

How the Ukrainian Working Class Was Born

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At the turn of the last century, Ukraine's labor movement was subject to tsarist domination and divided along linguistic lines. The revolutions of 1917 inspired calls for self-determination and the formation of a common Ukrainian identity.

Faced with the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine, many pundits have reached for simple stories of Ukraine's national identity — as have key figures in the war itself. Vladimir Putin insists that Ukraine was a creation of Vladimir Lenin in a Bolshevik crime perpetrated against the integrity of the “Russian world.” At the same time, even commentators outwardly supportive of Kiev have regurgitated far-right narratives that celebrate Nazi collaborator [Stepan Bandera](#) as an avatar of national independence.

Yet there are also other, very different trends in Ukrainian history: that of the workers' movement that emerged under the yoke of the tsarist empire; the Ukrainians who made their careers — or else were cruelly repressed — in the interwar Soviet Union; or the millions of Ukrainians who joined the Red Army to fight against Nazi colonization. Understanding these elements, as well as developments in post-Soviet decades, is key to breaking out of the rival accounts that take the whole of Ukraine's history for a monolith.

Marko Bojcun is a Ukrainian socialist and author of [The Workers' Movement and the National Question in Ukraine 1897-1918](#). He spoke to Jacobin's David Broder about the historic rise of Ukrainian national identity, its paradoxical development in the Soviet period, and the prospects of peaceful cohabitation among the peoples of Eastern Europe today.

DB | Vladimir Putin claims to uphold a centuries-old tradition of “triurnal” Russian civilization, and [condemns Lenin and the Bolsheviks for creating Ukraine](#). What importance did 1917 have for Ukrainian statehood — and was Lenin the decisive actor?

MB | The year was a significant moment for the emergence of Ukrainian national identity, for peasants but also for a section of the working class. Several factors converged, giving the revolution its specific character in the provinces of the Russian Empire where Ukrainians were a majority. By 1917, they had been a conquered people for over two hundred years. They lacked independent political representation in an era when the opposing imperialist states around them had unleashed a world war to redivide their land and labor among themselves.

In that war, Ukrainians found themselves fighting on both sides — that is, in the opposed Austro-Hungarian and Russian armies. In the tsarist era, the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine was the political majority. This affected peasants becoming workers, in the transition from rural agricultural life to urban industrial work, and, from there, higher up the social ladder, if they got an education to become engineers and doctors and lawyers or army officers. In that process, Ukrainians gave up their native language and their traditional culture and assimilated into the Russian language and culture dominant in the workplace, the army, the schools, and the courts.

That process was arrested by the 1917 revolution, when the peasantry and an increasing number of

workers refused to continue to identify as Russian and sought their own self-determination. That is to say, they looked to their own government based in Kiev rather than to Petrograd all the time, be it to the provisional government or to the workers' and soldiers' soviet there. So whereas in Russia proper there was a dual-power struggle between the Petrograd Soviet and the provisional government, in Ukraine it was a triple power struggle that involved also a third force, the Ukrainian Tsentral'na Rada (literally Central Council, or soviet in Russian), which had the backing of the peasantry. They recognized the Rada in Kiev, demanding it sue for peace and end the war, distribute the land, and hold elections to a government based on the peasants', soldiers', and workers' councils. In October 1917, it overthrew the provisional government in Kiev and Ukraine's other major cities and declared the Ukrainian People's Republic.

DB | To what extent was that a product of a distinct social democratic movement in Ukraine? Was there a specific Ukrainian labor movement crossing state borders – and what about the Bund or the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP)?

MB | There were significant contacts across the Austro-Hungarian-Russian border, between Ukrainian radicals, anarcho-socialists, and later Social Democrats who cooperated during the period of autocracy. In 1905, the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' Party was formed in Russian Ukraine and stood alongside the [Jewish General Workers' Union \(the Bund\)](#) and the RSDLP.

There were fourteen non-Russian social democratic parties in the Russian Empire, plus the Russian one. In Ukraine, the three main ones were the Russian, the Jewish, and the Ukrainian parties. They implanted themselves in different parts of the working class: the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party in the agricultural proletariat and among unskilled workers in the towns and cities; the Bund amongst the Jewish craft proletariat and industrial workers toward the east and south of Ukraine; and the RSDLP everywhere from the craft proletariat to heavy industries in coal mining and metallurgy, especially in the east. These parties naturally used the language of their social bases, and they advocated national self-determination, be it autonomy within a democratized all-Russian state or complete independence. This is the case, most certainly, for the Ukrainian Social Democratic Workers' Party. There were always discussions that went on between social democrats of all nationalities: what was the long-term vision with respect to the national question? Those different views informed different programs and methods and divisions of organizations.

This question was not so prominent in public political life, but did seriously influence social democratic activity in Russian Ukraine. Only in 1902–3, when big strikes broke out in the latifundia in the wheat- and sugar-beet-growing areas of Ukraine, did Ukrainian socialist democracy take off and acquire a social base and try to build on that. In the 1905 revolution, the national question was publicly at issue. Then, in 1917, it exploded, basically because of the war and the collapse of the Russian autocracy, when many more workers came into the national movement. It grew rapidly alongside the workers' movement throughout 1917, from February to October. As my book tries to analyze, the social democratic workers' movement in Ukraine struggled to find a common solution to the national question in the form of a democratic republic, in which the interests of all classes and all nations would be satisfied. The attempt to consolidate a Ukrainian People's Republic failed in 1918, and in the process of the civil war, the German occupation, the collapse of that occupation in November 1918, and then the outbreak of widespread peasant jacquerie during the civil war, this question was very important. At the end of the civil war in 1921, it was clear to the Bolsheviks that they could not establish a state of their own on the territory of the former empire without recognizing the right to national self-determination, including for Ukrainians.

DB | There seem to be two parallel processes at the end of the civil war: an overall centralization of the Soviet state, with less local control, yet simultaneously a Ukrainization process which recognized its differentness.

MB | There was a recognition of political autonomy, including cultural autonomy. You can't bring the population into the process of government without recognizing their languages as the languages of everyday use in the workplace, in education, in government. It's a process of self-emancipation for non-Russian peoples, for the Ukrainians to be recognized for who they are and the language that they want. They don't want to live and work in the language of the former empire that had ruled over them.

During the civil war, the Ukrainian Social Democratic Movement splintered, as did the Bund and the RSDLP. Two Ukrainian Communist parties formed, advocating an independent Ukrainian socialist republic, and they eventually merged with the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine, which had itself declared its autonomy from the RSDLP in 1918. The Communist Party of Ukraine was made up overwhelmingly of Russian speakers, but increasing numbers of Ukrainian speakers joined it either individually or by merging their own communist parties, which they had formed during the civil war. So, by 1921, you have a significant component within the Bolshevik party of Ukraine made up of Ukrainian speakers and a significant portion of the Ukrainian intelligentsia demanding an independent Ukrainian government that would unite with other Soviet republics freely, of its own will.

This pressure resolved itself in Lenin supporting the idea of creating a confederation, a Union Republic, meaning that Ukrainians would have the right to govern themselves, to unite with other Soviet republics, and to leave if they so desired. So the USSR formed at the end of 1922 was constitutionally a confederation of Union Republics. But in reality, it had a strongly centralized political structure and the ruling Russian Bolsheviks did not permit the development of an independent state. However, they had to make big concessions. In the 1920s, Ukrainian national identity grew within the working class, and, by 1928, half of the trade unions in Ukraine functioned in the Ukrainian language, whereas prior to the revolution they had been overwhelmingly Russian-speaking.

DB | What explains why the working class identified ever more as Ukrainian during this early post-1917 period?

MB | It's a paradoxical result of the development of the Soviet Union that industrialization, the acquisition of universal literacy, and urbanization strengthened Ukrainian national identity. This was difficult for the ruling party to manage, because the desire for self-determination among people who were beginning to occupy higher echelons in society and government, the army, and so on, meant that they wanted to control and decide the basic issues of their lives. So the Ukrainian Communists of the 1920s wanted and demanded that there be, first of all, recognition of their Soviet Socialist Republic as a single economic unit, whereas the Russian Bolsheviks originally wanted to see the Ukrainian Republic divided into two — an agricultural and industrial area, and to decide the priorities of these two regions from Moscow. The Ukrainian Communists said no, we want there to be one plan for our republic that includes both industrial and agricultural development, and we want to decide it ourselves. That had serious implications for education, for economic planning, and for all kinds of development issues.

There was a perpetual struggle going on. Joseph Stalin put an end to the peaceful process of Ukrainization. His rule permitted the expression of national identity as an *ethnic* identity: you can use your language, you can sing folk songs, you can dance, but you can't govern yourselves. If you want to participate in government, you have to go to Moscow. Many talented Ukrainians went to Moscow and Leningrad and occupied important positions in the Soviet government: people like Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev and others before them. We see the descendants of those people today speaking on television from Moscow as representatives of the Russian Federation.

DB | You also show that this process continued throughout the whole Soviet era: ever larger parts of the working class identified as Ukrainian into the 1970s. But was this necessarily a political or even oppositional consciousness?

MB | This is certainly a complicated and intricate question. What I can say is, first of all, the Ukrainian identity as a choice for self-determination, which grew stronger in the 1920s, in conditions that allowed Ukrainians to enter into political life, was brutally brought to an end in the 1930s and driven underground with the Stalinist purges and the terror. The large majority of all Ukrainian political and cultural leaders were eliminated: 140 out of 142 members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine in 1933 ended up in the camps and prisons or executed outright. There was a wipeout of the intelligentsia during the famine of 1932-33, which broke the back of the peasantry as an autonomous political force.

Ukraine had been divided between four different states at the end of the civil war — Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the Soviet Union. Adolph Hitler and Stalin carved up Poland between themselves in 1939, and two years later Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. During World War II, Nazi Germany enlisted some 250,000 Ukrainians in its army formations and auxiliary police, while 4.5 million Ukrainians served in the Soviet Red Army, accounting for 40 percent of its total number. They fought in the major battles that expelled and then defeated Germany in the war. As a result, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic suffered the heaviest losses in terms of human lives and material damage of all the Soviet republics. In 1945, practically all the territories of Ukraine were united for the first time under one state. In 1954, the Soviet Union's leaders transferred the Crimean autonomous republic from the Russian to the Ukrainian constituent Soviet republic, largely out of economic considerations.

In the post-Stalin period, there were alternating periods of liberalization of political life and the return of repression. Yet a political consciousness for self-determination was always there, up until the 1980s. There are good examples of this coming out of the dissident movement: the Ukrainian Workers' and Peasants' Union, formed in the late 1970s, and the Ukrainian Helsinki Group. But these were very small expressions of a political consciousness that was repressed under the pressures of censorship and intimidation.

I worked in Ukraine for twenty years, traveling all over the country to Odesa, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Lviv. Everywhere I went, I spoke Ukrainian, and almost everywhere people answered me in Russian but would switch to Ukrainian. I never experienced, except once in a Kiev market, any expression of chauvinism or racism against me for speaking Ukrainian. Today Russian and Ukrainian speakers navigate their way in communication fluidly and with mutual respect. At the same time, I saw how much Ukrainian was becoming accepted and increasingly used as the language of everyday life, especially after the Maidan in 2014.

DB | It seems obvious that the 2014 war, and especially this one, have hardened Ukrainian national identity, even among the Russian-speaking population. But how about areas like the Donbas?

MB | First, I should say that Russian speakers are everywhere in Ukraine, and they are not only Russians. They are Russians and Ukrainians, Jews and Crimean Tatars, Armenians and Greeks. So the Russian language is not itself a significant marker of national identity or political allegiance, except for far-right nationalists. What is significant is whether you identify with your fellow citizens who live here in this country, as one nation.

Many in the international left don't grasp this when they say that there is this Russian population dissatisfied because it faces discrimination. That is simply not true. It is a claim made by the

propagators of the ideology of the *russkiy mir* (the Russian-world civilization) to which all of Ukraine, they say, rightfully belongs, including Donbas.

Those claiming discrimination against the Russian language have lately focused on the January 2021 law requiring that public and commercial services be provided in Ukrainian, where, until now, Russian had continued to predominate, especially in mass and social media. It is, in effect, a positive discrimination law intended to strengthen Ukrainian, now the official language. Such a measure is deemed necessary after three centuries of discrimination and prohibition against Ukrainian and in the face of competition with corporate media broadcasting out of neighboring Russia.

The law is widely supported because it is in keeping with what most people want and choose to do themselves. But it was introduced with little attention paid to measures needed to ease the transition from Russian for unilingual Russian speakers. The biggest critics remaining are media and publishing outlets that must now produce parallel services in Ukrainian, if they continue to provide them in Russian.

So let's see how things really are in the Donbas. It was industrially the most developed part of Ukraine; the region also spreads over the border into Russia. It had a very high standard of living, was economically closely tied into the economy of the Russian Federation, was historically linked up with Moscow and Leningrad by rail and other communications. From the 1970s onward, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the new capitalists pillaged and privatized the nationalized assets, this region declined economically. The working class experienced what workers in rust belts in the United States and in Britain have experienced: becoming marginalized, unemployed, forced to emigrate in search of work. Their environments have been poisoned and polluted by industrial production. They suffer as a result in all kinds of ways, including their health and their opportunities in life.

So there is this resentment that was seized upon by Russian nationalists: the far right in Donbas and in Russia. They argue that the Donbas people have been politically disenfranchised and so need to have their own government or, rather, that they should join the Russian Federation. That's how this process began, and if you look carefully, the separatist republics were launched in 2014 by far-right Russian nationalists. This, in turn, generated a strong Ukrainian nationalist reaction, including its far right. These two nationalisms feed off each other, shaping important parts of the entire political process and the military situation.

The majority of the Donbas electorate supported Ukrainian independence in the December 1991 referendum. But independence came without a radical break with the past, without removing the old Soviet ruling class from public office or its command over the economy. More than anywhere else in Ukraine, those who ruled the Donbas maintained an authoritarian, paternalistic relationship with the working-class population and fostered their distinct regional identity rather than a civic and national identity. But they identify with other people in Ukraine as citizens of one country. That was the situation before 2014, but the situation was obviously polarized and inflamed by the conflicts that broke out.

When Viktor Yanukovich was elected in 2010, he brought with him to government in Kiev a faction of oligarchs from Donbas. They lined up behind him because he controlled access to licenses to trade abroad, for instance, oil, gas, and chemicals processed in Ukraine. His ministers basically came from the Donbas region. When he was ousted by the Maidan in 2014, he fled to Russia, but his party established itself as a rump force in the Donbas. They tried to mount a response from there and to maintain a foothold in Ukraine. The Russian Federation under Putin came in and backed them militarily. First, Russia seized Crimea in February 2014, and then the people behind that seizure moved to the Donbas and established, with the local Russian nationalist parties and remnants of

Yanukovych's party, the [Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics](#).

DB | Some point to the peace negotiations that followed 2014, and especially the Minsk II agreement, as the basis for talks now. What kind of peace settlement could Ukraine accept that wouldn't just be swallowing a humiliation, even despite the current success in holding back the invasion?

MB | If the Minsk II agreement ever had any utility as a basis for resolving the conflict, Putin has destroyed that. Putin did not even want to meet with Zelensky, but kept insisting that the process was conditional on Ukraine accepting the leaders of the separatist republics as parties to the negotiations. The Ukrainian government refused to do that. And that became one of the triggers to the Russian invasion, which has destroyed any such process. Putin has put an axe through the negotiating table by invading, demanding Ukraine's surrender and by bombing civilians in their homes, in hospitals, and in so-called evacuation corridors.

The Ukrainian government now says that it will not engage in comprehensive negotiations unless Russia fully withdraws, including from Crimea and the Donbas. It says that it cannot negotiate under the intimidation of the bombs being dropped on the civilian population. But it has sent its representatives to talks where it thinks it can help protect civilians' lives.

My view is that Putin expected to carry out a blitzkrieg, to march in and occupy Ukraine quickly while also inflicting minimal damage, so that the Ukrainian population would more readily accept a Russian overlordship, a government installed by Moscow. That was the initial strategy that Putin pursued, which has been stymied by the stiff resistance that Ukrainians have mounted. There is ample evidence that Russian soldiers lack motivation to advance at the desired pace or to engage with their opponents at close quarters once they are there. That makes it difficult for the invasion to go according to plan.

The Western powers have not agreed to impose a no-fly zone, because that would risk triggering war between NATO and Russia. However, Western support is quite significant, and is felt by the Russian state and its big business allies. It is known increasingly by the population of Russia, which is also showing less than enthusiastic support for the invasion. So now it is the Russians who have asked for negotiations, but they are not really asking for that but demanding Ukraine's surrender.

We are now into full-scale war. The Russians have resorted to terrorizing the civilian population and driving them out of their homes under fire. I think we're in for a long fight here — increasingly a Syria-type situation, I'm afraid.

DB | So how do we avoid that?

MB | Right now, Russia seeks to defeat the Ukrainian side or partition the country at the very least. Ukraine faces almost overwhelming odds, but has dug in, demanding Russia's complete withdrawal from all of pre-2014 Ukraine. Partition or reunification and no compromise, other than from those in the West calling for peace in exchange for Ukraine accepting Russia's terms. Such advocates of peace, I think, are sincere, but they hardly have the moral authority to propose such a solution from the comfort of their homes in still peaceful democracies. I think we could move toward a cease-fire and a peace agreement only if there is a mass antiwar movement in Russia, and indeed the West, and if Putin's rule is seriously undermined. Neither are imminent. But if there's a stronger popular movement that demands the Russian government withdraw its forces from Ukraine, that would begin to change the situation.

There needs to be a mass political response in the West, and a new conception and strategy toward

peace in Europe. The analogy I would make would be with the period of the late 1970s, early 1980s, when the Americans stationed cruise missiles in Britain and the Soviet Union responded by stationing SS-19 and -21 missiles in Czechoslovakia. The response was a mass movement organized and led by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. [E. P. Thompson](#) and others in the smaller European Nuclear Disarmament camp contributed important new insights to this campaign about war and possible paths to peace in our age of mass destruction. That was a significant development in its own right, and I believe it had a big impact on the behavior of the great powers subsequently. It informed and made important proposals that became part of the disarmament process, the limiting of missiles within a certain range in Europe, and the discussions that Mikhail Gorbachev started with European and American leaders that brought the Cold War to a close, at least for some years.

So we need a new European nuclear disarmament and peace strategy that is put forward *by society itself*. Governments are too slow, and they respond to war with war. They're counting the losses to their own big businesses that come as a result of the interconnection between our Russian capital and Western capital through investment, trade, debt, the pipelines, and so forth. There needs to be a clear message from a popular movement of people both in Russia and in the West that would force these governments into proper negotiations. We don't have enough of that right now, but there has been a moment of recognition of the gravity of the situation and the strategic importance of Ukraine for European peace.

DB | We can broadcast the message of the Russian peace movement, and clearly the Ukrainian military resistance can stir some dissent among Russian troops. But how could we build a peace movement that doesn't just push toward a fresh agreement between Washington and Moscow over the heads of the people of Ukraine and other smaller or weaker states? Putin's invasion has seemingly strengthened support for NATO not only in Eastern Europe but also in, say, Finland.

MB | We can't achieve a durable peace by reforming the blocs. The right to national self-determination has to be at the heart of global peace. The view of the crisis as one that can be resolved by a new relationship between Russia and the West is not the way of approaching the problem. There are a lot of countries between the West and Russia. Russia has twenty-one military bases and installations outside of its own borders, eighteen of them in independent ex-Soviet states. These are instruments of the Kremlin as a gendarme of the entire region.

Ukraine finds itself caught between two regional military powers protecting their respective regional integration projects. There is Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and its Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance that went into action quite recently in Kazakhstan. There are also bilateral arrangements that Russia has made with a whole set of other countries, including China. The NATO alliance led by the United States guarantees the military security of the European Union, as well as engaging in wars east and south of the Russian Federation. These two regional integration projects have been expanding for a long time now; it's now come to a confrontation. Here in Ukraine is the heart of this clash, because the route to transnational status and power for Russian multinationals and the Russian state runs through Ukraine in terms of investment, trade, debt, transport, communications, and so on. Russia seeks to build a strong, cooperative linkup with German capital. This frightens the United States, which is a declining power, certainly in Europe, a power that has lost the initiative. So there are these two wheels of big regional integration projects that are grinding up Ukraine between them.

I don't want to be a foreign policy adviser for governments. Rather, I want to show that there's another way of looking at the situation other than through governments. We have to begin with first principles. That firstly means each country has a right to defend itself, but it should withdraw all of

its military forces that are outside its own country if it has placed them there. Secondly, it means that we need to disarm, to reduce and eliminate offensive weapons. These massive missiles are flying into the center of cities right now. We need to talk about creating a cooperative environment and linking up people, that is to say, civic and social and human rights movements, productive collectives and labor organizations across borders, to build up mutual trust and support rather than relying entirely on governments. If we start building a conception like that, maybe we can show that there's another way of addressing the problem rather than looking at the balance of power between states. This does not stop us from putting pressure on states and demanding changes of public policy.

Right now, however, Ukrainians cannot take part in discussions about a durable future peace. That must come later, at war's end. They are demanding an immediate end to the aggression against them, desperately asking for help from those who say they stand alongside them. They are increasingly frustrated by the failure of Western states to come to their aid, but they have no illusions about NATO or whose interests it will ultimately serve. They are quite aware and thankful for the practical aid that civic, trade union, human rights organizations and charities are getting to them. It is helping to save lives. Our task is to stay with them, build and maintain our links with them, and to demand that Putin's regime stops the killing. The ties we make with them will lay foundations for in-depth discussions and decisions later about the long-term peace.

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