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Palko, Olena (2023) The October Revolution and the competing projects of Soviet state-building on the western border (Ukraine and Belarus). *Works In Slavic Studies VI* , pp. 404-422. ISSN 2522-462X.

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## **THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION AND THE COMPETING PROJECTS OF SOVIET STATE-BUILDING ON THE WESTERN BORDER (UKRAINE AND BELARUS)**

The February Revolution marked the starting point of a complicated social, political and economic transformation across the former Russian Empire. The subsequent October revolution and Russian civil war put different projects of national state-building on trial. The rivalry between these different forms of statehood became especially severe at the Western margins of the former Empire, divided by the front lines of the First World War. In Belarus, partly occupied by the German Army since mid-1915, national activism was weak and often supported by external forces: the German administration, the Bolsheviks and later the Second Polish Republic. With an underdeveloped grassroots national movement, neither the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR), first declared on 25 March 1918, nor the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), established on 1 January 1919, could claim to fully represent the population of Belarus. Contrarily, in Ukraine local actors became the most ardent promoters of self-rule and state independence. The first post-revolutionary years were thus defined by the rivalry between the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR), formed on 7 November 1917, and the Soviet Republic in Ukraine that had existed under various names since December 1917. The period 1917–1920 was to be, by far, the most turbulent in the political history of these two republics.

### **The October Revolution: from Autonomy to Independence**

The abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in March 1917 led to the establishment of the Provisional Government in Petrograd. This executive authority was primarily tasked with organising the elections to the Constitutional

Assembly, scheduled for November same year; it also tried to manage the revolutionary situation in Russia and in the borderlands, especially since the regional elites had started to voice their demands for political autonomy. Once the events in Petrograd became known in the peripheries, local political leaders began to take the initiative by declaring national self-rule.

On 17 March 1917, an initial representative and temporary constituent body, the Central *Rada* (Council), was formed in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. The establishment of the Rada was initiated by the Society of Ukrainian Progressives, a nonpartisan political and civic organisation, formed in 1908, and the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' Party (USDWP), a successor of the Revolutionary Ukrainian Party, the first mass party in Ukraine, established in 1900. At its founding, the majority of the Rada's seats were occupied by representatives of the socialist and revolutionary parties, which would come to define the political orientation of Ukraine's elites for the years to follow. A similar representative body, the National Committee, was organised in Belarus in March 1917, claiming to represent all the ethnic groups and social classes within the new republic. At the second Congress of the various Belarusian political parties, held in Minsk in July 1917, the National Committee was transformed into a Central Rada. Its leading national party, the Belarusian Socialist *Hramada* (Assembly), a successor of the Belarusian Revolutionary Party, formed in 1902, had very small following, however. Political life in the Belarusian lands was thus dominated by Russian and Jewish-led socialist parties, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (the SRs), as well as the Jewish *Bund* and *Poale Zion*<sup>1</sup>.

Both regional assemblies recognised the right of the All-Russian Constituent Assembly to decide on the former Empire's federal order. During the first months, their requests did not go beyond political autonomy and Russia's constitutional transformation. These moderate demands were reflected in the First Universal of the Ukrainian Central Rada, issued on 23 June 1917. This legal act-declaration read as follows: "Without seceding from all of Russia [...] let the Ukrainian people have the right to manage its own life on its own soil"<sup>2</sup>. It also envisaged the creation of a democratically elected all-Ukrainian people's assembly, which would have the sole right to draft laws to be confirmed later by the All-Russian Constituent Assembly. The Second

<sup>1</sup> T. EMMONS, *The Formation of Political Parties and the First national Elections in Russia*, Cambridge Mass.; L. (Harvard UP), 1983, p. 150–151.

<sup>2</sup> The First Universal reprinted in TARAS HUNCZAK, (ed.) *The Ukraine, 1917–1921: A Study in Revolution*, Cambridge Mass. (HURI), 1977, p. 382.

Universal (16 July 1917) reconfirmed Ukraine's commitment to non-separation from Russia. Given these moderate demands, the establishment of the Rada in Ukraine was met with unprecedented enthusiasm; the national government engaged Ukraine's key public figures and intellectuals. By contrast, the Belarusian Rada had little contact with the masses and significantly lagged behind other political groups, which also claimed their right to represent the interests of the peoples of Belarus<sup>3</sup>.

As arranged by the Provisional Government, elections to the new Russian Constituent Assembly took place on 25 November 1917. The Bolsheviks, who, following the October coup in Petrograd, quickly directed their attention to the border republics, hoping that the elections would legitimise their power over the entire territory of the former empire. Instead, they gained only 24 % of votes, with 10.5 % on the territory of Ukraine and 57 % in the area of Belarus that had not been occupied by the Germans. The comparative results of the 1917 elections suggest just how different the following of the national leftist parties and their role in the two republics were at the time. In Ukraine, the Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs), which had existed in various formats since 1905, became the major political player, obtaining around 50 % of votes in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. In comparison, the Belarusian *Hramada* failed to get single candidate elected<sup>4</sup>. Also, during this election period, the Bolshevik party in Ukraine remained marginal, being alienated from the wider populace in both class and national terms. By the end of 1918, it counted only 4,364 members<sup>5</sup>. In Belarus, however, the membership of the Belarusian section of the Bolshevik Party grew rapidly. At the time of its formation in June 1917, it had had a mere forty members<sup>6</sup>. In the months leading up to the October Revolution, however, the membership in Minsk increased from 2,530 members at the end of August to 28,508 members and

<sup>3</sup> R. PIPES, *The Formation of the Soviet Union. Communism and Nationalism 1917–1923*, N. Y. (Atheneum), 1980, p. 73; Per A. RUDLING, *The Fall and Rise of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906–1931*, Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh UP), 2015, p. 82–83; N. P. VAKAR, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation*, Cambridge Mass. (Harvard UP), 1956, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup> J. SMITH, *Red Nations. The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR*, Cambridge (Cambridge UP), 2013, p. 23–24.

<sup>5</sup> М. Фролов, *Компартійно-радянська еліта в УСРР (1917–1922 рр.): становлення і функціонування*, З. (Прем'єр), 2003, с. 30.

<sup>6</sup> I. S. LUBACHKO, *Belorussia under Soviet Rule, 1917–1957*, Kentucky (Kentucky UP), 1972, p. 16.

27,856 candidate members by the beginning of October<sup>7</sup>. In frontline and war-weary Belarus, the popularity of the Bolsheviks could easily be attributed to their successful anti-war propaganda and the national socialist movement's inability to offer credible solutions to social grievances.

The Bolsheviks, after their initial success in Petrograd, tried to replicate the same scenarios in Minsk and Kyiv. The Bolshevik coup in the Belarusian capital was swift: already on 14 November, the Russian Bolsheviks, supported by the Minsk Soviets and a Red Army battalion, had proclaimed the victory of the Bolshevik revolution in Belarus<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, the Belarusian leaders called for an emergency session of the First All-Belarusian National Congress to discuss the existing political situation. This, however, was immediately disrupted by the local Bolsheviks. In Kyiv, by contrast, these Bolshevik efforts at seizing power quickly failed: an attempted workers' uprising in the city's largest factory *Arsenal* was promptly crushed by the national armed forces. In response, the Bolsheviks called for an All-Ukraine Congress of Soviets to be held in Kyiv in December 1917. Against all expectations, the delegates voiced their support for the Central Rada. This forced the Bolsheviks to move eastwards to Kharkiv, the industrial centre of Ukraine. There, the Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets was proclaimed, and an All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee elected as the governing authority.

These Bolshevik actions alarmed the nationalist leaders. On 20 November 1917 the Rada announced the creation of an autonomous Ukrainian People's Republic (*Ukrain's'ka Narodna Respublika, UNR*), which proclaimed independence from Russia on 22 January 1918. The Bolsheviks, in response, declared war on the new Ukrainian government<sup>9</sup>. This sudden escalation revealed how unprepared the UNR was for such reversals. The Rada, that, since its formation, had been pushing for a leaner military, was caught in an unequal fight with the Bolsheviks. Forced out of Kyiv, and unable to resist the superior Red Army, the Central Rada turned to its former adversary, the Central Powers, for military support.

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<sup>7</sup> R. PIPES, *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in I. S. ЛУВАЧКО, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> П. МІРЧУК, *Українсько-московська війна 1917–1919*, Торонто (Ліга визволення України), 1957; Ю. БОРИС, *The Russian Communist Party and the Sovietization of Ukraine: a Study in the Communist Doctrine of the Self-Determination of Nations*, Stockholm (Norstedt), 1960; A. E. ADAMS, *The Bolsheviks in the Ukraine: The Second Campaign, 1918–1919*, New Haven (Yale University Press), 1963.

Shortly after the exclusive protectorate treaty had been signed on 9 February 1918, German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers occupied Ukraine's territory and forced the Bolsheviks out of the republic's territory. In return, the Ukrainian government agreed to substantial economic liabilities, including deliveries of grain, food and raw materials<sup>10</sup>.

At the same time, the new Bolshevik regime in Petrograd was conducting its own separate negotiations with the Central Powers. Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed on 3 March 1918, the Russian Soviet government agreed to give up control over much of its European territory, including the Belarusian lands. Their retreat from Minsk had also seen the return of anti-Bolshevik activists, forced underground in November 1917. On 25 March 1918, Belarusian nationalists, supported by the German occupational authorities, declared the independence of the Belarusian National Republic (BNR): "Today we [...] cast off from our country the last chains of the political servitude that had been imposed by Russian tsarism upon our free and independent land"<sup>11</sup>. This reorientation towards Germany led to a split in the Rada and further weakened the republic's feeble nationalist movement. In response to this the most radical members started considering cooperation with the Russian Bolsheviks.

The BNR, nevertheless, did not last long. The Allies, who were to decide the ultimate fate of post-war Eastern Europe, did not support the independence of Belarus and its territory once again became a battleground between Poland and Soviet Russia. Moreover, contrary to the gradual weakening of the national governments, the Bolsheviks were now steadily regaining ground in the area. Their clear social orientation, strong party organisation and appealing national program were attractive to many socialists, both in Ukraine and Belarus. In addition, the Polish authorities, to whom the national leaders applied for military support during the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–1921, had little interest in advancing local nationalism. Being forced to choose what they considered the lesser of two evils, local revolutionaries turned to the Bolsheviks in hopes of restoring the independence of their republics under the red banner.

<sup>10</sup> See: O. FEDYSHYN, *Germany's Drive to the East and the Ukrainian Revolution, 1917–1918*, New Brunswick; N. Y. (Rutgers UP), 1971; P. BOROWSKY, 'Germany's Ukrainian Policy during World War I and the Revolution of 1918–19', [in:] *German-Ukrainian Relations in Historical Perspective*, ed. HANS-JOACHIM TORKE and JOHN-PAUL HIMKA, Edmonton and Toronto (CIUS), 1994, p. 84–94.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in N. P. VAKAR, *Op. cit.*, p. 103.

## Debating the soviet regime

Contrary to the expectations of the nationalist leaders in Ukraine and Belarus, the German and Polish occupational forces had little interest in advancing local self-rule. The Bolsheviks, instead, saw local nationalism as an important mobilising factor. Since the pre-war years, Lenin had supported the right of nations to self-determination, which he considered to be an inherent part of the international revolutionary movement<sup>12</sup>. Hence, the formation of a separate Soviet government on the territory of Ukraine did not contradict the Bolshevik ideology. Moreover, it was instrumental for Bolshevik strategic plans in the area. The Russian Bolsheviks, bound by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, could not declare a war against Germany, an ally of the national activists both in Ukraine and Belarus. Instead, a separate Soviet Ukrainian government could enable the Bolsheviks to enter into open war with the German occupying armies. Similarly, a separate status for Belarus could provide the Soviet regime with a necessary buffer against Poland and strengthen its overall standing in the region<sup>13</sup>.

In 1918, there was no unified Bolshevik view on the republican status of Ukraine with two different positions dominating debates. Firstly, a motion had been put forward to create numerous separate Soviet republics, corresponding to the social and economic conditions in Ukraine. Following the example of the Odesa Soviet Republic, created on 31 January 1918, the Donbas-Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic was established on 11 February 1918. The idea behind this project was to remove the Russified industrial areas from the countryside and to join them onto the central Russian provinces. The Kyiv group, on the other hand, argued that Ukraine's scant working class could not advance without the help of the peasantry, whose strong national aspirations had to be taken into account. Despite being advocated for by a minority in the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine (KP(b)U), the central leadership conceded and declared themselves in favour of a unified Ukrainian republic. Consequently, the liquidation of all the independent Soviet republics on Ukraine's territory and their unification with the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic was proclaimed<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance, V. LENIN, 'The socialist revolution and the right of nations to self-determination. Theses', [in:] V. LENIN, *Collected Works*, vol. 22, p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> A. WILSON, *Belarus. The Last European Dictatorship*, New Heaven; L., 2011, p. 96.

<sup>14</sup> V. HOLUBNYCHY, 'Outline History of the Communist Party of Ukraine', [in:] *Soviet Regional Economics. Selected works of Vsevolod Holubnychy*, edited by IWAN S. KO-ROPECKYJ, Edmonton (CIUS), 1982, p. 70.

The need to address the Belarusian question was first discussed at the ‘Conference of Belarusian Communists’, held in Moscow on 21–23 December 1918. The Bolsheviks needed to take resolute steps in response to the proclamation of the BNR in March 1918<sup>15</sup>. As a result, on 1 January 1919 the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was created and the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Belarus (KP(b)B) was formed. This centralist decision was, however, challenged locally. During the First All-Belarusian Congress of Soviets, summoned on 2–3 February 1919, delegates from Smolensk, Mogilev and Vitebsk rejected the idea of a separate Soviet republic being created on the territory of Belarus. Following the Congress, the idea emerged to join the BSSR with the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR), a Soviet republic established on 16 December 1918. However, this idea of an artificial Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania and Belarus, or LitBel, was unpopular and proved to be politically short-lived. Belarusian nationally oriented communists considered the merger as an annexation of Belarus by Lithuania. LitBel ceased to exist five months later. A separate BSSR was restored on 1 August 1920<sup>16</sup>.

Nevertheless, the creation of the autonomous Soviet republics was balanced by a unified system of government and a centralised party organisation. Despite continuous demands for creating separate Bolshevik organisations for Belarus and Ukraine, the two regional parties were made integral, although autonomous, parts of the RKP(b). The 1919 RKP(b) program made the centralist claims of the central Bolshevik leadership unambiguous. It was stated that despite a separate status being agreed for the Soviet republics there was no intention to reorganise the Party as a federation of independent Communist Parties: “There must exist a *single* centralised Communist Party with a *single* Central Committee leading all the Party work in all sections of the RSFSR. All decisions of the RCP [the Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks] and its directing organs are unconditionally binding on all branches of the party, regardless of their national composition. The Central Committees of the Ukrainian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Communists enjoy the rights of the regional committees of the party and are entirely subordinated to the Central Committee of the RKP”<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> A. RUDLING, *Op. cit.*, p. 122; A. WILSON, *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>16</sup> Т. ПРОТЬКО, *Становление советской тоталитарной системы в Беларуси (1917–1941 гг.)*, Минск (Тесей), 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in R. PIPES, *Op. cit.*, p. 245 (italics in original).

Clearly, actual sovereignty in all Soviet republics belonged to the central party leadership in Moscow. The subordinate status of the republics was reflected in the composition of their Soviet governments. For instance, the first Ukrainian Soviet government, the Provisional Workers'-Peasants' Government of Ukraine, formed on 28 November 1918 in Kursk, was headed by the Russian revolutionary Georgii Piatakov and consisted predominantly of Russian Bolsheviks. The second government, led by Khrystian Rakovskiy (who remained in office until July 1923) would later see ethnic Ukrainian commissars assuming marginal posts, such as education, justice and communication.

### National Communist Opposition

In 1923, the first party historian Moisei Ravich-Cherkasskii suggested that the history of the KP(b)U was “a sum of the two histories: that of the Ukrainian proletariat and that of the Russian proletariat in Ukraine”<sup>18</sup>. Accordingly, there were two distinct ideological roots in the KP(b)U, one extending from the Russian Revolutionary movement and another from the Ukrainian socialist movement. Unlike in Belarus, where local socialists had never occupied a significant position, self-standing communist parties and a Bolshevik movement with a distinct national agenda contributed to strengthening Ukrainian national communism, an important rival to the Russian Bolsheviks in their state-building initiatives. National communism was a theoretical approach and political practice, derived from the platform of the Ukrainian SRs that aimed to reconcile demands for national and social liberation in search of a national path to communism. Stephen Velychenko maintains that this orientation emerged in reaction to the moderate socialism of the Ukrainian national government and chauvinistic Russian Bolshevik rule, which initially disregarded the national sentiment of the population<sup>19</sup>. The strong national communist orientation in Ukraine reflected the two equal constituents in the revolutionary movement: social and national. By contrast in Belarus the revolution was mainly social with only some signs of a national revival<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> М. РАВИЧ-ЧЕРКАССКИЙ, *История Коммунистической партии (б-ов) Украины*, Х. (Госиздат Украины), 1923, с. 5.

<sup>19</sup> S. VELYCHENKO, *Painting Imperialism and Nationalism Red: The Ukrainian Marxist Critique of Russian Communist Rule in Ukraine, 1918–1925*, Toronto (Toronto UP), 2015, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup> A. WILSON, *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

The ideological foundation of national communism was set out in the brochure *Do Khvyli: Shcho Diyet'sia na Ukraïni i z Ukraïnoiu?* [‘Concerning the Moment: What is Happening in and to Ukraine’] published in January 1919 by the Ukrainian Bolsheviks Vasył' Shakhrai and Serhii Mazlakh<sup>21</sup>. The pamphlet mostly touched upon the discordance between Lenin's claims for nations' right to self-determination (realised, as believed, in the creation of Soviet Ukraine) and the inferior position of the republic's Bolshevik party. Instead, its authors pushed the idea of establishing a self-standing independent Ukrainian Communist Party of Bolsheviks that would affirm the Ukrainian language, culture and independent statehood. Shakhrai and Mazlakh concluded with a list of demands, addressed to Lenin. These declarations encapsulated the key objectives of the Ukrainian communists: recognising Ukraine's independence and the right of its leaders to defend the republic's sovereignty either “by armed struggle, or in a democratic way by compromise with neighbouring countries”. Similarly, the authors affirmed the right of Ukrainian communists to adopt a national position until the independence of Ukraine and the rights of its working class was assured<sup>22</sup>. The demands expressed in *Do Khvyli*, were indirectly answered by Lenin in his late 1919 resolution “On the question of the attitude towards the working people of Ukraine”<sup>23</sup>. Lenin reassured his Ukrainian counterparts that the RKP(b) had no intention of limiting the independence of the Ukrainian SSR. He also granted Ukrainian workers and peasants the exclusive right to decide on the republican status of Soviet Ukraine. There was yet another important implication of Lenin's address: due to the precarious position of the Bolsheviks and the lack of a well-developed plan for Ukraine, the activity of different socialist pro-Soviet parties was tolerated and sanctioned.

Besides representing a distinctive ideological orientation within the KP(b)U, national communism also emerged as an important political practice. There were, after all, several other communist parties competing with the Bolsheviks for the right to represent the republic's toiling masses. The major non-Bolshevik communist faction in Ukraine was a pro-soviet splinter group in the Ukrainian SR party, the Ukrainian Communist Party (*Borot'bysty*)

<sup>21</sup> С. МАЗШАХ, В. ШАХРАЙ, *До хвилі: що діється на Україні і з Україною?* Нью Йорк (Пролог), 1945; *The Current Situation in the Ukraine*, Michigan (Michigan UP), 1970.

<sup>22</sup> С. МАЗШАХ, В. ШАХРАЙ, *Op. cit.*, с. 105.

<sup>23</sup> V. LENIN, *Collected Works*, vol. 30, Moscow (Progress Publishers), 1965, p. 291–297.

[derivative from the party newspaper *Borot'ba*, Ukrainian for 'struggle']. Among its founders and most famous representatives were Hnat Mykhailychenko, Oleksandr Shums'kyi, Vasyl' Ellans'kyi (Blakytnyi) and Panas Liubchenko, all of whom would soon play a prominent part in the political life of Soviet Ukraine. The Borot'bysty considered the October Revolution a necessary stage for the wider world revolution. From this perspective, events in Russia in 1917 had been a useful example for Ukraine, although these developments could not be blindly copied. The Borot'bysty, who enjoyed broad public support among the Ukrainian population, rejected the idea of a messianic role for the proletariat of one particular country. Instead, they advocated for the need to "translate a revolutionary struggle into the language of local conditions"<sup>24</sup>. The revolution in Ukraine was therefore both social and national and had its own demographic bases: the urban and rural proletariat alongside the semi-proletarian and poor peasantry.

The Borot'bysty regarded the Moscow-led KP(b)U, supported by Russified industrial workers in eastern Ukraine, as an occupying force. Russian communists, according to the Borot'bysty, persistently neglected the social, economic and cultural peculiarities of Ukraine and had alienated themselves from the wider Ukrainian population<sup>25</sup>. The Bolsheviks, according to their ideological rivals, would therefore not be capable of delivering the idea of world proletarian revolution to ethnic Ukrainians. Overall, as seen from the Borot'bysty's perspective, the Bolshevik efforts to Russify the republic were detrimental for the entire communist endeavour in Ukraine<sup>26</sup>. Without recognising the national aspiration of the Ukrainian people, it was argued, attempts at creating a unified national working class would be doomed. The sovietisation of Ukraine could only succeed if the persistent antagonism between the workers of the Russian cities and the Ukrainian peasantry ceased. To achieve this goal, a new communist party was required, one that could unify different social groups under a single ideology. This envisaged communist party would unite all local communist forces, including the KP(b)U, and join the Third International as a separate territorial section<sup>27</sup>. Similarly, the Borot'bysty advocated for

<sup>24</sup> *Боротьба* (К., 1919, 13 серпня).

<sup>25</sup> 'Меморандум Української Комуністичної партії (боротьбистів) Виконавчому комітету II-го Комуністичного Інтернаціоналу (August 1919 р.)', [в:] *Українська суспільно-політична думка в 20 столітті: в 3 т.*, ред. Т. Гунчак, Р. Сольчаник, Мюнхен (Сучасність), 1983, т. 1, с. 432, 435.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, с. 437.

<sup>27</sup> 'Меморандум Української Комуністичної партії (боротьбистів)...', с. 435–36.

a separate Soviet Ukrainian republic, which would eventually become a part of an envisaged Universal Federation of Socialist Republics<sup>28</sup>.

In December 1918, a splinter group in the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' Party, the Organising Committee of the USDRP *Nezalezhnyky* (independentists) also declared their support for Soviet power<sup>29</sup>. The faction included a number of prominent political figures of the time: its main theorists were Mykhailo Tkachenko, Minister of Internal Affairs of the Rada, and Andrii Rychyts'kyi, one of the editors of the USDRP central newspaper *Robitnycha Hazeta*. Although not forming their own party, the *Nezalezhnyky* emphasised their difference from both the USDRP and the KP(b)U, proposing a radical program of socio-economic and political transformation. The group adopted a rather critical stand against any form of parliamentarianism, which had failed to provide a strong organised power, a prerequisite of a socialist revolution. So, soviets of workers' and peasants' deputies were the only possible form of governance<sup>30</sup>. Nevertheless, the *Nezalezhnyky* highlighted their unbridgeable differences with the KP(b)U<sup>31</sup>. They were especially opposed to those KP(b)U members who, like the RKP(b) ideologists, had persisted with the Great-Russian chauvinist attitudes towards Ukraine, neglecting its separate status and national peculiarities. As with the Borot'bysty, the *Nezalezhnyky* also rejected the Bolshevik idea of proletarian dictatorship, which did not correspond to the Ukraine's social structure.

The main reason for disagreements with the Bolsheviks, however, was their position in relation to the national question. The Bolshevik party, according to the *Nezalezhnyky*, had proven itself "a hypocritical party which continually violates its own principles" and, therefore, "cannot be trusted until it is transformed organisationally and merges with the interests of the Ukrainian toiling people"<sup>32</sup>. The success of the socialist revolution, according to the group, heavily depended on the right to form separate independent socialist republics. The *Nezalezhnyky* promoted the

<sup>28</sup> 'Меморандум Української Комуністичної партії (боротьбистів)...', с. 434.

<sup>29</sup> Сн. FORD, 'Outline History of the Ukrainian Communist Party (Independentists): An Emancipatory Communism 1918–1925', *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 17, 2 (2009): 193–246.

<sup>30</sup> *Червоний шлях* (К., 1919, 22 January).

<sup>31</sup> П. ХРИСТЮК, *Замітки і матеріали до історії Української Революції 1917–1920*, Нью Йорк (Видавництво Чарторийських), 1969, т. IV, с. 72.

<sup>32</sup> П. ХРИСТЮК, *Op. cit.*, с. 56.

idea of Ukraine's independence. Subsequently, at the Sixth Congress of the USDRP held on 10–12 January 1919, a motion was put forward to transform “the sovereign and independent Ukrainian People's Republic into the sovereign and independent Ukrainian Socialist Republic”<sup>33</sup>. Additionally, the group's leaders started discussing the possibility of forming a separate Ukrainian Communist Party. This idea, however, was forcibly crushed by the KP(b)U in the spring of 1919, when the *Nezalezhnyky* leaders were arrested and their organs of press (*Chervonyi Prapor* in Kyiv and *Kharkivs'kyi Proletar* in Kharkiv) closed down.

Despite the well-justified claims of the Ukrainian communists to join the Soviet Government, the Third Congress of the KP(b)U in Kharkiv (1–6 March 1919) confirmed its stand in opposing cooperation with other pro-Soviet parties and refused to allow their representatives to hold responsible posts within the Ukrainian Soviet Government<sup>34</sup>. This competition between the communist parties in Ukraine was finally brought to an end by the Third International. At the beginning of August 1919, the Borot'bysty passed their Memorandum to the Executive Committee, demanding that it accepted their organisation's status as a leading communist party in Ukraine<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, at the end of October 1919, the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Party of Left Socialist-Revolutionists submitted their application for joining the Communist International. In January 1920, the session of the Executive Committee of the Communist International devoted to the Ukrainian question passed a resolution, according to which the KP(b)U was recognised as the only representative of the Ukrainian proletariat<sup>36</sup>. The Congress also raised the question of unifying all communist forces in Ukraine into one single party, the KP(b)U.

Abiding by the Congress' decision, the Borot'bysty voted for their self-liquidation and merger with the Bolshevik party. Subsequently, some 4,000 Borot'bysty were admitted into the KP(b)U in 1920<sup>37</sup>. However, open opposition to the Bolshevik party was not abandoned entirely. A

<sup>33</sup> П. ХРИСТЮК, *Op. cit.*, с. 69.

<sup>34</sup> А. Е. АДАМС, *Op. cit.*, p. 218–19.

<sup>35</sup> *Українська суспільно-політична думка в 20 столітті: в 3 т.*, ред. Т. ГУНЧАК, Р. СОЛЪЯНИК, Мюнхен (Сучасність), 1983, т. 1, с. 427–437.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in І. МАЙСТРЕНКО, *Borot'bism: A chapter in the History of Ukrainian Communism*, N. Y. (Research Program on the U. S. S. R.), 1954, p. 184–185.

<sup>37</sup> І. МАЙСТРЕНКО, *Історія Комуністичної партії України*, Мюнхен (Сучасність), 1979, с. 74.

splinter group of the *Nezalezhnyky* initiated the creation of a separate Ukrainian Communist Party (UKP)<sup>38</sup>. From the beginning, the UKP had a scant membership, numbering some 250 at its inaugural meeting. Nevertheless, the group repeatedly rejected any offers for a merger. Until its dissolution in 1925, the UKP was the only legal, although often persecuted, political opposition to the Bolsheviks in Soviet Ukraine.

A number of factors enabled this political pluralism of the early 1920s. The unstable position of the KP(b)U was, however, a decisive one. The Bolsheviks, due to the lack of public support, low party membership and an underrepresentation of locals within its ranks, were unable to impose their monopoly outright. Cooperation with local national activists was therefore highly encouraged. It should be admitted that in Belarus, several the former BNR leaders and activists also supported the Soviet regime in hopes that the Bolsheviks would assist in building a separate Belarusian Soviet republic. Unlike in Ukraine, however, there was no institutional opposition; a number of nationally oriented Bolshevik party members and leftist intellectuals, who had joined the establishment, occasionally voiced their concerns about the status of the republic and its Communist party. Nevertheless, almost all of these opposition groups had been eliminated by the end of the civil war in Russia. The merger with national communist currents in Ukraine and Belarus provided the Bolsheviks with a much needed legitimacy in the region. At the same time, those national leftist activists continued to pursue their agenda from within the party ranks throughout the 1920s.

### **The Soviet Nationalities Policy**

In the early 1920s, a preferential nationalities policy, *korenizatsiia*, was designed to rectify various political disparities on the territories of the Soviet republics. *Korenizatsiia* was adopted at the Twelfth RKP(b) Congress in April 1923, with the aim, according to the then Commissar for Nationalities Stalin, to fight both “Great-Russian chauvinism” and any manifestations of local nationalism. The underlying motives of *korenizatsiia* were yet more complex: the need to root the predominantly Russian revolution at the margins of the former empire; to make the Bolshevik party, with its small percentage of locals in regional party organisations,

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<sup>38</sup> Програма Української Комуністичної партії, К.; Відень, 1920.

the embodiment and the implementers of the revolutionary ideals for all Soviet republics; to re-conciliate with local nationalism; to overcome the tsarist legacy of alienation between the Russian centre and non-Russian peripheries; and to address the hostility between the cities (which often were Russian outposts) and the countryside. In the western borderlands, korenizatsiia's success had critical importance: it was also meant to provide an outlet for national sentiment and activism, developed during the anti-Russian wars of 1917–1920, and to contribute to Soviet strategic goals in the region.

The international factor became an important prerequisite for the implementation of the new nationalities policy. After the First World War, a significant number of Ukrainians remained on the territories of Romania, Czechoslovakia and Poland. In addition, following the Polish-Soviet war, millions of ethnic Ukrainians and Belarusians were left in the territories ceded to Poland by the 1921 Treaty of Riga. A successful solution to the national question was therefore needed to counterbalance the strongly anti-Soviet attitude of Ukrainians and Belarusians abroad, stirred up by significant political emigration. The Soviet strategy behind the implementation of affirmative actions in the national sphere was based on the idea that the generous treatment of national minorities within the Soviet Union would make the regime appear attractive to their countrymen from abroad and undermine neighbouring governments<sup>39</sup>.

The RKP(b) Resolution on korenizatsiia was followed by similar declarations in the peripheries. In Ukraine, important decrees, concerning the status of the Ukrainian language, schooling and major tasks concerning the regulation of political education and propaganda in the countryside, were passed in the summer of 1923<sup>40</sup>. Similarly, the new nationalities policy was approved by the Belarusian Central Committee. Korenizatsiia consisted of two interlinked national policies with distinctive goals: linguistic de-Russification (that incorporated concepts such as *Belarusizatsiia* and

<sup>39</sup> М. Скрипник, 'УСРР – П'ємонт українських трудящих мас', [в:] М. Скрипник, *Статті і промови з національного питання*, Мюнхен (Сучасність), 1974, с. 178–184; Т. MARTIN, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca (Cornell UP), 2001, p. 9; М. PAULY, 'Soviet Polonophobia and the Formulation of Nationalities Policy in the Ukrainian SSR, 1927–1934', [in:] *Polish Encounters, Russian Identity*, Bloomington (Indiana UP), 2005, p. 172–188.

<sup>40</sup> М. Панчук та ін., *Національні відносини в Україні в ХХ ст.: Збірник документів і матеріалів*, К. (Наукова думка), 1994.

*Ukrainizatsiia*); and party entrenchment, aimed at ‘rooting’ Soviet rule within the republics. The nationalities policy, however, was regarded as a soft-line, minor in comparison to the core Bolshevik tasks. As a consequence, its implementation was often met with stubborn passive resistance and a number of initiatives were prescribed but never enforced. The significance of *korenizatsiia* increased only after 1925, when the official course on industrialisation was declared by the Fourteenth VKP(b) Congress.

In the following years, the national composition of the Communist parties changed drastically. The percentage of ethnic Ukrainians in the KP(b)U grew from 23.6 % in 1922 to 53.0 % in 1930. For Belarusians in the KP(b)B, this took the form of a rise from 21.0 % to 46.7 %<sup>41</sup>. Such changes also occurred in the use of language by the bureaucracy and the state apparatus. In Belarus, for instance, the proportion of the central administration of party, state and union organisations who spoke Belarusian, grew from 20 % in 1925 to 80 % by 1928. Such advances were mostly attained through a massive campaign to engage “local cadres” in party and governmental service. Similar success was recorded in translation the bureaucratic paperwork and the press into local languages. In 1927, 70 % of central government paperwork was produced in Ukrainian while the percentage of newspapers had increased to 68.8 % by 1929<sup>42</sup>. The main republican newspapers, *Komunist* and *Visti*, started to be published in Ukrainian while Belarus’s *Zviazda* began to appear in Belarusian.

By the late 1920s, *korenizatsiia* proved to be a great success in all spheres concerned. Particularly important changes were reported in regard to schooling. By 1933, 88.5 % of teaching in elementary schools was being conducted in Ukrainian (against 50.4 % in 1922)<sup>43</sup>. Similar, albeit slower, tendencies were reported in professional and higher education. In 1929/30, 40 % of higher education institutes conducted their teaching in Ukrainian; 39.5 % of academic and teaching staff and 62.8 % of enrolled students were Ukrainians<sup>44</sup>. In Belarus, the reported percentage of school programmes taught in Belarusian rose from 28.4 % in 1924–25 to 93.8 % in

<sup>41</sup> T. RIGBY, *Communist Party Membership in the U.S.S.R.*, Princeton (Princeton UP), 1968, p. 369.

<sup>42</sup> В. СМОЛІЙ та ін., *Українізація 1920–30-х років: передумови, здобутки, уроки*, К. (Інститут історії України НАН України), 2003, с. 81.

<sup>43</sup> В. СМОЛІЙ та ін., *Op. cit.*, с. 89–90; M. D. PAULY, *Breaking the Tongue: Language, Education, and Power in Soviet Ukraine, 1923–1934*, Toronto (Toronto UP), 2014.

<sup>44</sup> В. СМОЛІЙ та ін., *Op. cit.*, с. 102.

1929–30<sup>45</sup>. Advances also occurred in professional and higher education: the Belarusian State University was opened in 1921 and by 1928 there were four institutions of higher education in Soviet Belarus.

Despite comparable results in the two Soviet republics, there were also significant differences. To a certain extent, the *korenizatsiia* campaign in Ukraine built upon the accomplishments of the previous governments, the UNR and the Ukrainian State (a puppet state established by Germans in April 1918). In addition, Ukraine, despite its provincial status in the Russian Empire, had a long tradition of higher education. By contrast, Belarus had previously possessed no universities or tertiary institutions, while in Ukraine, Kharkiv University had been founded in 1804 and Kyiv University in 1834. Similarly, the institutionalisation of cultural life in Ukraine was mainly achieved before the Soviet consolidation of power. In 1918, under the short-lived Ukrainian State, institutions like the State Archive, the National Art Gallery, the Ukrainian History Museum, the National Library, the National Academy of Sciences and the State Publishing House had all been established. In comparison, the Belarusian Academy of Science only opened in 1928, having been reformed from the Institute of Belarusian Culture, founded in Minsk in 1921.

There were also different approaches to understanding *korenizatsiia* in these two republics. The creation of the Belarusian republic from the beginning, according to Francine Hirsch, was an example of nation-building “from above”<sup>46</sup> with little say from local elites and only sporadic engagement from national intellectuals. Ukrainian statehood came as the result of a continuous power struggle between the central and local elites, notably the Russian-oriented and Ukraine-minded Bolsheviks. *Korenizatsiia*, as seen from the central party perspective, was designed to break the isolation of the Bolsheviks in the border republics and gain support from national activists. At the same time, for Ukrainian communists in the party, *korenizatsiia* predominantly meant *Ukrainizatsiia*: the continuation of the UNR initiative of forced nation-building. For both groups, linguistic *Ukrainizatsiia*, aimed at accelerating the de-Russification of the population, became a necessary and yet subordinate objective. Whereas the central party leadership aimed to create a Ukrainian-speaking community as

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<sup>45</sup> I. S. LUBACHKO, *Op. cit.*, p. 86–88.

<sup>46</sup> F. HIRSCH, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca (Cornell UP), 2005, p. 149.

a step towards further assimilation of Ukrainians into a homogeneous Soviet people, national intellectuals, including those in the party, saw the formation of the Ukrainian nation as an end in and of itself. These two clashing visions of Ukrainizatsiia became obvious in 1926 when Shums'kyi, the Commissar for Education, indirectly accused Stalin of hindering the Ukrainizatsiia campaign<sup>47</sup>.

Ukrinizatsiia quickly assumed a political aspect. This preferential policy strengthened the Ukrainian fraction in the KP(b)U, who mistook this Bolshevik initiative for a possibility to develop a separate Soviet Ukraine. In most cases, the leading Ukrainianisers had previously belonged to the above-mentioned national communist parties, who, after their merger, had enhanced the Ukrainian political horizon within the KP(b)U. In March 1920, for instance, out of 11,087 KP(b)U full members and 2,439 candidate members, around 30.5 % had previously belonged to other political, mainly national, communist parties<sup>48</sup>. Nevertheless, this share of former rival party members within the KP(b)U did not stay intact. At the beginning of 1926, it had already decline to only 3.2 %<sup>49</sup>. However, it was not the quantity that made the influence of Ukrainian communists so significant. Following the merger, the main leaders of Borot'bysty were admitted to important positions within the KP(b)U. Blakytnyi and Shums'kyi even entered the Central Committee of the KP(b)U, the former also became the part of the Politburo. Liubchenko became the TsK KP(b)U's Secretary for Culture and the editor-in-chief of the TsK newspaper *Komunist*. Already in May 1919, the Borot'bysty had won over the Bolsheviks through their control of the Ukraine's Commissariat for Education and the All-Ukrainian Literary Committee, *Vseukrlitkom*. Under the auspices of the Commissariat for Education, the State Publishing House (*Vsevydav*) was opened in Kyiv. Gradually, the former Borot'bysty began to take charge of the cultural and intellectual life in the republic<sup>50</sup>.

In her book on Soviet nation-building, Hirsch argues in favour of state-sponsored evolutionism and modernisation. According to her analysis, the Soviet regime's modernisation program entailed organising the

<sup>47</sup> G. LIBER, *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth, and Identity Change in the Ukrainian SSR 1923–1934*, Cambridge (Cambridge UP), 2002, p. 121–143.

<sup>48</sup> М. ФРОЛОВ, *Op. cit.*, c. 175.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 182.

<sup>50</sup> М. SHKANDRII, *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation: the Ukrainian Literary Discussion of the 1920s.*, Edmonton (CIUS), 1992, p. 22–23.

‘backward’ borderland peoples into nations within the context of a unified Soviet state. The ultimate goal was ‘double assimilation’, where national identification was to be developed based on a more fundamental loyalty to the Soviet state, a step in creating a “new historical, social and international unity of people”: the Soviet people. This model could be easily applied to the case of Belarus, where the Soviet regime played a key role in ascribing national identity, developing the national language and culture and establishing the republic’s borders. Instead, Ukraine’s Soviet state-building became an amalgamation of at least two different nation-building projects: the Ukrainian Soviet (as envisaged by the national communists both within and outside of the KP(b)U) and the Soviet Ukrainian (the result of the Soviet national preferential policy of the 1920s)<sup>51</sup>.

These two dynamics were not contradictory. The Bolsheviks, who had faced incomparable challenges during the Russian-Ukrainian wars in Ukraine, came to adopt significant parts of the national aspirations which had been articulated in 1917–1918. In doing so they co-opted, absorbed and were themselves changed by a diverse array of Ukraine-oriented left-wing forces. In addition, the Ukrainian political horizon within the party was reinforced by korenizatsiia. A strong national communist orientation in the KP(b)U combined with the lenient attitude of the central party leadership towards certain ‘deviations’ made the Ukrainian Soviet project distinctly Ukrainian, and, as a result, distinctly problematic for Moscow. The national communist orientation in Ukraine did not perish in the 1920s. There were at least two other instances when the Ukrainian orientation in the party came into direct opposition with the centralist perspective: the rise of national communism in the 1960s and the end of the 1980s, both of which eventually led to Ukraine’s independence<sup>52</sup>. The different experience of national communism in Ukraine and Belarus suggests the reasons as to why these two republics had different experiences under Soviet rule, notably the positions they assumed during the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the nation-building strategies, thereafter, may be explained by differences in establishing and consolidating the Soviet regime during its formative decades.

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<sup>51</sup> O. PALKO, *Making Ukraine Soviet Literature and Cultural Politics under Lenin and Stalin*, London (Bloomsbury Academic), 2020; M. FOWLER, *Beau Monde on Empire’s Edge: State and Stage in Soviet Ukraine*, Toronto (University of Toronto Press), 2017.

<sup>52</sup> O. PALKO, ‘Ukrainian National Communism: a Challenging History’, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 22, 1 (2014): 27–48.

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**Жовтнева революція та формування альтернативних проєктів радянського уряду на західному прикордонні (Україна та Білорусь).**

*Анотація.* Жовтнева революція стала початком складного процесу соціальної, політичної та економічної трансформації Російської імперії. Уже в період Жовтневого перевороту та громадянської війни в Росії було запропоновано різні проєкти національного державотворення, боротьба між представниками яких особливо загострилася у західних областях колишньої Імперії. У Білорусії, що частково перебувала під німецькою окупацією з середини 1915 р., національний рух залишався доволі слабким і часто підтримувався зовнішніми силами, як наприклад німецькою адміністрацією, більшовиками, а пізніше й Польською Республікою. У таких умовах, ні Білоруська Народна Республіка (БНР), уперше проголошена 25 березня 1918 року, ні Білоруська Радянська Соціалістична Республіка (БРСР), утворена 1 січня 1919 року, не могли претендувати на значну підтримку білоруського населення. Натомість, в Україні національні лідери стали найзапеклішими пропагандистами самоврядування та державної незалежності. Таким чином, перші післяреволюційні роки були означені жорстким протистоянням між Українською Народною Республікою (УНР), утвореною 7 листопада 1917 р., та Радянською Республікою в Україні, яка існувала під різними назвами з грудня 1917 р.

*Ключові слова:* Жовтневий переворот, УНР, Україна, Білорусь, політичний процес, коренізація.