

The Failure of Nationalism in Revolutionary Ukraine: 1917-1920

Matthew Kowalski
La Salle University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

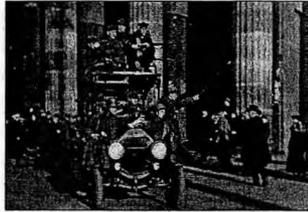
Kowalski, Matthew () "The Failure of Nationalism in Revolutionary Ukraine: 1917-1920," *The Histories*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol4/iss1/4

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

III

The Failure of Nationalism in Revolutionary Ukraine: 1917-1920

By Matthew Kowalski



Any history of the Russian Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union would be incomplete without addressing the importance of the non-Russian nationalities of the Tsarist Empire. The collapse of the Tsarist regime in 1917 presented opportunities for both the revolutionary left and the various ethnic groups within the Russian Empire. During the years 1917–1920, the forces of radical socialism and nationalism came into direct confrontation in Ukraine. Although the Bolsheviks in Ukraine ultimately emerged victorious, they were dominated by ethnic Russians and never amounted to a ‘mass movement.’ In the words of Robert Sullivant, “at the time the Bolsheviks assumed power in Petrograd it was only in the eastern districts of the Ukraine that the Communists controlled important Party organizations, and it was only in the urban centers that the Party was able to develop popular support.”¹ This statement immediately raises the question, how could such a numerically small movement have triumphed? The answer lies in the unique socio-economic structure of pre-revolutionary Ukraine. Failure to establish an urban support base, lack of a political consciousness amongst the peasantry, and ideological divisions severely retarded the development of a Ukrainian national consciousness. . Correspondingly, the Bolsheviks’ ability to control the cities and their eventual willingness to adapt policy to Ukraine’s unique socio-economic structure proved instrumental to their success.

Before examining the socio-economic factors that contributed to the Bolshevik victory in Ukraine, it is important to describe Ukrainian society on the eve of the Revolution. One major feature of pre-revolutionary Ukrainian society was an acute sense of regionalism. Indeed, “the Ukraine in the late nineteenth century was a conglomerate of several geographic territories, the Left Bank, the Right Bank, and the Steppe, each with its own unique past.”² By the time of the Revolution in 1917, these historic regional differences had been reinforced by the economic changes occurring in the Tsarist Empire. In Eastern Ukraine, the considerable mineral wealth of the Donbass region resulted in the establishment of large industrial towns. New economic development also stimulated urbanization in the Black Sea region. At the turn of the century, increased foreign capital had already transformed the southern port of Odessa into the principle port and commercial center for the export of Ukrainian cereals.³ The socio-economic structure of central and western regions, however, remained largely agrarian and peasant oriented.

¹ Sullivant, Robert. *Soviet Politics and the Ukraine, 1917-1957*. {New York: Columbia University Press. , 1962} 24.

² Krawchenko, Bohdan. *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth Century Ukraine*. {New York: St. Martin’s Press.,1985}1.

³ *Ibid.* 7.

A major outgrowth of this profound socio-economic diversity was the ethnic configuration of Ukrainian society. Although ethnic Ukrainians formed the majority in almost every district, they were primarily concentrated in the countryside. The Imperial Russian Census for 1897 indicated that 87% of Ukrainians gained their livelihood from farming, while only 2.4% lived in towns with twenty thousand inhabitants or more.⁴ It was in these rural districts that manifestations of Ukrainian culture were the strongest, as the inhabitants were not exposed to any intense Russianizing pressure. The high proportion of ethnic Russians amongst the landowning classes strengthened this sense of cultural awareness. For the average Ukrainian peasant, "daily experience convinced him that the capitalists and the landowners stood for a one and indivisible Russia."⁵

Correspondingly, the economic opportunities of the trading and industrial centers of eastern and southern Ukraine attracted many non-Ukrainians. In most Ukrainian urban centers, the population was primarily ethnic Russian and Jewish, and included substantial Polish and German communities. Relatively few Ukrainians resided in these urban centers, and, in most cities, they constituted only the third largest ethnic group. Even in Kiev, the presumed capital of Ukraine, ethnic Ukrainians made up only 16.4 percent of the civilian population in 1917.⁶ In some of the industrial centers in the Donbass region, this percentage was even lower. As a consequence, the cultural character of urban Ukraine was also overwhelmingly Russian.

This considerable geo-economic and ethnic diversity within pre-revolutionary Ukrainian society profoundly shaped both the Bolshevik and nationalist movements. In essence, "the position of the Communist in Ukraine was in almost every respect opposite of the nationalists."⁷ As a result of the economic structure of Ukrainian society, the Bolsheviks drew their support from the predominantly non-Ukrainian urban centers, while the nationalist movement would be forced to rely on the peasantry. Although the nationalists commanded a numerically stronger base of support, their movement suffered from a series of profound internal weaknesses.

First, there was the failure of the Ukrainian movement to control the major urban centers. The importance of urban centers in the development of an ethnic group's sense of national consciousness cannot be understated. In the case of Eastern Europe, "cities—particularly historic capitals such as Prague, Budapest, Vilnius, and Riga—were flagships to emergent national movements."⁸ Urban centers not only provided these movements with the core of their leadership, but also with the means to effectively mobilize resources and manpower. As already mentioned, the ethnic demographic of Ukrainian cities were overwhelmingly non-Ukrainian. Therefore, the vast majority of the urban populous would be either hostile or indifferent to Ukrainian nationalist appeals.

Most of the ethnic Russians who dominated the cities did not even regard Ukrainians as a separate ethnic group. Rather, they were seen as mere dialect speakers and labeled as 'Little Russians.' The words of the Ukrainian Bolshevik Mykola Skrypnyk best sum-up the ethnic Russian attitude concerning the existence of a distinct Ukrainian ethnicity: "The Ukraine as a national unit did not exist, most recognized Little Russia,

⁴ Guthrie, Steven. 'The Popular Base of Ukrainian Nationalism.' *Slavic Review*. 38.no. 1. {Mar. 1979} PG. 31.

⁵ Mazlaakh, Serhii & Shakhari, Vasily. *On the Current Situation in the Ukraine*. {Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press., 1970} 72.

⁶ Wade, Rex. *The Russian Revolution, 1917*. {Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 2000.} 153.

⁷ Pipes, Richard. *The Formation of the Soviet Union*. {Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., 1964} 150.

⁸ Liber, George. 'Urban Growth and Ethnic Change in the Ukraine 1923-1933.' *Soviet Studies*. 41.no.4 {Oct. 1989} Pg. 574.

and even some the Ukraine, but only within the framework of the so-called Western Lands.”⁹ Even amongst the small urban Ukrainian population, the effects of living in a culturally Russian atmosphere had weakened their sense of national consciousness. In describing the urban Ukrainian population, John Reshetar comments, “There were millions of nationally unconscious people who cried out for Moscow and Russia and who regarded themselves as Russians.”¹⁰

One immediate result of the under-developed national consciousness of urban Ukraine was the failure of the nationalist parties to gain influence in the most important political assemblies. Control of the newly formed workers’ and soldiers’ soviets translated in the ability to mobilize both the population and resources of the major urban centers. Essentially, whatever group dominated the soviets could effectively dominate the city. Lack of a nationally conscious Ukrainian urban population, however, put the nationalist parties in a significantly weak position. The support of the Russian or ‘Russified’ Ukrainian workers tended to gravitate towards Russian or non-Ukrainian socialist parties. Political allegiance amongst the garrison soldiers, although mainly Ukrainian peasants, was also largely concentrated in the Russian revolutionary parties. Moreover, the increasingly socio-economic focus of the revolution meant that many urban dwellers were simply opposed or indifferent to Ukrainian nationalist concerns.¹¹ As a result of these profound handicaps, the various nationalist parties were outvoted in every major city. In Odessa, the Ukrainian nationalists were defeated by Zionists and Bolsheviks, in Kharkov by Kadets and Bolsheviks, and in Ekaterinoslav by Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.¹²

Another factor that arose from the lack of a nationally conscious Ukrainian urban population was the political divisions within the leadership of the nationalist movement. The social backgrounds of the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement were *petit bourgeois*, the majority being members of the small urban intelligentsia.¹³ As a consequence of operating in a pre-dominantly Russian cultural environment, the potential leadership base of the Ukrainian nationalist movement remained small and ideologically divided. Most of the educated urban elite were thoroughly ‘Russified’ and did not associate themselves with the nationalist causes. Consequently, the core of the Ukrainian movement remained small and lacked the widespread cultural organizations enjoyed by nationalist groups in other countries. In Kiev, the historic center of the Ukrainian movement, the local *Prosvitra* society could only boast of having 331 members.¹⁴

The small leadership of the Ukrainian movement also suffered from a lack of ideological consensus. Split between those who saw the national-question as the paramount goal and those pushing for radical social change, the nationalist movement never developed a coherent political program. As early as 1904, the Revolutionary Ukrainian Party had split into a competing right and left wing.¹⁵ This internal schism within the movement would prove to be a major factor in the failure of the successive nationalist governments during the Civil War years. Indeed, the bitter feuding between

⁹ Dmytryshyn, Basil. *Moscow and the Ukraine: 1918-1953*. (New York: Bookman Associates., 1956.) 25.

¹⁰ Reshetar, John. *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1920*. (Princeton University Press., 1952.) 329.

¹¹ Wade, Rex. *The Russian Revolution, 1917*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 2000) 154.

¹² Guthrie, Steven. ‘The Popular Base of Ukrainian Nationalism.’ *Slavic Studies*. 38. no. 1 (March, 1979) Pg. 43.

¹³ Subtelny, Orest. *Ukraine: A History*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press. , 1988) 346.

¹⁴ Krawchenko, Bohdan. *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine*. (New York: St.Martin’s Press. , 1985) 20.

¹⁵ Reshetar, John. *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1920*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press. , 1952) 19.

the right and left hampered the ability of both the Central Rada and the Directory to implement policy. While Vynnychenko and the left argued that the nationalists should pursue more socially radical policies so that they could 'out-socialize' the Bolsheviks, Pelitura and the conservative wing of the movement believed that more emphasis should be placed on building the institutions of a nation-state.¹⁶

Although the Ukraine movement failed to capture the urban centers, the mass of the peasantry offered the nationalists a large and culturally conscious base of support. In elections in the rural districts, the peasantry voted overwhelmingly for Ukrainian nationalist parties.¹⁷ Reliance on the peasant masses, however, had serious disadvantages. First, there was the considerable task of coordinating the small-dispersed villages of the wide territory of the Ukraine. As a consequence of the geographic conditions of rural Ukraine, the small nationalist elite could never effectively reach or organize the bulk of its constituency. Convincing the peasantry to cooperate was a logistical nightmare that would consistently plague the nationalist movement.

In addition to their dispersed geographic position, the peasantry's political awareness was limited to local issues. For the vast majority of the Ukrainian peasantry, the overriding political concern had always been land reform as opposed to the national question. During the Civil War, the Ukrainian peasantry was an independent force primarily concerned with local issues. Indeed, "once the land had been redistributed the peasants never considered it their duty to exert themselves on the behalf of distant villages or larger cities which they frequently considered either foreign or hostile."¹⁸ The peasantry's allegiance more often focused around the leaders of various local guerrilla bands, such as the anarchist Nestor Makhno, than any central authority.

The political unreliability of the peasantry also contributed to the nationalist movement's failure to build an effective military machine. The high desertion rate amongst the Ukrainian nationalist forces was a consistent problem during the Civil War. For example, in 1919, the number of troops in the army of Petliura fell from between 1,000,000–1,270,000 to 9,000 men.¹⁹ An additional hindrance to the military success of the nationalists came in the form of mass defections. The potency of Bolshevik propaganda on the Ukrainian peasant troops cannot be underestimated. The Bolshevik appeals to radical land reform spoke to the peasantry's immediate concerns. During the 1918 campaign, a large number of units, including the Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the Polubotkovsky, and the Taras Shevchenko detachments, went over to the Red Army.²⁰

The nationalist movement's reliance on foreign elements also alienated it from its peasant support base. Memories of collaboration by some nationalist elements with the German occupying forces in 1918 left many peasants with a deep suspicion of the Ukrainian nationalist movement. The anti-Bolshevik alliance between Pelitura's forces and Poland was an additional cause of peasant disenchantment. In the words of Orest Subtelny, "Petliura's personal popularity with many peasants was not great enough to overcome their traditional dislike of his Polish 'landlord' allies."²¹ Even cooperation with the French succeeded in turning away many of the nationalist movement's potential

¹⁶ Subtelny, Orest. *Ukraine: A History*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press., 1988) 354.

¹⁷ Wade, Rex. *The Russian Revolution, 1917*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 2000) 154.

¹⁸ Kamenetsky, Ihor. 'Hrushevsky and the Central Rada: Internal Politics and Foreign Interventions.' *The Ukraine, 1917-1921: A Study in Revolution*. Ed. Taras Hunczak. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., 1977) 41.

¹⁹ Bilinsky, Yaroslav. 'The Communist Take-over of Ukraine.' *The Ukraine, 1917-1921: A Study in Revolution*. Ed. Taras Hunczak. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., 1977) 116.

²⁰ Pipes, Richard. *The Formation of the Soviet Union*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., 1964) 124.

²¹ Subtelny, Orest. *Ukraine: A History*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press., 1988) 375.

supporters. *Otaman* Hryhoriiv, one of the Directory's most effective military leaders, was so opposed to the French orientation that he and his army defected to the Soviets.²²

If the socio-economic structure of Ukrainian society proved detrimental to the cause of nationalism, it provided advantages to the numerically small Bolshevik movement. By drawing its support from the ethnic Russian or Russified Ukrainian workers in the urban centers of eastern Ukraine, the Bolsheviks possessed a politically reliable power base. Unlike the peasantry, the urban proletariat had developed a fully-formed political consciousness. This was a working class that by 1917 "was already very well-suited for political and trade union activity."²³ As a consequence, the Bolsheviks never experienced the logistical problems of the nationalists. Practical experience gained from union activity meant that they had little difficulty in organizing their supporters in times of crisis. The urban working class's familiarity with radical left-wing political ideology was also advantageous for the Bolsheviks. In the industrial cities of Ukraine, Bolshevik slogans such as the socialization of industry and workers' control of factories found a largely receptive audience.²⁴

Control of the cities also provided the Bolsheviks with significant strategic advantages. First, the cities provided the Bolsheviks with an entering wedge into Ukraine. From their bases in the Donbas, the Bolsheviks could both threaten the rest of Ukraine while simultaneously maintaining a link with the government in Moscow. The economic resources of the cities, such as rail centers, ports, warehouses, munitions dumps, and factories, would also prove crucial to the Bolshevik ability to continue the struggle in Ukraine.²⁵ By controlling these resources, the Bolsheviks were able to win the war of supply in the Ukraine. The Bolshevik ability to operate along the key railway junction provided them the additional advantage of strategic mobility. Indeed, "the ability of the Red Army to operate the north-south rail line to Kursk allowed them to move troops on Kharkov and Kiev simultaneously."²⁶

Finally, the Bolshevik movement in the Ukraine adapted its policy to meet the socio-economic realities of Ukrainian society. After experiencing problems exercising control over the rural districts, the Bolsheviks ceased their unpopular policy of collectivizing landholdings. Communes were made voluntary and they would be constructed with "the greatest regard for the conditions of the Ukrainian village."²⁷ Although class war continued in the countryside, the Bolsheviks made a concrete effort to win over the poor and middle peasants. By forming Committees of Poor Peasants, the Bolsheviks refocused their agrarian program to the purpose of alienating the kulaks from the poor peasantry. As a result, they succeeded in both pacifying significant portions of rural Ukraine and splitting the nationalist movement's support base.

In conclusion, the failure of nationalism to take hold in the Ukraine was a direct result of the socio-economic divisions within pre-revolutionary Ukrainian society. The nationalist movement's inability to control the urban centers, its failure to effectively

²² Ckomiak-Bohachevsky, Martha 'The Directory of the Ukrainian National Republic.' *The Ukrainian, 1917-1921: A Study in Revolution*. Ed. Taras Huczak. {Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., 1977} 95.

²³ Krawchenko, Bohdan. *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth Century Ukraine*. {New York: St. Martin's Press., 1985} 43.

²⁴ Sullivant, Robert. *Soviet Politics and the Ukraine: 1917-1957*. {New York: Columbia University Press., 1962} 24.

²⁵ Adams, Arthur. *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*. {New Haven, CT: Yale University Press., 1963} 30.

²⁶ Reshetar, John. *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1920*. {Princeton: Princeton University Press., 1952} 329.

²⁷ Adams, Arthur. *Bolsheviks in the Ukraine*. {New Haven, CT: Yale University Press., 1963} 396.

mobilize the peasantry, and the internal divisions within its leadership all contributed to its limited success. The Bolshevik movement, although numerically small, benefited from a politically conscious and reliable support base. Finally, they adapted their policies to suit the socio-economic conditions within Ukraine.

Works Cited

- Adams, Arthur. *Bolsheviks in Ukraine*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Bilinsky, Yaroslav. "The Communist Take-over of the Ukraine." In *The Ukraine, 1917-1921: A Study in Revolution*. Ed. Taras Hunczak. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Chomiak-Bochachevsky, Martha. "The Directory of the Ukrainian National Republic." In *The Ukraine, 1917-1921: A Study in Revolution*. Ed. Taras Hunczak. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Dmytryshyn, Basil. *Moscow and the Ukraine: 1918-1953*. New York: Bookman Associates, 1956.
- Guthier, Steven. "The Popular Base of Ukrainian Nationalism." *Slavic Review*, 38. no.1 {March 1979} 30-47.
- Kamenetsky, Ihor. "Hrushevsky and the Central Rada: Internal Politics and Foreign Interventions." In *The Ukraine, 1917-1921: A Study in Revolution*. Ed. Taras Hunczak. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Krawencko, Bohdan. *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth Century Ukraine*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1985.
- Liber, George. "Urban Growth and Ethnic Change in the Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1933." *Soviet Studies*. 41. no. 4 {Oct, 1989} 574-591.
- Mazlahk, Serhii & Shakhari, Vasily. *On the Current Situation in the Ukraine*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1970.
- Pipes, Richard. *The Formation of the Soviet Union*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964.
- Reshetar, John. *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917-1920*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952.
- Subtelny, Orest. *Ukraine: A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988.
- Sullivant, Robert. *Soviet Politics and the Ukraine: 1917-1957*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.
- Wade, Rex. *The Russian Revolution, 1917*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.