

The progressive legacy of the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-1921) - Part 4

Soviet Ukraine or Democratic-Socialist Ukraine?

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(...) That is why the Bolsheviks began to oppose the parliament democracy and put forward the slogan: “All power to the Soviets of workers and Soldiers’ Deputies”, which were elected based on non-universal, unequal, non-secret, and often not directly electoral rights; the population showed indifference to these Soviets, and therefore the communists managed to take the Soviets into their hands almost everywhere; where it did not succeed, there the communists declared the Soviets bourgeois, and organised a revolutionary committee of their own [1].

— B. Martos

The Ukrainian left-wing tradition split in the harsh conditions of the revolution. It was not divided on the axis between radicals and moderates but between different mindsets. Should Ukraine be a Soviet country, in the sense that it should be governed by a soviet congress of peasants and workers in a manner similar to syndicalism, along class lines? Or should socialists accept the slogan of a democratic republic and rally around it?

Those who adhered to the Soviet system but maintained the pro-Ukrainian and anti-Bolshevik position were later labelled “Shapovalists”, derived from the name of the main ideologue and one of the leaders of the Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries (main current), Mykyta Shapoval, and led by him and Nykyfor Hryhoriyv. After the Russian Civil War, this group, together with Viktor Chernov from the Russian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries and other socialist parties of various nationalities, created the Socialist League of New East, a group of anti-Bolshevik radical democratic socialists who supported national demands for freedom and independent states and self-governance.

Another group consisted mainly of Marxists and Western Ukrainians who viewed the Soviet platform as a restriction of democracy and the narrowing of citizenship to economic representation. Instead, they saw the future of Ukraine as a parliamentary, albeit very decentralised, robust democracy. Among the main critics were democratic socialists of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers’ Party, such as the cooperative movement activist, Borys Martos, and other deputies of the Ukrainian Central Rada, Isaac Masepa and Panas Fedenko.

As a compromise, a convoluted “Labour principle” which combined Soviet and Parliamentary democracy was adopted at the Labour Congress from 23 to 28 January 1919.

Tensions were high, as “the left” of the Republic, the National-Communists, together with Makhno, demanded the disbanding of the Directory and election of a fully Soviet government (but a Soviet government of an independent, united Ukraine), while “the right”, namely the democratic socialists

from the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' party demanded the restoration of parliamentary democracy. The Ukrainian government was in constant disarray, which weakened potential resistance to the Russian-Bolshevik invasion. At this time, Ukraine was moving from the compromise "Labour principle", which satisfied no one, to a parliamentary state under the influence of Symon Petlyura. The Ukrainian People's Republic began to disintegrate. Due to military pressure from all sides and the collapse of the front line, the government was practically unable to function. As the military defeats increased, so did the political differences.

The idea of the Ukrainian People's Republic

In 1921, the Ukrainian People's Republic collapsed, and Bolshevik forces occupied the entire Ukraine. The illusions of a semi-democratic and semi-independent Bolshevik Soviet government quickly disappeared, and Ukraine was rapidly incorporated into a system of colonial rule by Lenin's government. This process was finalised by the introduction of the centralised planned economy by Stalin.

It would be reasonable to argue that, in some way, the Ukrainian SSR's existence resulted from the struggle of Ukrainian revolutionaries. The Ukrainian SSR was not simply the continuation of the former province of the Russian Empire under Bolshevik leadership, nor was it due to Bolshevik notions of some sort of Ukrainian right to exist. The same can be said about Ukrainisation. The Ukrainian cultural revival in the 1920s was the result of the previous anti-Bolshevik struggles involving more than one million Ukrainian soldiers and rebels, which made the occupation of Ukraine impossible without substantial compromises. Even after the collapse of the front, there were numerous peasant uprisings against the Bolsheviks in Ukraine, whether anarchist, republican or national communist. Student circles, partisan detachments and self-defence groups were active until the genocide in 1932-1933 [2].

The memory of the republic inspired many people to resist Soviet rule and fight for an independent state — because they already had an example to follow. The Ukrainian People's Republic became a mobilizing myth in a long history of struggle against foreign rule and occupation, and conceptual discussions about Ukraine's liberation could not be conducted without the experience of the Republic. However, when the Republic lost to the Russian-Bolshevik forces, the question arose: Why did we lose? The various groups gave different answers to this question. For the right-wing, it was socialist populism; for the social democrats, the situation was too bad to achieve more; [3] for the socialist revolutionaries and national communists, it was mainly passivity in organizing social reforms. [4] The later radical right of OUN was the most critical. They concluded that it was democracy that had weakened the Republic, while the authoritarian and totalitarian forces that opposed the Republic had been victorious.

However, it is quite remarkable how the various forces repeatedly adopted the slogan of the Ukrainian People's Republic, even if they acted in completely different contexts. In 1942, the "left-wing" split of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) under the leadership of Ivan Mytrynha, together with Taras Bulba-Borovets, joined republican, nationalists and national communist groups and founded the so-called "first Ukrainian Insurgent Army" with the primary goal of restoring the Ukrainian People's Republic. [5] The same was true of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army organised by Banderites, which, after its transformation into a mass organisation, was actively joined by new members from all regions of Ukraine. Under pressure from its newly arrived partisans, the Insurgent Army could no longer adhere to its totalitarian far-right program. It was forced to adopt a social democratic program, incorporating leading figures of the Ukrainian People's Republic into its ranks and creating a semi-democratic pre-parliament with a socialist revolutionary

at its head [6].

Outside of Ukraine, a whole range of different organisations took up the cause of restoring the socially progressive democratic republic in the form of the Ukrainian People's Republic. First and foremost, the Ukrainian National Rada, a coalition government formed by the Ukrainian People's Republic government in exile and joined by the OUN(M) (Melnyk), the OUN(R) (Bandera), the Ukrainian National Democratic Union (UNDO), the labour-left Ukrainian Revolutionary Democratic Party (URDP) led by Ivan Bahryaniy, the URDP-socialists; the Ukrainian National State Union (UNDS), the Ukrainian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (UPSR), the Ukrainian Socialist Radical Party (USRP), the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' Party (USDWP) and the Ukrainian Agrarian party. OUN(M) and OUN(R) soon left [7] the Rada as it was incompatible with their authoritarian and totalitarian approaches, while other parties emphasised the Republican heritage and its struggle for social and national rights.

Dissidents also carried the Ukrainian People's Republic on their banners. On the night of 22 January 1973, for example, student dissidents carried yellow-blue flags and placed a proclamation that read:

"Dear comrades! Today, 55 years have passed since the day when the independence of the Ukrainian state was proclaimed by the IV Universal of the Central Rada in Kyiv. This historical act demonstrated the will of the Ukrainian people, their original desire for independence. However, today's Soviet official historiography tries to show this event in the eyes of our generation as anti-people and anti-democratic. This gross distortion of historical reality is indignantly condemned by the conscious people. This is condemned by everyone who cares about the interests of the nation." [8]

Under the influence of the distorted USSR social system, the social appeal of the Ukrainian People's Republic was slowly downplayed, and national, anti-colonial and democratic aspects of it were disproportionally brought to the centre of the discussion. This led to very imbalanced views on the legacy of the Republic. This is the situation that still exists. The horrible trauma left by the Soviet Union led to the suppression of discussion of the boldest, most progressive social and economic reforms ever produced by the Ukrainian people in their struggle for social and national independence and later in their fight to realise a modern, democratic socialist vision.

Vladyslav Starodubtsev

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Footnotes

[1] Borys Martos: Vyzvol'nyj zdybh Ukraïny, New York, 1989, p. 192 (translation by the author)

[2] Arsen L. Zinčenko: Povstannja Seljans'ki proty bil'sovyckoho režymu 1929-1932, in: NAN Ukraïny (red.): Encyklopedija istorii Ukraïny (elektronnyj resurs), [n. d.] URL: http://www.history.org.ua/?termin=Povstannia_sel_1929_1932.

[3] Isaak P. Mazepa: Bol'shevizm i okupacija Ukraïny. Socijal'no-jekonomyčni pryčyny nedozrilosti syl ukraïns'koï revoljucii, L'viv/Kyïv, 1922; Volodymyr Vynnyčenko: Vidrodšennja nacii. Istorija ukraïns'koï revoljucii (marec 1917 r. - hruden' 1919), Kyïv/Viden', 1920

[4] Mykyta Šapoval: Velyka revoljucija i ukraïns'ka byzbol'na programa, Praha, 1927.

[5] For the „left wing“ of the OUN cf. the interview with Borys Levitskyi (who was later employed to the RES for some years (<http://poliskasich.org.ua/?p=630>). For the national-communists cf.: Volodymyr V. Dz'bak: Konflikty v OUN(b) i ïch vplyv na ukraïns'kyj Ruch Oporu (1941-1944 rr.), Kyïv, 2005, p. 36. Cf. also T. Bul'ba-Borovec': Za ščo boreťsja Ukraïns'ka Povstans'ka Armija (UPA) (1942 r.)?, URL: https://hai-nyzhnyk.in.ua/doc2/1942.UPA_Borovec.php.

[6] Jevhen Staxiv: Rol' Schidnoï Ukraïny u formuvanni novych idejno-polityčnych zasad OUN-b, in: NAH Ukraïny, Instytut ukraïnoznavstva im. I. Krip'jakevyča (red.): Ukraïns'ka Povstans'ka Armija u borot'bi proty totalitarnych režymiv, L'viv, 2024, p. 51-55.

[7] Then 'left-democratic' split of OUN in emigration, so-called 'dviykary', rejoined Ukrainian National Council.

[8] Borys Zacharov: Rosochac'ka grupa, 24.5.2005, URL: <https://museum.khpg.org/1116887093>