

Why Ukrainian revolution matters for the Left and democratic history?

Wednesday 23 August 2023, by [STARODUBTSEV Vladyslav](#) (Date first published: 22 June 2023).

In March 1917 Ukrainian national-liberation movement formed Ukrainian Central Rada - an organization to self-govern Ukrainian affairs. Central Rada was formed by two radical-socialist parties. In its nature, Central Rada wasn't a parliament, but rather a coalition of trade-unionists, feminist circles, sport and military organizations, peasant unions, cooperative movement, soviet organizations, national minorities, civil and local representatives. Forces that formed CR were divided between more radical forces that wanted to build socialism nearly immediately, and more evolutionary forces. With time, also, supporters of more democratic approach or soviet approach.



Ukraine was home to massive cooperative movement. More than 60% of the population participated in one way or another in cooperatives. 4 million families were directly members of cooperation. Country was in process of organizing land reform and state industries, introducing working management

Ukrainian revolution immediately was opposed by Provisional Government — with threats even to coup Ukrainian government. But Provisional Government didn't stay too long, and was overthrown by Bolsheviks. They immediately started the war of imperialist conquest against Ukraine, and Ukraine declared firstly an autonomy in future democratic Russia, then Independence.

Ukrainian bolsheviks (later called by their enemies “national-communists” to discredit them - while in reality they were absolute internationalists opposing Russian nationalism) were participating in revolution and put an effort to build socialism here. But all creative tendencies of them were destroyed by Russian leninism — Russian chauvinist and totalitarian ideology, based on one-party rule and restoration of “one and indivisible” Russia.

Ukrainian Central Rada declared creation of Ukrainian People's Republic.

Some time later, Ukrainians in the Western part of Ukraine self-organized and declared Western Ukrainian People's Republic. A Republic less radical - governed by center-left Ukrainian People's

Labour Party, non-marxist democratic socialist Ukrainian Radical Party and marxist Ukrainian social-democratic party. Labour party agitated for partial socialization and promotion of cooperatives, as well as introduction of Universal basic income. Radical party, which had practically 30% votes from all of Ukrainians, promoted the idea of Guild Socialism, and social-democrats (roughly 9% of popularity share) oriented partially on bolsheviks (later accepting totalitarian platform), and partially on German traditions of socialism.

Ukraine was the first to implement national-territorial autonomy. Parties immediately become realization of different theories of radical democracy and self-governance as well as realization of different socialist visions, usually contradicting each other — one of syndicalism, one of Kautskiyte democratic-socialist state and another of Cooperative republic.

Ukrainians usually downplay importance of Ukrainian revolution — only to national-liberation of Ukraine. But in fact, Ukraine, the same as now, become fortpost against Russian imperialism, both totalitarian-leninist and white. As one historian pointed out, Western Ukrainian People's Republic could gather more than 100,000 soldiers with professional officers. With Ukrainian People's Republic, which even with highly disorganized army could gather 300,000 soldiers, would be enough to stop Russian imperialism and totalitarian ideology once and for all.

Isaac Mazepa and Matviy Stahiv paint a picture: victory of that army would mean massive victory for international socialism. In that time, socialist forces came to power in Baltic states, Belarus, Crimea, radical-socialist government was in Ukraine, Czechoslovakia soon was co-governed by moderate socialists and marxist social-democrats, and German revolution placed in power social-democratic forces. In Caucasus, three socialist republics were established: Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani. Social-democrats were strong in Finland. And in Russia, if Soviet and White forces to collapse, most popular force would be Socialist-Revolutionary party, party to the left of bolsheviks, which leader was in favor of confederalizing Russia, supporting self-determination of indegenous people and Ukrainian cause. Victory of Ukraine would empower everywhere in the world progressive, socialist and democratic forces. And victory of Bolsheviks or Whites would weaken or destroy young socialist forces, it meant global counterrevolution and grow of totalitarianism.

History didn't give Ukrainian revolution a chance. Polish state adopted increasingly xenophobic and imperialist stances, wishing to pursue its colonial ambitions rather than fighting bolshevism, it occupied Ukraine and Belarus. Even worse situation with bolsheviks, where all democratic elements were shutdown by party centralism, and party was fully dominated by Russian imperial nationalism. Need to hold unpopular dictatorship meant to build unseen before by level of control and repressions regime — blocking any possibility to socialism be built by bolshevik party.

Entente blocked Ukrainian revolution from buying arms abroad, instead massively supported White's ("one and indivisible" right-wing capitalist Russia) and Polish imperialist projects and division of Ukraine between White Russia and Poland. French forces were fighting against Ukrainians, and Entente organized an economic blockade against Ukrainian revolution. Bolshevik forces, everywhere they came, destroyed workers organizations, soviets and cooperatives, as well as peasant movement to establish one-party Russian rule, organized mass repressions against socialists, both in its colonial conquests, as well as organizing international inquisition - Third International - against socialists internationally. What was left - global reaction, dictatorship, man-made famine, complete denigration of rule of law.

Ukrainian story is usually forgotten and untold. Or even, supressed. Both by democratic and socialist movements abroad.

Later, Ukrainian peasants and worker's rebellions against Bolshevik rule failed. The same hapenned

in Georgia and in other places.

Defeat of Eastern European and Caucasian socialism and establishment of imperial and totalitarian interpretation of leftism as dominant was one of the greatest tragedy for the whole Left and Democratic movement — as the history could go in absolutely different way.



On picture — Ukrainian Sich Striltsy medal [1]. It says: “do not cry, but fight and win”

Vladyslav Starodubtsev Historian, member of the Ukrainian socialist organization Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement).

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

Footnotes

[1] Sich Striltsy – a military organization formed by socialist youth of Western Ukraine, and then expanded to all-national organization with start of the First World War. Named after Cossack “Sich” to resemble idealized hyper-democratic and peasant traditions of Ukraine. Sich Striltsy were military wing of Ukrainian parties in Galicia and main revolutionary force in 1918.