

The progressive legacy of the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-1921) - Part 3

Monday 24 June 2024, by [STARODUBTSEV Vladyslav](#) (Date first published: 24 May 2024).

As the Ukrainian population is predominantly peasant, land reform was at the heart of the economic policy of the Ukrainian People's Republic. The debate which took place opposed the ideas of global socialization and those of the distribution of land into small farms. The latter option meant that each peasant was to be given as much land as he could work on and that the land was to be distributed fairly. Large lands and economically important lands were to be nationalized.

Regarding the "labor question", the Ukrainian People's Republic was one of the first countries to introduce the eight-hour day, collective bargaining, freedom to strike and support for trade unions. In the turmoil of revolution and war, which had caused immense destruction in Ukraine, large-scale corporate socialization was impossible. Instead, the Ukrainian People's Republic opted for an interim model, in which workers' committees managed enterprises with the state or private owners. A proactive labor inspection was established, collecting statistics, maintaining a permanent dialogue with workers and commissions, informing workers of their rights and training them in defending their rights and organizing. This approach is very different from the current philosophy of the labor inspectorate, which is a passive body dealing only with complaints.

Cooperative enterprises were encouraged as an alternative to private enterprises, but which continued to exist alongside them. However, the Ukrainian economy was already mostly organized in cooperatives, while state-controlled or private sector companies were in the minority. The cooperative organization of the Ukrainian economy meant, in the language of the 20th century, something like "worker-owned" economic units according to the principle "one person, one vote". Within the framework of the federalist and municipalist conceptions of the Central Rada [parliament], local authorities and self-management bodies were given broad autonomy and means to manage local problems.

The majority of members of the Ukrainian socialist-revolutionaries favored more radical solutions, but they lacked experienced cadres to implement their demands. The reforms proposed by the Republic were very radical and modern, had never been experienced before and required large administrative capacities which the Ukrainian People's Republic did not have and which were under great pressure due to the post-war situation. -revolutionary and military. Maintaining the army, fighting famine, containing epidemics and forcing factories to open to avoid the collapse of the entire economy were priorities and made other reforms difficult.

National autonomy and Jewish rights

The influence of the great 19th century Ukrainian socialist philosopher Mychailo Drahomanov (1841-1995) inspired Ukrainians to demand national autonomy for all nations. Drahomanov seems in particular to have influenced the attitude of Ukrainians towards the Jewish nation. While most (non-

Jewish) social democrats did not recognize Jews as a national or cultural group in their own right, but only as a religious group, it was Drahomanov who called for their recognition as a nation and the Jewish national autonomy and which launched the debate. Subsequently, most Ukrainian parties took up demands for autonomy in their programs and, as Henry Abramson writes [1], some Ukrainian circles adopted the demand for Jewish autonomy even before Jewish organizations did so themselves. During the revolution, the Ukrainian Central Rada was led by the most prominent supporters of minority rights, including its president Mychaylo Hrushevskiy. The Ukrainian government distinguished itself positively on this point from the Russian provisional government. The latter advocated "equal rights", but fell short of this requirement and even tended to adopt chauvinistic positions when this equal rights was implemented in Ukraine. The Central Rada became a strong contender for the sympathy of the Jewish minority, which at the time was strongly oriented toward Russia.

All Jewish parties supported the proclamation of the Ukrainian People's Republic, both the socialist-Zionist parties and the autonomist parties. However, conflicts arose with Ukrainians' aspirations for independence. "For socialists, preserving the political integrity of the territory was particularly important for maintaining the broadest possible 'revolutionary front,' while for Zionists it meant a potential mobilization of the greatest mass of Jews to their own political purposes. » [2] The Jewish parties were part of an overall Russian policy, while the Ukrainian parties were determined to liberate their country from Russian foreign and colonial domination. There was no popular Jewish-Ukrainian identity, as most Jews belonged to the urban middle class, while Ukrainians were isolated in the villages as a lower class. All this led to a lack of understanding of the objectives of the two movements, a general bad atmosphere and hostility based on class affiliation.

When war broke out between Ukraine and Bolshevik Russia, the Central Rada began to draft a law on national autonomy for minorities – and a first wave of pogroms took place at the same time (in January 1918). The Central Rada partially failed in one of the most important tasks of the revolution: maintaining order and organizing an effective and disciplined army. The lack of administrative capacity and officers was an objective condition difficult to overcome.

The influence of minorities within the Central Rada was comparatively stronger than that of other representatives. For example, when Ukraine began preparing its land reform, a Polish MP, who represented the interests of Polish landowners, protested against the reform and threatened to resign. This protest led to include some exceptions in the reform.

By the third Universal (declaration of the Ukrainian People's Republic on relations with the Russian Republic), the Ukrainian government had created ministries for each "major nationality". There were Jewish, Russian and Polish ministries. The law on national autonomy, introduced by the Fourth Universal, further considerably expanded the influence and representation of minorities. The law provided that each minority had to maintain a list on which citizens could register themselves and, depending on the size of the list, Ukraine wanted to allocate a proportional share of the budget for the national activities of minorities. National associations were created and granted the right to take legislative initiatives and govern themselves within the limits set by the Constituent Assembly.

Although the autonomy law was the most advanced in the world at the time, it also had flaws. The national identity listed on the lists was based solely on personal choice and could be easily changed. This opened up the possibility of joining a national association that granted the most preferential conditions (such as tax benefits and financial support). There was also the question of mixed identities: did people consider themselves Jewish (Russified), Ukrainian, both, or neither?

The adoption of the law was linked to a national tragedy – because the fourth Universal, which was passed at the time, was rejected by all nationalities, except the Poles. The Jewish and Russian

parties abstained or voted against, showing that they were more in favor of Ukraine's autonomy than its independence. Ukrainians felt demoralized, as they did not feel understood or supported in their struggle.

"All honest people of Ukraine must support with all their might the work of the General Secretariat and local administrations in their fight against pogroms, the legacy of tsarism... We have issued decrees stipulating that every Ukrainian must consider his freedom as uncertain until we are freed from national hatred and anti-Jewish pogroms, a black mark on our face which pushes the whole world to consider us as a people still enslaved.

Oleksandr Schulhyn , Minister of Nationalities Affairs, October 1917 [3]

As General Secretary for Military Affairs of the Ukrainian People's Republic, I call on all of you, my comrades and friends, to act unitedly in these difficult times. Be organized and united, one for all and all for one. Our army is young, it has only just been established, but it will live up to the reputation of our ancestors. Everyone must unite around the Central Rada and its general secretariat. Do not tolerate pogroms or behavior contrary to public order, as tolerating such activities will bring shame to the name of the Ukrainian army. There must be no pogroms on our territory. I have already called on Ukrainian troops to protect order in Ukraine. Be ready to put an end to all pogromist activity throughout Ukraine, especially on the railways... I can only place this responsibility on your shoulders, and I have confidence in you, Ukrainian soldiers. »

Symon Petlioura , November 1917 [4]

Throughout 1917, the Ukrainian government managed to prosecute pogromists, protect the Jewish population, and successfully prevent pogroms. The Jewish Military Union supported the Ukrainian Central Rada, and in December 1917 they together called for the creation of Jewish armed forces in order to defend against pogroms [5]. This call, however, encountered opposition from Jewish socialist parties, who saw it as hostility and a break with the Russian Republic. Such units were not formed until January 1918. Henry Abramson suggests that the creation of such units at an earlier date could have prevented or limited the massive wave of pogroms of 1919.

The Ukrainian People's Republic's growing lawlessness and limited control over its territory eventually led to an increase in pogroms, carried out by both the regular Ukrainian army and the atamans (warlords) loyal to it - a large gap then opened up between the government and the governed. The lack of control, the confusing and contradictory policy and the political environment played a determining role. Nevertheless, a large wave of pogroms took place, mainly carried out by regular Republic troops. In other words, the Ukrainian People's Republic and its directorate were responsible for the fact that the pogroms were not stopped and their armed forces were not disciplined. At the same time, all governments of the Ukrainian People's Republic defended the rights and safety of Jews, but did nothing to remedy the rapid deterioration of the situation, for which the Directory was responsible. Jewish parties supported the Directory and many Jewish representatives were open to the idea of Ukrainian independence, but the pogroms deteriorated relations. Already at the time, the de facto head of the Jewish Ministry of Ukraine, Nahum Gergel , estimated that at least 16,700 people had been killed by the Directory's forces alone.

Today, most historians agree that the real figure was much higher. The anti-Semitism of some members of the Ukrainian armed forces and the government's inability to effectively combat the pogroms weighed heavily in the balance. The government of the Ukrainian People's Republic has always provided material aid and compensation, investigated pogroms and prosecuted those responsible, but did not do enough to prevent pogroms in the first place. For all Ukrainians, this is a dark stain in the country's history. For a realistic and not idealized view of history, we cannot help

but talk about pogroms, even though the government of the Ukrainian People's Republic has made enormous social and political progress, especially with regard to rights of Jews.

Cooperative movement and self-organization

"The current era is favorable for the development of cooperative production, and that is why

1. a) cooperatives must take all necessary measures to appropriate production in Ukraine and help the broadest masses as well as the young state to strengthen economically and establish new forms of production;
2. b) the State must, for the same purpose, make every effort to return into the hands of the people, through their economic organizations - the cooperatives and their unions - the factories transferred to the State by temporary institutions created by war [6];
3. c) to this end, the state should rely mainly and, if possible, exclusively on cooperatives in its plans to create new industrial enterprises supplying independent Ukraine [...]
4. Cooperatives and their federations may only create industrial enterprises to meet the needs of the population of their constituency, in agreement with the concerned cooperative federation.
5. uncoordinated achievements of unions and individual cooperatives outside the general plan are recognized as harmful to cooperation and, therefore, planning for the development and management of cooperative enterprises is entrusted to the Ukrainian central cooperative federations...

Third All-Ukrainian Congress of Cooperatives in Kyiv , May 26-29, 1918 [7].

The cooperative movement was the basis of Ukraine's very progressive economic reforms. Ukraine was a people of peasants who lived in terrible economic conditions. They were exploited and denied the opportunity to develop, receive an adequate education, qualify or prosper. For their part, the Russians tried to annihilate the Ukrainians through their policy of assimilation. This is where the cooperative movement arose naturally, as Ukrainians tended to defend themselves collectively against injustice, poverty and assimilation. The cooperative movement was not only concerned with serving communities , but also became the center of cultural life. The cooperative movement used its income to fund schools, scholarships, museums, libraries, reading groups and much more. The movement had a semi-centralized structure, that is, a regulatory authority organized by the cooperatives from the bottom up, which planned their activities. This was to prevent some from making excessive profits to the detriment of the well-being of Ukrainians. Cooperatives were also prevented from adopting undemocratic platforms and workers avoided hierarchical structures. Undemocratic cooperatives were described as "pseudo-cooperatives" and a cooperative regulatory authority was to intervene and impose "sanctions" against them. This is how the cooperative movement became an important part of Ukrainian life. Most Ukrainian politicians acquired management skills through cooperative activities, skills which they then used to build the Central Rada. More than half of its members acquired their experience in administrative organization and democratic governance through their participation in the cooperative movement.

With the Ukrainian revolution, the cooperative movement also grew. In 1920, Ukraine had 22,000 cooperatives with six million members [8]. 60% of them were organized into consumer cooperatives. The cooperatives managed to create their own scientific institution at the initiative of Tuhon-Baranovskij. The Ukrainian Cooperative Institute was the first of its kind in the world. Ukrainian cooperatives had strong ethics and loose planning structures; they were well organized and were active in local communities. It was also a movement of education and national self-determination which actively participated in the revolutionary struggle.

With the arrival of the Bolsheviks, the cooperatives were eventually transformed into pseudo-

cooperatives. They were no longer free associations of producers, but became party-controlled institutions or were generally transformed into state enterprises. The cooperative movement still tried to develop while the Bolsheviks had already announced a New Economic Policy (NEP). The movement attempted to achieve its goals of self-defense and national self-determination, but was severely controlled. From then on, Western Ukraine became the torchbearer of the Ukrainian cooperative movement and actively expanded into the Polish non-cooperative market.

Church reform

“This latest method of struggle of the rulers against the Christian community extends to the present day and brings the life of the Ukrainian Church of Christ to the state where believers begin to restore and liberate the Christian community oppressed by the son of the “prince of this age”, the ruling classes. »

Volodymyr Chekhivskiy , “For the Church, the Christian community, against darkness [\[9\]](#)”

Independent Ukrainian communists participated in the Ukrainian People’s Republic and were an essential component of its democracy. Although their sectarian and authoritarian interpretation of class struggle theory was dangerous to democratic forms of government, they played an important and generally positive role in the activities of the Republic. When the extreme left factions separated from their parties, and then from the Republic itself, seats were reserved for them in all important political assemblies, in case they returned and participated in republican democracy. This was also the case in the Workers’ Congress.

This context explains why the gifted Ukrainian communist Volodymyr Chekhovsky , a man of the Church and one of the organizers of Church reform, served as Prime Minister from December 1918 to February 1919 [\[10\]](#). He was one of the brightest and most interesting examples of Ukrainian Christian socialism – a surprisingly small intellectual tradition that drew its socialist analysis from the Christian faith. Although Ukrainian activists were mostly religious, they were passionately secular, both in their public policies and in their opinions. They viewed faith as an entity distinct from their beliefs, which they justified through political theories rather than religion. Their first Ukrainian political organization, the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius, to which Taras Shevchenko belonged, was based on a very republican, democratic and strongly social, even socialist, interpretation of Christianity. Another example of the participation of Ukrainian priests and clergymen in socialist politics is the All-Russian Socialist Christian Brotherhood of Struggle, which existed at the time of the 1905 revolution. Volodymyr Chekhovsky was one of those who later organized church reform, creating the autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church and ultimately separating it from the highly politicized, pro-tsarist, imperialist Moscow Church.

Chekhovsky did everything in his power to promote a peaceful, tolerant, and secular approach to religion and to encourage the clergy to adopt a progressive spirit and move toward social reforms. The Ukrainian Church immediately occupied a place as a comparatively progressive community, strongly linked to the goals of Ukrainian independence and democracy.

The Ukrainian Church managed to survive until 1937, when, after more than a decade of oppression and a new wave of Stalinist terror, it was destroyed and replaced by the Russian Church, a more political institution than religious.

Footnotes

[1] Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government : Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920*, Cambridge/Mass, 1999, p. 34-35.

[2] Ibid., p. 40.

[3] Ebd., S. 81. (Original) "...all the decent peoples of Ukraine must assist with all their strength the work of the General Secretariat and the local administrations in their struggle with the pogroms, which are an inheritance of tsarism...We have issued decrees [to the effect] that every Ukrainian should consider our freedom insecure until we are free of national hatred and anti-Jewish pogroms, a black spot on our faces, which makes the entire world consider us a people who are still enslaved."

[4] Ebd. (Original) "I, as General Secretary for Military Affairs in the Ukrainian People's Republic, call upon all of you, my comrades and friends, to work in unity during this difficult time. Be organized and unified, one for all and all for one. Our army is young, it is just standing on its feet, but it will live up to the reputation of our ancestors. All must unite for the Central Rada and its General Secretariat. Do not tolerate any pogroms or disorderly behavior, because tolerating such activity will bring shame on the name of the Ukrainian army. No pogroms must occur on our land. I have already called upon Ukrainian troops to protect the order in Ukraine. Be ready throughout all of Ukraine, particularly on the railroads, to put a stop to any pogrom activity...This responsibility I can place only on your shoulders, and I will have trust in you, Ukrainian soldiers."

[5] Ibid., p. 83.

[6] This is a unique example of cooperative appropriation of state property, which underlines the non-state and decentralized character of the Ukrainian revolution.

[7] Illja Vitanovyč , *Istoriia Ukraïns'koho kooperativnoho ruchu* , New York, 1964, 194 et seq.

[8] Vsevolod Holubnychy / Illia Vytanovych : *Le mouvement coopératif*, dans: *Encyclopédie Internet de l'Ukraine* [1984]. Cf. Illia Vytanovych : *Istoriia ukraïns'koho cooperative rukhu* , New York, 1964.

[9] Volodymyr Čechivs'kyj : *Za Cerkvu , Chrystovu hromadu , proty carstva t' my* , New York, 1974.

[10] Short-lived governments were common in this era. From December 1918 to November 1920, the Ukrainian government changed de facto six times, "jumping" from the radical left to the moderate left, then to an apolitical government, to a moderate left, then to the left again, then to the centrists and finally to the apolitical semi-dictatorship of Petliura.