

Ukraine's history of struggle

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Christopher Ford looks at the Ukrainian socialist tradition

The rediscovery of the Ukrainian socialist tradition is a key part of building solidarity with today's Ukrainian freedom struggles. Ukraine's vernacular left suffered not only extermination under Stalin and Hitler but a long succession of retrogressive approaches to the history of Ukraine.

We have seen Russian imperialism advance old Tsarist narratives that Ukraine is a fabrication by rival powers to weaken Russia, and the Ukrainian movement was always led by reactionaries. This Ukrainophobia permeates sections of the Western left. Meanwhile in Ukraine, efforts towards decolonisation have been marred by those seeking to place conservatives centre stage: a fetishised Lenin and Stalin being replaced by a revisionist portrayal of wartime nationalist leader Stepan Bandera.

But far more important than the era of Bandera was the generation who made the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917-1921. Before 1917, there existed only 'southern Russia'. In the revolution, Ukraine was reborn. This has never been reversed. It was achieved by a struggle led by socialists and social democrats.

The reality is that socialists have played a vital role in the Ukrainian movement at each stage of its development since the beginnings of the 19th century national revival. The leading figure was Mykhailo Drahomanov, a socialist under whose influence one of the first socialist parties in Eastern Europe and the first Ukrainian political party, the Ruthenian-Ukrainian Radical Party, was founded in Lviv in 1890.

Amongst Drahomanov's circle was Mykola Ziber, Marx's favourite commentator and the first theorist and publisher of Marx's ideas in the Russian Empire. Another was Serhii Podolynsky, a member of the First International, who in 1875 raised the banner of a Ukrainian social-democratic party. This circle smuggled tens of thousands of publications into Russian-ruled Ukraine, the confiscation of one batch leading to the first anti-socialist trial in Austrian history.

When the social democratic workers' movement grew globally with the Second International, two of Ukraine's foremost historical figures founded the first Ukrainian social-democratic organisations. In 1896, Lesya Ukrainka, leading writer and feminist, created the Ukrainian Social Democracy, the first in Russian ruled-Ukraine. It emphasised the need for self-organisation and for an autonomous "workers' and peasants' Ukraine". In Austrian-ruled Galicia, Yulian Bachynsky pioneered the concept of a unified, independent Ukraine and helped found the Ukrainian Social-Democratic Party in 1897. Ukrainian Social Democrats held seats in the parliaments of both empires, the Duma and the Reichsrat.

Ukrainian Marxists were responsible for widespread publishing in the banned Ukrainian language. In 1902, the Tsarist authorities blamed their "revolutionary propaganda... printed in Galicia in Ukrainian" as the cause of the mass agrarian strikes later viewed as the "beginning of the Ukrainian revolution".

It was the Ukrainian Social-Democratic Workers Party (USDRP) in Petrograd, organised in the Izmailovsky and Semenov regiments, who decided the fate of the February Revolution in 1917. The Ukrainian Revolution of 1917 saw unprecedented self-organisation and mobilisation of the masses, centred on the Ukrainian Central Rada (council). An assembly consisting of councils of peasants', soldiers' and workers' deputies, it included the Russian, Polish and Jewish socialist parties, setting up the pioneering organisation of Jewish national autonomy. In historical terms, it represented for Ukraine what the Easter Rising and First Dáil did for Ireland. The foremost leaders were exclusively socialists. The chairman of the Rada was the eminent historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky, aligned with the Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionaries, and the president was the Marxist Volodymyr Vynnychenko of the USDRP.

In his history *Rebirth of a Nation*, Vynnychenko wrote:

“The biggest part of the burden, both of that heroic work and all subsequent serious errors, was imposed on the social democratic current. It had a considerable past (since 1901, then having the name of the Revolutionary Ukrainian Party; in 1904 changing it to the Ukrainian Social-Democratic Workers Party). Its programme and tactics, originating from the programme and tactics of international socialism, were already adapted to Ukrainian conditions. It had its history, traditions, methods and its own school. The practice of underground revolutionary party work familiarised its members to good organisation, educated them, formed a stable outlook and accustomed them to the political work. The very name of the party, as well as the names of its leading figures, was known among a wide range of Ukrainian workers.”

From the 1870s when Ukrainian social democracy had emerged, socialism had grown from a few intellectuals to nationwide dimensions. If the Ukrainian Revolution had developed unimpeded by external forces, it would have inevitably seen the new Ukrainian People's Republic under the leadership of the radical socialists. It is possible, if the Russian centralism of the Bolsheviks had not prevented constructive participation in the revolution, that they could have enhanced this process and reinforced the formation of the Ukrainian republic.

The question of what might have been opens up many possibilities. Ukrainian socialism was not absorbed and marginalised by nationalism; it was destroyed by external forces: a fate shared by Jewish, Polish and other sections of Russian socialism. The Bolsheviks' endeavour to found their own Communist Party of Ukraine became a manoeuvre, a sub-unit of the Russian Communist Party. Far from representing a culmination of previous developments within the socialist parties in Ukraine, it was instead an artificial creation. The objective effect of the formation of a one-party state model imposed on Ukraine was the destruction of the entire previous socialist tradition.

Chris Ford

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