

1917: the Ukrainian flag flies over the Kremlin

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“During the days of February [1] ... the Ukrainian soldiers of the Petrograd garrison were the first to side with the revolution, because we had suffered enough from the persecution of Ukrainians under the old regime”, a Ukrainian soldier stationed in the Russian capital later declared. N He was one of the 30,000 Ukrainian soldiers who made up 1/5 of the city's garrison [2] and it is estimated that the Ukrainian community in Petrograd numbered 100,000 souls. The Ukrainian military community was highly politicised. Since 1913, the Ukrainian Revolutionary Party (RUP), which later became the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' Party (USDRP), had been carrying out underground revolutionary work in the military units of the Russian capital. Particularly in the guard regiments. “Work in the Izmailovsky, Semenivskiy, Moscow, Zaliznychy and Preobrazhenskiy regiments of the Guard was particularly well organised... work began in the Volynskiy regiment and in some others... The guards of the First Machine Gun Regiment also had USDRP circles, where revolutionary work was also carried out brilliantly”, explains Mykhailo Avdienko [3] , one of the party's leaders, who himself served in the Izmail regiment. According to his testimony, the USDRP's illegal newspaper Our Life contributed to revolutionary work in the army and among the city's workers, as well as at the front. It was published as early as 1915 and printed clandestinely at ... the General Staff of the Russian Army. According to Oleksandr Lototskyi, head of the Petrograd Ukrainian National Council, “the most important Ukrainian element in the capital and its environs was to be found in the army. The guard regiments were mainly, and some almost exclusively, made up of Ukrainians - who had Cossack traditions... in those parts of the city where there were barracks... you could still hear the Ukrainian language”.



A column under blue-yellow flags.

On 9 March, the birthday of the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, a general strike broke out in Petrograd. The Ukrainian workers' organisations of the USDRP were present in the larger factories. For example, one of the largest, Putilov, the party organisation had around 400 members who took an active part in the workers' uprising.



Ukrainian rally on Palace Square in Petrograd on 1 May 1917.

The Volynskyi regiment, made up mainly of Ukrainians, was one of the first to join the demonstrations. The Ukrainian students formed a revolutionary committee, which declared on the day of Nicholas 2's abdication: "In the liberation struggle of the last few days, the Ukrainian demonstrators played a great role in the person of the Ukrainian soldiers from the regiments who joined the uprising. Russian citizens will one day remember with gratitude that the ranks of the army that fought for freedom as well as the broad democratic masses of Petrograd, [who were] composed in large part of the sons... of the Ukrainian nation" [\[4\]](#) .

On 22 March 1917, the Petrograd section of the Ukrainian Progressive Association (TUP) issued a declaration demanding national and territorial autonomy for Ukraine. Three days later, the city's Ukrainians organised a demonstration to commemorate Shevchenko's birthday, attended by 30,000 civilians and soldiers. Shevchenko's 100th birthday had already been celebrated in 1914 in the Tsar's capital, but with a "silent birthday", which was banned in Ukraine. The committee organising the celebration was made up mainly of young Ukrainian revolutionaries. The USDRP supported the initiative and, according to Mykhaïlo Avdienko, brought in 12,000 soldiers and workers. But on 22 March 1917, celebrating Shevchenko's birthday took on a special meaning in this revolutionary period. Russian oppression could be brought to an end, and Ukraine's national rights could be recognised. Petro Kovaliv, a diplomat, wrote from Geneva 20 years after the events: "More than 20,000 Ukrainian soldiers gathered... Many yellow and blue ribbons. Many detachments of soldiers from different regiments brought yellow and blue flags. When this mass lined up on Nevsky Prospect, it was an extremely majestic and moving sight". After the commemorative ceremony in honour of Taras Shevchenko, a demonstration marched along the Nevsky Prospect to the Tauride Palace, where the Russian Parliament traditionally sits. The newspaper *Russkaya Volya* reported: "Under the orders of the organisers, a huge mass of demonstrators, numbering up to 20,000 people, without mingling with the spectators, surrounded by a strong chain [of young people], began to stream onto Nevsky Prospect. Huge flags on a yellow-blue background read: "Long live free Ukraine".... The orchestra played the Khmelnytsky march. The newspaper *Rech* also described the demonstration: "The demonstrators sang sad, haunting Ukrainian songs. Military bands played a mixture of Ukrainian music. Incessant shouts of "hurrah" were heard. A crowd of several thousand people entered the palace courtyard and stood there in rows. The representative of the executive committee of the Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies [Mykola Sokolov] greeted the demonstrators on behalf of the Council." During the march, the entire Nevsky Prospect was covered in Ukrainian flags and a large portrait of Shevchenko was carried in front. Five days later, on 30 March and again on 3 April 1917, delegations of Ukrainians from Petrograd, who had by then organised a Ukrainian National Committee, visited Prince Lvov, the then Prime Minister and Interior Minister of the newly formed Provisional Government. They called for Ukrainians to be appointed to all leading positions in Ukraine, for a commissioner for Ukrainian affairs to be created within the provisional government, for cultural and educational needs to be met, and for the Ukrainian language to be introduced into the administration of churches, courts and schools in Ukraine. The need to free the thousands of Ukrainians arrested and deported from Galicia and Bukovina was also discussed. The Prime Minister dithered. The news of the collapse of the Tsarist regime reached Kyiv on 13 March 1917 and sparked enthusiasm. On 17 March, the new body of Ukrainian sovereignty, the Rada, was formed. This national effervescence worried the new provisional Russian government.

The empire was threatened by these nationalist upsurges. At the end of May 1917, the Rada received the support of the first Ukrainian military congress.

All-Ukrainian military congresses

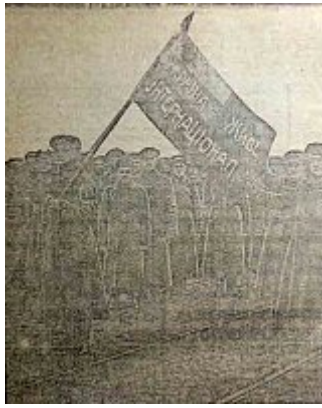
The spontaneous Ukrainisation of military units actually began after the February Revolution, when soldiers' councils and committees began to appear en masse in the Russian army. In regiments dominated by Ukrainians, the latter insisted on having their units recognised as Ukrainian. When the 6e corps began to receive massive numbers of Ukrainian recruits, and Ukrainian officers were transferred there at their own request, there was strong resistance from Russian officers. Elsewhere, Ukrainisation was carried out with varying results [5]. On 9 March 1917, a meeting of the Ukrainian military was held in Kyiv, at which it was decided in particular to found a Ukrainian military organisation committee led by Colonel Glynsky, whose aim was to form Ukrainian military units. On 16 March, at a meeting of representatives of the Kyiv garrison, the Ukrainian Military Club named after Pavlo Poloubotok was set up and headed by Mykola Mikhnovskyi [6]. The club's charter, adopted two days later, stated that it "aims to unite and befriend in a single family all soldiers, doctors and military officials of the government of the Ukrainian nation under the slogan: Federal Russia - Autonomous Ukraine". Similar gatherings of representatives of Ukrainians in the army and navy also took place in other places. On 6 May, the Rada session accepted "the proposal of the military club to convene a congress of Ukrainian servicemen representing Ukrainian military units, departments and organisations from the rear, front and fleet".



Rally on the occasion of the 3rd Ukrainian Military Congress in Kyv.

The 1er Ukrainian Military Congress was held from 18 to 21 May 1917 in Kyiv on the premises of the Pedagogical Museum. Around 900 delegates from various military units on all fronts, the Baltic and Black Sea fleets and Ukrainian garrisons, representing 1.5 million Ukrainian servicemen, took part. The Congress was opened by the President of the Ukrainian Rada, Mykhaïlo Hrouchevsky, who was subsequently elected Honorary President of the Congress. The following issues were discussed: analysis of current events, the positions of the Provisional Government, the activities of the Councils of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and the development of a common strategy for action; the problem of the Ukrainisation of the army and the formation of Ukrainian units. Among the other issues dealt with, land and education figured prominently. In the resolution concerning the first, it is stated that "the right of ownership of land and underground resources in autonomous Ukraine should belong exclusively to the people, and the conditions of distribution of this land among the people working on it will be worked out and determined" by the Ukrainian Rada, "on the basis of justice and equality of all people living on the territory of Ukraine". On the second point, it is emphasised that "education in the schools of Ukraine" should be in the Ukrainian language and that education should be provided at state expense. An 18-strong Ukrainian General Military Committee headed by Simon Petliura was elected. The committee was to coordinate its actions with the Russian General Staff. In 1917, two other similar congresses were held in Kyiv.

The blue-yellow flag flies over the Kremlin



Moscow, Ukrainians with their slogan on 1st May 1917.

Two days after Shevchenko's commemorative ceremony, the Moscow Ukrainian Military Club was created "where Ukrainian servicemen should meet, as in their native homes, to exchange opinions, develop tactics and support the demands of their people with their authority and their armed forces". A delegate from the Club was soon to be sent to the Ukrainian National Congress, held in Kyiv from 6 to 8 April 1917. The Club also sent its congratulations to the Congress:

"We Ukrainians - teachers, soldiers and officers of the Moscow garrison - welcome the Ukrainian Congress. We wish to hear in its resolutions the unshakeable will of the Ukrainian people... We dare to assure you that the Ukrainians of the Moscow garrison will respond fearlessly to the enemy's attacks... Long live free Ukraine. Fight and you will win.

When the revolution reached Moscow, the local Ukrainians organised "a huge demonstration with the Ukrainian flag near Gogol's monument on the boulevard that bears his name" (near the Arbat) and carried out "work among the Ukrainians", particularly among the soldiers stationed in the Moscow barracks. At one of the meetings, it was decided to carry only one red flag... The idea of "carrying two flags - red and yellow-blue" was rejected, as the majority of socialists "did not want to hear about the national flag of Ukraine". They would later join the Bolsheviks. It was not until the very day of the demonstration that "a section of the most nationalist-minded socialist youth" tied yellow and blue ribbons to the red flag. "Let Moscow see the sons of the newly resurrected Ukraine demonstrate" argued the young revolutionaries. And the Ukrainian students proudly brandished national symbols, the use of which was forbidden under the Tsarist regime. From July to the end of October 1917, "Ukrainian units stood guard in the garrison, and mainly in the Kremlin", recalls Smovsky. And he adds: "Then, on the Kremlin tower, instead of the three-coloured tsar's flag (black-yellow-white), the blue-yellow Ukrainian flag flew until the Bolsheviks took Moscow". In other words, instead of the flag of the Romanov family, which abdicated the throne, the Ukrainian national flag flew [7] .



Flag of the Ukrainian Zaporizhzhya regiment, formed in Moscow from Ukrainian soldiers of the local contingent.

The Rada in Petrograd

At the end of May 1917, the Rada decided to travel to Petrograd to present its demands to the new Russian authorities. Its ten-strong delegation, led by Volodymyr Vynnytschenko [8], was greeted at the station by Ukrainian military representatives from the Petrograd garrison, appropriately accompanied by a military orchestra. Two units of Ukrainian soldiers formed a guard of honour for the Ukrainian representatives. The delegation made nine demands, including recognition of the principle of Ukrainian autonomy and the participation of Ukrainian representatives in the peace negotiations, particularly with regard to the question of Ukrainian territories in Galicia. The formation of separate Ukrainian army units in the rear and, as far as possible, at the front was also demanded. The congress delegates demanded that the provisional government immediately declare Ukraine's national and territorial autonomy and unanimously supported the Ukrainian Rada as "the only competent body, called upon to resolve all questions concerning the whole of Ukraine" [9] .

"The Ukrainian delegation soon discovered that the principle of "preserving the unity of the Russian state" guided the decisions not only of the Cadets, but also of the new Russian leadership in general. It took the delegation three days to organise a meeting with the Soviet executive committee. When they finally met, the Soviet avoided taking a position on the Ukrainian question and sent the delegation back to the provisional government. The Ukrainian delegation was particularly frustrated by the fact that "not a single" newspaper of the Russian "revolutionary democracy" (i.e. the socialists) published the Rada memorandum. The members of the provisional government listened politely to the delegation's requests and explanations, and then passed the whole problem on to a commission of judicial experts charged with examining the legal aspects of the problem". This committee questioned the legal validity of virtually all the Ukrainian claims and, after a few meetings, the delegation left Petrograd empty-handed", says Wolodymyr Stojko [10] .



Cockade of Ukrainian soldiers in the Russian army, 1917.

The fall of the provisional government a few months later, when the Bolshevik party took power, did not open up any better prospects for Ukraine. It is fact that in this party the reference text on the national question was signed... by a certain Joseph Stalin [11] .

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] The overthrow of the monarchy is known as the February Revolution. However, according to the Western calendar, the event took place in March. The dates shown here follow this calendar.

- [2] Of the almost 10 million members of the Russian army, 3 million were Ukrainian.
- [3] Лютнева революція в Петрограді і УСДРП // Літопис революції. - 1928. - Ч.1 (28). - С. 229-230.
- [4] Lototsky O, Сторінки минулого: частина третя, Варшава, 1934. - С. 327.
- [5] Dmytro Kalinchuk "Від імператорської до національної: як українізувалися частини російської армії" March 16, 2022. <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/>
- [6] Mykola Ivanovytch Mikhnovsky (1873-1924), a figure of Ukrainian independence nationalism and co-founder of the Ukrainian Revolutionary Party (RUP).
- [7] Yuri Yuzych, "Синьо-жовтий прапор над Кремлем", 23 August 2022. <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/>
- [8] Volodymyr Vynnytchenko (1880-1951), member of the Ukrainian Revolutionary Party (RUP) and, later, of the executive committee of the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' Party (USDRP).
- [9] Wolodymyr Stojko, "Ukrainian National Aspirations and the Russian Provisional Government" in The Ukraine, 1917-1921: A Study in Revolution, Harvard University Press, 436 pp. 1978.
- [10] Wolodymyr Stojko, Ibid.
- [11] Joseph Stalin, Marxism and the National Question, 1913.