

Is Putin a Bolshevik? A Ukrainian perspective

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Ukrainian mainstream historians lump Lenin and Putin together, because both were ready to invade Ukraine. But, as Andrii Zdorov explains, the difference between the Bolsheviks and the modern masters of the Kremlin is that the Bolsheviks had a rational progressive modernist ideology and were able to admit their mistakes.

105 years ago, on December 17, 1917, Kyiv received by telegraph from Petrograd the “Manifesto to the Ukrainian people with ultimatum demands to the Ukrainian Rada (parliament).” It came from the Council of People’s Commissars - the government of Soviet Russia signed by its Chairman Vladimir Lenin and People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs Leon Trotsky.

The authors of the manifesto reaffirmed the right to self-determination for all peoples oppressed by the Russian tsarism and bourgeoisie up to separation from Russia:

“Therefore, we, the Council of People’s Commissars, recognize the people’s Ukrainian Republic, its right to secede from Russia altogether or to enter into a treaty with the Russian Republic on federal and similar relations between them.

Everything that concerns the national rights and national independence of the Ukrainian people, we, the Council of People’s Commissars, recognize immediately, without restrictions, and unconditionally.”

Nevertheless, at the same time, the Bolshevik government presented to the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UPR) a number of ultimatum demands, in particular, to abandon any support for the Don Ataman Oleksiy Kaledin and to stop disarming the supporters of the Soviet government in Ukraine itself, including pro-Bolshevik Russian troops. If these demands were not met, Lenin’s government threatened the UPR with war. The first demand could still be understood, because General Kaledin united around him White Guards and supporters of the revival of the empire from all over Russia, and the UPR was still part of the Russian Republic. However, the second demand directly contradicted the principle of the right of nations to self-determination without the presence of foreign troops proclaimed in the Bolshevik “Decree of Peace.”

This Manifesto of 17 December 1917 is often considered in Ukrainian historiography to be the beginning of the first Ukrainian-Bolshevik war, although in fact negotiations continued for several weeks after that. Actually, this manifesto or ultimatum was timed to coincide with the First All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets. This was convened in Kyiv on the initiative of the Bolsheviks, hoping to peacefully seize power by re-electing the Ukrainian Central Rada. But the Bolsheviks’ plans failed: the Kyiv Congress of Soviets expressed confidence in and support to the Ukrainian Central Rada. Lenin’s manifesto also played a role in this. As the Ukrainian Bolsheviks themselves acknowledged, instead of splitting the Ukrainian masses, Lenin’s ultimatum united them around the Rada, because when the order for the power of the Soviets comes from outside, it only causes confrontation,

because “we” have to wage war with the Ukrainian people.

This 1917 Manifesto of the Council of People’s Commissars completely discredits Putin’s thesis that the Bolsheviks created Ukraine or arbitrarily gifted it any territories. In fact, the Bolsheviks were forced to recognize the Ukrainian People’s Republic, formed in accordance with the III Universal declaration of the Ukrainian Central Rada on November 20, 1917, and within the boundaries defined in this declaration. Even the Ukrainian Soviet center created some days later on December 25 in Kharkiv by the Bolsheviks also initially retained the name of the UPR and aspired to hold power over the same territories.

A little later, on January 10, 1918, at the peace conference in Brest-Litovsk, Trotsky recognized the right of the UPR to act as a separate party to peace negotiations with Germany. This was used by the delegation of the Ukrainian Central Rada to conclude an alliance with the central powers against the Bolsheviks. Neither Trotsky nor Lenin questioned this step at the time, although later Soviet historians wrote that by acting like this Trotsky had betrayed the socialist revolution.

Nowadays Putin considers all Bolsheviks to be traitors to Russia or the fifth column of foreign countries. This makes those Ukrainian historians who consider Putin to be following in the footsteps of the Bolsheviks look strange. Should we use Bolshevik as some label for all foreign rulers who conquered Ukraine from the Mongol leader Batu Khan to Adolf Hitler? What does this give us except for the devaluation of historical concepts and historical writing itself, turning it into state propaganda, like happens in Putin’s Russia?

Certainly, the Bolsheviks were a Russian party with characteristic imperial ambitions. But the main difference between the Bolsheviks and the modern masters of the Kremlin is that the Bolsheviks had a rational progressive modernist ideology and were able to admit their mistakes. They were the Jacobins of the Russian Revolution of 1917-1921. They recognized the principle of the right of nations to self-determination and recognized Ukrainians as a separate nation.

In contrast, Putin’s ideology is a continuation of the traditional conservative doctrine of the Russian Empire of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which considered Ukrainians part of the “Russian people” or “Russian world.” It is from that tradition that Putin borrowed the idea that the Ukrainian nation was invented by Russia’s enemies – back in those days it was the Poles and Germans. The current ruler of the Kremlin has only added Bolsheviks to these traditional enemies of Russia. But even in this he is not original, because the same thing was declared by the Russian White Guards - the fiercest enemies of Bolshevism, who also hated everything Ukrainian. A typical example is the address of General Anton Denikin “To the Population of Little Russia” of August 25, 1919:

“Wishing to weaken the Russian state before declaring war on it, the Germans had long before 1914 sought to destroy the unity of the Russian tribe, forged in the hard struggle.

It was for this purpose that they supported and fomented in the south of Russia a movement which set itself the object of seceding from Russia its nine provinces under the name of the “Ukrainian State”. The desire to detach the Little Russian branch of the Russian people from Russia has not been abandoned to this day. The former protégés of the Germans - Petliura and his companions, who started the dismemberment of Russia, continue even now to carry out their evil deed of creating an independent “Ukrainian state” and of fighting against the rebirth of the United Russia.

However, it is necessary to completely distinguish between the renegade movement aimed at the division of Russia and that activity which is inspired by love for the native land, for its peculiarities, for its local antiquity and its local folk language.

With this in mind, the basis for the organisation of the regions of Southern Russia will be the beginning of self-government and decentralisation, with due respect for the vital peculiarities of local life....

By the Providence of God the regions of South Russia are destined with great honour and great responsibility to become a support and source for the armies, selflessly advancing in the exploit of the reconstruction of the United Russia.

In the struggle for the United and Indivisible Russia I call upon all the faithful sons of the Motherland to lend their active support to the army, which is bringing the deliverance of the suffering people from the Bolshevik yoke.

Particularly worthy of note are the atrocities of the Bolsheviks as portrayed by Putin:

"The Bolsheviks treated the Russian people as inexhaustible material for social experiments. They dreamed of a world revolution, which, they thought, would abolish nation-states altogether. That's why they arbitrarily chopped up the borders and distributed lavish territorial "gifts". In the end it doesn't matter what was guiding the Bolshevik leaders' thinking when they were hacking up the country. It is possible to argue about the details, the background and the logic of this or that decision. But one thing is clear: Russia has in fact been robbed."

One can indeed get lost here. Who wrote that: Denikin or Putin? Let us quote the president of Russia:

"In 1922, during the creation of the USSR, one of the founding entities was the Ukrainian SSR. After quite an intense discussion among Bolshevik leaders, the Leninist plan of formation of the union state as a federation of equal republics was realized. The text of the declaration on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and, later, the 1924 Constitution of the USSR incorporated the right for the republics to freely secede from the union. And so, a terribly dangerous "time bomb" was laid in the foundation of our statehood. It exploded once the safety mechanism in the form of the CPSU's leading role, was removed, when that party collapsed...

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Bolsheviks actively promoted a policy of "korenization" (growing roots) which in the Ukrainian SSR was carried out as Ukrainization. Symbolically, as part of this policy, and with the consent of the Soviet authorities, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, former chairman of the Central Rada and one of the ideologues of Ukrainian nationalism, who at one time had the support of Austria-Hungary, returned to the USSR and was elected to the Academy of Sciences. "Growing roots" undoubtedly played a great role in the development and consolidation of Ukrainian culture, language and identity. However, under the guise of fighting so-called Russian great-power chauvinism, Ukrainianization was often imposed on those who did not consider themselves Ukrainians. The Soviet national policy promoted a triple nation consisting of 'Great Russians' [Russians], Little Russians [Ukrainians] and Belarusians. This enshrined at the state level the position of three separate Slavic peoples: Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian, rather than one big Russian nation."

Lenin's opponents - the Ukrainian Bolsheviks Vasyl Shakhrai and Serhiy Mazlakh - pointed to imperial chauvinistic motives in the leadership of the Bolshevik Party. At the same time, they stressed:

"National movements in the modern sense of the word arise simultaneously with the development of capitalism. And they arise not because they are "invented" in their own vested interests by certain exploiting classes of capitalist society (this moment certainly plays a big role in national movements,

as in all other movements), but rather because capitalism draws the widest circles of humanity into global dynamics, into the common economic and therefore spiritual life. National movements are more connected with the world progressive side of the development of capitalism than with its destructive tendencies of exploitation, degradation of the masses. This latter aspect has its own large influence on the development of national movements. But it cannot on its own explain national movements, their depth and spread among all classes of modern society. There is not a single class that would not participate in national movements, that would not put its demands into their national content. The proletariat is such a class. This, of course, does not mean that in every wave all classes make the same demands with the same enthusiasm and with the same force. Different classes at different times in different cities make different national demands with different strength and stubbornness.”

“The Ukrainian movement is not something unknown in history. But it has acquired such vivid forms, so clearly and “classically” that its study is of great importance for understanding the nature, content and laws of development of national liberation movements in general. And this experience has and will have not only theoretical interest. Nowadays, reactionary, imperialist capitalism is increasingly destroying these democratically defined borders of large and viable European nations, whose borders were previously marked more and more by the language and sympathies of the population. All signs point to the fact that imperialism will leave less democratic borders and a series of annexations in Europe and in other parts of the world as a consequence of the socialism that will replace it. [1]

Proclaimed by Peter the Great in 1721, the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, less than two centuries later. There have been many attempts to restore it. Perhaps the most blatant attempt to rebuild a “united and indivisible Russia” was Denikin’s attempt, which failed miserably in early 1920. Putin has repeatedly expressed his respect for Denikin, calling him an outstanding statesman and patriot of Russia, facilitating the transfer of his ashes from Paris to Moscow and even receiving his saber as a gift from Denikin’s daughter. In this regard, the loyalty of the Kremlin master to the White Guard imperial traditions is natural. At the same time, Putin tries to combine this White tradition with the traditions of Stalin’s USSR, which continued certain features of the empire in a new form.

No matter. All empires sooner or later die as a result of the development of the world market and capitalism, the needs of which are best met by national democratic republics. The destruction of empires and dictatorial regimes is a necessary condition for the fullest development of productive forces and overcoming national enmity between peoples. And this in turn brings us closer to the moment when capitalism will exhaust its resources for development and will have to give way to a more just society without exploitation of man by man, without states and borders. At this moment, the greatest enemy of progress is the Russian regime, which is rapidly turning into a fascist regime. The destruction of the Russian Reich is a condition for the survival not only of Ukrainians, but ultimately of all humanity.

P.S.

Source: <https://www.dsnews.ua/ukr/blog/chi-ye-putin-bilshovikom-18122022-471252?s=09>

Translated from Ukrainian by AN

Footnotes

[1] “Mazlakh S., Shahrail V. “To the wave. What is happening in Ukraine and with Ukraine”. 1919.