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Reconstruction of Kharkiv in 1943–1945

Summary: The events of the Second World War brought immense suffering and devastation to countries around the world, and the USSR, including Ukraine, was no exception. Almost 80 years ago, the liberation of Ukrainian territories from German invaders began, including the liberation of Kharkiv on August 23, 1943. From that day on, a complex and necessary process of rebuilding the city commenced, not only by its residents but also with the support of other republics of the USSR. Today, in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine, Kharkiv once again finds itself under the threat of destruction. This paper examines similar events that occurred in the 20th century and the study of how the city was rebuilt during the war, with the aim of not only quickly restoring industries and institutions but also providing proper living conditions for its residents.

This article aims to identify the priority areas for the reconstruction of Kharkiv during the war years (August 1943–May 1945). It can be argued that two primary objectives existed: rebuilding industry and addressing social issues. Providing housing, adequate nutrition, and medical care were crucial not only for improving people's daily lives but also for increasing labour productivity. The local leadership utilised the joy of liberation and the belief in victory over Nazism to mobilise the city's residents for unpaid work during their free time, compelling them to address most of their household needs independently. However, those involved in the reconstruction of Kharkiv did not bear grudges against the city authorities for these measures; they understood the necessity of quickly restoring normal life and considered the inconveniences to be temporary.



The article emphasises the importance of defining priorities for reconstruction of the economy and improving the living conditions of the population. To achieve these goals, organised leadership, community participation, and individual citizen participation were necessary.

Keywords: Kharkiv, World War II, reconstruction, re-evacuation, de-occupation, destruction, housing stock, faith in victory

Introduction

The events of the Second World War brought immense suffering and devastation to numerous countries worldwide. The Soviet Union, which included Ukraine at the time, was not spared from these hardships. Almost 80 years ago, the liberation of its lands from the Nazi invaders began. Kharkiv, in particular, was liberated on August 23, 1943. From that day the people of Kharkiv began the challenging and necessary phase of reconstruction, undertaken with the assistance of people from other republics of the USSR.

Since February 24, 2022, Kharkiv has once again been subjected to shelling as a result of Russian aggression in Ukraine. This ongoing conflict has led to the destruction of critical infrastructure and residential areas in the city. The historical investigations covered in this paper can shed light on how the city has previously been rebuilt amidst conflict, aiming to restore the functioning of enterprises swiftly and provide a decent quality of life for its residents.

The purpose of this article is to determine the first and most important steps in the reconstruction of Kharkiv between liberation and the end of the war; therefore, the study's chronological framework spans from August 23, 1943, to May 9, 1945.

The topic of reconstruction during the specified period has received relatively limited attention in historiography. However, an article within the collective scientific work *History of the City of Kharkiv in the 20th Century* holds significant relevance. S. Ivanov addresses certain aspects of housing construction during the period, specifically focusing on the emigration of rural populations to Kharkiv. Ivanov's abstract also sheds light on the subject matter related to the reconstruction efforts in the city.

The testimonies of witnesses who experienced the events hold immense significance for the research. Among them, the most extensive memoirs are those of Volodymyr Rybalov, titled *Notes of the Head of the Military Department of the City Executive Party Committee*. In his memoirs, Rybalov provides a party worker's perspective on the reconstruction of Kharkiv. From 1943 to 1945, he held various positions, including secretary of the food industry, head of the military department in the city, and regional committees of the CP(b)U (Communist Party (Bolsheviks))

of Ukraine). Rybalov actively participated in leading the city's reconstruction efforts. Another equally valuable source is the collection of published documents and materials, namely *City and War: Kharkiv during the Great Patriotic War* and *Kharkiv Region during the Great Patriotic War*. These publications contain fragments of documents and memoirs from individuals who survived the war and provided descriptions of the city's state after its liberation from the occupiers. They offer insights into the activities and experiences of those who were involved in the reconstruction process at that time.

Data Analysis and Results

On August 23, 1943, Kharkiv was liberated from Nazi invaders. However, it is important to note that despite the liberation, fighting continued in the region, though the city's reconstruction efforts had already commenced. The initial two years of the German-Soviet war (1941–1943) had inflicted substantial losses upon Kharkiv.

In the initial days of the war against the Nazis, the Soviet government made a crucial decision to evacuate not only the population but also various industrial, food, and other enterprises from the regions that were under threat of occupation. This measure aimed to minimise available resources for the invading forces. The evacuation efforts involved 320 specialised trains for carrying equipment sent to the rear, along with 225 echelons dedicated to transporting people, and an additional 56 echelons specifically designated for hospitals.¹

Despite the evacuation efforts, however, numerous items and resources were left behind in the city and were subsequently utilised by the occupying Nazi forces for their purposes. As the Nazis retreated in 1943, they managed to take with them nearly 350 wagons filled with equipment from factories and educational and research institutions, as well as valuable items from museums, libraries, and cultural centres.² This loss of resources and cultural heritage further added to the challenges faced during the reconstruction period.

But the most significant damage to Kharkiv was inflicted by the hostilities during the war. Russian writer Aleksey Tolstoy vividly described the devastation, stating:

I saw Kharkiv. This is probably what Rome was like when hordes of Germanic barbarians swept through it in the 5th century – a huge cemetery. On the site of the city, on the site of all giant factories without exception – ruins and burnings.³

1 Diakova O. 2013, 7.

2 Diakova O. 2011, 280–281.

3 Diakova O. 2011, 281.

The destructive impact of the war extended to architectural monuments, leading to their burning, destruction, or mutilation. Prominent landmarks such as the railway station, post office, the Stary Pasazh mall, and the House of the Nobles Assembly (which housed the Palaces of Young Pioneers and Schoolchildren in Soviet times before the war) were among those affected. Additionally, the premises of major enterprises, theatres, educational institutions, and research facilities suffered damage. The scale of destruction was immense, with over 1 million square meters out of the total 2.8 million m² of residential buildings being destroyed.⁴

At the time of liberation, Kharkiv was inhabited by approximately 190,000 people,⁵ primarily consisting of women, children, and the elderly. These vulnerable populations had endured the hardships of hunger, fear of reprisals, and humiliations inflicted by the occupiers and collaborators. However, they were the ones who had to initiate a new chapter in the city's history – the era of intensive reconstruction. Although it may have seemed that the task would require decades to accomplish, the city remarkably began to revive itself right before the eyes of its inhabitants.

From the very first day of liberation, the local residents of Kharkiv actively participated in the reconstruction efforts. They offered their assistance to sappers in defusing explosives, aided in setting up crossings, and played a vital role in clearing road debris, etc.

During that time, the responsibility for the reconstruction of the city rested with the local party and Soviet authorities. The regional and city committees of the CP(b) U were led by Viktor Churaev, while the executive committee of the Kharkiv City Council of Workers' Deputies was headed by Oleksandr Selivanov. Major General Mykola Trufanov held the position of military commandant.

On August 24, the City Executive Committee was established, comprising 12 departments that focused on various social issues related to the reconstruction efforts. These departments were responsible for tasks such as coordinating reconstruction work, ensuring food supply, resuming education, healthcare services, and more. Additionally, nine district committees of the party, district Komsomol (Communist Youth League), and district councils of workers' deputies were formed.⁶ The following day, to restore normalcy in the city as swiftly as possible, the city council passed a resolution according to which all managers and workers of state and cooperative institutions were required to conduct inventories of their respective enterprises or institutions and commence work starting from August 27.⁷

4 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 360.

5 Diakova O. 2013, 32.

6 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 359.

7 KIM.R. part 2, 279–280.

Immediately after the liberation, a wide range of businesses reopened in Kharkiv, including hairdressers, grocery stores, cafeterias, canteens, household goods stores, and food stores, commonly referred to as stalls or kiosks. It is worth noting that many of these establishments were privately owned. Markets where you could buy any product (even if they were very expensive) were traditionally popular.

In order to regulate the distribution of goods, the city administration implemented a system of food and industrial cards. The population was classified into four categories: workers, employees, dependents, and children under 12 years old.⁸ Among them, the best-fed groups included workers, employees of the party, Komsomol (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League), Soviet bodies, law enforcement personnel, scientists, artists, and nursing mothers.

Secretary of the Food Industry, V. Rybalov, expressed significant concerns regarding the functioning of bakeries, as bread was considered a vital food source. An assessment of the enterprises was conducted as early as August 24, revealing that all seven bakeries had been destroyed and required substantial repairs.⁹ Initially, the military provided bread, which was transported from other regions. However, in September, the production of bread resumed with the establishment of new bread factories in the city.

Polyclinics, hospitals, and medical facilities were promptly operational following the liberation of the city. Additionally, baths, pharmacies, and sanitary hygiene shops were opened to cater to the needs of the population. Medical professionals provided care not only to the wounded but also to local residents who required assistance. Precautionary measures were implemented to prevent outbreaks of infectious diseases, underscoring the importance of public health in the post-liberation period.

On August 28 the first train arrived in Kharkiv from Moscow, carrying individuals eager to assist in the city's reconstruction efforts. This marked the beginning of a consistent flow of trains transporting vital supplies such as food, construction materials, factory equipment, and other necessary items. Daily arrivals of these trains played a crucial role in providing the resources needed for the reconstruction of Kharkiv.

The party and Soviet bodies had a primary focus on the reconstruction of power plants, as well as other crucial industrial and transportation infrastructure. This emphasis was driven by the need to facilitate the production and repair of military equipment. Power plants played a vital role in ensuring a stable supply of electricity, which was essential for supporting industrial operations and meeting the demands of wartime production.

On August 26, 1943, a government delegation led by the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Nikita Khrushchev, and the Chairman

⁸ Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 359.

⁹ KIM.R. part 2, 279–280.

of the Presidium of the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukrainian SSR, Mykhailo Hrechukha, arrived in Kharkiv. The purpose of their visit was to address administrative matters and assess the extent of the damage suffered by the city.¹⁰ On August 30, a city-wide rally celebrating the liberation of Kharkiv from the Nazis took place in the T.H. Shevchenko Garden. At the rally, N. Khrushchev emphasised:

Your task, friends, is to roll up your sleeves and, with a Bolshevik soul, undertake the restoration of the destroyed city, and the sooner you achieve this, the better it will be for you and the socialist society as a whole.¹¹

The state of the city became a matter of special concern and deliberation during a meeting of the Soviet People's Committee of the USSR. On September 7, 1943, the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR (CPC) adopted a resolution titled 'On emergency aid to the city of Kharkiv'. Support and aid quickly began to arrive from the eastern regions of the country, which had not suffered the same level of devastation caused by the war.¹²

Despite the ongoing shelling and bombing of the city that took place until the end of August, the confidence in the victory over Nazism was so strong, that not only evacuated specialists needed for the restoration were called upon to return, but those serving at the front as soldiers were demobilised as well. These specialists primarily included architects, teachers, engineering, and technical personnel. It is worth noting that the architects were among the first to return to the devastated city. Notably, the first to be demobilised were A. Kasyanov, who assumed the position of chief architect of the city, and V. Orekhov, who was appointed head of the regional department for construction and architecture. Other architects, such as Professor O. Molokin, O. Leibfreid, E. Lymar, M. Lutskyi, M. Movshovich, N. Pidgorny, I. Pushkaryov, I. Khazanovskiy, H. Yanovitskyi, and many others, also returned from evacuation shortly after.¹³ Their primary task was to expedite the restoration of residential, industrial, and public buildings, enabling industrial and communal enterprises to resume operations as soon as possible.¹⁴ To facilitate coordination among the specialists involved, the organisation *Mis'kproekt* was established in September 1943 under the guidance of the chief architect of the city (this organisation exists to this day, now known as the limited liability company *Kharkivproekt Institute*).¹⁵ The city planners developed

10 KIM.R. part 2, 283.

11 KIM.R. part 2, 286.

12 Posohov S. 2012, 16.

13 Posohov S. 2012, 390, 414–415.

14 Posohov S. 2012, 414–415.

15 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 366.

projects for the reconstruction of the street and road network, marking the beginning of a transformation in the city's appearance.

Clearing the debris and restoring buildings became a top priority in the reconstruction process. The focus was on restoring the housing stock, particularly those close to industrial complexes, to ensure convenient access for workers. In order to expedite the resettlement of the population, individuals were allocated land plots for the construction of their own houses.¹⁶

During that time, a significant portion of the building materials needed for reconstruction was obtained by dismantling heavily damaged and unsalvageable buildings. Initially, this process was somewhat disorganised and spontaneous. Priority was given to restoring administrative offices, medical facilities, and industrial enterprises.¹⁷ A large number of individuals, including volunteers and forcibly mobilised workers (including German prisoners of war), actively participated in various restoration tasks. They were involved in activities such as repairing railway tracks and clearing rubble at key industrial sites, including the Kharkiv Tractor Plant (KhTZ), Train-Building Plant, the 'Serp i Molot' factory, the 1st State Flour Mill Plant, and the 'Krasnyi Khimik' factory, etc.¹⁸

The reconstruction of factories for the production of military equipment was also important. Shortly after the liberation, specialists started returning to Kharkiv from their places of evacuation, beginning with the heads of enterprises. On August 28, representatives of the factory named after Comintern (now known as the Malyshev Factory or KhPZ) arrived, led by director M. Sobol' and chief engineer K. Trusov.¹⁹ The process of registering employees from various enterprises began as well. As early as August 23, 1943, 50 workers had returned to the Kharkiv Electromechanical Plant, and by the end of the month 2000 Comintern members and 150 employees of the bicycle factory had returned as well.

The workshops of the aviation, train-building, and motor-building plants, as well as the mechanical workshop of the tractor plant and the newly established cable plant, were among the first to resume operations.²⁰ Their products were needed by the front, which caused their rapid entry into the system.

In addition to heavy industry, the light and food industry enterprises in Kharkiv also played a crucial role in the city's reconstruction. These industries were responsible for producing essential goods and products needed for daily life. The reopening of the soap factory, the M. Shchors Woodworking Plant, and the Zhovten Confectionery

16 Ivanov S. 2011, 14.

17 KIM.R. part 2, 297.

18 KIM.R. part 3, 24, 28.

19 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 360.

20 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 361.

Factory (now known respectively as the private industrial and trading firm YUSI, the Kharkivderev open joint stock company, and the Kharkivnyanka confectionery factory) in September 1943 marked a significant step in resuming the production of goods that were in high demand by the population.²¹

Scientists and specialists from various enterprises were actively involved in the restoration of electricity. The initial supply of electrical current for radio and telegraph needs was obtained from the restored engine of the Institute for Mechanical Machine Engineering, which later became in 1949 part of the Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute. Some residents of the city began receiving electricity at the beginning of September through a train with installed power-generator that arrived from Moscow. On September 5, the first electric generator was put into operation, producing a current of 5000 kW. Simultaneously, efforts were made to repair other critical infrastructure – the water main, sewage system, tram tracks, and trolleybus carriages were undergoing repairs to ensure the smooth functioning of transportation and utilities.²²

In parallel with the restoration of enterprises, the reopening of schools was a significant step towards normalising daily life in Kharkiv. On September 5, 1943, classes resumed in schools across the city. It is worth noting that at that time, 55 schools were teaching in Ukrainian and only 22 in Russian.²³ Given the circumstances and the need to provide skilled labour for the factories, many teenagers, particularly those who had experienced the occupation, were directed to attend trade schools at various industrial plants. This measure aimed to equip them with practical skills and contribute to the workforce needs of the factories.²⁴

In October, higher education institutions in Kharkiv, including the university, polytechnic, pedagogical, agricultural, and other institutes, resumed their classes. All applicants who had completed their full secondary education were admitted to the first year of their respective programs without the need for entrance exams. This was done to expedite the educational process and provide an opportunity for individuals to continue their studies without undue delay.

As the approaching frosts, which were already being felt in October, became more severe, the issue of heating industrial and residential premises was brought to the attention of local authorities. To address this problem, the management of the enterprises sent out special teams to cut down trees in nearby forests or acquire coal from the Donbas region. While the management of enterprises and institutions provided coal to their employees, the supply was insufficient. As a result, people resorted to burning books, furniture, and anything else that could produce heat. However,

21 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 361.

22 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 360.

23 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 362.

24 Posohov S. 2012, 486.

as time went on, boiler rooms for heating were gradually established, and by the end of the war, the problem of heating apartments was resolved, and the need for such extreme measures disappeared.

In October 1943, several cultural institutions in Kharkiv were restarted or opened despite the challenging circumstances. Among them were eight cinemas, the Theatre of Musical Comedy, the Music and Drama Theatre T.H. Shevchenko, the Conservatory (now known as the Kharkiv National Kotlyarevsky University of Arts), the Historical Museum, and 21 libraries, including the esteemed Korolenko State Scientific Library.²⁵

1944 brought forth new challenges. Those who had been evacuated in 1941 began to return home in large numbers. The rapid growth of the city's population further complicated the already tense situation regarding food, housing, and other domestic matters. As a result of wave of returning evacuees in early 1945, the population swelled to 460,000 people (nearly 2.5 times the figure in August 1943),²⁶ and there was still a lack of habitable premises. There were instances where apartment owners returned home after the occupation only to find that someone else had been living in their apartments. This naturally led to conflicts, and many of these cases ended up in court proceedings. In the memoirs of engineer I. Shamrai, an incident of this nature is recounted:

As we walked up the stairs, we encountered Kateryna Ivanovna Sighidina coming from our apartment. It turns out she lives in our apartment with her son, and she has returned and let us into the living kitchen. [...] On the ground floor [where she used to live], she was constantly bothered, so she moved to our apartment.²⁷

It is important to note that the quality of housing during that time remained low, and not everyone was fortunate enough to move into or return to habitable homes. Many people received dilapidated apartments and had to undertake repairs at their own expense. The majority of the population lived in small apartments, where they slept tightly packed like herrings in a can. Even if some apartments had relatively more space in terms of area, living conditions were still cramped due to issues such as missing glass in windows or parts of the ceiling, etc.²⁸ The dwellings lacked basic amenities such as water, toilets, heating, and electricity. Apartments that were unsuitable for habitation became dumping grounds for garbage. Furthermore, some rubble and basements served as makeshift toilets, while corpses lay beneath the debris,

25 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 363.

26 Posohov S. 2012, 16–17.

27 Posohov S. 2012, 442.

28 Posohov S. 2012, 442.

emitting a lingering odour until mid-September 1943. The houses were infested with parasites, including bedbugs, cockroaches, mice, and rats, which were extremely challenging to eradicate.²⁹

According to the recollections of the family of biologists and professors of Gorky State University (now known as V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University) Yurii Prokudin and Oleksandra Matvienko, they were assigned a new apartment when they were called to the city to work in an educational institution. They described the apartment in the following manner:

Only one smaller room was deemed suitable for habitation – it was somewhat isolated from the outside world, with two doors and a window frame made entirely of glass. But a part of the ceiling in it had collapsed onto the ceiling joists, the walls had cracks, and a portion of the parquet flooring was torn off.³⁰

The issue of food shortages remained a pressing concern. To address this, a resolution was passed to allocate plots of land for vegetable gardens to those who were willing. Departments of labor supplies were established in major enterprises to improve the nutrition of workers. Many factories, plants, institutions, organisations, and educational institutions in the suburban areas established subsidiary farms where they cultivated grains and vegetables and raised livestock. The resulting products were then supplied to canteens and distributed among the workers.

During the difficult times of hunger in Kharkiv, the people found a traditional way to alleviate their hunger by consuming sunflower seeds. V. Rybalov recounted: ‘During the two-year famine under the German occupation, the population became so accustomed to shelling seeds that they did it at home, on the streets, and even in theatres’.³¹ In the morning janitors cleaned the streets, and a significant portion of the garbage collected consisted of seed husks.³²

Other republics of the Soviet Union played a crucial role in assisting Kharkiv Oblast in its efforts to rebuild the economy. Support came in the form of agricultural equipment and over 30,000 head of livestock from Russia and Kazakhstan. On September 18, 1943, a shipment of 959 tons of flour arrived from Saratov (Saratov Region, Russia). The Republic of Georgia contributed medicines, equipment, and medical personnel to work in hospitals.³³ Food, construction materials, machinery, and other essential supplies were sent to the city from various regions across the country.

29 Posohov S. 2012, 442; KIM.R. part 2, 298; KIM.R. part 3, 83.

30 Posohov S. 2012, 439.

31 KIM.R. part 3, 96.

32 KIM.R. part 3, 96.

33 KIM.R. part 3, 30; Diakova O. 2013, 32; *Pisliavoienne vidnovlennia*.

In the spring of 1944, the city committee of the party issued a resolution stating that each worker should contribute 100 hours of work throughout the year towards the restoration efforts.³⁴ In other words, every resident was expected to work additional hours without pay to contribute to the reconstruction of the city.³⁵ Despite the voluntary nature of this duty, it was not seen as a burden because it was undertaken for the revival of their own city. Such work was performed, as a rule, on Sundays. In 1943 alone, young people dedicated 30,000 hours of their time on such voluntary Sundays (in Ukrainian *nedil'nyky*).³⁶

Despite ongoing hostilities in the Western regions, Kharkiv enterprises began transitioning towards the production of goods essential for civilian life in 1944. In August, KhTZ resumed production of tractors. The Hammer and Sickle plant began manufacturing threshers, while the surveying tools plant started producing tools for mines in the Donbas and Kryvbas regions (Kryvorizkyi Iron Ore Basin).

However, the pace of reconstruction in Kharkiv slowed down during this year, primarily due to the demands of the ongoing war and the necessity to rebuild other regions that had been liberated from Nazi occupation. As a result of the government allocating 283.6 million karbovanets for industrial construction, 615 enterprises were put into operation by the end of World War II.³⁷ But it is important to note that not all of these 625 establishments were large-scale enterprises.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that the primary objectives between liberation of the city and the end of the war were the reconstruction of the economy and the resolution of social issues. Securing housing, improving nutrition, and providing medical assistance were crucial in enhancing labor productivity. The local leadership capitalised on the people's sense of liberation and the belief in victory over Nazism, mobilising citizens to engage in unpaid work outside of regular working hours and take independent responsibility for household matters such as apartment repairs and pest control. Despite the additional burdens placed on the residents, they did not resent the city authorities for these measures. They were motivated by the desire to establish a normal life as quickly as possible and viewed the inconveniences as temporary setbacks.

34 KIM.R. part 3, 170.

35 Posohov S. 2012, 447.

36 Yarmysh O. (ed.), 2004, 366.

37 Yarmysh O. (ed.) 2004, 367.

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