

Solidarity, decency, socialism: in memory of Marko Bojcun

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On March 11th 2023 our friend and comrade of Commons, known political economist, political scientist, labour movement historian and an activist of left-wing movements and solidarity with Ukraine, Marco Bojcun, passed away. He played an important role in keeping the flame of the Ukrainian left alive and in giving it, through emigrants and dissidents, to present time Ukraine.

During the last years of his 72-year life he was heavily ill with cancer and despite that he continued to work and never lost optimism of the will to make as much impact as possible. His magnum opus, which was based on his doctoral thesis ("Labour Movement and National Question in Ukraine: 1880-1920") written in 1985, was significantly expanded with inclusion of previously unavailable sources and new research.

As a result, it first came out in Ukrainian ([a single volume edition is available for downloading at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation website](#)) and a review of this work — [on our website](#)), then in English (*The Workers' Movement and the National Question in Ukraine* in a book series "Historical Materialism"). This fundamental research of societal transformations in Dnieper Ukraine at the turn of the 20th century, the formation of national and class consciousnesses and the creation of numerous socialist parties revolves around a key question – the balance of goals of social and national liberation before and during the Ukrainian Revolution.

But, most likely, the main priority for Marco was active participation in the network of British left and trade unions' solidarity with Ukraine called "[Ukraine Solidarity Campaign](#)". This network connects a lot of people, including a historian of Ukrainian left Christopher Ford and a well-known Labour MP John McDonnell, but it would be impossible without Marco. Since its inception almost ten years ago USC has been doing everything in their power to make sure that people abroad knew the truth about events in Ukraine and to support our grassroots movements.

Thanks to this campaign and especially Marco, the Kryvyi Rih miners' and the Kureniv trolleybus drivers' struggles for their rights were even heard in the UK Parliament. Resisting countless stereotypes, disinformation and justifications of Putin's aggression, which were passionately shared by Stalinist and other conservative forces within the left-wing movement, was also important for Marco. So he regularly wrote and spoke, took part in events both in-person and online. During the full-scale invasion he doubled his efforts in explaining to the Western leftists the dangers of Russian imperialism, the history of Eastern Europe then and now to garner support for the Ukrainian people despite the illness.

Marco Bojcun was born in Australia, studied in Canada and lived in the United Kingdom ever since

but, since it became possible due to Perestroika, he regularly visited Ukraine. During the fateful year of 1968, his family had relocated from a small town on the edge of an Australian forest, where his parents worked on a farm, a railway and a factory, to a big Canadian city, from +40°C heat to -20°C frost.

But substantial changes happened in his political environment as well: from a small isolated community in the diaspora (Marco's parents met in a refugee camp: his mother was forcefully relocated by Nazis from Czechoslovakia whereas her husband up until then was fighting for the Nazis in SS "Galicia" division – hard to imagine something so far away for Marco's political preference, but later when Bojcun-senior was asked to report on his leftist son to OUN(b), he refused and was forced to leave his newspaper job) to the big new world.

Marco belonged to the generation of youths whose political awakening happened on the wave of 1968 radicalism – student protests and workers' strikes in Europe and abroad, anti-war and pro-civil rights movements in the US, countercultural revolution and searches for a "socialism with a human face" to counter the Western capitalist and the Soviet bureaucratic models on both sides of the Iron Curtain, which came to life during the Prague Spring which was crushed by Soviet tanks.

Since then, despite their parents' conservative nationalism, those Ukrainians born in emigration came to radical socialism or anarchism, becoming a part of the global wave of the New Left. In Marco's case that was Trotskyism of the Fourth International (post-reunification) (whose theorist was Ernest Mandel, a comrade of [Roman Rozdolsky](#), who was perhaps the best known Ukrainian Marxist at the time of his death in 1967) and the Marxist humanism school of thought (Marco was a member of the Canadian FI branch until 1982 when the local organization wasn't able to unequivocally condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan).

The leftist diaspora had to fight against both the dominance of the right in the Ukrainian diaspora and pro-Soviet illusions of the Western left movement. Marco explained it brilliantly in [his article for openDemocracy](#). This problem became more prominent for Ukrainian leftists after the start of the war in Donbas in 2014 and even more prominent as the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war commenced in 2022, when it turned out that lots of Western leftists avoided showing solidarity with the victims of an imperial aggression when it's not American imperialism.

A lot of then left-wing youth in Canada became famous representatives of Ukrainian intelligentsia – [John-Paul Himka](#), Bohdan Krawchenko, Myroslav Shkanrdij, Roman Senkus – but maybe only Bojcun was involved in left-wing activism to the very end (there was however the member of the New Democratic Party Halyna Freeland, the now-deceased mother of the known minister). Marco colourfully (and funnily, the picture of a pompous old Borotbist Maistrenko still wearing his cloak remaining from the revolutionary times even in the 1970s alone is worth it) remembered those times, his social circle and contacts with the older generation of the leftist diaspora in a [detailed interview for Commons](#).

Their radical left student movement focused a lot of attention on the support of ethnic minorities and French Canadians as well as internationalism and international solidarity. Marco's first rally was at the US consulate in Toronto in 1970 against the shooting of anti-Vietnam war protestors by the National Guard in Kent State University (interestingly, one of the propellers of the anti-war movement at Kent State was another future friend of Ukraine – [Bill Artrell](#) who, inspired by the Maidan, devoted his life to our people until it tragically ended last year in a car crash).

Shortly after Marco began founding first Canadian civil committees in solidarity with Ukrainian political prisoners and was organising a hunger strike of Ukrainian Canadian students against persecution in Ukrainian SSR in 1972, when the wave of arrests impacted almost every known

Ukrainian dissidents, in particular Vasyl Stus, Leonid Plyushch, Danylo Shumuk, Ivan Dziuba, who were criticising the system from the democratic left perspective. As a consequence of that hunger strike Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau himself had to negotiate with the students and raise the question of political prisoners at a meeting with his Soviet colleague Alexei Kosygin.

During the next ten years after 1975 Bojcun was among the creators and authors of the *Diialoh* journal (with articles about Ukraine, critical analyses and interviews with other members of the liberation movement), which they illegally distributed to Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe with other pieces of literature forbidden there (particularly anti-Stalinist Marxist classics, novelties in left-wing thought and revolutionary brochures). The magazine's motto – "For socialism and democracy in independent Ukraine" – stuck with Bojcun until the very end.

He became the pioneer in educating and researching Ukrainian studies in British universities (which up until then were part of Russian studies) in political science and history, at first in the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, then in the Ukraine Center in London Metropolitan University (unfortunately, one of the first students of Marco who travelled to study to Saint-Petersburg and Kyiv for a year has suffered from racism by OMON and Berkut forces because he was from Eritrea).

For his fluency in Ukrainian language, British TV producers invited Bojcun to filming documentary films in Perestroika Ukraine, like, about the aftermath of the Chornobyl disaster (a film made by him and Anatoliy Artemenko, [Children of Chernobyl](#), received international rewards and he also co-authored (for the first time) a book about similar themes called The Chernobyl Disaster), the excavation of NKVD victims' burial sites in Lviv or the People's Movement of Ukraine (Rukh) and the first free elections.

So he was able to interview party leaders like Kravchuk and Ivashko, but he was more interested in visiting dissenting voices, from Volodymyr Sterniuk, an archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church who was held under house arrest, to some social democrats from Lviv who took him to the Rukh leader Viacheslav Chornovil, hippie-anarchists and miners on strike. He also spoke with the common people whose unique life stories became the foundation of his book called East of the Wall.

In an independent Ukraine he actively tried to help either on the official level by consulting on EU policies and integration (specifically he warned government officials about mindless enthusiasm on free trade and proposed a proactive position on exporting Ukrainian products to the EU market) or on the grassroots level by analysing and critiquing oligarchic capitalism and the neoliberal tendencies, by supporting the trade union movement and the young Ukrainian left which has come anew after its destruction by the Stalinist terror and the demonisation by wild capitalism. It's no wonder that in an interview during the first years of the global 2008 crisis (the full version of which [has been published](#) by Commons) he was confident that Ukraine will be able to revive the labour movement which will fight for better salaries, social security and political rights.

Marco helped publish [several important books](#) like, for instance, the first Ukrainian release of To the Wave by the so-called "national Communists" Vasyl Shakhrai and Serhiy Mazlakh (edited by Andriy Zdorov), the re-release or "[Borotbism](#)" by Ivan Maistrenko (which was one of the first works which introduced the English-language readers to the Ukrainian Revolution) and the collection of works and speeches of [Leon Trotsky](#) on the Ukrainian question (who was most likely the sole international politician who raised the demand for an independent Ukraine in the 1930s) to which he wrote a foreword and came to its presentation in Kyiv. Its disruption by aggressive far-right, who more than a decade ago already had no other arguments for alternate thinkers except for violence, displeased

Marco and his Ukrainian colleague and fellow historian Yuriy Shapoval who were supposed to organise the book's discussion.

Marco Bojcun personally took part in other events organised by the new Ukrainian left, like, research seminars by the Visual Culture Research Center and "Economic Crisis or Crisis of Neoliberalism?" conference by *Commons*. His "[Approaches to the Study of the Ukrainian Revolution](#)" article for the "Journal of Ukrainian Studies" helped us conceptualise the Ukrainian Revolution's place in international revolutionary processes after 1917 and its uniqueness and the manuscript of his "Labour Movement and National Question in Ukraine" inspired the new generation of modern revolutionary history researchers like [Hanna Perekhoda](#).

And his scientific contributions on "pressing" themes also helped comprehend the genesis and contradictions of post-Soviet oligarchic capitalism. In particular in his article "[Strategy of development and accumulation mode: Ukraine's return to capitalism](#)" published in volume №7 of the *Commons* journal "Other World" he thoroughly described the formation of Ukraine's system of private accumulation of capital and the fusion of the big bourgeois class by Kuchma's government, the unsuccessful attempts at export-oriented and import substitution strategies, the growth of debt and disappointing results of market transformations for the populace.

His articles about modern-day Ukraine written for an international audience were no less important. Lots of them were included in a recently published "Towards a Political Economy of Ukraine: Selected Essays 1990-2015" collection. They represented a competent and progressive perspective (and a rare one sadly) of the dynamics of socio-economic, electoral, internal and external political processes in our country. Contrary to popular among certain Western leftists' schemes which replaced the class approach with "geopolitical" tropes, he relentlessly pointed out on the subjectivity of the Ukrainian and other nations which cannot be erased by the clutches of different imperialists.

In another printed article for *Commons*, "[The causes of Ukrainian crisis](#)", Bojcun was among the first to make an attempt at a thorough analysis of the origins of Yanukovich's regime's collapse, the social explosion on Maidan of 2013-2014 and the consequent conflict not with clichés of "civilisational" and "national-cultural" contradictions, but with the context of an objective crisis that is the type of capitalism that was established in the post-Soviet Ukraine. And since the beginning of last year's full-scale aggression Marco, who warned us about the rebirth of Russian imperialism in advance, regularly prepared [reports for the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign](#) about the course of war and news of the Ukrainian resistance.

Marco will be remembered by the way he is in his photos – with a bright smile which emits human decency and with a readiness to act, both of which he always kept no matter what. Everyone who had the chance to know him fondly [remembers](#) him as an honest, easy-going and welcoming person with a wide array of interests and passions. It is worth noting that, besides political science, economy and history, he was also professionally growing his grapes and making wine by being the founder of a wine-making cooperative Hawkwood Vineyard.

For more than half of the century he stood for the vision of a free, democratic and socialist Ukraine which was picked up here by like-minded people in the new millenia. His unwavering solidarity gave strength to Ukrainian workers and other progressive movements. And so the left-wing organisation "Social Movement" [commemorates](#) their deceased comrade and one of their teachers: "Although now when our independence is considered as an accomplished fact, although then he was one of those people who always reminded the world about Ukraine's existence and its fight for freedom... All his efforts were to make sure that our people got all the needed support in their fight against

injustice and imperialism, especially during the Russian aggression". In order to achieve the victory of the Ukrainian working people, Marco till the very end never stopped working for our common cause. Thank you, comrade, for your work which you never ceased until the end and inspiration which became your way of life. Rest in power.

Denys Pilash

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