

Ukraine: Communists Opposed to National Liberation

Ukraine's Bolsheviks (1917-1923)

Thursday 2 November 2023, by [VELYCHENKO Stephen](#) (Date first published: 14 October 2023).

Background.

At least 5.7 million of tsarist Ukraine's population in 1917 were classified as urban. Declared Russians were approximately 10% of the total population, 33% of the urban population, 43% of the population in the eight largest cities, and 52 per cent in the four largest cities. Of all workers, 17% came from non-Ukrainian provinces and, of these, 70% were Russians in 1897. Ukrainian speakers averaged between 30-50% of all urban industrial workers. Of all Ukrainian-speaking workers, 20% were urban industrial workers, and 70% of workers in settlements not classified as cities. Pre-1917 statistics did not record the bilingual.

Ukrainians were the dominated native majority for whom social mobility was contingent on learning a foreign language and adopting foreign cultural norms. All had to learn some Russian. Many assimilated and considered themselves Russian – like later marshal Klimenty Voroshilov (Voroshylo). In line with “the colonizer’s image of the colonized”, many considered themselves “Little Russians”. Socially mobile ethnic Ukrainians who linked their own identity with a rural backwardness and poverty they sought to escape, equated Russian national identity with the European modernity they aspired to. There was no direct relationship between public language-use and national affiliation. Families could include “Little Russians” Ukrainian nationalists, and Russian imperialists. The loyalties of educated declared Ukrainian or Russian activists in Ukraine were not necessarily those of the populations they represented. In the empire, as often as not, people’s language use and loyalties depended on circumstances.

A century of direct rule from St. Petersburg, no border between Russian and Ukrainian provinces, and Russian-language education, administration, publishing, and high culture, meant that Ukraine’s Russian settlers did not become an immigrant minority whose social mobility depended on learning a foreign language and assimilating into the host community. Although they did not see themselves as such, they can be classified as a dominant colonializer minority. Some Ukrainian activists at the time did so and accordingly categorized Ukrainian peasants as “white niggers.”

By December 1919, Ukrainian socialists had failed to establish an independent state – the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR). The Ukrainian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (UPSR) and the Ukrainian Social Democratic Labor Party (USDLP) had been the ruling parties. Their left wings were pro-Bolshevik and in early 1919 formed separate parties that rallied support for the Bolsheviks, as did Jewish leftists in the General Jewish Workers Union (Bund). The Bolsheviks had forced all these parties to disband by 1925.

The left wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) was called the Bolsheviks – renamed between 1918 and 1925 as the Russian Communist Party (RCP). Its leaders considered themselves the sole legitimate representatives of workers in the entire tsarist empire and not just the ethnic Russian provinces. The overwhelming majority of Ukraine's Bolsheviks were Russians and Russified non-Russians. Almost 65 per cent of members were in Kharkiv and Katerynoslav provinces where approximately 45% of Ukraine's Russians lived. The Bolsheviks controlled not more than one-third of Ukraine's approximately three hundred soviets. In 1917 they had majorities only in two city soviets — 88 per cent in Luhansk, 60 per cent in Kyiv. Of the 68 of Ukraine's almost 300 soviets in Petrograd at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets, 43 supported the Bolshevik seizure of power.

Ukraine's Congress of Soviets that met to ratify the Bolshevik coup in Kharkiv in December 1917, represented no more than 49 of the 140 soviets of the Donbass region and 95 of Ukraine's soviets. The "Ukrainian Peoples Republic of Soviets" set up its government with the help of approximately 4,500 troops and Red Guards, including approximately 2,100 from Moscow, and claimed authority over five Ukrainian provinces. Bolsheviks in Ukraine's other four provinces remained under the Petrograd Soviet of Peoples Commissars (SNK). This first Bolshevik government sought more powers than its Petrograd superiors were prepared to allow. Some of Ukraine's pro-Bolshevik workers supported it as a Ukrainian, not Russian, soviet government.

The Kharkiv "People's Secretariat" arrived in Kyiv on 30 January (12 February) 1918, from where the Germans evicted it in March. That month, the Brest-Litovsk Treaty[KB1] forced the Bolsheviks to recognize the UNR as an independent state including the 9 former tsarist Ukrainian provinces. Central leaders then placed all soviets in Ukraine under the authority of its Kharkiv affiliate. That decision explicitly avoided legitimating Ukraine's Bolshevik "Republic" in national terms — which it defined as a "soviet republic on Ukrainian territory." That July, Russia's Bolsheviks allowed their comrades from Ukraine, in exile in Moscow, to form a provincial sub-unit called the Communist Party (bolshevik) of Ukraine (CPU). Previously, Ukraine's provincial party units had no ties with one another. The CPU's founding resolutions, specifying it was a subsection of the RCP and that Ukraine and Russia were "indivisibly tied" economically, remained secret until March 1919. Few outside the top leadership knew about this subordination, because like this resolution, other party instructions subordinating the Ukr. SSR and its CPU to Russian ministries and the RCP were also secret during the period under review. Most remained unpublished until after 1956 – some until after 1989.

When Germany collapsed in November 1918, Russian Bolsheviks withdrew their recognition of the UNR, and created a second government for Ukraine in the Russian town of Kursk. On 19 November Stalin arrived there and told the local leaders: "The Central Committee of the RCP has decided to create a Soviet government -- headed by Piatakov." On 29 November, Lenin explained to the Red Army commander in chief that he had allotted Ukraine a fictitious government so as a future attack would not look like an occupation. In January 1919, this government proclaimed the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic. Formally, by 1920, the Bolsheviks ruled all of former tsarist Ukraine. In reality, their control did not extend far beyond city limits. People alienated by Bolshevik brutality fought Red Army troops under anti-Bolshevik warlords (otaman) – most of whom supported either the UNR government-in-exile, or Nestor Makhno. Some fought only in defense of their own rural county. Overwhelming Russian military superiority, terror, physical exhaustion and policy concessions ended armed resistance by 1923.

Party Politics and Structure

The RSDLP in Ukraine was a Russian organization, not the party of an oppressed nation. No more than 7% of CPU members in 1918 declared themselves Ukrainian. That rose to 19% in 1920 due to an influx of former Left – Ukrainian SRs (Borotbists). Iuryi Lapchinskii, a Russian Bolshevik since

1905 and CPU member, left the party in 1920. In an open letter, he condemned the Bolsheviks as "an organization of Russian and Russified workers," who even after 1917, "regarded the attempt to creat a [bolshevik] Ukrainian territorial national state as a farce to fool Ukrainian chauvinists and foreigners...." Nikolai Bukharin in 1925 described the CPU as "Russian-Jewish." Russians and Russified secular Jews together averaged 80% of the delegates to the six RCP congresses between 1917 and 1924. In 1922, 72% of RCP members were Russians. Jews and Ukrainians averaged 6% each. That year, of 56 000 CPU members, 14% were Ukrainian, 50% were Russian Red Army soldiers, 80% were urban, and 13% were workers. 92 per cent were office workers.

Ukraine's Bolsheviks were divided into "federalist" minority and "centralist" majority factions that differed over issues of administrative prerogatives. The former sought maximum autonomy. The latter regarded Ukraine as a province of the Russian Socialist [\[KB2\]](#) Federal Soviet Republic (RSFSR). This internal division was fluid. Kremlin backing determined which group triumphed in any given policy issue. Russian leaders considered Ukraine's "Republic" status a propaganda ploy. In April 1918, when they decided the ploy no longer necessary, Stalin told his local subordinates: "You have played enough at being a government and a republic, that's it, time to end the game." The next spring, Ukraine's third Bolshevik government, like the second, was dominated by Moscow appointed "centralists." "Centralist" Ukrainian Bolshevik Dmytro Manuisky [\[KB3\]](#) frankly referred to the Ukrainians in it as decoration - like the natives that colonial powers invited to join local administration.[\[KB4\]](#)

In 1918, although officially recognizing the independent German-backed Ukrainian state, in their publications party officials wrote there was no independent Ukraine of any sort, only a German occupation that had divided Russia. They avoided using the word Ukraine. They wrote about "the southern part of the German-occupied provinces in the east," that when the occupation ended, would again be "southern Russia." The first and second centralist-dominated CPU conferences announced that there was no Ukrainian national liberation struggle, merely a "class struggle" for unity with Russia.

"Federalist" Georgii Piatakov headed Ukraine's Bolshevik government in November 1918. Russia's Revolutionary Military Council decreed on 12 November that Ukraine's Revkom (Revolutionary Committee - temporary Bolshevik dominated administrative unit) was subordinate to it. Realizing he was totally subject to Moscow, Piatakov complained and asked Stalin on 7 December whether his "provisional" government was "necessary only for fictional purposes or as a real directing centre ...?" There is no known reply. In January 1919, Lenin replaced him with "centralist" Khristian Rakovskii. In a circular to local party officials that same month he explained that Ukraine's Worker and Peasant government was created by the RCP Central Committee and was in no way independent. Its army was labeled "Ukrainian soviet army" so that there could be no talk about "an offensive by Russian armies." Bolshevik publications that year explained the republic structure was a temporary organizational expedient to last only for the duration of the war. They dismissed the need for a separate Ukrainian party and independent Ukraine on the grounds that the tsarist economy had integrated the empire into a single unit. In April and November 1919, secret RCP resolutions specified that Ukraine and Russia had to be "fused." A December 1919 Politburo instruction specified the Ukr. SSR could have no separate ministries because that would complicate "the future fusion of the two republics." The Union Treaty of 1920, retained the "Republic" structure, but the "Republics" in reality were provinces in the RSFSR. Russia's SNK controlled all governmental administrative functions in Bolshevik ruled territory.

Ukraine's Red Army came from Russia. Leaders were wary of recruiting Ukrainians in Ukraine. Russian commanders did not trust their partisan Ukrainian military units who got less pay than Russian units in Russia, fewer provisions, and fewer arms than Russian formations sent from Russia. Until 1921, most of Ukraine was administered by Bolshevik controlled Revkoms. In 1920, of

Ukraine's provincial, district, and county executive committees, 56 % were Revkoms subject only to Moscow. Lenin rejected "federalist" complaints about the mass influx of Russian party members. The Ukrainian Communist minister of housing in August 1920 described Ukraine's subordination in a letter of resignation. His ministry, like the rest, was simply a branch of the RCP whose officials totally ignored them: "The administrative division of Ukraine exists only for the eyes of the 'citizen' idiot [hlupaka]."

The Bolshevik Victory

Ukraine's Bolsheviks had a social and political base among the Russian and Russified urban population in the country's big south-eastern cities, the rural and urban lumpen proletariat, and leftist Bund and Borotbist supporters. Broader popular support their propaganda initially attracted dissipated once people experienced the brutal chaotic reality of commissar rule. In the final analysis, Ukraine's bolsheviks took and held power primarily thanks to Russia's Red Army.

Bolshevik leaders at the time knew they had militarily conquered Ukraine. Red Army commander Mikhail Muraviov, who took Kyiv in January 1918, proclaimed that he had brought Red Power to Ukraine on the points of bayonets from the north. On 17 January 1919, Pravda wrote: "The Red Army paved the road to grain when it conquered Ukraine." Vladimir Antonov-Ovseienko, who commanded attacking Bolshevik troops in January 1919, explained his task as follows: "We must occupy Ukraine with our armies. In April 1919, Lenin called his takeover of Ukraine a conquest. And fast." In May 1920 Feliks Dzierzhinskii, head of the Secret Police (CheKa), wrote to his deputy: "Ukraine must and can be conquered only by the daily persistent work of workers from the center who come here for the long term." Leon Trotsky, in September 1920, wrote: "Soviet power in Ukraine has held its ground up to now (and not well) chiefly by the authority of Moscow, Great Russian [russkii] communism and the Russian [russkaia] Red army." In December 1919, "centralist" Bolshevik Dmytro Maniulsky, told delegates at the Eighth RCP congress: "They [Ukrainians] beat us [Bolsheviks] for a long time and, in the end, we naturally realized that banal truth that, first, without Russian communists, Petrograd and Moscow workers, Soviet Power cannot be established in Ukraine." UNR agent reports from the autumn of 1920 related that incoming Russians would tell the locals: "We conquered you honkies [khakhly, pejorative for Ukrainians], so shut up and give us what we want."

In 1922, Rakovskii, chairman of Ukraine's SNK said: "Our [CPU] experience showed us that, if we did not have behind us a power like Soviet Russia, the revolution in Ukraine would have died and today we would have had another government here... The establishment of the proletarian dictatorship in Ukraine ... is possible only with the help of Soviet Russia and the Russian Communist Party." In 1923, another important Bolshevik stated: "Soviet power did not triumph in Ukraine by virtue of its own strength, but only with the help of a strengthened Soviet Russia and while the German army was collapsing." Kyivan Old Bolshevik I. M. Lapidus wrote:

The whole course of our revolution clearly showed that in the borderlands it was not conquered [zavoevaniia] by the local proletariat but almost always was conquered [sic] by the proletariat from the center, and that Soviet power in the kulak-cossack borderlands is nothing other than military occupation, in particular, in Ukraine... the Khakhol has more faith in his [local-born] Jew than the foreigner Muscovite because most Russians truly behave like conquerors....

There is no known Bolshevik policy statement calling for the extermination of Ukrainians, as there was in the case of the Russian Don Cossacks, but analagous attitudes were likely among some in Ukraine. Lenin in *How to Organize Competition* (1917), dehumanized his opponents and called for their extermination. After 1918 he labeled them insects, vermin, parasites, and bugs.

The Red army targeted civilians. In 1920, 20% of the Red Army, one million troops, of whom no more than 10% were Ukrainian, supplemented by more than 200 000 men in special punishment battalions, were fighting in Ukraine. In May that year Dzierzhinskii informed Lenin: "Our chekists here [in Ukraine] work like in a foreign country." In July he wrote: "The absence of Ukrainian chekists [in our organization in Ukraine] is a great hindrance in the fight." In 1921, the CheKa in Ukraine numbered 22 000 alongside an equal number of secret informers. In 1917 in the entire empire, the tsarist secret police was no more than 15 000 strong.

In April 1919, Bolshevik troops began destroying entire insurgent villages using heavy artillery. Their leaders, who realized indiscriminate destruction was unwise, as it would kill Bolshevik supporters alongside everybody else, that same month forbade this tactic. Ukrainian resistance persisted. In April 1920, instructions marked top secret again allowed commanders to destroy and eradicate entire villages that offered strong resistance. In July, Lenin ordered the First Cavalry Army (15,000-20,000 troops and even more horses) to sweep through each Ukrainian county twice, stripping them of everything it could, and shooting whoever resisted. That December, Bolshevik leaders issued another instruction specifying that only houses and property of partisans were to be destroyed, not entire villages. Whether troops stopped razing entire villages, and how many villages they totally destroyed between April 1919 and 1923, is unknown.

Sergei Zorin, Leningrad's First Secretary, was a Russian Bolshevik who thought Russia had to control Ukraine and extract its resources by any and all means. At an April 1919 CPU Central Committee meeting, he stated that people were starving in Petrograd and demanded Ukrainian grain: "We do not recognize any kind of nations." If anyone opposed grain collections in Ukraine: "then send them to the other world, thousands, tens of thousands, and, if necessary, 100,000 of those idiots fools or villains [*negodaev*], but don't waste time." He got a round of applause. Opinion at the meeting was that the Bolsheviks had no need of Ukraine's population - only its resources for use elsewhere.

In late 1920, a comrade Turkin, who commanded a food requisition unit, told a Ukrainian communist in the town of Pavoloch: "We will burn down these damned Kyiv, Podillia, and Volyn provinces, not leaving one stone on top of another and let all know just what the Communist party is" - a second hand report that suggests Zorin's views circulated within the party. In another report submitted to the UNR government in exile, a Ukrainian prisoner of war, who had traveled through Bolshevik-controlled Kyiv province during his escape in early 1920, claimed that the head of the Workers and Peasants Inspectorate of the First Cavalry Army, a man named Latipov, had told him that he didn't care if 75 per cent of Ukraine's population died of hunger. If they didn't, they would be shot anyways. That would make the remaining 25 per cent obedient: "We need Ukraine, not its people."

Consolidation

With the end of armed conflict in 1922, Stalin concluded "broad autonomy" had been an unnecessary concession intended to demonstrate "Moscow's liberalism" that had, unexpectedly, created people "who demanded real independence in all aspects." He counselled Lenin that September to dispense with the propaganda about independent "Republics" that had been necessary to conquer Ukraine. He reminded Lenin of the secret resolutions from April and November 1919 that instructed party officials to "carefully prepare plans to fuse Ukraine and Russia." Dzierzhinskii also advocated abolishing republics. He thought it a great misfortune that all the "borderland governments" took themselves seriously "as if they could be independent governments."

In discussions about Republic status and prerogatives in 1920-1922, Ukraine's "federalists" complained about the centralization to Moscow where the Frunze Commission recommended the country be organized as a confederation. The then incapacitated Lenin thought only war and foreign

affairs should be under Moscow's jurisdiction. Stalin, then Commissar of Nationalities, ignored Lenin, the complaints and the Frunze recommendations to devolve administrative power away from Moscow. The resulting USSR, proclaimed in 1922, was a sham federation; a façade behind which the RCP held power and controlled the territories it ruled. "Centralists" and central ministry officials ignored concessions Stalin did grant in matters of language and culture, refusing to use Ukrainian for government business in Ukraine.

After 1922 the RCP remained, organizationally, the centralized Russian structure it had been before 1917. This subject did not figure in the deliberations preceding the formation of the USSR. Party leaders did not repeal Lenin's rules on party organization that forbade non-Russians autonomous sections within it. As Iakov Sverdlov had reminded comrades in November 1917: "We [Lenin Stalin and Trotsky] consider the creation of a separate Ukrainian party undesirable no matter what it is called or what program it adopts." An 8th RCP Congress resolution of March 1919 reaffirmed that decision. It specified the RCP would not re-organize itself as a federation of independent communist parties. The various non-Russian "Republic" central committees: "... have the rights of regional committees of the party and are completely subordinated to the CC [central committee] RCP."

Under tsarist rule what happened in the Ukrainian provinces was decided beyond their borders - in St. Petersburg. Under Bolshevik rule what happened in Ukraine was again decided beyond its borders - in Moscow.

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