

Labour and cooperative movement in Ukraine (1898-1920)

Saturday 4 February 2023, by [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 4 February 2023).

The cooperative movement in Ukraine was born at the end of the 19e century.



Small Ukrainian producers could not provide for their needs alone in the face of competition from large, mostly Russian, companies. In order to resist the market more effectively, it was necessary to unite and cooperate. Consumers, on the other hand, suffered from the often exorbitant market prices. Co-operation as a self-defence movement of politically and culturally colonised, socially humiliated and economically exploited sections of the population played an important role in the development of national feeling. Under the domination of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires that ruled the Ukrainian lands, this new type of economic organisation represented a form of economic resistance. However, this form of self-organisation was not new to Ukrainians, as proto-cooperatives can be found in carpentry, masonry, blacksmithing and crafts from the 16e to 18e century. The first consumer associations appeared at the end of the 19e century all over the territory of the Russian Empire, and their members were representatives of various social strata: intelligentsia, civil servants, soldiers, workers, city dwellers, peasants. The aim of consumer cooperatives was to provide their members with good quality goods at the best possible price. The cooperatives bought goods in bulk with large discounts. Their own shops sold the goods to their members at cheaper prices. Kharkiv saw the first consumer cooperative in Ukraine. The charter of the Kharkiv Consumer Cooperative was approved on 6 October 1866. From the very beginning it had 356 members. In addition to trading in consumer goods, the cooperative had its own canteen and bakery. Members of the cooperative had been in contact with the cooperative movement in the West, its representatives had visited Great Britain, France and Germany and maintained relations with European cooperative organisations. In 1870, on his initiative, a cooperative congress and the formation of a union of consumer cooperatives were planned. However, the governor of Kharkiv forbade these events on the grounds that the activities of the association should not extend beyond the city's borders. The reactionary policy of the Russian government, the persecution of all local

initiatives in Ukrainian educational and economic life had a negative impact on the activities of the first Ukrainian cooperatives. From 1870 to 1894, only 31 consumer cooperatives were established in the eastern part of Ukraine. A second consumer cooperative was founded in the west in Kyiv at the end of 1868. Its board was headed by the most prominent figures of the Ukrainian national movement of the time. In 1873, a law allowed the development of cooperation in the territory of Austria-Hungary, and the following year (1874) the Prosvita cooperative in Lviv (founded on 8 December 1868) filed its statutes in accordance with the law.

Subsequently, cooperative farms began to spread throughout western Ukraine. It should be noted that even before the Austro-Hungarian law of 1873 came into force, several dozen cooperatives founded by Poles were operating in Galicia. In 1874, Polish cooperators created the Union of Cooperatives in Lviv, which included 51 credit cooperatives and 7 industrial and commercial cooperatives with 17,175 members. Later the first cooperative shop Narodnia Torgivlya was founded in Lviv by the engineer Vasyl Nahirny. The number of production cooperatives grew rapidly and by 1902 there were more than 125 production cooperatives, but none of them lasted more than three years. In 1899, the first Ukrainian union of credit cooperatives, the Regional Credit Union (KSC), was established, which was responsible for organising cooperatives and providing them with low-interest loans. Thanks to the activity of the credit cooperatives, it has been possible to curb usury to a large extent. However, this movement was opposed by government representatives, as well as by the Russian intelligentsia, including socialists. All of them see the Ukrainian independent cooperative movement as economic and political separatism. The Russian left-wing intelligentsia, occupying leading positions in the Russian co-operative centres, tries to prevent the development of Ukrainian co-operation through competition, putting forward the slogan of "All-Russian co-operative unity" at co-operative congresses. In addition, the government and local administration often use administrative sanctions and various brutal repressions against Ukrainian cooperatives. Also in the eastern part, the nascent co-operatives quickly disappeared and were only revived after the February 1917 revolution. The February 1917 revolution considerably changed the conditions for the development of cooperatives, as the political obstacles to the cooperative movement were removed. Cooperatives were freed from many restrictions and prohibitions imposed by the Tsarist regime and a more favourable legal environment for their activities emerged. In the context of the beginning of the national liberation war, a large-scale process of Ukrainianisation of existing cooperatives and creation of new Ukrainian cooperatives was launched. The main tasks of cooperation at that time were: restructuring and democratisation of the national economy, providing the population with the most necessary goods, as well as carrying out a wide range of cultural and educational activities.



The Ukrainian workers' movement and cooperatives

In 1905-1916, the development of the South Ukrainian cooperative movement was characterised by its politicisation. Social-democrat forces became interested in consumer co-operatives in order to spread their ideas among their members. They provided financial and organisational support to the cooperatives and spread their propaganda. On 25 January 1908, the Central Committee of the Russian social-democratic Workers' Party adopted a resolution "On Cooperation", which obliged all party members to actively promote the development of cooperative organisations, to ensure that the

profits of consumer cooperatives were used for trade union and cultural purposes. The politicisation of the cooperative movement was particularly rapid in the industrial Donbass. The archives are full of police reports on the subversive behaviour of members of some consumer co-operatives. One of these was the consumer cooperative Robichnyi Trud (Labour), which opened in 1909 in Yuzivka.

In the second half of the 19^e century, the Donbass developed intensively industrially. On the eve of the 20th century, workers in the region took the initiative to run cooperatives independently. They began to open in the region on the initiative of the workers themselves, without the participation or assistance of the company administration. One of the first independent workers' consumer co-operatives, not only in the region, started its activities in 1898 at the Donetsk- Yurievsk Metallurgical Company. These cooperatives participated in the revolutionary events of 1905-1907. In particular, the Katerynka Railway Consumers' Cooperative provided the revolutionaries with food and basic necessities during the December 1905 strikes. The cooperative also donated 300 roubles to the Katerynoslav strike committee. For their part, the Alchevsk and Druzhkivka metalworkers' unions provided financial and organisational assistance to the workers' cooperatives and encouraged the development of their cultural and educational activities. In 1909, social democrat activists set up a consumer cooperative in the Novorossiysk Society's metallurgical plant in Yuzivka and also used it to discuss political issues. It had 860 members, all of whom were workers at the company.



The workers' cooperative Trudova Kopyka

The activity of the Trudova Kopyka cooperative was the most characteristic of this period of consumer cooperative formation. It was founded on 25 November 1908 in Mykolayev and existed for almost 10 years. It was a real mass consumer cooperative, with 15,000 city dwellers as members. The activities and experience of Trudova Kopyka are one of the most important pages in the history of the cooperative movement. In 1907, after strikes in the factories, unemployment spread. Companies were cutting back and many workers were out of work. At this difficult time, a small group of shipyard workers set out to organise a workers' consumer cooperative.

During his studies abroad, Kostyantyn Romanovych Krypopuskov had become familiar with the workers' movement in many countries. He went to the shipyard's trade union committee and proposed to organise a workers' meeting with Levytsky, a well-known organiser of the cooperative movement in Russia at the time. The factory management and the mayor agreed to such a meeting, which took place in the factory. The conference on the development of cooperation abroad, its advantages and its importance for the improvement of workers' lives appealed to some workers. A working group was set up, which welcomed those who wanted to join the consumer cooperative. But many, if not most, workers were suspicious of the idea of a cooperative, which had been discredited by the consumers' association that had existed in the factory in 1902-1903. The working group redoubled its efforts until several dozen people joined the cooperative and its minimum share capital was raised. Once the cooperative's charter was approved at the general assembly, its registration at the governor's office had to wait more than a year. Finally, on 25 November 1908, a grocery shop was opened under the sign Trudova Kopyka, consumer cooperative.

Immediately, the surrounding private merchants declared a fierce war on it. They slandered the co-operators, intimidated the buyers and members of the co-operative by explaining that it was going to

die, that the contributions in shares would disappear, etc. However, Trudova Kopyka was not the only one. However, Trudova Kopyka grew and more and more workers joined. Soon, the premises of the first shop were too small, and it was moved to another, more spacious and comfortable place. The cooperative joined the Moscow Union and the Moscow People's Bank. The cooperative not only provided its members with products, but also improved their social security, especially by providing medical care. To this end, in 1909, its board hired two doctors. The pharmacies granted a discount to the members of the cooperative on condition that they presented prescription forms bearing the seal of the cooperative and the signatures of the doctors. Representatives of rural associations came to town to see the shop's operation up close, and to get advice on how to set up a cooperative business in their village. With the outbreak of the First World War, the prices of basic necessities began to rise. As a result, the working capital of the business melted away like snow in the sun. The board reports on the situation to the general meeting. It noted that the war had deprived the cooperative of many active workers and approved the overthrow of the tsarist regime. In order to resist the unprecedented rise in prices, the cooperative joined the Kherson Union of Consumer Cooperatives and the Union of Consumer Cooperatives of Southern Russia, based in Kharkiv. But by 1918 Trudova Kopyka had ceased operations.

The development of cooperation during the revolution and liberation struggles

A new impetus for the development of Ukrainian cooperation was given by the Central Ukrainian Rada, which, as early as 20 March 1917, issued a law on cooperatives that created a legal basis for the activities and congresses of national cooperators. The first Ukrainian cooperative congress was held in Kyiv in May 1917, and soon, in August 1917, the second cooperative congress was held. At the congresses, general problems were discussed and plans for the further development of cooperation in Ukraine were worked out. Immediately after the 1st cooperative congress, the Ukrainian Central Cooperative Committee (UCCK) began its activities as the main organization of national cooperation. The UCCK became the main center of Ukrainian cooperation and published the magazine Ukrainian Cooperation.

The year 1917 gave a powerful impulse to the development of all branches of cooperation in Ukraine. During this year, for example, the number of consumer associations increased to 4,873, and a center of consumer co-operatives was established on 6 May 1917 called Dniprosoyuz, which in January 1918 had a turnover of 5 million roubles and published the fortnightly Cooperative Zorya.

In the middle of 1917, a Ukrainian financial cooperative was established with branches in all major cities of the country - the Ukrainian People's Cooperative Bank (Ukrainbank). The organizer of this central cooperative financial institution was a Ukrainian government official, the first General Secretary of Financial Affairs of the Ukrainian People's Republic of Ukraine, H. Baranovskyi. In the same year, the first Union of Dairy Cooperatives, which began to emerge in Ukraine at the beginning of the 19th century, was established in Kyiv. In the first year of the revolution, the following dairy unions appeared in Odessa and Kharkiv, and by 1918, 112 such cooperative unions were already active.

The average number of members per consumer cooperative also increased: 1914 - 112 members, 1917 - 227 members, 1918 - 303 members. In addition, in 1918, two more regional unions of consumer cooperatives were established: the Odessa Oblast Union (Odobsoyuz) and the Chernihiv Region Union.

By 1918 the cooperative unions had opened 14 bookshops and founded 70 cooperative publishing houses which published 273 titles of newspapers, magazines, newsletters etc. Many of these titles were also printed in Ukrainian, an effort that contributed to the defense and revival of the Ukrainian language. The Knygospilka cooperative publishes 43 titles, Dniprosoyuz 40 titles and the Deoltava

cooperative union 41 titles.

However, with the establishment of the Bolshevik regime, the cooperative movement began to be subordinated to state structures. Shortly thereafter, the official Cooperative Committee of Ukraine abolished the regional cooperative unions, including Dniprosoyuz, on 7 April 1920.

After the proclamation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic by the Bolsheviks in Ukraine in 1920, cooperatives came under strict state control.

Patrick Le Tréhondat

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.