

The Bolsheviks, the National Question and the Civil War

The policy of Bolshevism on the national question, having ensured the victory of the October revolution, also helped the Soviet Union to hold out afterward notwithstanding inner centrifugal forces and a hostile environment.

— Leon Trotsky¹

During a debate on the national question in an internet forum, I was challenged on a comment I had made to the effect that ‘the Russian Revolution would not have taken place if it had not been for the positions of the Bolsheviks on the national question.’ The objections that were raised were these:

- ‘Between the February and October revolutions national governments were formed in many of the nations within the Russian Empire. The Bolsheviks did nothing to either encourage or dissuade this process as they could do nothing about it.’
- ‘With the exception of the Ukraine and Byelorussia all the nations peripheral to the Empire were lost to counter-revolutionary forces regardless of the position the Bolsheviks held on self-determination.’
- ‘In the Ukraine the argument that self-determination won the masses to the revolution simply will not wash given that more than once Lenin had to intervene their to rebuke the local representatives of the party for Great Russian chauvinism. When a stable regime was finally established in the Ukraine it was to be headed not by a Ukrainian or a Great Russian but by a man whose very nationality was more than a little in flux. I refer to Christian Rakovsky.’

And finally, that the national question ‘was a very secondary ideological weapon in this struggle.’

Given that my interlocutor saw fit to cast doubt on my capacity to engage with the ‘historical process’ and suggested that I really knew nothing about the events under consideration, the historical ignorance he displayed was staggering. To keep this discussion at least some way manageable I am going to concentrate my comments on the Ukraine, since it was here not only that the most important phase of the civil war was played out but where the national question was posed most sharply. But it is not true that the national question only emerged in the Ukraine: in the east, in Turkestan, the Bolshevik’s position was also a vital factor in winning over the most militant fighters for national liberation, a point admitted by the region’s bourgeois nationalist leaders themselves.²

It is also a fallacy to claim that, since the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks shared the same programme on self-determination then the Mensheviks also have share some of the credit for its success. Trotsky addressed the problem like this: ‘The Bolsheviks defended the right of a nation to self-determination. But the Mensheviks also subscribed to this formula in words. The text of the two programmes remained identical. It was the question of power which was decisive.’³ This was the fundamental cleavage between Bolshevism and Menshevism over the

¹ *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York, 1977), 170.

² See Gerry Foley, ‘Lenin’s Policy vs. Stalin’s: How the Bolsheviks Defended the Rights of National Minorities’, *Socialist Action* (US), October 1990.

³ *History of the Russian Revolution* (London, 1977), 904.

course of 1917, the real meaning of the phase of dual power. The Bolshevik slogan of ‘all power to the soviets’ was precisely aimed at the Menshevik’s unwillingness to break with the bourgeoisie: it was not intended to mean turning the soviets into organs of government, for they were that already. The dual power took the form, not of a conflict between the soviets and the Duma, but a struggle between the soviets—which the masses regarded as sovereign—and the bourgeois government that the soviet leaders had put into power. Over this people fought and died in the summer of 1917. The immediate practical meaning of the slogan ‘all power to the soviets’ related to the question of government. It meant that the soviet parties should take their rightful place at the head of the revolution. It meant ‘break the coalition’ and ‘down with the ten capitalist ministers’. That this was its chief popular connotation is attested to by the fact that Lenin felt it necessary to write an article reminding people that the slogan did not refer *only* to government.⁴ Thus the formal position of Menshevism on the national question is an irrelevance. The Bolshevik indictment of Menshevism was that it would not take power independently of the bourgeoisie, whereas the Bolsheviks would. It was that intransigence on the part of the Bolsheviks that won them the support of the Russian working class and (along with the Left Social Revolutionaries) large sections of the peasantry, and it was this that made the October revolution possible. To say that ‘the revolution took place because the system of dual power that the February Revolution had seen arise was unstable and the Bolsheviks were the only party able to reconcile the contradictions inherent in this fragile situation’ is a nonsense: the Bolsheviks were the only party able to reconcile the contradictions in a *revolutionary* way: those willing to reconcile the contradictions in a counter-revolutionary way were not wanting. That was precisely what the civil war was fought over.

It is also important not to pretty the Bolshevik position, however. Addressing this question of the nationalities in 1917, Trotsky noted that ‘The Bolshevik Party did not by any means immediately after the February revolution adopt that attitude on the national question which in the long run guaranteed its victory. This was true not only in the borderlands, with their weak and inexperienced party organisations, but also in the Petrograd centre.’⁵ Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to talk about ‘a Bolshevik position’ on self-determination; we can talk about Lenin’s position, and we can talk about the party’s programmatic position, but if we look at the broader party itself it is clear that Lenin’s position on self-determination had not been completely assimilated. In fact the great part of Lenin’s writings on the national question are composed of polemics with those, both inside the party and within the broader international social democratic movement, who disagreed with him. His position had even been challenged by a sizeable current, whom Lenin dubbed the ‘imperialist economists’, within the party on the eve of the revolution. In addition, Lenin, being no dogmatist, developed his position on the national question (as in general) in relation to the concrete situation. We can thus see shifts in his position: his views on the national question before and after his work on imperialism, for example, are significantly different. In addition, the experience of 1917 and soviet power changed radically his views towards federalism. Nevertheless, there are constants in Lenin’s thought: his defence of the right of self-determination, his insistence in posing questions concretely rather than abstractly, and a remarkable sensitivity towards national demands. Incidentally, the fact that Lenin and others had to intervene to correct those on the ground in relation to Bolshevik national policy doesn’t mean that the policy was unimportant, as my interlocuter seems to suggest: rather the opposite in fact. The fact that the leadership of the Russian party had to more than once intervene into the regional parties, sometimes overturning the entire leadership, testifies to the deadly seriousness with which Lenin in particular viewed the national question. Had Lenin agreed with my interlocuter’s view that the national question ‘was a very secondary ideological weapon’ in the civil war he would not have been exercised to intervene in this way. Thankfully for the revolution—and for us—neither Lenin nor Trotsky viewed matters this way: hence, as we shall see, their decisive political interventions around these questions.

The only parts of the Tsarist empire where there were demands for national independence immediately after the February revolution were Poland and Finland. Poland at this point was completely under German occupation with the Central Powers already offering independence to the separate (bourgeois) Polish state. The provisional government thus issued a proclamation committing itself to recognition of an independent Poland. On Finland

⁴ ‘One of the Fundamental Questions of the Revolution’, *Selected Works*, vol. 2, 276.

⁵ *History*, *ibid.*

the provisional government was a little less enthusiastic, since Finland lay outside the immediate zone of military operations; the hesitancy of the provisional government, however, was roundly condemned by the Bolsheviks. Following the October revolution, the Soviet government unconditionally accepted the independence of Poland. In December, when pressed by the Finnish government, the Soviet government also recognised the independence of Finland, even though in January 1918 the Finnish social democrats attempted to seize power, and received aid from the Soviet forces still in Finland. The ensuing civil war, which was fought with great bitterness, was only concluded with the assistance of German troops called in by the Finnish government.

The sphere in which it is most clearly shown that Lenin enjoyed no unanimity in the party is in relation to the Ukraine. The Ukraine was the decisive sector in the civil war; it was also, as Rakovsky noted, also the key next link in the unfolding of the international revolution (and we need to remember that an understanding of the international nature of the revolution was ubiquitous in these pre-Stalinism days: for the Bolsheviks of 1917 the very possibility of constructing socialism in one country, never mind one as backward as Russia, would have been regarded as nothing other than absurd⁶); and it was in the Ukraine that the train of self-determination came up against the buffers of greater Russian chauvinism to the degree that it nearly cost the Bolsheviks the civil war (and consequently the revolution) and, my reluctance to engage in the entertaining parlour game of historical counterfactuals notwithstanding, quite possibly did cost the international extension of October. The nonchalance of my interlocuter's treatment of this question is astonishing.

E. H. Carr's view was that the Ukraine embodied a social structure *sui generis* within the Russian empire.⁷ The peasantry, the overwhelming majority of the population, were partisans of a strong and deeply rooted national tradition principally directed against the landowners, Polish in the west, and Russian elsewhere, and against (the almost exclusively Jewish) usurers. It has often been argued that Ukrainian nationalism considered itself a part of Russian identity; if this is so, it was Russian understood as *rossiiskaya* rather than *russkaya*: Kiev, after all, had been a Russian capital before either Saint Petersburg or Moscow. The modern proletariat—where Bolshevik support was based—was not indigenously Ukrainian: urban Ukrainian culture was predominantly Great Russian. The modern—i.e. early twentieth-century—nationalist movement was in turn based in the intelligentsia, and expressed itself, unlike traditional peasant nationalism, as a defence of Ukrainian language and culture against the imperial Great Russian bureaucrat.

The Bolsheviks, like the Mensheviks, were completely unprepared for what was going to happen in the Ukraine following the revolution, being based as they were in the most modern and concentrated sectors of the proletariat, which did not share Ukrainian nationality. They did not have a leadership centre in the Ukraine, and they ignored the national question in their press and propaganda, which was in any case published entirely in Russian.

In March 1917 a Central Ukrainian Rada, representing (although the body was not elected) Social Revolutionaries, social democrats, national federalists, and national minorities constituted itself under the presidency of Mikhaïlo Hrushevsky, a professor, whose *History of Ukraine*⁸ had provided a historical basis for the movement. The Rada slowly emerged as an embryonic national assembly. In June 1917, frustrated at the progress of negotiations with the Ukrainian government, it issued a decree, 'The First Universal', proclaiming an autonomous Ukrainian Republic. The Provisional Government grudgingly conceded a claim to autonomy, conditional on a final decision by the Constituent Assembly. On 7 November, the Rada proclaimed a Ukrainian People's Republic, through the 'Third Universal', even though this declaration specifically repeated the intention of not separating from the Russian republic. Soviets, however, had made their appearance in various parts, notably in Kiev. With the organisation of anti-Bolshevik armies led by Kornilov and Kaledin on the banks of the Don, Ukrainian army units were ordered back to the Ukraine, and Soviet army units were prevented from crossing the Ukraine while Cossack formations were allowed to cross to join Kaledin: a showdown between the bourgeois nationalist led Rada and the provisional government was thus inevitable. In December, the Ukrainian

⁶ See Marcel Liebman's excellent textual treatment in his *Leninism under Lenin* (London, 1975), 359-65.

⁷ E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth 1976), 295f.

⁸ Published in English by OUP, 1941.

Bolsheviks, who had retired from Kiev, formed in Karkhov a new all-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets. A Central Executive Committee elected by the Congress telegraphed the government in Petrograd announcing its assumption of full powers over the Ukraine. A Fourth Universal was issued by the Rada in January 1918 lengthily proclaiming the Ukrainian republic as a free and sovereign state. Ten days later the independence of this Ukrainian state was recognised by the German government.

The soviet armies invaded immediately, surrounded Kiev and entered it at the end of January. The Rada was overthrown and a new Soviet government installed. This government lasted three weeks, since on 12 February, the Rada appealed for help to Germany, and on 2 March the Bolsheviks had to abandon Kiev in the face of the forces of the Rada under the nationalist Simon Petlura. But at the end of April the Rada was dismissed by the Germans, who installed their own puppet state, the Hetmanate.

At an ad hoc conference in April 1918 in Taganrog in Ekaterinoslav province, as the Bolsheviks retreated in the face of the beginning of the German occupation of the country, the Ukrainian Bolsheviks decided by a narrow majority to constitute themselves as an autonomous unit of the Russian party: the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) in the Ukraine. Both Piatakov, and the veteran Ukrainian Communist leader Mykola Skrypnyk were members of the Organisational Bureau set up by this conference.

The first proper congress, however, of the Ukrainian Bolsheviks took place in Moscow in the summer of 1918. The party leadership in Moscow, including Lenin, were unhappy with the party's Taganrog position, viewing it as a 'nationalist deviation'. The Taganrog resolution on independence was overturned. Skrypnyk was not re-elected to the Central Committee.

In June 1918, under the German supported Hetmanate government, the left wing of both the Ukrainian social democrats and the Social Revolutionaries passed over to support for the Bolsheviks and participated in the Second All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets.

In November 1918, as the Central Powers collapsed and revolution broke out in Germany, there was a generalised national insurrection which overthrew the Hetmanate. The Rada re-established itself, this time in the form of the Directorate. The Red Army invaded, chased out the latter, and a Bolshevik government under Piatakov was installed, although he was soon to be recalled to Moscow and be replaced, on the nomination of Lenin and with his instructions to win the support of the Ukrainian peasantry and placate the Ukrainian left, by Christian Rakovsky (an outstanding revolutionary, who—bizarrely— my interlocuter sees fit to rebuke for his uncertain nationality⁹). In January 1919, the Directorate declared war on Moscow, but this was not sufficient to stop the red army re-establishing itself in Kiev by February.

Rakovsky, despite his claims to be expert on Ukrainian affairs, could not at the beginning come to terms with the national realities of the political situation in the Ukraine; he failed to understand the national nature of the Ukrainian revolution (Rakovsky's views at this time were based on the idea that the relations between soviet states and the relation between bourgeois states were essentially different: the elimination of private property in the soviet state resulted in the elimination of the national question¹⁰). However, he did correctly understand the absolutely central strategic significance of the Ukraine. In January 1920, writing in *Izvestiya*, he wrote: 'The Ukraine is truly the *strategic nodal point* of socialism. To create a revolutionary Ukraine would mean triggering off a revolution in the Balkans and giving to the German proletariat the possibility of resisting famine and world imperialism. The Ukrainian revolution is the *decisive factor* in the world revolution.'¹¹

⁹ I prefer Victor Serge's interpretation of the 'state of flux' of Rakovsky's nationality that it was a mark of his *internationalism*, calling him 'a veteran socialist of Europe' and 'a revolutionary internationalist'. *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (London 1992), 258-9.

¹⁰ Gus Fagan, 'Introduction', Christian Rakovsky, *Selected Writings on Opposition in the USSR 1923-30* (London, 1980), 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

Rakovsky's government, which was on paper that of an 'independent republic', in fact considered itself simply the regional arm the Russian workers' state. Recruitment to the administration was effectively restricted to often reactionary Russian petty bourgeois layers; similar trends existed in the army.¹²

Nevertheless, by March 1919 a constitution of the Ukrainian SSR was adopted by the third all-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets. However, in practice, the Red Army had done little to ingratiate itself with the peasants: land was forcibly collectivised, while there were few concessions made to Ukrainian language and culture.¹³ There were stories of Red Guards who shot those who had the nerve to speak Ukrainian in public. In addition to this, the Ukrainian SSR's military prospects were also inauspicious. Fighting continued in the west where Petlura's retreating forces distinguished themselves by massacring the Jewish population. In the east, Makhno's 'anarchist' army of partisans—now fighting on the same side as the Bolsheviks, now against them—controlled wide swathes of the country. Here and there there were pockets of German troops. On the Black Sea coast were detachments of French troops. In the summer of 1919, a wave of uprisings led by the rebel army of Hryhoryiv paved the way for an advance by Denikin. In July, Denikin's army began to advance north. By the end of August most of the Ukraine was in White hands, threatening not only the Russian revolution but also isolating the Hungarian one (in late April Lenin had urged the Red Army to make contact with Soviet Hungary¹⁴). By September Denikin was in Kiev.

From Budapest, a desperate Bela Kun demand a radical change in Bolshevik policy in the Ukraine. Antonov-Ovseyenko, the commander of the Red Army's Ukrainian front, did the same.¹⁵ The far left of the Social Revolutionary Party in the Ukraine, the Borotbists, who had been increasingly building up support among the peasantry, set themselves up as the Ukrainian Communist Party (Borotbist), standing for an independent soviet Ukraine, and demanded recognition as a national section of the Comintern, a request, needless to say, which was turned down. Both the Hungarian and Bavarian revolutions were crushed. The Russian revolution itself stood in mortal danger from Denikin's offensive.

But without a social base on the ground Denikin found that he had over-extended himself. At the same time, the Bolsheviks had begun to draw lessons of the experience of the Ukrainian national question. In October, the central committee of the Ukrainian party and Soviet government was indicted by the Russian party for behaving as a colonial power and excluding Ukrainian participation.¹⁶ As the Red Army moved onto the counter-offensive, both Trotsky and Lenin made decisive political interventions. In November, as the Red Army advanced deep into the Ukraine, Trotsky issued the following order to the Red troops:

By defeating Denikin's bands you are freeing a fraternal country from its oppressors.

The Ukraine is the land of the Ukrainian workers and working peasants. They alone have the right to rule in the Ukraine, to govern it and to build a new life in it.

While striking merciless blows at the Denikinites you must at the same time show fraternal care and love for the working masses of the Ukraine.

Woe to anyone who uses armed force to coerce the working people of the Ukraine's towns or villages! The workers and peasants of the Ukraine must feel secure under the defence of your bayonets!

Keep this firmly in mind: your task is not to conquer the Ukraine but to liberate it. When Denikin's bands have finally been smashed, the working people of the liberated Ukraine will themselves decide on what terms they are to live with Soviet Russia. We are all sure, and we know, that the working people of the Ukraine will declare for the closest fraternal union with us. [...]

¹² Zbigniew Kowalewski, 'For the Independence of Soviet Ukraine', *International Marxist Review* 4.2 (Autumn 1989), 95.

¹³ Nigel Harris, *National Liberation* (Harmndsworth, 1990), 91.

¹⁴ Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed* (Oxford, 1970), 434.

¹⁵ Kowalewski, 94.

¹⁶ Harris, 92.

Long live the free and independent Soviet Ukraine!¹⁷

What Trotsky understood was that insofar as the Bolsheviks were to be accepted by the Ukrainian masses this would be so essentially as the least of a number of evils: the White powers, whose fundamental aim it was to maintain the unity and social structure of the old imperial Russia were detested; and the bourgeois nationalist forces were impelled so much by a fear of Bolshevism and October that they preferred collaboration with whoever was currently arraigned against the Bolsheviks than with the Bolsheviks themselves (as the subsequent Polish invasion would prove). As Carr points out, ‘The only effective choice which confronted the Soviet Government at the beginning of 1918 and again at the beginning of 1919 was between direct incorporation of the Ukraine in the Russian Soviet unit and an attempt to satisfy Ukrainian national aspirations by creating a separate Soviet unit.’¹⁸ The former option would have been suicidal for the maintenance of Soviet power in the Ukraine.

In December Lenin, at the Bolshevik Central Committee, proposed a resolution that made it ‘incumbent on all party members to use every means to help remove all barriers in the way of the free development of the Ukrainian language and culture.’¹⁹ He went on to urge the limiting of the construction of Soviet farms and the requisition of grain, and to urge the distribution of the old estates to the peasants.

And in a declaration addressed to the Ukrainian workers and peasants, he wrote:

We Great Russian Communists have differences with the Ukrainian Bolshevik Communists and Borotbists and these differences concern the state independence of the Ukraine, the forms of her alliance with Russia and the national question in general. [...] There must be no differences over these questions. They will be decided by the All-Ukraine Congress of Soviets.²⁰

By December 1919 the Bolsheviks were again in control of Kiev.

This was the decisive turning point in the war in the Ukraine and in the overall war against the White defenders of the old empire and the imperialist intervention: the insurrections of the Ukrainian masses turned the defeat of Denikin into a rout. The March 1920 Congress of the Borotbists decided on the dissolution of its organisation and its entry into the Ukrainian Bolshevik party: two Borotbists entered the Central Committee. Although it is estimated that Borotbists were only around four thousand strong, according to the Soviet historian Popov, with their entry into the Ukrainian Bolshevik party this latter ‘acquired considerable cadres of functionaries who not only had a command of Ukrainian but also had ties with the Ukrainian masses. Most of them were particularly connected with the countryside.’²¹ Despite the invasion of the Ukraine by the Polish army, who occupied Kiev for some six weeks over May-June 1920 (a result of a desperate attempt by bourgeois Ukrainian nationalism in the guise of Petlura to save itself), Soviet power had not only won out in the Ukraine but had enough in reserve to consolidate itself. In the following years, the Ukrainian language was introduced into the schools and a knowledge of local history and culture was fostered. Indigenous personnel were trained for positions of importance and responsibility within the Party. For the first time, the Ukrainian language was raised from its marginal, minority position on its own territory.

Yet the Bolsheviks had come within a whisker of losing the civil war in the Ukraine: at the height of Denikin’s advance the Soviet government was moved from Petrograd to Moscow as a precaution (with Lenin even entertaining the possibility of a further forced move to the Urals). A defeat in the Ukraine would sooner or later have spelt the end of Soviet rule. As it was, the Bolshevik revolution found itself isolated, with consequences that are well known. Yet what would have happened had the Red Army been able to break through to save the

¹⁷ Leon Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed itself*, vol. 2 (London, 1979), 439.

¹⁸ Carr, 311.

¹⁹ *Collected Works*, vol. 30, 163.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 294-96.

²¹ Fagan, 26.

Hungarian soviet republic, as Lenin favoured? What would have happened in Germany had the Bavarian soviet republic not also been isolated? No-one knows, and speculation on these matters would be precisely that. But it is clear that the Bolsheviks in the Ukraine were hampered from the start by great weight of Greater Russian chauvinism, not only emanating from Russia itself but also from the urban Ukraine. As Skrypnyk wrote in July 1920:

Our tragedy in the Ukraine is that in order to win the peasantry and the rural proletariat, a population of Ukrainian nationality, we have to rely on the support and on the forces of a Russian or Russified working class that was antagonistic towards even the smallest expression of Ukrainian language and culture.²²

The reversal suffered with respect to the policy of 'Ukrainiasation' during the consolidation of Stalinist rule is well known: in good part the Stalin machine understood negatively what Trotsky and Lenin had understood positively: the revolutionary potential of popular Ukrainian national sentiment. The disproportionate effects of collectivisation in the early 1930s find their reflection in Khrushchev's famous admission in the 'secret speech' that Stalin feared Ukrainian nationalism so much that he would have wiped out the Ukrainians in their entirety had there not been so many of them.

Nevertheless, E. H. Carr's judgment (and it is a judgement that has not only stood the test of time but which Communists should pay heed to) is clear:

In 1918 [...] the tide of nationalism was in full flood. [...] Unqualified recognition of the right of succession not only enabled the Soviet regime—as nothing else could have done—to ride the torrent of a disruptive nationalism, but raised its prestige high above that of the 'white' generals who, bred in the pan-Russian tradition of the Tsars, refused any concession to the subject nationalities; in the borderlands where other than Russian, or other than Great Russian, elements predominated, and where the decisive campaigns of the civil war were fought, this factor told heavily in favour of the Soviet cause.²³

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January 2002

²² Cited in Kowalewski, 101.

²³ Carr, 263.