

III Interdisciplinary Congress on Depopulation
Zaragoza, November 5-6, 2025
Regional depopulation and community welfare in Ukraine, 1950 – 2022
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Examples:

Abstract:

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From the early 20th century onwards, the world has continued to set new records for population growth. Paradoxically, this perpetually raising global population has coincided with the depopulation of many regions. In Europe, since the 1950s, declining fertility and outmigration, accompanied by population ageing have underlined regional depopulation (Coleman and Rowthorn, 2011; Reher, 2011; Lutz and Gailey, 2020). Not only have these demographic developments led to shrinking local communities. These changes have also resulted in declining welfare provision, such as due to the closing of schools and hospitals (Hummel and Lux, 2007; Bock and Haartsen, 2021). Some scholars suggest that demographic crises such as depopulation should be seen as slow burn crises (Pendall, Foster and Cowell, 2010; Martin and Sunley, 2015; Evenhuis, 2020). Unlike one-time shocks such as natural disasters, the slow burn crises occur over extended periods of time, while also causing structural declines within the affected communities. Understanding this long-term impact of depopulation on the affected communities requires a historical lens.

Only a handful of studies have explored regional depopulation in post-1950 Europe (Pallot, 1990; Eberhardt, 1993; Anderson, 2002; Cañal-Fernández and Álvarez, 2022). These studies primarily focused on the economic and demographic aspects of depopulation, rarely linking them to how those who stayed in the communities have perceived and responded to depopulation (exceptions are Collantes and Pinilla, 2011; Perelli-Harris and Hilevych, 2023). By addressing this lacuna, the DEPOP project takes regional depopulation as a potent example of a slow burn crisis. DEPOP's overarching goal is to develop a comparative socio-historical framework to study community welfare in the slow burn crisis of depopulation. DEPOP's main question is: how have European communities coped with depopulation to achieve and maintain their welfare from the 1950s onwards? To address this question, we comparatively look at three borderland regions: Groningen in the Netherlands (Hoekstra), North Karelia in Finland (Railo), and Khmelnytskyi in Ukraine (Hilevych). My project looks at the case of Ukraine and has two main objectives:

O1: Unravel variations in demographic trajectories of depopulation and their relationship with welfare provision.

O2: Investigate in-depth perceptions and responses that have underlined coping strategies with the decline in population and welfare of those who stayed in depopulating communities.

Addressing these objectives through the case of Ukraine is interesting because it is one of the few countries in Europe that has experience both regional and national depopulation since the 1990s, which continues to the present day and is exacerbated by the Russian war on Ukraine. Ukraine's regional depopulation has started in at least the 1950s. As several studies have shown, the demographic impact of the interwar Stalinist policies on the region was paramount. The Harvard Holodomor project and subsequent studies have shown (e.g. by Levchyk et al), that as the result of the Great Famine in 1932-

34, some regions lost nearly half of their population. Subsequent Stalinist massive deportations also had a tremendous impact on the shrinking population. The overall impact of the WWII was also one of the greatest in Ukraine (Levi-Bacci 2021), leading to, for example skewed gender ratios. Ukraine also did not experience baby boom after WWII, and fertility there continued declining, reaching the below-replacement level of under 2.0 TFR in the 1960s in some regions (Hilevych 2021). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine also experienced decollectivisation, which particularly had an impact on rural life. The link between collectivisation, decollectivisation and regional depopulation has, however, not been examined previously by historians.

Historical studies examining population decline in Ukraine, let alone regional depopulation have been extremely scarce (Coleman, 2022; Perelli-Harris and Hilevych, 2023). The impact of this multifaceted process of slow burn crises of depopulation on communities has not been examined previously. Khmelnytskyi, located in west-central Ukraine, has been one of the most depopulated regions in Ukraine (Kuczabski and Michalski, 2013; Shvindina, 2016). In the 20th-century historiography of Ukraine, and in social history more generally, this region has been a blind spot. This project ties together these knowledge gaps to produce an exemplary social history of depopulation in Ukraine.

The project draws on the analysis of quantitative data and qualitative data. To address O1, the project decomposes regional depopulation in Khmelnytskyi region at NUTS3 level and beyond. By selecting individual towns and villages, the project then addresses O2. Existing oral histories from the region are analysed and inform the data collection of new oral histories (to start summer 2025). The welfare provision in health and care sectors includes understanding the changing role of kinship (i.e. availability of kinship social security) and mapping access to polyclinics, hospitals, nurseries, kindergartens, and schools. We will map both state provision as well as that by other non-gov sector, for example organisations like Red Cross that were active in the Soviet Union. After the 1990s, additional focus is paid to the religious organisations as Caritas and churches among other actors. I plan to map this provision for the selected villages and towns for the whole period. In the future, the project will also employ a PD who will do the mapping for the whole region (and also for NL and FIN cases). By the time of this conference in November 2025, I would be able to show the trajectories of depopulation in the region and illustrate the role that Red Cross played in healthcare provision, such as nursing, in the 1950s. I assume that Red Cross provision was more involved in the parts where depopulation was most pronounced.

Keywords:

regional depopulation, health and care provision, community welfare.

Thematic Area:

- **Demography**
- **Health and well-being**
- Basic, public, and private services
- Third sector and associative movements

How will you present your communication if accepted?

- Oral presentation