

The Bolshevik approach to territory: Eastern Ukraine in 1917-18

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The Donbas is at the heart of Vladimir Putin’s claim that Lenin divided Russia to create Ukraine. Yet the region’s real history shows how much the Bolsheviks struggled with demands for national autonomy amid the collapse of the tsarist empire.

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Announcing the Russian invasion of Ukraine late last month, Vladimir Putin offered a [detailed presentation](#) of his vision of the world — and of history. The Russian president explained that Ukrainians do not exist, that their identity is a mere invention, and that the Ukrainian state is a mistake. More than that, he cast it as an illegitimate creation, an act of theft against Russia.

Putin had special venom for Vladimir Lenin and his conception of the Soviet Union as a federal state — painting this as a time bomb that contributed to the collapse of the USSR, “the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century.” He was also frank about his sympathies for Joseph Stalin, since, in renouncing Lenin’s ideas, he had been able to build “a strictly centralized and totally unitary state” within the borders of the old tsarist empire. Putin criticized Stalin only for not having revised Leninist principles more thoroughly — that is, for not having gotten rid of the Soviet republics’ formal autonomy.

Even among those who do not question Ukraine’s historical right to be an independent state, it is commonly assumed that its internationally recognized borders are, in essence, artificial. Many do not question Putin’s claims that the southeastern regions of Ukraine were “stolen” from Russia for Ukraine’s benefit. Since 2014, Putin has claimed that these “historically Russian” regions were attached to Ukraine in the 1920s. But does this really have anything to do with the historical facts?

Indeed, it was the Bolsheviks who emerged victorious in the struggle for power at the end of World War I, who had to solve the problem of the border between Russia and Ukraine. Drawing the boundaries of a new country within a previously centralized empire was no small problem, especially since the provinces that were to become Ukraine had not had any special status or autonomy in the tsarist empire. In the nineteenth century, the territory of today’s Ukraine was divided into three general governments encompassing various provinces: the General Government of Kiev (northwest), the General Government of Little Russia (northeast), and the General Government of New Russia and Bessarabia (east and south). After the gradual liquidation of the general governments, this de facto subdivision into three regions persisted. These structures inherited from the empire did not simply disappear without a trace after the February and October revolutions. In 1917-18, their

persistence not only influenced the main forces' strategies regarding their organizational structures — also guiding their political choices — but decisively shaped what historians Sophie Coeuré and Sabine Dullin call their "[mental geographies](#)"

Forgetting the National Question

The February Revolution put an end to tsarism; in Ukraine, as in the rest of the empire, the soviets (workers' councils) and the provisional government started to fight for power. But in Kiev, a third actor made its claim to power: the Central Rada, an assembly of different Ukrainian parties that sought Ukrainian autonomy. The only census that had been held, in 1897, [did not include data](#) on the ethnicity of the empire's inhabitants. The advocates of autonomy claimed as Ukrainians all those who had indicated "Little Russian" as their mother tongue; Ukraine would, then, include all the territories where this population was in the majority. Such a way of defining the political space was quite logical: for a country whose lands had long been subject to imperial authorities who denied the historical and cultural subjectivity of its inhabitants — instead structuring economic circuits according to the needs of the metropole — criteria of historical legitimacy or economic rationality could hardly serve as arguments for autonomy.

Based on this language-based data, the Central Rada drew up a list of provinces that were to be considered Ukrainian, which included Kiev, Volhynia, Podolia, Poltava, and Chernigov, but also the eastern and southern provinces of Kharkov, Yekaterinoslav, Kherson, and Taurida (without Crimea). Although the large cities were the centers of colonial domination and spoke Russian, the indigenous rural population spoke Ukrainian and were everywhere [the majority](#).

For Bolshevik militants, Ukraine's autonomy and its future territory were hardly a priority. One member recalled that they were "extremely unprepared to grasp the idea of the unity of Ukraine" and did not contemplate its possible borders. In fact, the geographical spaces in which the Bolsheviks operated depended above all on the soviets and the relations they established among themselves. On the territory of the future Ukraine, there were three such groupings of local soviets in 1917 — one centered around Kiev, another around Odessa, and a third bringing together the soviets of the industrial region of Donets-Krivoi Rog. This division largely overlaps with the administrative map of the tsarist era, where these three regions are also found. Regional branches of the Bolshevik Party were formed according to the same territorial principle, and militants organized within the bounds of these three areas.

Shortly afterward, the local Bolsheviks were overwhelmed by events for which they were ill-prepared. In October 1917, it was not the Bolsheviks who overcame the provisional government in Kiev but the Central Rada that consolidated its power. Yevgenia Bosch, a member of the Bolsheviks' Kiev branch, wrote that "when the question of Ukrainian self-determination was raised in practice," the organization remained without "any real program."

Across the Dnieper

With the failure of the initial plan to seize power in Kiev by force, the Bolsheviks' plan B consisted of organizing a congress of soviets together with the Central Rada. The second part of this plan involved bringing in masses of Bolshevik delegates from the eastern provinces and using this numerical strength to tip the balance in favor of supporters of the new authority in Petrograd. But the congress was a debacle for the Bolsheviks, as sympathizers of the Rada won the majority.

The Bolsheviks needed to improvise a plan C, and decided to “look for a place where the proletariat is more numerous, more concentrated, more conscious.” So, the delegation headed east to Kharkov, a large industrial city. The newcomers tried to convince their comrades that they were all bound by a common goal — to sovietize Ukraine as a whole. However, the eastern Bolsheviks wanted first to establish themselves permanently in the industrial and working-class Donets-Krivoi Rog oblast, while letting the Ukrainian peasants in the western provinces choose a government “in their own image.” The Kiev Bolsheviks called their comrades’ approach “head-in-the-sand politics” and blamed them for wanting to “barricade themselves in their Donbas.”

Despite the disagreements, on December 12, 1917, the Kharkov congress proclaimed soviet power, declared the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic (attached to the Russian Soviet Republic by federal ties), and announced the overthrow of the Rada. The name of the new state was identical to that chosen by the Rada — the Ukrainian People’s Republic, or UNR. The clear aim was to substitute the Soviet UNR for the Rada’s UNR. But it was also clear that the idea of the Ukrainian state, as defined by the national movement, was more influential than it had seemed — and the Bolsheviks had no choice but to adopt it, albeit in their own way.

The Donets-Krivoi Rog Soviet Republic

In reality, there was far from any real consensus on these issues within the party. At the time of the proclamation of Soviet Ukraine, the Kharkov Bolshevik leaders were already building up a republic locally with their own organs of power. So why did they oppose the project for a Soviet Ukraine? Some members pointed to the Kharkov Bolsheviks’ choice to isolate themselves in the Russified urban environment, given their only very limited contacts with the Ukrainian peasantry. Moreover, Bolshevik militants were not immune to Great Russian imperial ideology. However, this was not only a clash between bearers of different regional or national loyalties but also a disagreement about tactics and overall strategic vision.

The idea of a Donets-Krivoi Rog republic, uniting eastern Ukraine and the industrialized part of the Don oblast, seemingly emerged among the Kharkov Bolsheviks under the influence of some militants coming from Rostov-on-Don after the conquest of this neighboring Russian region by anti-Bolshevik general Alexei Kaledin. The Don was a rallying point for many anti-Bolshevik forces in these lands, and was thus perceived as an immediate threat. The Donbas, conversely, was a region loyal to soviet power, capable of imposing its proletarian will on the peasant and “reactionary” regions. Securing its support was thus a top priority both for those who had fled from Kiev and for the fugitives from Rostov. Their respective plans were essentially identical: to integrate the Donbas into their state project and to use its forces to drive the enemy out of their own home region.

In January 1918, the Soviet armed forces took control of the Ukrainian capital. The government of the Central Rada fled. According to the Bolsheviks in Kharkov, there was no longer any need to maintain Soviet Ukraine, as its tactical mission — to gain control over Ukraine — had been accomplished. So they decided that the provinces of Yekaterinoslav, Kharkov, Tauride (without Crimea), and a part of the Don Oblast were now a separate republic — the Donets-Krivoi Rog Soviet Republic (DKRSR).

But why establish a republic within these territorial limits? Its proclamation was justified primarily by the fact that “the Donets and Krivoi Rog basins represent an economically self-sufficient unit.” According to the supporters of the DKRSR, with the socialist revolution, “the class principle, that is to say, the economy, has prevailed over the national principle.” They insisted that “to create Ukraine, even a Soviet one, would be a reactionary decision,” because giving the state a national

form meant only “a return to the distant past.” On the contrary, founding a state based solely on the criterion of economic relevance would be rational and therefore progressive. The DKRSR was meant to be an embodiment of such a breakthrough into the future. By creating the economic and not the national republic, the Bolsheviks in Kharkov were convinced that they were defending a truly Marxist vision of the world and of history. It was not until 1922 that Lenin’s idea that the nation is a necessary step on the historical path to a socialist society won out and became a guiding principle of the USSR. In 1917–18, a good part of the membership of the Bolshevik Party, if not the majority, was still convinced that the socialist revolution and the equality it brought rendered the “national question” obsolete.

Moreover, the founders of the Donets-Krivoi Rog Soviet Republic justified their decision by the need to put all of Donbas’s resources at the service of the “industrial centers of the North,” such as Petrograd and Moscow. “We want to join the whole country,” insisted DKRSR leader Fyodor Sergeyev, implying that the whole country meant the former tsarist empire and its Great Russian metropole. The proclamation of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic was instead perceived as a harmful decision, “a whim that could not last,” that broke the unity of the imperial economic space inherited from the tsarist era.

Sergeyev informed Petrograd of his decision. The answer came back immediately: “We consider this separation harmful.” However, the central authorities refrained from any definitive answer deciding in favor of either side. Yet the circumstances were changing day by day.

Seeking to extricate itself from World War I, the Russian Soviet Republic signed the peace treaty with the Central Powers in March 1918. One of its conditions was the withdrawal of Red Army troops from Ukrainian territory and the abandonment of Russia’s territorial claims to Ukraine. The Bolsheviks in Ukraine obviously did not want to give in so easily. What if Soviet Ukraine proclaimed itself independent, too? It could oppose the occupation without Soviet Russia being held responsible for its actions. For this to be possible, it was necessary to convene a new congress that would vote for Ukrainian independence and armed resistance to the German and Austrian invaders. The Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party supported this project and finally gave a clear directive: the DKRSR must be part of Ukraine and send its representatives to the congress.

However, once the Germans began to invade the industrial regions, Moscow instead brought out the card of Donets-Krivoi Rog belonging to Russia, stating that the German offensive “exceeded the borders of purely Ukrainian territory.” The Soviet authorities, involved in a diplomatic game, sought to keep all possibilities open in Ukraine. But as soon as Austro-German forces had occupied the whole of Ukraine, this diplomatic game ended.

Why “Invent” Ukraine?

Far from being a coherent and premeditated plan of action, the decisions taken by the Bolsheviks in 1917–1920 were the product of constraints — but also of the opportunities of the moment. In 1917, notably thanks to the perseverance of the men of the Rada, Ukraine imposed itself as a new political space. This new reality, at first poorly analyzed by the Bolsheviks, finally forced them to take a position on questions hitherto alien to them. More important, it confronted them with the contradiction between the immensity of their political ambitions on a global scale and the very concrete, local difficulties of a revolution playing out in a decaying colonial empire. This contradiction sparked a long process in which the Russian Marxists’ mental geographies were challenged and reconfigured.

The main question remains why, long after the defeat of the Ukrainian nationalists, the top Soviet

authorities continued to support the conception of a “greater Ukraine” while ruling out any possibility of a Russian or independent Donbas. Wasn’t the main mission of this project — namely to combat the Ukrainian nationalists — now complete?

Until about 1922, the overall goal of the Bolsheviks remained a world revolution. It was thus necessary to win the support of peoples outside the Russian core of Soviet-ruled territory in order to expand the reach of the popular revolt. Their sights were directed toward the West, the uprisings in the European countries providing the only hope of survival for the revolution, of which the Russian October was only a first spark. In this sense, Ukraine had an important role to play in their global revolutionary enterprise — to open the first door to Europe, and in particular to Germany. In this sense, the openly anti-national rhetoric of the DSKSR leaders could have provided a disservice to Soviet power and alienated Ukrainian allies from the Bolsheviks.

During the civil war, the Communists brought out the flag of Soviet Ukraine on several occasions, especially during military offensives, in order to ensure the support of the local population. However, it was not until 1919–1920 that the Bolshevik leaders began to realize that the formally independent Soviet Ukraine, including the southern and eastern provinces, was not only a good tactical response to neutralize the nationalists but that its maintenance also had long-term advantages. The eastern cities, as industrial melting pots and centers of colonial domination, could become a kind of transmission belt between the Russian metropolis and the “peasant” Ukrainian periphery. This is why Moscow no longer planned to separate this region from Ukraine — quite the contrary.

As Terry Martin rightly points out, the Bolsheviks’ strategy was “to assume leadership over what now appeared to be the inevitable process of decolonization.” This is why, first in theory and then in practice, Lenin opted for a national principle in building the USSR. Each Soviet nation was thus to have its own territorially and administratively delimited “national home” — a difficult plan to implement in a continental empire like Russia’s. Indeed, the tsarist empire had a multiplicity of geographical areas, halfway between metropolitan and colonial status. Eastern Ukraine represented such a zone of hybridization: its urban centers, economically and culturally oriented toward Russia, existed as islands in an ocean of socially, ethnically, and culturally distinct countryside.

The arduous and ambitious task of building a national home for each Soviet nation had both political and economic advantages, favoring the establishment of a type of state structure that guaranteed centralized decision-making — a sine qua non of a transition to communism for the Bolsheviks — while appealing to local populations and their particularities. By making a concession to the nation-state concept of matching nation and territory, the Bolsheviks hoped to preserve the territorial integrity of the former Russian Empire and transform it into a multiethnic socialist state. The federation of Soviet republics was supposed to be only the first step in the long process of merging and consequently eliminating nations first in the USSR and then worldwide. It was this policy, which [Francine Hirsch](#) calls “state-sponsored evolutionism,” pursued within the framework of a centralized state with a quasi-colonial economic and administrative structure, that would give the USSR its distinctive form.

The ideal of a “brotherhood of peoples” soon became a smokescreen to conceal Stalinist imperialism. Thus, the knot of contradictions between the imperial heritage of tsarism and the utopian project of Bolshevism on which the USSR was built was never untied. It remains and represents today a challenge for many countries of the post-Soviet space that have been deprived of a real national, political, and economic sovereignty during the whole twentieth century. In the continuity of its long imperial history, Putin’s Russia continues to exercise its brutal domination over its former colonies.

Today Lenin’s project for national autonomy is trampled upon by Putin, who advances irredentist

and revisionist historical arguments to justify his barbaric war against Ukrainians. It is time to say no to this denial of the subjectivity of not only the state but also the Ukrainian people. Our solidarity must go to the Ukrainian people who have taken up arms to fight the imperialist force, as well as to all those in Russia who, at the risk of their freedom, protest against the military adventure decided by the Kremlin.

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