

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Ukraine > Women (Ukraine) > **Olena Stepaniv, Ukrainian, the world's first female officer**

Olena Stepaniv, Ukrainian, the world's first female officer

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We publish the contribution of Vladyslav Starodoubtsev which appeared on his page [Facebook](#).



Olena Stepaniv was the first female officer in the history of modern armies. She was a member of the Ukrainian Radical Party [1], a co-operator and a feminist.

Born into a family of progressive priests, Olena Stepaniv grew up in the atmosphere of the social and national liberation movement. Her father opened a Prosvita branch in a village not far from Brody) and defended the peasants against the local landowner.

As a child, she received an education, joined the Plast sports society and grew up listening to lectures by the historian Hrushevsky. In sports and student associations, she organised lectures and debates on the importance of women's participation in political activities and, in the event of war, in military activities. She fought for the equality of women in Ukrainian society. During her student years, she took part in the organisation of clandestine circles that disseminated socialist literature, particularly that of Drahomanov and Russian socialists and anarchists.

At that time, the activities of underground political circles and Ukrainian sports organisations were extremely closely linked. Sports sections, driven by a sense of military combat, formed underground circles to study guerrilla theory and marksmanship. Józef Piłsudski was one of the famous lecturers who spoke in the Stepaniva group.

"He [Piłsudski] spoke of the absolute necessity of military training, because ignorance of military affairs is the cause of the failure of the Russian revolution since 1905, when the workers were given weapons, rapid-fire rifles and even, as in Moscow, cannons, and they did not know how to use them and lost. The caller looked modest. He was dressed in a grey uniform, tied up to the neck, holding a matzevah [small mace] and speaking in a flat, hushed voice, but there was a certain power in his words. The presentation was imbued with a single thought: the need to prepare for an armed

struggle against Moscow. The small hall at the Sich was full, and his words impressed the audience. Olena Stepaniv was the first to react to the future Marshal's speech: "The Ukrainians also have their own scores to settle with the Poles, who make no secret of their plans to "destroy Rus" and are systematically implementing them. So the question is: how can we walk together if our paths are different? We want the Polish people to be free, to create their own state on their ethnographic lands, to enjoy total freedom and all the advantages of life. But we know that all circles of the Polish population aspire to the restoration of a great Polish state, which should also include the Ukrainian lands as far as the river Dnipro [Dnieper]. Those who are enslaved and aspire to freedom, while thinking about how to enslave others, in no way deserve freedom. If the speaker wishes to defeat Moscow and bring freedom to the Polish and Ukrainian peoples, he should have made this position clear in his report today and in his speeches in general. And not just to formulate it, but to implement it consistently".

Stepaniv went on to talk about the existence of two camps among Ukrainian students: those in favour of training a cultural and administrative intelligentsia to organise a free Ukraine, and those in favour of training officers and soldiers. Stepaniva belonged to the militant part of the radical student movement, which was preparing for the "Great War".

On 14 December 1912, a women's meeting was held in the Sokol-Bat'ka building, preceded by extensive organisational work carried out by Olena Okhrymovych-Zalizniak and Olena Stepaniv under the direction of Konstantyna Malyska. The meeting was attended by representatives of women's organisations and the women's community, the Women's Circle of the Ukrainian Pedagogical Society and the Students' Section. The meeting was chaired by Olena Sichynska (mother of Myroslaw Sichynski), opened by Maria Biletska, and introduced by Konstantyna Malyska with a report on the political situation. Olena Stepaniv, who spoke on behalf of the Women's Section, spoke about the need for women's participation in political life, work in the event of war and the admission of women to the National Council that could be formed with the outbreak of war. The minutes of the meeting were published in two essays, slightly modified and supplemented, which were published in a separate booklet entitled *Women in the Old Ukraine*, edited by K. Malyska. The meeting adopted the following resolution: "1. The meeting of Ukrainian women held in Lviv on 14 December 1912, assessing the importance of the current political situation in the region, calls on the general population of women to organise themselves into a community which will cover all areas where the work of women in wartime can bring the best results and will morally and materially support the activities of men's organisations" writes Oksana Knykyska in her monograph on the activities of Ukrainian women.

"This is why, although European diplomats have unfurled the white banner of peace as their political horizon, we continue to stand under the flag of the war cry. A people like ours, fighting in every field for the right to life and development, must be on constant alert, because we know neither the day nor the hour when the age-old enemy will decide to strike again. But these rivalries could be to our advantage. Not all clouds bring hail, not all lightning kills - there are clouds that bring fruitful rain to the barley fields, and there is lightning that illuminates the darkness and clears the atmosphere. We wait for the fateful lightning bolt that will show us our own path, our own purpose."

She took part in the liberation struggle as a member of the Ukrainian Sich Striltsy.

Olena Stepaniv joined the Ukrainian Sich Striltsy [Galician Ukrainian Army] and its women's cheta (platoon). She was an officer in this cheta. She showed great talent during the battle on Makivka Mountain in 1915. She took an active part in the Ukrainian revolution in the revolutionary army formed on the basis of the Sich Striltsy. After the Western People's Republic lost the war, she became dissatisfied with left-wing politics and politics in general and turned to academic work. Over time, the defeat of the ZUNR [Western Ukrainian People's Republic] led to disillusionment with

socialist ideals and distanced her from the Ukrainian Radical Party, to which she had previously devoted much energy. She was also disillusioned with feminism. Initially, she became close to the Ukrainian National Labour Party [2], but this party also disappointed her. She devoted her energies to scientific and cooperative activities and became a member of the audit committee of the Union of Ukrainian Cooperatives. She devoted herself to scientific work and cooperation.

From 1949 to 1956, she was imprisoned in Soviet camps. After a significant deterioration in her health due to these terrible conditions of life, she was released. She returned to Lviv, where she died a few years later.

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Translation Patrick Le Tréhondat

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Footnotes

[1] Ukrainian Radical Party, a non-Marxist socialist party founded by Ivan Franko, M. Pavlyk and others with a pluralist socialist programme. It aimed for social control of the means of production and land, the abolition of wage slavery, Ukrainian independence and decentralisation. It was influenced by the ideals of Drahomanov, Proudhon, G.D.H. Cole and its own theories.

[2] Ukrainian National Labour Party, a short-lived nationalist party with the slogan “Ukraine for Ukrainians”. The party was created after an internal split in the centre-left People’s Labour Party in 1922 between the pro-Soviet and pro-Polish wings. Only two forces opposed the Polish and Soviet occupation of Ukraine: the nationalists and the radicals. Those who were against radical ideology, but also against compromises with Soviet Russia or Poland on issues of Ukrainian independence, created a National Labour Party. Later, the party’s members became radicalised in a proto-fascist direction.