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Palko, Olena (2020) Debating the early Soviet Nationalities Policy: the case of Soviet Ukraine. In: Douds, L. and Harris, J. and Whitewood, P. (eds.) *The Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution: Illiberal Liberation, 1917-1941*. Library of Modern Russia. London: I.B.Tauris. ISBN 9781350117907. (In Press)

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Debating the Early Soviet Nationalities Policy: the Case of Soviet Ukraine

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The February Revolution marked the starting point of a complicated process of social, political and economic transformation within the Russian Empire. Nationalist movements emerged on the peripheries demanding sovereignty; with the Provisional Government attempting to accommodate these diverse demands for autonomy and independence. Nonetheless, it was the October Revolution and the Soviet regime that irreversibly changed the administrative and cultural map of the former autocratic and centralised empire. Guided by the principle of ‘national in form, socialist in context’, the new central government encouraged the formation of various heterogeneous communities with distinctive national identities. The Soviet Union would thus come to be defined as ‘the world’s first Affirmative Action Empire’ or ‘the world’s first state to institutionalize ethno-territorial federalism.’² However, by the end of the 1920s, Soviet ethnic particularism came into conflict with the homogenising project of Soviet modernisation.

The Bolsheviks’ view on the national question evolved overtime and the tactics of the party were defined by the immediate political, economic and social context as well as their short-term and long-term objectives. While the Russian Civil War required quick solutions to the almost total political and social alienation in which the Bolshevik Party often found itself, victory over their political and ideological rivals raised the question of how to modernise the country. With a century-long legacy of backwardness and distrust of central institutions, the problem was how to make such a diverse population contribute willingly to the Soviet project. The first objective could be achieved by tactical engagement of local activists and interest groups, whereas the second one required mass indigenous participation in the sovietisation campaign.

There was yet another important difference: the Bolshevik experience of the civil war varied significantly depending on the border republic where local challenges determined the amount of concessions the party was ready to make to achieve victory. By contrast, the success of the Bolshevik modernisation and sovietisation projects was a universal objective to be achieved through the new nationalities policy of *korenizatsiia* (literally, indigenisation), launched in 1923 Union-wide. *Korenizatsiia* was designed to exploit the national factor in the political modernisation of diverse peoples of the Soviet Union and to propagate universal Soviet values in a variety of national languages. Its ultimate goal was to ‘usher the *entire* population through the Marxist timeline of historical development’³ and to achieve socialism.

Soviet Ukraine represents one of the most fruitful cases in examining the objectives and limitations of the Bolshevik approach to the national question. The republic, with its economic and social potential, would be crucial to the success of the wider revolution. Nevertheless, unlike most newly created Soviet republics, Ukraine had a relatively well-developed national movement and a history of independence, albeit short-lived. Consequently, here the Bolsheviks had perhaps the most arduous experience of the civil war and it took three campaigns for the Red Army to win over the republic. In addition, Ukraine’s contiguous western border made the republic an ideological battlefield and an outpost of Soviet foreign policy. This struggle later manifested over party divisions on the implementation of *korenizatsiia*, to an extent unheard of in any other Soviet Republic.

This chapter conceptualises the Bolshevik approach to the national question in the Soviet border regions by examining how local challenges forced the central party leadership to adjust its universal objectives. In the case of Ukraine however, this process of elaborating and implementing the nationalities policy was not linear. The civil war and the *korenizatsiia* policy caused Bolshevik theory and practice to diverge over issues of centralisation and perceived security problems.

Self-determination versus party centralisation: the Bolsheviks and the civil war

During the pre-war years, Lenin was greatly engaged in polemics with other European socialists over the national question, perceiving its solution as being closely linked to an anticipated European war. Lenin awaited that such a conflict would lead to a defeat of the great empires, especially the tsarist monarchy, this ‘most reactionary and barbarous of governments,’ and thus contribute to the socialist cause of proletarian emancipation.⁴ According to him, the immediate support to national struggles within the empire’s borders would help the proletarian revolution in the long-term. This prompted him to introduce popular slogans of national self-determination into the Bolsheviks’ programme and proclaim the national question an inherent part of the international revolutionary movement. As explained in April 1916, the task of the proletariat could not be achieved ‘unless it champions the right of nations to self-determination.’⁵

Indeed, Lenin’s approach was reflective of the wartime zeitgeist: nationalist movements were on the rise worldwide and national elites kindled patriotic feelings and national pride among their fellow countrymen. Such movements also thrived in the former Russian Empire. Nonetheless, the Provisional Government, while condemning the restrictive tsarist regime,

declaring the equality of all citizens and ensuring cultural autonomy, failed to respond to the demands of regional separatists. The final decision on the national question was postponed until the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, the elections to which were scheduled for late-November 1917. Such moderate response corresponded to the horizon of expectations of the political leaders in Ukraine, however. The first legal act-declarations of *Tsentral'na Rada* (Central Council), the national legislative authority established in Kyiv on 4 March 1917, proclaimed Ukraine's autonomy and reassured its non-separation from Russia 'in order that we and all her peoples might jointly strive toward the development and welfare of all Russia and toward the unity of her democratic forces.'⁶

The October Revolution, however, changed this mainstream autonomous orientation. Local elites, often with foreign help, quickly reacted to the events in the former imperial capital and started making provisions for independence. Those actions did not contradict the announced Bolshevik position on the national question: 'The Declaration of Rights of the People of Russia', issued shortly after the Bolsheviks had taken power in Petrograd, guaranteed equality and sovereignty for all peoples within the former Russian Empire, ranging from self-determination to complete independence. It also called to put an end to Russification and replace 'the unworthy policy of falsehood and distrust, of fault-finding and provocation' with 'an open and honest policy which leads to complete mutual trust of the people of Russia.'⁷

The declaration of the right to self-determination had an explosive effect on the former Romanov Empire. By 1920, Poland, Finland and the Baltic States were fully independent while national movements had emerged in the Caucasus and Central Asian provinces, leading to the formation of separate republics in Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. In Ukraine, where

neither the socialist-oriented Ukrainian People's Republic, nor the German-controlled conservative Ukrainian State were able to consolidate their power, the demands for self-determination were voiced by left radicals. Members of both the Bolshevik and non-Bolshevik communist parties articulated plans of a sovereign Soviet Ukraine and its own self-standing communist party.

However, the threat of complete disintegration of the former empire and subsequent loss of control over the region forced the Bolsheviks to reconsider their general democratic principles. The balance between self-determination and party organisation needed to be found. Hence, the experience of the civil war in the borderlands became the first instance when Bolshevik theory and practice diverged. Indeed, in his early writings, Lenin expressed great tolerance to local separatism and nationalism. Nonetheless, this affirmation was always subordinate to the ultimate goals of the proletarian revolution. With more regional governments attempting to achieve independence, the party's central leadership needed to clarify its understanding of this abstract right. Pivotal to these debates was the question of who should represent the rights of the peoples and who would decide whether to apply the principle of self-determination and in which case.

On 28 January 1918, at his speech during the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets, Stalin, then Commissar for Nationalities, made it clear that self-determination was 'a means of attaining socialism' and as such should be limited only to the toilers of each nation.⁸ Yet the proletariat, following Lenin's teaching, was ideologically immature and relied on its vanguard, the Communist Party. With proper guidance, the proletariat - the only bearer of the right to self-determination - would never secede from the world's first proletarian state. As Stalin

explained, ‘now that Russia is a Socialist Republic and the champion of the great ideal of freeing the oppressed classes all over the world, there is no longer any reason for separating from Great Russia’.⁹

Moreover, Lenin regarded self-determination as an exception, rather than a general rule. Between the two policies of self-determination and party organisation, the latter clearly prevailed: ‘Democratic centralism’ remained the main guiding principle in state and party organisation. As stated in the resolution of the 1919 Congress of the Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks (RKP(b)), a separate status granted to the Soviet republics did not mean that the party would also be reorganised as a federation of independent communist parties. Instead, the central committees of the Communist Parties in these republics were recognised as regional committees of the RKP(b) and as such were entirely subordinated to its leadership.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, this discrepancy between Bolshevik theory and practice was quickly exploited by those regional party and non-party leaders who continuously opposed centralisation. The first attempt to uncover Bolshevik hypocrisy in the national question came from within the party. In his pamphlets ‘Jesuits’ policy’ (1915) and ‘Russian social democracy and national question’ (1917), Lev Iurkevych, a former Ukrainian social-democrat, who after 1905 joined a section of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party (RSDRP(b)) in Ukraine, accused the Russian Marxists of chauvinism, despotism and national enslavement.¹¹ In 1919, this critique was picked up by the Ukrainian Bolsheviks Vasyl’ Shakhrai, the Commissar for Military Affairs in the first Ukrainian Soviet government, and Serhii Mazlakh. In their brochure ‘Concerning the Moment: What is Happening in and to Ukraine’, the two Ukrainian Bolsheviks accused their Russian fellows of chauvinism, hence justifying

Ukraine's claims for independence.¹² Overall, early critiques of the Russian Bolsheviks concerned the discordance between a separate status of Soviet Ukraine and the inferior position of its Bolshevik party.

The pamphlet was published during the heated debates between those demanding the autonomous status of Ukraine's Bolshevik party and those promoting a centralised party organisation. The idea to merge different regional organisations of the RSDRP(b), which were mainly situated in the industrial Donbas area, into a separate Bolshevik Party was linked to the German occupation of Ukraine, under whose support the conservative government of Pavlo Skoropads'kyi was established in late April 1918. A Bolshevik leader in Ukraine, Georgii (Iurii) Piatakov argued that an autonomous party would have more control over and understanding of the situation in the region since the Russian Bolsheviks were simply too far away to respond on time. Piatakov's motion, however, was rejected by the Katerynoslav group headed by Emanuil Kviring. Kviring spoke of the greatest importance of Ukraine's industrial areas for the future of the Russian Revolution, which could be weakened if the autonomy of Ukraine's Bolshevik party and Ukraine be adopted.

Nonetheless, the escalation of the civil war forced the Russian Bolsheviks to finally define their stand on Ukraine. Bound by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the party could not declare war against Germany, an ally of nationalist governments in Ukraine. The creation of a Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic in March 1918 thus enabled the Bolsheviks, through the Ukrainian Soviet government, to enter into open war with the German occupation forces. Ukraine's independence was compromised by the status of its Bolshevik party, however. Despite the decision of the Taganrog conference (19–20 April 1918) on the independent status of the

Communist Party of Bolsheviks of Ukraine (KP(b)U), the first party congress, held in Moscow in July the following year, voted for its integration with the RKP(b). The KP(b)U retained an autonomous status with its Central Committee (TsK) acknowledging the authority of the TsK RKP(b); Stalin entered the Ukrainian TsK as the liaison with the RKP(b).¹³

While the Russian and Ukrainian Bolsheviks were looking for options on how to reconcile their promises, other left-wing parties and movements went ahead in defending the unconditional sovereignty of a Soviet Ukraine. Admittedly, during the civil war the Bolsheviks did not have the rhetorical monopoly on preaching the ideas of proletarian emancipation and a socialist future, being obliged to compete with a number of native communist parties, the biggest of which was the Ukrainian Communist Party of *Borot'bysty* (derived from the party newspaper *Borot'ba*, Ukrainian for 'struggle').¹⁴ Stephen Velychenko maintains that these parties emerged in reaction to the moderate socialism of the Ukrainian nationalist government and chauvinistic Russian Bolshevik rule, which initially disregarded the national sentiment of the population.¹⁵ Their members believed that communism and nationalism were compatible, hence the revolution in Ukraine could be both social and national. There were disagreements about the possible cooperation with the Bolsheviks, however. The Borot'bysty's decision to merge with the KP(b)U in May 1920 led to a major split among national communists, resulting in the creation of the Ukrainian Communist Party (*Ukapisty*), which existed, although as a small minority, until 1925.¹⁶

During the civil war, the national communist parties underwent major transformations, gradually evolving towards an acceptance of the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, Ukraine's independence remained their primary goal.¹⁷ They opposed the Bolshevik-led Soviet Ukraine,

since it united ‘all sorts of Russian nationalist elements from the Black Hundreds to the revolutionary intelligentsia in Ukraine [...] joining forces with the Bolsheviks to help reconstruct a “united and indivisible Russia”.’¹⁸ The Bolsheviks themselves were considered as proponents of Russian imperialism¹⁹ and ‘a hypocritical party which continually violates its own principles’.²⁰ Overall, their chauvinism was regarded as detrimental to the entire communist endeavour in Ukraine.²¹

Nonetheless, in May 1919, in the face of General Anton Denikin’s advancing army, the Borot’bysty expressed their readiness to cooperate with the Bolsheviks and to share government responsibilities. The Bolsheviks, however, were wary of their fellow revolutionaries. On the one hand, they were desperately looking for political allies in the civil war, more so since the Ukrainian communists could offer a link with the resentful Ukrainian peasantry and intelligentsia. On the other hand, the Bolsheviks did not trust these parties. Lenin considered the Borot’bysty as ‘a party, which aims to split the military forces and supports banditism; it is violating the basic principles of communism and thereby plays directly into the hands of the Whites and of international imperialism.’ Whilst encouraging the merger, the Ukrainian Bolsheviks were instructed to collect information on ‘the non-proletarian and most disloyal nature’ of the Borot’bysty activity.²²

In fact, in their early days, the Russian Bolsheviks hardly had any unified view on Ukraine. Their treatment of national affairs depended mostly on the immediate challenges which they faced on the ground. This lack of comprehensive policy perhaps explains why the Bolsheviks, while seeking alliances with local leftist movements, continuously persisted in their anti-Ukrainian attitude and violently reacted against any nationalist sentiments within or without

the party. This discrepancy soon drove back the occasional support the party had managed to gather. It became clear that if the Bolsheviks wanted to establish control in the region, they needed to reconsider their attitude towards Ukraine. In short, the Bolsheviks needed to offer a feasible alternative to ‘bourgeois nationalism’ of the Ukrainian governments and national communists by embracing their separatist discourse.

A turn in the national policy was marked by the TsK RKP(b)’s resolution ‘On Soviet Rule in Ukraine’ in late 1919. In the resolution, adopted after the victory over the Denikin’s White army, it was assured that the RKP(b) was committed to ‘removing all barriers to the free development of the Ukrainian language and culture.’ The Bolsheviks in Ukraine were instructed to treat the existing nationalist tendencies ‘with utmost patience and tact, countering them with a word of comradely explanation of the identity of interests of the toiling masses of Ukraine and Russia.’ Ukrainian was declared ‘a weapon of communist education of the toiling people’ and a tool in establishing ‘the closest contact between Soviet institutions and the native peasant population of the country.’²³ The Bolsheviks, also seemingly, conceded to the debates on Ukraine’s independence. In his letter ‘To the toiling masses of Ukraine after the defeat of Denikin,’ Lenin reassured that it was ‘self-evident and generally recognised that only the Ukrainian workers and peasants themselves can and will decide at their All-Ukraine Congress of Soviets whether Ukraine shall amalgamate with Russia or whether she shall remain a separate and independent republic, and, in the latter case, what federal ties shall be established between that republic and Russia.’²⁴

National communists were also invited to join the government of Khrystian Rakovskiy (in place until July 1923), where they occupied posts in education, justice and communication. In

addition, a merger of the national communist parties was initiated. In March 1920, some 4,000 former Borot'bysty members were admitted to the KP(b)U on case by case basis.²⁵ In total, by mid-1920, around 30 per cent of the KP(b)U's 11,087 full members and 2,439 candidate members had previously belonged to other political parties.²⁶ This unification of the leading communist movements initially proved to be mutually beneficial: the Bolsheviks were able to eliminate important political rivals while the Borot'bysty gained access to important leadership positions, further promoting Ukraine's autonomy and cultural development from within the party ranks. For instance, the former Borot'bysty Vasyl' Ellan-Blakytynyi and Oleksander Shums'kyi joined the TsK KP(b)U, the latter also acquired a seat in the Politburo. Arkadii Liubchenko became the TsK Secretary for Culture and the editor-in-chief of the party newspaper *Kommunist*. Since May 1919, Ukraine's Commissariat for Education (Narkomos) was headed by the Borot'bysty - Hnat Mykhailychenko, Mykhailo Panchenko, Shums'kyi and Hryhorii Hryn'ko.²⁷ In such a way, former Borot'bysty not only gained control over the republic's cultural and intellectual life, but also started to play a decisive role in implementing the nationalities policy. It was under the Narkomos' chief authorities that the main orders for the future policy of *korenizatsiia* were issued.

Ethnic diversity versus assimilation: Korenizatsiia in the context of Soviet Ukraine

As discussed above, to win the civil war and re-unite the former imperial territories, the Bolsheviks were forced to make concessions to nationalist sentiments and form alliances with non-Russian political elites. Nevertheless, these tactical agreements would not suffice if the Bolsheviks wished to consolidate their power and establish political and social systems that would last. More importantly, the Bolsheviks needed to change the way the party was perceived in Ukraine. Instead of an image of a Moscow-led occupying military force, it needed to become an embodiment of revolutionary and national liberationist ideals of the local population. This

change in approach reflected a more general moderation of nationalities policy within the Soviet Union. By the end of the civil war, it had become obvious that the national question in the peripheries could not be ignored, even more so with the threat posed by independent Poland, under Józef Piłsudski, to the recently acquired western Soviet borderlands. The possibility of losing Ukraine became especially apparent after the united Ukrainian-Polish Army drove the Bolsheviks out of Kyiv in May 1920.

Amidst the Polish–Soviet war, Stalin highlighted the urgent need to reassess the position of the Soviet government on the national question and redefine the centre–periphery relationship. In October 1920, he observed that the very success of the Russian Revolution depended heavily on gaining trust of the peripheries: ‘central Russia, that hearth of the world revolution, cannot hold out long without the assistance of the border regions, which abound in raw materials, fuel and foodstuffs. The border regions of Russia in their turn would be inevitably doomed to imperialist bondage without the political, military and organisational support of more developed central Russia.’²⁸ According to Lev Kamenev, another Bolshevik leader, the civil war had taught the party a valuable strategic lesson: ‘the unity between the centre and the periphery is necessary for the survival of both the centre and the periphery. The communist society in Moscow cannot be built without establishing a fair relationship with those peoples living around the Donets [coal] basin, or around Baku oil, or Siberian bread, or steppe pastures.’²⁹

This new approach to the national question was approved by the 1921 Party Congress. Far-reaching political, social and economic modernisation of the former imperial lands was seen as a remedy to the alienation of the peripheries, their distrust towards the centre and attempts

by local nationalists to solicit foreign intervention. State-encouraged modernisation and economic equalisation was therefore perceived as a means of spreading new Soviet values among outlying populations who would, consequently, contribute willingly to building socialism in the former Romanov Empire.³⁰ However, to achieve this, party activists needed to ‘preach against [slogans of national culture] in all languages, ‘adapting’ themselves to all local and national requirements.’³¹ The Party Congress, therefore, called for a comprehensive national program, establishing local administration, promoting national languages and cultures and recruiting indigenous elites into the party rank-and-files.

The success of this task relied on active participation of indigenous populations and the creation of new Soviet elites. As highlighted by Stalin, in order to make Soviet power ‘near and dear to the masses of the border regions of Russia,’ it was necessary to integrate ‘all the best local people’ into the Soviet administration, since ‘the masses should see that the Soviet power and its organs are the products of their own efforts, the embodiment of their aspirations.’³² However, ‘the best local people’ were not, as yet, members of the Bolshevik Party. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the civil war, the party looked to establish a consensus with those ‘intellectual forces of local origin,’ who did not necessarily agree with Bolshevik ideology.

To achieve this, the Bolsheviks, as discussed above, encouraged a merger of different political forces, especially of those who shared the Bolshevik proletarian discourse. In addition, the party found a compromise with the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, incentivising cooperation with numerous educated specialists and engineers, whose skills and technical knowledge were urgently needed during post-war reconstruction. Apart from this ‘toiling intelligentsia’, a

hybrid term coined to designate old ‘bourgeois’ specialists, the party sought reconciliation with recent political émigrés. Numerous Sovietophiles and *zminovihivtsi* (Rus. *smenovekhovtsy*), who showed readiness to reconcile with the former enemy and participate in building the Soviet state, received official amnesty and were invited to return to Soviet Ukraine.³³ Lastly, the early 1920s proved to be the heyday of the so-called *poputnyky* (Rus. *poputchiki*) or fellow-travellers. The term was first used by Leon Trotsky to refer to artists who presented a kind of transitional art, ‘organically connected with the Revolution, but which [was] not at the same time the art of the Revolution.’³⁴

Engaging the old intelligentsia however, could offer only a temporary solution to the lack of loyal Soviet cadres. Indeed, they enjoyed a rather privileged position in the Soviet society and played an important role during the transitional period of the early 1920s. However, those fellow-travellers who had offered their tacit support to the party in power could hardly disseminate Soviet values and inspire the masses to join the process of constructing socialism. Moreover, hardly any of them could become trustworthy representatives of Bolshevik ideology in the long run. While endorsing national differences, the party’s central leadership was ultimately seeking to create a homogeneous Soviet identity based on a shared set of values which could only be internalised through mass mobilisation and participation.

Bohdan Krawchenko argues that *Ukrainizatsiia* of the KP(b)U had a demographic character: modernisation brought more rural Ukrainians to the cities, where they joined the working class and subsequently the party ranks.³⁵ *Ukrainizatsiia* of the party ranks could not be spontaneous, however. It was designed to defeat critics from the left who did not regard the KP(b)U as a Ukrainian party with strong grassroots support. Thus engaging indigenous cadres soon

became a key priority, as defined by party congresses in 1921 and 1923. In the following years, party membership skyrocketed. The 1927 party census already attested that 69.7 per cent of party members and 99.5 per cent of candidate-members had joined in or after 1922.³⁶ Overall, this indigenisation of the party apparatus achieved incredible results. Within a couple of years, the number of Ukrainian bureaucrats increased from 35 per cent in 1923 to 50 per cent in 1925 and 54 per cent in 1926. The percentage of ethnic Ukrainians in party organs also grew from 23.6 per cent in 1922 to 47.0 per cent in 1927 and 53.0 per cent in 1930 while, by 1926, the number of Ukrainians in the government amounted 56.5 per cent in 1926.³⁷

This party entrenchment served a much wider purpose: *korenizatsiia* was ultimately a policy of winning ‘hearts and minds’, a well-elaborated programme launched to draw the broad masses towards the Bolshevik party and their ideology. In the Ukrainian context, the main concern was the Ukrainian-speaking peasantry. Reaching out to the countryside could potentially help in overcoming continuing peasant resistance and bring the rural population into party and governmental work. Furthermore, by de-Russifying republican urban areas, *Ukrainizatsiia* might also continue the influx of workers through increased rural-to-urban migration. In Volodymyr Zaton’skyi’s words, the party should make cities less hostile and foreign (*chuzhoi*) to these new-comers through ‘creating an environment where the peasant gets used to seeing Ukrainian signs, announcements, and posters.’³⁸

While facing the ‘hostile’ peasantry was an accepted objective, the question of proletarian *Ukrainizatsiia* was one of the most difficult to agree upon. Historically, Ukraine’s cities were often Russian outposts, reflecting the century-long tradition of tsarist assimilation and Russification. In 1897, for example, native Ukrainian-speakers constituted less than a third of

the urban population.³⁹ Increasing rural-to-urban migration during the 1920s changed this dynamic. As a result, by the middle of the decade, the republic's industrial working class already consisted of three more or less equal groups: Ukrainians, whose national self-identification was the same as their native language; non-Ukrainians (especially of Russian and Jewish origin); and Russified Ukrainians, who identified themselves as Ukrainians but whose native language was Russian. As a consequence, despite a common understanding of how important the working class was for comprehensive *Ukrainizatsiia*, the party was wary of defining these ethnically diverse proletarians as its immediate target since it could make the process appear non-voluntary.

The question of whether the Russian-speaking industrial working class should be considered as a target of *Ukrainizatsiia* entered the Bolshevik agenda in earnest after the appointment of Lazar Kaganovich as First Secretary of the KP(b)U in March 1925. In June 1926, a TsK KP(b)U Plenum called for reinforcing comprehensive *Ukrainizatsiia*, encompassing the industrial proletariat, higher education, all-Union institutions and the government bureaucracy.⁴⁰ Despite the many objectives, it was proletarian *Ukrainizatsiia* that sparked heated debates over the scope of this policy and exposed fundamental differences between central-oriented and Ukraine-minded factions in the KP(b)U. These debates once again exposed the limits of Bolshevik particularism, when the realities on the ground forced the party centre to reconsider their wider democratic intentions on the national question.

In regards to Russian-speaking Ukrainians, the main challenge was whether to consider them as Russians or Ukrainians. In the first instance, they were to be exempt from the *Ukrainizatsiia* campaign, in the second – become its main targets. For Shums'kyi, now the Commissar for

Education, however, the working masses were not Russians, but Russified Ukrainians who simply needed to re-internalise native Ukrainian culture and language. Addressing the slow pace of the policy in Ukraine at the 1925 KP(b)U plenum, Shums'kyi pointed at those in charge, especially Kaganovich, who due to his ethnic origin and close ties to the centre (Kaganovitch was a Ukraine-born Jew and Stalin's protégé) had little interest in the policy's success.⁴¹ Hence, Shums'kyi suggested replacing Kaganovich with Vlas Chubar, Mykola Skrypnyk or another Ukrainian who would ensure proper implementation of *Ukrainizatsiia*.⁴²

Stalin indirectly responded to Shums'kyi's criticisms in a letter to Kaganovich dated from 26 April 1926.⁴³ According to Stalin, the Commissar for Education had misinterpreted the very concept of *Ukrainizatsiia*, conflating *Ukrainizatsiia* of the party and other apparatus (a declared objective of the policy) with that of the republic's proletariat. *Ukrainizatsiia* of the working class was supposed to be a natural and gradual process, whereas Shums'kyi was seeking to impose it 'from above'. Forcing the Russian-speaking working masses to renounce their Russian language and culture, according to the Soviet leader, 'contradicted the principle of the free development of nationalities [...] and [was] equal to national oppression.' Stalin predicted that *Ukrainizatsiia* from above could provoke 'an outbreak of anti-Ukrainian chauvinism among the non-Ukrainian proletariat' as well as 'the alienation of Ukrainian culture from the All-Soviet culture [...], the Russian culture and its greatest achievement, Leninism, altogether.'⁴⁴

Following Stalin's letter, Shums'kyi was quickly demoted and replaced by Skrypnyk, who was seen to comply with the centralist view on *korenizatsiia*. Indeed, Skrypnyk maintained Stalin's view on natural *Ukrainizatsiia* of the republican working class, believing that 're-

identification' could be achieved by combining demographic *Ukrainizatsiia* with the necessary promotion of Ukrainian culture. Instead of enforced *Ukrainizatsiia* 'from above', Skrypnyk developed a strategy to encourage workers to identify themselves with Ukrainian culture and language. Since use of the Ukrainian language was obligatory only for government employees, the linguistic *Ukrainizatsiia* of the workforce could only be achieved by creating a total Ukrainian urban environment: a favourable setting in which the working masses would either convert or become inclined towards the Ukrainian language and a new proletarian culture.⁴⁵

This was to be accomplished by, firstly, increasing the prestige of the Ukrainian language and culture, and, secondly, bringing Ukrainian culture directly to the proletarians. Cultural work was therefore regarded as the main vehicle for drawing workers into the Ukrainian milieu. This included evening language and country studies courses, public lectures in Ukrainian, distribution of books and periodicals, organising reading circles, concerts, theatre performances and film screenings. As a result of the combined efforts of Soviet modernisers and Ukraine's cultural managers, by 1934 three-and-a-half times as many workers identified themselves as Ukrainians than in 1926 and the percentage of the working class who identified as Ukrainian increased from 51.7 in 1926 to 59.2 in 1934.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, *Ukrainizatsiia* did not make Ukrainian the everyday language of the urban populace. Despite concerted government efforts, Russian continued to dominate economic, industrial, political and academic spheres, whereas Ukrainian was confined to education, propaganda work and cultural initiatives.⁴⁷ Instead of becoming mono-lingual, urban centres were transformed into enclaves of bilingualism where workers and state functionaries remained dominated by Russian culture. These overall moderate results raise the question of why the party centre attempted ardently to restrict proletarian *Ukrainizatsiia* and in what way it had become a matter of utmost political importance.

Indeed, in the Soviet hierarchy the working class mattered most with Bolshevik doctrine being entirely built around the necessity of working class mobilisation. The declared objective of industrialisation required a far bigger influx of workers, meaning that the party needed to continue reaching out to the peasantry, the source of the future workforce. Social and ethnic heterogeneity of the working class meant that there could never be a single ideological line on which the party could base its propaganda. Moreover, local factional struggles created a situation where multiple interest groups attempted to present themselves as the ‘vanguard of the working class,’ which, according to Lenin, could not formulate any independent ideology of their own. Since class political consciousness could only be brought to the workers from without,⁴⁸ the party’s central leadership needed to react quickly against any non-authorised attempts to control the process of workers’ mobilisation. The factional struggle within the KP(b)U and the hostile international climate of 1926–27 had therefore made Ukraine’s Russian-speaking industrial working class the bastion of the Russian Revolution.

Within the KP(b)U, Shums’kyi came to represent the Ukrainian faction, which consisted mainly of former members of national communist parties. Shum’skyi was one of their most prominent members, who made a successful career in the Soviet government and as a Commissar for Education oversaw the entire cultural and educational process in Soviet Ukraine. The success of *Ukrainizatsiia* reaffirmed Ukraine-minded communists that their vision of a Soviet Ukraine was indeed possible. James Mace somewhat optimistically suggested that ‘Skrypnyk temporarily achieved what Ukrainian communists had advocated since Mazlakh and Shakhrai, recognition that Ukraine was a country in its own right, ruled by a regime which was clearly Ukrainian in its policies and goals.’⁴⁹ The reinforcement of

Ukrainian separatism in the mid-1920s proved that the Bolshevik efforts to convert their former opponents into loyal followers through compromise had failed. Instead, the growing share of ethnic Ukrainian members and their preferential position within the party created a new Ukrainian Soviet elite, who started demanding more political, economic and cultural autonomy for their republic.

The inner-party struggle was not the only threat to the success of *korenizatsiia*, as envisaged by the central leadership. Since the early debates on its implementation, there were regular concerns that the policy would unleash and reinforce nationalist forces on the ground. Party directives demanded high results in implementing *Ukrainizatsiia* but provided little to assist reaching set targets. For instance, despite the official declaration of its completion on 1 January 1926, comprehensive linguistic *Ukrainizatsiia* among governmental employees was never met.⁵⁰ Whereas governmental employees were usually passive in complying with *Ukrainizatsiia* requirements, the Ukrainian language and culture was aggressively promoted at the local level by the non-party intelligentsia. This led to ‘spontaneous’ *Ukrainizatsiia*, as nationalist elements started taking advantage of the benign climate in the republic. While Shums’kyi blamed the party’s failure ‘to capture, direct, and compensate non-party efforts appropriately,’ the central leadership blamed ‘anti-Soviet elements’, who had decided to capitalise on *Ukrainizatsiia*’s success.⁵¹

As noted by Kaganovitch, *Ukrainizatsiia* led to two parallel processes: ‘the process of our growth, the growth of the Soviet culture and society; and the process of the growth of hostile forces, which attempt to master this process’⁵²; the former was to be accelerated, the latter – combatted. The danger of those nationalists who, like the former Borot’byst Shums’kyi,

‘changed their tactics but not their ideology,’ was outlined in a top-secret GPU report ‘*Ob Ukrainskom Separatisme*’ (On Ukrainian Separatism), issued on 4 September 1926. According to the GPU, *Ukrainizatsiia* had been exploited by all those nationalists who, having given up their hopes for overthrowing Soviet power, accepted it as an unavoidable fact. However, they started using the new weapon of ‘cultural work’ to ‘place supporters of the national idea in all important parts of the state organism.’⁵³ To regain control over the implementation of *Ukrainizatsiia*, the party needed to undermine public faith in this policy and the pre-revolutionary elites.⁵⁴

One of the biggest show trials of the late 1920s, concerning the alleged conspiratorial organisation Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (*Spilka Vyzvolennia Ukrainy, SVU*), created an excellent opportunity to tackle both the old intelligentsia and eager local ‘Ukrainisers’. The SVU trial had serious repercussions and signalled a process of accelerated monopolisation of the artistic and cultural spheres in Soviet Ukraine. Firstly, it led to the elimination of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences’ autonomous status, thereafter subjugating it to the party agenda. Secondly, the trial brought to an end the lenient attitude towards *zminovikhivtsi* and fellow-travellers, many of whom were direct targets of prosecution. Thirdly, it weakened the local initiative for *Ukrainizatsiia*, since some 30,000 people, including many Ukrainian educators and schoolteachers, were arrested in connection to the SVU.⁵⁵

There was yet another element to the Shums’kyi affair. Before occupying the post in the Narkomos, Shums’kyi had been the Ukraine’s representative in Poland and a liaison to the Communist Party of Western Ukraine (KPZU). The KPZU, seen as a mechanism to influence the alignment of political forces in Poland, was financially and ideologically supported by

Moscow. Nonetheless, the Ukrainian question was one of the most significant in the KPZU program and its members aimed to unite all Ukrainians, including those under Polish and other western governments, within the borders of Soviet Ukraine. KPZU representatives ardently embraced Shums'kyi's vision of a comprehensive *Ukrainizatsiia* and later expressed great concern over his demotion in 1926. To make matters worse, the defection of the KPZU leadership occurred at the height of the war scare of 1926–27, when Soviet leaders were anticipating an attack from an alleged anti-Soviet coalition, with Poland at its forefront. Unsurprisingly, Shums'kyi's Polish-backed calls for wider political autonomy quickly came to be perceived as anti-Soviet. In 1926, foreign considerations took over practical necessities, and *korenizatsiia*, originally designed to foster a positive image of the Soviet authorities internationally, was recalibrated along national security lines.

Lastly, by the end of the 1920s, the objectives of *korenizatsiia* began to directly conflict with other core Bolshevik policies. Rapid industrialisation led to a major clash between central and regional elites, who sought to maximise regional control over the allocation of investment resources and demanded more authority in economic administration.⁵⁶ The Soviet Union, despite its federalisation, acted as one economic entity with decentralisation perceived as a threat to the wider modernisation project. It was clear that successful industrialisation required constant centralised planning and control over regional performance. This was administered by a single Central Planning Committee, or *Gosplan*, established in 1921, whose authority widened significantly by the decade's end. Such economic dependency contradicted the view of the regional elites, for whom 'nationality, resources, and local political power [became] officially linked.'⁵⁷ Hence, by the end of the twenties, *korenizatsiia*'s economic aspects came to the fore, demanding economic decentralisation of the Soviet Union to correspond to its federal system of government.

The debates on the amount of regional control over the national economy were especially heated in Ukraine, since the republic was seen as key in delivering production targets. The demands came from both within the KP(b)U leadership and the non-party elites and ranged from the need to reconsider industrial locations to transforming Ukraine into a single economic unit. At the 1927 Party Congress, Kaganovich advocated expanding planned targets and increasing capital investment in the republic.⁵⁸ The KP(b)U leader aimed to reinforce Ukraine's former industrial dominance and continuously defended local interests at the central level. The economic side of *Ukrainizatsiia*, however, was formulated by two economists, Hryn'ko and Mykhailo Volobuev. From 1924 to 1926 Hryn'ko, a former Borot'byst, had overseen the Ukrainian Gosplan before taking the post of deputy head of the all-Union Gosplan. Volobuev chaired the programme of adult education and literacy within the Ukrainian Commissariat for Education.⁵⁹

The plan for rapid industrialisation reignited the debate on regionalisation, according to which the republic was seen as a number of administrative districts with different economic functions. According to Hryn'ko and Volobuev, this had undermined Ukraine's potential as a national economic unit. Moreover, it contradicted the objectives of *Ukrainizatsiia*, which meant to establish the link between the industrial working class and the peasantry.⁶⁰ In Volobuev's words, Ukraine became a 'European-type colony', economically and financially exploited by Russia.⁶¹ Not only was its national economy over-reliant on raw materials and natural resources, but one third of Ukraine's taxes were being utilised outside of the republic. Instead, he advocated rational allocation of resources and financial autarky, which could help Ukraine develop a more balanced economic base and better contribute to the economic growth of the

Soviet Union as a whole. Needless to say, Volobuev's position on the national economy, articulated in 1928 on the pages of the party journal *Bil'shovyk Ukrainy*, was quickly compared to the opinions expressed by Shums'kyi. Both were accused of promoting national deviationist position, labelled respectively '*volobuevshchyna*' and '*shums'kism*' and were subsequently deposed and relocated.

Bolshevik ideology had originated in a complete and total rejection of the oppressive tsarist regime. Its implementation was intended to bring peace, distribute land and give bread to the people exhausted by World War I, and overcome the political and social chaos into which the Russian Empire had descended by 1917. Most importantly, the Bolsheviks promised to liberate the peoples of Russia from national, social and political restraints. To achieve all this, they needed to defeat numerous enemies of the revolution first. The Bolshevik takeover in Petrograd was swift, yet taking the former imperial capital could not guarantee control over Russia's peripheries or its borderlands. Neither could military supremacy ensure immediate victory over political and ideological opponents, as the experiences of the civil war had shown.

The Bolsheviks needed to secure popular support which would allow them to realise their liberationist vision. Significantly, the success of these long-term goals depended on the party vanguard's ability to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat in the country, which had neither the industrial capacity nor a well-developed working class. Popular mobilisation was the answer to all Bolshevik's concerns with the party quickly coming to understand the potential of the national factor for inciting mass mobilisation. National languages and national elites were thus necessary to engage the working class and reach out to the peasantry, who even a decade after the revolution remained hostile to those in power.

The situation in Ukraine forced the Bolsheviks to revise these plans, however. The republic was perhaps the most important for the success of their political projects and yet its internal contradictions posed a genuine threat to the Bolshevik dictatorship. Various nationalist forces fought continuously with the Bolsheviks in trying to preserve their control over territory and its resources. Moreover, during the Polish-Soviet war, the competing interests of the two governments converged in Ukraine. Nevertheless, nationalist and foreign governments were not the main obstacle to the Bolsheviks' long-term strategies. Unexpectedly, the fiercest opposition to the central vision came from within the Ukrainian Bolshevik Party itself. Bolshevik modernisation required uniformity and compliance with the centre, including readiness to surrender the levers of control to the central party leadership. These expectations of absolute obedience, however, were crushed by the intentions of Ukraine-oriented communists in the party, empowered by the Bolshevik's experimentation with nationalism in the former imperial borderlands.

By the end of the 1920s it became obvious that Bolshevik ethnic particularism had created more problems in Ukraine than it was intended to resolve. As a result of Soviet modernisation campaigns, more people had gained access to higher education and promotion opportunities, whereas *korenizatsiia* gave preferential status to those fluent in local languages and created ethnic Ukrainian elites who owed their status and positions to the Soviet regime. These new nationalised elites began challenging the central leadership, attempting to gain control over the power structure and decision-making. More importantly, regional leaders started to question the internationalist (Russian) nature of the industrial proletariat - the political base of Bolshevik ideology - and demanded a say in the industrialisation campaign.

Two Five-Year plans sufficed for the Soviet Union to catch up with, and even surpass many of its European neighbours. Moreover, Soviet industrial achievements coincided with major strides in social modernisation. In 1939, the party leadership proudly declared the success of ‘the greatest phenomenon in the history of humankind,’ claiming to have overcome social-class boundaries through attained literacy levels, access to professional education and guaranteed gender equality.⁶² As soon as ‘backwardness’ became a word of the past, there was no further need to engage national elites and encourage national differences. Although *korenizatsiia* was never suspended officially, its course was significantly redefined by the urgent need to address the growing influence of the nationalised regional Soviet elites, while further encouraging industrialisation. Unsurprisingly, responses to both of these challenges coincided. With calls for greater economic efficiency beginning to supplant ethnic interests, nation-based persecutions could be easily justified. The intensity of terror in the late 1930s reflected the strength of the national ‘deviations’ in the party during the 1920s. In turn, the national Soviet elites became strongest in those areas where the Bolsheviks had taken longer to consolidate power during the civil war, encapsulated in the example of Soviet Ukraine.

¹ The author would like to thank the initiative “Ukrainian Research in Switzerland” (URIS) for providing financial support and especially Prof. Dr. Frithjof Benjamin Schenk and the Department of History at the University of Basel, as well as the editors of this volume, for their comments on various drafts of this chapter.

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