Revolution through the Lens of Ordinary Life in Kyiv

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I have spent a number of years studying the history of Kyiv during the First World War and the revolution, and there remain two central problems: 1) the large number of scholarly texts in the field that increase exponentially; 2) the poor development of a significant number of topics related to the revolution. Moreover, studies of the revolution coming out of western historiography share the same problem: a generalization of the research under the label "Russia," which ignores the voices of the newly created republics, including Ukraine. Yet at the same time, the Ukrainian perspective often ignores the more general context of the empire. Therefore, it seems that much has been written, but when it comes to analyzing the material from the point of view of urban studies, there are many unanswered questions. In this essay, I will touch on some of them in hope of creating an agenda for further research.

The Stories of Little People

Let me start with a personal story. My family's background connects to the 1917–1921 period in several ways. The most legendary story is that Mykhallo Hrushevs′kyi was the godfather to my grandmother's elder sister ("At least he was not Petliura himself," my grandmother used to joke). My grandmother's favorite story began like this: "My father helped Ahatanhel Krymsky with creating the Academy of Science!" In May 1920—so another story goes—my great grandmother prepared food for Poles, and they jokingly called her daughter "little Bolshevik." The most romantic family story involves my great-grandmother and great-grandfather going to their church wedding in a carriage. It is not clear where they met each other. Supposedly, it happened in the cafeteria of the Central Rada where my great- grandmother worked. This is how key episodes and players of the revolution—Hrushevs′kyi, the UNR, the Poles, the Bolsheviks—have become connected with the story of my family.

Although these stories were transferred inconsistently, as oral stories always are, they still reached my generation. Yet it is difficult for me, as a historian, to verify or decipher them. One day, while working with archival materials on the history of Kyiv during the First World War and the revolution, I found records in the parish register that related to my family. Of course, I did not ever expect to find this kind of information, since I did not know the addresses of my ancestors and therefore could not know their parish. As it often happens, the new information only added to my list of unresolved questions. I did, however, finally refute the legend about our family ties to Hrushevs′kyi—though how he came to appear in family stories still remains a mystery.

This example of my family story illustrates, on the one hand, how little we as historians can explain, understand, or study when we step away from large historical events to look at "little people." On the other hand, however,

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this story also demonstrates how many unpredictable episodes that do not fit into well-known schemas or national narratives we can accidentally discover. After all, the above-mentioned parish register appeared in my hands only because I decided to try to create a list of Kyivan residents who died during the revolution using the available parish registers of Kyivan churches, in hope of reconstructing the events happening in the city during the most tragic moments of that period.

I started looking through the parish records in order to find additional sources that could better explain those weeks, which official sources ignore. I succeeded when I decided to dig deeper into the events of January-February 1918 in Kyiv, during the first Bolshevik invasion of the city. What did parish records allow me to discover? First of all, they showed the various ways in which the causes of death of parish members were recorded. While making a record, a priest could write that a person died "during the civil war," "during the disruption of public order," "during the revolution," or "during the fight between parties." When it came to recording deaths by violence in late 1918, a priest could write "killed by Petliurites in the forehead," or "killed on the streets of the city of Kyiv by Ukrainians for being a Russian volunteer."[1] Second, by looking at the list of deaths we can reconstruct the social topography of violence in Kyiv. These records allow us to follow the events from January 16, when Bolsheviks started rebellions in different parts of Kyiv through January 22–26, when Bolshevik commander Mikhail Muraviev gave an order to bombard Kyiv from the left bank of the Dnipro River, to January 25–29, when Muraviev's subordinators started their "murderous rampage" by killing civilians and military men.[2] The nature of these deaths allows us to talk about the beginning of Terror and to reflect upon family stories. For example, Colonel Kostiantyn Ivanovych Kolchyhin, his brother Major General Mykola Ivanovych Kolchyhin, and his son, cadet Mykola Mykolayovych Kolchyhin, all died on January 29.[3] At the same time Borys Kostiantynovych Kolchyhin—that is, the Colonel's son—was already making a career as a general in the Red Army.

Parish records also allow us to reconstruct the social portrait of the population of Kyiv. Records often show information about social status and places of birth, as well as attitudes of Kyiv residents towards the shelling of the city. The fact that shelling often killed women, couples, or even entire families shows that people did not yet know how to survive. When lining up for food, or when out in the streets for other reasons, city residents simply did not yet realize how devastating and dangerous the new weaponry could be, and so they did not protect themselves properly. This is not surprising, since the events of January 1918 were the first military conflict on the streets of the city during the war period. People simply did not know how to behave during the shelling and probably had little understanding of what was happening in the city.

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[1] Tsentral′nyi derzhavnyi istorychnyi arkhiv Ukrainy u m. Kyievi (TDIAK), f. 127, op. 1080, spr. 481, ark. 139, 324 (Metrychna knyha Tserkvy Blahovishchennia Presviatoi Bohorodytsi u Lybidskyi chastyni).

[2] According to data from the Kyiv Statistics Bureau, at least 1286 people were killed in January-February of 1918 in the city. See more, "Smertnost′," *Statisticheskii biulleten′ po gorodu Kievu / publikuetsia Statisticheskim biuro Kievskoii gorodskoii upravy,* (January–March, 1918): 25–32.

[3] TDIAK, f. 127, op.1080, spr. 484, ark. 291 (Metrychna knyha Tserkvy Sv. Volodymyra u Lybidskyi chastyni).

As we see now, the study of the revolution through the lens of "little people" can help us reconstruct everyday practices of survival of Kyiv residents, explain their attitude towards these events, map out the social topography of the city, and ultimately enrich our understanding of how "big events" that construct a larger national narrative were experienced. In other words, this allows us to "anthropologize" the Ukrainian revolution and to go beyond the traditional limits of political and military history, which pays attention largely to elites and fighters for the Ukrainian state.

The Need for a Polycentric Perspective

"Kyiv is taken by the Soviet troops. Rada and Secretariat ran away. . . . Everybody is in good health. Professor is here, in good health. Rada tried to pull our troops in, but we kept strict neutrality. Few of our people became victims of misunderstandings and provocations, everything is getting back to order gradually. While passing by the district, where our second division is deployed, Commander-in-Chief Muraviev recognized our military neutrality." his was the report coming out of the Section of the Czechoslovak National Council in Russia (Odbočka Česko-Slovenské Národní Rady v Rusku) located in Kyiv.[4] The person referred to as "Professor" was Tomas Masaryk, future first president of the Czechoslovak Republic. In 1917, Masaryk was staying in Kyiv, trying to form a Czechoslovak corps and transfer it to the western front in accordance with an agreement with France. This episode is still absent from the general narrative of the Ukrainian revolution and remains a research question for scholars of Ukrainian-Czech relations.

The presence of Czechs in Kyiv had a long tradition. Despite its low number (some 9000 people before the war), the Czech colony was quite significant for the city. Czech Vaclav Vondrak owned one of the tallest and most modern hotels in downtown, the *Praha* ; Jiri Jindrisek established one of the first gramophone record factories in the Russian Empire in Kyiv; Czech businessmen owned several factories.[5] During the war Czechs participated in the formation of a Czech unit in the Russian Army (*Druzhina*), were detained in a camp for prisoners of war (POW) located in Kyiv's Darnytsia district, and as POWs they worked for various city factories. In particular, Jaroslav Hašek appeared in Kyiv as a prisoner of war and started writing his immortal novel *The Good Soldier Schweik* in the city.

Adding the Czech perspective reveals the diversity of political and national movements in Kyiv throughout the revolutionary year 1917, and allows us to analyze and compare the level of self-organization of Ukrainian, Polish, Jewish, Czechoslovak, and other movements after the February revolution within a single city. We can also look at the way these movements used the same urban space to form their own institutions and to call congresses.

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[4] Vojensky historicky archiv Vojenskeho ustredniho archive v Praze—OCSNR v Rusku—presidium. 1917–1918, k. 6. č. 4073: Petrograd, Nadezhdinskaya № 36. Polucheno 15 fevralia 1918.

[5] See, Olena Betlii, "Ubi bene ibi patria: Reading the City of Kiev through Polish and Czech "Spatial Stories" from the First World War Period," in Lud′a Klusáková, Laure Teulières, eds., *Frontiers and Identities: Cities in Regions and Nations* (Pisa, 2008), 197–221.

Analyzing the year 1917 beyond the lens of Ukrainian statehood reveals not only Kyiv's multinationalism, but also its multiparty system. Political support and practices of Kyiv residents were directly related to party plurality. The extent to which these political practices changed the city itself can be seen from orders of the Kyiv militia:

> The elections to the Municipal Duma will happen on July 23. All citizens of the city will go to the ballot boxes to give their vote, to fulfill their civic duties. There will be meetings, manifestations, marches in the city. There will be vehicles with signs and speakers. There will be agitators, mounted and on foot. There will be cyclists and bikers. There will be huge signs, posters, houses full of attendants. Whole canvases with calls and mottos will speed by. There will be a competition of lists. There will be everything—in one word—everything that happens in Europe and in other countries during elections, including wide, outdoor agitation.[6]

In a short period of time residents of Kyiv participated in three electoral campaigns: elections to the Kyiv City Duma (City Council), the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, and the Ukrainian Constituent Assembly. The turnout to the municipal elections was 58.3%, to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly—57.46%, and to the Ukrainian Constituent Assembly—only 28.54%. The distribution of votes was the following: "elections to the municipal Duma—socialist block 37.01%, Bolsheviks 5.4%, Ukrainian socialist block 19.95%, Russian voters 14.08%; elections to All-Russian Constituent Assembly—socialist block 9.33%, Bolsheviks 13.17%, Ukrainian socialist block 20.88%, Russian voters 23.51%; elections to Ukrainian Constituent Assembly—socialist block 8.55%, Bolsheviks 9.94%, Ukrainian socialist block 20.26%, Russian voters 33.22%."[7] These results do not support the supposed "anti-Ukrainian" character of the city. They do, however, demonstrate that Kyiv residents supported socialist ideas when choosing their representatives to the municipal Duma and to the general Constituent Assembly. In the meantime, a gradual increase of support for "Russian voters" (that block of Russian nationalists led by Vasilii Shulgin) in early January 1918 might signify the political mobilization of this part of the electorate after the announcement of the Fourth Universal that proclaimed the independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic. Ukrainian politicians, put simply, lacked the force to mobilize their own electorate in a situation when the existence of the newly-born Ukrainian People's Republic was at risk. Indeed, the Universal was adopted without a consistent media campaign, and messages in Kyiv newspapers demonstrate how unexpected this decision of the Central Rada was for people. Therefore, it is not surprising that it was easier for Shulgin's electorate to define its affiliation at this time. The low turnout might also suggest that at times of political unrest, the majority of Kyiv residents were not willing to express their opinion. Reasons for this might be revealed after deeper research into the topic.

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[6] Derzhavnyi arkhiv Kyivs΄koi oblasti (DAKO), f. 2031, op. 1, spr. 911, ark. 347 (Kopii nakaziv po Kyivs΄kii miskii politsii).

[7] M-nov S., "Itogi vyborov v Kieve," *Kievskie gorodskie izvestiya,* No 7 (1918): 6–16.

Stepping away from an exclusive focus on the policies of the Central Rada when discussing 1917 allows for a better explanation of the "honeymoon period of the revolution" in Ukraine in general and in Kyiv specifically. Pursuing topics like political modernization, liberal and democratic political practices, and building new relations between citizens might benefit from using methods that are already well-applied to the transitional period in central Europe after 1989.

Revolution as a Way Out of the War

A focus on the activities of political and military elites can lead to a twisted understanding of the course of events in these years. A direct consequence is the inappropriate use of parallels between the period of 1917–1921 and the events in Ukraine after 2013. Hardly anybody does not talk about the Ukrainian People's Republic leaders' mistakes and the lessons that contemporary Ukrainian politicians should draw from them.[8] This assumption reflects a poor understanding of processes that happened in 1917–1921, however, the logic of which was determined by the long First World War, which the Russian empire exited not only with an ongoing revolution and territorial losses, but also with surprisingly weak state institutions.

Eric Lohr and Joshua Sanborn argue that one of the main reasons for state collapse was massive military desertion, followed by demobilization of the Russian army.[9] Kyiv sources support this statement. While in 1914–1916, police tracked down defectors and punished those who helped them to hide, by 1917, we see that the newly-created militia was gradually, month by month, losing control over the masses of demobilized soldiers. Armed assaults, murders on the streets of the city, and uncontrolled crowds of soldiers became ordinary phenomena. The militia often had to interfere in the process of "rendering justice" by the mob. An angry crowd could punish a drunk soldier who misbehaved on a street, for example, and in some cases the militia had to save the disturber from mob lynching.[10] In other words, this new institution—the militia—did not have the capacity to monopolize the right to violence. Therefore, if we do look for lessons for contemporary Ukraine, we might focus on the inability of authorities to control violence in revolutionary times.

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8. One of the most popular Ukrainian bloggers, Pavlo Kazarin, claimed that the ideal future for Ukraine would be when contemporary discussions about sovereignty and independence would become an archival set of truisms, and lose their relevance for further generations. I would agree that we have to leave the past events behind us and build Ukraine's future on a different set of texts and events more relevant to the contemporary world. Kazarin's text was widely read and liked by at least 42,000 users. See Pavel Kazarin, "Pohoronite nas za plintusom," at https://site.ua/pavel.kazarin/12347/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=shrike (accessed October 8, 2019).

9. Eric Lohr and Joshua Sanborn, "1917: Revolution as Demobilization and State Collapse," *Slavic Review* 76, no. 3, Special Issue on the Russian Revolution, A Hundred Years Later (Fall 2017): 703–8.

10. Derzhavnyi arkhiv m. Kyieva (DAK), f. 163, op. 37, spr. 53, ark. 103–132 (Svedeniia o proisshestviiah i neschatsnyh sluchaiah po Kievu).

All possible parallels with the revolutionary period for contemporary Ukraine end here.

Another direct result of the war was a lengthy economic crisis aggravated by revolution. Kyiv sources help us evaluate the consequences of this crisis as well. In particular, multiple reports came out from the Department of Consumption, which functioned under the authority of the City Provisions Office (Misʹka prodovolʹcha uprava) in August 1917 because of "a lack of food supply on the market, problems with purchasing from places of production, and destruction of railway transport."[11] The Provisions Office was responsible for the food stamp system and provided goods to housing committees for distribution. This was a practice that was previously unknown in Kyiv. Perhaps unsurprisingly, inspections of the food stamp system revealed multiple violations, making it possible for goods to appear on the market, which resulted in speculation and price increases. This analysis of the food supply allows us to reconstruct the economic network of Kyiv at that time. Until late 1917, the City Executive Office purchased goods from all over the (former) Russian empire. This was risky due to the collapse of the railway connections, but still possible. However, starting from January 1918—that is, the Bolshevik invasion—the situation changed: "The management by the Bolsheviks, which brought disorganization into the functioning of the Provisions Office, also led to much economic harm; the following political and economic situation that tore Kyiv away from the rest of the economic centers in Russia has put at great risk any possibility of returning the significant sums spent by the Office to purchase goods."[12]

The resulting problem of supplying Kyiv with essential goods brings us to one of the most complicated topics of 1918: the relations between the Ukrainian authorities and the German Commandant's Office. When solving urgent matters, representatives of the City Executive Office often addressed respective Ukrainian ministries and the German Commandant at once. Appeals often represented the interests of the poorer residents, who could not afford to buy goods from speculators. Numerous messages about the lack of bread that put the city on the edge of famine together with requests to define and supply daily rations show that the Ministry of Provisions failed to supply essential goods.[13]

Yet an agenda of a meeting regarding normalizing the supply of provisions to the city in late 1918 opens further questions about the changes that had happened in the everyday life of Kyiv residents since the February Revolution. The agenda included concentration of all food supply questions under the responsibility of the City Duma, which could involve cooperatives into the supply of goods.[14] This last point, on the development of the cooperative movement, reveals the period of the revolution as not only a time of lost chances, economic collapse, radicalization of society, and drastic levels of criminality, but also a time of new opportunities brought by revolutionary changes. An attempt to found a new enterprise at this time could show how Kyiv residents evaluated risks and benefits and made their choices about taking economic risk and might suggest that they evaluated the current events as a process of exiting the war and turning toward a peaceful life.

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[11] DAK, f. 163, op. 8, spr. 26, ark. 68 (Perepiska s ministrom prodovolʹstviia, Gorodskoi prodovolʹstvennoi upravoi o peredache dela po snabzheniiu naseleniia prodovolʹstviem gorodskomu samoupravleniiu o snabzhenii goroda khlebom).

[12] Ibid., ark. 80.

[13] Ibid., ark. 111–120.

[14] DAK, f. 163, op. 8, spr. 26, ark.185.

Therefore, an analysis of the revolutionary events through the lens of an ordinary life in Kyiv allows us to analyze a variety of new topics, all of which require reassessment of our approach towards the study of the years 1917 to 1921. In particular, I would like to propose 1) moving away from the reconstruction of "important" events and towards the experience of "little people"; 2) moving away from a concentration on the development of Ukrainian state institutions towards a more complex analysis that incorporates a multinational and multiparty perspective into the narrative; 3) moving away from a revolution-centric starting point toward rethinking the whole period as a unique way out of the First World War, one that was accompanied by the revolution and the creation of new (as well as preservation of old) institutions, economic crises, and the creation of new strategies of survival while transitioning from a state of war to a state of peace. Ultimately, the study of one city can dynamize the way we understand larger events, and the Kyiv perspective, in particular, shapes our understanding of 1917–1921 by raising new questions requiring further research. I also hope to show that a deep and detailed investigation of 1917–1921 in Kyiv should be taken on its own terms, and not as a point of comparison with current events in Ukraine. On a larger level, perhaps, this deep and detailed investigation reveals that how people experience "big events" often defies categorization, and how people create ways of surviving crises is often consequential.