Searching for the Ukrainian Revolution

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In Memory of Mark von Hagen (1954–2019)

On July 5, 1918, in the hallway of the Pedagogical Museum in Kyiv, two former classmates from St. Petersburg University ran into each other. One was a prominent Ukrainian nationalist with the Russian surname of Dontsov, the other, a Soviet Russian diplomat with the Ukrainian family name of Manuil′s′kyi. There was a reason for this unexpected encounter. The delegations of Bolshevik Russia and the Ukrainian State of Hetman Pavlo Skoropads′kyi were meeting in the building to negotiate the border between the two polities. Dontsov had an appointment with the head of the Ukrainian delegation, and Manuil′s′kyi was the deputy chair of the Bolshevik mission. When Manuil′s′kyi saw Dontsov, he first expressed his regrets about not having been able to attend the latter's recent public lecture about Russian culture. In normal times, he opined, this provocative lecture would have sparked major discussions in the Russian press. But these were not normal times: Russia and Ukraine were still at war, and Germany was forcing them to conclude peace, even though the Bolsheviks occasionally protested that it was allegedly an internal Ukrainian conflict, a "civil war." Yet, despite their positions on opposite sides of the conflict, the conversation between the two seemed friendly, until the very last words. When he was leaving, Manuil′s′kyi fired off his parting shot: "Dontsov, you are a decent person, after all. Why are you not a Bolshevik?" "Precisely because of that, Manuil′s′kyi," replied Dontsov.[1]

This striking episode encapsulates many features of the revolutionary period in Ukraine: national identity was as much a conscious choice as political allegiance; the revolution was about delineating where Russia ended and Ukraine began; and, finally, World War I served as a crucial context that often influenced the course of the revolutionary process.

Moreover, the subsequent careers of Dontsov and Manuil′s′kyi illustrate the importance of the Ukrainian setting, which made the events of 1917–1922 differ from those in Russia. The Ukrainian-born Manuil′s′kyi would eventually become a Bolshevik authority on Ukrainian affairs precisely because the Revolution had shown that the national specifics of Ukraine mattered and the Bolsheviks needed such specialists. In 1922, Stalin had jokingly called Manuil′s′kyi a "fake" (*lipovyi*) Ukrainian because, in contrast to other Soviet Ukrainian leaders, he had supported Stalin's project to incorporate the republics into Soviet Russia as autonomous units.[2] As a faithful Stalinist, Manuil′s′kyi would go on to play an important role in the Ukrainian SSR in the early 1920s and the late 1940s, both periods of intensive Sovietization, in

Although he did not read this text, the mentorship and publications of the late Mark von Hagen shaped my thinking about this topic.

1. Dmitro Dontsov, *Rik 1918, Kyiv* (Toronto, 1954), 30.

2. L. S. Gatagova, L. P. Kosheleva, and L. A. Rogovaia, eds., *TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b) i natsional'nyi vopros,* vol. 1 (Moscow, 2005), 79.

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the latter case because of the recent Nazi occupation and the incorporation of troublesome western Ukraine.

By contrast, Dontsov would move in the opposite, but perhaps not unrelated, direction. Disillusioned with what he saw as the (Ukrainian) Revolution's defeat, he would blame the Ukrainian intelligentsia's naïve populism. A former Social Democrat, Dontsov embraced the philosophical theories privileging the strong will of a small minority and viewing ethnic nations as locked in a Darwinian struggle; he also translated works by Hitler and Mussolini. Although Dontsov never formally joined the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (est. 1929), his ideas laid the ideological foundations of Ukrainian radical nationalism. These two intertwined biographies show that the "Russian Revolution" is not a satisfactory analytical tool for making sense of Ukrainian events, which require a greater understanding of the Ukrainian context: the land, the people, and the "transnational" national idea traveling back and forth across the former Russian-Austrian border.

Let us, however, return to the aftermath of the two former schoolmates' encounter in Kyiv. The members of the Soviet Russian mission, including Manuil's'kyi, were busying themselves conducting illicit preparations for a workers' rebellion in Kyiv and other cities.[3] A rebellion against the Hetman did happen, as soon as it became clear that his protectors, the Central Powers, were losing the war. It was not, however, a pro-Bolshevik workers' rebellion, or not exclusively so. The Bolsheviks found themselves drowning in a sea of peasant rebels, who were dismayed by the return of noble landlords, as well as being ethnically Ukrainian enough to choose the Directory of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) over the Bolsheviks. The Directory moved into Kyiv and took all the credit for the victory over the Hetman, ignoring the Bolsheviks' role in the uprising.

The Directory then did something that was at once national and transnational. It connected the processes of imperial disintegration in the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires by proclaiming on January 22, 1919 the union of the UNR with the Western Ukrainian People's Republic (ZUNR), which had existed in the eastern part of the former Habsburg Crown Land of Galicia since November 1, 1918. In so doing, the UNR technically entered the war with Poland that the ZUNR had been fighting almost from the start of its existence, but also extended its history beyond the borders of the former Russian empire into the world of the east-central European wars of imperial succession.[4] With radical socialists of the Bolshevik variety playing little, if any, role in the war that was unfolding in the former Habsburg territories, it becomes utterly impossible to confine the Ukrainian revolutionary turmoil within the narrow historiographical niche of the "Russian Revolution in Ukraine." How can it encompass the politically moderate Galician Ukrainian leaders, who, in their efforts to build a Ukrainian nation-state, avoided the very term "revolution"?

3. O. K. Ivantsova, ed., *Getman P. P. Skoropadskii: Ukraina na perelome: 1918 god* (Moscow, 2014), 105–6.

4. On this, see Jochen Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe: The Reconstruction of Poland, 1918–1921* (Oxford, 2018).

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The first concise history in English of the revolutionary events in the Ukrainian lands appeared in 1952. The political scientist John S. Reshetar, Jr., then a lecturer at Princeton who later enjoyed a long career at the University of Washington, titled his book *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917–1920: A Study in Nationalism*.

Reshetar took the term "the Ukrainian Revolution" straight from its participants. He had access to Ukrainian materials from the library of Mykola Haydak, a soldier in the UNR army who became a professor of entomology at the University of Minnesota, and interviews with the historian and memoirist Dmytro Doroshenko, who had been Skoropads′kyi's foreign minister.[5] Ukrainian politicians across the political spectrum had used the term "Ukrainian Revolution"—from centrist Socialist Federalists like Doroshenko to the Bolshevik-leaning Social Democrat Volodymyr Vynnychenko. The Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionary Pavlo Khrystiuk entitled his influential four-volume chronicle and compendium of sources *Notes and Materials towards the History of the Ukrainian Revolution* (1921–22). This term was not generally meant, in these works, to establish the Ukrainian events as separate from the Russian Revolution, but rather to underscore their important difference. In addition to issues of social justice, the question of national liberation played a major role in the Ukrainian Revolution—and not just in the struggle of the Ukrainian authorities against the Provisional Government and the Whites. The Ukrainian Left was soon criticizing the Bolsheviks for continuing tsarist colonial practices in the Ukrainian lands.[6]

The term "Ukrainian Revolution" was also widely accepted in Ukrainian Soviet historiography of the 1920s, when the importance of combatting Russian great-power chauvinism was still acknowledged by the Bolshevik authorities. After the Stalinization of historical scholarship in the 1930s, however, it came to connote "nationalistic" attitudes. The official terminology switched to "the Revolution and Civil War in Ukraine." Meanwhile, émigré nationalists were also abandoning the term in favor of something more loaded: "National-Liberation Struggle" (*natsional′no-vyzvol′ni zmahannia*) or, after World War II, "First National Liberation Struggle," because the Ukrainian nationalist insurgency during and after the war was now seen as the second one.

When, in the wake of the Soviet Union's demise, the Ukrainian historical profession began searching for a new conceptual apparatus, it turned to two sources: the works of the revolutionary generation stored in the special-storage sections of major libraries and more recent publications produced by the Ukrainian diaspora. Ultimately, it adopted both terms: the Ukrainian Revolution and the (First) National-Liberation Struggle. For example, the volume on this period in the late-1990s book series that aimed to replace the official Soviet multivolume *History of the Ukrainian SSR* was entitled *The Ukrainian National-Liberation Struggle*, but the more recent two-volume,

5. John S. Reshetar, Jr., *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917–1920: A Study in Nationalism* (Princeton, 1952), ix.

6. See Stephen Velychenko, *Painting Imperialism and Nationalism Red: The Ukrainian Marxist Critique of Russian Communist Rule in Ukraine, 1918–1925* (Toronto, 2015).

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collectively authored treatment is called *Survey of the History of the Ukrainian Revolution*.[7]

Although the term "national liberation" does not necessarily determine methodology or coverage, it is considerably more restrictive and teleological. It does not require serious engagement with political projects other than the Ukrainian nation-state (even if these projects had the support of some ethnic Ukrainians), and it automatically "others" minorities with their own national movements and stories. In comparison, the "Ukrainian Revolution" is more inclusive and less teleological, while still articulating the fact that the Ukrainian national movement and the demand for independent statehood that it developed in the course of the Revolution marked the events in Ukraine as distinctly different from Russian provinces. Various responses to the Ukrainian idea could also determine the success or failure of other state-building projects. For example, it was obvious even to contemporaries that Anton Denikin's failure to recognize Ukrainian aspirations contributed to his defeat by the Red Army. In contrast, when the Bolsheviks reconquered Ukraine for the third time at the end of 1919, Lenin insisted that "ignoring the importance of the national question in Ukraine" meant "committing a profound and dangerous error."[8]

Of course, using the term "Ukrainian Revolution"—just like the use of the term "Russian Revolution"—demands a critical reading of contemporary sources that juxtapose their often-exclusive focus on the Ukrainian nation with narratives originating from ethnic minorities and the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens. The same requirement applies to sources privileging the class struggle or the all-Russian political framework; these sources require the context of other perspectives, the national one in particular. Sometimes the limitations of one approach or the other are revealed when the challengers of its original proponents adopt it for their own purposes.

Consider perhaps the most controversial issue in the history of the Ukrainian Revolution: the role of the UNR government during the bloody Jewish pogroms of 1919. The ferocious debate about Symon Petliura's personal responsibility for the pogroms, which began immediately after his assassination in Paris in 1926, saw groups—including the Soviets—that usually denied the UNR government any degree of legitimacy or popular support suddenly embracing the "nationalizing" view by laying these horrendous crimes at the feet of the nation, in this case, the UNR leadership and "Ukrainians" in general. This, despite the UNR having established the first Ministry of Jewish Affairs in modern history and trying—in extremely constrained circumstances and sometimes belatedly—to prevent the pogroms.[9] Yet this episode, which is usually "read" through the national lens, is precisely the

7. O. S. Rubl′ov and O. P. Reient, *Ukraïns′ki natsional′no-vyzvol′ni zmahannia 1917–1921 rr.* (Kyiv, 1999); V. F. Verstiuk, ed., *Narysy istorii Ukraïns′koï revoliutsiï 1917–1921 rokiv*, 2 vols. (Kyiv, 2011–12).

8. V. I. Lenin, "Vybory v Uchreditel′noe sobranie i diktatura proletariata," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 55 vols. (Moscow, 1974), 40: 19.

9. See the best modern treatment of the Ukrainian-Jewish relations during the Revolution: Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

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occasion when a dense social history of communal violence is called for. It is well known that Bolshevik troops in Ukraine also committed violent Jewish pogroms and sometimes refused to accept Jewish soldiers.[10] Clearly, larger social trends cut across very different ideologies and political projects: White Russian, Bolshevik, and Ukrainian republican—only the first of them embracing antisemitism.[11] The violent and chaotic events of that spring cannot be explained by presenting all the events in Ukraine as related to the struggle for the Ukrainian nation-state. The collapse of state institutions, various armies' reliance on local warlords, and the culture of violence established by World War I should be given serious consideration instead.

Perhaps it is equally important, however, to say that the struggles of 1919 cannot be explained without taking into account the Ukrainian movement. Consider these two fateful days, August 30 and 31, 1919, when Ukrainian and White troops defeated the Reds on their respective fronts and entered Kyiv from two different sides. The Ukrainian units belonged to the Ukrainian Galician Army of the ZUNR, which the Whites considered foreign but legitimate—in contrast to the "treasonous" local Ukrainians from the Russian Empire.[12] The Whites won the day by forcing the Ukrainians to withdraw, but lost the war against the Reds—in large measure because they recognized the existence of Ukrainians in the former Habsburg Empire, but not in their own.

By the 1980s a prominent historian of Germany and international socialism, Geoff Eley, suggested that the revolutionary events in the Ukrainian lands, as well as in the Baltics, Transcaucasia, and Belarus, could be seen "as separate revolutionary processes with an integrity of their own."[13] This is not to diminish the importance of World War I in general for the politicization of ethnicity in the region—a point made by Mark von Hagen, Eric Lohr, Joshua A. Sanborn, and Borislav Chernev. Yet it was imperial collapse rather than the war itself that enabled the mobilization of a political Ukrainian identity in the former Russian Empire, and this process was well advanced by the time the Germans arrived in the spring of 1918.

The Ukrainian national movement and the "transnational" Ukrainian question more generally defined the distinctiveness of the Ukrainian Revolution from the February days of 1917, if only because all the forces operating on that territory had to formulate their attitude to the national rights of the Ukrainian people. The importance of this cornerstone idea was not immediately apparent. On March 19 (April 1), 1917, when some 100,000 people

10. V. A. Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski o Grazhdanskoi voine*, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1932), 3: 288–89.

11. For the point that the pogroms were a mass social movement that began in 1914 and involved all the armies operating in the region, see John-Paul Himka, "The National and the Social in the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–20: The Historiographical Agenda,"*Archiv für Socialgeschichte* 34 (1994): 104.

12. The most detailed treatment of this two-day episode is in Stefan Mashkevich, *Dva dnia iz istorii Kieva: 30–31 avgusta 1919 g.* (Kyiv, 2010).

13. Geoff Eley, "Remapping the Nation: War, Revolutionary Upheaval and State Formation in Eastern Europe, 1914–1923," in Peter J. Potichnyi and Howard Aster, eds., *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective* (Edmonton, 1988), 207.

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flooded the streets of Kyiv in support of autonomy for Ukraine, this rally came as a surprise to predominantly Russian Kyivites. Even more surprising for the Provisional Government was the army's mass support for the establishment of Ukrainian military units. The 2,500 delegates to the Second Ukrainian Military Congress in June 1917 claimed to represent two million Ukrainian soldiers and sailors.[14]

The Ukrainian idea meant something different to different constituencies: a slogan of powerful antiwar mobilization, or for claiming positions from former Russian elites, or doing away with Russian landlords.[15] During the elections to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly in the fall of 1917, the majority of the peasant vote in Ukraine went to leftist entities that linked the land issue with questions of national autonomy and Ukrainian schools: the Ukrainian Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (UPSR) and the Peasant Union, which they controlled. Excluding the ten largest cities in the Ukrainian provinces, the UPSR and the Peasant Union captured 55 percent of the total vote, and another 15 percent went to the electoral bloc of the UPSR with the left wing of the all-Russian Socialist Revolutionaries that they formed in some regions.[16]

We still do not know much about the role of politics in the world of the Ukrainian peasantry during 1917–20; the only archival-based monograph, by Mark Baker, focusses on a not-so-typical region—the province of Kharkiv, situated on the Russian border, which served as the Bolsheviks' base for their numerous attempts to take over Ukraine.[17]

However, we do know that the Revolution sparked an impressive revival of the Cossack tradition in most Ukrainian regions, which found its expression in the spontaneous formation of the so-called Free Cossacks. One can argue that this was an "invented tradition" because the peasant founder of this volunteer-militia movement, a well-to-do peasant of Cossack heritage named Nykodym Smoktii, was apparently assisted by two patriotic students from the Kyiv Commercial Institute, who returned to their native Zvenyhorodka County in Kyiv Province in April 1917 in order to set up a revolutionary administration there.[18] Still, the idea's immediate appeal to the masses confirmed that the memory of the Cossack past was linked to notions of social and national liberation. The Ukrainian Cossacks had ceased to exist as a social estate in the late eighteenth century, but the peasants remembered that the status of registered Cossack meant personal freedom, which explains their enthusiastic response to the temporary reestablishment of Cossack regiments several times during the nineteenth century. This anti-serfdom social component

14. V. F. Verstiuk, *Ukraïns'ka tsentral'na rada: Navchal'nyi posibnyk* (Kyiv, 1997), 152.

15. The Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries at first replicated the Russian slogan of socializing the land, but later discovered that the Ukrainian tradition of individual farming made it easier for them to rally the peasants against socialization. See Steven L. Guthier, "The Popular Base of Ukrainian Nationalism in 1917," *Slavic Review* 38, no. 1 (March 1979): 32–33.

16. Guthier, "Popular Base," 40.

17. Mark R. Baker, *Peasants, Power, and Place: Revolution in the Villages of Kharkiv Province, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016).

18. V. F. Verstiuk, "Vil′ne kozatstvo iak vyiav revoliutsiinoï tvorchosti mas," in V. A. Smolii, ed., *Istoriia ukraïns'koho kozatstva: Narysy u dvokh tomakh* (Kyiv, 2007), 2: 419–20.

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empowered national historical mythology. It is instructive to note that the Free Cossacks of the revolutionary period tended to be socially conservative, and the Social-Democratic Ukrainian government distrusted them. But even Bolshevik commanders named their cavalry "Red Cossacks" and styled themselves as *otamans* in their appeals to the Ukrainian peasantry.[19] The UNR army accepted the same historical designation of Cossack leader as a replacement for the Russian and western rank of general.

The centrality of the Ukrainian question did not disappear even in the days of the Ukrainian governments' worst military defeats; politicians simply reconceptualized it as a peasant question, and a peasant question it remained under the Bolsheviks.[20] As Andrea Graziosi argues in his influential work on this subject, the Ukrainian Revolution can already be seen as the "first act" of the Bolshevik war on the Ukrainian peasantry, which culminated in the murder by starvation during the Holodomor of 1932–33.[21] It is precisely this conflict in the countryside that enabled Felix Schnell to see Ukraine during the entire period from 1905 to 1933 as a space of violence where, for very different political regimes, coercion replaced rather than supplemented other social mechanisms.[22]

Finally, the transnational dimension of the Ukrainian Revolution also had momentous historical consequences. The union of the UNR and the ZUNR brought together politically incompatible systems, but both held in high regard the notion of sobornist′, or "wholeness," of a Ukraine encompassing diverse historical regions located in two different empires. The solemn declaration of State Union on St. Sophia Square in Kyiv on January 22, 1919 was intended to serve as the capstone of the Ukrainian Revolution, if not all of Ukrainian history. Today it is largely forgotten that the more conservative Galician leadership did not want to join forces with the socialist politicians of the UNR, and the Soviet offensive dislodged both Ukrainian administrations from Kyiv on February 5.[23] Before we dismiss the idea of Ukrainian unity as a one-time nationalist diversion, however, let us remember that the Bolsheviks inherited this powerful slogan in their interwar foreign policy and exploited it eagerly.[24] Their success in 1939 likely contributed to the Soviet collapse in 1991, in which the reunited Ukraine was a major player.

19. Antonov-Ovseenko, *Zapiski*, 3: 305.

20. Guthier, "Popular Base," 40.

21. Andrea Graziosi, *The Great Soviet Peasant War: Bolsheviks and Peasants, 1917–1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

22. Felix Schnell, *Räume des Schreckens: Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine 1905–1933* (Hamburg, 2012).

23. Oleh Pavlyshyn, *Ievhen Petrushevych (1863–1940): Iliustrovanyi biohrafichnyi narys* (L′viv, 2013), 163–69.

24. Christopher Gilley, *The "Change of Signposts" in the Ukrainian Emigration: A Contribution to the History of Sovietophilism in the 1920s* (Stuttgart, 2009); O. S. Rubl′ov and Iu. A. Cherchenko, *Stalinshchyna i dolia zakhidnoukraïns′koï intelihentsiï: 20–50-ti roky XX st.* (Kyiv, 1994).

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