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Marko Bojcun (1951-2023): A life for socialism and Ukraine's national rights

Monday 3 April 2023, by [NICHOLS Dick](#) (Date first published: 23 March 2023).

When Ukrainian writer, teacher and activist Marko Bojcun died in England on March 11 after a long fight against cancer, an important link snapped in the chain of struggle for the Ukrainian people's social and national emancipation.

Bojcun's work is required reading for anyone who wants to understand Ukraine's social, economic and political evolution — from the 1917 revolution against Tsarism's "prison house of nations" right up until Russian president Vladimir Putin's present offensive to reinsert Ukraine into "Russian space".

Bojcun's output revealed the breadth of his concerns: from his exhaustive [The Workers' Movement and the National Question in Ukraine \(1897-2018\)](#) and [Towards a Political Economy of Ukraine to East of the Wall](#), short stories partly based on the traumatic experiences of his parents' generation, trapped between Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism.

His 1988 book [The Chernobyl Disaster](#), co-authored by Viktor Haynes, remains a powerful antidote to the temptation, now rising with the climate emergency, to regard electricity co-generated with radioactivity as somehow safe.

For Ukrainian speakers, one of Bojcun's most important contributions was to collect in one book the main writings of Leon Trotsky on "the Ukrainian question".

Far-right hooligans made an unintended tribute to Trotsky's ongoing relevance to the politics of his country of birth by wrecking the book's 2013 Kyiv launch.

From Australia to Canada...

Bojcun's life began on the outskirts of the Australian coal-and-steel city of Newcastle, where he was born into a Ukrainian immigrant family in 1951.

His father worked on the railways and in the steelworks, while his mother looked after their small farm and helped lead the cultural life of the city's 200-strong Ukrainian community.

The couple had immigrated after Bojcun senior, who had served in [the SS's](#) murderous [Division Galicia](#), was finally cleared by the victorious Allies and then sent to a German internment camp for "displaced persons". There he met his future wife.

The couple led a separate existence in such camps, in Italy and Australia, until they finally settled together in Newcastle in 1949.

After twenty years, the family migrated to Canada because, in Bojcun's words in a 2017 interview on

the web site Commons, “my parents hoped that their children would become better Ukrainians if they saw what it would be like in a larger community.”

That parental scheme flopped, because the young Marko and other Canadian-Ukrainians of his generation straight away became involved in the movement against the Vietnam War. According to Bojcun, “we moved from the Ukrainian nationalism that we were brought up with to radical socialism, and some of us moved to Trotskyism.”

Relations within the community became fraught: “When the Ukrainian left emerged in Canada, it led to a lot of friction and tension with the Banderites [followers of Stepan Bandera, leader of the dominant ultra-right faction of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)].

“I remember sitting in a church in 1973, and during the sermon, the priest accused me personally in front of the whole congregation: that there were communists among us, that the KGB’s black hand had interfered in the Ukrainian community.

“My father was fired from his job for my activities. He worked for the Voice of Ukraine, a Banderite newspaper in Canada [...] The nationalists put pressure on all leftists because they were in charge, dominant in the organised Ukrainian community.”

The crime of Bojcun’s father was to refuse to spy on his son for the OUN.

...to Trotskyism and beyond

The inquisitorial priest was very wrong to see the hand of the KGB in Bojcun’s activity. Besides their opposition to the Vietnam War and support for Black rights and feminism, he and his contemporaries were throwing themselves into helping the dissident movements then emerging in the “Soviet bloc”.

He recalled: “We defended Soviet political prisoners, demanded rights for ethnic and cultural minorities; we followed the development of the dissident movement in Soviet Ukraine, the repressions of 1972.”

This was a reference to the arrest of writer [Valentyn Moroz](#) and the KGB-extracted recantation of [Ivan Dzyuba](#), author of *Internationalism or Russification?*, the classic study in the Ukrainian case of the governing bureaucracy’s perversion of Lenin’s policy towards the non-Russian nationalities of the Soviet Union.

His group went on a hunger strike that forced Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau to raise the repression of the Ukrainian dissidents with his Soviet counterpart Alexei Kosygin.

Strongly influenced by Trotsky and his work *The Revolution Betrayed*, Bojcun became a member of the Canadian section of the Trotskyist Fourth International, led by Ernest Mandel.

However, contrary to Trotsky’s characterisation of the Soviet Union as a “deformed workers state”, Bojcun thought it was “a dictatorship in which the bureaucracy, although it did not have private property, held the economy and the coercive levers of the state in its hands.”

Moreover, the Soviet Union was dominated “not only by the ideology of Stalinism — a one-party dictatorship as the face of the dictatorship of the proletariat — but also by a Great-Russian chauvinist party that oppressed the non-Russian peoples of the USSR, who had no right to self-determination, except in soft folklore cultural forms. The constitutional right to self-determination was not recognised in practice.”

Bojcun left the Fourth International in 1982 because its Canadian section “took an ambivalent position on the [1979] Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. I considered it a shameful step and demanded the immediate withdrawal of those troops.”

Abiding concerns

The abiding concern in Bojcun’s work is the often-fraught relation between the Ukrainian national movement in all its currents and the Ukrainian workers’ movement — especially in the concrete forms this took after the 1917 Bolshevik-led October Revolution.

In *The Workers’ Movement and the National Question in Ukraine* Bojcun revisits in detail the 1917–18 period, when the tensions between the new Soviet power and the rebellions of the non-Russian peoples peaked.

In Ukraine, this basic conflict was exacerbated by the fact that the industrial working class was predominantly Russian while the peasant majority was predominantly Ukrainian, with a large Jewish minority in both classes.

Tensions reached breaking point under the onslaughts of the Austro-Hungarian and German armies and then of the counter-revolutionary White armies and Polish forces, backed by British, French and US imperialist expeditions.

In the Ukrainian case, the Central *Rada* (“council”), the government born of the February overthrow of the Tsarist monarchy, opposed Ukraine declaring independence, but only up until the October Revolution,

It then allowed the passage of counter-revolutionary Don Cossack military units to pass through Ukraine, in turn provoking a declaration of war by Bolshevik-led Soviet Russia.

These events set off a chain of conflicts between and within the Ukraine’s various socialist formations — the different currents of the majority Socialist Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks, the Jewish Bund, the “Marxist-Zionist” Poale Zion, and the Bolsheviks themselves.

Indeed, Bolshevism in Ukraine was split three ways at its founding conference (in Taganrog in 1918). While agreeing that the power of the soviets should predominate in Ukraine as in Russia, the three tendencies disagreed on: the very existence of a Ukrainian right to self-determination (formally Bolshevik policy); Ukrainian independence; the need for a Ukrainian Communist Party separate from the Russian; and the Brest-Litovsk treaty, which in exchange for peace handed a vast amount of Ukraine to German imperialism.

Such differences were only partially settled through the victory of the Red Army in the Civil War, possible because of the peasant support won by the Bolshevik leadership eventually committing to the Ukrainians deciding their own future in relation to Russia.

However, by the end of the 1920s, after an enaissance in Ukrainian culture, the black night of Russian centralism descended once again on Ukraine, this time in “Soviet” guise. It culminated in the 1932–33 famine that took millions of lives as result of Stalin’s forced collectivisations.

How much of this horror was inevitable? How much did the imperative of defending the newborn revolution against its imperialist enemies conflict with respecting the national rights of the oppressed non-Russian nations?

Bojcun’s untimely death has ended any chance of his promised sequel to *The Workers’ Movement*

and the National Question in Ukraine, which would have greatly helped us answer these vital questions.

In the meantime, any socialist who wants to get to grips with today's Ukraine will give Bojcun's work the closest possible attention.

Selected publications (incomplete list)

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Dick Nichols is *Green Left's* European correspondent. This article draws on sources on the *Commons* web site: [“The obituary of Bojcun by Denis Pilash of Social Movement”](#), as well as Bojcun's 2017 interview by Maksym Kazakov, [a machine translation of which is available here.](#)]

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