

The Ukrainian underground university (1921-1925)

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Independent Ukrainian student union Pryama diya (Direct Action)

The situation before the First World War

The origins of this phenomenon date back to 1772. It was then that Eastern Galicia and Lviv itself were ceded to the Austrian Empire following the first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. On 9 March 1787, Emperor Francis II issued a decree establishing a separate Ukrainian department within the University of Lviv (Studium rutenum). However, the empire's education policy changed after the People's Spring of 1848-1849. As the Austro-Hungarian Empire was already populated by many different peoples, the authorities began to extend university teaching from German to minority languages.

The policy of the "patchwork monarchy" consisted in favouring the most influential in the areas of conflict between the different peoples and thus solving two important problems. The influential minority was loyal to the crown because of its privileges, while the other minority focused its resentment not on the crown itself, but on the region's ruling class. This situation led to conflicts between Poles and Ukrainians in Lviv.

The students have called for the creation of a separate Ukrainian university. They are organising mass meetings and taking their demands to parliament. This situation did not sit well with Polish chauvinists. Confrontations and violence were frequent in order to suppress the Ukrainian student movement. Vasyl Mudryi, who was a student at the Faculty of Philosophy at the time and later one of the founders of the Ukrainian Secret University, wrote in his book *The Ukrainian Secret University (1921- 1925)*:

"On 13 July 1899, a large assembly of Ukrainian students from all the Austrian universities was held in Lviv, devoted exclusively to university affairs... and demanded the creation of a fully-fledged Ukrainian university in Lviv. Naturally, this meeting aroused great indignation among the Poles... In hand-to-hand combat, up to 20 Poles and 3 Ukrainians were injured."

These words illustrate the great organisation of the student movement at the beginning of the 20e century and their determination to succeed in their demands. However, with the local authorities supporting the Poles in the conflict, repression began. Active students were expelled from the university and banned from holding meetings. This reactionary policy inevitably led to confrontation. The Polish students built barricades and forcibly prevented the Ukrainian students from entering the university. The confrontation was bloody. In 1910, for example, student Adam Kotsko was killed. As a result of the riots, several Ukrainian students were arrested, while the Polish students received only a warning. The local authorities "hushed up" the case of the student's murder.

It is important to note that Adam himself was actively involved in public activities, in particular, he

took part in the work of the academic youth society "Free Community" and the Volia workers' society. Volodymyr Kachmar writes about Adam Kotko in his book :

"Adam actively campaigned for electoral reform in Parliament, visited dozens of Galician villages and campaigned extensively among the villagers. The police arrested him in one of the villages for inciting the villagers to go on strike... He was released from prison after going on hunger strike. That same year, fascinated by the revolutionary events in Russia, he crossed the border illegally and toured on foot the towns and villages of the Naddniprianshchyna [\[1\]](#) region.

The situation after the First World War

In 1914, the First World War broke out. A greater, more global threat emerged, and the struggle for an independent Ukrainian university took a back seat. What's more, the front line between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires lay directly in Eastern Galicia. As a result of military operations, this territory changed hands. The issue became topical again after 1er November 1918. The so-called November Uprising took place and the Ukrainian National Rada, supported by the Ukrainian Sich riflemen, took power in Lviv and then throughout Eastern Galicia. The ZUNR [Western Ukrainian People's Republic] was proclaimed. A few days later, the Polish- Ukrainian war broke out, from 1918 to 1919. ZUNR lost all independence and was absorbed into Poland. Vasyl Mudryi writes on this subject:

"After taking Lviv, the Poles immediately occupied the University of Lviv. All the Ukrainian cathedrals were closed and the university was renamed the University of King Jan Kazemierz".

As a result, Ukrainian students found themselves in an even worse situation than before the Great War. Ukrainians were not allowed access to higher education. The Polish authorities only allowed those who had fought alongside the Polish army to study. But the majority of Ukrainians had fought on the side of the ZUNR, in the Ukrainian army in Galicia, and were therefore excluded from education. All Ukrainian teachers were dismissed and banned from all activities. Ukrainian teachers were even forbidden to give independent lessons.

A glimmer of hope appeared after 15 March 1923, when the Council of Ambassadors of the Entente confirmed Poland's sovereignty over the territory of Eastern Galicia, but on condition that the region be granted broad autonomy. These demands were ignored by the Polish side.

Origin, structure and operation

However, this situation, even before the ambassadors' meeting, prompted students and professors to found the Ukrainian Underground University in 1921, at a student congress. Vasyl Shchurat was elected its first rector. He is best known for his literary translation of Igor's *Countryside Tale*. Initially, the university opened three faculties: philosophy, law and medicine. It was planned that studies at the Faculty of Philosophy and Law would last four years, and those at the Faculty of Medicine two years, with an extension abroad. In 1922, a technical department was also opened, which later became the Higher polytechnic school. The first intake was 1,028 students, and every year around 1,000 new students were admitted. Classes were held in St George's Church or in private flats. The students even had university cards, as did the teachers. A programme was set up to enable students to continue their studies abroad. With the help of the diaspora, the degree from the Ukrainian Underground University was recognised and carried some weight outside Poland. In his article, Marian Mudryi tells us more about the university's teaching staff:

"In the history of the secret university, there have been three rectors: the literary critic V. Shchurat, the doctor M. Panchyshyn and the lawyer E. Davydiak (the mathematician M. Tchaikovsky, who was

elected rector after M. Panchyshyn and later resigned). The first deans of faculties are: M. Korduba (former teacher of the Chernivtsi gymnasium), V. Verganovskyi (former associate professor of the Department of Civil Procedure at the University of Lviv) and I. Kurovets (member of the Ukrainian Medical Society, State Secretary for Public Health in the first ZUNR government)."

It should be noted that in February 1923, the Curatorium [scientific council] of the Ukrainian higher schools in Lviv was created. This division was established in order to distinguish between the academic power of the university and the administration that dealt with the running of the university itself. For example, the Curatorium was directly responsible for funding the university and purchasing the necessary literature and equipment. It also arranged for students to travel abroad to pursue their studies. Another important task was to promote the importance of supporting the university project among the various Ukrainian political movements around the world.

Charitable contributions have become the university's main source of funding. The Ukrainian diaspora around the world has also become more active. It has used all its resources to raise funds for the Ukrainian university. For example, one of the first contributions was from the Ukrainian Workers' Party in New York, to the tune of one thousand US dollars. The university has survived thanks to this system.

The Polish authorities did not sit idly by and continued to do their utmost to eliminate any possibility of Ukrainian students gaining access to higher education. Initially, they tried to arrest students and teachers, but this had no serious impact. Then the Polish authorities launched a huge campaign against the financing of the university. They imposed huge fines on potential sponsors, cutting off the university's only source of funding.

Four years later, the university closed its doors. The actions of the Polish authorities in terms of fines and arrests had their effect. The fact that Ukrainian students were allowed to study at Polish universities if they fought in the armed forces of the Ukrainian People's Republic [2] also played an important role. Some students, disillusioned by these repressive methods, abandoned their studies. Some accepted defeat, while others joined more radical organisations such as the OUN.

Meanings

The story of the Ukrainian Underground University is not just the story of the existence of a unique structure in Galicia in the years 1921-1925. It is the story of the heroic struggle of students for their fundamental right to education. They organised meetings, protested and fought for their university. When they didn't succeed officially, they went underground. Why might this phenomenon be important and interesting for us?

Firstly, it is an important part of the Ukrainian national liberation struggle against the imperial and colonial governments of Austria-Hungary and Poland. It is relevant in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war and our struggle against Russian imperialism. This is a time when we can look back and explore the past for inspiration.

Secondly, this phenomenon demonstrates people's ability to unite when necessary. Creating an underground university with a thousand new students enrolled every year is no mean feat. What's more, a whole network of donations had been set up. This fact also resonates with our times, when a strong solidarity movement has developed in Ukraine to help the military and people affected by the war.

Thirdly, this is yet another illustration of how much students and young people can achieve by defending their rights and interests. The history of the Ukrainian underground University always

encourages us to unite and fight, whatever the difficulties of the struggle.

Direct Action

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Footnotes

[1] Historic region in the central part of Ukraine, in the Dnieper valley. NdT.

[2] In 1920, the Warsaw Pact, or Pilsudski-Petliura Agreement, was signed by representatives of Poland and the Ukrainian People's Republic. NdT.