Donets and Oleksandr Ulukhanov (on the materials of the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine)

## Трагедія творчих доль: листування Михайла Донця та Олександра Улукханова (на матеріалах Галузевого державного архіву Служби безпеки України)

**Abstract.** The present paper examines the documents from the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine (SSA SSU) and highlights the situation in the Ukrainian opera art of the 1920s–1930s. The tense atmosphere of the everyday life of an artist of the era is described based on the correspondence of two prominent opera singers—Mykhailo Donets and Oleksandr Ulukhanov. The excerpts from their letters, which were preserved in the case-form of Mykhailo Donets, are provided with a commentary. The brutal execution of Mykhailo Donets is another evidence of no moral boundaries of Stalin's empire. The last documental mention of Donets being alive is dated July 6, 1941. His further fate remains unknown. On September 10, 1941, Vsevolod Merkulov, the Minister of the State Security of the USSR, ordered the execution of all detained in Kyiv prisons. It is believed that Mykhailo Donets was executed that day. In 1955, his case was closed “in the absence of a corpus delicti,” and by late 1980 it was declassified and accessible to the public. The life of Oleksandr Ulukhanov also ended tragically. He emigrated to Lviv but was murdered by NKVD in 1941.

**Keywords:** theater, opera, NKVD, NKVD agents, Mykhailo Donets, Oleksandr Ulukhanov.

**Introduction.** Mykhailo Donets and Oleksandr Ulukhanov were renowned figures of Ukrainian musical art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, singers, artists of great talent, and outstanding personalities. The leading artists of the Kyiv Opera and Ballet Theater of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were among those who, in an extremely difficult period of Ukrainian history, raised Ukrainian art to a new level but paid for this with their lives.

Their correspondence, as objective evidence of time and creative life, is a valuable source for research. Its multidimensionality reveals both artistic and socio-political

narratives of the era and enables recreating of the lost dimensions of cultural and artistic development. The introduction of these documents about the figures of the pre-war Ukrainian operatic scene into scientific circulation reconstructs a micro-model of creative life in its development.

The **aim** of the paper is to analyze the correspondence of Mykhailo Donets and Oleksandr Ulukhanov (based on the materials of the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine), in order to aid with the reconstruction of artistic and socio-cultural processes of the totalitarian period of Ukrainian history.

**Results and Discussion.** Upcoming 140<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of the outstanding Ukrainian singer Mykhailo Donets, who created a number of multifaceted, one-of-a-kind images in Ukrainian, Russian and foreign opera classics, in particular, Taras Bulba and Vyborny (*Taras Bulba, Natalka Poltavka* by M. Lysenko), Ivan Karas (*Zaporozhets za Dunayem* by S. Hulak-Artemovsky), Ivan Susanin and Boris Godunov (in the eponymous operas by M. Glinka and M. Mussorgsky), Melnyk (*Rusalka* by O. Dargomyzhsky). Mephistopheles (*Faust* by C. Gounod), Don Basilio (*The Barber of Seville* by G. Rossini), Marcel (*Les Huguenots* by G. Meyerbeer), Kochubei (*Mazepa* by P. Tchaikovsky), and many others, will be commemorated in 2023. Even in his small, episodic parts, such as Zuniga (in *Carmen*), or Varangian Guest (*Sadko*), Mykhailo Donets created unforgettable types.

In 1911, during a T. Shevchenko memorial concert, M. Lysenko praised Mykhailo Donets's performance. With great success, Mykhailo Donets toured the country with folk songs and works of Ukrainian and Russian composers. The audience was fascinated by his strong and expressive voice and unique acting skills.

Unfortunately, the body of literature on Mykhailo Donets, who successfully performed on the opera stages of Moscow, Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Sverdlovsk, is scarce: a few articles dedicated to his 100<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary in the 1983 periodical press (Rozumova, 1975; Maistrenko, 1983; Palazhenko, 1983; Lysenko, 1983; Kozlovsky, 1983; Kolodub, 1983; Borischenko, 1983) and a small monograph by Mykhailo Stefanovych (Stefanovych, 1965). The latter in his outline strove to present the figure of Donets in all its titanic glory. Maksym Rylsky, an academician and poet but also a friend and adviser, left a particularly warm account of Mykhailo Donets, written in January 1963 and printed in the *Muzyka* journal: "Mykhailo Ivanovych was an artist of the Chaliapin style, as they say: his vocal craft was always in complete harmony with his acting, every part performed by him was subordinated to the main idea of the author, he always combined every musical phrase, every note with a gesture fully true to life, with telling facial expressions, with all that is called the stage embodiment of an image" (Rylsky, 1973, p. 21).

Still, the most profound study to date about the work and life of Mykhailo Donets is Mykola Kagarlytskyi's book *The Glory and Tragedy of Mykhailo Donets* (Kagarlytskyi, 2020). Mykola Kagarlytskyi, a researcher of the work of Mykhailo Donets, writes, "...since 1937, all his private conversations at home were surveilled, he was surveilled by secret agents, and in his theater, there was a suffocating atmosphere of suspicions and denunciations" (Kagarlytskyi, 1997).

When Mykhailo Donets was interrogated in 1941, he was asked if he knew Oleksandr Ulukhanov. Mykhailo Donets answered affirmatively. He first met Oleksandr Ulukhanov in Moscow in 1907 and later worked with him in the Private Opera at Sergei Zimin Theater until 1910. Their next encounter was at the Kyiv Opera in 1913, where Ulukhanov was employed as a director. In 1922, Mykhailo Donets worked in the Kharkiv Opera, then in Sverdlovsk,

and returned to Kyiv in January 1927. The same year, he reconnected with Oleksandr Ulukhanov, who worked at the Kyiv Opera at the time.

The case-form of Mykhailo Donets from the archive of the Security Service of Ukraine contains a denunciation. The message authored by certain "Kavkazets" and dated February 20, 1928, states: "... He is friends with Ulukhanov (right-wing Russian) and Bierdiajew (Polish). This 'trio' runs the show in the opera and terrorizes everyone. Mestkom [local committee of employees] is powerless to act against them, because Donets is a member of mestkom as well; he was elected as a representative solely because others see him as a 'well-connected' man. Ulukhanov's wife wants to get a visa abroad, Ulukhanov says: 'Misha will arrange everything.' Bierdiajew stages *The Barber of Seville* featuring Tesseyr only because she is the wife of Donets, although the part is ill-suited for her (a small voice range). Both of them (Donets and Tesseyr) receive 1,800 rubles per month despite their lack of voice ... Ulukhanov buys dollars but obviously not for himself, because, in spite of Ulukhanov's big salary (1,500 rubles), he has no savings and there is reason to believe that he is doing this for the 'Donets almighty'" (HDA SBU, n. d., p. 249).

In 1928, Oleksandr Ulukhanov was accused of "Little Russia sympathies" (*malorosyistvo*) and was dismissed: his contract was not renewed. Having an invitation from the Lviv Opera, he left Soviet Ukraine for Poland. All of the above was revealed by Mykhailo Donets during his 1941 interrogation.

Oleksandr Ulukhanov (Ulukhanyan), who since an early age performed characteristic bass parts, showing considerable acting talent, primarily comedic, and good vocal form, was a man of high musical culture; he refuted any operatic clichés, as noted by Mykola Kagarlytskyi.

Below is a copy of Mykhailo Donets's letter to Oleksandr Ulukhanov from December 9, 1929. It should be noted that the correspondence of both cultural figures was monitored, copies of the letters were handed over to the NKVD authorities (doc. order No. 683).

"Poland, Lviv, Hoffmana 12/4. To Alexander ULUKHANOV.

... As for the theater, I carry on the daily grind and do not get involved with its everyday life, and to be honest, there is nothing to be interested in: squabbles, nastiness, intrigues, artlessness, speculation on nationality, on fashion, covering up one's ineptitude with this fashion and other similar phenomena, of which you are well aware, create such atmosphere in the Kyiv Opera that I tend to stay away of the theatre when not working, just not to hear or see all of the above. BAZANOV continues to fight with DZHAMAN and MANZIY and makes their life a burden. There is a resolution to replace DZHAMAN already but no substitute for him yet. It is the same story with MANZIY. With him, though, the matter is further complicated by the fact that he signed a one-year contract, which is not easy to cancel, but one must think that his jog is up in Ukraine and he will have to look for work elsewhere. Both camps are trying to pull me over to their side but I firmly hold on to 'neutrality' and do not

get involved in their squabbles. In general, the atmosphere in the theater is pernicious. The repertoire is very uninteresting (old), with the only recent novelty *Duma of Black Sea* (S. Kishka), music by Yanovsky. The music is selected randomly from a dozen popular operas, the libretto is boring but staged very well by the young director LYSHANSKY.

The repertoire crisis, or rather the fatally erroneous agenda of introducing the 'young blood' lowered interest to the theater to the point that our bosses panicked. I am waiting for a collapse [in ticket sales] every two weeks but so far, we are holding on. This season is ruined but there should be a big restructuring for the next one.

M. I. DONETS, Streletska 1/34" (HDA SBU, n. d., p. 228).

Volodymyr Manziy (1884–1954), mentioned in a letter, was a Soviet Ukrainian film director of classical Ukrainian films. From 1917 to 1926, he worked in theaters in Odesa, Astrakhan, Penza, and Kharkiv. From 1928 to 1953, with a break, he was the chief director of the Kyiv Taras Shevchenko Opera and Ballet Theater. At the time when the letter was written, he was a deputy director of the theater, in fact, its artistic director. The only fact known about Yakiv Dzhaman is him being a director of the theater at the time. "Young director Lyshansky" later worked as an artistic director at the Red Army Theater.

Around this time, on December 2, 1929, there was another denunciation authored by certain "Kochehar." It informs the secret police about the apparent secretiveness of some theater employees, such as Mykhailo Donets and the chief director Volodymyr Manziy. In addition, the operative report states that Mykhailo Donets hardly appears in the theater, except for those days when he participates in the performances. This was linked to the arrest of Mykola Deynar (an outstanding Ukrainian singer).

Mykhailo Donets's second letter to Oleksandr Ulukhanov from his case-form in the Sectoral State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine was copied on a typewriter. It is undated. Presumably, it was written late in 1929.

"Poland, Lviv, 12/4 Hoffman Street.

To Alexander Ivanovich Ulukhanov.

...I will start with the sentiments in the theater and with work. To list everything briefly but clearly: the overwhelming majority of us is in a shitty mood. Money is delayed for us, the artists, for 13–14 days all the time. The salary is paid in installments, and no one is sure that they will be paid neatly at the end of the season. In the theater, a quarrel goes after quarrel. Gossips, nastiness, denunciations, and other nasty things. What are the reasons? Like master, like man: the first reason is a stupid casting with a ridiculous number of random people, who have nothing else to do but to wander around and initiate quarrels, because they are not involved in the production, and this is the second reason. Dzhaman has proven his ignorance and inability to manage and I am afraid that he will not get away with it. The season ends on February 28 and not a day later. What do you think of that? This will be no fun for a mass worker. And why? Yes, because the deficiencies that started in summer were not covered even in winter

(20,000 rubles), and there was nothing to cover it with, because DZHAMAN did not have the right to have a summer garden without the special funds for it. How will it all end? I fear, with prosecution and his dismissal.

Our artistic achievements. *Turandot*, *The Red Poppy*, *May Night*, and *Turandot*. And so on. By the way, *Turandot* has not been on the posters for about a month, due to the lack of an audience that wants to attend, while *The Red Poppy* is played to full house... *The Christmas Eve*. In December, *The Eve* was staged 8 times a month, 8 times *The Red Poppy* and everything else, namely: *Taras Bulba*, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, *The Queen of Spades* 1 time a month, and *Carmen* also 8 times. Now we are busy with the barbaric impairment of *Faust*, which will take place on December 29 at the DISKOVSKY'S 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary [of creative activity], who ruins this opera. Fate has punished me bitterly, probably for my great sins, because I participate in this staging and my refusal to participate has unleashed a storm of reproaches. As he was extremely attentive to my anniversary, I had to agree to participate, with a heavy heart. Next in line for the failure is *May Night*, then *Prince Igor*, which had already failed in Kyiv earlier, and they strongly persuade me to memorize *The Eagle's Riot*. That is our artistic plan for the season. By the way, *Carmen* and *Onegin*, staged 'anew,' were such a flop that it could not possibly be worse.

M. I. DONETS, Kyiv, Streletska st., 1/34" (HDA SBU, n. d., p. 244).

The mentioned Mykhailo Hryhorovych Diskovskiy (1888–?) was an opera director, choreographer, and translator of opera librettos, known in Kyiv during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The next letter in the case-form is from the Ulukhanovs to Mykhailo Donets and Maria Donets-Tesseyr; it is undated.

[The letter starts in Lidia Ulukhanova's handwriting] "My dear beloved Musenka and Myshunya... I am writing as I am waiting for a student. Then I will be back home from the conservatory, I will have some tea, have dinner and immediately go to bed as I always do because I am not capable of any kind of activity after a busy day, I listen to the radio and read newspapers. Today you will be with me all the time, Musya, I will be listening to you and watching your *La Traviata*. Oh, I would really like to hear your real live performance. I love you performing and I love you as an artist. Our life turned out to be incredibly boring and monotonous... SOKIL and Ant. Iv. [Antin Rudnytsky] are already in Berlin, left this place. I wonder if they will be lucky there. You know, dear, apparently your letter has also been lost ...

[In Oleksandr Ulukhanov's handwriting] Dear beloved Musenka and Misha... In this long letter, we express our delight and gratitude for receiving your photographs. Mishka, bastard, looks very young and Lyd. Al. [Lydia Oleksandrivna] considers him very attractive, on the picture he resembles our famous Polish singer KIEPURA.

Since you have not received the letter, me and my old lady thank you once again for the photograph. We liked the films very much, looked at them with a magnifying glass and upon the light and on different coins.

Today, on the 29<sup>th</sup>, you, Musenka, sing *La Traviata*, we will be with you all day and evening, and later you will tell us in detail about the production, the action, and the era. What pleasure would it be for Lyd Al. and me to listen to *La Traviata* in the dear Kyiv theater. Mishka ... cannot bestir himself and write me. You do not mention, if Misha received a birthday greeting from us or was the letter lost once again, that would be such a shame. You know very well that we always remember January, 11<sup>th</sup>.

In that letter, I described to you in detail my trip to Warsaw, where I worked for 6 weeks on the production of *Aida*, wrote about the new achievements, costumes and a completely new staging, conducted by Val. Val. [possibly, Walerian Bierdiajew], who is already working at the Warsaw Opera this year. I was terribly worried about how the critics would react to the new staging, almost everyone told me that it would be scolded thoroughly for two reasons. First, to honor the long-lasting friendly relations with the previous director, and second, because the current director is from Lviv. Just like in the 'good old' times. Moscow did not recognize another capital and vice versa. It turned out that all the newspapers praised me in short words and in full articles. Thus, in addition to material satisfaction, I also got a great moral one. We needed the latter, since there is no opera in Lviv this year.

I was invited to a production of Stravinsky's new opera *Oedipus Rex* in Barcelona and for a two-month season in Spain, but it coincided with my production of *Aida* in Warsaw, and in addition, they did not want to cover my return trip; so due to the fall of the Spanish currency ... it would not have paid off. And there was the time when the Spanish season was the best one after American. The dollar rate is also artificially lowered, and in general, difficult times have come for the theater. In addition to the conservatory, Lyd. Al. works in two schools, the most recent one is the Ukrainian school named after Lysenko ... Kisses. Yours, Lydia and Alexander. Our kisses to Eduard Ed. and to Mikhail, as well as to those who still remember us ..." (HDA SBU, n. d., 365–366).

Mentioned in the letter are Maria Sokil, a celebrated Ukrainian operatic singer, and her husband Antin Rudnytsky a conductor, pianist, and composer. Mykhailo Donets helped Maria Sokil to leave the country. In 1993, the singer returned to Kyiv and brought the manuscript of her husband's opera *Anna Yaroslavna*. Jan-Wiktor Kiepur (1902–1966) was a renowned Polish singer, lyrical, and dramatic tenor.

Official encyclopedias provide very scant data on the work and life of Oleksandr Ulukhanov. In the case-form for Mykhailo Donets, there was a 1940 certificate for Oleksandr Ulukhanov: like Mykhailo Donets, Ulukhanov was already marked for extermination. This certificate states that Oleksandr Ivanovych Ulukhanov, born in 1874 in Astrakhan, an Armenian, was a director of the Lviv Opera Theater. According to the Lviv UNKVS, he arrived to Lviv from the USSR in 1928 and never returned. In 1932, he accepted Polish citizenship. A study of the archives revealed that Oleksandr Ulukhanov worked as a director of the Kyiv Opera Theater until 1928, and on September 18, 1928, along with his wife, he applied to leave for Lviv for ten months. It was stated

in other documents that his leave was temporary, and the other documents mention him as a "non-returner" (a defector). It was clear from the certificate that in 1928 Oleksandr Ulukhanov was the object of GPU interest as an anti-Soviet person engaged in acquiring US dollars; he repeatedly visited the Polish consulate. In addition, according to the card file of the visa and registration department of the Ukrainian Central Committee of the NKVD, Oleksandr Ulukhanov received Soviet citizenship in accordance with the resolution of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the USSR of September 10, 1925 (protocol No. 24/229). The document is as follows: "In May 1940, ULUKHANOV expressed anti-Soviet sentiments during a meeting with an agent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> department of the UGB of the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR. As reported by the agent Cinematographer:

'In conversations, ULUKHANOV expressed regret that the government in Lviv had changed. According to ULUKHANOV, the art in the USSR is at a low level, because theaters are engaged in politics and propaganda.'

ULUKHANOV explains his departure from the USSR to Poland in 1928 by the impossibility of working in the USSR. A certain Valery BIERDIAJEW [Walerian Bierdiajew] arranged for him to enter Poland, a Pole, a great figure in Warsaw.

Head of 6<sup>th</sup> Division of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Department of the UGB of the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR, Lieutenant of State Security Prokhorenko. August 1940" (HDA SBU, n. d., p. 54).

Tamara Steshenkova writes: "Even when the singer [Mykhailo Donets] came to Lviv twice (in 1939 and 1940), he was surveilled by the Soviet chekists who recorded conversations with the 'Ukrainian bourgeois nationalist'... Oleksandr Ulukhanov, of Armenian ancestry" (Steshenkova, 2000).

**Conclusions.** It can be reasonably assumed that the Soviet chekists did not surveille the artist in person, instead, they had numerous agents, who mostly constituted the inner circle of Mykhailo Donets and Oleksandr Ulukhanov. The artists had no idea that their close friends, whom they invited for holidays and dinners, wrote reports on the conversations and thoughts of Mykhailo Donets. After the war, in confidential discussions, Maria Donets-Tesseyr mentioned four of those whom she suspected. Mykola Kagarlytskyi also lists this fact. Analysis of the case-form reveals a lot of delations signed: "Modest one," "Yanosova," "Sympathetic," "Solid," "Administrator," "Tsereteli," "Kochegar," "Quiet One," "Tenor," "Golinsky," "Gripp," "Perepelkin," "Start," "Vynogradova," "111," "Actor"; in 1935, almost weekly denunciations by an agent "Dniprov" started that persisted until the last day of Mykhailo Donets. There is a strong probability that the real names of these agents could be subsequently deciphered. Presumably, they would be actors, directors, and confidants, whom Mykhailo Donets trusted, with whom he shared his last piece of bread. These false "friends," who reported on the political views of Mykhailo Donets and Oleksandr Ulukhanov, collaborated in their extermination, as they provided the NKVD with all the details of the singers' lives.

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**Трагедія творчих дол: листування Михайла Донця та Олександра Улуханова (на матеріалах Галузевого державного архіву Служби безпеки України)**

**Анотація.** На основі листування двох видатних співаків — Михайла Донця та Олександра Улуханова — висвітлено ситуацію в українському оперному мистецтві 1920х — 1930-х років, відтворено напружену атмосферу щоденного життя людей мистецтва цього часу. Прокоментовано листи, копії з яких збереглися у справі-формулярі Михайла Донця у Галузевому державному архіві Служби безпеки України (ГДА СБУ). Жорстоке вбивство Михайла Донця в підвалах НКВС свідчить, що для сталінської імперії не існувало жодних моральних меж. Останній документ слідства, де згадується ім'я Донця, датований 6 липня 1941 року; що було з ним далі, достеменно невідомо, але 10 вересня 1941 року за наказом міністра держбезпеки СРСР Меркулова усіх осіб, утримуваних в київських в'язницях, розстріляли. Вважається, що Михайло Донець загинув того дня. 1955 року його справу закрили «за відсутністю складу злочину», а наприкінці 1980-х її матеріали стали публічними. Трагічно скінчилося і земне буття Олександра Улуханова. Емігрувавши до Львова, він, на жаль, також загинув від рук НКВД в 1941 році.

**Ключові слова:** театр, опера, органи НКВС, агенти НКВС, Михайло Донець, Олександр Улуханов.

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